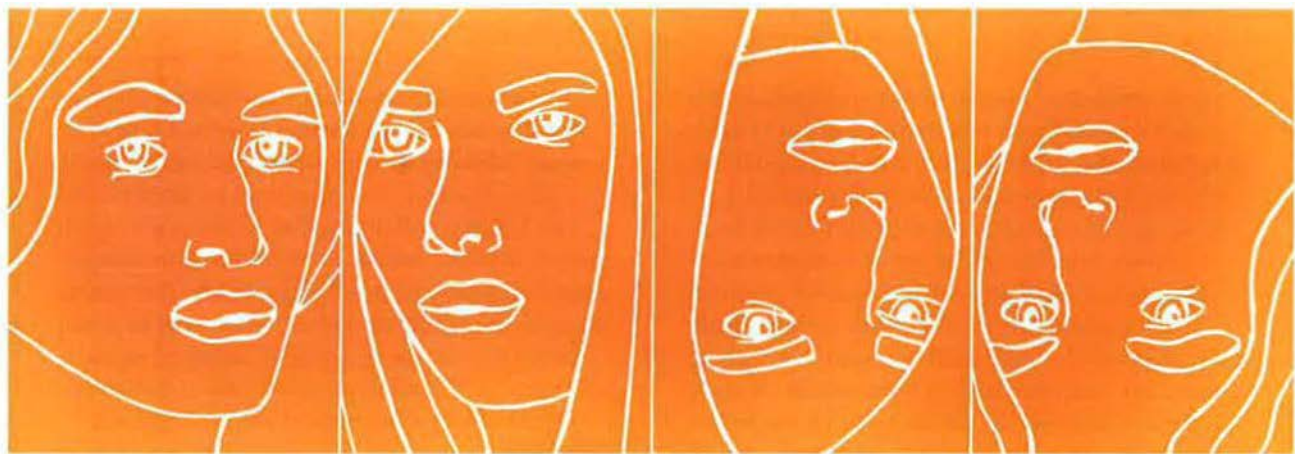


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**NORTHRIDGE REVIEW**  **SPRING 2004**



fiction

## fiction Editors' Note

Some writers write in a home office, surrounded by a mini-library of tattered paperbacks and little knick-knacks that harbor some sentimental value. Others write on laptops in the corners of coffee shops, corporate or private, finding comfort and inspiration in the bustle of counter clerks and order takers. Still others prefer the yellow legal pad and a clutch of sharpened pencils, the tactile sensation of graphite on paper inspiring prose that for them is impossible to find on the keyboard.

Regardless of the location, all writers of fiction have something in common, and that's storytelling. Although these stories are all diverse they begin the same way. First there is imagination, which leads to a spark, which leads to an idea, which leads to more ideas, which leads to a story that simply has to be written down. The creative process takes hold, and

stories emerge—each as distinct, and distinctly personal as the individuals that create them. If there's one thing you'll find in this collection in your hands, it's a diversity of stories in a diversity of styles. We don't know if they were written in coffee shops or laundromats or on the back porches of parents' homes in Sylmar. What we do know is that something inspired each writer to make tangible the amorphous images in their heads. When that happens, no matter what the final outcome, that person becomes a writer. And that, as any true writer knows, is enough.

So, in conjunction with the university, the Associated Students, the Dept. of English faculty, the staff of the Northridge Review and Mona Houghton, we are happy to provide this forum for these writers and their stories, no matter where they were written.

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# fiction Elements

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she will drag the whole world  
Thomas Noble

I think I told her I hoped so.

They talked about it for a while and decided that Toad would swim, Dog would paddle and Donkey would walk along the side of the river. Toad wanted to go to the fair on the edge of the forest where the river meets the lake and the animals gather, trade, and tell stories. They were not sure how to get there, but they knew that if they had faith and followed the river all would work out for the best.

Anyway, they went to that place and met up with this badger who was standing in front of this big half-circle of different animals sitting around, then that badger tells them a story. It seems strange because there are wolves and rabbits sitting next to each other, and there's a lion sitting in this forest next to a house cat with a collar. A goat is playing a fiddle even though it doesn't have any fingers and some cross-eyed giraffe is sticking his head out from

behind a pine tree with part of his tongue hanging from his mouth. The lady who wrote the thing—Juliet Kasper—is insane. She’s telling kids that all these animals hang out together in the forest and listen to stories? There’s a ferret and a huge ladybug holding hands in a ray of sunlight waiting to be told some story by a badger sitting on a tree stump. The rest of the story is pretty fucked up too.

“The story is about the ear mice,” Badger told the crowd of animals. “They were afraid, but not of humans—other things.”

The animals shuddered as a group and looked around them, behind them, then turned their eyes back towards Badger. So that rooster’s afraid of people, but he’s not afraid of that tiger sitting next to those daffodils. Fine.

“Do not worry,” Badger told them, “we’re safe here in the forest.”

The ferret hugged the gigantic ladybug and the badger began his story. He said part of it was

exactly as Coyote had told him. Father Badger had passed down the other part to Badger.

Coyote talked about how he would always see the ear mice scurrying out onto the fields and hiding from Hawk under bushes. Coyote said that he thought they were cowards, running back and forth, gathering food and living in fear. He said he wanted to play a joke on them. Stupid ear mice. So one day he told some of the ear mice that Hawk could not be found, that he had gone out of town, left their field altogether.

The ear mice looked out from under their bushes and could not see Hawk anywhere. They told other ear mice, they told other ones, and those ear mice told other ear mice. Eventually all of them were out on the fields collecting seeds. They did not appear to be worrying or thinking about Hawk at all. All the ear mice, little and big, laughed and jumped as they sang ear-mouse songs and collected seeds.

Far out of mouse-sight, Hawk watched them and



waited. Coyote watched the mice and laughed. He watched them for a few hours and then went over to a group of ear mice far out on the field, a group away from the hiding bushes.

"Hawk was gone," Coyote said to the mice, "but he only went to get more hawks." He froze, looked up, around, and behind him. "Now it's not just Hawk who is hunting you, but Hawk and his brothers!"

Just then Hawk saw Coyote talking to the mice and swooped down, snatching up an ear mouse. The mice started to run off. Coyote grabbed a straggler and bit down on him, but the nine or ten other mice that were nearby did not see what he did. They just ran towards the bushes at the edge of the field, squeaking and yelling.

"Hawk is back and with his brothers!" they yelled to other mice as they ran.

"There're hawks everywhere!" the other mice yelled to other mice as they ran.

"The fields aren't safe!" they all yelled as they ran.

Hawk flew off with his mouse. Coyote dropped the mouse he had in his mouth and rolled around on his back laughing and laughing.

The ear mice all gathered together at the edge of the field under the bushes. They took a tail count and two ear mice were missing. They squeaked and yelled. They told each other that they were not sure what they should do now that the field was so dangerous. There were arguments and mice fights. The little ones were crying and the big ones talked about the future.

"We need to go to another field," said one.

"We need to move to the city," said another.

"We can go underground," said one that was looking out at the field for hawks.

They stopped and looked at the one who said they that could go underground. They asked him about food; they asked him about sunlight. They

asked about the rain and wind and all the things that they loved under the bushes and in the field.

The mice talked about going underground for a day and a night. The little ones cried themselves to sleep. The big ear mice paced back and forth as far beneath the bushes as they could get.

The next morning they decided to go underground. From beneath the juniper bushes they started to dig tunnels and from those tunnels they dug other tunnels. The little ones took the dirt out to big ones who took it out to the surface and watched for hawks. The big ones dug for days and weeks. They dug with their front and back feet. Some of the tunnels lead to mouse-caverns. Water dripped into some of the caverns making underground mouse-ponds. They all ate worms and roots and talked about how scared they were when they first saw all the hawks.

The mice worked and lived and talked about the hawks. They made their tunnels and caverns and went deeper underground. One day, after being

underground for several weeks, the mice diggers stumbled upon a large cavern that they had not dug. It was filled with white trees a foot tall. The tiny trees had fruit on them the size of cherries and the color of milk. Word of the strange trees went through the tunnels and within minutes the little ear mice were plucking the pale fruit from the pale trees and eating it.

"It tastes good," a little one said.

"I feel strange," another little one said.

"I feel sick," another little one said and fell over on her side.

The ear mice quickly found out that it was not the fruit of the pale plant that was poisonous, but the seeds that almost filled the inside of the fruit. The fruit itself tasted very, very good and even the little ill and dizzy mice asked the big mice if they could have some more. The elder mice came to the new and mysterious room, for now after being underground for a while, the elder mice were looked to for

important decisions. The elders took some fruit and separated the many seeds from the small portion that could be eaten. They tasted it and made the decree that several caverns should be planted with it. Then the elders said that the seeds must be taken from underground, put outside where they would not be eaten.

Many caverns were planted with paletrees that grew palefruit. The growth and harvest went on smoothly for a very long time. Some of the little ear mice would sneak seeds and eat them, but not very often. All the mice ate the fruit and were happy, and they tried not to eat too many palefruit seeds.

Then a problem was brought to the elders. It was about the poisonous seeds from the palefruit trees. Grasshoppers were eating the seeds that were taken to the outside and they would gather around the entrances of the ear mouse tunnels to get the seeds.

"That is not so bad," the elders said.

"But, then the skunks come and eat the grass-

hoppers," an ear mouse said.

"And, then the skunks turn mean and dig down our holes," another ear mouse said.

Every time they went up to the surface to get rid of mouse trash and palefruit seeds they lost at least one mouse to the mean skunks. It was a big old fucking mess. The seeds and trash and shit from the mice would rot and stink in the tunnels if they didn't get rid of it, but they refused to stop growing the palefruit, and the skunks kept offing ear mice.

It wasn't done, but that was enough. She was finally asleep and I was tired, so I closed my eyes for a little.

When I got up I covered her with a blanket and I went over to Tooly's to hang out there with Phil and Marty and Tooly. We met there and were only at Tooly's for a few minutes.

"She drove by last night, and the night before," Phil said.

"We should walk out through the back yard tomorrow night," I told him.

"We should be asleep tomorrow night," Marty said and fiddled around in his pockets.

It was around four thirty in the morning when we had that conversation. There was one street light on and the paper lady always drove by when we were leaving Tooty's house. We'd seen her five nights in a row. Tooty didn't get a paper, but every time she'd drive by us she would wave a rubber band bound paper at the three of us. She'd drive by and now and then a paper would thump onto a driveway or kinda fwamp onto some grass. Her car left clutch fumes, or brake fumes—I don't remember which. We hadn't slept for a few days. Burning fiberglass fumes. It was an old Datsun, but I can't remember what color it was. Five or six, I think.

We usually ride our bikes over to Marty's apartment, but that morning we wanted to go to a dance that Marty's Mormon buddy was having later that night. Apparently Mormons have get togethers and dance with each other every now and then. Me, Phil

and Marty rode bikes—one normal one and Marty had a tandem bike and I rode on the second seat. Phil and I were embarrassed to ride being that we were thirty-two, thirty-five and twenty-eight. But, Marty didn't think he was as much a loser because he had a five speed tandem bike. Some guy in Culver City traded it to him for something. He says it was a good trade even though he couldn't remember what he'd traded. I guess Marty could get a car, but he seems to like that bike.

Phil rode a bike that he found. A few months ago he plowed his car into a column in front of the hospital emergency room. When he dislodged the car he decided that he wasn't hurt that bad and drove away. The car died a few blocks later, so he left it there and walked home.

I ride with them because I got my license suspended again.

We went to the park and hung out for a while, but didn't stay that long in any one place because we

got a little paranoid. Since we wanted to go to the dance we rode to Walmart around nine in the morning and bought button-up shirts with the money we had left over from Tooty's. We got ties at the Salvation Army because the Walmart ties were ugly.

After we bought all the stuff, we killed the ten hours before the dance at Marty's. Phil drank and sat in the bathroom. I shut my eyes for a while, then played with Marty's cat, but the cat set himself on fire when he walked by a candle and ran off and hid in the bathroom with Phil. So I watched TV and shuffled cards. Marty watched TV with me and played Chinese checkers by himself.

The dance started at seven and we were there on time. We looked pretty respectable. I had on a pair of suspenders that almost matched my tie. Phil had no socks, so he wore flip-flops. The Mormons at the door didn't let him in—not because of the way he was dressed, I don't think, but because he was drunk and smelled like alcohol. They were very nice to

Marty and me. They smelled both of us before they let us in to make sure that we weren't drunk too. Marty and I don't drink. They apologized and I told them it was no big deal. Those Mormons didn't have a clue.

Marty introduced me to his Mormon friend; he was pleasant, but I don't remember his name. That guy was outside standing around and we all shook hands. He asked us if we could ask Phil to not smoke in the parking lot. We did. Phil told us to fuck off, took his bike and went over to the elementary school next to the church, I think. We didn't see him for the rest of the night.

The music wasn't very loud and we couldn't hear it until we were actually in the room where the dance was being held. When I walked ten feet into the room it felt like junior high. Cologne and perfume like they'd put it on ten minutes ago or just rolled around in a tub of it. Chicks doing that standard girl dance. I was in there, like twenty seconds and just

lost it. The whole room felt like it got smaller and I felt sick and dizzy. I couldn't breathe and my heart was beating a lot faster than it usually does. Marty looked at me and told me my face was white. I didn't run out, but I walked really fast.

In the bathroom I went into an empty stall and tried to throw up. I just dry heaved for a few minutes then sat down on the floor. Some guy asked through the door if I wanted help and I just panicked, pushed the door open and ran. I don't remember getting into the parking lot, but I do remember seeing a big pickup truck and thinking that it was a good idea to hide under it. I was under there for a little bit when I heard somebody say something to me.

"That's my cousin's truck," she said.

I ignored her for a few minutes, but she wouldn't go away.

"I'm scared. Would you go away," I said to her.

"What are you scared of? Why don't you come out here?"

"No."

She talked and talked. Can't remember how long she went on for, but it was a while. She sounded like a pigeon or a dove—she cooed. I didn't catch most of what she said. I did hear her say something about God—I was waiting for that.

"This has got nothing to do with God," I told her.

"Most things have something to do with God."

"I'm not a big fan of God."

"How's that working out for you?" she said and crouched down next to the truck. She had on dark shoes and smelled like fruit and new leaves.

I sat under the truck for a while thinking and looking at her dress and the way it draped around her legs.

"Rachel, you all right?" I heard.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said.

I decided to get out from under the truck and sat down next to one of the rear tires, right beside her. She didn't move as I got out and sat down. I'd hit

my head on some part of the truck and was bleeding from my scalp into my hair and behind my ear.

I lit a cigarette and smoked it. When I put it out she asked me questions about things. She asked if I was on drugs and I told her no. We talked about suspenders and blood. We talked about fear and junior high school. She told me I was hiding under her cousin's truck—he was visiting from out of town and walked with a limp because a barn door hit him or something like that. We talked about God for a while. I disagreed with everything she said. I told her that my God was a rose bush with white flowers planted a few miles outside of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho and named Simone.

"Why don't you try to come back inside?" she asked when I'd finished.

"My hair is full of blood."

"Then wash it out and then come back in."

"No, I think I've had enough."

She smiled at me, stood up and patted me on the

cheek.

"Doesn't look like you've talked to Simone in a while," she said and walked away.

Marty came out to look for me later on. One side of my suspenders was unhooked and the bleeding had stopped. He didn't say much as we rode over to Tooly's. Tooly didn't have anything right then, but he did tell us that Phil had stopped by a little bit ago. When we left the newspaper lady hadn't been by—it was still too early. The street light wasn't on anymore. I guess it burned out. Back at Marty's I tried to get drunk sitting in the shower and talked to Simone.

I went to sleep on Marty's floor and when I woke up a day or two later I didn't know where anybody was. I couldn't even find the cat or my shoes. I borrowed some of Marty's shoes and walked home through the park and some alleys by garages because I thought this guy in a van and some cops were following me.

When I got home my daughter was on the couch, asleep in front of the television. I woke her up and asked her where Indah was, but she didn't know. Anna was hungry so I microwaved corndogs for her and went in my room to sleep. She came in after a few minutes with that book in her hand and wanted me to read to her. The little book with a cartoon picture of a donkey, an Irish Setter and a toad. The thing wasn't to scale, the picture on the front. The toad was huge and the Irish Setter was the same size as the donkey. The thing didn't make any damn sense. I was really tired, but she kept talking and I hadn't been home in a while so I figured, fine, do something with her.

It started out with the dog and the donkey walking through the woods, then they met up with this toad hopping along. The three of them walked and talked for a while as they came to a river. There was a boat on the river, a flat Tom Sawyer kind of thing with wood, and ropes tying it together. Anna

always says that the boat doesn't look safe every time I show her the picture with the dog, donkey and that giant fucking toad standing on it. The three of them talked about stealing the boat. Jesus shit, how many times have I read this.

"We can't take this," Dog said.

"Why don't we swim downstream," Toad said.

"I can't swim," Donkey told them.

I didn't understand why they're hanging out in the first place, let alone why they needed to go anywhere downstream. None of it made any sense and the bright blue river always looked too clean. I stopped and asked Anna why she wanted the ear mice story again, but she didn't answer. She just asked if I thought the ear mice would stay in the field this time.



# i don't understand chewing gum

Logan Strain

*(ZACHARY stands nervously on stage. He only looks up occasionally and speaks quickly)*

I don't understand chewing gum, y'know. So when the guy says, "Hey, you want some chewing gum"—he didn't say "chewing gum," he just said "gum"—I don't know what to do. You chew it and spit it out. I could chew on actual food, and swallow, and get nutrition. But I tell him "Sure" because I'm really lonely. I spent all last

semester and I didn't meet a single person. I sometimes went three days without stepping outside of my studio apartment. Don't have a roommate. Where would I go? I take the gum and I chew it and for a few minutes we do the college student Q and A. What's your name? What's your major? Oh, that's interesting. What classes you taking? I hear that's hard. Where you from? And we talk. And his name is Lee, which is my middle

name. Funny? That's funny. And he says, "I'm having a Bar-B-Q at the park." That's cool. I am invited to something.

"That's cool. I'll be there."

He says it's on Sunday morning.

I have to go to class.

I'm all happy.

I got invited to something. I sit in my room all day Friday and Saturday waiting for Sunday. But sometimes when I think about the BBQ I think about the park where it's at, which makes me think of the time I went to a park when I was like ten and I met a kid there and we played tag with other kids, and he asked me to hold on to his glasses for him, so I did. And we stayed there for hours, and then he had to go home. I stayed a little longer, then I had to go home. When I got home I realized I still had his glasses. I imagined him crying to his mother, explaining what happened. And every time I think about that I start hating myself. Y'know. I did something horrible to the poor kid.

Sunday I come to the park, I walk up, there is a group of people, and they all have these huge ass books. And it hits me, Sunday morning, a *group of youths*. And I don't have a problem with religion or anything, no. In fact, everyone should read Huston Smith's book *Why Religion Matters*. It's a good book. I just have a hard time figuring out the whole religion thing. So I can either ask them my questions and tell them my confusions about God and Christianity, or I can lie and say I'm already a Christian. So I lie, because I hate confrontation. And first there's a pastor and he gives a sermon based on 2 Kings 2:23. (*ZACHARY gets out a Bible. Turns to the page, reads*) "From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some youths came out of the town and jeered at him. 'Go on up, you baldhead!' they said. 'Go on up, you baldhead!' He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths." (*Puts Bible away*)

The sermon is about not listening to the people who mock you. And I have to stay as long as I can.

I don't want to be rude.

I have to appear comfortable.

I don't want to look bad.

And then we sing some, and we eat fruit and hot dogs and stuff. And I talk theology with this guy.

"Oh, you're a film major? Do...do you like 'The Matrix'? It references the Christ story, you know."

"Yeah."

I went to a Lutheran middle school so I know a good amount.

We play Ultimate Frisbee.

There's group prayer. I don't get group prayer. I don't know how the universe works, but I'm pretty sure God doesn't run a democracy.

O.K., I think I saw someone leave.

That means I can leave.

So I say good bye to everyone, and they are all really friendly. So I go, and I'm home at my dreary little place.

I put on Little Walter. Some people say that he's the greatest harp player ever recorded, but I actually prefer Sonny Boy Williamson's playing. But Little Walter is my favorite blues player of all the artists who recorded for the Chess recording company.

