

ginosko

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A word meaning

to perceive, understand, realize, come to know;

knowledge that has an inception,

a progress, an attainment.

The recognition of truth from experience.

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Oftentimes have I loved death,
Called death sweet names and spoken of
it in loving words both openly and
secretly.
Yet though I have not forgotten, nor
broken the vows of death,
I have learned to love life also.
For death and life have become equal to
me in beauty and in joy;
They have shared in the growth of my
yearning and desire,
And they have divided my love and
tenderness.

– Kahlil Gibran

Another Kind of Secret

Michael Hettich

He had walked the empty beach for miles,
gathering driftwood branches, interesting
shapes and contortions.

But now he'd grown tired, so he put the bundle down

and stepped in for a swim. And though he waded far out,
the water didn't deepen beyond his waist,
so he kept walking, until he'd stepped up
onto a sandbar, almost out of sight,

beyond which the water dropped deep.

He could see large fish swimming there, creatures
with dog-and-bird faces, with ravenous eyes,
pink-fleshed and grunting, too large to swim

into the shallows he'd waded through.

The winds had picked up, and he wondered if maybe
he should swim out there, leap out, just to see what
might happen, before darkness fell

and the houses in the dunes started filling up with fireflies
as though they were dreaming, which they did every night now,
though few people noticed. Instead he turned back
and waded in, chilly now, and walked home empty-handed,

so he could tell stories about the driftwood

he'd gathered, and the fish he'd almost swum with.

And what about the fireflies? No one would believe him.

He was almost naked. That beach glowed like the moon.

The Stranger

Michael Hettich

We're halves, of course; we keep our have-nots
jumbled in the corner. Would you like a glass of wine
on the terrace with this me? You, and then the butterfly
I glimpsed in the lobby of the hotel that morning,
fluttering zigzag in the air-conditioned swoon

into the elevator. And later, when I came back
it was just this song: As though our bodies
could rain on some landscape we've just stumbled into,
nurture it that way. We keep dread by the door

and talk about recycling. In my office was a bird
large as a filing cabinet, or a small person's bed,
a heron which burst up when I carried in my morning's
not-life; it flew off, against the empty wall,

so I drank my espresso like silence. *Touch me,*
someone was singing, *where there might still be a mouth,*
and not because I'm hungry, though I'm starving, though I'm bare
bones. But we knew that: A place beyond this air
where gentleness purrs, for the silence. *Touch me there.*

The Night-Blooming Cactus

Michael Hettich

These flowers seem to pull the sky closer, but they don't make it feel heavy or oppressive. Actually, they make the blue sky feel both *closer* and *lighter* at the same time. It's a little like the feeling when someone who's made you feel slightly tense with his witty repartee, reaches out and touches you, gently, on the shoulder, in a gesture of affection. Laughing sometimes, for no reason at all. The flowers seem to do that too.

If I were to pick one, just one, take it home and place it in a glass of water, would it infuse the air in my house with an aroma of kindness? Would the afternoon light fall more gently through the curtains, illuminating the dust motes drifting through the room with its slant of insight: *each moment is alive*? Or would it just wilt, as wildflowers do?

One afternoon, my son and I climbed the huge avocado tree that grew in our back yard. There were small pools in the crotches where branches met the trunk, and in each grotto-pool there were tiny water lilies. Then Matt found a little toad—a *peeper*--only about the size of a fingernail, who leapt from that branch into the grass far below. We sat there and thought about that leap for a while. Then we sat a while longer in the shade, hardly talking, watching the world as though we might glimpse some sort of secret. There were cactus plants above us, hanging down through the near-darkness.

Sometimes, when the moon grew full, those cactus plants blossomed, calling the night-bees and the wasps and the moths into that canopy, to fill it with their song. We never climbed up in the darkness to smell them. By morning they'd withered and fallen to the grass.

