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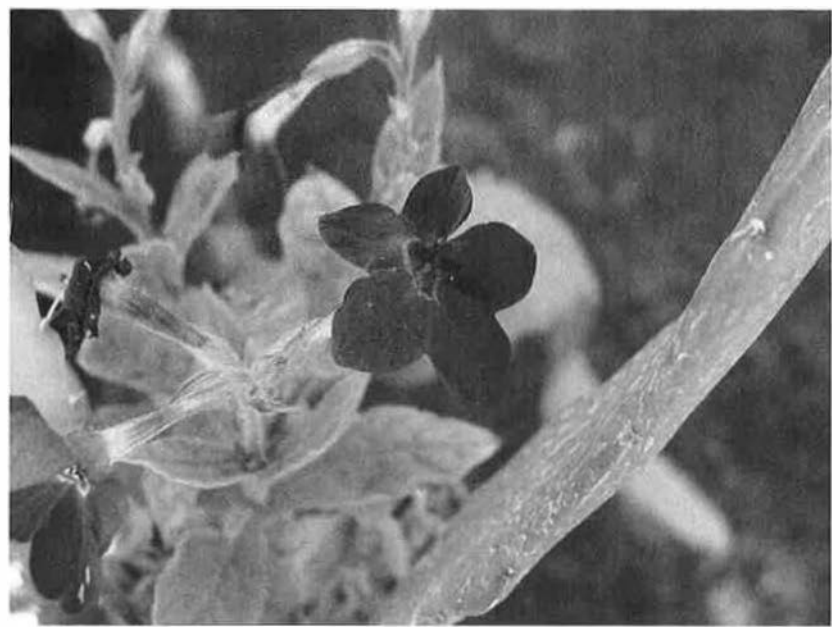
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The Northridge Review gratefully acknowledges the Associated Students of CSUN and the English Department faculty for all their help and generosity. Thanks to Bob Meyer and Color Trend for their continued assistance and support.

A very special thank you to our faculty advisor, Mona Houghton. She continues to be the backbone of this entire project. Without her dedication, this magazine would not be in existence.

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number narrative

ara shirinyan

In the moment before 'full sleep,' I think of writing a story that goes something like this, and I say to myself, "Should I get up and write this down so I don't forget?" I don't even give myself an answer and wake up 3 and 1/2 hours later. But, as you can see, I didn't forget.

John gets on a bus going from B to A. The ticket cost him \$55 and it took him a little over 12 hours (after taxes) to earn that kind of money. On the bus John meets Ana and she talks about how she's going to see her mother who will turn 42 in 7 days (a week). Ana is not going all the way to A, just half way, 1/2 way. When she gets off, they wave goodbye, like in romantic days, and then six Jehovah's Witnesses get on. One of them is my uncle Sako.

This narrative is about numbers. In math (a most dreaded subject for the author) an exercise that uses narrative is called a 'word problem.' I am trying to 're-kidnap' the narrative. (I even wonder sometimes why they call these number narratives 'word problems.' It is sort of offensive.)

My uncle Sako and his 5ive buddies and buddets are dressed in nice, respectable attire. That which is becoming of a saved person. All of the men wear ties, equaling three. All the ties on the bus equal four. The bus driver wears one too.

John notices that all the new passengers have briefcases. These briefcases hold *Watchtower* magazines. There are 116 *Watchtower* magazines in the six briefcases. The average for this is 19.33. The 3 repeats 'til infinity. So, you put a line over it as soon as a pattern has emerged.

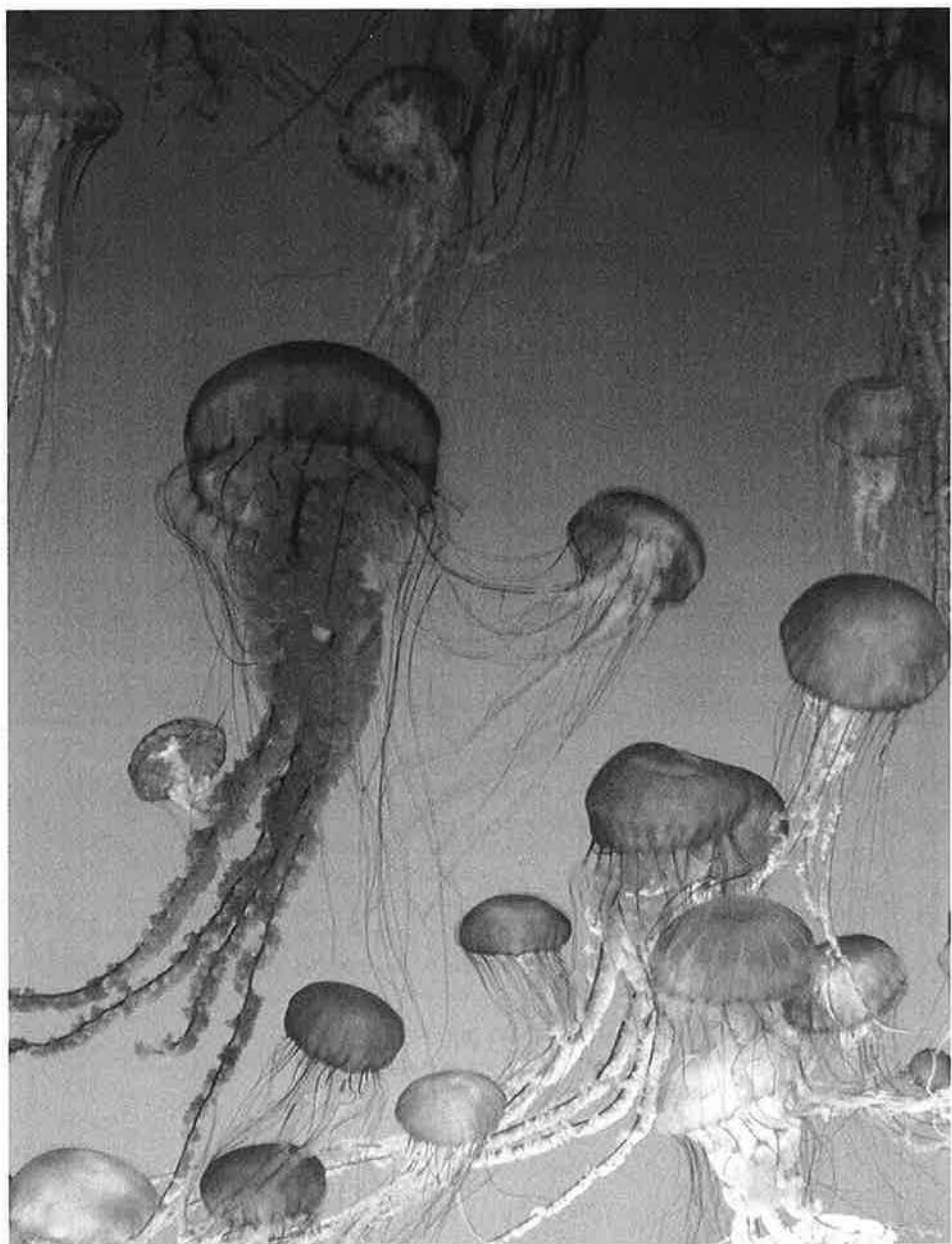
My uncle Sako bought his briefcase from Office Max. It's fake leather. He was really excited that the Jehovah's Witnesses let him into their church. The briefcase cost \$25.00 + tax (8.25%). So the final price was _____.

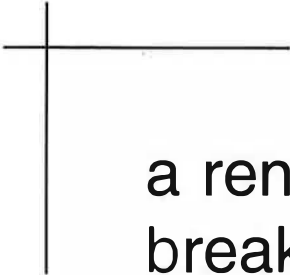
The number of *Watchtower* magazines that my uncle had in his briefcase was 22. And nine of these were in Armenian. Once he dropped one off at our house and tried to get my mom into the religion.

I started writing this story (or number narrative, or if you are a word-fearing number believer, 'word problem') at Taste of China. Which is famous for having bad food even though they got an 'A' rating from the health services people. An 'A' rating is 90% or better, and whoever gets this is very proud. But I hated the food. My orange chicken was too soggy. Probably 2 minutes and 30 seconds undercooked, if you ask me.

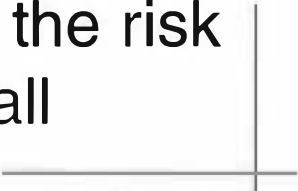
Walking out of the place, I imagined being asked by one of the workers, in front of the many customers in line, "How did you like it?" And my reply would be in this pissed off, cocky tone, and I would say, "Hasn't changed, still sucks." And I wouldn't be using 'Irony' or 'Parody' when using a word like 'sucks.' 'Irony' and 'Parody' are two categories created by people in the 20th century who were battling the massive amounts of information and had to use irony to get through things. They are also categories describing various types of narrative.

*Walking out of the restaurant, I walked two storefronts away to Unicuts because my hair had grown nappy and I could do very little with it. As I was writing that whole thing about the Jehovah's Witnesses, my name was called to get my haircut. My barber or hair stylist, which is the term used for barbers who work on women's hair, or barbers who just charge too much, took me to her chair and asked how I wanted my hair cut. As I was telling her I noticed the Spanish translation of the *Watchtower* magazine sitting on her table and I felt that the events that had been running through my head 20, 25 minutes prior, suddenly had a nice...resolution.*





a renaissance
breakfast at the risk
of dying small



jeffrey sosner

Terror is a moldy piece of French toast syrup-less
served at the International House
of Pancakes beside a missing link

of Renaissance sausage. I sit sucking
baptized donuts as the waitress's blue eyes nova
to a cheerful blood-purple;
Sugar granules bring her tongue to orgasm.

(She comes words.)

Salt smells an awful lot like
sugar feels, just as laundry detergent, when
properly spanked, tastes
exactly like blackened birdcall steak.
Broken spirits and dishes crawl under the
kitchen door, startling the average
newspaper devourer.

Lyndon Johnson, hoists his blanket pig, says
If you pick 'em up by their ears it doesn't hurt 'em as much.
Maple bark sings smooth across
sticky ridges of his fingerprints.

With a pen stroke he sends Lady Bird
to Da Nang, then returns to his crossword.
Three-letter word for police action?

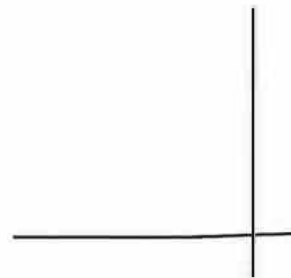
I ask what it starts with.
(already know how it ends.)

Granted, that waitress's eyes
never explode—only rattle close to the
brink, which, optometrists claim, is the leading
cause of cats on racks. They also say
meowophobia, fear of talking eats, staves off
smallpox and other forms of

smallness.
Don't laugh.
My grandmother dies small even
as she gristles into apple-green vastness. She chants:
Just hang loose, blood. Chi gonna catchya on th' rebound witta med-side,
in proper molasses-tongued jive.


No one cries for boysenberried bride and
groom. Their vows sound more
like coffee and born-again waffles.

Perdoneme hermana, pero vaya con Dios—
though you hear it whispered by broken houses,
though terror chews you at breakfast served anytime,
though waitress's eyes splice like
fireworks airbrushed on early May twilight.





the continuum



kelsey pyle

after Li-Young Lee

Like any dirty dish, I am without hunger
no longer wanting

and you say, unclean dishes serve no purpose
only work.

Spotless plates await
their function,
hear sounds of rumbled bellies,

and you are quick
to remind that soiled dishes
require more work
from fellowship. And a gathering
of the famished,

but unclean plates
means full stomachs,
no hunger.

Television's female answer
to Batman, Superman and Spiderman.
She could fly to the scene
of any crime in her invisible airplane.
Stop criminals and evil thugs
with her bracelets
that block bullets.

Same superhero outfit everyday—
red, white and blue
like gas stations
Chevron and Mobil
or beer cans
full of Budweiser.

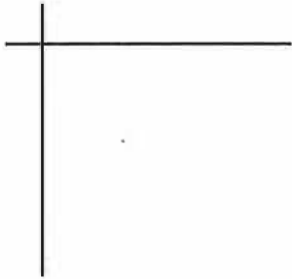
If TV networks cancel
syndicated reruns of Wonder Woman
Lynda Carter can get a job
pumping gas, full-time.
Go home, angry.
Drink Budweiser all night.



wonder woman



scott struman



girls who play volleyball

keith onstad

There is no reason to believe that you will ever be hit in the head with a clod of dirt that has a large rock hidden just below the surface, but there is also no reason to believe that you will not. Even if the only rules of engagement are that no rocks are allowed—there has never been a dirt clod fight without rocks. If you do get hit in the head with a rock, and if the rock hits you in your mouth, chips your tooth, and smashes your lip so that you start bleeding, it helps if you have a thirteen-year-old sister who is on the school volleyball team. You don't need a sister to pack your lip with ice, to clean the dirt around the wound, or to help you find the tooth. Boys are tough. Boys don't cry. You need a sister to kick the ass of the kid from the next block over, who is also thirteen, who threw the rock at you in the first place. Girls who play volleyball are tall. Girls who play volleyball have long legs, long enough to run after Jeremy Grantham, long enough to catch him. Girls who play volleyball have strong arms and large hands. Girls who play volleyball are not afraid to make a flying tackle. Girls who play volleyball know how to fight. Girls who play volleyball don't mind getting dirty when they are smashing the face of the kid from the next block over into the mud. Girls who play volleyball make good older sisters.

Older sisters coach you on how to lie about bloody lips and ripped shirts. Older sisters loan you the Saint Andrew's cross they received after confirmation class. Older sisters even offer to let you hold on to their lucky rabbit's foot, and even luckier severed Barbie's head, as charms to spirit you past inquisitive parents who will ground you in an instant if they think you have been fighting.

Older sisters take the fall with you when you get caught trying to sneak into the house, past your parents, and are caught despite the charms of the Saint Andrew's cross. Older sisters

don't cry when they are grounded for two weeks and can't wear their lucky sneakers, practice with their regulation volleyball, work out with their weights, or even ride their bike.

Older sisters sneak into your room at night after everyone has gone to sleep and tell you stories about how when you grow up and move out of the house you will be able to get into dirt clod fights every day of the week, and about how you will be able to come home with chipped teeth and bloody lips whenever you want and not have anybody say a word, and about how they will never fall in love with a boy and you will never fall in love with a girl, and how you will be best friends forever.

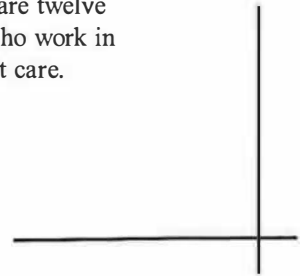
Older sisters pull the secret box out from under their bed and show you the regulation Olympic volleyball, the cardboard gold medal they made when they were seven, and the jersey they wore to the state championships—charms that are going to take them all the way to the Olympic games, but only if you promise not to tell anyone that you ever saw them.

Older sisters don't mean to, but sometimes they lie. Sometimes they do grow up, sometimes they fall in love with boys, sometimes they make out in the backseat of a car with a boy they like, sometimes they get pregnant at sixteen. Sometimes they forget that they ever had dreams of Olympic gold.

Older sisters have children out of wedlock and drop out of high school. Older sisters carry around a baby in a pack that wraps around their shoulders like an albatross around the neck. Older sisters never leave the house without a bottle, a bag of diapers, and an assortment of powders, cremes, and liquids to be put on, in, or over the child they never wanted in the first place.

Older sisters have nametags that read "Liz—Seattle." They wear short skirts, a white blouse, and an apron. They wear comfortable shoes because they are on their feet all day long. They carry a small paper pad and a pen. Older sisters always have plenty of ones so they can make change, but they really want people to tell them that they can keep the change so they will have enough money to buy a six-pack on their way home from the diner.

Older sisters sometimes get married to men they meet in a bar. Men who are twelve years older than they are. Men who already have two children of their own. Men who work in construction. Men who don't know that they ever played volleyball. Men who don't care.



When you meet an older sister after years of being apart you find out that she has developed a taste for Jack Daniels, but that most of the time she drinks Budweiser and MGD Lite. You find that she eats a lot of frozen foods because she does not have time to cook after a long day at the diner. You find that the little girl she had when she was sixteen does most of the cooking anyway, because she has turned out great; she is a softball player in middle school. She is tall for her age and has strong hands and long legs.

When you meet an older sister after years of being apart she will show you a picture of her daughter in her softball uniform and tell you about the championship game she was in last year that the older sister didn't see because she had to work, but where her daughter was MVP. She will show you pictures of the two sons of her ex-husband that she loves like they were her own, and never sees anymore because they live with their dad, but still sends a card to every year at Christmas and on their birthdays. She will show you the picture of the son she had with her ex-husband and who is the smartest little boy in the third grade. She will show you the picture of her new boyfriend, who loves her like her ex-husband never did. She will show you the picture of her new boyfriend's nineteen-year-old daughter who is starting to smoke and drink and is going to have to move out of the trailer soon if she does not shape up.

When you follow your sister's dented, 1986 Plymouth Horizon back to the trailer park you see her neighbor's children running in to and out of and around the trailers, you see bicycles propped up against metal walls, tiny plastic picket fences around postage stamp lawns that are either overgrown or mostly bare earth. You see bright red, plastic hummingbird feeders with not a single bird in evidence. You see cars that have been parked in the same places for years. You see dogs on leashes and dogs running free. You see worn out door mats that long ago said "Welcome," but now only say "We."

When you walk into the trailer with your older sister you can see the little girl you last saw when she was four years old sitting at the kitchen table cutting out coupons and putting them in an old Kool-Aid canister. You can see her making notes on the shopping list that hangs on the refrigerator door. You can watch her boil spaghetti, pour a can of sauce over it, and spoon it onto chipped plates. You can watch her go to the refrigerator and open a can of beer for her mother, and another for you which she holds out at arms length when she hands it to you because she knows you are her uncle but does not remember you, and has no reason to trust the men who have come into her life during the past thirteen years.

You can watch your older sister rummage through cupboard after cupboard looking for the carton of Camels that she knows is still half full. You can see her search the junk drawer for

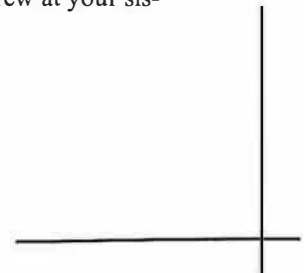
matches. You can watch her thirteen-year-old daughter glance at the box of matches sitting on the top of the oven, but then look away without saying anything. You can see the souvenir bottle opener from Ivar's Fish and Chips that she pulls out of the drawer so she can open the bottle of wine that she bought on the way home from the diner because it was a special occasion. You can watch the little girl wince as the bottle opens, and see her glance up at the half-full bottle of Jack Daniels on top of the refrigerator without saying anything. You can watch your older sister find the box of matches and begin to chain smoke filterless Camels like she is not allowed to do at the diner.

Later, when the kids are in the living room watching TV, the bottle of wine is gone, and your sister is drinking Jack Daniels from a glass that used to be a jar that held some sort of cheese product, you can listen to her tell you that she was never meant to be a mother, that she never wanted children, that she could have gone to college, that she would have gone on a volleyball scholarship. You can look over her shoulder as she shows you the picture from her freshman yearbook when she was the captain of the JV volleyball team even though she was only in the ninth grade. You can wait while she pulls her old trophies out from a secret box underneath the bed and tells you with slurred speech that the fucking asshole who knocked her up ruined her life. You can pray that the TV is turned up loud enough so the kids can't hear, even though you know that it is not.

You can watch as the Jack Daniels, bile, spaghetti, and cheap wine come bubbling up out of your sister and she passes out on the floor next to her bed. You can walk through the dirty trailer, past the cigarette-stained kitchen table with its mismatched dishes and the overflowing ashtray.

You can take the two children outside and teach them how to play football in the vacant lot next to the trailer park—trying in one afternoon to make up for years of National Geographic subscriptions at Christmas, Snoopy cards on their birthdays, and promises to take them to Disneyland if they ever come down to Los Angeles for a visit.

You can ask yourself why you were not there to stop the rocks that life threw at your sister, the way she was there to stop the rocks when they were thrown at you.





a vulgar stupendous
life's dream




christopher mulrooney

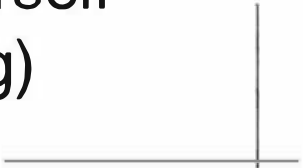
the crowd mills about
butterflies glued down
from Thailand

this is the black noir
shadow of things
in the very large cave
of the city





(finding yourself
while driving)



drew deboy

i thought i found
your heart in a corn maze
outside a little town on
state road 26. i thought
we connected in your
kitchen in a bigger town
on state road 26. i thought
i recalled your unscripted
voice when i drove through
james dean's time-forgotten
birthplace off state road 26.
and when i passed those
clapboard-ranch houses clad
in forest remnants, i thought
for a moment we too could
be timeless and infinite, stretching
into both horizons.



the
vagabond

darah kabot

The Vagabond lay low under the sun. The motel was L-shaped, two buildings meeting at a corner and partially enclosing the pool. It was Friday, one of the rare afternoons when Bernice wasn't needed at the restaurant. She lay on a plastic pink flotation raft, drifting along the length of the pool.

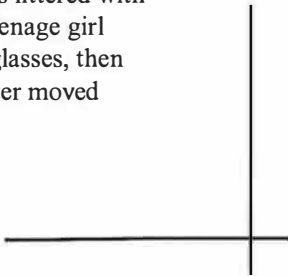
The plaster around the water's edge was chipped in some places, and grass grew in cracks in the sidewalk. Her son Victor sat near an edge, his feet and legs immersed and pedaling to create small waves. The water rose in ripples to make the drifting raft jump and dip.