*(Starts singing off key)* "This is a mean old world/ try living by yourself/ this is a mean old world/ try living by yourself/ can't get the one you loving/ have to use somebody else."

I can't get the one I'm loving. She's all the way the hell back where I lived. I mean she's...great...and all, but she's not worth a five-hour drive. I mean...*(snorts a laugh)*.

God, I hate people. I don't really hate people. I hate people in the same way a heroin addict hates heroin. The only time anybody is nice to me or invites me to something is when their God commands them to. I should really put it out of my mind.

My parents sent me some money for food today.

That's good of them. Good people, good people.  
I'm outside writing in my journal in the evening. A  
girl walks in the same area and sits down. She says,  
"Do you have a cigarette?"

"No."

We introduce ourselves. Do the Q and A. I jot in my  
journal: "A pretty girl is talking to me. Her name is  
Lindsey." She waits for someone, but they never  
arrive. She says, "He's an hour late. Well I guess I'll  
spend tonight watching television."

I know what she wants.

"I dyed my hair recently, do you think it looks  
good?"

Why can't she just ask me if I'm doing anything  
tonight?

"God, he always does this to me."

Because if I'm the one who asks, then I'll be the one  
who pays.

I say: "I'll take you out."

Then I'm paying for a salad, a burger, a beer, and a

glass of wine. I only have water to drink.

I'm spending my grocery money.

I don't know what I will do for food.

She kisses me.

She says, "You ever been to a gay bar?"

"No."

"Go with me please. My boyfriend won't go with  
me because he's a homophobe. It will be fun.

Please, please, please."

I'm at a gay bar. I'm not 21 yet. I snuck in. It was  
exhilarating. I know she's using me for money and a  
good time. I don't care. It's nice to be out. I have  
this green martini-looking thing. And a few shots.  
And a few more. I buy her six beers. The place is  
packed. A sea of people. But no one grabs my ass,  
which is something I have mixed feelings about. She  
starts to make out with me. I don't want this. But I  
don't want to stop. She's...quite attractive. I hate her  
so much.

Because I could have been anyone. I hate her.

"I have to be somewhere tomorrow. Let's go."

She takes my keys.

I'm drunk. We go out to my car.

She takes a hit from her pipe before she gets in and passes it to me.

We start driving. I don't where were are. I know I'm gonna die. She takes us down all these winding roads. She drives with her knees and takes another hit. I don't care anymore.

At least I'm going to die an interesting death.

And I'm not going to die alone.

But I hope we don't just get in a little fender bender or something. Then authorities would get involved.

I want to get fucking decapitated. Or crushed. That would make a better obituary than "He died alone in his apartment. He won't be remembered because he was whiney and annoying."

I wake up with a mild hangover. Christ, I'm such a lightweight. Where did she park my car? I'm going to have to live off of pasta and eggs for the next

month because of all the money I spent last night.

I don't care.

Whatever, man. I guess I'll just continue with my plans for the weekend. Crying and masturbating in this shit hole.

What's wrong with me?

Why is it that the only people I meet either want to convert me or use me?

It's not as if those kinds of people are picky about who they talk to.

My girlfriend probably wouldn't approve of me kissing another girl (*shugs sholders*). She won't find out. I don't care. I'm only still with her because I'm afraid of breaking up.

I don't care, man.

I don't care.



e!, Alex Lee

## the mysteries

Dennis Vannatta

Staring at a river for any length of time is sure to get a man thinking about his life, and that's not always a good thing. It depends on the life, of course, but it also depends on the river.

A lot of the older folks in Glasgow still called it Clearwater Creek, although it had officially been Clearwater River since the Army Corps of Engineers started damming and channelizing it back in the '70's.

"It used to be a doggone good little

creek, but now it's just a *damned* river," Al Pan liked to say, arching his bushy black eyebrows so you wouldn't miss the pun.

Al owned Pan's Hardware, just across from Fisher's Pharmacy at the corner of Main and Water Streets. Les Sims' auto repair shop was only a dozen yards behind the hardware store, on your right if you were coming down Water Street toward the river where Les spent a lot of time sitting on the dock. Well, it wasn't really a dock.

It was a set of steps in the sidewalk that ran alongside Water Street. Right below his feet the sidewalk and broken concrete slab of Water Street disappeared into the coffee-colored water of the river. There really was a boat ramp down there, old-timers swore, but it was swallowed up when the dammed creek backed up to Glasgow.

Every so often Les would see a bass boat motoring up toward him as he sat on the steps, and he'd call out, "If you're thinking about tying up here, better not try it. There's a concrete dock right below the surface of the water. Don't bother looking, you can't see it. But it'd take your propeller right off." And the man driving the boat would holler his thanks for the warning, and back off.

Les would feel a little guilty, but you couldn't blame a guy who had as much time on his hands as Les did for trying to have a little fun. To anybody else, what Les paid for Donny Brownwell's bar-b-cue

shack would have seemed like peanuts, but it was a big step for Les, and his auto repair business hadn't picked up one blasted iota from when he ran it out of the shed in his back yard—which his wife Georgia reminded him of about four times a day.

Les glanced at his watch. 11:58. He turned and looked back up Water Street. No sign of Georgia and her little gray Festiva, but he'd lay odds within the next two minutes she'd be there with their lunch.

He stood up and rubbed feeling back into his rear-end, then started up the sidewalk toward the shop. He resisted an urge to break into a jog. He didn't give a good goddamn if Georgia "caught him" sitting on the steps again. What difference did it make whether he sat there or inside the un-airconditioned shack?

He'd made the mistake of saying that very thing to her, and she'd swung from the hips like he'd served her a slow one down the middle: "You're



right. It don't make any difference. You might as well be back home instead of messing around down here by the river or in that shack, either one. Then we'd have thirty-five hundred dollars in the bank instead of giving it to Donny Brownwell for a pile of plywood and two-by-fours. What do you do down here all day, anyhow? Gotcha a woman down here or something?"

He laughed but, well, he sort of did.

After lunch with Georgia, Les banged around on Curtis Whitehead's pickup for a bit, but he couldn't work up much of a sense of urgency over it. Curtis was in the hospital in Little Rock with his prostate, so that valve job would keep.

Instead he went back down to the "dock." Even though it was late June, it was cooler sitting on the steps in the afternoon than in the morning because of the shade cast by the huge cottonwood at the water's

edge. The river was up now, or at least what people who had anything to do with the river called "up." Ever since Clearwater Creek was channelized, it didn't seem to get much higher or lower as far as Les could see, but in dry season it'd look thick and slow, like chocolate pudding, but in late spring it'd rush on past, furious, scary, carrying trash from the campsites up-river and throwing up old tires, animal carcasses, and tree trunks. A little bit more of the bank on this side was gobbled up each year. One day he'd come to work and the cottonwood would be gone.

He didn't know what any of it meant.

He liked to think of himself as the wise old man of the river, a man boaters would seek out for his advice on currents and sandbars or just to hear him spin tales of life on the Clearwater, now and in times past. Problem was, he was only thirty-five, and no one had ever asked his opinion on a blamed thing,

and if they did they'd be shit out of luck because he didn't understand any of it.

Why did the river never seem to rise or fall but just ran faster or slower? He didn't know. Why had they channelized it in the first place? If it was to improve it for boating, like that Corps of Engineers guy had said, where were all the boaters? There were never more than a couple a day, even in good weather. Why was the water the color of coffee with cream today, but old-timers could remember when the creek ran so clear you could see trout on the bottom and stones rounded smooth as bowling balls?

Les looked around at the flight of wooden steps leading up to the door above Fisher's Pharmacy. Over the window in the door were curtains with rose-colored figures on a pale pink background. What exactly were the rose things? Bells? Blossoms? Little girls in long-flowing dresses? Les never got close enough to tell. He stared at the curtains. Did

they part just for a moment? No.

He forced himself to turn away from the window. Stare at anything long enough, and you'll see what you want to see.

He looked back at the river, gurgling and hissing not two yards below him. What did he want to see there? Clarity. He wanted to see all the way to the bottom.

He peered down into the water but could see nothing, not even his reflection. There was a mirror back in the shop if he wanted to look at himself. Ha. Try to imagine somebody wanting to do *that*. He was thirty-five, hair thinning in a swathe down the crown of his head, shoulders sloping, fat on his chubby thighs rising toward his belly. His hands, fingers thick and callused and darkened with grease he could never entirely scrub away, looked like an ape's. He'd never been a handsome man, and now he was thirty-five, looking at the backside of the long

downhill slope of life, business going nowhere, and who could possibly want to look at *him*?

He turned once more and peered back up the hill at the door above Fisher's Pharmacy. He stared a long time at the curtains over the window. Nope, no movement. Rita didn't come out every day, of course.

He'd asked Al Pan about her, figuring a Greek ought to know more about these things than a regular American, but for once Al let him down.

"Hey, I'm a friggin' Baptist. What the hell do I know about *nuns*?"

A Greek Baptist! Who would have guessed that? Al must go to Good Hope Baptist instead of Glasgow Baptist, where Les's family went, when they went at all. You could never tell where you'd run into a Baptist in Arkansas, but, still, a *Greek*. Add it to the list of things that caught Les by surprise, that he was totally ignorant of. Like, Catholics.

He'd known the Fishers were Catholic and that they had to drive all the way over to Subiaco for mass, but other than that, about Catholics, well, zilch, nothing. He'd passed the pharmacy every single day but he'd never exchanged a dozen words with any of the Fishers.

Rita had moved into the little apartment—he thought of it as "little," but maybe it was big, or maybe only a single room—above the rear of the pharmacy seven or eight months ago. At least that's when he first saw her, picking her way south along the bank of the river until the bramble bushes blocked her, then back north until she got to the steps at Water Street, then south again. Les, mystified, watched her out of the front door of the shop and then, when she got to the steps, out of the side window. She took walks almost every day, and every day he watched her. One day instead of taking his cigarette break in the shop he went out and sat

on the steps and waited. But the woman didn't come out that day, or for many days afterward.

She was absent from the river so long that he thought she'd left town, but then one day, deep in winter, he saw her sitting on the bank by the cottonwood, fishing. He hadn't wanted to scare her off again, so he let her be, only continued to watch her from inside the shop door, standing back in the shadows so if she turned his way she wouldn't see him spying on her.

This went on for a couple of weeks. Then he thought, this is silly, anyone else I saw fishing, man or woman, I'd say hi to. Why not her? So one day he waited until she was all settled in her canvas chair on the bank, hook baited, line in the water, and he ambled down the bank like he was just out for a stroll, then stopped a few feet from her and stared at her line for a while with a little smile on his face like he expected her any second to jerk the line up and

find something pretty amusing on the end of it.

Finally he said, "Winter's not the best time for fishing, is it?"

"Why not? Fish eat in the winter, too, don't they?"

He was caught off guard by how fast she came back at him, turning and looking him right in the eye almost confrontationally. He'd expected her to be rabbit-timid, to jump and run maybe when he spoke or at least to reply in a hesitant, tiny voice. He couldn't say why he expected that except there was this air of mystery about her, and mysterious women didn't look you right in the eye like that, did they? Of course, he had to admit his experience with mysterious women was just about as extensive as his experience hunting elephants in the Yukon.

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye as she turned her attention back to her line. She was a short woman with straight, brown hair and small,

black eyes with an almost Asiatic slant. She had big hands for a woman, though, and held the pole loosely with the confidence of one who didn't worry about it being yanked out of her hands. She was several years older than he was, he decided. And not pretty. She might have been homely, in fact, except a woman couldn't be mysterious and homely, too, could she?

When the silence was beginning to make him edgy, he said, "What are you fishing for?"

"Fish," she said.

Les was taken aback for a moment. Was she being a wiseass? But then she turned and grinned, and they both laughed, and that was the ice-breaker.

After that, he went out to chat with her almost every day he saw her fishing. He didn't pump her for information about herself because he wasn't sure he wanted to know much about her. She wasn't pretty. He wasn't attracted to her that way at all. It

was the mystery that attracted him. Ironically, though, each bit of information he learned made her less familiar, more foreign, more mysterious.

The big shocker she'd announced at the outset like it was something she might as well have over and done with: she'd been a nun for close to twenty years, but then she'd decided the life wasn't for her and she'd renounced her vows. That's when she'd come to Glasgow, somewhere she could "hang out"—the phrase sounded comically bizarre on her lips—until she decided what she wanted to do with her life.

A nun! He didn't know what to think. Not that he'd never seen one before. There'd been at least one, maybe two, plus a priest, all of them in those get-ups they wore, in the stands at the state regional when Glasgow played Conway St. Joseph Les's senior year. Les had been so distracted he caught the first pass to him with his face. But that was in Conway.

You'd expect stuff like that in a city. This was his little ol' Glasgow, Arkansas. A nun!

It was weeks later before the second shocker.

"So, Rita, it's none of my business, but, I mean, why here? Why come to Glasgow?"

"Free rent. John and Beth let me stay in the apartment over the pharmacy for free."

"John and Beth?"

"Sure. The Fishers."

"Oh. Oh yeah, right, John and Beth *Fisher*."

"I'm John's sister," Rita added.

Les wasn't normally that slow, but this Catholic business was a whole new world to him, and for a moment he thought she meant that she was John's "sister"—that is, his own private nun. But then he realized things didn't have to be that weird, even for Catholics.

"So, you're John's sister. I didn't know he had one."

She shrugged, let out a little fishing line.

"That's not surprising. I was in an order in New York for eighteen years."

Les was staggered. His understanding was so circumscribed, his experience of the world so narrow that the river that ran by his feet was a mystery to him, and yet half a block away was a man who had a sister who was a *nun*, who'd been in an *order* in *New York*. What was an order, anyway? It didn't hardly sound American. But that was probably because it was in New York. New York was only technically part of America.

"Hey, Al," Les had said the next time he ran into Al Pan, "that Rita woman, that former nun, is from *New York*."

"Figures," Al said.

Now, what did that mean?

Later that afternoon, when the shade of the cotton-

wood had swung on eastward, leaving the steps in the sun, Les returned to the shop. He banged on Curtis Whitehead's pickup for awhile, then tinkered with Leon Holtz's Caravan. All the Caravan needed was a belt tensioner, and Les could have had it done before lunch, but the longer he took with it the more he could jack up the labor charge. Les normally didn't do things that way, but Leon's son Jared had beamed Les's son Brandon in a Babe Ruth game last summer and then laughed about it, and Les was taking his revenge a little bit at a time.

After that he found a country station out of Ft. Smith on the radio, put his feet up, and took a nap. When he woke up it was after five, time to call it quits for the day. He locked the door and turned, and there was Rita on her canvas chair by the cottonwood, line in the water. He walked over toward her.

In the dozens of times he'd gone out to talk to Rita in the recent months, she'd never once turned at

his approach, never once said the first word. In the beginning he'd thought it was indifference, sometimes to the point of rudeness, but finally he decided she was just shy. Maybe that's why she had become a nun. There had to be some reason a woman would give up a chance at a normal life—men, kids, all that.

"Catch anything?"

"Nope."

He grinned and nodded like that was exactly what he'd expected.

"Yeah, I have to say that you don't seem to have a whole lot of luck with this river—especially for a Fisher."

She missed the joke, said seriously, "True, but the primary reason you fish isn't the catching but the fishing."

Les grinned once more, but he felt a pang. *Not the catching but the fishing*—it was the sort of wise-sounding thing he wanted to be able to say about the

river, about life, about any damn thing, but he'd never managed it. Maybe this was the kind of thinking you learned by being a nun. He badly wanted to ask her about that—being a nun—but he couldn't quite bring himself to do it.

Instead, he said, "You know, Rita, it's absolutely none of my business, but the one thing I've never been able to figure out is how your brother John grew up here in Arkansas but you're from New York. How'd that happen? Were your parents separated or something? I know it's none of my business but . . ."

Rita looked at him like he had two heads.

"What in heaven's name are you talking about? I said I was in an *order* in New York. I was born and raised right here in Glasgow."

"You're kidding."

"Why would I be kidding? I went to Glasgow

High just like you did, class of 1980. I was in the Spirit Club. Go Pirates."

Les walked home in a daze.

"What's the matter with you?" Georgia asked. She was slamming pots and pans around like she was trying to signal somebody in the next county.

"Nothing. I just had a long day, that's all. Leon Holtz's Caravan is giving me fits."

"Is that why you're so late?"

"Am I late?"

"Hell yes you're late! It's after six."

*Bang!* a lid slammed into the sink.

Uh oh. Looked like the Wicked Witch of PMSville had arrived.

Les sat at the kitchen table and held up the sports page so that it blocked him from Georgia's view. In times like these, it was best to keep a low profile.

He pretended to read but instead thought about



Rita. It wasn't her and her life that puzzled him so much as his own reaction to that life. Why did the idea of a girl born and raised in Glasgow, Arkansas, winding up a nun in New York so trouble him? Was it because she'd done something different, something exotic with her life while he'd done nothing at all? Or was it because she'd gone off and lived an exotic life and then had *come back*. Maybe there wasn't anything truly different and exotic anywhere; after you'd been there awhile it was all just as mediocre as it was here. Mediocre as his own life. Yes, now he was getting to it. But what was so wrong with his life? He couldn't say. What did he want from life? He didn't know, but he didn't want to think that now, thirty-five years into it, maybe that much to go, it was just one muddy river, running a little faster one day, a little slower the next, but endlessly and pointlessly running in the same channel. Until one day it would be over. Surely it wasn't vain to hope

for something new, something magical to come into his life.

He put the paper down.

"Say, did you know Rita was born and raised right here in Glasgow? Went to Glasgow High and everything."

Georgia turned slowly from the stove.

"Rita? Rita who?"

"Rita Fisher. You know, lives in that apartment above the drug store. John Fisher's sister."

"I don't know who you're talking about."

"Of course you do. Rita Fisher. You know, the ex-nun. The one who—"

Suddenly, it occurred to Les that maybe he hadn't told Georgia about Rita. Maybe? No damn maybe about it. He'd never told her, and now, smack in the middle of a PMS alert, he'd started babbling like an idiot. Good men had died for less.

Supper was fun. Georgia didn't say a word. Les

tried to get a little conversation going by asking Melinda and Brandon what was new with their friends, which is of course just exactly what teenagers are dying to talk to their parents about. The rest was silence.

After supper, Les offered to help with the dishes, but Georgia gave him a look like, touch one dish and I'll put this paring knife through your eye, so he went out and played catch with Brandon a while whether Brandon wanted to or not, then put in the dimmer switch in Melinda's room like he'd been promising for weeks, and then he read the paper.

By the time he finished the paper, it was starting to get dark. He went out and stood on the back porch and watched the lightning bugs.

The screen door opened behind him. Georgia walked past and as she did so took his hand and yanked him off the porch.

"Hey, you about jerked my damn arm out of the

socket!"

Georgia said nothing, just pulled him on across the back yard.

There are times when a man has to stand up for himself. Les wasn't convinced this was one of those times. He followed where she led, on across the back yard and into the weeds, then on through weeds knee high and then waist high, mixed with brambles and wild privet and sunflowers taller than a tall man, and finally into the line of hickory and scrub oak and sweet gum trees. Then Georgia stepped aside, swept her arm in an arc before her as if in offering, and said, "There it is."

Yes, there it was: the river. It wasn't seventy-five yards from his house, but Les had almost forgotten it was there. You could always hear it when you listened, but why would you bother to listen for what was always there? And why would you fight your way through chigger-infested weeds to look at it?

"Tell me something, smart guy. What's the river down town got that it hasn't got here? What's so special about the river down there? Huh? Tell me!"

She was almost shouting. She seemed furious, and something more than furious. What was going on? This wasn't PMS. It was deep twilight, and he struggled to see her face clearly. Was she about to cry? He'd seen Georgia cry only once, that time they were afraid that Melinda might have a brain tumor.

Then Georgia said it: "What's that woman got that I don't have?"

Les was thunderstruck.

"Woman? What the hell are you talking about? What woman?"

"Don't give me any of that 'What woman' shit. You know damn good and well who I mean. That Rita woman. That *nun*."

Before Les could respond, Georgia turned and ran back through the line of trees. He heard her crashing

through the brush and then the softer *whish whish* as she ran through the weeds. And then he heard nothing but the river.