The Fire

Michael Hettich

I wake late, to find the answer to everything
I've ever thought I'd need to know
 lying in a heap in the middle of our living room
like a pile of old magazines, or photograph albums,
while my wife lights a match and leans down to set the pile
on fire. But it doesn't burn the floor
 or furniture, and it's hardly even *hot*, though the flames
rise almost to the ceiling. So the answer to everything,
this pile of essentials, burns without burning
to ash, while this woman I've lived with for years,
 the mother of our children, sprawls in a fold-up
lawn chair beside the fire, reading
from a dog-eared manual I gave her one long-ago
 Christmas, *Fifty Ways to Fly*
 Away into Your True Life; she's drinking a cup
of fragrant tea, humming an old folk song
of trains and rivers, fields of waving
wheat, of a man who done her wrong
 and a woman who yearns *for the voice of the dew*
in the barley. So I get out my old twelve-string
and sing along with her, of hump and resurrection,
highways and vast distances, lovers who capture
 our souls and send us down the demon
path—I know all the chords, though I haven't
played for years; and the fire keeps burning
as stars seem to come out all across the ceiling
 like the real stars that glint in the black sky beyond
our rituals and carefully-measured-out doses
of loss. I play until my fingers bleed,
which doesn't mean I play well. Eventually we crawl into
 our sleeping bags, and gather up our dreams from wherever
we can find them, which is everywhere. And then we're burning too.

by Marie Olofsdotter

RITUAL

Every night, she walks the corridors of her body in search of small disappointments. She pulls them out from hands, feet, the lining of the stomach, the small curve of the mouth. In a pot of earthen clay, soaks them in the light of the moon until her face rearranges itself into the original face.

BONE LANGUAGE

A sea of leaping ghosts, those early morning fogs. Five years old, I knew how to thread a worm on the hook, break the neck of a perch: hold on tight, finger in its mouth, sharp teeth, yank back, feel it go limp in the hand. We unhooked the small ones and threw them back. They disappeared like stars in the black lake.

Black light, the way of the river. A buzzard, a falcon and an eagle glide over the water. A thousand small hands turn a wheel in my chest, and I tug on the line, looking for a different kind of fish this time, the way my grandmother taught me to be fearless in the face of dark water, where the bones live, the broken pieces, what's been lost.

A buzzard, a falcon and an eagle glide over the water. A thousand small hands turn a wheel in my chest, and I pull on the line. The surface breaks with a whisper; white bowl of skull, crushed ball and socket joints. A different kind of fish. I reassemble her carefully on the shore, weave bone into word.

UNDER THE FULL MOON

Inspired by Humberto Ak'abal, Maya-K'iche' poet from Guatemala.

Humberto says that poets are born old, and with the passing of years, we turn ourselves into children. The Mayan symbol for poetry is a rabbit, and the rabbit a symbol of the moon.

It bothered me to find five blind baby rabbits sprawled across the sidewalk that hot Tuesday in July. Instead of writing I spent my afternoon trying to save their lives. I turned girl again, and made a nest of grass in the shade next to the house. Put out lettuce for their mother. Asked the neighbor to keep her cats inside.

Everything belongs to nature, and goes back to nature, Humberto said that too. I tried to chase away a hungry opossum three times, but once the baby rabbits stopped squealing I let it all go. Standing in the dark on my balcony, I watched him find his way to the river, his black eyes full of the moon.

DOVES FLY IN MY HEART

Urpi chai sonqollay, thank you in Quetcha (Peru), translates to ‘doves fly in my heart.’

She longs for the invisible hands that hold up branches, occupy birds’ nests, and color the cracks in dry sand. Earthen time pushes in on the arteries of her heart, making the blood rush. Internal noise wakes her in the morning, night a small box.

Listen long enough and messages can be heard in patterns of wind. The wind tells her that the night has a second sky. A black cauldron behind the ribcage the size of eternity, where a thousand doves live, their wingbeats the color of newborn stars.

WHEN MOTHER FLEW KITES

Stephen Poleskie

On the way up the hill I asked my mother what the strange noise was. It was coming from a nearby poplar tree, loud and screeching like a siren—so shrill that I put my fingers in my ears to block the sound. Mother said she didn't know what it was, but thought that it must be some kind of bug, or something. There were more and more questions I had in those days that she could not answer. I didn't learn much in school, which was not my fault, it was a poor school, and my father was away in the war.

The other mothers and children walked along with us carrying their kites. We were going kite flying. I had made my kite, as had most of the other boys, and hoped it would be the finest, but conceded it was not, not even second best. It might have been the best, had I been allowed to make it myself. My father, however, had tried to help me when he was last home on a furlough. I only asked him to get me the materials. He said he had made kites when he was a boy, and knew how. I could tell that he was not good at making things with his hands. I remember he had once said he knew how to draw, and tried to do a picture of our dog Nip, which didn't turn out very well compared to mine. I was very good at drawing, which didn't seem to impress many people. I was not good at sports. My father had been very good at sports when he was young.