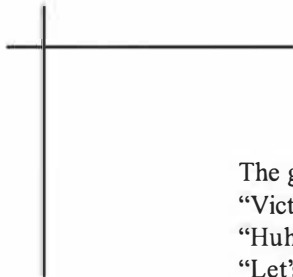
"Hey, Vic." She lifted her head and looked at him. "Get in the water with me."

"It's too hot, Mom. It's shadier here."

Bernice closed her eyes and relaxed again on the warm raft, which bent to the curves of her body. They'd lived at this motel for almost three years. Victor was eleven when Bernice decided she'd had enough of Anaheim and that they should move to Vegas. At a laundromat she saw an ad from the Vagabond advertising weekly rates of \$55. They'd be a half-mile from the Strip, where she worked at the Exalibur and the Luxor.

When she opened her eyes again the sun was directly over her. The sky was littered with thin clouds, the motel standing black in contrast. Her skin had dried. There was a teenage girl sitting in a red bikini on the steps to her left. Bernice regarded her through her sunglasses, then looked over to where Victor sat. He was staring at the girl. Reflections from the water moved across his face and she couldn't see his expression.





The girl lit a cigarette and leaned back on one arm; she shifted and spread her legs a bit. “Victor, you hungry?” Bernice’s back ached. She’d stayed in one position for too long. “Huh? Yeah.”

“Let’s go in the room. We’ll cool off and eat.”

Victor stood up and put his flip-flops on. Without leaving the raft Bernice grabbed an edge of the pool and pulled herself flush. She put her hands on the cement and hoisted herself up, the plastic squeaking against her skin. She followed him up the stairs, breathing heavily from the effort.

Bernice and Victor lay in their beds, watching a TV propped on the writing desk. Victor’s chin rested on his chest. His face, at 14, was losing its softness. His nose was more prominent than hers; a rash of acne had emerged along his forehead. He held a Pepsi and clicked through the channels.

A quart of potato salad sat on the nightstand between the beds, along with plastic forks and mismatched plates. Bernice ate absently, watching the TV in silence. Victor stopped at channel 83, one of the pay-per-view porn channels. The screen was black except for a telephone number scrolling across it, but the soundtrack came through: the soft guitar and moaning Bernice recognized from a former life. Victor giggled and sped through the channels to 112, Home & Garden TV.

“Stop! I want to look at this,” Bernice said.

Victor sighed and set the remote down on his bed. They watched the show “Transformed Homes.” That day’s episode centered on a three-bedroom, two-story house that the owners had converted into a five-bedroom “estate.”

The room that Bernice and Victor lived in consisted of twin beds, nightstands, a writing desk and chair, a small fridge and microwave. During a commercial for jewelry cleaner Bernice fell asleep and didn’t notice Victor leave.

She woke up and was alone in their room. She needed to go to the bathroom. Bernice walked, tugging her bathing suit down from where it had ridden up. She entered the bathroom and peed with the door open. Sitting on the toilet, she looked down at her thighs, which spread across the seat. She hadn’t gone on a date in eleven months. She was sure of this, since it had

been on her last birthday. Another waitress at work had set it up for her. She thought Victor might have gone back to the pool. She grabbed a room key and stepped out onto the landing.

Victor was swimming, crossing the pool one way with a sidestroke and returning on his back. Each arm broke through the surface of the water and descended behind him, showering him in drops of water. He was strong and he moved quickly, reaching the pool's end in only a few strokes.

Bernice decided to join him. She didn't see the girl until she had come out of the stairwell. It was the Red Bikini girl from earlier, sitting at a table that faced the pool. When Bernice passed she looked up and didn't smile so much as bare her teeth.

"Hey, Victor, you're supposed to tell me when you're coming down here."

Victor kept swimming. Maybe he hadn't heard her.

"Victor."

He finally stopped, then swam to a guardrail. He looked past her at the girl.

"Okay Mom, I'm going down to the pool. Here I am. Now I'm going to get out of the pool."

"Hey, Vic, I don't need attitude."

Victor climbed out of the water and passed the girl. She smiled at him.

"Hey," Bikini said.

"Hey," Victor said and smiled. He sat down at the next table. Bernice followed, and as she pulled a chair out next to Victor's he shot her a look.

"That's a good workout, huh?" the girl asked.

"Yeah, well, I like to swim. Victor. I'm Victor."

"I'm Candace. Hi."

"Hi."

Candace took off her sunglasses and they smiled at each other.

"And I'm his mom." Bernice's stomach gurgled.

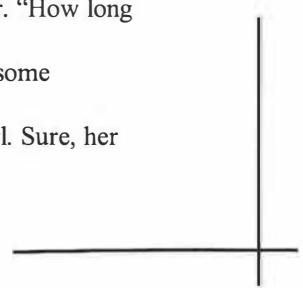
"Hi. Have you been staying here long?"

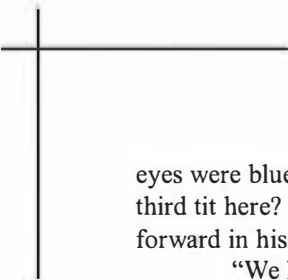
At least she was polite. Bernice stayed put, though. "We live—"

"We've been here a little while." Victor spoke over Bernice, surprising her. "How long are you here for?"

"I got here this morning. From L.A. I hadn't reserved a room and there's some convention in town, so..."

"Oh, L.A." They were quiet. In the silence Bernice looked again at the girl. Sure, her





eyes were blue and her hair was blond. But was that such a big deal? Why should she feel like a third tit here? Jesus, *they* were from L.A., too. Victor was looking around her at Candace, leaning forward in his seat. He hadn't talked so much all day.

"We lived in Anaheim."

"Where do you live now?"

"Oh, here and there. We travel around the country. My mom's a singer." Victor kicked Bernice under the table and she said nothing.

"Oh, wow. A stage show?"

"Yeah, and I help her out. I do her books for her."

Bernice figured he'd heard that on TV. She looked at him now, with amazement and some fear. His eyes shone as he continued, describing the cities they'd toured and how his mom was taking a vacation soon. He told her he was 18 and that he'd graduated early to manage his mom's career.


Bernice could see the holes in Victor's story and the girl, dumb as she looked, would probably figure it out. Bernice stood up, bumping her head on the umbrella covering the table.

"Well, we've got some...work to do, Victor." She looked down at him, then at Candace. They looked at her, their spell broken briefly.

"In a minute, Mom."

Bernice walked back to the room, her bare feet burning on the hot pavement. She shut herself in the room and waited. After an hour and a half she sighed and turned the television on. She turned the sound off and watched more houses transformed, growing greater, more intricate and beautiful, in a half-hour's time.





vegas thru the cat's whiskers



jennifer tracy

the main character is a man with three first names, like me, this can only benefit the miles he has traveled & will travel. these names transform aliases to identities to miles & to something else we haven't discussed just yet.

one. *what's in a name...* i thought i loved him when i was sixteen & drunk. i thought i loved him when i was seventeen & still alive. thought i knew the definition of words i have yet to experience, all i knew were the bonds i took for granted, held, planted, let grow wild like the wandering blue jewel out back—the sun was too hot one day, burnt us down to the roots.

two. we used aliases when we drove to vegas to see the grateful dead play live in the dust stadium. sad, we had no fabricated illusions from man-made poisons; we stood water soaked & sober, loving every second, thinking we loved each other more.

three. he coerced me to de-claw mccooy (who later changed his name to cody) for clawing caves in our gray couch.

four. *ours* was never new. from a family to a lover, never mine, always ours.

five. lovers is what they thought we were. always thinking.

six. on warm nights with freshly noodle-ed lasagna & homemade thoughts—they smiled at us, like lovers soon to produce. i was eighteen.

seven. i do not eat meat anymore. i learned all sorts of things make the person. i don't like the flesh texture crawling thru my mouth, making its home, how my stray climbed into the backside of the couch, grayed—ironically the color of indecision.

eight. i do not want to produce a mini-me, only try to love the one. my mom understands.

nine. tender. he captured a stray flea-infested cat in the pouring rain of our first december, so he could wake me, see me smile at him. he hated cats.

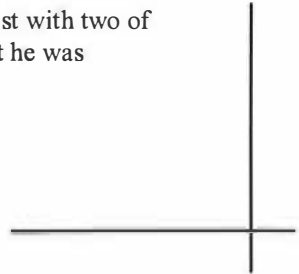
ten. in bed before him, trying to sleep with my thoughts, comfortable & differentiated from the beginning, i found my first pattern.

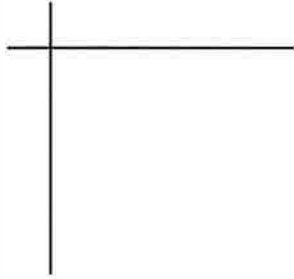
eleven. now, again, i see this pattern emerging, like a flood, the inevitable withdraw from my lover where i discover & rediscover my own world, possibly for the best.

twelve. apology. i was so greedy, protective, controlling—young. he was so good to me, i have learned men are often good to me.

thirteen. jealousy. i am not jealous of anyone, too much work for so little reward.

fourteen. driving in a flash flood thru barstow—getting lost with two of my best girlfriends, after leaving nevada, i wondered what he was doing.





fifteen. remember. i told him i could never see my life without him. he grew up with me, we changed against the background of each other's auras.

fifteen and one-half. secret. he held a secret from me for so long, i remember the feeling when he confided in me.

sixteen. still. i can't see my life without him, afraid to let him in, afraid he would try to be the lover *we* never were, i should have never asked for more than a friend. should have.

seventeen. meghan changed his name from trouble to ben. ben is a black lab we picked up in front of a wal-mart, up north at the lake.

eighteen. regrets—tattoo removal. he should have stopped the cycle before it began.

nineteen. sleeping in my toyota in a downtown ghetto of a city we barely ~~k~~new, with the alarm on, was fun.

twenty. lies. i told him i didn't like his head shaved, afraid other women would try to take him; he looked good.

twenty-one. i never liked being fat, buying fat clothes; i never liked how he didn't tell me they were fat clothes.

twenty-two. i thought i loved him when i was nineteen. i thought.

twenty-three. he is hard to keep out of my mind, especially with the cards he keeps sending my parents; you're the father i never had, blah, blah, blah.

twenty-four. believe.

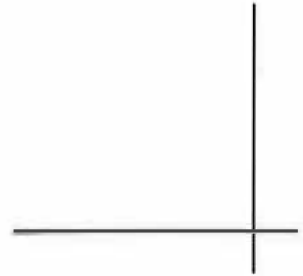
twenty-five. i believe we were meant to have exactly what we had, no more no less. it had a purpose, a development in my mind permanently altered for the better.

twenty-six. damn—i loved his family on such an intense/real level—more than they will ever know. i would have done anything for them.

twenty-seven. i thought i loved him. i am still searching to find the truth.

twenty-eight. truth or dare. prove real love while you spin & spin until you fall—disoriented, disillusioned & bruised from your speed.

twenty-nine. speed, momentum, continuous push of a motion started long ago, seeming never to unravel, like a gyroscope, part stands still & part moves forward—never lasting, but slowing, slowing, then toppling head first on to the sherry wood in the second story condo where i can feel the sea breeze on my still-bare arms.





uninvited



leann mizzi

cold hands are greedy
mouths, brittle against your own
passive narrow bones





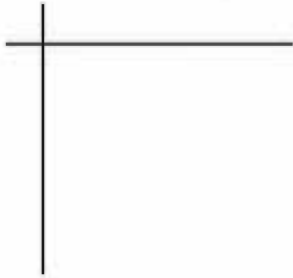
desert life



susan brown

Cacti, roadrunners, tumbleweeds, a blue pool, painted green burros and grandma's hair the color of bright orange lilies—memories of the week my sister and I spent in the desert, oh, and the time after the old folks' morning game of shuffleboard when they gathered round us like a swarm of bees seeking something sweet, buzzing all over our polka dot bikinis, stroking our long smooth limbs, tickling our warm sugary bellies with veined hands transparent as bee's wings, crooning "remember when we were like that Elsie?" and "feel how soft Harry" while a blind man's curled fingers swam the swell of my hip. Could they really have been like us? We longed to dive into the sea of blue chlorine, rinse away the feel of their balmy touch draining, swallowing our silky moisture, like we were fountains of youth. But grandma wanted to show off her winning bingo cards so we stood still, waited like they waited for their numbers to be called, let them double check our soft low numbers while they dreamed of living among the clouds—until Harry's yellow fingers began to slowly uncurl and his eyes beamed as he made out the slight curves of my breasts and Elsie's stoop straightened out like a wild flower reaching for the sky, her parched skin grew soft as petals and a peachy hue spread on her powdery face—then my sister ran away and I blinked, realizing they hadn't changed at all; it was only the glare of the desert sun swimming in my clear brown eyes.





breaking the surface

leann mizzi

There is a spider lazily making its way across the cottage cheese mountains of my ceiling. I woke up to the sound of Koi frying somewhere (in the kitchen maybe?) and my mother telling me that all of the pancakes were dead. The spider seems to be lost. No, wait...It was the pancakes that were frying, and she said that they had been killed a few days ago. *Dead pancakes? No, that can't be right.* Either way, the world is most uninviting today. I don't even like pancakes. Especially not the ones my mother attempts to manipulate into edible substances. I burrow back under the cool shade of my comforter and search for the remaining fragments of my dream: soft images of underwater shadows and brightly colored fish.

The phone has been ringing for eighty-nine days straight, making it impossible for me to find my dream again. I roll over and answer angrily, but there is no response. Björk looks down at me from the ceiling and encourages me to go outside, but that would mean facing an empty pond. I pretend not to hear her, but she continues anyway, reminding me that it is cold outside and not to forget my gloves. There's no stopping her when she's in dictator mode. Sometimes I worry that she is Hitler in disguise and that I will have to kill her in order to save my Jewish friend with his two sets of silverware.

Eric is my only real friend at the high school. I think most of my classmates find me boring or weird. Not Eric though. Even though he's a senior, he hangs out with me during lunch hour. Sometimes at night we sit on the porch in his grandparents' backyard, and he'll play guitar while I read. I keep telling him that he'll be famous someday but he always shakes his head in

disagreement. Whenever I attempt much more of a conversation with him, he shuts off completely. I have no idea what happened to his parents, nor why he's so closed off, but I've grown comfortable with his social short comings during the course of our friendship.

Björk interrupts my reverie. "Get going girl! There is much to do before the day is done." *Where does she come up with these stupid sayings?* I give the black and white poster a dirty look before leaving the room spitefully gloveless. Sometimes I think that maybe I could kill her even if she isn't Hitler.

My mother is washing the dishes when I enter the kitchen in search of breakfast. There's a pile of nearly blackened pancakes on the table and a glass of orange juice. I wonder why she's turned into Ms. Happy-Homemaker, but don't voice my question for fear of having it come out wrong.

"How ya feeling this morning, kiddo?" she asks, smiling at me. I hate when she does that. Her teeth creep me out.

"I'm fine," I reply dully, hoping to ward off future questions. It backfires; my insolence earns me a first class ticket to guilt-trip land.

"Only fine? I let you sleep in. I made you breakfast. I'm warshin' the dishes. What the hell do you want from me?" She gestures wildly (drunkenly I suspect) with a plate in one hand. She sounds as though she's on the verge of tears, but I am unable to let my guard down, unable to sympathize.

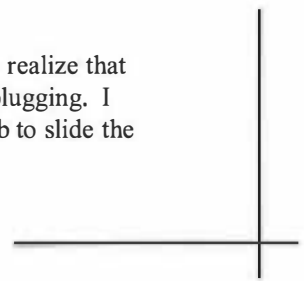
"There's nothing you can do. I don't want anything from you." The words sound trite, even to my ears.

"Sarah, you're gonna have to accept help from someone. You're making yourself sick."

I examine my fingernails, picking at the chipped nail polish. "I'm fine."

She sighs wearily, "Yeah whatever." All of the soapsuds have disappeared by now, but she goes back to washing the dishes anyway. I drain my glass of orange juice, and quickly hide the pancakes underneath a magazine and some t.v. dinner boxes in the trash can.

In the front yard, the silence is alien to me. It takes me a few moments to realize that it's the sound of the air pump that is missing, the lack of fish the reason for its unplugging. I reach down into the chilly pond water and grab a handful of rocks, using my thumb to slide the



smaller ones into the center of my palm and push off all of the rest. Slowly, I bring my hand up to the surface of the water for a closer inspection and pop three of the smoothest stones into my mouth. The wet clacking sounds they make whenever they hit my teeth is strangely soothing as I role them around with my tongue. My heartbeat sounds like it's trapped in my head. *Two and a half years I had those fish.* In the grand scheme of things they may not have meant much, but watching their sleek bodies glide through the water had comforted me on more than one occasion.

A couple of kids walk by, snickering. I give them a nasty look, digging my fingernails into my hand reflexively. *Why are they laughing? I bet they're the ones who killed my fish. Always throwing rocks in my pond.* Anger rolls in my stomach, but flies out in the form of embarrassingly girlish tears. The kids start laughing harder as they round the street corner and disappear from sight. I spit the rocks back into the water and imagine that it is the kids who are sinking to the bottom instead. Their laughter disappears in small bubbles as their pale bodies slither over and around each other in frantic attempts to get out. When they scream for help I start throwing heavy, hand-sized rocks at them just like the ones that killed my fish. The sweat on my forehead collects itself into small rivers that travel slow, then fast, and then slow again. I dream of swimming along the ocean floor, resting in beds of kelp and sand.

When I go back into the house there is the scent of burnt pancakes still lingering though my mother is nowhere to be seen.

"Long time no see, ice princess." Eric startles me when I open my bedroom door.

"What's that supposed to mean? What are you doing here? What are you doing on my bed?" Flustered, I push a large pile of dirty clothes under my desk. *Why didn't my mom tell me I had company? We never have company. I hope there aren't any tampons in my trash can.*

"You sounded pretty nasty on the phone earlier. Your heart... is like ice," he says in a cheesy almost-French accent.

"That was you? Most people let the phone ring a few times and give up you know."

"I figured you were sleeping."

"You are such a bastard."

"Ah, but the ladies love me, they do. Just ask them." He grabs a sea turtle off my floor and starts interviewing it. "On a scale of one to ten, Ms. Turtle, what would you give the dashing and exotic Eric?"

“Oh Eric, you are so charming and special. I just loooove your curly hair. Definitely a ten,” he says in a falsetto voice while making the turtle dance around on my bed.

“That’s a boy, and he doesn’t like men. You still haven’t told me why you invited yourself over.”

“I didn’t. When I called again a little while ago, your mom asked me to come over. I was thinking we could go over to San Francisco. Hit up a deli or something.”

Why would she do something like that? It’s not like her to be so nice. I want to question Eric further, but don’t care enough to press him for details.

“I’ll need to change. It’ll only take a second.”

“Riiiiiiight. I’ll just settle in for a visit with my good friend *A Tale of Two Cities*,” he says, picking up my book and heading to the living room.

The deli that Eric takes me to is packed full of noisy people. We decide to try out a bakery on a less busy street, away from all the tourists. I order a bowl of tomato soup with a croissant, and Eric buys a turkey sandwich. When our food is ready we take it outside and sit at a small wrought iron table. There are so many pigeons looking for crumbs that I begin to feel anxious. They keep giving me strange looks like they’re conspiring something sinister.

“How come you’ve never invited me over to your house?” Eric asks, spitting a piece of sandwich onto the table. I pretend not to notice.

“Because I didn’t want you to meet my mom.”

“Why? She seemed nice enough when she let me in.”

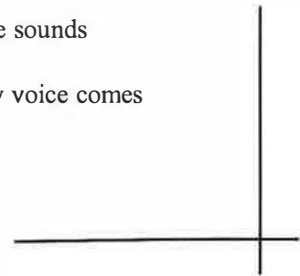
“I hate her. She’s always saying terrible things about me. Besides that she has abnormally small teeth. It’s disturbing when she smiles.” I rush on, hoping that he won’t ask me to elaborate upon my relationship with her. “I found one of her high school yearbooks the other day. Her smile was scary looking even then, and her gap was bigger. I almost cried when I saw that only her teachers had signed the book. I don’t think she had any friends.”

“Why does she say mean things about you?”

I can’t do this right now. Not today. “Forget about it.”

“No. You can’t say something like that and then just drop the subject.” He sounds irritated.

“Why not? You do it to me all the time.” I try to sound in-charge, but my voice comes out in a kidlike whine.



“Your mom said that she was worried about you and that she thought maybe you would talk to me. That doesn’t sound like the same woman you’re describing, or not describing, I should say.”

“Oh sure. Just take her side, traitor. I’m telling you, there’s nothing wrong with me.”

“Then why did you kill your fish?”

All of the background noises that had been irritating me seem to get sucked up into a vacuum. The pigeons collectively turn and stare at me, their eyes resembling black glass beads. It is hard to know what they are thinking when their eyes reflect nothing. I get up quickly, knocking my tray onto the ground. My bowl breaks on the pavement. The tomato soup spills out like ribbons of blood as the pigeons move in, smiling greedily.

“I didn’t kill them,” I mumble before leaving the courtyard.

Eric yells after me to slow down, so I speed up and nearly run into an old man who is sweeping the sidewalk. My apology does not placate him. He starts yelling about how kids are nothing but trouble, always running from something, never just facing life head-on. His tirade stuns me long enough for Eric to catch up.

“Didn’t you hear me calling after you to wait up?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie. You know you did.” He punches my arm and laughs nervously. “I’m sorry I upset you.”

The old man starts mumbling angrily to himself and then moves further down the sidewalk. He acts like he’s trying to give us some privacy, but I can tell that he’s straining to hear our conversation. I motion for Eric to start walking with me across the street.

“No, I’m the one who should be sorry. I’m turning into such a drama queen these days. I hate it. I don’t know what’s gotten into me.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

I want to say no. I can feel the shape of the word in my mouth, and yet something else comes out. Something inside of me gives way. “How did you know that I killed my fish?”