Georgia was jealous, that's what it was. Of him and Rita. Good lord, he didn't think about Rita that way at all. To be jealous of him and Rita was crazy. . . . Or was it? Obviously, she did interest him in a way. What, exactly, did he feel about Rita?

Les stood there on the bank trying to understand what he felt for Rita Fisher, but he couldn't think clearly. That other, far more astounding realization kept intruding: Georgia was jealous! This woman, he'd known her since they were kids. She was the fastest girl in the neighborhood. She could outrun most boys! He'd had a crush on her even way back then because she could run so fast. When they were teenagers, they'd dated other people, but it'd seemed to Les they both were just sort of biding their time until they were old enough to get really serious.

They married not long after high school. Brandon came along, then Melinda. There'd been good times and some very bad times—his parents getting killed in the car wreck, Melinda with the fainting spells and headaches—and now they were in their mid-thirties. He couldn't in all honesty say that she was pretty any more. Hell, maybe he was the only one who ever thought she was pretty. But look at him. Hell now, look at *him*. What was he? What had he ever been? But here was a woman who'd seen him warts and all for almost all of his life, and she was still capable of *jealousy*.

He stared at the river. The moon trembled on its surface, and lightning bugs danced in the air from here to the levee rising up above the opposite bank. Even so, he could not say the river was beautiful. It was too murky, too relentlessly rushing onward. But as he stared at the river he thought that—who knows?—maybe down beneath the dark river there

still flowed that creek so clear you could see trout hanging in blue shadows, and softly rounded stones, and pebbles like jewels. For the man for whom all things are mysteries, everything is possible.

He turned and went through the line of trees. Then he began to run toward the house, ran hard, not because he was afraid Georgia would be gone but because he knew she would still be there.

## under the stars

Susan Brown

The first time I kissed Martin he was dressed as a woman. I assumed that he was a man, though, because we had met at a costume party, and a woman would not go to a costume party dressed simply as a *woman*, plus he had a deep raspy voice, but mostly I could tell that he was a man by the way his tongue, long and slippery, slithered like a snake into my mouth, quickly, without hesitation, and searched for a place to hide. I also assumed, having no previous

experience at kissing a woman, that only a man would be so direct in his intentions. I further assumed that if he was a woman going as a *woman*, he, or she, would perhaps desire some small talk before slipping into a side bedroom and making out. Why I assumed this, I don't exactly know. It just seems that women (I am one) prefer to get to know the person they are smooching before the actual kissing takes place, but, on the other hand, I was (am) a woman, and

had gone into the bedroom with the man-dressed-as-a-woman without the small talk, so why I would ever assume that a woman would not want to do that, I don't exactly know.

Martin had dressed in a red, sequined dress that shimmered like the ocean at midnight and his breasts looked so radically real. They were perfect mounds, shaped like ant hills, swelling with life. But it was his lips that drew me in—they were a deep reddish-purple, outlined perfectly like the tips of a rose petal: delicate, soft, curvaceous, moist with morning dew—a pleasure to the eyes, a feast of delicious longing, an exquisite masterpiece. Our kissing, however, screwed up that part of his costume.

When we left the bedroom, I took Martin and his lips into the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet and when I located a tube of *Luscious Lily* (a bit too orange-looking for my taste) I layered it on Martin's lips and told him to smack his lips together and then

I took a wad of toilet paper and dabbed the corners of his mouth.

"There," I said, "Perfecto."

"It doesn't match my dress," Martin whined, just like a woman. So I began to have my doubts, at that point, if he was a woman or a man, so I asked him right out: "Are you a man or a woman?"

"Are you joking?" he said, puckering his *Luscious Lily* lips. "Because if you are, I'm leaving right now."

That shook me up. I liked him and I didn't want him to leave without me on his arm. That's how good-looking he was. So I told him that, yes, I was joking, and I laughed until I had to pee.

"Wait outside," I said. Then I peed.

After almost a year of dating, Martin and I were no longer together. There was a whole series of sad events that led to us no longer dating: he didn't like how I dressed—too boyish he said—and he didn't

like the toes on my left foot, which had been crooked since I was born, and I didn't like him living with his mother, and he didn't like me telling him that I didn't like him living with his mother, and although I eventually made a real effort to change the way that I dressed and he finally accepted my left foot, crooked toes and all—because I no longer took my socks off—I developed a rare form, for my age, of vaginal dryness that led to many nights of anguish, on both our parts. Had I not developed the vaginal dryness, there is a possibility that we might still be together, but it became somewhat difficult to carry on a normal relationship with the vaginal dryness problem occurring concurrently with the other problem of Martin living with his mother—a meddling, middle-aged woman with long wavy hair, black as a crow.

I had had steady boyfriends before Martin, but he was the first one that I fell madly in love with. After I had peed, that first night at the party, he took my

hand and led me to a bench under the stars. From the depths of the near moonless night, cold and dark as the dickens, the stars, hundreds of them, seemed to shine just for us. It was the kind of night where you dream, silently, about the future babies you might make some day, the kind of night where all your dreams can come true, all you have to do is make a wish. I wished that Martin was a man. And I had to find out for sure, so I asked him to take me home so that we could lie together, kissing, stroking, feeling each other below the belt, or up the dress, as the case may be.

I was twenty-one, living in a one bedroom beach apartment in Redondo Beach, and I had a good job as a bank teller. I lived with my older sister, Casey. We shared the apartment's single, small bedroom, sleeping in the bunk beds that we had slept in since we were little. I had the top bunk. Our parents had moved to the desert (Palm Springs) and I did not

want to move with them: cacti, red rocks, hot sunny days, and scorpions hiding in my shoes did not appeal to me much. I preferred the beach, the waves, the surfing, the boys. Casey seemed to have trouble keeping jobs, so she let me move in with her if I paid half the rent.

That first night, after I followed him home, Martin snuck me into his house like we were teenagers. First we walked around the outside of the house looking through cracks in the curtains, and then he opened the back door as quietly as he could, and he whispered to me while lifting a long, slender finger to his faded orange lips: "Sshhh, we don't want to wake Mama."

"Who's Mama?" I whispered back. I pictured Mama to be a huge Great Dane, his roommate's dog perhaps, or maybe Mama was a Boa Constrictor that had the run of the house. I really liked snakes. Once,

when I was a kid, I had a pet snake, a small garden snake with stripes that I had caught in my backyard, and I kept it in a cracked glass aquarium taking it out to show all my friends how brave I was, but it eventually curled up in a corner and died because I forgot to feed it.

"Mama is Mama," Martin whispered.

"Your Mama?"

"Of course she's my Mama. Be quiet."

I was quiet all right. I had never slept with a man who dressed like a woman and lived with a Mama.

Mama didn't like me from the beginning. This I could tell by the way she glared down her large nose at me while I lay next to Martin in his bed. On the tip of her nose, above the right nostril, sat a mole the size of a hummingbird egg. Speckled like one too. I had never seen the likes of such a mole; a thick black hair grew from the middle of it. And while Mama



was positively ugly, Martin was gorgeous.

Once we got into his room, after tiptoeing down the hall, he took off the red dress, the bra stuffed with cotton balls, the nylons, the high heels, and the honey-colored wig. His own hair was black and shiny as oil, cut short, and his eyes, behind the clumpy mascara, were blue and cold like two turquoise stones. He had high cheek bones and delicate features, and yes, he looked like a man, even with the faded orange lipstick lingering on his lips. As I watched the cotton balls fall to the carpet like clumps of dry snow, manhood was further confirmed by the lump in his bikini underwear.

I had just crawled into bed next to Martin, after removing my costume, a white rabbit get-up with floppy pink ears that Casey had worn one Easter when she was a nanny for a family that lived in a ritzy area of Palos Verdes, when Mama walked right into his room, without so much as a knock. She

stormed up to the bed, where I had froze solid, and she snarled, "Marty, what are you doing?"

"Nothing Mama," Martin answered.

"It doesn't look like nothing."

"We want to go to sleep, Mama, now go back to bed."

I did not want to get in the middle of things, so I kept quiet. But I have to admit that I felt like a character in a crappy movie. The whole night had been so corny: kissing a man-dressed-like-a-woman, listening to his sad tales, following him home, sneaking into his bedroom, being assailed by his mother, what would happen next I wondered?

Nothing happened next. Mama left the room, and Martin fell asleep. I tried to wake him by kissing his neck, even biting it once or twice, petting his slick hair, rubbing my breast against his shoulder, fingering his hairless navel, but not a muscle moved. Soon I got tired of rubbing myself on him and I passed

out. I slept good, though, knowing that he was a man.

Even before I developed the vaginal dryness problem, Martin and I had a somewhat rocky relationship. Mama, after barging into Martin's room several more times, once when I was on top, told Martin that if I spent the night with him one more time he would lose his weekly allowance. I put my foot down, then, and told Martin that it was not normal for a man of twenty-seven to get an allowance. Mine had stopped when I turned sixteen and got a job at Taco Town. Besides, he had a good-paying job as a shoe store manager, so there was no reason for him to need an allowance, or to live with his mother, as far as I was concerned. But this is what he told me: "Mama wants me to buy a house. She gives me spending money so I can save my paychecks."

"Houses are nice," I replied, "but so is a normal

sex life."

On a few occasions we had sex on my top bunk. This was squeaky, and a bit scary; I kept thinking that the bed would collapse, and I worried constantly that Casey would come home and find us up there. Several times we did it on Casey's bed, and this worried me too because if she came home and found us on her bed, she'd kill me. The backseat of Martin's car worked fine for a while, until a cop shined his flashlight on us while we were parked at a church, and the beach was fine too, if you liked sand in your crack. So I began to bug Martin daily about moving out and getting his own apartment. "It's the only way for us to have a normal relationship," I told him over and over again.

Not one to get lost in the bugging game, Martin then began to complain about the way I dressed (he disliked my ragged jeans, surfer tee-shirts, old black tennis shoes) and then he began to complain about

my crooked toes (his toes were perfect) every time I bared my feet. So after a while I began to leave my socks on when we made love. If I knew that I would be seeing him, I'd put my best socks on that morning: the white pair with red lady bugs running along the top, the pink silky pair, the black fishnet pair that both my baby toes kept popping out of. But this bugged Martin too. "I want you completely naked," he would say when we found a new place to be alone.

"Socks don't count," I would counter back.

"Anything material counts."

"You'll just make fun of my toes," I would say.

"You make fun of my allowance."

"Only because *that's* not normal."

"Either are your toes."

"At least my toes don't get an allowance."

"Can you stop nagging about the allowance?"

"I will when you move out."

This bickering had gone on for some time when I came down with the vaginal dryness problem. The doctor suggested that it could be caused from stress. Naturally, I blamed the vaginal dryness, induced-by-stress problem on Martin, since I was not stressed before I met him and had never in my life experienced a problem like it. I then began to tell Martin, after our failed attempts to have sex, "If you had your own apartment my vaginal dryness would clear up."

"Is that your answer for everything?" he would ask.

"Quite possibly," I would say.

All the while, Mama kept disliking me more and more. It seems that Martin and Mama had a Mama-to-son talk one evening while eating enchiladas—the talk was over the allowance issue—and when he asked her if he could keep his paycheck instead of

getting an allowance, because, he told Mama, his girlfriend (me) thought it was a more normal thing for a man his age to do, she hit the ceiling. Apparently Mama called his girlfriend (me) a tramp and then something worse. She also told Martin that if he wanted to keep his paycheck he could move out and leave his Mama all alone to wither up and die.

"Are you gonna do it?" I asked, feeling a razor thin wisp of hope.

"NO!" he said, surprised.

"Fine," I stammered, holding back tears. "It's Mama or me."

Giving Martin an ultimatum was not something that I had planned on doing, it just slipped out, and once I said it, I was too stubborn to take it back.

On the night we met, while sitting on the bench under the stars, Martin told me that he had never met his father. His dress and orange lips appeared

almost luminescent under the glow of the many sparkling stars and I wanted to give him a hickey on his Adams apple—it looked as smooth as a pebble tumbled by the salty sea and I assumed it would taste like one too—while he talked in a quiet monotone. He went on to tell me how, in his dreams, his father's face would appear thin as a skeleton, and his lips, dry as raisins, would mumble absently about places that Martin had never been.

"When I have those dreams," Martin said, "I want to die."

It tore me up, that night, to watch his pretty facial features contort with pain and I wanted to fill the void that his father had left. I wanted to seep into his wound and heal it with my warm, pumping heart.

In the spring, as if I were an animal shedding a heavy coat, my hair began to fall out in clumps. During the dead of winter, I had purchased some

new tight sweaters that showed off my bosom quite well, a dark blue cable knit, and a peach cashmere, soft as a cat. I did not wear the peach one any longer, though, since the long dark hairs that were falling out at an alarming rate showed up too well on the shoulders, but at least Martin stopped complaining about my boyish clothes, which brings me to my point: I had made a concerted effort to change what bothered him, to please him, yet he had not made a single effort to change what bothered me. He still received an allowance, and he had made no real effort to look for a new place to live, although a week after I issued the ultimatum, he had called and said that he would begin working on moving into his own place. But, some time later, when I asked him what he had found out, he shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Apartments are expensive."

"Duh," I said. "That's why I live with my sister." That's when the idea of Martin and I moving in

together hit me, and I ventured, "Why don't we live together?" This, I assumed, would fix all our problems.

"I'll ask Mama."

"MARTIN," I said, "you're a grown man—you don't need to ask Mama anything."

He did not come right out and ask Mama, instead it kind of just slipped out while he and Mama were watching the news on TV one night, and Mama hit the ceiling—again. Martin told me that she refused to listen to him, and she also refused to fork over his savings account—she was the sole trustee on the account.

"Well," I said to Martin the following day while pulling clumps of loose hair off my left shoulder, "I can't take it anymore." I was worried that all my hair would fall out and we had not had sex in over a month. Also, I was beginning to realize that Martin

had no real intention of ever moving away from Mama. So I did the only thing that I could do; I issued the ultimate ultimatum: "Martin," I said, slowly. "I'll give you until the end of the month. If you don't have an apartment by then, it's over between us."

He stormed away without a word.

I was downright devastated. While a tear pooled in my eye, I took off my purple kitty socks and old tennis shoes and walked onto the beach, letting the warm afternoon sand slide in between my crooked toes. Summer would soon draw to a close, which caused me to think about the seasons, how they always repeat themselves, how they blend smoothly into one another like images in a collage, and I wondered why my life could not blend smoothly like that, like summer into fall, and as I walked on towards the sea my feet left deep impressions in the

sand, and I felt aimless and confused, but then the night I met Martin slipped back into my mind and I remembered our first kiss, when he was dressed like a woman, and how I had been confused whether he was a man or a woman, but this new confusion went much deeper than that, and when I reached the blurred line where the waves become the shore, I sat down and looked across the vast sea for answers to my problems.

This is when Doug showed up. He had just broken up with his girlfriend of three years, and he asked if he could sit next to me and stare at the ocean. I recognized him as one of the beach rats that Casey's boyfriend hung out with. His hair was blond, long and curly, and he was deeply tanned from too many days of surfing. His eyes looked red from crying. We talked for hours, watching the orange sun sink to the rim of the salty water, until it disappeared.

Then I took him home with me.

Towards the end of summer, I received a phone call from Martin. He had found an apartment and would be moving out in two weeks. There was excitement in his voice when he told me that Mama had relinquished his entire savings, but would never speak to him again, and he said that the apartment was in Torrance, next to a series of railroad tracks, but a freight train had gone by while he was there and the walls had shook as if in an earthquake, but the shaking did not last too long. When could I move in, he wanted to know.

"I can't move in with you," I said quietly.

"Why not? The train's not that loud."

"It's not the train."

"What is it then?"

Silence. Then, "I met someone else."

More silence. "How could you do this to me?"

Why didn't you tell me?"

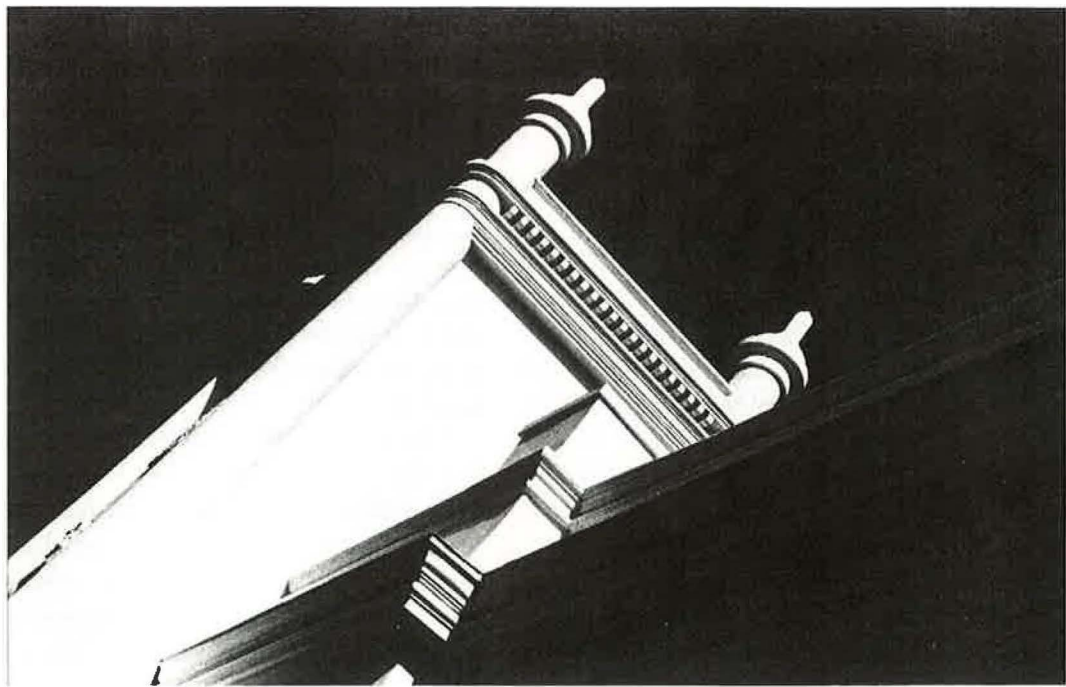
"I don't know. It just happened."

"Sue," he said. "I love you."

His words hit me hard, and I felt like a rat for what I had done, but I summed it up to fate: my hair was growing back in quickly and my vaginal dryness had cleared up and I was living stress-free. Also, Doug lived in a converted garage (by himself) that he rented from an eccentric old woman, so we had plenty of time to be alone, and he had crooked toes, too.

"Martin, you'll be fine without me," I said.

The one thing I do not know, and what I wonder about every fall when I watch the leaves float to the ground like Martin's cotton balls did on the first night we met, is this: was Martin, at the end of the story, really fine without me?



*Brand, 1922, Dena Skiles*



letters unsent  
irena sinitsky

PART I

Hopes:

December 1, 2001

I hope my eyelids will have the strength to lift themselves following the afternoon nap and will blink until ten p.m. —until the lights will be switched off. I hope the nurse on shift will bring me a

piece of notebook paper and let me write. I hope I don't need the space of the wall under the bed because the space is limited and my handwriting isn't small. I hope the nurse on duty will bring a bestseller by John Grisham from her home and will pretend to ignore me as I let the hardcover harden my pillow; I'll smile and thank her, and I'll return the borrowed book in a week. I hope she likes Edgar Allen Poe and

will forget to spoon-feed me as I summarize his mysterious, short stories. I hope I can gain half of a pound per week and come home for Christmas.

Hope you miss me,

Elizabeth

Introducing Dr. Miller:

December 2, 2001

I want to tell you about my doctor—Dr. Miller. Dr. Miller didn't let me keep Mommy's lipstick for my swollen and cracked lips and left me to miss the taste of melted wax last night. Dr. Miller didn't let me brush my teeth before breakfast because he believes I prefer to eat toothpaste and keep the taste of mint in my mouth instead of food (like his former patients).

The white walls kept themselves around me

and helped me to deceive Dr. Miller as I gritted my teeth against the wall above my bed and stole the taste of cement. I didn't tell Dr. Miller that I didn't want to throw up mashed potatoes, which tasted like earth, and green beans, which tasted like plantain growing out of a pot of earth; I didn't want to tell Dr. Miller that I wasn't hungry. Instead, I threw up and hid rotting vegetables under my bed for a week.