Huffing and puffing mother and I climbed the steep hill until we reached the region of the cemeteries. The nearest was the Russian Cemetery, Saint Basil's. There were many ethnic groups in our town then, families that had come over to find a better life for themselves in our valley. The grandparents and parents were now buried up here on our hill. Some of their children had left the valley for more prosperous places. As we hurried through the closely placed gravestones, I tried to read the names, but could not: although I could read very well for my age. I asked my mother why some of the letters appeared to be backwards. She answered that it was because they were written in the Russian language. When I asked her why Russians wrote some letters backwards she said she did not know, but would find out and tell me later.

Our goal was the Irish cemetery, St. Ignatius, perched on the crest of the hill. From there you could see the whole valley, which looks different now, so many years later. Then the landscape was stacked with the collieries and slack piles of the many working coal mines, the same fields presently covered with highways and shopping malls. As I look out over the valley now my mind wonders—the population currently being half of what it was then—who buys what in all those rows of big box stores.

The Irish cemetery had some open spaces, a vacant corner where we could fly our kites. Most of the other kites were soon in the sky, bobbing and weaving on the fresh summer breeze. They seemed to leap into the air right out of the holder's hands, flying high, strings taut, and tails waving. But my kite no sooner flew from my mother's grasp than it would spin wildly and crash to the ground.

My legs were growing tired from running while trying to pull my kite aloft. I would rather have been in my room working on my drawings. This was Sunday, however, the day we always spent with the other mothers whose husbands were also away in the war. These were the women who had a small flag, with a blue star in the middle, hanging by a string in their window. Some had sons away as well so their flag had two or three stars. One of the houses I passed on my way to school even had a flag with five stars. I admit that at the time I was a little jealous. Now I would not have the same feeling. The mothers who had a gold star on their flags, which meant their husbands had been killed in the war, never came with us on our little trips. My friend Beebus's mother had hung a gold star in her window just three days ago, so he and his sister Lily weren't along on this trip. My mother had gone downstairs to see them. She made me wait in our apartment upstairs. At first they didn't answer her knock, but she said who she was and they let her in. When she came back she said that Beebus and his mother and sister had just been sitting there in the dark crying.

After a while the kite flying stopped, and we sat down on the grass in the shade of some trees and opened our picnic baskets. I carefully laid out on a clean cloth the sandwiches that we had brought. My mother unscrewed the lid from the Mason jar she used to mix up a batch of orange Kool-Aid. The drink would be warm, but that was the way we always had it anyway as we didn't have a refrigerator then, only an icebox. With my father away there was no one to go for the ice, and my mother said it cost too much to get it from the iceman who came around in a truck.

Our group of kite flyers was sitting in a loose circle, talking and laughing, eating our food when a car drove up and parked on the gravel drive, not near to us, but not far away. There was a man inside wearing a hat and sunglasses. I remember the car clearly. It was a 1936 Chevrolet, the model that only had two doors, with a wide seat in the front, and a tiny seat in the back, a funny dark green, a color they don't paint cars anymore. At first I thought it was my uncle Frank, who drove a coal truck so he didn't have to go to the army, and who had a similar car. But it was not him.

The man did not get out. He just sat in his car looking down, like he had something on his knees. Every now and then he would stare out his window at our group. I could sense the mothers were getting nervous. The man would look at us, and then down at his lap. I saw his arm was moving, and thought maybe he had a pad and pencil and was drawing a picture of the graveyard or the trees. I nervously brushed away an unknown insect that was about to crawl up my pants.

The man was still watching us. I guessed he must be a man of some importance if he was still able to drive his car. Gas was rationed back then because of the war. All the cars had ration stickers on their front windows. Our car was in the garage. My father had put it up on blocks so the tires wouldn't rot while he was away in the army.

"Johnny! Put the sandwiches back in the basket. We have got to go!" my mother said sharply.

"Why Mom, we aren't done eating yet. . . ."

"Johnny! Just do as I say."

I caught the tension in her voice. My mother kept looking at the man in the car as she crouched down, quickly putting things away. The other mothers were packing up their baskets also.