Eric’s surprise at my turnaround is apparent as he trips over his words. “Uh... your mom told me. She said you did it a few nights ago. That you’ve been holed up in your room ever since. She also said that your neighbor killed himself last week.” He looks to me for a response but I can’t think of anything to say. “Why didn’t you call me? I would have come over and kept you company. Played Scrabble or baked cookies or whatever.”

I can feel a familiar tightness in the back of my throat, but don’t want to cry in front of

Eric. I fiddle with the zipper on my jacket to distract myself.

“Your mom seems really worried.”

“She’s faking. My mom hates me.”

“Sarah, no mother can hate her own child.” The matter-of-fact way Eric goes about discussing things is so irritating sometimes. Who would know my mother’s love, or lack thereof, better than me?

“My mom had a thing for our neighbor.” *Why am I telling him this?*

“The one who killed himself.”

“Mm-hm.” *He’ll probably stop talking to me, and then I’ll be alone again.*

“And?”

“It was my fault. He killed himself because I got fed up with his tell-anyone-and-you’ll-regret-it game. I pushed the line and he did exactly what he promised he would.”

“Tell anyone what?”

“That we were having sex. No, it wasn’t rape, but it wasn’t exactly something I wanted either.” A long silence passes. I wonder if he is disgusted with me and wish I were at home in bed. Anywhere but here. “I don’t really know how to explain it, but it was nice to have someone that paid attention to me.”

“You can’t mean that. You’re only fourteen.”

“Old enough to know right from wrong, and obviously I messed up pretty bad. My own mother calls me a slut.”

“But what he did was illegal, and there’s a reason for that. You’re just a kid.”

“I am so sick of hearing that. *He* never called me a kid. In fact, he treated me like an equal. The things I said mattered, they held value.”

“But look at what’s happened to you. You killed your fish, you live in a perpetual daydream—”

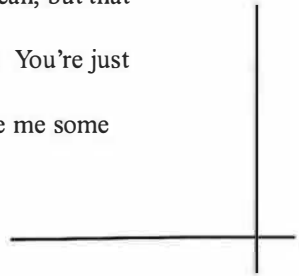
“Shut up. You don’t know anything about anything.”

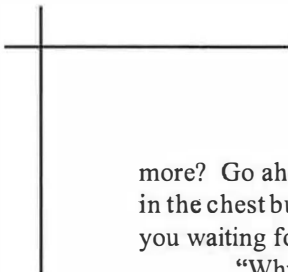
“I know enough to see those bruises on your neck and know that they were caused by someone with strong hands.”

Reflexively, I cover my neck and then realize how stupid it must look. “Yeah, but that doesn’t magically make me the innocent victim in the scenario.”

“I can’t believe that you’re trying to argue this with me. You are innocent. You’re just too naïve to realize it.”

“And I can’t believe what an asshole you’re being. Why don’t you belittle me some





more? Go ahead, but let's move on to bigger and better things. Call me a whore." I punch him in the chest but he doesn't seem to notice. "Come on. Call me a nasty cunt. What the hell are you waiting for?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what? You're the one who keeps insulting me. Don't try and turn this around on me."

"This is ridiculous. You're not even making sense. I refuse to stand here and listen to you beat yourself up over something that you aren't even responsible for..." He keeps talking, making large sweeping movements with his hands.

I examine the brick pattern of the building we are standing next to. The symmetry of the mortar lines is precise, soothing. The gold lettering on the store's window advertises that it is a jewelry shop. The iron bars over the window tell of past robberies committed. *I had a ring once. Alexandrite. Gift from him, back when things were still alright. Before my life became different shades of gray. What happened to that ring?*

"Mom made me give it back." Too late I realize that I have spoken aloud and interrupted Eric's grand monologue.

"What? What are you talking about?"

My words hang in the air, too heavy to explain away. Eric's pained face makes me feel like a jerk. "Umm..."

"Forget it. This was a huge waste of time. I'll take you home."

The ride home is silent, not even the radio to fill the distance between our seats. All the cars we pass are filled with laughing faces. Thom Yorke sings in my head:

*i'll take a quiet life
a handshake*

some carbon monoxide

*no alarms and no surprises
silent
silent*

We pull up to my house. Eric says nothing. I study the side of his face for a moment, then get out of the car. He starts to drive off before my door is even closed. *Why do people get mad at you just because you don't want their help? They'd rather listen to themselves than hear anything you have to say.*

My bedroom is not exactly the way I remember it when I left. It feels more empty than usual. There is a strange silence. *It's not my fault he doesn't understand anything. I will be perfectly fine.* I do a belly flop onto my bed, pretending that I am a whale. I slice through the ocean gracefully, and all the fish give me saltwater kisses. *I don't need anyone. I will depend solely on myself and never be let down.*

"That's not possible," Björk interrupts my daydream.

"Leave me alone."

"I'll leave you alone when you stop feeling sorry for yourself."

"I'm not. I don't care about anything."

"Stop acting like a whiny brat."

"Stop bossing me around. I am so sick of having to accommodate to what other people expect from me."

"Then don't. Play by your own rules."

"Go away."

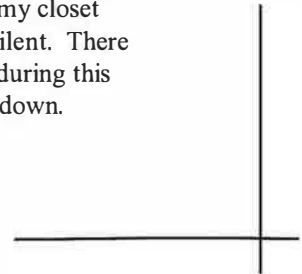
"I am only here because you wish it. There is something in you that needs me."

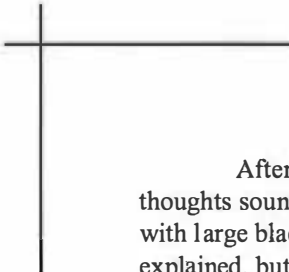
"I don't need anyone. Especially not you."

"I will leave, but listen to me first. You need to begin your own story. Something they will have to listen to. If you don't explain yourself, no one is going to bother trying to understand you."

She has a point, but I'm too tired to continue the train of thought. I fall asleep with my shoes still on.

The shadows of my curtains have traveled away from my bed and toward my closet when I finally get up. I look at Björk from the corner of my eye but she remains silent. There are birds chattering amongst themselves outside, and I wonder if they always sing during this time of day. I move the dirty clothes pile out from under my desk so that I can sit down.





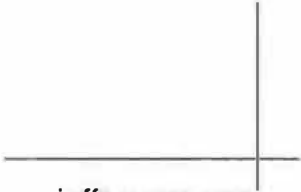
After writing for a little while I scan the page, reading aloud to myself. None of my thoughts sound the way I had intended. They seem melodramatic, too whiny. I scratch them out with large black strokes; the ink bleeds onto my desk. There are so many things that need to be explained, but I am unsure what point I am even trying to make. Already feeling defeated, I look up in search of a distraction. There is a spider on my ceiling. *It's probably the same one from this morning. We are both stuck, going in circles. I don't want to live this way anymore; there has to be something better than this half-rate sideshow I stumble through everyday.* I begin writing again, not allowing myself to stop or cross anything out.

I used to have a father. Not a real one, but a good replacement. He would take me to the Japanese Tea Gardens to look at the fish. He did all sorts of other things that fathers are supposed to do too...even built a pond for me. We got the stones for free from a construction company, so it didn't end up costing very much. This pond had a little waterfall, and we filled it with the most beautiful Koi. Orange and black and white and red and silver: all the best colors. Things changed though...





may



jeffrey sosner

Her silhouette eclipses
a television screen,
her liver-spotted hand
extended, giving
Ron Reagan a single-digit
salute. Had I been

allowed to attend
her funeral, I'd have blown
up that photo with the
negative I kept, and
placed it on an easel before
her casket. She was there

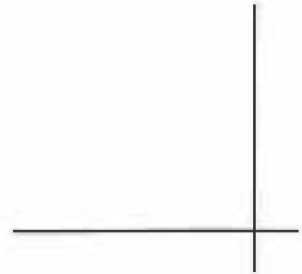
the day I wept at the water
fountain; by way of double-dribble I had
cost the Pee-Wee Nuggets a
championship. She said life was
not a basketball game. I wish
I had never told her that I wished
she would die. From behind her
Mardi Gras oxygen mask she
forgave with Yoda eyes.

jeffrey sosner

51

may

Cancer had danced in, trampled her.
I never thought words could plant
tumors, else I'd have
sewn my tongue in my throat
and swallowed the sun.






drawn to bone




james doyle

The estate parceled itself out
to each survivor. I got the basement
of the woods, where the trees
couldn't let go of their dead branches,
tangled them with the live parts
in a latticework so thick
it held the sky at bay. Leaves
from a dozen autumns never moved
from where they fell. It was a place
to love shadows, so I learned
that alternatives to the sun held
their own grace, caverns of dark
foliage to line my blood
like protective clothing. Through long
afternoons of shade that seemed
to build up like a storm
I imagined the humid air
condensing into shells
and the underside of driftwood. Crawling
things carried this sunless grove
on their backs. Flying things
circled it, waiting for something
like the seasons to gouge
openings. I considered myself
the prime survivor, the lord
of the estate who could fold
his land over himself
the same, living or dying.





gehrig hits
for the cycle



jeffrey sosner

Disease gnaws soft at my lumber;
bat speed bleeds through
pinstripes. Not like I used to be—a Yankee,
cleaning up for the Babe. He's three, I'm four,
on our backs and through
the order. Seventeen fractures

healed in my hands;
still I played, wouldn't let them X-ray me.
Now look at my iron horse stagger. I
try to say:

“Why, God?
Why now
do You devour me?”

But then the demon, the dinosaur, the
doppelganger digs in, dines on my self-pity, which is a
good meal, I suppose, and a blessing, really, for he leaves
only words:

“Today I consider myself
the luckiest man
on the face of the earth.”

jeffrey sosner

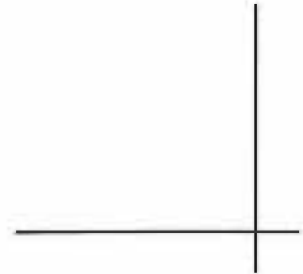
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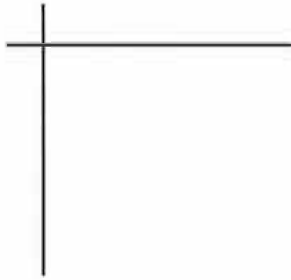
gehrig hits for the cycle

I always said they'd have to
kill me to get me out of the lineup.

And worse than that, my wife.
We're not telling her until it's almost
time. I'm going to miss the scent of red-brick dust
kicking up on the infield.
The peanuts and chimney smoke of Autumn,
siren-song me to the plate.
I grind my spikes on the left side,
watch pitchers fear
the heart of Murderers' Row.

Now it's the swelling, aching
new fear clubbing me—the
hammer of a much bigger,
better hitter.





racing the sell-by-date

jordan mott

All my friends are drunks. I didn't plan it that way, but that's how it is. So when the phone rings after 6:00 p.m., I can pretty much count on a certain level of drama at the other end of the receiver. But lately I've gotten tired, so I stay in a lot. My Southern California Toyota dealers bring me re-runs of *Seinfeld*, and I have a pretty good stereo, but since my ex, Kathleen, moved out, late last year, things have been pretty quiet on a lot of fronts.

Dave, my oldest friend and high school drinking buddy, was determined to change this. He wanted to fly out for a weekend, the Friday after Thanksgiving. He began calling about it twice a week in September. It was fine with me. The club where I'd been bartending went under earlier in the year, and I was collecting the last of my unemployment and trying to figure out my next move. I wasn't coming up with much, and a visit from a friend sounded good, but I wasn't sure why we needed to touch base about it so often.

Finally, around the first of November, he let it slip that there was a girl in Long Beach that he'd need to look up while he was here. At this point, I didn't have to be Sigmund Freud to figure out that he was flying halfway across the country to get laid. This was fine with me too, I just wished that he wouldn't try to be so artistic about it.

The object of his long distance affections was a dizzy, twenty-three-year-old rock and roll party girl who called herself Trixie. Her real name is Ruth. Dave met her in Vegas last summer when he was on tour with a punk band. Dave runs a recording studio in Detroit that caters to an underground clientele, and when he's feeling restless, he can be persuaded to play guitar or organ with several of the groups he records. By his own admission, very little of the stuff he works on is any good. And he never cared much for the cramped vans and cheap motels

of the rock road life, but it got him out of Detroit once in a while, and it was a good way to meet girls. Dave turned thirty-six last April.

He told me I should pick him up outside the terminal, but I met him at the gate anyway. Since there are no more smoking sections on domestic flights, I thought it quite a feat that he was able to step off the plane reeking like Tennessee's ashtray.

"I know," he said, "I had a layover in Houston. You should have seen the smoking lounge at the airport. I only had two cigarettes, but after ten minutes, I said 'I gotta get out of here.' It was fucking gross."

Back at my house we had a beer and began trying to figure out what we were going to do about dinner.

"I better call Old Trixie, and see what she's doing," he told me. Dave has always referred to people he has a limited amount of respect for as "Old Insert Name Here."

"Well it's quarter after seven, man. She's probably watching a re-run of *Murder She Wrote*, and thinking about going to bed."

"What?" Dave asked.

"Nothing. Call Trudy."

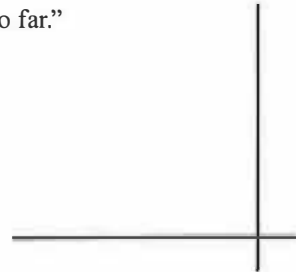
Dave wandered around the apartment, murmuring into the phone like a virgin, and I tried to ignore him by thumbing through a copy of *Architectural Digest* that Kathleen left behind. I'm probably the only guy in the barrio that keeps *Architectural Digest* on his coffee table. I'm aware it might seem pretentious, but if Kathleen ever comes back, I want her to know that her magazines are important to me. Also, they cover up a burn mark left by the end of a candle I'd recently slept through.

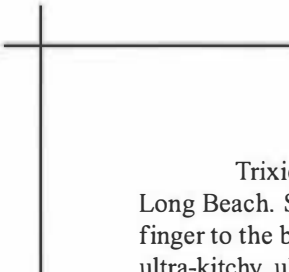
After ten minutes Dave hung up with a plan.

"How far away is Long Beach?" he asked.

"About an hour."

"I told Trixie we'd meet her there for sushi at 8:00. I didn't know it was so far."





Trixie lived in a small one-bedroom apartment in what's supposed to be the hip part of Long Beach. She must have seen us coming from the window, because just as Dave got his finger to the bell, she threw open her door and yelled, "Hiii." She'd decorated the place in that ultra-kitchy, ultra-ironic style that people in their early twenties find just so darn clever. There was ugly furniture and doodads everywhere; black panther TV lamps, porcelain figurines of dogs wearing clothes, Ken and Barbie having sex, Ken and Ken having sex, that kind of thing. She also kept three cats and wasn't big on housekeeping. I hated her on sight.

"Hiii," I yelled back, stepped on Dave's foot, and gave her a big hug.

After an awkward embrace with Dave, Trixie told us she was having a fuzzy navel and did we want one? In a move that rapidly drained my reservoir of affection and respect for him, Dave said yes. I took a beer and sat on the couch.

"Have you ever had one of these?" Trixie asked me, handing Dave his drink.

"Yeah, during the war," I said. "Too many memories."

"Oh." She looked embarrassed and reached across the coffee table for her Virginia Slims.

"Yeah, the war," Dave chuckled. No matter how much he wanted to get with a girl, if I felt like being a condescending jerk, Dave would always play along. I forgave him the fuzzy navel.

With alcoholics—same goes for junkies, strippers, and prostitutes—there is never a straight line between points A and B. I decided to follow in my car, hoping to cut the evening short and get out after dinner. But on the way to the restaurant we stopped at a bank machine, a 7-Eleven for more Virginia Slims, and Trixie's friend Scott's house, to pick up the sunglasses she left there the night before. Scott—who looked a half a fix away from a physical breakdown—needed a ride to the all night pharmacy, across town, so we did that too. This is all par for the course, really. I can't count the number of trips I've made to somebody's manager's cousin's or girlfriend's sister's houses in order to pick up money owed, lost identification, dog-eared copies of Kierkegaard. The list goes on and on.

Finally, a little after ten, we arrived at Origami, a not at all bad looking sushi bar on Pine Avenue. I was lucky to find a parking place right out front, but Trixie, who drove a red Ford Explorer accessorized with several Greenpeace decals, had to drive around the block to find a big

enough space. I went inside, got a table, and ordered drinks. A beer for me and two double fuzzy navels.

“First round’s on me,” I said when they found their way to the table.

Dave looked at his drink and smirked. I couldn’t be sure of Trixie’s reaction because she was wearing the big black sunglasses we had retrieved from Scott’s.

“Are those prescription?” I asked. Trixie struck me as the kind of person who would lose her glasses, and then spend two or three months driving around in her shades, day and night.

“No. I don’t need glasses. I wear these so that nobody can look into my *soul* without asking.” The way she leaned on the word *soul* suggested that, otherwise, I might not get how it was particularly significant in her case.

Dave couldn’t even look at me.

The waitress was a friend of Trixie’s, which evidently meant it was ok for her to ignore us. Trixie subverted any awkward lull that might have occurred by jumping into a long explanation of how they knew each other. The story involved a half a dozen people Dave and I didn’t know, a lot of ‘*she said,*’ and ‘*so I said,*’ and ended half an hour later with a ‘*God. Why are people such assholes?*’ A lot of drunk’s stories go exactly like this.

Dave said he didn’t know and switched to Canadian Club and soda. I didn’t care and excused myself to the bathroom. Mercifully, I found an exit in the back.

I’m falling apart and I know it. Not big-pieces-flying-off-in-the-middle-of-the-freeway falling apart, but more of a slow moving disengagement that I’m powerless to do anything about except watch. It’s not altogether unpleasant, except in its absoluteness. If I was younger I’d blame Kathleen, but I’d be wrong. Besides, at least I got to keep the magazines.

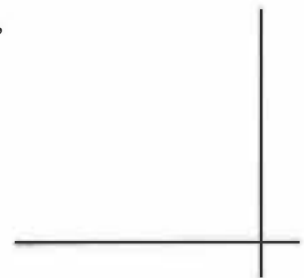
“What happened to you?” It was the next day and Dave was letting himself in the front door. He didn’t look that upset.

“Where’s Vicky?” I asked.

“Trixie. She just dropped me off. She had to go visit her mom in Encino.”

“That’s nice. Why didn’t you go with her?”

“Shut up. What are you doing?”



I've known Dave for twenty-four years and he's never once asked me how I was doing. Only what I was doing. I think he's afraid I'll think he's gay. In this case, however, his question wasn't without merit. Saturday being chore day, I was standing on a chair in the middle of the living room, spraying insecticide into a series of termite holes in the ceiling.

"I'm strafing bugs. How was your night?"

"Oh man," he said, shaking his head and fishing in his pockets for the cigarettes he's always leaving somewhere. Dave begins a lot of stories this way. It usually means there's a tale of some social train wreck in the offing. The deal here was that Trixie apparently saw fit to order another three fuzzy navels before Scott paged her. It turns out the bus that he was hoping to take from the pharmacy stops running at ten, so he needed a ride back to his place. Fearing the police, Dave insisted on driving since Trixie was, by this point, swallowing her words whole. But, with her passing out every two to three minutes, and Dave not knowing where he was, the trip across town took on the proportions of a hajji, at the end of which, romance was not in the air.

Since Dave's always prided himself on two things—handling his liquor and being raised a gentleman—back at her place, he carried Trixie from her car, got some water and aspirin in her, and put her to bed, before drinking the rest of her vodka and going to sleep on the couch. "But," he told me, "not to worry." (This is something else he says a lot, and it usually hangs on the unasked question of whether or not he's gotten laid.) My fears were to be put to rest because Trixie woke up early, and, feeling bad about the night before, made it up to him twice before breakfast.

"Nice of her," I said.

"Yeah, everything kind of worked out." He did nothing to contain the sneerish grin that makes him look like Snidely Whiplash without the mustache.

"You want to go get some lunch? We've got great Mexican out here."

"No. I'm not hungry," he said. Then he went into the kitchen and popped open a beer.

"Think I'll take a nap."

Two minutes later I heard him snoring from the other side of my bedroom door. I went back to the termites, swamped the ceiling with insecticide and drew in a deep breath.

As I know them now, it's hard to imagine my parents ever finding cause to be in a room together, much less marry and have children. My mother is the kind of woman that will always be described as nice, and not much else. She works for a podiatrist in suburban Detroit. My

father is a former schoolteacher who now works as a night watchman at a golf course in Myrtle Beach. They split up in the seventies, not long after he developed a mania for the writing of Richard Bach and books whose titles began with the words: *Zen and*. Three years ago, at the height of a Christ complex—he grew the beard and everything—my father took his fourth run up the aisle. This time with a crackhead. I haven't spoken to him since. It's not that I'm mad at him. I'm just bored with the drama.

I have one sister, Janet, seven years older than me. She lives in Texas and is expecting her first grandson in the spring. I should probably know the date, but because of the age difference, we aren't that close. She called me a few months ago to tell me that Dad and Crackie were separating. Apparently he hadn't been able to save her from herself. Janet sounded sincerely surprised and disappointed by this, and mentioned that Dad had asked about me, and she was sure it would cheer him up to hear from me. I told her she was probably right, and that if I went to flight school, someday I might walk on the moon.

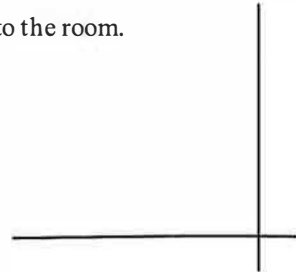
"I don't get it," she said.