I miss the fatty taste of your oil-paints and oil-brushes, which I stole from your room in September when the school-year started,

Elizabeth

Preparation for the Garden:

December 3, 2001

Dr. Miller instructed the nurse on shift to walk with me in the garden. He told her I needed to take

a pair of slippers because my sneakers could start to give my narrow feet corns. He told her I needed to take a blanket to coat my bones because my bones lacked iron, fiber and flesh and could start to freeze and shiver like Jell-O. He told her I needed to take a twelve oz. carton of milk to drink. He told her I needed to take a green apple because its tart smack could save me from vomiting and from fainting. I tried to tell Dr. Miller and the nurse that I needed to take a piece of paper and a pen to write a letter to my sister, but Dr. Miller told me I needed to take a stethoscope to listen to my growling stomach. I needed to take my bed.

I miss the bed in my room with blue flowers and yellow leaves,

Elizabeth

The Garden:

December 4, 2001

I remember seeing the green island surrounded by the gray sea that blended with the pinkish sky of sunrise. I remember seeing fellow patients wearing white gowns with blue dots as they sat in silver colored wheelchairs and watched the sunrays bounce off the metal. The nurses stood like loyal dogs at patients' right sides, holding blankets, glasses of water with straws, and had black pagers attached to the left pockets of their white robes. I remember meeting a girl of five with curly, brown hair like mine, who held a bagel with cream cheese in her left hand, and picked violet flowers off the grass with her right hand.

"Ella, finish collecting flowers for grandma because I've got to go to work after our visit," a mother's voice called and the girl ran after its echo.

I remember seeing the doctors swim by, along the gray sea in a straight line, like sharks, carrying black briefcases. I remember seeing a boy with a bandaged leg studying astronomy.

I miss having homework,

Elizabeth

### Remembered Photographs:

December 5, 2001

Dr. Miller worried that I might lick the glossy side of photographs for dinner and removed the photo album from my room. I didn't tell him that I keep five photographs in my head:

1. The photograph in which Daddy held you; the photograph in which I was invisible because I crawled under Mommy's long satin skirt.

2. I was four, and Mommy and Daddy made me take figure skating lessons. Or was it you in the snapshot who sat on the ice in a pink dress and refused to get up?
3. I was six and you were four, and we sat playing on the floor. You took the teddy bear with the ear you tore off, and doll Kristina in her red dress, and bunny Stephan, and Baby Boris, who was supposed to be sleeping, and I started to cry. But before taking that picture Mommy said I had to behave like a kind schoolgirl who was going to the first grade and who was supposed to be learning the alphabet instead of playing with toys.
4. The photograph of Flynn Turner, which I should have torn up, because he was my first kisser, because he was 6'2" and had two dimples on his smiling cheeks and three

freckles on his crooked-up nose, because he played varsity football, because I knew he flirted and had sexual intercourse with seniors while I was a freshman and wasn't ready, and because he was the first who pretended to ignore the rumors that I was anorexic.

5. The photograph I called 'Teenage Sisters'—the photograph that wasn't snapped but entered my head when I was twelve and you were ten, and you ate my sandwich on the walk home from school as I asked you to.

I miss my friends,

Elizabeth

As a Writer, I Used To Have...:

December 6, 2001

As a writer I used to have a scrapbook of lists.

Those lists included titles like *Anna Karenina*, *The Bluest Eye*, *The Death of The Heart*, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, *The Golden Notebook*, *La Tulipe Noire*, *Lie Down in Darkness*, *Pamela*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Those lists included poets like Elizabeth Barrette Browning, Byron, Emily Dickenson, Robert Frost, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Victor Hugo, John Keats, Lermontov, Stephane Mallarme, Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spencer, Alfred Tennyson, and novelists like Honore de Balzac, Emily Bronte, Fanny Burney, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, Henry James, Harper Lee, John Ernst Steinbeck, Virginia Woolf. I kept those lists for inspiration, to become a writer and to keep writing.

I used to have a notebook covered with the imitation of alligator skin—my literary journal into which I jotted down my ideas for poetry and short

stories, and into which I copied down my favorite lines, like the lines from *The English Patient*: “We die. We die rich with lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have entered and swum up like rivers...”

I have been left with a piece of torn paper and an unsharpened pencil with which I write you this letter. But I write...

I miss my lap top,

Elizabeth

The List I Hate, but The List is My List:

December 7, 2001

I hate my gown because it is white with blue dots, because it has three ribbons on my back which tickle me and untie themselves while I turn in my bed, because it hangs on me like a turned over paper

shopping bag while I stand or promenade the long corridor. But I can't take it off because fellow patients, nurses and doctors will stop and count my bones. I hate the four white walls which surround my bed and the white door which faces me and begs me to blend with its whiteness and to disappear. But I can't scrape off the whiteness because I'll break my nails and I need to chew my nails. I hate my stomach because it doesn't want food.

I miss hating Mommy and Daddy, and you,  
Elizabeth

Untitled:

December 8, 2001

I stood on scales this morning. I watched Dr. Miller and three nurses exchange glances and shake their heads. The scales said I gained half of a pound

in three weeks. I wanted to say that I felt like I gained ten. But I knew Dr. Miller was interested in displayed numbers in the small window between my toes and in handwritten numbers on my yellow chart.

At breakfast this morning, my stomach felt like sleeping. I tried to awaken it with bread and butter, but it didn't wake up. I vomited the sandwich, which looked like wheaten kasha on the white, tiled floor of the cafeteria.

I miss the Italian tile with roses on the kitchen floor at home,

Elizabeth

My Charms and Lucky Tokens:

December 9, 2001

Dr. Miller removed my amulet from around my

neck—the amulet that Mommy and Daddy got me from a shaman two years ago, saying that I should let mashed potatoes, green beans, cereals, and milk become my lucky tokens.

I miss the seashells, which I believed were charmed when I was four and collected them on the Malibu Beach, and from which you made the first jewelry box for my tenth birthday,

Elizabeth

Mixing the Odds and End of Things:

December 10, 2001

I went on a field trip to the hospital kitchen with Dr. Miller. The cook was making a salad dressing. He squeezed a tomato and red juice flowed into the bowl like blood flows out of the vein and into the

syringe when an arm is squeezed. The skin of the tomato wrinkled, but remained firm, like a plastic bag. The cook cut garlic into tiny white dices, that looked and smelled like prescribed pills. He reached for the grater and grated green peppers, celery, white mushrooms, and red onions with their pink and purple linings, that dissipated into the tomato juice. And he mixed into it olive oil that added a yellowish tone.

"You want some?" the cook asked after pouring the salad dressing over spinach.

I was about to politely decline and started to shake my head when Dr. Miller replied: "Sure. Why not?"

I wanted to tell Dr. Miller that I didn't want food in my stomach and I didn't know why, but he handed me a plateful. It slipped out of his hand. Or was it already in mine? I wanted to tell him it was an

accident, but I didn't.

I miss watching Mommy cook in the kitchen,  
Elizabeth

Equipment: (written in the dark)

December 11, 2001

Dr. Miller attached me to a tube...dropping vitamins into my vein...tired of counting drops, of feeling vitamins flow into my arm, of waking up... machines beep in neighboring rooms...can't twist and turn in my bed...needle...cutting through my bones.

I miss sleeping on my right side in...,  
Elizabeth

My Neighbors:

December 12, 2001

My neighbors and I pretend we know each



other because we are similar. We wear white gowns with blue dots and three ribbons tied on our backs. We rest on creaky beds with thin mattresses, white sheets, white pillowcases, and cover our legs with beige blankets. In truth, we don't know each other. We pass neighboring rooms without a nod or a smile.

I miss our house with a brown fence, a brown door and a brown roof,

Elizabeth

If I Could Go Home:

December 13, 2001

If I could go home I would leave the white walls of this room and cover the walls in my room at home with your paintings of waterfalls, of begonias, lilies and angelicas, of ballerinas eating during inter-

missions, and between paintings I would ask you to paint on my four walls brown bears somersaulting and koalas smiling in their sleep from tree branches. If I could go home I would take off the white gown with blue dots by untying three knots on my back and put on a tight bra, size 30B, beige stockings, my favorite beige dress with a turtle neck and a black line around its waist, and I would slip my feet into high heeled shoes. But I would take with me the white slippers because my feet breathe in them.

I miss wearing T-shirts, jeans, socks and sneakers,

Elizabeth

Stories:

December 14, 2001

I carry with me a story of Mommy and Daddy,

who baked chocolate chip cakes for dessert, bought an assortment of Italian pastas for dinner and agreed to let me have vanilla ice cream for breakfast if I wanted, to get me to eat. I carry with me a story of my sister—of you, who ate my lunches and covered for me until you couldn't because I fainted during a tennis practice at Beverly Hills High School.

I carry with me stories that Dr. Miller tells me, of Carrie, Bianca and Tess—of his former patients who didn't want food in their stomachs, whose bones shivered under five blankets until their hearts stopped pumping blood because they weighed under ninety pounds.

I miss the stories of Hans Christian Andersen that Mommy used to tell us before bedtime,

Elizabeth

Weight carried by my feet:

December 15, 2001

The weight my feet carry doesn't change. The bones my feet carry remain cold, whether moonlight shines or sunrays strike and warm the wall that faces the garden. And the gown my feet carry is always white with blue dots and three ribbons.

I miss changing my clothes,

Elizabeth

Inside:

December 16, 2001

Dr. Miller says that I carry inside me a puzzle called anorexia, a puzzle which I may choose to solve. He says that I carry teeth inside my mouth, which are supposed to chew food, and I carry a stomach, which is supposed to digest the food I

swallow.

I miss wanting food in my stomach,  
Elizabeth

P.S. I'll miss you on Christmas, my darling  
sister.

## PART II

### Your Portrait:

December 5, 2001

From my memory of you or from my own reflection on the window, that was my 18"x24" smooth newsprint for quick sketches this morning, my right hand's forefinger was able to trace your eye sockets, irises, pupils, the outlines of your crooked-up

nose and your bony, oval face. Even though your skin had to settle for a green tone produced by the sun's rays that periodically gleamed through the gray clouds, I wished you were posing.

We could have had a good laugh or a silly pillow fight,

Gretchen

### Your Painting Lessons:

December 6, 2001

I remember (or maybe you/Mom told me) that when we were little, we used to paint together. You were always so thoughtful, so afraid of ruining the paper, while I just wallowed my fleshy fingers in paint and painted whatever I saw or imagined. I remember (or was told) that I always asked you to get involved in my paintings—to pick a tiny brush

and outline a vase in the background or continue a pattern of brown rectangles and make them look like bricks around a fireplace.

I don't remember the day we stopped painting together. I just remember that suddenly I had to wash all the dirty brushes and the sink by myself, while you were reading Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* by yourself.

We could have kept on painting together,  
Gretchen

Your Preference to Write:

December 7, 2001

Although I miss the times we could have spent together if you hadn't given up on painting, I was secretly glad when you found another hobby. (I guess I preferred us being best friends rather than

rivals.) I remember how inventive you got when it came to writing. You could look at an empty box and write a story about a girl who found her grandmother's photo album inside it. You could look at one of my paintings called *Hair in the Wind* and write a poem about it.

I remember how you were always writing—writing with a flashlight under a blanket at night, writing during lunch at school, writing at the dinner table.... And then you started to skip meals on weekends, explaining that you had to finish writing. I wonder if writing became your favorite substitute for food. I wonder if you know. I wonder if your doctors know.

We could have talked about it if you were home,

Gretchen

P.S. I don't know why I write. I guess I just want to understand you better.

Your Poem:

December 8, 2001

A week ago Mom asked me to clean your room. (Don't worry, I didn't throw away anything with your handwriting on it.) I found one of your poems called "Face of Female Hamlet."

It was probably one of those poems I shouldn't have read without your permission, but it's not like I could call you or anything.... Anyway, I've been working on a painting called *Bony Faces*, and I just didn't know what to do with the background until I read your poem. So, I went to the print shop and voila—for under ten bucks I have your beautiful, blown up words behind two surrealistic, blue faces.

(Don't worry, I'll not submit it into contests or for a grade in my art class until you get back home. And if you hate it, I'll cover it up with oils or acrylics and think of something else.)

We could have celebrated and called it our first collaborative, creative project,

Gretchen

P.S. When I was cleaning your room, I also found my oil paints in the top drawer under the oak desk—the ones Mom and Dad bought me in September. I found some of the tubes empty. (Don't worry, you know me, I'll never say anything to Mom and Dad.) But my God, Liz, if you ate them to lose your appetite, to feel nauseous and dizzy.... How could you do something like that to yourself?

Our Vacation:

December 9, 2001

Last night I had a dream about our vacation in Paris—the one we planned to take after you would graduate from high school. In my dream we went to the Chateau of Louis XIV in Versailles and by the time the tour guide let us walk down Galerie des Glaces, the bones in our feet felt like broken, frozen branches. But in spite of our aches, we took off our high-heeled sandals and ran barefooted through the gallery and into the greenness of the garden.

“Wait for me, wait for me,” I was exclaiming with joy when I woke up.

We could probably still go if you want to, and if you promise Mom and Dad you’ll eat (at least the truffles),

Gretchen

P.S. Sorry, I probably should not be commenting on food.

My List:

December 10, 2001

I came up with a list of the things we’ll do when you come home:

1. On your first night back we’ll stay up all night, watching old movies in the living room. We’ll bring blankets, pillows and a box of tissues downstairs. We can even watch Shakespearean films if you want or the French ones with subtitles. I’ll do my best to stay awake.
2. You’ll pose for an hour while I paint a portrait of you. In return, I’ll let you write anything you want about me, but you can’t

use my name in the final draft. (I'll even answer three or four of your silly questions.)

3. We'll go shopping for presents. (No more soft toys, sweaters and slippers or Hallmark cards that make Mom cry.) Dad will get Mom something from the jewelry department as usual. But we need a change. Maybe I'll buy you an art history book, and you'll buy me a book of your favorite poems. In any case, we do need to get new decorations for the Christmas Tree.
4. We'll collaborate on one or more of our creative projects.
5. On the 24th of December, we'll wake up at six in the morning to decorate the Christmas Tree.

We could still change any/all items on my list,  
Gretchen

P.S. You are coming home for Christmas, aren't you?



*Triptyc*, Joe Medina



the story  
Mike Vincenti

There's a composer hard at work on some night-time piece across the street. Sitting on my balcony with the lights off, I can spy him through some chicken-wire and his open window. But I'm not really at home right now.

I'm fooling you.

I'm at the Donut Stop on the corner of Highland and Franklin, and I'm joined here

by two Korean, 20-something ex-patriots, a tantalizingly luke-warm ham and cheese croissant, yellow-Formica tables (and swivel chairs), and a good notion that I'm being followed. I've also got a fiance at home watching *Raging Bull* (or perhaps she's sleeping because she loves to nap).

I'm not sure why I've parked myself right in front of this cafe window, facing the glaring sun. I know only where I've been; nestled

in the heart of Hollywood, taking a siesta with an ex-semi-pro football player, turned personal trainer (slash)pimp-drug-dealer (who had been shot 4 times exactly 8 hours before signing his contract to play for a CFL team).

Xavier; he put me in this trance. He gave me his history in 45 minutes, passing bowls and discussing fitness.

Don't you remember? I had merely paused at the Donut Stop on my way home from meeting Xavier and hearing his wonderful stories (or didn't I tell you that?). Yes, I decided to pay my dope dealer a visit. I walked into the apartment, looked around, and Shelley wasn't there. But here was Xavier sitting at the counter in the kitchen, talking with Janice (on the sofa) about the benefits of golden-seal root for skin blemishes. And before I knew it, I was imagining

a train station two years ago: watching his little boy, crying, carried away in mother's arms, never to be heard from again...probably. No way Xavier could win that custody battle, having just been arrested for attempted murder (which was a bogus charge, and I believe that all the way!!). The little boy's name was George, and his mamma was a track-and-field star, running at the University of Oregon. They had met at a tournament where Xavier threw discus.

Xavier's stories affected me.

O.K., so you've caught me. I've escaped the horrible, sun-drenched silence of the Donut Stop and have returned to *Raging Bull*. The composer across the way has no idea what has befallen me today; can he imagine my meeting with the colorful dope-dealer and his terrible circumstance; can he know that I gave Xavier four tickets to a show happening down

at the Whiskey tonite? What the hell does any of this matter?

Yes. Xavier. So rich, yet so horrible.

How lucky I was to be sitting there, taking it all in. It reminded me of walking down to Boardner's on a Monday night and spying all the bards scribbling in their journals; eyes darting here and there just to catch a glimpse of the movements of an underground story that I had just been privy to without the bar-room haze. I had no journal and never attempted, in front of Xavier, to record any of what he said to me about why he ended up in Hollywood selling dime-bags, and coordinating small-time tricks with his small-time chicks.

But being back on the balcony, looking over at Mr. Music, writing in my neat, leather-bound pouch of

dreams, I wondered, what would those versifiers in the bar think of me now; the pale-faced, Hollywood Bohemian community, basking in the uncomfortable smell of a back-alley saloon, all the while, just waiting to return to their 2-bedroom rented gondolas, nestled next to John Voight and Stewart Pankin. Do they know that I've stolen their ingenious, spontaneous story-telling conceits?

We are all thieves.

Our unknown pianist lifts himself from the chair, stretches, claps, and sits back down. I light another cigarette and continue to steal his motions. I can close my eyes and imagine that a hooker's Cape Cod, being poured at Goldfinger's, is now being spied by a clever, practicing poetaster, who sits beneath the Bud lamp, just to the left of the exit sign. But there should be more than this. More than an

insomniac musician across the way, and the diseased court stenographer turned hooker drinking at Goldfinger's (even though she doesn't exist). I don't think I ever told you why I walked over to the apartment where I met Xavier Courteau. I never told you about standing with him on a cigarette-butt-soaked balcony, watching a little black girl learn to swim in a tiny, plastic pool. I never told you about the odd orange juice I purchased just before leaving the Donut Shop. But all that must end now because I've awakened the sleeping princess inside my apartment with all this coughing and stirring and swearing and writing.

She peers at me through sleep's wonderfully delicious haze. She looks so feline, so dangerous and vulnerable in the light of the TV screen and the innocence of a nap. I can spy her nipples through her lavender tank-top, and I can almost hear her heartbeat if I

remember laying close to her with my ear to her chest. She beckons for a kiss so she can smile and fall back to sleep.

I am happy once again because it unfolds right in front of me. I am happy to have met Xavier, happy to have eaten a disgusting ham and cheese croissant, happy to have watched our musician create four bars of noise.

This is a love story, and I think maybe I'll call my brother now; I haven't spoken to him in a while.

integral from the land of dirt and sky  
alex lee

//point:

My name is Jor-El. Some people ask me why I call myself that. It's a very simple question. Jor-El comes from a comic book. This is Superman's dad's name. He saved Superman's life (Superman's real name is Kal-El) by sending Superman on a rocket-ship to earth. I tell this to everyone who asks me why my name is Jor-El as they get confused since I am not a guy. What I

don't tell them are three things.

- 1) That I hate the name my mother gave me.
- 2) What that name is.
- 3) That my mother is dead.

I say this because my boyfriend's name is Frank. I didn't know that. I don't think I

wanted to know that. He came back from going to college in Europe for about three years. Did he have a degree in art? No. Did he do anything? No! Why did he leave me then? I guess he's been doing stuff, like heroin, or crack or something. He said he was a lost boy, like from Peter Pan. Like Europe is some island with pirates. But he says weird shit like that. Now, he's going to the University of Northern AZ, which is just in town. Why come back? Anyhow, I avoided his phone calls and messages from friends and acquaintances that Daemon, as I knew him, was in town again. Flagstaff AZ is a smaller place than you'd think. Gossip gets around easily. I never knew his name was Frank. What the fuck was he thinking coming back and telling me that? Now he's not Daemon, and I don't want to know him as Frank. Now, he's just my x. Then he wanted to know what my name was. I wouldn't tell him.

The truth is, no one knows what my real name is. Except for one girl, and her name is Sandy. But sometimes I think she forgets what my other name is too.