"Ah, Mom, we only just got here. . . ."

"Come with me Johnny, now!"

She didn't say anymore, just grabbed the basket, and my hand, and began to run. The other mothers were running too. Some had started to scream.

I looked at the man, who was now out of his car. He had his pants pulled down to his knees, and his dangler in his hand. The knobby thing was standing out like a stick. I figured he must have to pee, but why would he do it out in the open like that? My mother always told me to go behind the garage to pee when I was playing in the yard, or to find someplace else where no one could see me.

"Stop looking back at that man and run!" my mother shouted, tugging my arm so hard I slipped and fell down. "Did you hurt yourself?" she asked anxiously.

"No! I'm okay. What's happening, Mommy?" I said, brushing myself off.

"Do what I tell you now! Just run!"

"Let go of me and I'll run."

"Then run, run!" she urged releasing her grip. "Run home and wait for me by the back door."

Some of the other mothers were racing ahead of us, some struggled to catch up. Children ran past on either side, screaming and in panic, not knowing what to fear, their fright set in motion by their mother's actions. Over the fleeing shoulders I could see that the man had pulled up his pants, and was getting back into his car. Did he mean to come after us? I abandoned the gravel road and took off between the rows of graves. As I ran along my kite, which had been so reluctant before, was now eager to fly. I thought to abandon it, but knew I would not get another one if I should come back for the kite later and not find it where I had left it.

Slipping between the widely spaced headstones of the Irish cemetery, and dodging the closer monuments of the Russian cemetery, I made it to the bottom of the hill. I was one of the first down. Standing under the poplar tree where I had heard the siren-like noise earlier in the day I waited for my mother. The man in the car was nowhere to be seen. The group had scattered like ants do when the stone they had been living under was suddenly lifted. Since we were the only ones from Grove Street, and no one was planning to meet back at Mickey's Market as we had on the way up, everyone had headed for their homes. My mother walked toward me alone. Out of breath, she handed me the basket to carry.

"Why did we have to run, Mommy?" I asked.

"I'll tell you when you get older, Johnny," was her only reply.

"But why can't you tell me now?" I pestered, running along to keep up with her

rapid pace. But she would say no more. A fresh breeze fluttered the branches of the poplar tree. The siren-like noise had begun again. Holding the heavy basket with my two hands I could not cover my ears.

As I retrace my steps of that day I find that the Irish cemetery has many more headstones than it had then—one of them belonging to my friend Beebus, who died three years ago without me knowing about it. The once open corner by the trees is full of gravestones. Kite flying would not be possible there now, and if it was, I am sure it would not be allowed, along with dog walking, plastic flowers, votive candles except on All Souls Day, and all the other things listed on a six foot tall sign that mars the entrance way.

I no longer live in this small, snug, town with its simplistic absence of perspective, where many of the children who ran down the hill with me that day still dwell in the clapboard houses of their youth. The poplar trees that once sheltered the cicadas have been cut down. And naughty Lily who first showed me her young girl's charms, and who wasn't with us that day, but did explain to me a short time later why we ran, is now the church-bound Mrs. Lillian Novak, mother of six, one died at birth, and grandmother to sixteen. And the woman who held my kite, the prettiest of all the mothers who ran down the hill that day, now ninety-three years old, sits quietly in her rocker, her blood-swollen legs up on a cushioned stool—waiting for a husband who did not return from the war.

It is only now that I realize how I thrived on the wisdom of all the questions she did not answer, her kitchen stacked full with bottles and jars of things—untold tales I still do not know.

by Vanessa Young

A Drowning

A moss of gold at its edge and her ankle
turning with an ivory shoe – this is what
the water sees. It bears its point of vantage,
rises incrementally on a tangled bed,
hardly enough to adore the thickening weed,
the scattering of coins, their radiating chorus
of what has been denied. It thinks in saturation,
of pulling, her knee to the stony ridge,
eyes past themselves to what is pooled below
as if to say – I, too, know of displacement.

Making Taralli

They stored
in the knuckles
what had passed
through hands
and often fists
their babies
then ones
cutting teeth
rosaries
to be placed
with men
and sisters who
died young which
made them afraid
of many things.
With names
that begged
to be cried out
under streetlamps
Fil – o – me - na
what praise some
denied their daughters
they heaped on us
and while we waited
to be cried to
they kneaded

and twisted
and unknowingly
squeezed
youth back up
through their veins
so that the gnarls
and tightness
were covered
with shiny skin
supported by
plumpness
beneath.