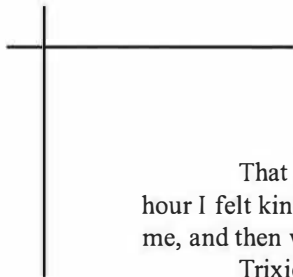
My father's favorite picture of the two of us features him as an asshole. It came in the mail while Dave was napping; the latest in a series of attempts to bond that accompanies each of his divorces. On the back of the snapshot, in my mother's careful, still-married handwriting, is the caption: *What lungs! February 1967*. In the picture my father, bending in to the frame with a freshly lit Tereyton in his mouth, holds open the lid of a beige footlocker in our basement. I'm standing in the footlocker wearing bright red overalls with a matching face, and screaming what looks to be bloody blue murder. The story as it was told to me—being eighteen months old at the time, I have no real memory of the actual hijinx—is that while my parents were cleaning the basement, I climbed in to the old footlocker. In a pique of wit, my father closed the lid over the top of me, and according to family lore, the ensuing noise that escaped from the metal box was so hysterically funny that they had to try to capture it on film. The irony is not lost on them and, in fact, according to them, is exactly what makes the shot *even funnier* than a picture of a baby trapped in a footlocker might otherwise be.

I was reading the accompanying note, (Love, Dad), when Dave walked into the room.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Fine, thanks." I said.





That night I had a few drinks and got as drunk as I get anymore, meaning for about an hour I felt kind of loose, bummed a couple of cigarettes, teased the shit out of everyone around me, and then wanted to go home to bed.

Trixie wouldn't hear of it. She had stopped by after spending the day with her mother, and insisted we all jump in her jeep immediately to go to Formosa—a nightspot on Santa Monica Boulevard—for calamari and cocktails. It was fun for a while, but as the night wore on, the bar became crowded with Angelenos. They were so primped and gorgeous it hurt to look at them, and the overwhelming majority were younger than Dave and I by at least ten years. Dave neither noticed nor cared, but—and I wouldn't vouch for direct cause and effect here—it was right after I noticed, that the fatigue set in.

“No, really guys, I'm done,” I said after Trixie's loud protest. I'd already held out an hour past the point of misery because, after my unceremonious exit of the night before, I wanted to be a good sport.

“You want to go somewhere else?” Dave asked.

“No. I'm getting kind of tired. But you kids have fun. I'll call a cab.”

Trixie giggled and said, “God. You're so like an old man.”

Just before we broke up, Kathleen said the same thing to me. People think it's a routine and I like it that way, but really, it's the thing about myself I hate the most.

“And you remind me of a mixed up little cunt.” I don't usually speak to people like this, but in the moment, the only alternative I could think of was to take a swing at her, and that's not how I was raised. In spite of my restraint, Trixie's lip began to quiver and she ran off to the bathroom.

“Wow,” Dave said. He shook his head and looked down at his C.C. and soda.

“Yeah,” I told him, “I'm too much.”

I tried therapy once. It was a few months after Kathleen and I split, and I was having a hard time getting out of bed. The therapist was a former Berkeley hippie who kept telling me what a good man I was, and that there were any number of women who would be happy to have me. I never liked hippies much. I mean, I don't hate them like genocide, but definitely more than bad breakfast. After three sessions my insurance lapsed and she told me we couldn't see each other anymore.

Two minutes in the bathroom was all it took for Trixie to get herself together enough to charge me with a wet roll of toilet paper. She got me with a good one right in the face. We were all then asked to leave.

On the sidewalk Dave negotiated as quietly as he could with a still screaming Trixie about how I was going to get home, and what he should do. I stood a few respectful yards away, using bar-naps to try to stop the flow of blood from my nose. When a cab pulled up and emptied a load of responsible, non-driving bar hoppers on to the curb, I took it as a sign from God, and got in the car. The cabbie was an old Mexican guy in a big straw cowboy hat. I liked him right away.

“Where to?” he asked.

“Not bad,” I told him, still bleeding, “How about you?”

I had just washed my face and climbed into bed when Dave came in.

“Hey,” I called into the other room.

“Hey.” Dave opened the bedroom door but didn’t come in.

“Where’s...?” I couldn’t think of a new one.

“She’s in the car, freaking out.”

“Oh for Chrissake.”

“You were a regular Noel Coward tonight.”

“Yeah. Sorry about that,” I said. This was a little bit true.

“Look, I’ve gotta drive her back to Long Beach.”

“Yeah.”

“And she wants me to bring my bag.”

“Hunh.”

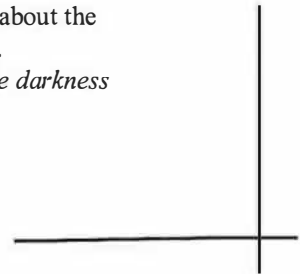
“Yeah, this is a good one. She’s convinced you’re technically evil.”

“Come on,” I said.

“I’m not kidding. I left her out there, still screaming about black holes and Hitler and you.”

“Really? I think I’m mostly a nice bunch of guys.” This is what they said about the saxophone player, Stan Getz. He was schizophrenic. It was an old joke between us.

“I know. But believe me, I bring my bag or I listen to her scream about *the darkness* around you all the way to Long Beach.”





“Jesus.”

“She’s just drunk and out of her mind,” he said. “I’ll get it worked out in the morning. She’ll be fine. Some friends of hers are having a party tomorrow. I thought you could come down, we’d hang out there a while, and then I’ll come back here with you. That way I’ll be closer to the airport Monday morning. Is that alright?”

“It depends,” I said. “Are her friends our kind of people?”

“Shut up. I’ll call you tomorrow.” He grabbed his bag and opened the front door. He turned on his way out and called back, “You want me to turn this light out?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

When I heard the front door click shut I reached under the bed and pulled the phone line from the jack. There were less than thirty-six hours until his plane left. I can go phoneless that long standing on my head.

Late Monday afternoon I was home with nothing to do. I had just checked the mail, cued up The Rolling Stones’ *Tumbling Dice* on the stereo, and was climbing around on the living room furniture—it’s a game I play, where I jump from the couch to the chair to the ottoman, landing on one foot and jumping again—when the phone finally rang. I turned the volume down and picked up. It was my mother. She wanted to know what I wanted for Christmas. I told her money. We talked about nothing for a minute and she hung up, sounding relieved to get off the line. I hung up the phone, turned the volume back up, and made it from a standing long jump near the stereo, all the way over the ottoman and the coffee table, and onto the couch.





huffing



celeste a. matthews

and there he was, my brother at twelve,
huffing vapors of asp
as if it was his first
kiss (which I suppose it was),
soft hands locking
into a mouth-moan
paper-grope,

like a musical flute,
a bilious *hissing* sound,
mesmerizing both Cobra and child,
from can to rhythmic bag,
from home to prison,

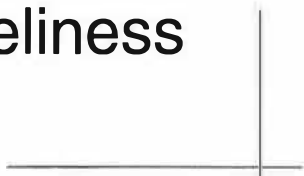
a collapsing papyrus designed
for holding bologna, apples,
and innocence; now used
for thinning
acid memories, not acrylics.

words of omission
and indifference are understood
as lovelessness
by even the youngest viper.





a riff on loneliness



jeremiah e. bernstein

An executive badgered
by the coax of confreres

The sprinkle of white
amid Jerry's black hairs

The blinking eye
in a crowd of stares

The rebellious cricket
giving samba a try

A tinge of salt
in Sara's sweet pie

The bright yellow
that pierces the sky

A grandfather clock
who has lost his cane

The harbor of hearsay
howling in the rain

A tumbleweed wandering
through a maze of sand

The bottled emotion
searching for land

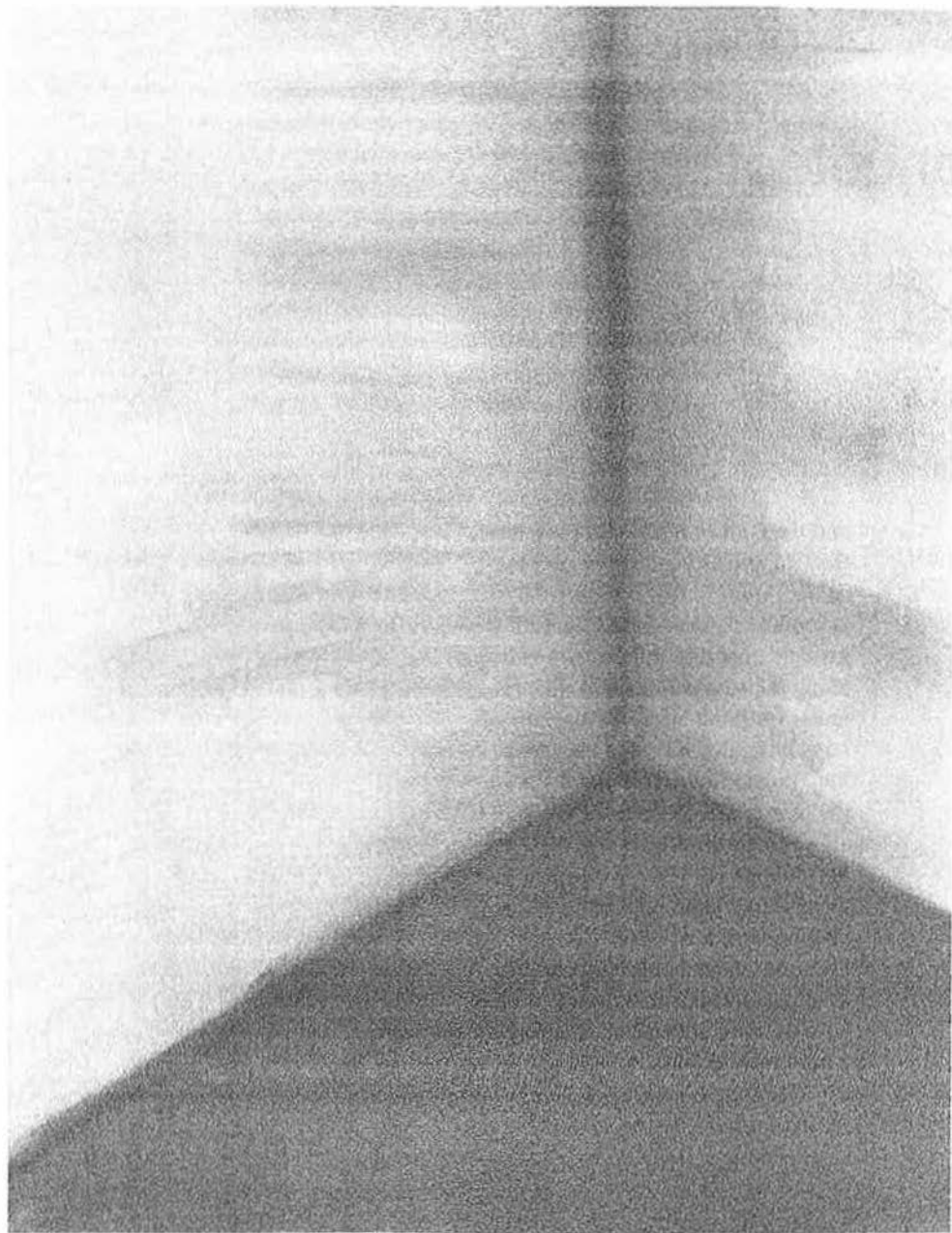
A moth swinging
to the melodious beam

The fallen leaves
floating down stream

Swift

Unseen

It has crept inside, made a home of me.





huehuetotl



kevin john mirarchi

*His sturdy body and coarse features indicate that he is an old "macehual,"
or man of the people; the Aztec patron of fire.*

and then, all of a sudden, I see him:
the Old, old God, the Ancient One
of the Fire,
baronially forever-posed, carved
inside a concrete square
along the sunseting sidewalk,
underneath the haze of city rain.
he is lying down beside the farmacias,
the Tijuana Love strip clubs,
the tecate bars (5-dollars-
all-you-can-drink),
his children.
there is one knec-high boy
playing with a wire;
his sister stares her empty cup
at me, and walks along mute
with us, who are talking in a foreign language.
I have forty dollars to blow.

kevin john mirarchi

71

huehuetotl

I look away from the twenty-dollar girls
who grab at my shirt,
and accidentally rub eyes with Huehuetotl
one last time.

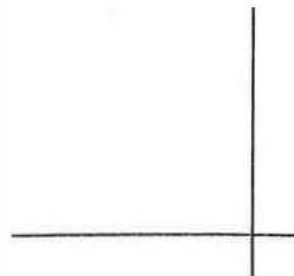
I haplessly notice his scarred cheeks,
his flame-torn shoulder blades

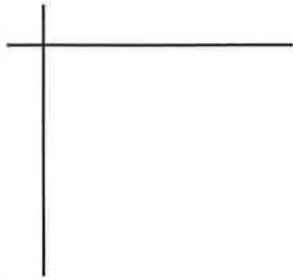
hiding underneath the neon-grey drizzle.

I notice Huehuetotl reaching his hands out
of the block—I see the macchual

crying,

begging for one last chance.





a flat
corn town
carnival

brian david cinadr

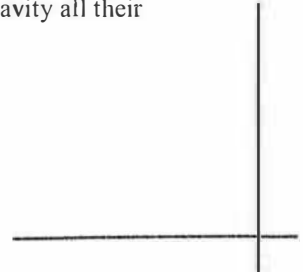
they would come in a racket caravan of smoke and diesel and brightly painted faded trailers every end of summer. there was a magic they parked on the tall grass town edge, edge of town. a witchery wove thru a late summer fabric despite a wand held by hands stained w/ heavy grease and the air of hardworking men who haven't showered for days. their cigarettes and swearing made for some incantation, some summoning of spirits and mischief. they labored in an order all their own as they scattered like ants to the beat of the sun and the ring master. he walked like i imagined a general would walk, though i had never seen one. he held a chaos in his hands, an insect whir that was repeated year after year between mile after mile into an america and a small town.

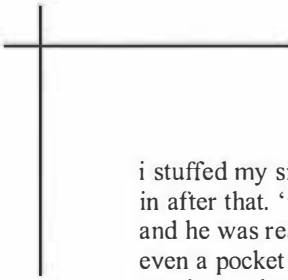
the carnies carried beams and canvas and long ago sins not worth oiling or repeating. they pounded stakes into the ground w/ sledge hammer arms until the day became one heart beating. they wore faded jeans and wife beater t-shirts and stained ball caps and red bandanas that hung in their pockets like tails. their arms were tanned and tattooed and spoke of hard labor and mom and girls named marybeth and numbered army units. the sky seemed to crouch down close to the ground as if it noticed. the sky seemed bigger then and easier to reach. they worked like a long drag off a cigarette until the sun tried and quit. and i would sit and watch it all, a tiny bird perched in a red pop heaven. a little boy w/out any know of the world's broken promise. still wide eyed w/ whim and wonder and the carnival edge of town. snug in a summer sun and a young, a so very young daydreaming. and i would run home dizzy w/ childhood and the circus and the mystery and the promise of both, all wrapped up in the same white lily lie.

i ran home thru the square square of town and the tree lined neighborhoods w/ their root crooked sidewalk teeth and crab grass lawns to a front screened porch and my father sitting w/ the paper and a second bottle of beer. my father drank beer in the summer, whiskey in winter. his eyes never saw me only a thundering of 'where were you, dinner's waiting' as i huffed past to my mother's apron safety. everything was kitcheny warm wonderful and pot roast and potatoes and carrots i wouldn't eat and an apple pie cliché and lawson's drugstore ice cream in the freezer. a perfect vanilla, a perfect cold against a september's evening heat. it was still hot, but you could feel the summer's end, smell it. the corn was in and the circus was here and the trees were weary w/ a green they couldn't hold knowing a fall would fall across the summer soon in a red maple breath.

dinner passed in a dream of sideshow marvels and lion acts and me as the ring master w/ my dash magic and tall hat. i was centered in the big top tent and all the circus was at my arm and w/ a single sweep of my hand everything would end and begin. everything... and i was perfect finally, as perfect as the white white steeds that galloped around me. a show of poise and precision and the show was me. an 'eat your carrots' spoke, an eyeless voice from behind the paper and woke me from my dreamy. i garnered my grudge and ate them in the blind eye of my father's paper and the clemency of my mother's smile as she cut into a still warm apple pie and waved me to the sink. no one could bake an apple pie like my mom.

after dinner i made for my room above the kitchen, apple pie still smeared across my dumb kid grin. the ancient oak outside my window didn't say a thing, only a church bell's ring, a six, seemed to move the air. w/ a secret agent suspicion i surveyed my room w/ a curious squint. satisfied that i was alone i grabbed a weathered cigar box that once was my father's from under my dresser and bounced down on my bed. i opened the lid like any satisfied pirate fat w/ his treasure. a rabbit's foot, a penny flat w/ a train train's pass, my best baseball cards, a shark's tooth all the way from the atlantic, thirteen marbles, a million good things. the best things i ever had, a whole wondrous childhood in a box. and i scrambled thru my young life and there it was.... a silver dollar. my silver dollar. i got one every year for my birthday. and i held it in my little hand and up to the old light in my old room and it shone a silver like a good idea. the night was almost and i could feel the strings of carnival lights and the greasy carnies in their shadows and the barkers in their light and the pull of the big top and the ring master waiting w/ a gravity all their own.





i stuffed my silver dollar deep in my jean pocket w/ a comic book hero effort and my rabbit's foot in after that. 'it's better to be lucky than good', that's what the old man at lawson's always said and he was real old and rumored to know everything. i was fixing to win a goldfish or maybe even a pocket knife, something of real value and figured a little luck was my ticket to riches as good was always someone else's. i took the back steps two at a time pushing past the day's thick air still stuck in the house until a t.v. voice two rooms away said 'slow down mister, no running in the house'. my father never once looked and saw me all along.

my mother was on the front porch reading in a wicker chair and singing to some black woman on the radio. i never saw a black woman sing on the radio but i imagined that's what a black woman would sound like. my mother said 'you're never alone w/ a book' and 'lena horn was beautiful' and 'be careful not to lose all your money on the games' and 'you come on home now as soon as the main show closes'. she said all that between notes w/ a single breath and 'have fun' and smiling and singing and reading all the while.

i ran thru the tree lined neighborhoods w/ their root crooked sidewalk teeth and crab grass lawns caught in long shadows now. the crickets started and black and white televisions flickered the news and something called vietnam in square rooms in wood houses as i passed. the street was warm like a skin. it echoed a noon sun's embrace and would well into the night. and i ran to the square square of town and past, to the town edge edge of town and the carnival lights burning like a universe in a sloe sky alone.

the circus, the circus...and

the townies wandered onto the tall grass matted down between the lights and the trailers and the tents, swimming in the rich air of september and cotton candy and unseen animals nervously pacing in sideshow trailers. the carnies kept to their shadows eyeing the girls like unseen animals themselves. they whispered dirty prayers 'jesus christ' and elbowed one another and grinned greasy grins w/ parts of their smiles missing. the barkers called like crows on a wire, selling the only piece of chance most of us would ever get. the hayseeds and the motorheads crowded the games w/ rolled up sleeves and dirty hair and worn levis. they had fast cars w/ fat wheels and girlfriends and drank beer w/ their arms out the window and would disappear when they turned 18 and come back w/out their arms and legs. i never knew where they left them, just their lost looks. my mom would yank my arm and tell me not to stare, "but they were looking at me" and make the sign of the cross when she'd see them and my father never looked he'd just shake his head.

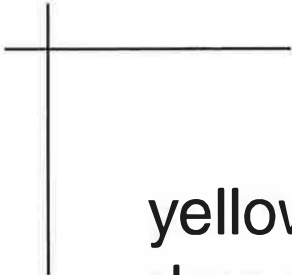
brian david cinadr

75

a flat corn town carnival

people always see you in a small town. i could feel their eyes thru my mother's big belly big w/ me then. i could feel their eyes everyday since like a dull tooth ache or a vague fear after a dream i couldn't remember. but i was safe here at the circus, safe from the townies and their small sharp blackbird eyes. there was too much to see in the big top's grand spasm or the sideshow's twisted misfit pull. they never noticed the boy w/ the thalidomide flipper arms inside the spot lights shadows' grasp. outside the pin prick stares, outside the grab of the big top's brilliance or the freak shows train wreck fascination. i was safe in the carnival's chaos. a night's asylum for a silver dollar.





yellow and silver documentary



irena sinitsky

subtitle: Have you ever seen one?

subconscious self translates into subtitle: Does she remember last, silver night?

subtitle: Have you forgotten one night stands
when stars didn't sparkle signs through silver clouds
but you wanted to forget fashion—
to just fasten stitches with thread-rolls and needles,
to just sew your yellow nakedness into fluffy silver stars,
to cut your yellow forefinger with slender, silver needles,
to roll salaciously with one, silver cloud—
just to be "you" (whoever "you" might be)?

dissolve to: [past] One silver night
one female fashion designer stands;
with scissors rounding her forefinger
she decides which fabric
to cut: cut calico—

subconscious self translates into subtitle: Nah, cheap cloth;
cut cambric (too white turns too yellow & translates into clean),
cut chamois (just skin),
cut chenille (for bedspreads & rugs?), cut chiffon
(too obvious—silk hints seduction!),
cut corduroy (only trousers) ...

subtitle: Have you worked one night
without having done work?

cut to: [present] One yellow dawn
one character's face beclouds her breast—
her breast turns silver.
She feels soft bones caress
(& cut through) satiny skin;
chenille rug fluctuates below soft bones & satiny skin;
feels one character's hand—
feels like cashmere turtleneck suffocates vibrating vocal cords in moans.

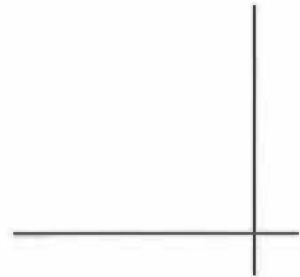
v.o. (translates voice over): shhhhhh ...

subconscious self translates into subtitle: Does she remember male model employee—
“one character”?

subtitle: Have you ever felt inspired after one night stand with one character?