Sandy's been my best friend for ages. Back when we used to live in New York together, we would sit on the top of our apartment building and dangle our feet between the bars. That was a whole different planet. The janitor often forgot to lock the stairwell to the roof. Then he did one day. We stole his keys. We'd sneak cigarettes from the liquor store. We'd drop cigarette butts into darkness. If we could see it, the moon would pass between clouds. If this was a movie we'd cross our pinkies, pass boots or rings or somethings. This would be our promise, cross our heart and hope to die. Back then it was clear: at night, the roof was our space and our time. What did we do back then that was so much fun?

Now Sandy and I live in Flagstaff where there are no tall buildings. Instead we drive out to the desert and walk off into night. This is kind of dangerous because there are rattlesnakes and things like that. Arizona has over 15 kinds of rattlesnakes, more than any other state by far: blacktail, tiger, ridgenose, hopi, sidewinder... Lucky for us they all have rattles. Sandy doesn't bring cigarettes anymore. She has a small dirty glass container with weed. We smoke this or crystal meth behind one of the big rock formations so passing cars won't see us. Sometimes a friend or two might come along. This was when she warned me that x was coming back.

Of course, then I didn't know he was x-to-be. WTF?

//line:

Sandy is my most important friend. I think that I am

hers too, since she lives with my dad and my grandma and me. If it weren't for me, she wouldn't wash her hair. I make sure to get all the lumps out, especially after she had disappeared for two weeks that one time. I told her as she was washing that she had to take care of herself.

"Even if you don't get married, you should take care of yourself."

Her voice came muffled from the sink and the water. "Why's that?"

"It's well, the social contract. Guys expect it. And other people do too. I mean what are these lumps?"

"..."

"Well, you should anyway." I think they were dirt

and semen, or syrup. The dirt is easy to tell, it's always red. I think there's rust in the sand or something. She wasn't kidnapped I don't think. I don't think Sandy traumatizes easily since her dad raped her when she was like four. Or maybe Sandy traumatizes easily and often. I can't decide. Anyhow it was the night George Acosta was playing in town. And usually things like that are a big deal. What else is there to do in the land of dirt and sky? We met with some people who drove in from California and even Texas at the party that night. The following night there were some DJs from England. But we didn't go to that. We went to White Cage and saw Rasputina and Joranne play. Then Sandy disappeared. It was very strange. But I didn't notice because I went home with different people.

Anyway she didn't want to talk about it. I didn't bother. I mean she doesn't know my other name

does she?

The code. Our code. We don't go past that. When everything breaks down, then people can't live with one another. We'd all be monkeys throwing shit at one another.

Her muffled voice: "Monkeys in trees, right?"

"Yup. In trees. Throwing shit."

"You sound like my mom. You know, talking about the break down of society like that. Like if I don't clean my room. Or something. People will die if I don't finish my dinner."

"Ha. You haven't seen your mom in ten years." I pour shampoo over her head. Sudsy-falls. "That's part of the social contract too."



"It is?"

"Yeah, it's an unspoken agreement. Like how your mom let you live with us here."

"Yeah..."

The lather runs thin again. Maybe I'll give her a haircut too. I don't get to see Sandy often anymore.

//slope:

I'm not always around people. More often than not, I'm alone. I sleep in the mornings and afternoons. I read comic books, talk with the old Japanese man, Mr. Daichi, or go to White Cage or the bar across the street on my nights off. Otherwise I work. I know everyone around here, and no one ever changes.

They are all so boring, and all glad to see x. So I stay away. And Sandy, well, Sandy leaves her clothes around the house. But she's not here. My grandma is always here. I love my grandma. She cooks us meals and Sandy's not around to eat them. But when she is, my grandmother grabs her face by the cheeks with the palms of her hands and kisses Sandy like she's a darling angel.

"Nanna!" How come she's so affectionate with Sandy? Then, I guess, spying me, my grandma comes over and does the same to me.

And then there's tons of pasta around. If you ever have an Italian grandma, you'll never starve. I eat until I'm full and then I'm stuffed. She tells me to eat more. What's wrong with her? Can't she tell I'm full? I don't need anymore weight. Then, my dad. We have to be quiet sometimes because he sleeps

more than me and he sleeps on his couch in the living room. He works for a temp agency and he was probably at a warehouse all night, lifting heavy boxes. This could be mail, or it could be the distribution restaurant supplies. Whenever I open a box of supplies at the diner, I think of my dad. He often looks worn like he's wax paper but he's not thin. Looking at him, you might think he worked at an auto-shop for the last 30 years. Pictures of him when he married my ma tell of a stronger man with long black hair like a curtain on his shoulders. He wears those brown 70's sunglasses and he holds a woman hugging a baby (that's me). Back then, he looked like Ozzy. Good thing he's not Ozzy. My dad might not talk much, but he's not brain-dead. He just keeps alone, like me.

After eating dinner I go to the comic book store where the latest issue of *Strangers in Paradise* lies

waiting. Graphic novels do what no other story can. It's the best blend of movie and story. You get pictures of people but you don't miss out on their voice. Imagine how much better Die Hard is if Bruce Willis could narrate it. T2 had a narrator, and it was a better movie. It wouldn't be the same without the voice. But unlike a book, you also get the way he looks with the machine gun and how his feet are bare and bleeding and he's at his last straw all alone without the cops' help and with the terrorists playing as hard as they can. I can wander around Gotham nights forever and learn all about how people know the one called Batman. But I will never know him. Like I can ask my Grandma to tell me about my parents when they were highschool sweethearts. I always liked listening to her stories. I didn't when I was younger. Things were different. Sandy was different.

And what about Sandy now?

Sandy shows me her nostrils and they aren't thin like cocaine. You can't do coke once you've done speed, it ruins you, at least that's what I'm told. So Sandy won't have a nose with holes. Her nose is solid black darkness, a well of feeling. Sometimes that's how I feel about Flagstaff. I drive my dad's old blue truck, covered in the red dust of Sedona. The town is a tourist land. The shops become oases of freon—welcoming tourists who want to shop. Shop and escape the hot sun.

But at night there is no sun. I often go to the Bell Rock just outside of Sedona in Boynk Canyon. Hippies and mystics came here, looking among squash green plants on the gigantic spirals of red rock, looking for some kind of alternate energy. There are strange magnetic fields here, the kind that

demagnetize hotel cards. I walk for a few hours, hiding in the shade now and then until night comes. It's dangerous I guess. But I've been here before, with Sandy, with x when he was Dameon, with friends. The desert echoes the moon everywhere, the silver lining along dark contours. City lights are yellow stars to the white ones in the sky. Sky and land are symmetrical. One raises us and the other presses us. Both are without end. At night they are the same darkness.

//plane:

Flagstaff in the desert. Sedona in the desert. On the US maps, Flagstaff is the only place for miles and miles around, among a run of dry river beds attributed to dead goldminers, lost wagon trains, or Indians generous with their names. It's important that on US maps, Arizona always seemed to be red, whereas

other states were orange or yellow or green. The Arizona desert is very red. Here, everything is red. We live on Mars. During the day, we are trapped by our cars and our houses hiding from the sweltering sun. Without a car we'd have to hide until night comes, and then, who wouldn't be afraid to walk the hundreds of miles to the cooler shades of the Grand Canyon or Phoenix? If you don't have a car, these places might as well be some distant Uranus.

Sometimes I go to the Lowell observatory. Tonight, they're having a special open house. Visitors can come in and see Pluto, or Jupiter, or the latest comet. They have a guided tour by volunteer amateur astronomers. This night, I go.

John Shumann guides these tours sometimes. I recognize him and he recognizes me. He's a chestnut-blond (because of the beard), bald, middle-aged and

widowed. It's important that he's a widower and not divorced. I wonder if he has a fondness for beer; you can see his navel pressed against the inside of his shirt and the wisps of hair rising from under his shirt collar like smoke from his heart. Two years ago, he didn't show up for work for about two months. His wife died in a plane crash. Sandy and I used to come here all the time; we had year-round passes. Like in comics, when humans on distant alien planets lie on purple grassy knolls dreaming about the brown earth, Sandy and I would lie on Lowell institute knolls and dream about the possible worlds we missed — missed by 300 years. If we were born 300 years from now, on another planet, we'd probably do the same and dream about Earth, only the earth would be brown. Not red. Not Arizona.

Today Shumann is in his best form. He shows the

slides and talks about what we know and don't know. The mystery is a purple circle. That's a star cluster hundreds of light-years away, meaning hundreds of years ago. I think of the BBSes, when they'd have ViPERnet or FiDOnet—we'd get messages locally as they were posted, messages from around a few hundred miles every week...but messages in Seattle or Miami would come in only once a month. From the UK it was only once every three months. So we'd read it, and it'd be something from a near past, and the current discussion would have passed to something else. That's how light-years work. X could have gone to the UK. If we used BBSes, he could have sent me a message and come back before I got it. I could then dig into his past like astronomers using spectrometers.

X is with me. He called my house and wanted to do something. I was going to see this tour anyway, and

in a moment of weakness, I told him about it and let him come. He was supposed to bring his friend or his friend's sister or something, but they couldn't make it. I don't know them anyway. He grasps my hand and smiles at me. Three years ago my hair was black and his was spiky. Now he looks almost like an ex-marine with his short hair and his slender drug-abused body. Why do ex-druggies either look super-fat or super-thin, as if the fat they carry is baggage from their struggles, or that their struggles wore them away so that they hang only onto what's important, with no in between. I had an uncle who came back from Vietnam—all quiet and thin like a stray alley cat, tension in his frame. War in the body.

My Daemon, my poor poor Daemon.

Does he expect me to smile back at him and squeeze his hand? Shall I be eighteen again? Or even thirteen?

Something in Shumann's voice catches me. "I've seen this show hundreds of times," I tell x. Of course, x knows this.

"Do you want to go?" he whispers.

"No, we're getting to the chair joke."

Shumann always has to point out the chair Lowell sits on. On this chair Lowell drew weird lines on Mars — what he thought were canals. "For someone who was as rich as Lowell, you'd think he'd buy a pillow for his wooden chair."

When I think of old rich man Lowell, sitting on that hard wooden chair for hours, staring at Mars and drawing canal lines on a white globe the size of a grapefruit, I can only imagine where his mind took him. What does someone who has never seen a

motion picture dream about?

//curve:

No one ever calls me anymore. I don't call anyone. I never go anywhere, except to the diner. Not even x calls. I don't know why I went to Lowell with him. What did he want anyway? Sandy walks in the door. I can tell by the way she drops her shoes. We have to be shoe-less in the house because otherwise the blue carpet would be red. Maybe my parents should have bought a red carpet.

She walks into my room. My bed flops. For a time, the Preacher becomes three men.

"Where did you go?" I ask.

"I'm pregnant," she says.

What? This is new. Is she kidding? She gets off my bed. I hug her. She goes to the other room. "Sandy, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get married," she says. "Paul asked me to marry him."

"What are you really going to do?"

"I don't know," she says. She grins. "I have seven and a half months to decide. When have you been such a bummer? You got an abortion."

"Shut up. You knew what that was like."

"Jor-El, what am I supposed to do? I don't have any money."

"I'll pay for it. I have a few thousand."

"No, you pay for everything. I'd feel bad. I owe you money already."

"You could get a job. Okay. But I don't want you to have a kid. So you're having an abortion."

"I—I want you to raise it," she says. "I'm not mature enough."

"What the fuck do you think I am?" I get up.

"Where are you going Jor-El?"

"Where the fuck do you think I'm going?" I drive. Borders: Ionic columns.

No. Comic books.

No. Mr. Daicho won't be there tonight, that guy with the 5 nose rings will be.

x's house: Two oil stains on his driveway. No car: He's not there. I spend a few hours talking to his parents. We're close like that, or at least we were. I haven't seen them in years. Surprisingly they seem the same, so we end up talking mostly about me. Then x comes home and he's surprised to see me.

"Hi," I say. He takes me to his room and I fall asleep on his bed. I wake up alone. He is asleep on the couch. I go downstairs and watch him sleep. The sky is pasty with a brand new sun. Even though I am without sound, he soon wakes.

//topography:

In Sedona by some resort there are these long windy

trails. The rock is magnetic and it works the same as those expensive japanese magnetized pillows and bedsheets. You never get tired walking these trails; the blood is kept circulating with the magnetic fields. Despite the hot sun, x and I go. He wants to go. We walk for about an hour to the waterfall. This is where I first lost my virginity, to him. You can see the whole of Sedona, a half circle that wraps around large rocks that juts from green plants. No one builds on these earthen phallics.

x is breathing hard; I think he's out of shape. I take off my shoes and let my sweaty feet rest. I've been here at least a dozen times and I've never taken a picture. I think I'll remember this forever.

"You won't," he says. He hands me a disposable camera. "Take my picture."



Okay, sure, whatever.

"Let me take yours."

"No."

"Why not?"

"You know I don't like it."

He stands off to one side, on one leg and then the other. "I just want something to remember you by."

The waterfall looks cool. I wish I had brought some water with me. My forehead is sweaty, the sun is out about now, its about 9am. It's going to get hotter.

"I lead an easy life," I say.

"I know," he says. "Don't worry about the picture. I don't think I'll ever forget you."

I look at the crotch of his jeans and then I think I have too much hair. It's going to be hot. Maybe I can clip it back. "I got a letter from a guy who lives in France," I say.

"Jor-El, we never talk," he says. "I mean we talked, but we never talked. What did we talk about? I can't remember."

I feel fat.

He looks at me. "What do you think Sandy is doing right now?"

"I don't know," I say. "One of these days," I say, "she's not going to come home."

"How do you know," he says.

"Just a feeling."

"I came home," he says.

We gaze at each other. "You didn't come home," I say. "You're wearing jeans."

"I've never been more home before in my life."

I want to go home. I put my shoes on and stand up. I could be reading comic books right now. I never did finish that issue of the Preacher. "You can take my picture," I say. I stand at the edge of the rock. If he pushes me, I will fall and die; it's 300 feet to the bottom. He doesn't move. "But if you do, you might never see me again."

"That's exactly why," he says. He smiles at me.

Weak.

//space:

We're still here. Sandy had an abortion. I paid for it. My dad was cleaning out the garage. I guess when he doesn't have work, he still needs to lift boxes around. He found notebooks full of what I wrote a long time ago for school. I cleared off the spiderwebs. For about a month I didn't read comics. I learned that I'm terrible at math. I was good at biology though, and geometry. I was okay in English. We wrote stupid things. I read what I had written long ago:

*“What is death like:*

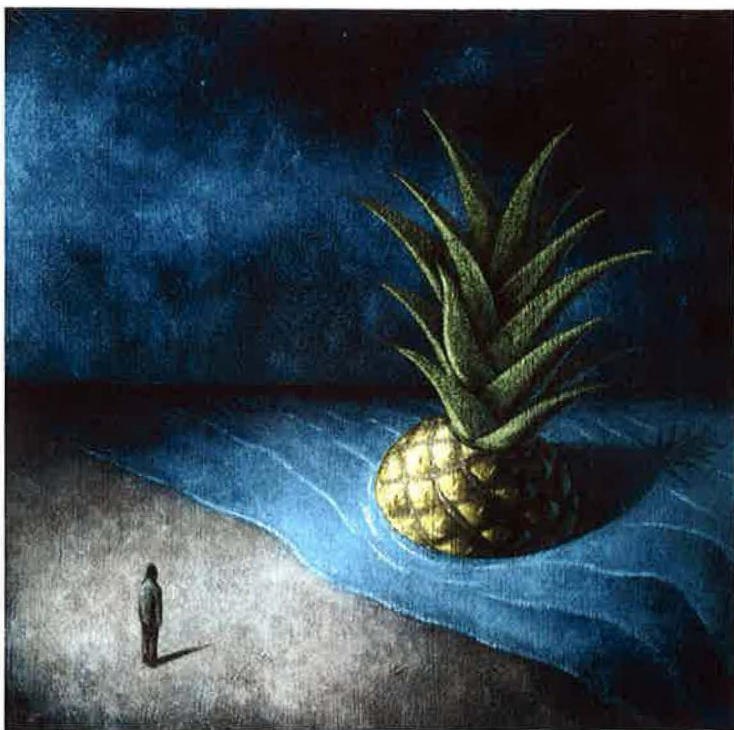
*I picture the moment of death like in movies when a bunch of doves are flying off. It's frightening, but it's a moment of liberation for you, the first step into eternity. What must death be like. When things are getting small and far away because you're sinking into yourself, into a coldness or a warmness, depending on how you're going. Death itself is a moment of disturbance, like the quiet of the forest is broken but then it's back to the way things were, before you were around and after you are around is the same. Life is the middle of the stage, a halftime show and people are dancing and parading for their favorite football team, but then that changes and it's over. I guess this is more about life than anything else.”*

On the page are doodles of Batman and Robin and

Animaniacs. Remember the Wheel of Morality? Batman spins it. Wheel of Morality, turn turn turn, tell us the lesson that we should learn. Moral #8. I got a gold star with the words: “very nice. This isn't an art class. Don't draw on your homework anymore.”

I don't remember getting words like that.

I let Frank take my picture. I am 22 years old. My name, Amanda.



*Finding a Mystery, Kazuhiro Tabuchi*

## spiders in the bucket

Erin Ashby

It was only upon later reflection regarding the incident at the fair that Richard remembered, several years later, his great fear of spiders as a small boy. One day at the age of forty-three the image of a daddy longlegs creeping toward him on the rim of the bathtub rose to the surface of memory and he felt a child's fear again. But Richard couldn't recall ever seeing a spider after the fair. He could not account for it. There had to be spiders. Everyone had spiders.

Drink the milk slowly, his mother had said. But it was chocolate and maybe there would never be any more. It is very hard to drink chocolate milk slowly. Richard put his hand on the edge of the table as he swallowed the last of it. His mother was behind him, squeezing the water out of a dishrag over the sink. Richard slammed his empty plastic cup on the table and licked off his brown mustache. He felt something in his chest clench a little and he let out a

whimper.

"See, you drank it too fast, honey."

Richard put his other hand on the edge of the table and studied a stack of paper napkins until the clench went away. He considered for a moment that his mother seemed to know many important things; sometimes the future.

"When will we go to the fair?"

"I told you," his mother said. "When Meryl calls."

Meryl would call and they would go to the fair in the car with a falling-down ceiling. Richard could accept the car but was of the opinion that a trip to the fair required special transportation. A rocket ship with many buttons to push or a covered wagon—the kind pioneers rode around in.

Richard's mother sat down at the table and played with her hands. The light was off in the kitchen because the sun was so bright through the windows. It bounced off the stark whiteness of the sink and the shiny metal faucet. Sometimes Richard

climbed up on a chair and turned the water on and off in the sink just to wrap his fingers around the smooth round knobs—on and off and on.

There would be cows at the fair. He had always wanted to see a real cow and in the spring—on vacation with his mother and father—he almost had. It was in his father's car: the blue car of big alien curves and guttural growls and a back seat big enough to wrestle in. He had camped out there on the smooth black leather and was already comfortable in his sleeping bag with Dr. Seuss and a drawing pad and crayons before they were out of familiar territory. They had rolled past all the houses and the rows of buildings that all seemed to be donut shops and copy centers and onto the highways where, if he was very lucky, they would drive on an overpass below which the the ground was not visible from his window and he could imagine that the car was flying.

Milk comes from the cows. Eggs come from the chickens. Apples come from the trees—but not all of the trees.

Richard swung his feet underneath the kitchen table. He was wearing yellow sneakers, the same pair he wore on the last vacation. He remembered this because he was lying sideways in the back seat as they were driving through Buelton—he had propped his feet up on the window. He had stared at his yellow sneakers against the blue sky. All he could see was blue and yellow and this too was like flying.

Richard couldn't remember what happened after Buelton. There had been fairy-tale hills and pancakes but then what? They must've gone to the beach. He has imagined himself on the beach digging tunnels—that's what he would have done. He is sure they went to the beach. He must've dug tunnels.

His mother put on lipstick and Meryl called. He imagined her as the phone was ringing. She was taller than his mother; she was the one with big smiling teeth. His mother picked up the phone and he imagined his mother and aunt at the fair. They would take him to the fair, to the black and white

cows, and they would all eat candy together.

The kitchen table was mint green with white speckles. Blue and yellow made green, Richard thought. He put his hands flat on top of it and spread his fingers, making eight triangles.