Promising Nothing

Ian Sherman

Light. Off. On. Off. On. The single bulb flickers while a broken chain lays untouched on the floor. A young girl takes small steps through the darkened room, using the moonlight to guide her. She moves too slowly for the warm glass of milk to spill. Her hands are pressed firmly on the glass. Sniffing, she passes the milk to her younger brother's free hand, his other has a bear cuddled to his chest. The girl begins to back away but her brother beckons her, as if she is his "servant." She shakes her head. He blinks.

No response, but he breaks the silence, "Please." She purses her lips, but Cassie gives in. She pulls Ben out of bed, and together they shuffle into the kitchen. Then she hushes him, hoping not to wake Mama who only just settled into bed after a long work day.

"I want Mommy," he whispers. Cassie drags him nearer to the apartment balcony.

"Sit down," she replies. She holds her breath for a moment as her toes touch the tiled floor of the balcony. A chill rolls up her spine; luckily she brought a blanket, folded over her shoulder. It's not only cold, but deadly silent too. Then, a sigh. A T-shirt is wrinkled on the floor; she rests it on the railing. Under the horizon is a dark navy blue line that meets a pitch-black sky, where the sun should be resting but instead is working its magic warmth somewhere else. Somewhere. Cassie stays quiet though, sitting Ben gently on her lap so the two can rest easily on the rocking chair. She unfolds the patched blanket and lays it on top of them.

"You know, mommy, she works real hard," she says. Ben nods his head.

"What about Papa?" he asks.

"He worked real hard too, but he isn't around right now," she replies.

"Where is he?"

"Somewhere. Don't really know though. Just somewhere," Cassie rocks the chair.

"Is he up there?" he jerks his head up to the sky. Cassie bites her lip.

"Yeah."

"When's he coming home?"

"I...I don't think he's coming home," Cassie told him, "But you'll see him one day"

"Tomorrow?"

"No, not tomorrow." She watches his grip tighten on the glass of milk, as if its slipping, as if he's afraid it will slip out of his hands and shatter to the floor. Nothing happens though.

"What's it like having a home in the stars?" Cassie blushes— then smiles.

"And what exactly do you think's living up there?"

"Papa," he cuts in, "with animals I bet."

"The ones from the zoo?" Cassie asks.

"Yep," he says proudly, "Probably Nana too. Maybe gummy bears? I'm not sure."

“...Heaven doesn't have stars.”

“How do you know?” He shoots back. For a minute or so there is quiet.

“I don't,” Cassie squeezes the blanket, looking down, “it just doesn't, buddy. Sorry.”

“Why there stars then?” She bites her lip, opens her mouth, but then decides its not worth it; better off killing the conversation with silence.” Cassie hears Ben muttering, however, says nothing. Then he gets off her lap, sets the milk down, and waves up at the sky.

“What are you doing?” she asks, pulling his hand to his side.

“Saying goodnight,” he says, pointing to the sole star beside he moon. Then he shuffles back inside, his teddy bear dangling from his hand. Cassie sighs, and then rests her head on the back of the chair, closing her eyes for a moment.

“Looks like you finally got the kiddo to sleep,” a voice says to Cassie who rises, shyly looking down. “Don't know how you do it.” Mama steps out onto the balcony and kisses Cassie on the forehead. “But I can betchya Papa'd be proud.”

“I guess.” Cassie tips her head up, so that their eyes meet. There is a moment between the two, and then Mama slips away after whispering Cassie goodnight.

The figure of a young woman stands under the moon. She pulls her hair back and leans over the railing. The wind brushes past her. Lifting her head, she whispers, “goodnight, Papa,” up into the sky. “Goodnight, Cassie girl,” she mutters back to herself, smiling because of her imagination. She continues to stand on the balcony. The quiet travels through the night until suddenly the sound of a taxicab zips through the silence, bring reality back— along with the exhaustion of a long day and the readiness to tackle the nearing one.