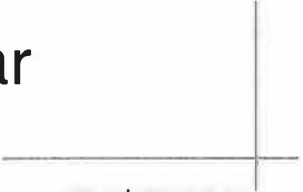
cut to: [closed studio] Undressed, she cuts cloth with scissors,
stitches cambric (too yellow translates into clean) & chiffon
(too obvious—silk hints seduction!) into cheap, soft, yellow fashion—
sews wedding dress.

fade out into title: (fashion designer's) One character's inspiration: One Night Stand.
fade out into yellow and silver screen





fragments
of a war year



grant marcus

Only the dead will see an end to war. —Plato

**ii. 9/11/01 – 12/5/02
east coast and west,
manhattan to islamabad**

“No,” she is saying from the next table,
“I’ll never forget it. My daughter sick, waking me
that morning. ‘Mommy, mommy,’ she’s
complaining, ‘Something’s wrong with
the TV. All the channels are the same.’
And me rolled over in my sleep, flipping
the tube, the lens zooming in on the Trade Center,
and the Trade Center, like a huge ship, sinking.”

*

I am thinking of that day, when nightmares
awakened the world into the eye of
the camera, and the man who leans out
from the burning bed of our history

grant marcus

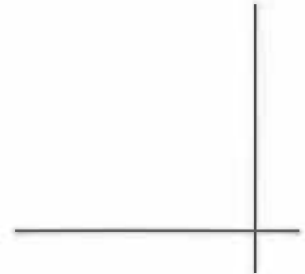
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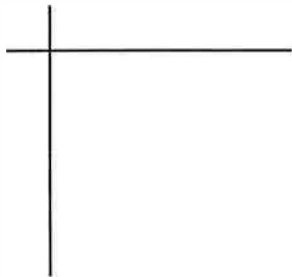
fragments of a war year

like a pearl on the Manhattan Skyline,
the glass still shimmering in refraction
before the second plane detonates—
Then the flames waxing the walls,
the sheared metal crinkled paper behind him,
his shirt still white and pressed, his blue tie waving
as he turns back to view the shattered window,
consumed by his God-given right to choose:
the fall or the fire—

*

Which is it, his humanity or his choice
that marks my troubled memory? Weeks later
I am consumed by the stories I'm not told:
Now I'm Strangelove's cone-shaped eye
riding the sky's air-sharp vision, my
intelligence the keening of satellite reconnaissance
registering photographs of my perfection. And
zeroed in on what will burst to flame,
I see the resignation in their reflection
under all the turbines and burquas,
the eyes of Hadith, Mecca, and Medina,
and their God-given right to choose:
the fire or the fall.





iv. 10/17/01

so hard

for lisa and todd beamer

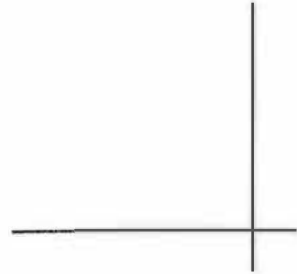
...When the sky you remember
slips through that vacuous plot
of ground your fingers dig into,
trying to hold onto—the invisible,
the intangible, the physical, yet
untouchable; and all the while,
the world placed before your needs,
with life, death quickening
inside you.

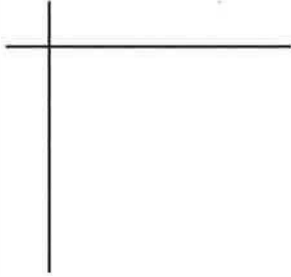
Then that eternal eye, with
its verve of youth and constant
presence, parting the blue blinds,
and you, playing your guitarless
guitar, awash in his music of silence.

It's so hard when it's you, and
it's not you, and the sky you remember
means everything.

v. 11/26/01
circle of runs

I have come here to exhale and paint my observations
of crows, crude in the backdrop of derricks, scavenging
the darkling circles of dirt and gravel shadowed by purple sage.
Through the gapped teeth of scrubbed chaparral, a crest of wave
snags and drags the light from the dusky October Pacific.
Long-haired penguins with surfboards are packing it up
for the day, and everyone hooded in wetsuits and sweatshirts.
A squirrel squats the ground sharing its diet with the birds.
It quickly stops its skittish adventure to stare at the lungeful kids
eyeing her. Over the cliffs and down the coast, a boatbell,
a gull's sigh, a dog's yap greatening the distance. The wind
has long been an unbroken reveler, and out the mouth of the bay,
tongues repeatedly flail their salty speech across the seaboard.
An ocean rocks its creations of twilight shadows. A lone pelican
buoyishly bobs where the sun casts its vanishing vision.
The nightflack slipveils the dumbing dark. Strewn islands mask
their cloud-like confessions. Fickle stars flutter with an errancy
of whiteflies, and the moon rolls on her side, pouting above
the lip of her satin sheets, rubbing that truth from one good eye—
A sudden static fouls the air, crazed with the news of politicians.
Even the wind on its knoll hushes the grass to listen—
Is it true we will never see what the dead see? An uncontrollable
lament roots inside: *I know the country is overrun with war.*
Moonlight means nothing to soldiers camped in Eastern deserts.





vii. 1/20/02
b n w

America has a BrandNewWar,
and techno-sales-reps biting at
the bit to pump the war schtick.
It's like a new car, a new soap,
softer tissue, a better whitener—

It's war, and it's brand banking new,
like a new sofa, a new man,
a new life, a new dawn. It's
a bomb, by God, and it's all ours—

with the very latest in technological merit.
Even the *peacekeeper's* new and improved
and comes complete with its own I.Q.
Let's face it, it's our most enduring product.
Equipped with a lifetime warranty,
why even the dead won't see it through.

Wittingly we'll turn every stone for a terrorist,
singing *We Are the World*, and *You're for US*,
Against US, with patriotic dogcollars, doormats
and flags, the world snug and safe in our colors
like comforters. We are newborn, united loyalists
and capitalists—I'm so excited I'm teary-eyed.

It's a BrandNewWar and all you have
to know is what's news on television,
and the commercial value of American lies.
We'll eat it right out of the box like cherrios,
or sprinkle it like sugar with shipping and
handling for the low low price of \$19.95.

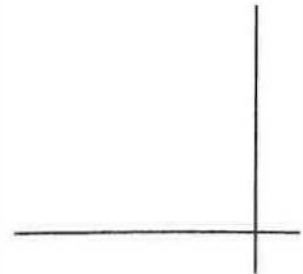
grant marcus

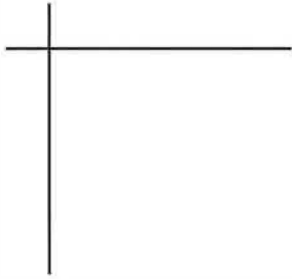
83

fragments of a war year

It's a new war, brand, blasting new,
and it will always and forever be new.
Come new women in bayonet, camouflage,
come new men in their suits and epaulets,
all plumed and plucked with Country Pride.

Don't you see, we've just got to buy it.
Like poultry, we can't eat without it.
It's war. And it's brand, brand new.





ix. 12/25/01
a change is gonna come

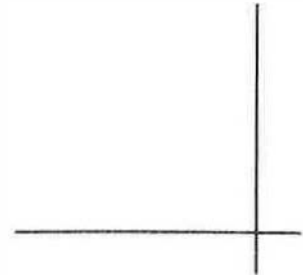
It's déjà vu and back to square one:
Pleistocene politicians have dug up their
skulls out the closet: alas, Oliver North, Henry
Kissinger, the Watergate Gang, George Jr., Sr.,
Rumsford, Ashcroft, and Cheney, all gems
on an ageless chokechain of command,
the old guard leaving their teeth in the new militia,
the omerta operandi of guns-for-butter diplomacy,
demanding a double standard on terror—
I'm too tired to believe, and
too old to be deceived in this infirmity.
I've read the Peoples' History, and
now I walk through the ghettos of spacious skies
like Edvard Munch's everyman,
a song-of-horrors between my hands—
horrors from the ploys of Pearl Harbor to the
unconscionable acts in Nagasaki and Hiroshima;
from the excuses of supply-side economics
to the sinister genocides in Vietnam and Korea;
from the coups of Columbia, Chile, Guatemala, Nicaragua...
to the sacrificial lambs for plantations in San Salvador;
from the bludgeoned innocents expedient in Indonesia
to the ho-hum game-cocking exploited in Grenada;
from the ivory towers of Britain to the oil conglomerates of America,
from the Bay-of-Pigs to the Gulf of Tonkin;
from cocaine-contra to Deserts Shield and Storm;
from Wall Street and Enron to the Massacres of Manhattan,
and Afghanistan, and Palestine, and Iraq, and
Somalia, and from who knows where else we are doomed—
Yes war is insidious, progressive, and terminal,

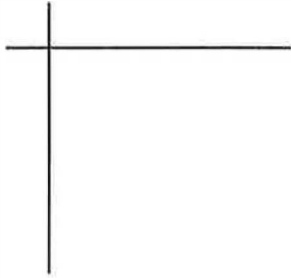
grant marcus

85

fragments of a war year

from Alzheimer president to King George descendants,
(and their techno-innovations for third-world elections)
transparent tyrants who throw their rockets at terrorists;
hypocrites whose prognoses has terrorism the penultimate pandemic
of bloodletting, scourges, and inquisitions—
who need our faith the plague on the world is endless,
requiring infusions of soldiers like antibiotics—
While minorities and the poor still toll the front lines,
and the arms of women conform to women-in-arms,
I'm too old to be deceived
and too tired to believe that
a change is gonna come.





xi. 1/1/02
on a stump, new years day
overlooking onion valley

The snow stubs the pines, and the pines
swim in a surf of white sea down
the Sierra slopes and mounded switchback trails.
A gray squirrel huddles in its mountain coat.
The clawed tracks of mountain lion
are a half-day's hike away. A jay
speaks into a microphone of sky.
A wind shaves the ice from trees;
its stippled music the chimed signifiers
of elevation, cold, isolation, comfort.
I sit on the stump with an apple and sandwich
looking out over Onion Valley, where below
a lake of cedar laps against the thinning neige
and the bald-headed stone. The quiet
can be so perfect in a moment, and
the moment so perfect in the quiet.

Suddenly the earth quakes with a sonic boom,
the jet-fuel rockets splitting the sky into
a cloud stream-lined with its distinct division,
as if a choice created were to be rendered—
or that even here, the sun and snow
like a neighboring path whitening
so close to heaven, that even here,
there is no peace to remember.

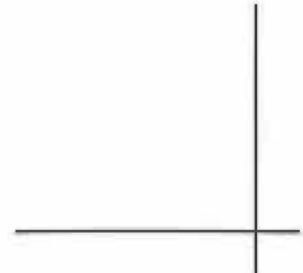
codetta: what color

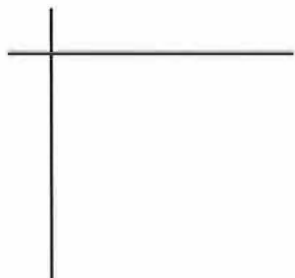
*My country, right or wrong, when right
to defend it, when wrong to question it.*

What color is terror? What color is tyranny?
We have a choice, the lines drawn, decided,
between coward and traitor, patriot and zealot—
I am the precarious balance of no-man's land,
the insouciant acrobat trying to walk a highwire,
where below, extremists and loyalists.
What do I know but to make sense of truth and
beauty from this lofty modicum of air on which
no survival depends. You watch, weighing every
word in metric feet, staring up from ground zero—

So what do I know of the color
of terror, and what color tyranny?
What wire do I walk upon to uphold human values
for the poor's defense from the wealthy? Is war
civil when it's launched from *high* technology, and
barbaric when it's hurtled from the feet of a knapsack?
Is it pure, neat, and clean when enmassed on faceless
thousands, and brutal when children are bombers,
sacrificial bodies tagged in schoolroom beginnings?

From K's Castle I've been ordered to balance a wire
between the two-headed monsters, two prime-time
zealots fabricating issues of Islam and Christendom,
while anthrax letters remain anonymous, and
the Bill of Rights strips to *emperor's clothes*.
What color terror, what color tyranny—condoning
violence and naming it spirit, the rest of us laboring,



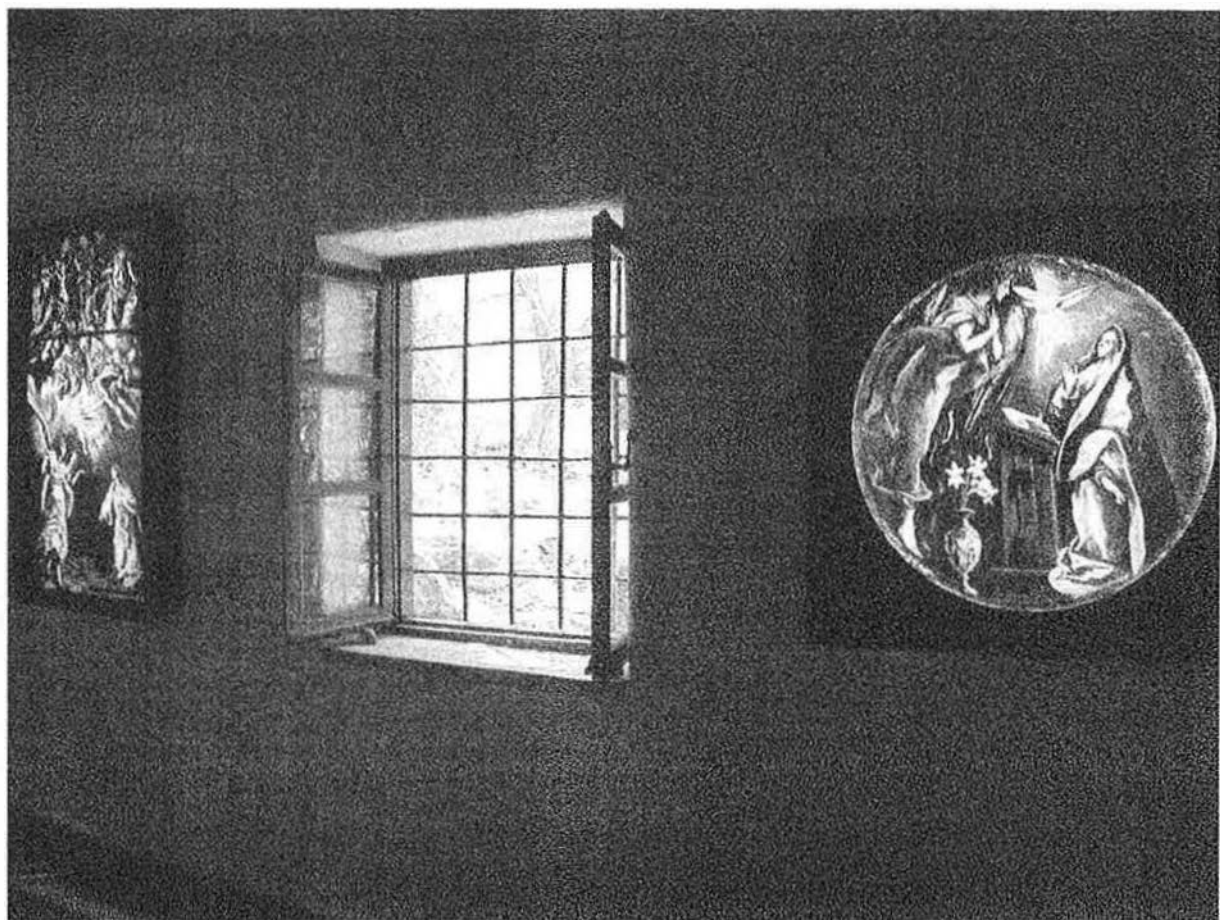


lumping as fools and heroes, bastards and bodybags,
perpetuating the spiral of the world's sickness.

“God bless America” has always been code-ified
for god bless white america, for white,
for white republican texans in power ties
reciting adulterations of The Lord's Prayer,
ending in “dead or alive.”

Why isn't Black: honest, and angelic, and holy?
Why isn't Brown: purity, and beauty, and intellect?
Why are our wars fought against culture and color,
and our alliances homogenous as driven snow,
white as Christmas? Under the pseudonyms of religions,
we have chosen our colors, made our Heavens a hell,
made our Gods little murderers.

Who made the bomb to destroy the world?
Who made the world the ignominy of power?
What color is terror,
and what color tyranny?





a good night



jody disalvo

I go

towards sleep

rehearsed to play in "Gentler Nights and Violent Days To Come"
a minor operetta

anticipating green persimmons

like an infant gone to breast surprised by a rubber nipple

I participate

in battle armed in locked joints full of fists fearless
until I free-fall

Does a jousting knight fall as hard?

Quite embarrassed

running naked strapped in sails,

those threads rigged on my maiden voyage to Thither and Yon

I go

towards sleep

with an occasional phantom in the balcony wanting to get back in
after their ticket's been spent

Like me

at age four leaving the tent

after the elephants carried the flying Carbones away





pain
is
love

kennah m. freeman

Characters

Marama Koromeh: 25-year-old Muslim woman

Time

2002

Place

An Islamic court in Northern Nigeria

Production Notes

This play can be performed as a one woman show or with a cast of an additional five silent characters, as follows:

Judge 1, Ali Babalou, 50's—sitting in audience

Judge 2, Fodal Abdullahi, 60's—sitting in audience

Mrs. Nasatu Koromeh, 44, Marama's mother—down stage left

Hidja Koromeh, 9 months old, Marama's daughter—down stage left

Mohammed Allahja, 35, Hidja's father—down stage right

These characters are on stage throughout the entire play.

The stage is beige and the world is beige.

SCENE 1

(A courtroom. Marama, a beautiful African woman, stands down stage center. Her pose is ghostly.)

VOICE OVER. This judgment will be carried out as soon as your baby is weaned.

MARAMA. *(Tears, facing the audience.)* As soon as my little angel...*(Turns down stage left towards HIDJA.)* My little angel will never know her mama...Hidja. I'm sorry...for this crazy and sad world. *(Sighs.)* The womb does not bring forth an enemy. *(Walks down stage right.)* I'm human.

SCENE 2

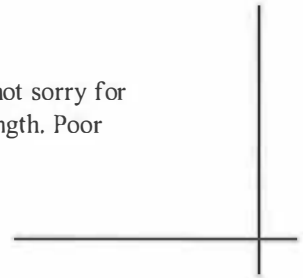
(A bright red light comes on. MARAMA is in an empty room. This empty room is the place MARAMA used to meet MOHAMMED. She sits on the floor. She holds her stomach.)

MARAMA. God please forgive me. *(Pause.)* Mohammed, I have to tell you something! *(Looks up.)* I...I am pregnant...Why are you looking like that? *(Moves.)* Lying! You think I planned this? Look at me...I'm dying...inside. What do you want me to do? *(Cries.)* Oh my God. I can't. I won't. Oh my God. I can't believe what you're asking me. *(Screams out.)* What about me? What about the...All you're thinking about. *(Cries.)* You want me to...I can't do that. You know I...*(Pause.)* You won't be...You are sorry! He who refuses a gift will not fill his barn. *(Stands up.)* Please baby, please don't leave. Don't leave me. They will...

SCENE 3

(Red light goes off. Spotlight comes on; MARAMA walks down stage left.)

MARAMA. Mama Nasatu, I'm sorry for all the pain I have caused you, but I am not sorry for giving my little girl...She deserves to...She is so innocent, so sweet. She is my strength. Poor



thing. *(Looks stage right. Laughs and picks up a wooden cup.)* Those eyes, her eyes are so full of life. She makes me feel alive. *(Drinks.)* How can people judge me?

VOICE OVER. "ALLAHU AKBAR." GOD IS GREAT

MARAMA. *(Laughs.)* He's eager to find fault in others; to notice his own, he never bothers. How can they say Allahu Akbar, and judge me. Don't cry Mama Nasatu, Allah will protect Hidja. *(Pause.)* Please don't cry mama...*(Pause.)*

SCENE 4

(MARAMA walks up stage left, a blue light comes on. She is in her father's compound. It is her 12th birthday. This will be the last day she spends with her family. She meets her husband on this day.)

MARAMA. *(Takes two steps.)* In my culture, when a girl turns 12 she becomes a woman. Why is it when a boy turns 12, he doesn't become a man? *(Laughs.)* The baboon, in the eyes of its mother, is a gazelle. My mother cried every night for three weeks...I thought she was just crying because her only girl was getting older. *(Looks down stage right.)* Mama, don't cry. Why are you crying? I am getting old, but you don't have to cry. *(Smiles.)* Guess what? I'm baking your favorite cake today! *(Pause. Moves up stage center.)* Who is that man standing by the entrance? Why is he looking at me like that? Mama, why aren't you answering my questions? *(Pause.)* Hey! Hey, what are you doing? Hey, let go of my arm. Mama...Mama, Mama, where are they taking me? *(Reaches out her hands.)* Help! Help me, Mama! Why are you just sitting there? Mama, why are you just...*(Screams out.)* Nooooooooooooo...stop it!

(Falls to the floor. Spot light comes on.) Poverty is slavery. I am a slave to men. My mother is a slave to my father. Her mother was a slave to her father. It's in my blood. *(Stands up.)* We start as fools and become wise through experience. There is a twenty year gap between my husband and I. I am the youngest wife of three. I do all the cleaning and cooking. *(Laughs.)* My two mates are old hags...I am from a new generation. I'm rebellious.

A MAN'S VOICE. This shit is good.

MARAMA. *(Raps.)* I have that good stuff...I know how to please my man. He gets mad at times...he hits my mates...people say I have mermaid blood running through my veins, 'cause all the men want a piece of this sweet...some of them are young and sexy, but I am not a cheater. *(She dances.)* All this is for my man. *(Walks down stage right.)*

SCENE 5

MARAMA. One summer, my husband and the entire clan went to America. We went for his cousin's wedding in New York City.