His father—where was he? A tall thin man with straight lines for a mouth. His mother was half circles. There were shapes everywhere, Richard knew. Everything was made of lines and circles. Red, yellow and blue. That's why Richard liked lemons and apples best. Sky through a window.

"We're going to meet Meryl at the fair."

Picture Richard photographed that day; he is standing on lawn—white wood-sided California bungalow. He is not quite aware of the camera, at an angle and smiling at something else—a lizard on the ground. Picture this round cornered square photograph taken with an old Instamatic in Technicolor greens, every color a little too persistent.

Richard rode in the back seat, the gray upholstery hung down from the ceiling in front of him, cutting

off his view of the street—a torn picture. This annoyed Richard who depended on a complete view. There were mysteries from a back seat. A short long building on one corner seemed familiar to him as his mother drove farther from their neighborhood, but the building next to it Richard was sure he had never seen.

His mother drove past the city and Richard watched the brown and green hills on either side of the highway from between curtains of felt. The hills were made of round bushes and roly-poly trees. They were shaped like clouds and Richard reasoned that they were very soft. To dive into the hills would be like diving into cotton candy. Buelton, he remembered, had different hills. They were sort of hills where castles were built and where he knew cows were hiding deep inside caves.

When he was in college, Richard took Introduction to the Humanities which, in the beginning of the course, focused on the unreliability of the senses and

the subjectivity of human experience. Because he dropped out of college after only two weeks and before the professor had moved on to the birth of psychoanalysis, Richard developed a theory that any experience once forgotten was nonexistent for good or ill. Because Richard had a notoriously bad memory, he considered this a noble conviction. And then one day, the spiders reappeared. They skittered into the picture, and his fear with them.

His mother told him to hold her hand. Beyond the sea of cars, the tallest heads in a crowd of shouting men and the spires of ticket booths was the fair. Richard held her hand and her palm was cool. Meryl was smiling down at him. She looked frightening in a black and red dress. Her teeth were large.

Richard's mother bought tickets and the man at the turnstile stamped the back of his hand. A declaration of citizenship. I cannot leave here, Richard decided. I can live here for years and years. He would not be afraid. Even though there were people



shouting and laughing all around him. Some with teeth as large as Meryl's.

There was a big room full of gadgets and amazing inventions. There were miniature buildings made of flowers and vegetables. Richard's mother was transfixed by a machine that made bread. Richard's hand slipped out of his mother's grasp as she spoke to Meryl about bread. Richard found a man who could split stones in two and find purple gems inside.

He wanted to see the cows. It was of urgent importance. He supposed the best glass of milk he had ever tasted was after the pancakes in Buelton. In Blue town. His mother had explained to him where his father was. She had knelt in front of him but he had only stared at her red half-circle lips. He was away somewhere. Maybe he was fishing.

Meryl found him by the stone man and grabbed his hand.

His mother was shopping, she said. She would take him wherever he wanted to go.

He wanted to see the cows.

They shuffled past the frozen lemonade stands, the boys playing flutes and balloons. Red, yellow, blue circles. Meryl asked him his favorite food. He said popcorn and she brought him a bag. Richard's lips became slippery with butter and salt.

The cows were far away, Meryl said. It would be quite a journey. Meryl's grip tightened. He could feel her long nails.

She took him to a fun house and he saw himself in a mirror, a fat and scary old man. Meryl saw it and laughed; it echoed off the metal walls.

"I'm an old man!"

Richard looked at himself in the mirror and opened his mouth wide. The old man was shouting.

Meryl took him by the arm and steered him out of the fun house. Her hair swung like old tree limbs. They were walking quickly through the fair. She asked him if he wanted to ride the big yellow slide. It seemed enormous. But Richard felt brave so he nodded meekly. A yellow slide. All half-circles. They climbed steep steps, one after the other and

closer to the blue sky. Meryl set him on a black burlap mat and a man pushed him. Richard flew down the yellow slide much faster than he would've liked and he felt his chest clench again. He was nearing the bottom of the slide and saw a man at the bottom who looked a lot like his father. Richard slowed at the bottom of the slide on his black mat and was about to shout at the man until he turned away. It was not his father. His father had darker hair.

Richard wished to see the cows.

They were not black and white. They were brown mostly. And they did not live in a big red barn. They were in stalls in a brick building. Richard pretended they were in a red barn.

"Milk comes from the cows," he said to Meryl.

Meryl held him up so that he could touch a cow. The fur was silky and warm.

Maybe there had been cows in Buelton. He just couldn't remember.

"Where's dad?" he asked Meryl suddenly.

Meryl knelt down like his mother had.

"Your mama told you," she said. "You're visiting him next Saturday, I think."

Her mouth was crooked. His father was away somewhere. Probably fishing.

Richard ran from Meryl down the aisles of cows, around corners and bounded into an empty stall. He tripped over a bucket and fell into the dirt. He cried out at a mass of spiders spilled from the bucket. Small black spiders crawling all over each other. There must have been a million legs between them.

through the bindings  
jennifer lu

It was the mother that bound her daughter's feet. The daughter was five years old, and her feet were getting bound. It was the woman that broke the girl's four small toes, one by one, leaving the big toe as it was, on one foot then the other. The young and soft bones snapped and crumbled underneath the skin. The girl cried out to the noise, as the flaming knife that was her bones a few seconds before threatened to cut open her foot from the inside.

The woman swatted the side of the girl's head: "The less you cry, the faster I will finish wrapping up your feet."

The bandage was long, not soft on the skin (how could it be soft when you were losing your toes?), and the woman with deft hands wrapped the cloth over and around the foot, securing the toes that were dying so that they stayed below the foot, and the front of the foot arched downward toward the heel in a kind of delicate

boomerang.

By the time the mother let her daughter go with both feet bound, the daughter was crumpled on the floor, writhing in pain.

"You will thank me later when you marry a prosperous husband," the mother said, swaying away on her own bandaged feet, tucked away in a pair of hand-sewn shoes.

The deed is done. The rat poison simmers away with the baby nourishment concoction. The rat poison packaging falls to the floor from the wife's shaking hands. She kneels with her round stomach that is still growing and picks up the packaging before the mid-day breeze can blow it away. She looks around the kitchen, at the basket of vegetables in one corner, at the plucked dead chickens hanging from wires above the chopping board, then back at the only pot bubbling over the fire. She waits for someone to materialize, threatening to tell the master, her husband,

about the poison, about the spoiled pregnancy brew. When nothing happens, she steps, as quickly as she can, from the kitchen.

Behind a partition in her bath area, she dipped her feet, coagulated cloths and all, into one of the two pails of warm water that her maid had drawn. She unwound the soggy bandages, foot by foot, revealing the sores that had grown next to and over her shattered toes, the sores that looked like toes trying to grow back, the sores to which blood still circulated, the sores that would not stop secreting pus that managed to seep through the layers of cloths. She never showed anyone her feet as they were, after the bandages were taken off.

She then submerged her feet in the bucket of clean water, pouring in a single bottle of perfume, his favorite scent. She soaked her feet until her maid's voice sounded from the other side of the partition. "*Fu-yun*, I have the fresh bindings ready."

"Do you have my new pair of shoes, the ones with the red flowers and lilac trimmings?"

"Yes, *Fu-yun*."

"You know where to put them." Her maid, without looking, reached around the partition and placed the bindings and shoes next to the water.

"Anything else you need, *Fu-yun*?"

"Will *Lo-yeh* be back today?"

"No, *Fu-yun*. *Lo-yeh* sent word that he will be meeting a business partner and will not return until tomorrow night."

"I have nothing else for you now. You may go."

"Yes, *Fu-yun*."

After her bath, she stood with her maid in the garden, admiring the blooming roses and leafy shrubs. She picked a rose petal off, kneading its cool velvety texture between her fingers, breathing in its fragrance.

A holler came from the outside. "Great bargains

here, very lovely accessories for girls and women!"

"Why don't you arrange a dozen roses in the new vase that *Lo-yeh* brought home the other night?"

She said to her maid. "I will go outside to look at the accessories, and see what is pretty for the both of us."

"Thank you, *Fu-yun*. I will take care of it right now. I'm sure *Lo-yeh* will love the flowers."

She greeted him just outside the front entrance. He snapped open the display case, revealing an array of necklaces, bracelets, combs, and barrettes.

"He won't be back tonight," she whispered to her lover, simultaneously admiring the combs and barrettes.

They stood several feet apart, within view of passersby and the throng of shoppers calling out bargains down the street.

"*Tai Tai*, this barrette will look stunning on your hair," he said loudly. "I will give it to you at a good price. Your husband will love it."

She agreed to buy the barrette and two extra combs, one for herself and one for her maid. He winked at her as she closed the double doors. "Great bargains here, accessories for girls and women!" He called out as he proceeded to make his rounds down the street.

She was on her way to visit her family in her birth village. It was the first time since she had left two years before on her wedding day. She noticed an apothecary's shop up ahead. She called for the carriage to stop for a moment.

"I would like to drop by and pick up some herbs for my family and old neighbors," she told the carriers. "I will not take long. Wait here for me."

She returned a few minutes later, with a string of parcels in her hand. "We can be on our way." Inside the carriage, she tucked away the yellow parcels with the rest of the souvenirs in the gift bag. She held up the only orange package, shook it—

"You must be extremely careful with this," the apothecary had cautioned, eyeing her protruding belly. "The very worse scenario is one body and two deaths. Rat poison is not a joke."

"Don't worry. My mother had specifically asked me to pick some up for her. The rodents have been invading the house nonstop."

She forced the package to the bottom of her personal sack, below her going-away clothes and cosmetics. She held the sack to her stomach for the rest of the trip.

She sits on a cushioned bench in her husband's study room, needle and silk cloth in her hands, sewing above her swollen stomach, surrounded by shelves of Chinese verse she does not know how to read. She smiles, thinking that there must be something hidden in those volumes that describes the way she feels. She is thinking that if she knew how to write, she would write a poem, or a story about

her lover (well, her former lover), about the dying flower that he takes care of so well that one day it transforms into a woman he falls in love with. She knows that if he knew how to write, he would also write about her.

She hums at the memory of their last night together, although they both did not know that it would be.

It was the only time they had met behind her bath partition. Before, they would meet in the wood storage room, where the thick mounds of branches hid their bodies and muted their murmurs. As they reminisced about the past, the past before her married days, only their hands would touch, their fingers intertwining and locking with each other.

That last night, only their heads and necks were visible above the partition. I missed you, her lover had said. She let him caress her bandaged feet for the first time, arching her back as he rubbed the bumps where her stiff big toes would be, exploring

the rest of her feet, between the grooves, the curves, the crevices.

Eventually, she had to say, "The moon is still up. You'd better go before the servants wake up to do their morning chores."

Before he left, he helped her dress, guiding her arms through the sleeves of the gown, her feet back into the shoes. "If your husband only knew."

"Let's hope that fate continues postponing that day."

What if he finds out, he wanted to know. How will I know that he knows?

"Then I would not greet you outside anymore, I would not buy any more of your accessories when you come by every month. And we certainly would no longer meet at night like this." She stroked his cheek with the tips of her fingers. "I suppose fate's treat must end sometime."

Although she no longer has a lover, the word lover rolls around in her head, as she dips the needle

through the cloth, etching the beginnings of a *phung*, the symbol of love, a cross between a peacock and a chicken, beautiful on its own, a creature heard and seen only in folklore, never in real life, the same embroidery on her wedding shoes stitched by her mother.

Only the music of crickets could be heard that night, like all other nights since she transitioned into her married home. The new residence accommodates two sectors, the servants' chambers and the superiors' chambers.

She felt stirring beside her as her husband got up from their bed and snuck out. She did not move from her position of sleeping on her left side, keeping her breathing metrical and calm.

She envisioned the maid that had arrived earlier in the day, the maid with her feet free and loose, her big feet bounding up to bow to her new young master and his young wife, the maid whose hands had kept

playing with the ends of her two long braids that hung down the front of her body. The maid whom the young master could not take his eyes off of. The wife had too stared at the maid, at her drab uniform and the feet in simple black sandals.

Her husband had said to the maid, "Tell me your name."

He did not raise his voice when the maid, while serving him, accidentally dropped a cup of hot tea on the table, splashing on his new silk robe. He had let his hand linger on hers as he attempted to help her wipe at the tablecloth then at his thigh where it started staining. His wife had also tried to help by reaching out with her handkerchief, but he did not notice.

She lay on her back now, her eyes fixed on the roof of the canopied bed. They had been married for two months, and he had touched her at night every night for two months, until tonight. She curled her fingernails against the hard surface of the bed, wanting



to get up and catch him in the act, wanting to slash at the maid's face, wanting to expose the ugly feet that only lesser beings had. She wanted to do all that and more, but everything seemed too far away.

Gossip circulates. The servants try to control their frenzy. They work extra hard at their chores, keeping their voices down.

From the chefs:

"It was supposed to be a boy."

"A dead boy, that is." Tsk, tsk.

"How is she?"

"How do you think? Bad, of course. You wouldn't want to lose a son. A son is a gift. A son carries on the family name."

From the grocery shoppers:

"Poor girl. She can't even move from her bed."

"What did she eat?"

"Who knows? How could she not be more careful about what she put in her mouth?"

"It was her first pregnancy. She probably didn't know better."

The voices resonate and whirl amongst the servants, and eventually find their way to the young master, who is on his way to visit the maid, his concubine, with whom he shares the dead child.

"Are you getting pregnant? No, I suppose you're not, otherwise there would be a little one running around by now." Her *Lai Lai* said. "A man has to do what he needs to do to keep the descendants flowing in. Wai-Quin is only doing his job as a good son. "You should enjoy being the *Fu-yun* instead of worrying about such a silly thing."

She had not wanted to turn to her mother-in-law. She had feared approaching the room in which the elder woman spent most of the day. She thought she could handle sharing her husband with a maid. Her own mother had not warned her of concubines.

"You see, *Lai Lai*, I don't feel like we are even

married anymore, the way he has been visiting that girl at night every other night since she's arrived a year ago. He sleeps with me then he sleeps with her. He is my husband, shouldn't he share a bed with me only?"

The elder woman squinted at her, patience dry. "Do you think the maid will replace you, is that it? A concubine she is, and a concubine she will stay. Now leave my room, my nap hour is here."

She watched as her *Lai Lai's* eyelids slam shut, and she walked out the bedroom, shutting the door quietly behind her.

"Child, this is nonsensical," the mother said. "You're under a new roof now. Whatever your new mother says, goes. And if she agrees with the actions of her son, then you must agree as well."

"What's the point of having a wife, then? Why doesn't he just get many concubines?" She sighed. "That way, he wouldn't restrict me so much, and I

wouldn't have to hate them like I do now."

The mother's eyes widened. "Marriage is like a spool of thread. You must let it unwind naturally. There may be knots along the way, but you do not yank or force it. You keep urging it along. As patiently as possible. If you break the thread, you also break the marriage."

The mother continued, "Sweet daughter, let's not make the rest of your visit a somber one. Let's talk about something else: we really loved the herbs and presents that you had brought back for us. See how well off you are now, you're the envy of many girls in the village."

As soon as the bedroom door shut, the husband slapped her, its impact sending her to the floor. "Does our marriage mean anything to you?"

She massaged the cheek he had struck. "Of course it does."

His lips were flat and stretched out. "Then do

you have any idea how bad it makes me look that you are outside flirting with a man who is not your husband?"

"I was only asking him about the things he was selling. I want to look pretty for you, can't you see?"

"It doesn't matter. Such trivial things can be left to your maid. That's why you have one. I do not want to come home after a hard day at the family business to see you smiling at a strange man."

He kneeled down behind her, his fingers rubbing the back of her neck, his breath leaving it tight and sticky. "From now on, you do not talk to strange men. I do not need a woman trying to taint the reputation of the Lee's."

She nodded and forced a smile, although her insides were twisting, and she wanted to vomit, to hurt him for plotting with fate.

"Who else is capable enough to care for us when we get shriveled and old?" The mother said, as she

helped her daughter adjust the red veil on her head. "You're getting married, you're a big girl now."

"I don't even know who he is," the daughter said, fidgeting with the matching pair of crimson shoes that had been hand-sewn specially for that day.

"Don't be silly. I told you, his name is Wai-Quin, 'intelligence and health.' Your father and I may not be educated, but we know a sound name when we hear one. The matchmaker said this is the best match possible. The Lee family may not be the richest in town, but they are successful enough."

The mother slipped the wedding shoes on the daughter's feet which had been coiled six more times since the very first time, every two weeks until the feet were deemed the proper four inches.

Horns and drums blared through the window. "Your ride is here," the mother said. "Let me smooth out your hair one more time."

The mother walked her daughter out to the carriage that had been sent by the groom's family to

pick up the bride. They held hands once more before saying goodbye. "Behave yourself. Don't disappoint your husband. Don't disappoint me. Your parents' futures are in his hands."

As the village faded into the distance, she thought about the boy her heart belonged to, whose name could not escape her lips as her parents consulted with the matchmaker. He would be the same boy who would one day become the man that dropped by the Lee family selling trinkets, who would become her lover that climbed the walls in the middle of the night to meet her, to comfort her when her husband was away, who grew to love her as she loved him, with whom she now shares a newborn girl.

killing mae's dog  
Thomas Noble

Mae scampered up to me in the hallway, still seemed pretty lively. She jogged in place for a moment, then grabbed a hold of my elbow with those hot strong fingers of hers. I could see that she was sweating. "Went up that flagpole out front," she said, "and I'm sweaty." Then she asked if the flowers were for her. Like always, I told her they weren't. "He would never send me anything," she said and wandered off down the hall.

Every week I delivered flowers to the Care Center and every week Mae would say something to me. The week after she told me about the flagpole, she asked me to kill her dog. "My son keeps that old thing at the house," she said, patting the top and sides of her white ball of hair, "I want him gone." I asked her why she wanted me to kill her dog, but she said we shouldn't talk about it. Nice lady, though, about four-and-a-half feet tall and always smelled like

rose water.

First time I'd met Mae, she asked me to mail her shoe, her slipper actually. She'd been standing in the west hall of the Center yelling for help and everybody just walked around her like she wasn't there. I was kind of confused when she asked me to mail her slipper, but I took it anyway. Then she asked if the flowers were for her. I told her no, that they were for the Center. "I doubt he sent them to me," she said and walked off. Her bare feet slapped on the floor as she walked away—still wonder where that other shoe was. I brought the slipper to a nurse at the front desk. She was ping-ponging paper clips into an empty coffee mug. She didn't look up when I came up to her. "Aren't you going to mail it?" she said and smiled, but still didn't look at me. I asked her if she really thought it was a good idea. "Usually people ask me where they should mail it to," she flipped another paper clip at the mug, "and I tell

them they should've asked for the postage money." I took the slipper home with me.

I went to the Care Center Mondays, usually around the same time. I'd always put an arrangement of flowers at each nurse's station, cheer the residents up. Had to make a couple trips back to the van, so it was a good bet that I'd run into Mae. She brought up the dog about three months after the slipper thing. It was the only thing she stuck with. Once, I asked her what kind of dog it was. "He's dirty too. I can't get him out of my house," was what she said. I really never had much time to stay and talk with her, so I never got why she wanted it dead. Dirty's fine. You can wash a dog. I'd see her and hope she'd forgotten about it, but she didn't. A few times she even got angry with me. This one time she said, "You don't know what you want," after I'd told her I didn't want to kill it. "I know the carpets are filthy," she said, and pounded on the wall with her fist. Her knuckles looked like pink ball

bearings. "Don't you know what he's doing?" I told her I didn't. That day she gave me an address where she said I could find the dog. I took the little strip of pink paper and put it in my pocket. Mae said, "It's attached to a country barn."

Back at the flower shop, the ladies voted that I ignore her. I said, "I'm not going to kill her dog—I don't even know her." We all agreed it was sad, but that I should try to ignore her. Carol told me to "be nice—just be nice." Never told anybody I had that address.

The Sunday after Mae gave me the address, I decided to check out the house. It was this one story number, yellow with white trim, small, but cozy. The garage looked like a barn. I'd brought a really small houseplant. "Flower delivery," I told him. He looked surprised, but happy. When he turned and went to another room to get a tip for me, I tried to check the place out. Couldn't see any dog,

but there was a canary in a cage by the front door. The poor little guy was totally bald except for the feathers on his head. He looked cold. To tell you the truth, I was pretty bummed I couldn't at least see the dog.

"There's no card?" Mae's son said.

I told him sometimes people do it that way, "folks expect other folks to know who they're from." He gave me a dollar tip. Better than nothing, usually people don't tip the flower guy.

The Care Center eventually stopped ordering flowers because they cost too much. They put in one more order for our cheapest silk arrangements, and that was the last delivery I ever made to the place. That last time I actually looked around for Mae. When I found her she was washing her face at a drinking fountain in the east hall. Swinging around a mauve face-towel, she told me she'd broken her hairbrush and a chair, and that they had to change her room. Then she asked when I was going to kill

her dog. I told her I wasn't going to and she said I was a coward. As I started to walk away she asked if the silks were for her. Told her no.

"Sends me nothing, dirty," she said. Then she stomped off down the hall and thumped on the wall as she walked, saying, "Carnations are inexpensive." Some nurse stuck her head out a doorway and told Mae to stop hitting things, that "it won't help anything."

A day after that last delivery to the Care Center, I put Mae's powder-blue slipper in a box, wrapped it in a Victorian flower-print paper that we use at the shop and mailed it to her son—put the Care Center as the return address. Postage wasn't a problem.



## scalpel

Erin Ashby

The head in her backpack weighs as much as one of her pink dumbbells. It is definitely lighter than a blue, a blue weighing 9.5 pounds. The weight is nothing, as much as a dead cat or a couple of hardback books. The weight is evenly distributed between her shoulders, helped by two thick black ballistic nylon straps padded with several layers of high density foam. The straps are ergonomically designed to hug her shoulders, easing the load she is carrying.

The head accounts for most of the weight, but the backpack also contains two blue ball-point Bic pens, one gel fine point Super-grip, two crumpled ATM receipts, an iPod and her wallet—a gray felt Guess? zip-up. She is striding but her gait hiccups so that she can feel the head bumping her back at every step—imagines the nose denting a little more as it presses against her back. The head doesn't smell yet as it's still early. But she will have to wash the Jansport a

few times before she'll be able to use it again, and there is already a dark stain on the underside of her Velocity model in two-tone pink over white.

She is carrying the head, and she is wearing Old Navy flip-flops which are also pink—the rubber toe fixtures creating an almost notable dirt mark on her feet. But the color of her shoes compliments her painted toenails. It is the flip-flops that put the hiccup in her walk causing the head thump against the small of her back. Her legs are tan. She is wearing white cotton shorts in a cut five inches above her knee, and she can't remember where she bought them. She is wearing a light blue baby-doll t-shirt, a Pacific Sunwear logo in yellow on the left breast, size Medium. Her hair is light-brown, her eyes are brown, her lips are pink, her cheeks are bright and she is wearing white eye shadow, silver hoop earrings, a white fabric covered rubber band holds her ponytail—the blond hairs on her legs are very fine. She is carrying a head right now as the bus 50 yards

away signals for a turn, just now as ants scatter from her looming step. She is carrying a head and the temperature is 73 degrees, low humidity, two o'clock in the afternoon. She is carrying a head in her backpack and walking through a public square, a space carefully designed to induce contentment and communal euphoria for a specific segment of the population. The iPod is rattling around in her backpack, separated by one compartment from the head.

She is carrying the head as the thought strikes a businessman across the street holding a six-inch Subway Club that he should have ordered the Veggie Delight. She is neither smiling nor frowning as she carries it. She is neutral and relaxed. She is functioning. She is carrying the head as the buildings stand glassy-eyed but resilient around her. She is carrying the head as the streetlights begin to sigh in walk signs. Around her there are clouds covering and uncovering the sun, there is water being poured, flushed, drunk. She does not swing her arms widely—

she is not ostentatious. Her heart is beating as she walks. Dust mites alight on her eyelashes. Particles are entering her unseen and attempting to cause damage to her lungs. She is awake and lucid as she walks. She hears voices around her but she is persistent in her march. She does not hesitate and it does not occur to her to question. She is surrounded by air and shapes. She is taking a step as a little boy cuts his thumb, sucks the blood and decides it tastes good. She is walking under a dome of many atmospheres. She is carrying the head as people around the world derive pleasure from a variety of activities and motions. Some are gesturing, deliberating, becoming quite angry and going with the flow as the head is carried in her backpack.

She stops.

She stops at a large green metal trash can which is cold to the touch. The trash can has been filled nearly to the brim with ATM receipts, with ripped open envelopes, with half-filled fast food soda cups, with

hamburger wrappers, with cellophane, broken pencils, Styrofoam, broken glass, crooked paperclips, losing lottery tickets, plastic wrapping, paper wrapping, wrapping, wrapping, wrapping, wrapping, wrapping, wrapping, wrapping. There is scum stuck to the trash can. There are bits of gum, nasal excretion, cigarette ash, soda, dust, tar and the smog particles that have not entered her lungs. The air she breathes. She sets the head inside the backpack on top of the trash can. She unzips the bag. Nobody takes notice. She stops at a trash can as a woman readjusts the foot inside of her high heel.

The ground is under her flip-flops, it is shifting slowly under her. She is standing on a crack in the sidewalk. She is standing—the toe portion of her left flip-flop has set down on a weed which has grown from the sidewalk. There are pigeons flying over her head. She is in a city as she unzips the backpack and slips a hand inside. Her girl fingers, her young fingers touch the slippery and shiny hair of the head. The

hair is nearly white blonde, and some of it has stuck to remains of the neck. The hair is like corn silk; it is hard to get a grip on the head because the hair is so slippery. She does not grimace as she tries to get a hold of the head. She is straight-faced. She slips her other hand inside. She has her hands on either side of the head. There are planets all around.

Her hands. Supple. Pert. Smooth. Sensual. Ladylike. Feminine. Porcelain. Ceramic. Ringed. Jointed. Her fingers grasp the protruding features of the head—nose, lips, ears—like talons. Her eyes are not dilated. She has not broken a sweat. She is grasping the head—the skin clammy and cool but not altogether unpleasant to the touch—as fifteen feet to her left a boy sits on a park bench and noticing only the stretch of leg between flip-flop and white cotton is immediately and involuntarily reminded of the smell of a pair of post-coital woman's underwear, having just written the following in a small red spiral notebook:

*The other day I saw a print of that painting,  
Full Fathom Five, and suddenly I felt like  
I was so close to understanding it, as if  
physically I was only inches away from it.  
I felt like I could feel the painting in my skin  
and it was nearly a condition. I could see  
in the painting the struggle to understand God  
and I don't know how but it was definitely there.  
I am so close to understanding it.  
If there was only more time.*

She is amazing, as inside the backpack the head is fully in her hands. The head is so cold and heavy in her hands.

She is not corrupted, neglected, deceived or despised. She has never bent lower than her reach. She has been neither enchanted nor cursed. She is in full control of her mental capacities. She has no excuses. She has always flossed her white teeth and

stapled together her loose papers.

She is in league with the gods.

It is so quiet as she deposits the head into the trash can that she can almost hear the sound of ice rattling in soda cups everywhere.

She is not belied by anyone.

She has known boxes of all kinds.

Colors don't change in the wrinkles of her clothing. She does not seem to cast a shadow. She has innumerable paths from which to choose but only one perception.

There is everything before her as she turns around, having rid herself of her dumbbells and muted lips, ear lobes, gray matter, tongue and cartilage and porous materials.

She is not brought to bear. And no one has seen her.

There are no codes or mysteries for her. There is only truth and goodness.

There are bags of things waiting for her; things, things, knickknacks, toy cars, swastikas and rubies. There is no blood on her hands, it is only on her backpack. She is allowed to skip or dance. She can play games within yellow lines. She can bounce up and down without fear. She can highlight words of choice. She can pick her favorite animals. She will never speak ill of her fellow human beings.

She believes in ideas.

She has stars in her eyes.

There are people not far from her in differing states of wakefulness. There are people altogether asleep. There is breathing and wasting.

For her there is no loss.

Everything now is a pixelated element flickering On/Done/On/Done.

# Staff

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## Editor's Note

Here you are, sandwiched between poetry and fiction. I'm curious: how did you get here? Were you looking for something? Lost? Confused? Just skimming through? What you will find here are the pages which usually appear at the beginning or end of a literary magazine. That's the trouble with a book like this—where to put the staff page, the contributor's notes, and other details relating to the production of this magazine. So this, the middle section of the book, is really where two ends meet, and that's where you'll find all that informational stuff. It's not that we, the staff, believe that poetry and fiction should be segregated, for despite their differences, they overlap often and in interesting ways. What happened was this: we decided on a horizontal format, but found that poetry looks so much better on a

vertical page. Aha, we said after many hours of deliberation, there is a way to have both. So here we are, in this no man's land between poetry and fiction, center of a book with two beginnings. It's kind of fun really, a mini-adventure. You turn the pages of a short story, back and forth, back and forth, and then, wanting to read a poem, you flip the book, place it on your knees vertically, and now your hand is moving up and down. It's like reading a whole 'nother book.

## Awards

*The Northridge Review Fiction Award* recognizes excellent fiction writing by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review*. *The Northridge Review* will announce the winner of this award in the Fall 2004 issue.

*The Rachel Sherwood Award*, given annually, recognizes excellent poetry writing by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review*. This award is given in memory of a woman who studied poetry at CSUN. The recipient of this award will be published in the fall issue of *The Northridge Review*.

*The Northridge Review* is also pleased to publish the winner of *The Academy of American Poets Award*. The recipients will be honored in the Fall 2004 issue.

*The Benjamin Saltman Award*, honoring the memory of Professor Benjamin Saltman, recognizes excellence in poetry writing. The recipient of this award will be published in the Fall 2004 issue of *The Northridge Review*.



## Contributors

**Jack Ahrens'** poetry has appeared in various journals and anthologies, most recently in issues of Lynx Eye and Poetry Motel. He is currently completing his Master's degree at California State University, Northridge, where he also teaches English composition.

**Erin Ashby** is a Creative Writing major currently working on a novel, *Funny (Ha Ha)*, and her web log is available at [www.spoonflipper.blogspot.com](http://www.spoonflipper.blogspot.com). After graduation she plans to become a struggling stand-up comedian.

**k.l. baker** has been scribbling poetry on miscellaneous scraps of paper since she was a little girl. Now a junior at CSUN, she plans to study abroad next year in the hopes of generating some good writing material.

**Sonia Mae Beduya** is a recent graduate from CSUN. She is currently freelancing as a graphic designer and illustrator, and draws her inspiration from nature, politics, and culture.

**Susan Brown** has almost completed an M.A. in English from CSUN. She lives in Ventura, CA, with her husband, three children, and cat. Her first novel is currently in progress. Depending on how this one goes, a second novel may follow.

**James Doyle's** book, *Einstein Considers a Sand Dune*, published in 2004, won the 2003 Steel Toe Book Contest, judged by David Kirby. James lives in Fort Collins, Colorado.

An amateur poet in the spirit of H.D. Thoreau, the insular **Esteban Serrano Durán** sought to write a poem that preaches back to bumpkins in their own trappings of banality. His other works mourn the sad repose of latinate nomenclature, mock the banter of love, and pose the question, "Can man condemn himself?" He thinks, therefore he is an uncommon CSUN Film major.

**Katherine firkins** is an English major, with a minor in art, and world traveler. She enjoys interacting with diverse cultures, and she also enjoys fine art, literature, food, and fashion.

**Kelli forsch** is currently a freshman at CSUN. Though she loves to write, this is her first publication of her creative work. Kelli is vice-president of Le Cercle Francais, CSUN's French club, and she is also consistently active in politics.

**Caroline law** is a graduating senior, theatre major, who has written several plays which are going to be put up for production soon.

**Alex lee**, who is a human erudite with B- blood type and has no interest in becoming a vampire, would like to thank Limor Isaacs for this witty blurb written on Alex's behalf.

**Anja Leigh's** poetry has been described as "words that testify to a quality of truth that is at once candid and universal." As the creator of 'etymon evenings,' she provides an atmosphere for creative artists to express themselves: <http://geocities.com/etymon2001> .

**Olivia Ilanos** is currently working on her M.A. in Art Education at CSUN, Teaching Credential in Art at CSUN, and painting murals in the San Fernando Valley. Questions regarding her current projects or artwork can be e-mailed to [olivia.borenstein@csun.edu](mailto:olivia.borenstein@csun.edu).

**Jennifer Lu** likes live chickens. She used to want to be a farmer. Now she wants to be a farmer who also writes.  
(C/o my brother, M)

**Joe Medina** has been living and working (personal/photography) in Silverlake, CA, for the past 4 years. His most recent work, "series of portraits," appeared as part of a group show created by Elmhurst Museum in Illinois.

**Tom Noble** claims he is "a pretty nice guy, occasional jerk." He lives in southern California with his lethargic pit bull, and neither of them can ice skate very well.

**Amber Norwood** is currently finishing her B.A. at CSUN and looks forward to an illustrious career as a writer and graduate student. She enjoys making music, taking liberties, and quiet time at home with the spiders and her attack-cat, Mouse.

**Kate Rowe** is currently working on her M.A. in English, with the Creative Writing option, at CSUN. She lives near downtown Los Angeles.

**Irena Sinitsky**, who is completing her M.A. in English at CSUN, was born in Russia and immigrated to the United States 10 years ago. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in previous issues of *The Northridge Review* and in other literary magazines. In fall 2003, she enjoyed the privilege of being the editor of poetry for *The Northridge Review*. Irena is currently working on her first novel, Of Our Unforgotten Lands.

**Dena Skiles** is currently pursuing her M.A. in English, with the Creative Writing option, at CSUN. She lives in Valencia, CA, with her husband and cat, and enjoys writing and photography.

**Jeff Sosner**, who is currently working on his M.A. in English at CSUN, has had poems published in the *Northridge Review* and in *Into the Teeth of the Wind*. He enjoys watching sports and movies with his lovely fiancée, Carolina.

**Hollie N. Stewart** is currently working on her M.A. in English, with the Creative Writing option, at CSUN. This is her fourth poem to be published in *The Northridge Review*. Hollie was editor of *The Northridge Review*, Spring 2003 issue. Besides writing, Hollie enjoys photography, singing, and playing guitar with her sisters, and her talents can be heard on their debut recording, "The Keeping."

**Logan Strain**, who is currently a senior working on his B.A. in English at CSUN, has lived in southern California all of his life. What's more, he doesn't care to leave. He "aspires" to write television sitcoms.

**Kazuhiro Tabuchi** is currently working on his B.A. in Art with illustration emphasis at CSUN. More of his artwork is available for viewing on his website: [www.csun.edu/~kt033554/Index.html](http://www.csun.edu/~kt033554/Index.html)

**Dennis Vannatta** has published stories in many journals and anthologies, including *Antioch Review*, *The Quarterly*, and *Pushcart XV*. White Pine Press has published two of his collections: *This Time, This Place* and *Prayers for the Dead*. His newest collection, *Lives of the Artists*, is from Livingston Press.

**Mike Vincenti** lives somewhere around here with his wife and two cats. Mike thanks you for your patience, and hopes you remember to give generously of something to someone. He believes we are what we be at the most when we do now, and that sometimes we can walk on water. If you've got anything interesting to say to Mike, you can e-mail him at: [joncentiproductions@hotmail.com](mailto:joncentiproductions@hotmail.com).

# thank you

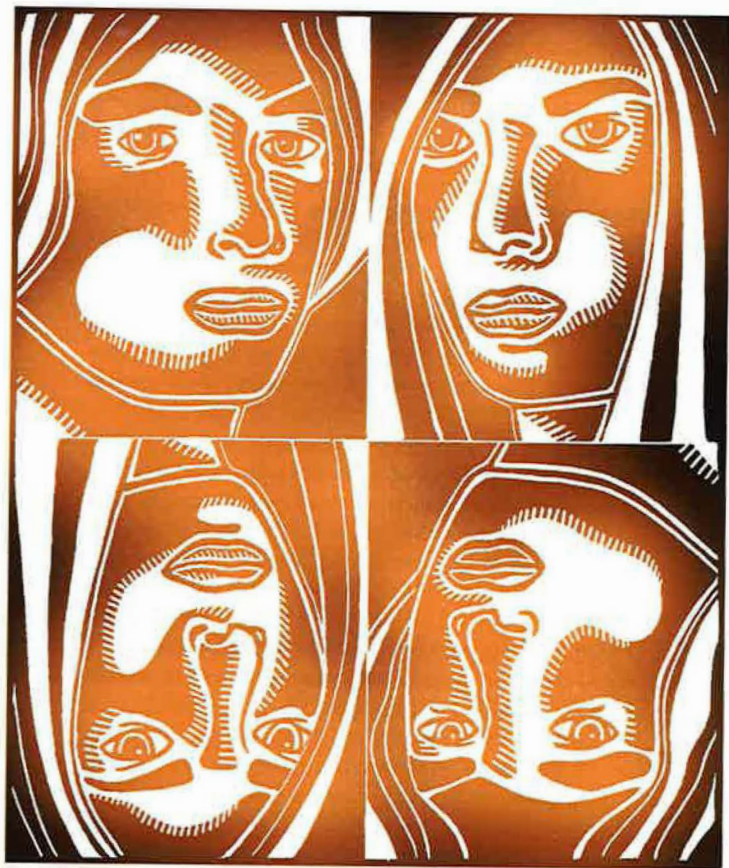
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# Submissions

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

**The Northridge Review**  
**Department of English**  
**California State University Northridge**  
**1811 Nordhoff Street**  
**Northridge, CA 91330-8248**

Manuscripts will not be returned.



poetry



## Poetry Editor's Note

In the beginning was language. Before television, Google, fair and balanced reporting, or moveable type there was language. Before cars, irrigation, or the decline of the family farm, before swords and before plowshares, there was language. Before there was writing there was language, and language has always been about two things: sound and meaning.

I can't help you with the meaning of the poems in this volume, and neither can the writers. Our work is done—the meaning is up to you (and whatever meanings you find are valid). I can, however, help with the sound. I have read each of these poems, and many others we wanted to print but did not have room for, out loud—and I am richer for it.

Poetry is language striving for its greatest potential—and poetry is meant to be spoken. What I would like you to do is pick a time of day when it is quiet and you are alert—my best thinking times are in the early morning, but pick whatever time is good for you. Find a comfortable chair in a place where you can be alone, pick one of these poems at random and read it out loud. Then sit for a few minutes while the words sink in before you read it out loud again, and then read it to a friend. Repeat as needed.

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the geese  
james doyle

over-excited  
along the lake, dipping  
their heads

yes, yes, yes,  
slipping from under their wings  
little forty-fives

and wrapping webbed  
feet, spackled with pinkie rings  
in the autumn light,

around the triggers,  
riddled the godfather of the flying  
wedge, the family's

lead bird,  
with bullet holes so his flashy rival,  
an up-to-date thinker

with modern ideas  
about going east or west  
instead of south,

could fly point  
in the V and lead them out of bondage  
to obsolete tradition.



*The Eyes of a Shark, Katherine Birkins*

new mexico 2001

k. i. baker

Fungal shrub tufts  
pimple the rocky  
New Mexico landscape  
like the blue cheese  
pixilates the chillin  
Weber's loaf  
sprouted from the land that  
bleached wheat comes from.  
I am home Mother  
Navajo, where's my fucking rug?  
Shrubbery monuments,  
rectitude's of the  
mortar and pestle extinction.  
Genocide reeks of  
New Mexico  
remembrance through the  
color billboards  
Exit 63  
buy a statistic  
dehumanization that  
looks like a turquoise bracelet.

à la mode

Caroline law

Life amounts to blueberry pies.  
Eat, sleep, dream, pick, live  
Blueberry pies  
Don't listen to his  
Jibber jabber  
Just make the pie  
Stopped listening to his  
Blah blah blah  
When there was no hay to comb  
Out of my hair  
Boiling over  
Watch the blueberries  
Pound the dough  
Squeeze 'tween my fingers  
No super-imposed images here  
Mash blueberries down  
Cover them up  
No one can see them boil  
In the oven  
A Fox?  
Foxes don't fit in my blueberry pie  
Blaming you?

Out comes the shotgun  
Out comes the pie  
Out goes the husband  
In goes my hand.  
Boil..  
Boil..  
Release.