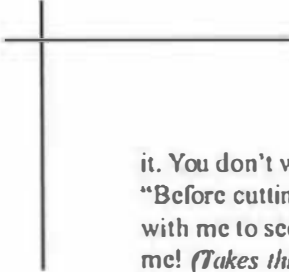
(MARAMA just got her hair braided at a braiding salon in Harlem. She has stars in her eyes. She sees how free women are in America.)

MARAMA. Wow, women own their own stuff. You don't have to stay at home while your husband's at work. YOU DON'T HAVE TO SHARE YOUR MEN! God does not send opportunity to sleepers. I have to do something. I'm tired of sharing my man, especially with some old baboons! I must do something! *(Walks up stage left.)* Papa, I have to talk to you tonight! It is very important. *(Turns left.)* Relax you old baboon; it will not take that long. I know you wanna work tonight. *(Takes three steps.)* Okay, I'll see you after the wedding reception. *(Sits at a table. A red light comes on.)* Papa, I love you and I will never leave you. *(Pause.)* You love me, right? I know that's a stupid question! Well, Papa, you have to understand my position; I don't...I can't live this way...*(Stands up and holds her face as if she just got hit.)* Don't touch me. You promised—You promised. I thought you loved me!

SCENE 6

(A blue spotlight comes on. MARAMA stands down center stage. She carries two middle size suitcases.)

MARAMA. You're divorcing me? I am too fast for you. *(Puts suitcases down.)* I love you and you love me. Doesn't that matter? Don't you love me? *(Pause.)* Oh I see. You don't have the balls to stand up to your father and tell him you don't want to live like this anymore. *(Smiles.)* So that's



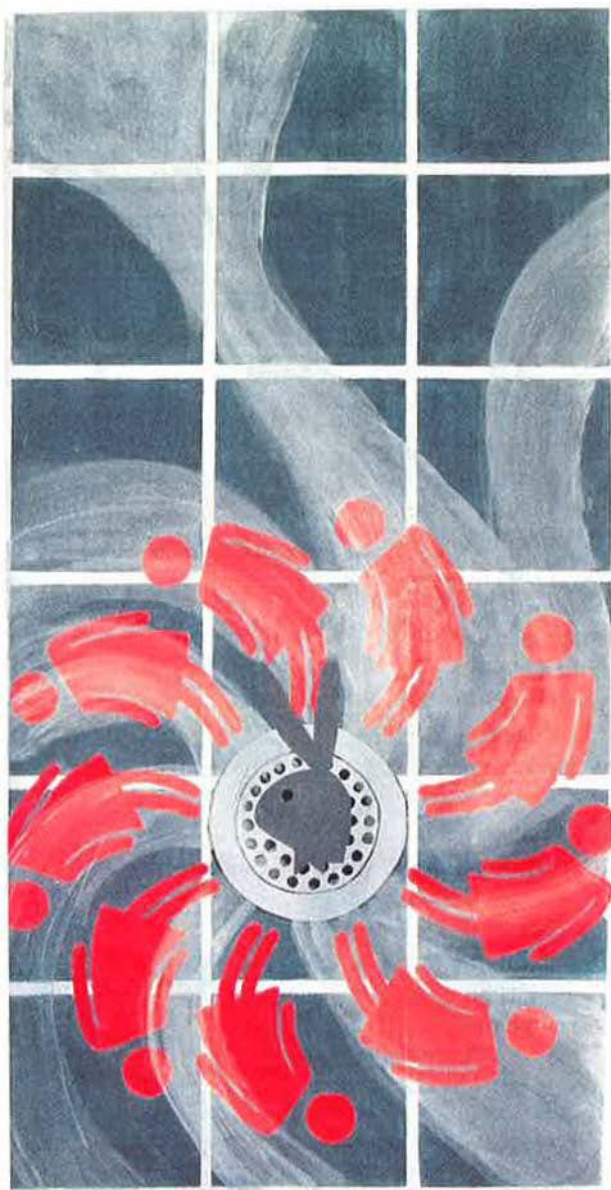
it. You don't want to lose what you have! You're already set in your ways. My nana always says, "Before cutting the cloth, you should take the measurements." Maybe you should've checked with me to see how I felt about this whole marriage business. *(Moves.)* Don't you dare try to hit me! *(Takes three steps and turns around.)* He sleeps in the water and he's afraid of the rain. You know what? You'll never know the worth of the water till the well runs dry. I am that water, and I always love you. Bye, Papa.

SCENE 7

(Back to the beginning of the play, MARAMA stands in a spotlight. Her pose is ghostly.)

MARAMA. In life we start as fools and become wise through the experience...*(Turns toward the audience.)* I guess this is the end. This is it. Life is so short. People say, "Marama, *(in African krio)* If God be gev yer 'nother chane, yer think yer go do wan the sane way." *(Smiles and looks stage left towards Hidja.)* If God be gev me 'nother chane, I go do wan the sane way. I no go change nathin. *(House lights come on.)* Everything has an end. *(Pause.)* And this is the end.

(Walks off stage.)





shopping with mom



gabrielle lissauer

Now what exactly did
We come here for? My mother
Asks me.

Milk, toilet paper, some eggs and bread.

Good.

We walk down the aisles.
Oh perhaps some
Cereal?
We are a bit low.
I'd like to make some cookies.
Not this weekend.
Next?

What did we need again?

Milk, toilet paper, some eggs and bread.

Good.

You want cheese noodles for dinner?
Perhaps, put it in the cart.
Ari ate all the tuna.
Put some in the cart.
Oh look the new TV Guide.
New episode of Buffy.

Repeat of Voyager.

What did we come here for?

Milk, toilet paper, some eggs and bread.

Good.

Call your father.

Okay

Here's the line.

Did we forget anything?

Yes.

What?

Milk, toilet paper, some eggs and bread.





just far enough



jack ahrens

I danced with my daughters
in the living room
until their hands, wrapped around
two of my fingers,
pulled me laughing to the floor.
Or I was a bear
they ran from around the sofa,
then bopped my head with pillows
'til I was play-dead
and had to be tickled alive.

Memory is the sliding glass door;
a maze of children's fingerprints.

Now, when we leave a restaurant,
they walk as teens, just far enough ahead
to make it perfectly clear
they couldn't possibly be with me.

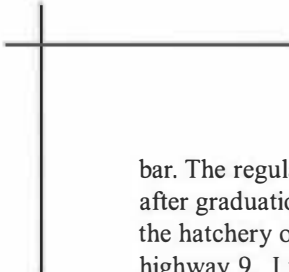
heroes

tracey ruby

On the eve of my grandmother Leona's 75th birthday she entered her third bikini contest. G.L., what we call her because she says she doesn't feel like a grandmother, began lifting weights ten years ago to stave off the onset of osteoporosis, and since that time she'd become something of a phenomenon in our little town. She'd even appeared on the popular cable access show, "Good Morning Little Rivers," with her widows' group. Each chunky widow bragged in turn that they'd been the one to encourage her to hit the weights after the death of her beloved, Big Jim.

G.L. has a thing for threes. She is convinced that the cultural foundation of Western civilization is based largely on trinary patterning. And when I naively pressed her for further clarification, G.L. declared, with some exasperation, that the births of babies and the deaths of loved ones had always occurred in threes. She also vaguely alluded to children's folk tales, like "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," and excitedly recalled a multitude of jokes that began with, "three guys walk into a bar." And then, of course, she'd really expounded on luck, and the old saying that the third time is a charm. For fun, I reminded her that we were Irish and that the luck of the Irish is based primarily on the mysticism of the four leaf clover. She pretended not to hear me.

Despite my comment, and because of her deep seated belief in the magic of threes, G.L., upon seeing the three-letters-missing-marquis outside of Heroes announcing the 'Fi st Ann al Bikini C ntest,' became convinced that this time, she could be a contender. I too was convinced that G.L. had a shot at winning, but it had nothing, what-so-ever, to do with the Western phenomenon of trinary patterning. Our town is small. Really small. And Heroes is a small town



bar. The regulars are, for the most part, my old high school pals who settled down immediately after graduation, married their high school sweethearts and went to work either at the hatchery or, as was the case with many of the women, at Slim's—a big coffee house off highway 9. I volunteered, like I had in her previous two bouts with bikini contention, to help her prepare for the contest. Before it began, I sidled backstage to help G.L. slather on the baby oil.

“Just a little on the thighs, sweetie.” The oil is thin and cool and threatens to run between my fingers.

“Oh God, G.L. There it is again,” I say mid-slather.

“What's that, darling,” she purrs.

“The smell.” The smell is, of course, bodies. Woman bodies. Twenty odd woman bodies hulked together backstage at Heroes. ‘Backstage’ being a 15x15 foot cube filled to capacity with ladies occupying their precious moments before showtime with the choking fumes of real aerosol hair sprays, distinctly Charlie perfumes and oil atomizers from compressed air guns. Ventilation is minimal. I complain to G.L. about the final result: a nagging sensation in the back of my throat which I am sure will never clear.

“My-oh-my,” she says, shaking her head, “You sound just like your father.” She sniffs, dramatically, and gives her gum a particularly loud smack which she often does at the end of her sentences in order to convey punctuation.

“Yeah. But you can taste it,” I venture.

“Taste what?” she smacks.

“The smell. You can taste the smell.” I explain as best I can about the taste of aerosol. How it's sweet at first and then the palate is hit hard with the lethal flavor of alcohol mixed with the lanolin mixed with the ethylexyl-meth. That the affected individual (me) involuntarily swallows again and again because the body is trying to help the mouth rid itself of something that isn't good for it. I think this is an impressive bit, but G.L. waves me off. Me and my six years of college science.

“You're full of shit,” she says, almost exasperated.

I'm ready to counter this time with something, anything that will make her think twice about dismissing me in the future. My witty comeback is interrupted by the tinny, high-mountain whine of Gustaf, who, at least for this night, has stopped slinging side-cars, and has officially begun his first stint as Heroes M.C. His for-dogs-only pitch somehow penetrates the thin pressboard door of the backstage cube.

“It's almost time. You've got to tape me,” G.L. says.

And, now we're to the bit I hate. G.L. is sporting a wickedly hot Tommy Hilfiger bikini fittingly titled "Tribute to Old Glory." Two red triangles containing two puffy white pleather stars constitute the top. A lovely blue backfield and a swoosh of a red stripe constitute the bottoms. "Okay," I say between my teeth as I rip off a piece of the cloth tape. I roll it up in an elongated 'o' so that I can stick her thin buns to the skimpy bikini bottoms. All the girls tape their buns so their suits won't ride up. No winner worth her weight in suntan oil would be caught dead picking at her ass on stage.

"Is that the cloth tape?"

"Rhetorical, G.L., you sound just like your son." I explain to her for the third time that she has to go with the cloth tape. That she can't take a chance on the regular double-sided sticky tape. That the regular double-sided sticky tape could, quite possibly, tear her thin skin. That because of the Cumidin she takes to thin her blood a small tear in her skin could leak her heart-diseased blood all over the stage.

"Heredit-y," she sighs.

"I-t-y words," I yell, thinking back to those long car rides we used to take and the games I'd invent while stuck in the backseat.

"Necessity," she says, playing along.

"Gravity," I say. I can tell she doesn't like this one. She eyeballs me.

"Com-plex-i-ty," she says, slowly, with weight on each syllable.

"Brev-i-ty," I say with an equal amount of care. I carefully finish taping one bun and move to the other.

"Bestiality," she says, with finality, obviously finished with the game.

Before I secure the final bit of tape I give her bottoms a super snap.

"Ow. What was that for?"

"That was for leaving me at the mall. Alone," I say, still squatting behind her even though I've finished taping.

"I didn't leave you. I ditched you. And you know why?"

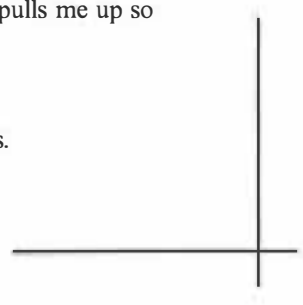
"I was seven."


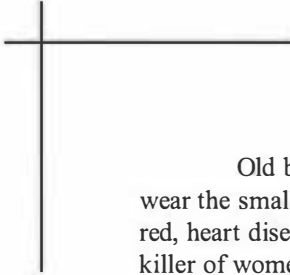
"I wanted to see if you would follow the plan," she says, defensively, and pulls me up so that I'm forced to confront her. Again.

"Passive-aggressive," she says.

"Aggressive-aggressive," I say, correcting her. "I did give you a snap."

"But it's thirty years late." She folds her arms across her chest and smirks.





Old bitch, I think, but don't say. I retreat, and change the subject. I suggest that she not wear the small, pink, breast cancer ribbon pinned to the spaghetti strap of her bikini top, but a red, heart disease ribbon, since that's what she has, and since heart disease is the number one killer of women and, in fact, kills many more women a year than breast cancer.

"You are dramatic, dear," she says. "And besides, red is for AIDS."

We take a moment to stare at each other. Me, wondering if another face off is at hand. She, probably taking mental inventory of the broads she has to beat. The music starts up tentatively, interrupting us, and she smiles wide and deep and genuine. Her eyes flutter and she clutches her chest. Adrenaline evident in the thin pulsing smallish vein that clings to her forehead like a lone vine on a castle wall. I think to myself that she is beautiful. That she really doesn't look so old, that she really does have a better body than just about anyone else I know. And that her hair, still tumbling with gray, looks great and full and that the weave she spent 300 dollars on to mix in some low-lights with the high-lights was worth every penny.

"I'm on sweetheart. Be the love of my life that you are and sit up front and cheer for me, okay?"

"Okay." I rub her back for encouragement and marvel at the lack of fat, the feel of her carefully sculpted muscles playing so close to the surface. I wonder if it's because her skin is so thin because she is so old, or if she's just built like a greyhound. I decide, that aside from the heart disease thing, she really is genetically blessed.

I leave G.L. behind and step across Heroes' makeshift stage constructed just hours before at the back of the bar and am careful not to hit any of the stripper-blue footlights. I think about the three things I've had to talk G.L. out of since she'd started these crazy contests. Number one: absolutely, and under no circumstances is she to ever wear a G-string. Number two: no Hawaiian Tropic anything. And number three: no chance, no way, is she to ever pierce her bellybutton. She is not to joke around about it, she is not to point to other women and comment on how good it looks. I did, however, give in, albeit reluctantly, on the belly chain. And really, it does look pretty good.

The stage is wooden and is missing several planks. I worry, momentarily, about G.L.'s balance. She is, after all, 75, but she had rejected my idea of going with flats and had instead insisted on a pair of red patent-leather stilettos. Penelope Crush, the 70-year-old owner and operator of Shop and Shears Beauty Boutique, had convinced G.L. that she should, "Most definitely wear them!" Penelope is one of the judges and, I suspect, G.L. was just trying to please her. I wind my way between two sorry, haphazardly placed microphone stands and take a

seat in the front row. I remove the flimsy placard that says 'Reserved' in black sharpie and am unhappy at the broken, red crushed velvet chair in which I'm forced to plant myself.

I'm elbowed right away by the mysteriously handsome Phil Jenkins, the now retired owner of Phil's Highway Hardware. My grandfather, Big Jim, always called him Dorian Gray, because he's near 80 and doesn't look a day over 60. My father always called him Dick Clark, but for the same reasons.

"Walnuts!" Phil says, loudly, though I'm literally inches away. "You must be thrilled! She's got some stiff competition tonight! Oh, I only wish Big Jim coulda been here! Where's your dad?" He elbows me again, sharply this time. "I gotta feeling about this one! Third time's a charm and all that!"

"Has she told you about her theory of threes...trinary patterning?" I say.

"Ha, ha, ha," he says, literally. "Sounds like college crap, sweetness."

Thankfully, our little chat is interrupted as the music starts for real. The first contestant, 37-year-old Kathy Barnes from North Little Rivers, gingerly crosses the stage with her thick legs and high butt. I sneak a peak at my watch, a Rolex Lady Sport, the worst best gift I'd ever received. My family and I had been celebrating the acceptance of a patent that I had authored for a pharmaceutical company that I'd been working for at the time. I had been the lead chemist on developing a drug that helped limit the need for insulin injections in diabetic patients. G.L. showed up late with a big card and a little box. I tore open the card and on the outside it said 'Congratulations' but the inside was blank. No sentiment, no signature. I knew her well enough by then not to question her. I shrugged it off. I opened the box and was stunned to find the tasteful gold and silver Rolex watch. Simple, but very extravagant for old G.L.

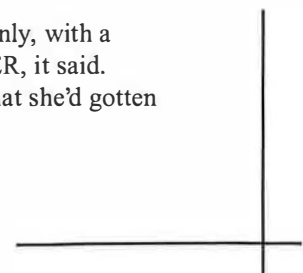
"I didn't sign the card, darling. But, I signed the watch." Her smile was playful and her eyes were shiny, which were sure signs of trouble.

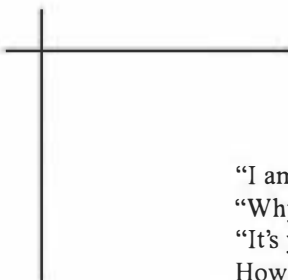
I removed the watch from the box and studied the inscription. "Oh my God, G.L.," I said. Inscribed on the watch was the patent number. Very sentimental. But, beneath the number was smaller type, engraved in all caps. "What does it say?" I angled the watch to try and catch even a sliver of the proper light.

"It's your patent number, silly."

"I know it's the patent number, but what's it say underneath?" And suddenly, with a squint, I saw it. The words beneath the numbers. NOT THE CURE FOR CANCER, it said.

"Why can't you just be proud of me?" I said, trying not to let her know that she'd gotten to me, again. Trying not to let the red completely envelop my face.





“I am, dear,” she said, with her stupid shiny eyes.

“Why do you negate the beauty of this gift with such a shitty inscription?”

“It’s your patent number, Walnuts.”

How dare she, I thought. How dare she call me Walnuts at a time like this. “Yes,” I said. “But, not the cure for cancer?”

“It isn’t. These miniature accomplishments are only smiles, dear.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means save the laughter and the pats on the back for the real deal. You’re young and you’re not *there* yet. And I don’t want you resting on your laurels or getting full of yourself,” she said.

“Fat chance of that with you around.” I stuffed the watch back in the box and looked to my bewildered parents for support. My father, of course, said nothing. Doing Nothing, saying Nothing, had long ago become his way of dealing with G.L., of dealing, in general. Though, he did grant me the you-started-it-look that he had down pat.

G.L. is the 16th bikini clad beauty to trot across the stage. The Heroes regulars go wild at the first step of her stiletto clad foot. Gustaf calls her “Lovely Leona.” She keeps her head held high which minimizes the chicken-skin look of her neck. Her eyes are flat, green, and round. And searching. Searching for me. I know that she wished Big Jim could have been here instead of me but that I run a close second to him. Big Jim was the love of G.L.’s life. He wasn’t big, but rather, knife thin and all of 5 foot 7. But he’d had the big thunderous voice of a man much larger than himself and you always heard him before you saw him.

“Big Jim’s here,” he’d boom. “Where all the women at?” It was his calling card and something he said every time he entered a room.

And G.L., though she’d heard this a million times, always smiled and said, “Oh, Jim.”

He had loved her. Adored her, beyond reason. He’d sent her a dozen purple roses every Friday night, without fail, for the 40 plus years that they had been married.

“Why purple,” I’d asked, so many years ago that I can’t remember when.

“Because red,” he’d said, “is for love. And yellow, Walnuts, is for friendship. And purple, purple is for *enchantment*.” And he’d looked at G.L. with wet eyes.

And G.L., the most no-nonsense woman ever to grace the planet, clapped her hands together and squealed, “Mama loves Big Jim!”

And it was because of Big Jim's deep unabiding affection for G.L. as a woman, and as his wife, that he could never be counted on as an ally in any of my many skirmishes with her over the years. One such skirmish took place on Christmas Eve at the Craftsman house G.L. and Big Jim had re-furnished years earlier in Little Rivers. I was already grown by then and at the point in my life where I was more excited by gift-giving than gift-getting. That year I gave Big Jim and G.L. a set of beautiful, black, high-glazed coffee mugs that she promptly gave to her brother—Slow Uncle Sam—right in front of me. And, she told Sam, not me, that she could never drink from anything she couldn't see the bottom of. I looked to Big Jim for help. I imagined that he'd say, "Ah, Leona. C'mon now, they're from Walnuts." But he didn't. He didn't even look around uncomfortably. He just smiled at her.

"Besides," she'd added, still talking only to Slow Uncle Sam, "you'd never *really* know if they were clean."

I said, "G.L., why don't you just give them back to me and I'll return them and get you something else."

"Because, darling, you've already given them, now haven't you? And once you've given something it would be rude to take it back. And besides, I've already given them to Sam. You wouldn't want to take them from Sam, would you?"

I looked to my father for help. "You started it," he hissed.

"That was years ago," I hissed back.

"You were warned," he continued.

"I was twelve," I said.

"I can hear you," G.L. said.

Slow Uncle Sam peered into the large mouth of one of the cups and smiled.

"I can see my reflection," he said, to no one in particular.

Gustaf, after consulting with the judges, whittles the contestants down to three finalists. G.L., of course, is one of them. Gustaf announces a small intermission so that the lovely ladies can prepare themselves for their final glide across the broken stage. I decide to use this time for myself, and not for nosing around backstage to see if Leona needs help. I run next door to the Quicky-Mart to buy a pack of gum and a Big Hunk. The kid behind the counter is Matty Herrington, the son of two of my former classmates. He asks me if I would care to buy a rose for one of the luscious contestants. He has the usual: red, yellow, and white.

“Got any purple?” I ask.

“I do,” he says. “Give me a minute.”

Matty comes back with a singular purple rose. “Where’s your folks,” he says, as he rings me up.

“I guess my father couldn’t quite bring himself to watch his mother strut the stage in a bikini,” I say.

“Ouch,” he says, and then thoughtfully adds, “I guess I wouldn’t want to see my mother in a bikini contest either.”

“But it’s G.L.,” I say, tapping my fingers on the counter.

“True ‘nough,” he says. “But still. You know your father.”

“I do,” I say. “I guess everyone else seems to too.”

“True ‘nough,” he says. “He did give that speech in front of City Hall.”

“That was ten years ago, Matty. You were only eight,” I say.

“Yeah. But my mom and dad still talk about it all the time.” Matty slowly begins to bag my items.

“He was calling for reform. It wasn’t popular, but at least he was passionate,” I say, as I remove my cumbersome wallet.

“True ‘nough,” he says. “But, he was going against his own mother. And the town. You can’t try to close down the one thing that makes a town a town.”

“He backed down. He always has when it comes to her,” I say, more to myself than to Matty. And then I add, “Besides, he didn’t really want it closed. Have you spoken to G.L.?”

“He tried to close the hatchery,” Matty insists, ignoring my question.

She’s gotten to everyone, I think. “Oh, Matty, by the way, your mother is in the contest.”

“You gotta be shittin’ me,” he says.

“True ‘nough,” I say. “Top three.”

“Ick,” he says and then, “That’ll be ten bucks.”

I think about protesting the outrageousness of the price but decide not to. I smile at cute Matty Harrington and hand him a ten dollar bill.

I venture back to my sorry seat in the front row and watch a sweaty Gustaf try desperately to cue the music. I pray that G.L. hasn’t selected, “You Can Leave Your Hat On” and then feel immediately guilty for the thought. Gustaf instead cues “Graceland,” for the first finalist, one-legged Gracie Peterson. Gracie had been the poster child for my father’s call for safety reform at the hatchery. Gracie, a long time disgruntled employee, had gladly lent her

pretty face and disparaging anti-hatchery comments to my father's cause. He was publicly disgraced when G.L. discovered that no one at the hatchery could specifically recall any major accident involving Gracie Peterson. Gracie, it turned out, had been trying to collect on big workman's comp benefits, and her doctor, Johann Swensen, happened to be a dear old friend of G.L.'s. Dr. Swensen, after much prodding, guiltily admitted to G.L. the depth of Gracie's scam. And he tearily confessed that he no longer wanted any part of it. Gracie hadn't lost her leg because of poor safety practices at the hatchery, but rather, from a secret life long struggle against the ravages of diabetes. And for some reason, the town had forgiven Gracie Peterson, but not my father.

Penelope Crush openly flirts with Phil Jenkins. She catches me staring, and Phil gives her his pointy elbow in her fleshy ribs and they both look at me sheepishly. Penelope licks her lips and Phil winks at me.

"This is the first big thing she's done, you know, since, you know..." Penelope says loudly to Phil but looks at me.

"Since Big Jim died," Phil finishes her thought and stretches his old but young looking hand out to me.

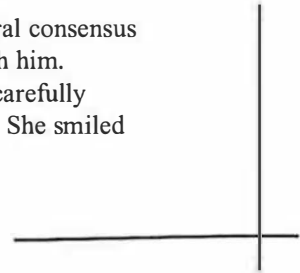
I take it, and he squeezes my fingers together so tightly that I get an immediate intense bone on bone finger ache from his steely grip. I jerk my fingers hard out of the hand hole that he's made.

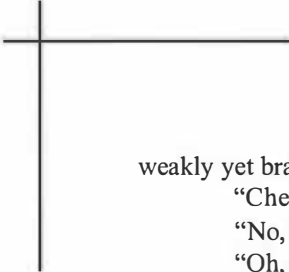
"I think she's a tad touchy, P, a bit like her father, I'm afraid," Phil says.

Penelope Crush nods her buff colored bouffant head in agreement. Phil elbows her again and they whisper to each other.

Gracie crosses the stage fairly well considering that she is an above the knee amputee. Her prosthetic looks remarkably good and if I didn't know better I might not even notice it. G.L. sticks her head out from behind the curtain and smiles and waves at me. She looks like a teenager. I smile and wave back at her and think about how far she's come since Big Jim's funeral.

It was crushing, to everyone. And not for the obvious reasons. The general consensus was that G.L. would be lost without Big Jim. Her purpose in life dying, along with him. She'd of course been stoic, but a few stray tears had wound their way through her carefully layered ivory foundation forming sad, crooked paths all the way down to her chin. She smiled





weakly yet bravely when they'd lowered his casket into the ground. I was a mess.

"Cheer up, Walnuts. You wouldn't blubber like that in front of Big Jim, would you?"

"No, G.L. I wouldn't. But he isn't here," I sobbed.

"Oh, sweetie, he is. He is." She put her arm around me and whispered into my ear, "Do you know what Big Jim and I were reminiscing about the day before he died?" She paused, but still held her lips to my ear. I could feel her breath. It was warm and smelled like Freedent yet somehow it was comforting. "The letter, darling. Remember the letter?"

I smiled at her and patted her sweet, tear-stained cheek. I was touched that she was comforting me at a time like this. "Of course I remember, G.L., how could I forget?"

When I was 12 years old, G.L. and Big Jim lived in Great Rapids, a good two hour drive from Little Rivers. And we, G.L. and I, were something like pen pals. She would write long beautiful letters to me about her life in Great Rapids. She'd rattle on about her bridge clubs, her friends' problems, and Big Jim's inadequacy around the house as a handy man—though she was always careful to point out that she adored him. Not typical 12-year-old-girl fodder. I loved that she saw me, at least in these letters, as a grown-up and I tried as best I could to tailor my responses to her letters with equal maturity. And in one such response I wrote about the trials and tribulations of 7th grade, of Sadie Hawkins' dances and crushes on 8th grade boys, who were probably smoking pot, of bad science teachers who half-heartedly taught evolution and left plenty of room for God in their lame discussions, and of pre-teen angst at living under the same roof as my conservative parents. The letter, I felt, was bold and daring. And some of the things I said in that letter I would never have shared with anyone else, and I knew I was taking a chance. A big fat chance on sharing it with an *adult*—especially one so far removed from 7th grade. But I felt I could trust G.L., that she would understand, that she would respond with the wisdom of Buddha. She responded, alright. She sent my letter back—my angst filled pre-teen, college ruled, best-handwriting ever, letter—with big fat red felt pen corrections. She circled 'Sadie Hawkins' and put an 'sp?' next to it. She underlined long, heart breaking sentences and wrote 'run on'. She put a box around the part about my parents being conservative and wrote "your parents? Hardly." I was devastated but I was also pissed. Really pissed, and full of that 12-year-old brand of fury where you're mad, embarrassed and hot for revenge all at the same time. Where you lie on your bed and crush your favorite stuffed animal to your chest and cry and wish for the speedy but painful death of the person who has done this to you. And in my case, it was G.L. Since I couldn't go to my parents for fear of revealing the contents of my letter, I took it upon myself to draft G.L. a brand new one riddled with mistakes. I took out a sheet of pink

stationary paper and wrote in black marker, all caps: SCROO EWE! And, before I could think twice about it, I stuffed it into an envelope and dropped it in the corner mailbox. She didn't write back. Six months later, Big Jim had his first stroke and G.L. thought that they should be closer to family so they moved to Little Rivers. During Sunday dinner G.L.—whom I was still being cool to—pulled out a box and presented it to my father. My father opened the box and unwrapped the tissue. And there, lying in the tissue was my letter, in a beautiful pink and purple rose frame. My heart seized. G.L. looked at me and smiled and winked.

“What's this?” my father said.

“Only the best thing to come out of this family in two generations,” said G.L.

My father turned to me, eyes ablaze, and for just a moment appeared to be forming words carefully in his head. Looking back, I realize that I was sitting at that table staring at him, longing for him to say something brilliant, something that would shed light on this woman we were forced to deal with. He was her favorite son, and I her favorite grandchild, that alone was enough to cement my relationship with him, forever. I imagined us as a couple of soldiers locked in battle against a common foe.

“Do you know what you've done?” Not the words I was hoping for. “Have you learned nothing! Have you any idea who you're dealing with?” His words were heavy and fierce.

I looked around the table. G.L. was still smiling.

“Just remember this day,” he said, without so much as a hint of irony in his voice.

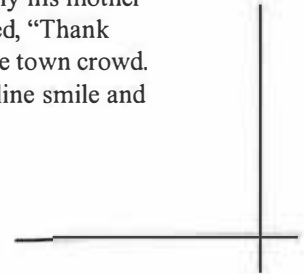
“From this day forward...”

“From this day forward, what?” I said, as snottily as I dared.

“From this day forward, you have started it,” he said.

He wasn't mad. But he was warning me. Warning me not to engage G.L. But, we all knew it was too late for that.

As Leona's music starts up loudly, I realize that I had completely missed the last glide of finalist number two, Helena Herrington. I curse myself silently for being so caught up in my own reverie. I had wanted to be able to report back to Matty about how wonderfully his mother had done and how little he had to be embarrassed about. Clever Leona had selected, “Thank Heaven for Little Girls,” and the irony of the song is not lost on Gustaf or the home town crowd. They are raucous as she struts her stuff across the stage. She smiles a toothy Vaseline smile and winks at Phil Jenkins.





Phil elbows me hard, again, and yells, “Class. See, now that’s class.”

“A winner if there ever was one,” Penelope Crush chimes in. “And those shoes,” she glares at me and says to Phil, “Walnuts wanted her to wear flats, can you imagine? Flats in a bikini contest!”

As Leona finishes her strut, she takes her place center stage. One-legged Gracie Peterson comes out from behind the curtain, stage right, and slowly ambles over to join Leona. 36-year-old, tanned and buxom, Helena Harrington, on Gustaf’s cue, ventures out from stage left. In true pageant fashion, the trio clutch each around the waist and collectively hold their breath in anticipation of the announcement of the winner. Gustaf takes a moment to consult with the judges. He smiles at Penelope Crush and Phil Jenkins and nods his head in agreement.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, the moment we’ve all been waiting for. The second runner up in Heroes’ first annual bikini contest is...Miss Gracie Peterson.”

Gracie puts her hand to her chest and gives G.L. a peck on the cheek. Gracie’s long time boyfriend, Seymour Tanner, clumsily bounds up onto the stage and hands Gracie an obscene bouquet of mums. The bouquet is so large I can barely see Gracie’s pretty face peeking out from behind it.

Gustaf cues a fake drum machine and belabors the announcement of the first runner up. When he finally spits it out, cute Matty Harrington, not missing a beat, runs out from behind the stage with a bouquet of individually wrapped roses of various colors. He hands them to his mother, Helena, who takes them, gratefully, and begins to cry. I suspect that she is not crying from Matty’s spontaneous outpouring of affection, but rather, from having just lost to a 75-year-old grandmother.

Gustaf yells over the sound of fifty-odd hands coming together for the sexy old broad standing center stage. He tells us what we already know, that lovely Leona from Little Rivers has won. G.L. allows Gustaf to drape the ‘Heroes Bikini Girl’ sash across her shoulder. She is beaming and in response to that glow on her face the crowd at Heroes jumps to their feet and gives her the standing ‘o.’ I take this as my cue to present Leona with the now wilting, sorry purple rose. I hop up onto the stage and hand it to her.

“Oh, darling, purple, you remembered,” she says above the din of the crowd.

“I was going to get you a dozen, but it’s not like you’ve won Hawaiian Tropic or anything,” I say.

“Don’t start now, Walnuts. You’ve always taken the high road,” she says as she waves to her new found fans.

“I’m sorry,” I say, ashamed. “Congratulations, G.L. I’m proud of you. I only wish Big Jim could have been here.”

She continues to wave but looks me in the eye. She holds the purple rose to her nose and inhales deeply. She smiles at me, and the apples of her sweet Irish cheeks are pushed up higher than I’ve ever seen them before. In response to that smile, my heart seizes like it did that day she gave my father the framed letter. But this time it’s out of love, not fear. Out of understanding, I think, out of knowing, just a little bit, about who she is.

She squats down, slowly, and shakes Phil Jenkins’s hand.

Caught up in the moment, and still feeling guilty about the Hawaiian Tropic comment, I squat alongside her and put my arm around her shoulders and press my lips to her ear and whisper, “Purple isn’t for enchantment, G.L., even though Big Jim always said it was.”

She pauses mid-handshake and presses her head even closer to my mouth, wanting me to continue.

“Purple is for valor. Purple is for heroes. Purple symbolizes victory in combat, pure and simple.”

She drops Phil’s hand and swivels on her red stiletto heels to face me. She pauses for just a nano-second, and then throws her head back and laughs, hard. She strokes her throat with her long manicured nails, and then finally takes my hand and kisses it and says, “Oh, darling, you are dramatic. Truly.”





in the barranca



susan brown

Listening to my trees
this fine warm morning,
the cottonwood's fresh green leaves
swaying with the ocean's hush
sound like light rain.

Two orange-capped birds sail by
in fast swooping arcs;
a dangling twig slips down to earth
from a slender black beak when
I call out hello.

Down the canyon
the Pacific's blue-green swells roll around
Anacapa Island, gently,
no longer disturbed by the plane
a bird dropped from the sky;

then a hawk's
wide brown wings whip the thin air
with loud silent cries

susan brown

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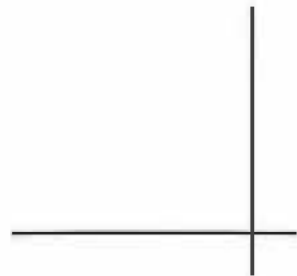
in the barranca

and dark numinous eyes
search for a feather lost in the trees.

White silk butterflies weave
through purple vinca, looking for ways
to keep their beauty—
all this changes
when body parts are plucked from the sea.


Owls sleep in the pines,
dreaming of why things fly or fall.
Last night they woke in the snow moon's glow
around midnight, calling
who, who, who.

Sitting with my trees in the shade of day,
I wonder if they
were asking who I am
or who fell from the sky?
Tonight I'll tell them I don't know.





september rain



jack ahrens

No need for sprinklers
this morning; rain
soaks the grass, the earth.

Fire in the canyons,
dry brittle drought-
ridden brush. Combustion.

The rain falls lightly:
cool September rain
that crowds out summer.

A plume of smoke
fills the eastern sky.
The choke of brown

sweeps curls of flame;
blackened stubble
left smoldering in ash.

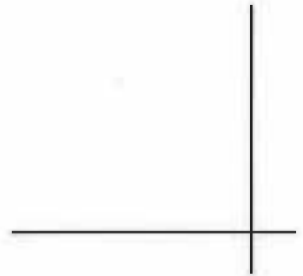
jack ahrens

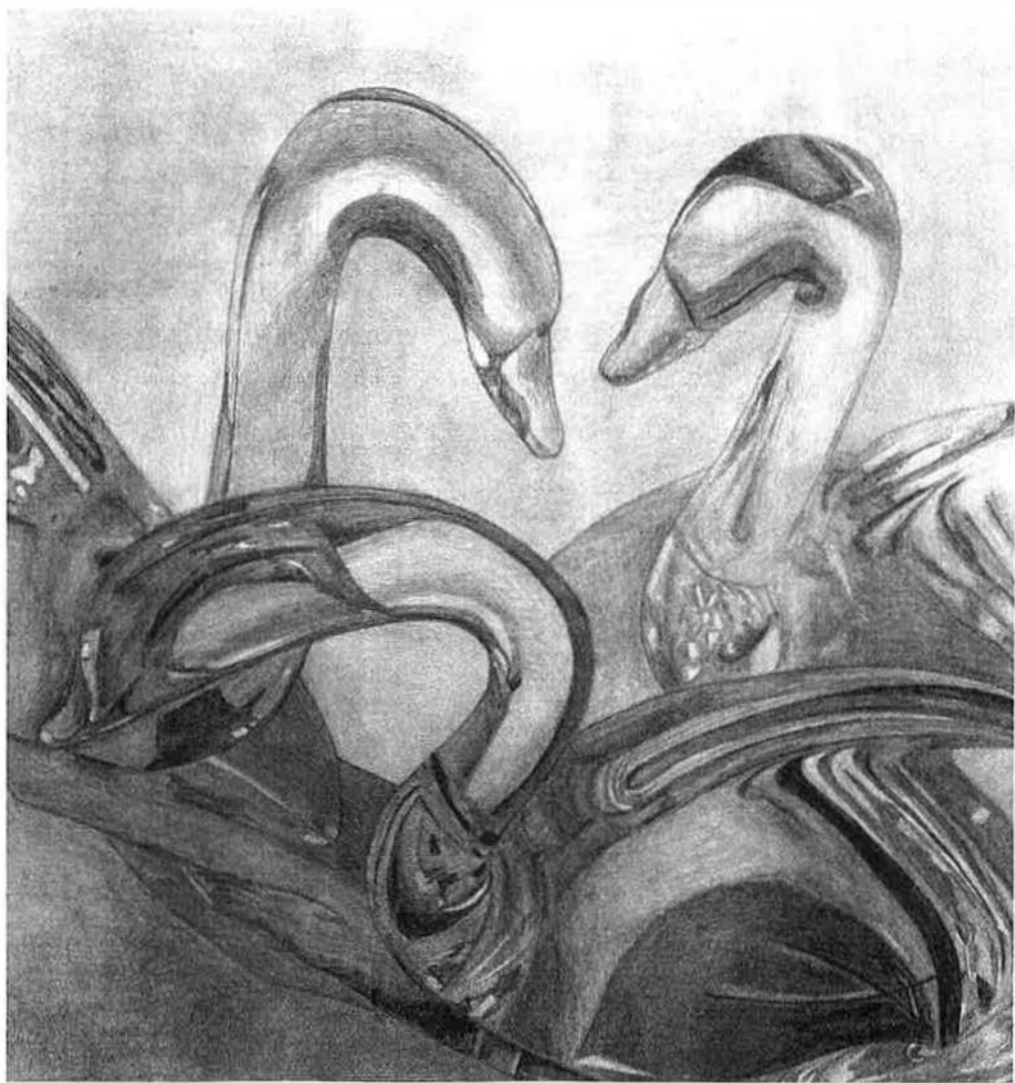
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september rain

The slow swirl
of water through down-
spouts and gutters

over late summer leaves:
a red and yellow tinged
carpet on the driveway.





antiquities

melanie wudl

Listen. I shot a hole through my Dad's wooden Buddha. My mother thinks it's a wormhole and is freaked that the thing is infested. They've got a Vietnamese priest staying at the house—to do the restoration. I don't think he can see.

My father's got a collection of Asian junk he thinks is worth something. Most of it's from Korea. Stuff his Dad bought for nothing during the Korean War in between screwing the whores. Dad's sure his collection is gonna put me through college and see him through his old age.

He's tried to have it appraised without paying for it, the appraisal I mean. Constantly inviting a stream of connoisseurs to the house for dinner and their opinion. "The ancestor portraits are in pretty rough shape George," says his friend Kristin who works in the conservation department at the museum. "The restoration isn't going to be cheap. And I gotta say I think the lot of these are pretty common. Not much outstanding here. Then again, you can't really know for sure because of their condition." I think she added this last bit after catching Dad's deflated expression.

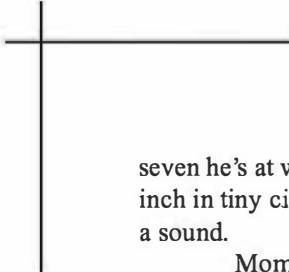
"Yeah, yeah. I've got a guy who's gonna restore them. The portraits and the Buddha."

Kristin glances at the Buddha. "You really might want to have that carbon dated before you go to any real expense," she breaks gently. "Is that a hole in its head?"

Mom deflects, "How much does that cost? George, have you looked into that?"

Dad changes the subject—something he's good at. One thing about Dad, not a lot of staying power.

The blind restorer doesn't speak English. He's up at five a.m. Makes tea and sits. By



seven he's at work on the Buddha with cotton swabs dipped in warm water. He works inch by inch in tiny circles on the four-foot Buddha, rubbing away the grease and the grit. Never makes a sound.

Mom wants to spray the Buddha with Windex or better yet take it to be dipped in formaldehyde. Dad thinks the priest is on the right track and buys some eastern wind music.

It's been ten days. I skulk through the living room, guilty. Tell myself I should let the priest in on the secret. A little wood putty and gold leaf and he's a hero. I think he already knows what I know but he likes the house, the quiet.

At the feeder she
pushes out other birds—

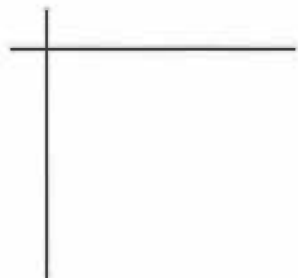
her black knife eyes
cut a snowflake open.



starling



kenneth pobo



on libraries,
literature,
and on
loveless it

irena sinitsky

Libraries

Libraries are organized places. Their sections separate books according to subjects, and at times bring total strangers together with nothing in common but a single interest. The books stand still, numbered, as though houses on both sides of the countless streets. The covers are doors that are kept closed unless someone gets the key to open them—to reveal the interior decorations which are the words, the sentences, the stories, and to awaken with a gentle breeze the inhabitants, who are the characters. Otherwise, the books in the libraries face the shelves, as though punished children, while their bound-sides play and brick the polished concrete floors of the halls, as though clear reflections and nothing more. The halls seem as though they could remain silent forever...

Yet, the high heels of her shoes shuddered the silence with each step they took toward the vanishing point, at which the walls and the floors of all the halls were never destined to meet. But then, her heels stopped and turned, and her shadow sneaked away into one of the side-aisles of fiction. And standing amidst the shelves of books that seemed to grow taller with each look around she took, she suddenly felt small and sad for all the thousands of pages she would never get to flip like wings. Her claustrophobia made her swallow the scent of the untouched and the old, and she coughed, resisting total suffocation. She heard the cough echo three or four times, but to her ear it sounded like a whisper in a foreign language, which she once learned but no longer wanted to recall. *What did she want?* In search, her eyes blinked until they saw a torn, tiny piece of paper in her hand. The wrinkled whiteness had a number written on it in unsharpened pencil, in grayness that almost blended with her long and lean shadow below her.