I sure didn't set the traps



explanation from ahmanson

k. l. baker

Jive monkey—  
That anachronistic slang  
Phrase means so much—  
Though I feel bland and unoriginal in my usage of it;  
But I feel it, man!  
Like coined phrases  
From the 1960's that I revamp but only  
For the tone, the TONE!

Arched back.  
He bends and flexes—  
The yoga of a truck driver,  
Backwards green cap, beige non  
Obtrusive jacket, waist length...  
Arches and blows and twists of the mouthpiece.  
The sounds echo off  
My chest and legs,  
I arch,  
I arch with him,  
His vibe, his jive.  
Oh that JIVE MONKEY!

In eve paved  
Sidewalks  
He arches to incoherent strangers  
He blows and puffs and blows  
Me  
Down the road of beats I obsess  
With sentimentality—  
Oh my words should stop  
This butchering portrait of jazzy perfection  
In front of the theater...  
But I can't!

Artist  
In the street  
Unrequited  
He grooves and rocks and  
Strides and I know  
What Joni Mitchell  
Means when she sings  
For free and I know  
What Whitman  
Means when he shouts and what  
Keats feels as nightingales  
Peck at his eyes—  
All that Jive  
Is screaming  
MONKEY!

—I am the twitcher  
The one who sees  
Astral explosions  
In splatters of ink

And who sweats to  
The sheets of my bed  
When it's 30 degrees.  
I am a rambler, the  
Man with the sax, the sage with the beard—  
Not me, but THAT—the jive,  
The groove, the sweat of whiskey  
And stale Marlboros  
Mixing with cattle manure across the  
Plains and digging it  
All the while, the  
Whole jive  
Of black men and fat  
Men and drunk men  
And monkey men  
Being alive and not  
Giving a fuck  
About it all...  
About it nothing.

The nothing of my watching  
Is love making in this cold  
But it's there,  
Which is here—everywhere!  
Om  
Om  
Om  
SHIT!

I saw a middle aged white guy making love  
To a lovely piece of al-to  
Saxophone

And we grooved beat style  
The jive monkey and me—the world!  
Universally converged,  
In my mind, in the horn,  
The reed flapping against his tongue  
Beauty,  
In the crotch of the whole, armpit  
L.A. itself.  
I was not there, but here,  
Getting head from a sax player.  
An alto boy in biker wear  
Outside the Ahmanson theater,  
By the fountain shooting up  
And out  
Solidifying the notes his breath  
Spit forth into crystal shapes drenched in  
Erratic rhythm...  
Rolling against the wall,  
Trying to contain myself,  
The jive monkey  
Hep cat  
Django man  
Soulful brother  
Truck driver queer...  
No scales, no Freud—  
Sigmund, lick my ass!  
No cash, despite society's lash  
Queer truck driver saxophone  
JIVE MONKEY'S  
Make  
Me  
High  
And I feel whole as never felt empty is this night, light, life.



*Tomatoes* Oliver Lierens

## the scissor-legged man Jeffrey Sosner

Ernest Byner fumbles  
on the three yard line, nine lives from  
the endzone, like he has been clutching  
a loaf of pumpernickel  
from the Sunshine Bakery  
and arrives home cradling stale air  
between his left arm and chest.

It's the 1987 AFC Championship  
game; he has scored two touchdowns  
already, but he'll be remembered  
for his felonious goating.

Three lousy, stinking, godforsaken yards undone,  
and Cleveland dies some more today.

Ernest Byner sits scissor-legged, looking for holes in his hands;  
dandelion snow-flurries and raspberries of a raucous, bundled crowd  
swirl around his quarters, pluck him from grass like a weed.  
He wears his orange helmet like a wound that  
festers and oozes through gridiron sieves.

Who remembers Ernest Byner?

*He's the guy who fumbled, right?*

hamlet's face  
irena Sinitsky

*thanks Shakespeare*

To be a face or to be a map of ancestral labyrinths:  
that is the question of female Hamlet—  
whether to dress her face with fresh mask of postmodern wax  
and color cheeks into waves of softer wind,  
or to flatten her face on cotton canvas,  
and by outlining herself with oil brushstrokes  
return a lineage  
her silky flesh is heir to?

To be a face is to be a skull without a name,  
but what is name?  
*'Tis not map of feelings—  
doesn't smile like lip,  
nor blink like eyelid  
'til tears creep out of corners like pale spiders;  
oh, but to walk backward on map—  
to touch her nose and feel mother's bone is  
to solve forgotten puzzle!*  
To draw her nose but to feel ascendants' bone  
feels like knowing;  
in graveyard female Hamlet will be a skull. Or perhaps,



to be a face is to be reflected in Hamlet's mirror above sink  
like gloss of photographs never snapped  
with mother's wrinkles and folds around right and left eye,  
upper and lower lip becoming female Hamlet's lines up and down  
and across forehead. In moonlight's full phase  
to wear a face as descendent is  
to wash away masks of nude sand, frosty tulip petals,  
dry thorns, waves of softer wind, brushstrokes of oil,  
photographic loss, and to let mirror whisper:  
*To be a face is to be a map of ancestral labyrinths—  
to wear naked face is to know in the end  
only skulls will remain of mother and female Hamlet.*



*Can YOU hear ME now?*, Olivia Llenos

room service at the renaissance

Jack Ahrens

An automobile speeds through  
flurried twilight swirled and slipping  
along Light Street, that wet edge  
of snowbank, the icy reflections of trees.

The cold is bitter wind  
as we cross another journey;  
in another childnight we walk  
and prop each other to the hotel lobby.

Woodwarm walls of elevator hold  
mirrors with scrolled and frosted edges.  
We rise, shadows in the dim light  
of the eighth-floor button.

Slow doors open to quiet, to tapestry  
and drapes of yellow jonquils trimmed in ivy.  
Your hand in my hand and down the long hall-  
way, the impossibly quiet, long hallway.

Outside room 8102 sits a blue tray  
with silver coffee server, tipped cups,  
and crumpled napkins curled together.  
I watch us walk by in miniature

in the coffee server we disappear:  
hall rug, door, room, riotous sheets,  
mint breath on cool skin.  
And snow still dancing at the window.

friendship

kelli forsch

They see the unimposing  
 Girl, and they think I fully savor it.  
 They assume that I was privy to their conversation.  
 That I know the words,  
 The strong sizzling sensation of the words that have caused  
 Their inner delight to  
 break free of their corpses  
 to the safety of my years.

I pretend to know the meaning of *each stressed syllable*  
 Because I can smell their ignorance.  
 They have forgotten this quiet one, as none can see a whisper.  
 This notion feels like the s(word)s,  
 slowly  
 slicing,  
 Blood permanently recalled.

choices, epitaphs  
james doyle

It is terrible to be landlocked  
when tentacles reach for you.

The entire country is a sandbar.  
I stand at its exact geographical center.

I am the driest thing for ten thousand miles.  
Wherever I look is the breaking plain of ocean.

I want its tentacles of salt and weed and scales  
to be indistinguishable from my wavery skin.

If death is dilution, I want my molecules visible,  
the way water holds anything it is given

in the palm of its hand, the dead walking  
the ocean's floor the same as the living.

The sandbar is a lie. There are bacteria  
in the air that pile salt on top of itself.

You stay in one place while a monument grows  
over you, flowers spell your name on anniversaries

and holidays. The land takes your arthritis  
for its own, but the sea never stops moving,

never stops flickering. Water resists sculpture.  
Water unreels like film, winds forward like memory.

## winter orchids

Kate Rowe

Right now they are young.  
They rise from the water like girls who know  
they are beautiful.

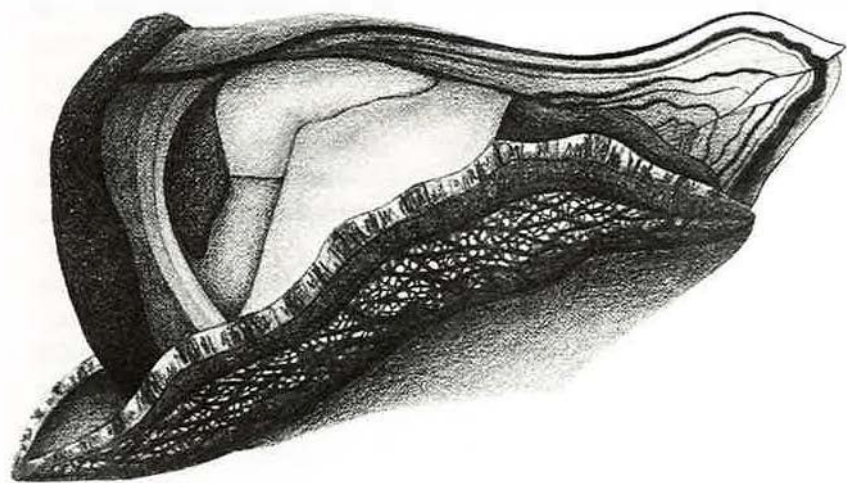
But I know how things go,  
years pass  
and questions begin to blaze like neon signs.  
I wish I were not the type of woman  
who thinks about it  
like this.  
Still, late at night  
I examine my thighs under the light bulb  
with excruciating attention.  
It's not that I don't regret the thin years  
when everything that passed between my lips  
was evil.  
But time rushes in  
and demands to know where I am going.

I need to feel the gravel under my bare heels.  
I just want to know something before I die.



Three days later  
the aged flowers shake their bony fingers  
at the sky  
shouting about the end, like me.  
But their petals are still the color of milk,  
their buds like flawless cashews  
and their cool stems as youthful  
as wet clay.  
Maybe passing is painless,  
maybe they will always  
be elegant.

Ladies,  
death appears simple.



*Gonad of Female Sea Abalone, Katherine Firkins*

I don't see much in California Dream Homes  
hollie Stewart

Because they're born in  
Tallapoosa, Kohler, Thomastown hospitals,  
populations of the corn-wheat dirt,  
where daughters drink Tinseltown gin  
of sparkle dip,

and like a Lakawanna, these girls  
knit celestial Tiogas and dance  
across Carbon Hill, feet crying

to feel marble cold, to drink  
lemon sunshine, sunglass sherry,  
and beauty in the glance of servants.

("One lump or two?")

They will shake open square-foot spaces.  
Virginia Slims will haze the room.

(No earthquake. No smog.)

They will sing So long, Buzzards Bay, you  
Burley potatoes, greens. I'm off  
to hammocks and bon bons  
under the gray Los Angeles wings.

insomnia challenges  
Amber Norwood

Because he lulls his head  
on pillows stuffed with her hair,  
smells her face in wall plaster skin,  
he doesn't sleep as well anymore.

She is both cause and effect.

He recalls once  
post-coital restless  
curled fast awake beneath his saint  
one murmured conversation  
on one's inability to sleep.

She challenged it, she told him.  
To feign death is to defy it,  
to fake sleep is to compel it,  
recounting countless nap times,  
only body still moving,  
chastised for fidgeting,  
she learned

to lie there and lie  
about sleeping.

Slumbering beside him, she still spoke  
in languages he knew better than to interpret—  
imagining he's being watched,  
tested on his aptitude to rest,  
slow down breathing, still eyes,  
he hears her mumbling,

wide asleep.

what 9-11 means to me  
leigh ann detwiler

Before it was 9-11,  
it was my Dad's birthday.  
This year he gave me two gifts:  
black and white prints of  
Main Street in Riverside, 1894  
and Wilshire at Western, 1925.

My parents used to take us to the Mormon Rocks  
when we were kids.  
Now they are much smaller,  
and overgrown with California Buckwheat  
and Mountain Lilac  
on the highway that we take to my  
Dad's new apartment.  
We pass the rocks  
in the lucid night  
as my Dad tells me he is getting a divorce.  
I wonder why they are called  
Mormon Rocks.

In the morning,  
Dad buys me a coffee  
but he doesn't drink one himself  
and we suck up the American kitsch  
in his new mountain town.  
Dad wants to buy a flannel shirt  
and eats flourless bread  
and makes his own  
wood furniture.  
He walks to the Post Office and his  
Beach Bodies video has arrived in the mail.  
He says, In one month I will have  
a new body.  
I think it will take longer,  
but I don't say so.

We pass the Mormon Rocks  
again on the two-lane highway  
and see a long red train  
on the horizon below us.  
It is miles away  
and looks surreal  
like it belongs in an old-west model  
or under a Christmas tree.  
My Dad is silent  
then he says,  
Your Grandpa was a railroad man.  
And I say,  
I know.



*Juggling Act, Sonia Mae Beduya*



forgetting pt-109

Jeffrey Sosner

John Kennedy rescued a man  
in World War II, teethered the sailor's life  
vest and towed him to shore.

And I thought, wouldn't it be funny if

this turned out to be the guy who put  
a bullet in his head that day in Dallas,  
and sent 80,000 boys off to  
die a jungle death in Nam, while his son

maybe escaped the draft because of dad's good  
deed to the country?

Or if he was the one who bathed Dr. King in  
crosshairs April '68, laid him down

to sleep on that motel balcony?

Or if, a couple of months later at the  
Ambassador Hotel in L.A., he spilled Bobby

on the kitchen floor?

Or if he worked with the CIA, intimidated witnesses,  
stole their film, offered them money to keep their

fucking mouths shut?

Or if he was on the cleanup crew that scrubbed  
Jack's blood, skull, and brains off the Lincoln's  
white velvet upholstery just before

the bouquet of red  
roses stained it again?

Of if he helped us forget PT-109  
and all ships lost at sea?

childhood memories

Jack Ahrens

Chainlink heart or the metal scream  
in concrete posts and broken lights,  
where children sing of falling down.  
Chalk bodies outlined on hopscotch—  
one, two, buckle the safety strap,  
harness the symptoms. Three, four,  
broken glass mixed in gravel  
in sand at the edge of macadam,  
blood red and cracked.  
A door opens, closes, closes;  
the disease spreads—not  
airborne, but ideaborne.  
Clutch at the throat and throw syllables  
in proper syntax, proper diction,  
enmeshed in perfect phrases. Do you  
wonder, like me? Do you  
have a nickel, a dime? What does it cost  
to undo everything?

under ~~stars~~ mars  
over ~~night~~ ~~payson~~ night  

---

Anja Leigh

the poetry of  
immense starry silences  
dwarfed us

we were swimming beneath  
a canopy of Arizona phosphorescence

one night (the last night)  
celebrating (Mars closing in on Earth)  
the end of summer  
a fragment ~~of summer~~

stumbling, floating  
overhead (Mars chasing the moon)

lying in chill dark  
covered by ~~down~~ feather quilts  
watching (Mars chasing the moon)  
our hands locked  
like embroidered lattice  
celebrating (a stitch in time)

snuggled on a Payson porch  
overlooking highway crossroads  
we lay ~~literally~~ between heaven, earth  
between simplicity & reality  
sharing whispered secrets  
while Mars forever red  
chases the moon forever  
~~the sky is black~~

the temperature drops  
we burrow further into feathers  
laughing because we left Los Angeles  
to escape the heat (para escapar el calor)

brain tumor  
Susan Brown

On my father's brain a lemon-sized tumor grew. Leaves crunched in my mind as I walked down the hall to his hospital room. White turban-like bandages enveloped his head. I took his limp hand, cool as a brick, in mine, and I fed the coolness warmth from the sun. He moved his lips but sounds came out as drool. I moved the plastic tubes aside and crawled into his bed, next to his shallow body, and held his hand and told him that I was mother earth, sent to heal his wounds. Together we saw rain, heard thunder, watched wildflowers grow in colors of violet, red, blue, yellow, white. Then we walked into a diner in Durango and I ordered a whole trout and ate some of the tiny bones. Weeks later when he is able to talk again he tells this story to everyone who will listen and he remembers only this one story.

I grow old believing all I ever did with him was eat splintery fish-bones once for dinner.

propriety  
Kate rowe

My mother mentions how  
her eighty-four year old mother  
has stopped wearing clothes  
on her way to the guest room  
after a shower.  
Perhaps she has forgotten  
the casual nudity  
after all these years,  
along with  
the homegrown cups of chamomile  
and her mother's ticklish feet,  
but to her,  
it seems new.

Either way,  
it's the idea of this woman,  
so many years  
muttering, stooped and shy,  
now shuffling the hall in nothing but skin,  
that empties us.

Maybe, we want words  
to climb out of the ash  
and drip in lines  
down her wrinkled back  
like the water that streams from her hair.  
Maybe, it's the cool air pulsing  
over her warmth  
that sends something stubborn  
and truthful  
from the gleaming barks of flesh.

In the moment  
for once  
a thousand branches stretch,  
forgetting how to behave.





*Adentro/ Afuera (Inside/Outside), Olivia Llanos*

## frontierland

Jeffrey Sosner

A black & white picture of her,  
my father's hamburger mitts around her waist,  
grad nite, Disneyland, 1969.  
She was pregnant with me in that  
snapshot, so it's a family photo.

I heard that she stole the bottom of my right foot  
as nurses skirted me post-incubus;  
she declined to meet me and  
return it when I was sixteen.

Her pudgy cheeks raw-beautiful, full of gray sounds.  
How do you touch a woman's cervix  
yet never tug at her shiny brown hair  
or feel a garden of her arms' vines silence you?

Stand still.

Be good while I kill you, young man.

Aunt Theresa wrote their names on the back,  
attached to the phrase, *Real Mom & Dad*.  
She gave me a book on Catholicism, *Credo: I Believe*  
and a pocket bible for my birthday in '87.

I ate them.

I tore out every page and chewed like  
a goat until I had a belly full of pulp, faith pulp.

I've been to Disneyland enough to know  
that the rustic log cabin and harmonica-juice  
background means they're  
in Frontierland somewhere  
near the shooting gallery.

backwoods Soldier goes to War  
Esteban Serrano Durán

I

eats then bye the Soldier cries.  
mock'ry ready yet harpoon  
sharpens. sacks low light for Free  
Cheese choose ration easterly.

like Guerilla no he feasts.  
ignorance to tow his disk  
Difference lives lift nor Serves.  
"nope, so sorry, maggots sift"

mash. tomorrow hash for sash.  
shells rock Reason mist from late  
tassel edgy longer quit  
felt a season please forebode.

II

chicken home News soft sleet.  
thirsty none for sand wash off.  
fisting father sees old coat.  
mother kneels, LOFT, "fur for me?"

"soft a toe my chick (l)oops wants,"  
 Soldier boasted, shirt seized hard.  
 system lax coast judge arraigned  
 lift'd convenience store next door

lived he none shoes forest Race.  
 said took guns checked pockets school.  
 "no, hides nothin'," stomps his Ma,  
 "masturbates in livin' room."

### III

"'llowed my minor nuisance by,"  
 boasts with bellicose and sighs,  
 "crown religiosity."  
 then sustained shoots turban off.

"that a boy," teaser bites  
 lisp, bipolar farmer sows  
 senses rise in kitchen. kiss  
 masts. TELLS all (when high he gets)

DON'T ASK, Soldier lacks the cry.  
 Pa, " 's back! what? sheets non-girl?  
 pussy blossoms! booze! massage!"  
 soon returns to Normal flaws.



*Cracked, Dena Skiles*

I.N.R.I.

jeffrey Sosner

Isabella says Spain is Europe's ponytail,  
 choked off from France by a  
 Pyrenees garrote.

Ferdinand vaults Gibraltar; in  
 Tangiers he eats Moroccan hashish, which  
 tastes like unsalted pretzels.

I am a ragged Spaniard

Sangria perfume wafts from her  
 majesty's smokebitten hair. Candlewax freezes  
 against Jesus eyes. An Obsidian Crucifix casts its  
 nets over grin sinners' ocean.

Seville bells drench Cadiz, each chord  
 drowned in the Mediterranean;  
 Auto-da-fe gestates inside me.

I wear the shackles of the Jew

Hash tastes nothing  
like pretzels—it sounds like snapping  
hardbread but paints the palate with orange  
specters and vanilla quills.


Catholicism grows red in my beard

Torquemada's nine tails tickle my ribs.  
He smolders in my stomach dungeon,  
lives inside me forever, and the Ebro  
interrogates in blood-snaked veins.

I will shed my Judaism in the summer

*Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum,*  
whispers the Ivory Crucifix, its  
steel breeze riding the scent of castanets.



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