R1606sh.77w.1979. Her eyes searched for the number on the shelves, *1000*...she turned to the opposite side, *1500*...she kneeled, *1606*...she found two numbers that were supposed to preserve her number in between, but the book she was looking for was not in its place, perhaps borrowed by somebody else. She rose up disappointedly, and taking dust off some books her fingers touched accidentally, she left the shelves aimlessly.

Literature

Her bare feet shuffled through the long quiet tables, where a few literature lovers read reference books that looked new and clean. Her high-heeled shoes were held in her left hand, while her right hand rumbled the piece of paper and carried no books to set down and flap through. Most of the chairs were empty, lined up, as though soldiers guarding the literature that lay on the long leanness. She saw a tall stack of books that appeared to have no reader. But the mound just hid its reader, as the chair she dragged screeched and scratched the floor, and he glanced up irritated and interrupted. His brief expression made her feel as though she was an uninvited guest or worse, an intruder going through his underwear. But she sat down anyway, and let her eyes wander down the list of his books. *Russian literature*.

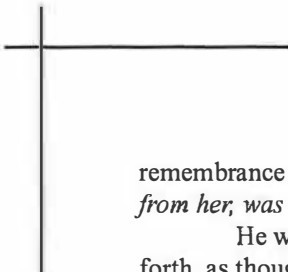
Chekhov's collection of short stories reminded her of *The Darling*, of who her mother was—of how her mother always agreed with her husbands for peace's sake in the house, of who she herself feared of becoming if she was to fall in love and, God forbid, get married.

Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* took her back to ten sleepless nights she spent when she was twelve, when her stepfather was packing to move away, and when she picked that book out of his private collection to have something to remember him by, knowing that he would never come by again.

And the thought of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, that she noticed toward the very bottom of that stack, still made her blush at the bittersweet memory of her first imaginary love—Bolkonsky.

Loveless It

The reader, who sat on the other side of the stack, raised his eyes again. This time, they looked slightly elongated and forgiving. The skin around them folded into lines, as though sun-rays of a brand new day. Not until she lowered her eyes to the skin around his cheeks that cracked into a smile, did she feel her own smile and recalled that hers was born out of a naïve



remembrance of Bolkonsky, who was not real and probably never was. *But he, who sat across from her, was real.*

He whispered something. She whispered something back. They whispered back and forth, as though already exchanging secrets under sheets. But they shared nothing concrete, nothing that she would remember the next morning. She would never know his name, his phone number, his library card number...she would never even know why he read Russian literature, but as the lights in the library began to flicker, she felt his hand cup her knee and then let it slither up her thigh.

The library was closing up and she remembered exactly what she wanted to find. She wanted to find a Shakespearean sonnet about a one night stand. She wanted to make copies, to read it to her senior composition class, and then to give a quiz on Shakespeare. Perhaps she will move the quiz and find the sonnet tomorrow. Perhaps she will scratch out the questions that deal with that sonnet, and pass out the quiz on its planned morning. Perhaps she will write her own poem, if she gets home before morning.

orange twilight sent us all to bed
at midnight I went strolling with help
lying down my face in sleep unruddied
tide and moon rose by the sea-pagoda
the swallows came back to roost again
my guttering candle brightened in the window
my thoughts ran all about till sunup
my ears heard flutes and strings playing

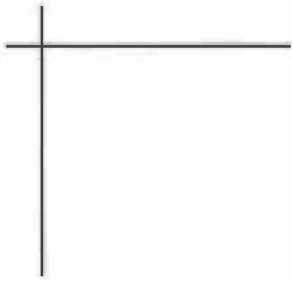
Po Chu-I (A.D. 772-846)
tr. C. Mulrooney (after Waley)



sleeping it off after
a party

christopher mulrooney





kevin
costner
saved
your life

ken cran

1991.

They say everyone has the same problems, but not you no, you have three times the problems that most people have and goddamn anyone who tells you otherwise. It's not easy starting a business, you tell them. You're in a constant state of war: war with the banks, war with the vendors, war with the employees, war with the customers. They don't know what it's like; what's more, they don't want to know. They're after you for one thing and one thing only: your ass. They want to see you fail, because how else are they going to feel good about themselves? They can go home to their dinners of lamb chops or hot dogs or ramen noodle soup loaded with MSG, sit there and say *Boy that Earl, he's a for real jackass and did you see him screw up the numbers today oh boy! I'd never do that! Can you pass the yams?*

No, none of them understand you. You try to explain what it's like to have a dream, to be independent, to work for yourself rather than for some twit with a bulbous belly and sweat stains under his arms. You try to reason with them, tell them that you've had a dream since you were in diapers, a dream that enables you to open your own store, which in turn allows you to wake up in the morning without putting a straight razor to your throat or Drano in your coffee cup.

But do they get it?

Hell no. They get nothing but the satisfaction of mocking you when your back is turned. None of them appreciate having a dream because none of them have dreams themselves. *Boy, that Earl, who does he think he's kidding with that marketing strategy? What a dink, oh boy! Honey, are we out of toilet paper?*

March 29, 1991 is the date that things begin to change. Your business is picking up, but

only because you no longer sleep or eat (unless cigarettes and espresso constitute food). Regardless, Sunday morning for some reason, you decide to walk to the shop. It's only a mile and a half, and you feel like the fresh air will do you some good. Besides, gas prices have gone up and you're sick and tired of paying a buck-twenty a gallon.

On the way, you pass the Bishop Cineplex 4 Theaters. You stop, read the marquee: *Sleeping with the Enemy*, *Curly Sue*, *Cape Fear*, *Dances with Wolves*. Now, reading the marquee isn't the strangest thing you do that day. Even stranger is what you do next. You amble up to the box office and smile at the pretty Vietnamese girl behind the glass.

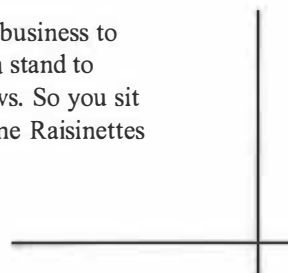
"Welcome to the Bishop Cineplex 4," she says with a mouthful of silver braces.

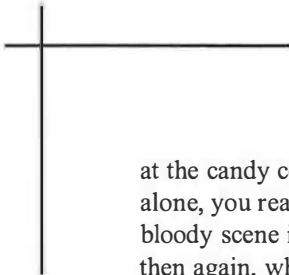
What you're trying to prove at that point, you haven't a clue. But for some reason, you say, "One ticket please, for *Dances with Wolves*." She takes your five-dollar bill and gives you a dollar fifty change. You go inside, bypassing the restroom and candy counter and head straight into the theater. The movie hasn't started yet, so the house lights are still up. You're surprised to see that for an eleven a.m. show, it's pretty crowded. You've heard something about this movie, not much, only that it's a western and it's up for an Academy Award or two. So it must be good, although you wouldn't know a good movie if it came up and bit you on the ass. The last movie you saw at the theater was *The Goonies*, and so far as you were concerned, *that* was high art. So movies aren't your thing. Business, merchandizing, employee relations—that's what you know. Stick to what you know, you remember someone saying.

You grab a seat close to the front because you don't like to see other people's heads while you're watching a film. You've been that way since you were a kid, when you were short and unable to see over large bald melons or old, gray bouffants. Such is the trauma of childhood. So while you wait for the show to start, you think about the store, about the employees who will be standing at the front door, anticipating and dreading the great unlocking of the doors. But you won't be there, no, because you're watching *Dances with Wolves*, and besides, they're mindless automaton bastard no-dreamers anyway. You chuckle, because they'll say *Boy that Earl, he's late and what kind of business man doesn't even show up to open his business, oh boy! Hey, does my breath smell like tuna?*

And you won't give a hoot.

The movie starts and suddenly, you realize what you're doing. You have a business to run, and yet here you are at the early Sunday screening of *Dances with Wolves*. You stand to leave, but then the previews kick on and you remember how much you like previews. So you sit back down, but *just* for the previews. You'll leave after they're done, maybe get some Raisinettes





at the candy counter on your way out. A man can't live off dreams and cigarettes and espresso alone, you reason. But then the previews end, and you're suddenly face-to-face with the movie: a bloody scene in a cavalry hospital with that young actor Costner. It looks pretty authentic, but then again, what do you know about the Civil War? Costner is playing John Dunbar, who tries to commit suicide by riding a horse before a line of Confederate soldiers. To your surprise, they show one Johnny Reb taking a slug in the head, and in gruesome close up. How'd they do that, you wonder? You become engrossed, forgetting the store, the employees, the customers, the vendors, the banks. The film unfolds before you, and then something unique happens, something you haven't seen in a movie since Richard Harris hung from his chest skin.

Up on the screen, Indians appear.

Or rather, *Native Americans*.

You watch the drama, listen to the music, scream at the buffalo hunt, cry when the good guys, who are the Indians this time for Christ's sake, get shot up. You watch the whole thing, your mind emptying of all worries about money and dreams. You give yourself completely to the movie, which is something you've never done before. And then, before you know it, it's over and you quickly realize that three hours have gone by and that you didn't open your store. But somehow, none of that matters. You've been transported back in time, and you can't conceive coming back. Not yet, anyway.

Indians, you think, then chastise yourself. *Native Americans*.

My God, was it really like that? They didn't have stores, but then again, they didn't need stores or banks or vendors or employees or customers. You sit there lost in your thoughts while everyone else leaves, but then soon the ushers come by and ask you to vamoose so they can sweep up the popcorn and Heath bar wrappers.

That night, you're glued to the set as *Dances with Wolves* sweeps the Academy Awards, winning seven Oscars. Afterward, you sit at the kitchen table and write to Kevin Costner, to Orion Pictures, to Michael Blake the writer, and to John Barry the music composer. You write letters to the *Bishop Daily Bugle* explaining why everyone should see this movie. You track down the address of the Tribal Council of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota and ask them how you can convert. While you're doing all this, not once does the store come into mind. And not once do you notice the flashing red light on the answering machine.

The next morning, you awake at the usual time, shower, eat your favorite breakfast of maple brown sugar oatmeal and sausage links. You decide to walk to the store again because it's so close and anyway, Indians didn't have cars, so why should you drive? You take the stack of

letters you wrote the night before and drop them in the mailbox on the corner of Main Street and Melbourne. You get to the store and there are three notes stuck to the window, all from employees asking what happened to you and are you sick? Hollow sentiment, you decide, then crumple them up and unlock the door.

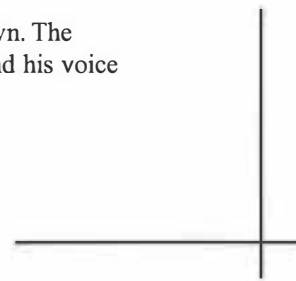
Inside, you turn the deadbolt and pull the door shade. The shade is yellowed and the sunlight coming through it is dingy. Earth tone, you might say. Comforting in a way. You spin around and face the store, but something happens then. You freeze, even though it isn't cold. You break out with a case of the sweats, but it isn't hot, either. Something grips your chest, like a giant hand squeezing the Charmin. You inhale sharply, deeply, because you've forgotten to breathe and your body is saying come on, let's get on with it. You study the store. Study the merchandise on the shelves. It's different today, somehow. Something looks different. Everything is nice and neat, the way you left it on Saturday before you left— not a speck of dust anywhere. On the shelves, rows of colorful boxes have been faced and are perfectly symmetrical. You did all that of course, not your employees. They don't care enough to make things perfect.

But none of that matters now, because everything's changed. You get a hold of yourself, wipe your brow, head over to the customer service counter. Flip on the little black and white television set to *Good Morning Tulsa*. Ordinarily, you'd crunch numbers from the day before, but since you weren't open the day before, number crunching isn't an option. You grab the Windex and a roll of paper towels from the back room, and then start to polish a counter that doesn't need polishing. *Good Morning Tulsa* comes back from a station break and they go through a list of Academy Award winners from the night before. You stop and watch, crank the volume up. As you already know, *Dances with Wolves* wins the most Oscars, including the majority of the major ones: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography and on and on. Kevin Costner is interviewed at the governor's party, and he again thanks the Sioux Nation for their support.

Sioux Nation. What a nice ring that has, you think. *Sioux Nation*. Beats the hell out of Damn Nation, which is currently your state of being. You set the Windex down, grab your keys and head for the door. You don't think twice about where you're going. But you most certainly are going.

At the Bishop Cineplex 4 box office, you slap another five-dollar bill down. The Vietnamese girl isn't there today, but a teenage boy is. He's gawky and pimpled, and his voice cracks.

"Can I help you?" he asks.



“One adult for *Dances with Wolves*,” you say.

“The theater doesn’t open for another two hours,” he says, but you shrug and smile, because you’ll wait *ten* hours if you have to. He hands you the ticket and your change, and then you park yourself by the theater door. Surprisingly, it’s not long before more people show up, purchase their tickets and get in line behind you. They try to talk to you about the Oscars, about Indians, about how awful the government treated those poor people. And about that wonderful Kevin Costner. You keep your end of the conversation short, because you’re not in the mood to talk. Certainly not to these people, these *white* people with their unenlightened, suburban-esque philosophies.

It takes forever, but they finally open the doors. You rush in, bypassing the concession area for the theater and a seat right in front. Soon, the movie starts and you’re transported back to 1863, along with John J. Dunbar, Kicking Bird, Stands With A Fist and Wind In His Hair. Before, you sat in shock at what you were watching, for it wasn’t *Shane*, or *High Plains Drifter*, or even *A Man Called Horse*. Sure, it was a western, but a western where Indians were the good guys? Where the U.S. Cavalry rode in at the end not to save, but to kill? That’s not how you were brought up to think. Davy Crocket killed ignorant Mexicans at the Alamo, General Custer was the victim of a cowardly ambush, and Indians were savage red devils.

No, this time, you sit before the flickering screen with a different perspective. This time, you know who to root for right off the bat.

The movie ends and you rush out to buy another ticket. You sit through every showing that day, spending over twenty dollars in tickets but nothing on popcorn and Raisinettes. You cheer when Mr. Costner appears on screen for the first time. You cheer when the rebel soldier takes the bullet in the head (how did they make it look so *real*?). You cheer the first appearance of Graham Greene’s Kicking Bird and Rodney Grant’s Wind In His Hair. You cry when the baby buffalo wails next to its skinned mother, for the unscrupulous white hunters have killed hundreds for their hides and tongues only. You cry when Stone Calf is killed, you cry when Two Socks the wolf is shot by the soldiers, you cry when Wind In His Hair yells out “I am Wind In His Hair, do you see that I am your friend? Can you see that you will always be my friend?”

You leave the theater at twelve-thirty that night, drained and starved. You walk home thinking about Kevin Costner and Graham Greene and wonder if ever in your life you had a friend that really cared about the real you. You wonder how hard it would be to meet Mr. Costner, perhaps tell him how much you enjoyed going back to another time, a time without banks or vendors or employees or customers. A time without perfectly arranged merchandise and Windex

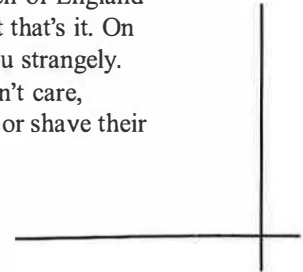
and notes on doors. Would he care, you think, or would he simply nod and say, "Thank you for seeing my movie, I wanted it to touch people's hearts, which way to the restroom?"

You write more letters when you get home, this time not only to the *Bishop Daily Bugle*, but also to *Newsweek* and *The National Review* and *The Wall Street Journal*. You chastise the American government for hiding the truth from its citizenry, and demand that we give back North and South Dakota and parts of Nebraska and hell, let's throw in the Michigan peninsula, too. In fact, you write, why not move everyone back to Europe and give the *Native Americans* the whole country back.

You go to bed without supper, condemning yourself. You pinch your body in different places as hard as you can, for you are a white man and of no real value. No one likes you anyway, white or not, because they're jealous of your store and your dreams. Even you start to question whether or not *you* like you, because you have a successful store that caters to the white folks of Tulsa and the surrounding suburbs like Glenpool and Kellyville and yes, Bishop. It does nothing to help the Lakota or Kevin Costner, and it won't bring back Two Socks the wolf because the bastard American soldiers used him for target practice. You fall asleep with purple bruises from pinching yourself so hard. You dream of bankers and vendors, about scalping them and feeding their flesh to your employees. You laugh in your sleep.

The next morning, you don't bother with showering or breakfast. You head out, again on foot because you no longer believe in driving. You drop the letters in the mailbox, then head right over to the Cineplex 4. You get your ticket, wait in line, and then enter the theater. Again, you're there all day and into the night, laughing, crying and fuming where you're supposed to laugh, cry and fume. You leave the theater after midnight again, go home and write letters, this time to your congressman, to the senator of the great state of Oklahoma, to the President of the United States. You write another letter to Kevin Costner, asking if he received your previous letters. Before bed, you eat a slice of cheese and half an ear of raw corn on the cob. You dream about shoving little notes down your employee's throats. You dream about bankers and vendors taking bullets in the head in gruesome close-up. You dream about setting your store on fire.

Wednesday and Thursday are pretty much the same. Spending the day with *Dances with Wolves*, writing letters to the United Nations, the Pine Ridge Reservation, the Queen of England and to Kevin Costner. You eat half an ear of corn at night and a slice of cheese, but that's it. On Thursday, the Vietnamese girl with braces returns to the box office and looks at you strangely. You haven't showered or brushed your teeth, and your beard is scruffy. But you don't care, because the Indians, or rather, *Native Americans* didn't shower or brush their teeth or shave their



beards. Or at least, you don't think they did. Not the way white people do, anyway.

You decide you don't like the Vietnamese girl with the braces anymore. Perhaps one time you thought she was pretty, but not anymore; she's ugly and you don't care if her family is from another country, she's still walking on the backs of dead Indians by living here. *Boy that Earl*, you imagine her saying. *He's got some real hygiene problems oh boy! Mom, how do I get the bloodstains out of my undies?*

Thursday, you leave the theater after midnight again, walk home and write letters. You glance over at the answering machine and the flashing red light. Vendors, you think. No, worse, bankers. All worried about why you haven't paid the bills or opened the store. Funny no one has stopped by. Does anyone even know where you live?

You write letters to Paul McCartney and Deng Xiou Ping and Nelson Mandela and Kevin Costner. You eat the last ear of corn in the fridge, the last slice of cheese. You go to bed and amazingly, do not dream at all.

Morning comes and right away, you throw on your pants and shirt, grab the letters and head on out. On the corner of Main Street and Melbourne, you stop and deposit the letters. You turn down Main to see several police cars. They're not flashing lights or anything, but their location is curious: they're parked right in front of your store. You quell the urge to go over and see what's going on and whether you've been robbed or vandalized. It's not much of an urge, though, and besides, you have more important things to do.

You head to the theater.

At the box office, you're happy to see that the Vietnamese girl with the braces isn't there. You slap down your five-dollar bill, and say "One for *Dances with Wolves*."

But the gawky kid with the pimples doesn't take your money. Instead, he arches an eyebrow and points up at the marquee. You turn and look. The marquee reads: *Sleeping with the Enemy. Curly Sue. Cape Fear. Father of the Bride.*

"What happened?" you ask the kid. But he only shrugs, because really, what does he know about movie distribution or film cycles or fucking *anything*?

You look around the street, suddenly adrift. What to do now? You can't go home, or to your store, or to the gas station. You don't drive anymore. You don't really eat anymore. You don't do anything anymore except spend the day in another time. A time when Native Americans were Indians and the U.S. Cavalry were the bad guys. And there were no bankers or vendors or lazy employees eating notes and burning in fires.

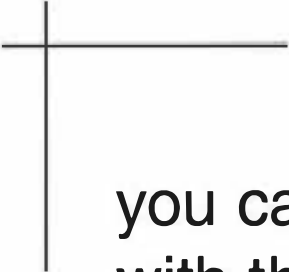
You begin to walk, but to where, you don't know. North, you think. Something's got to happen, you reason, something important. And then it hits you. It's so simple. Of course.

Kevin Costner.


You turn west, because he must live in California. In Hollywood. Near a movie studio or something. You get a warm feeling all over, because if there's one person who'll understand, it'll be him. You can't wait to get there, but of course, it'll take a while. That doesn't matter, because the indi— *Native Americans*, didn't have cars and so neither will you. Yes, now you have a goal, a real goal, something to shoot for.

You can't wait to see the look on Mr. Costner's face.





you can't dig a hole
with the word *shovel*



jack ahrens

There are those who contend
that language fails;
and somehow,
I agree.

For the past year, I've been trying
to tell my wife I love her.
I love you. Three little words.

But somewhere, amid the death of parents,
clinical depression, the shift of seasons, life
stages, and pubescent daughters, she doesn't hear.
Or doesn't understand. Or doesn't believe.

I envy birds,
without words being able to dance their way
into the heart of a mate. I don't dance.
Don't ask me why I never learned.
I always had words; and knew
I could rely on them. And how about

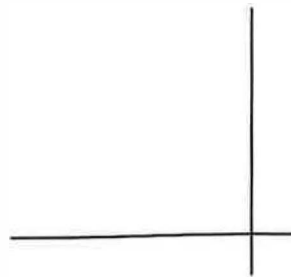
jack ahrens

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you can't dig a hole with the word *shovel*

those Bower birds: bringing a mate gifts
of shiny buttons, pieces of string, smooth blue stones.

Did I tell you we have been married ten years?
And it's only in this past year that we have stumbled
over the meanings of words, like love or trust.
I need to find new ways to say things. New words.
Maybe I'll learn to dance. Get a puppy.
Or find a piece of string and tie it in a knot.
Place blue stones at the edge of the coffee table.



submissions.

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

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

Manuscripts will not be returned.

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