PROPORTIONATE WISHES

A yellow Hummer vehicle
seven inches long miraculously
never collects dust on his desk
as when everyone leaves for lunch
he lies on the linoleum floor
and skids tire treads around his head
with appropriate motor noises
until one day he wins the lottery
or a falling star fulfills his wish
and a full-size version splashes
through mud puddles proportionate
to seven inches long now
leaving parallel paths
like Oregon Trail wagons

SKIN DEEP

His forehead grew higher and backward
until he shaved the fringes
forcing a convict mug shot to stare
from reflective skin
like a peeping tom in the outside night
staring through a lighted window
uncontained, all seeing, mirror-like
if a mirror contained a man
looking back and through and beyond
the creepy goose bumps before
curtains drew closed like eyes
remembering, forgetting the last image
before sleep resurrects, metamorphoses
the scene staring from eyes
of the bald man's head
until hair softens the glower
into a former friend's smile
before razor shone
unsavory images skin deep.

TERRIBLY WE LAUGH

She clumps around like Frankenstein
so bolts attempt to burst through her neck,
and we all shout, "She's Alive! She's Alive!"
but she only has a blank stare to give us,
and after all, why shouldn't she?
She's a baby in Frankenstein shoes
proud of the noise she makes
step by step across the hardwood floor.
And then she speaks,
slurred like a drunk or an infant monster
trying to mimic its maker
and terribly we laugh
probably like the menacing mob
after murdering the fictional monster
in the silence just after death.

Mountains

Joe Sullivan

Mountains are made
by people below the ground
whose eyes don't see
in normal light

With words and feelings
and hands
and a certain sourness
about their condition

The sun was never theirs
the night never held romance
the only thing left –
small details

So they fixated
and mountains were built
and were these false mountains?

In their minds they were real
as murder
as serious as granite

A WOMAN PHOTOGRAPHING A RIVER

David Wagoner

She stands on a cutbank, only ten feet above
the eddying surface, bracing herself
against a fir tree barely bracing
itself with all that's left of its roots
before toppling, ending it all.

She's focusing downstream across harsh light,
risking her life on the spur of the moment
for a quicksilver collaboration
of bed-load and riverbed and the hard thrust
of thaw from the mountains.

Her silhouette is under the glare of clouds
and against the clouds reflected beyond her,
and she and that tree are leaning
as if caught in the act of falling,

but still making themselves known
against the repercussions of water.
At the edge of her depth of field,
the stripped limbs of a snag are holding firm
against what streams around them,

and she sees among the unrepeatable patterns
what she wants us to remember,
even in this small reach now passing over
the rapids of her eye. She takes them in, the twists
and tremors, spelling what's beyond

and under them with a light touch
of her finger, and now she turns
that eye and the other eye behind it
toward my naked eyes and what still flows between us.

NIGHT RECONNAISSANCE

David Wagoner

That hand in front of your face,
which you can't see, may seem
like your own, but always remember
 there are degrees of darkness,
 and if you crouch, lie down,
 and crawl from cover to cover,
through bushes among trees,
from a fence, to a house, to a door,
you shouldn't feel secure:
 others have been at war
 before you and may still be
 exactly where you're going,
may have used the same cunning
concealments you've devised
and may be waiting for you
 now, hiding in places
 darker than yours. You have
 three tactical choices. One,
to retire, still in good order,
trusting your silhouette
will seem a less and less
 inviting target. Two,
 to go to ground and stay
 in hiding, hoping the dawn
will tilt the playing field
and redistribute the light
to your advantage. Three,
 to charge, your eyes wide open,
 toward that enemy
 you hope won't even be there.

ETYMOLOGY

Edward Butscher

When an imagined brain swells
there is nowhere for it to go
its shield and thin eggshell art
against unnatural natural forces
now doorless cell walls that
squeeze its prisoner into a gory
fetal ball, tormented awake
by dreams of a father's ax beak
mothers devouring their young
to bury them womb safe

when lips first leaked *hell*.

Water Marks

Margaret Elysia Garcia

They are upstairs in my shower—it's the best shower of any house I've ever lived in. I'm proving I'm the better person. I'm proving I'm not jealous, that I'm not human. You can wash away so much in that shower: water, blood, moments you rather not relive, semen.

I'm watching the kids because that's what friends do. They watch each other's kids so the others can have that moment of peace beneath warm water in the perfect shower.

This shower *is* perfect. The owner built it herself. You can look out over the pine trees if you're tall enough. You can sit down on the ledge of it. When I did the walk through she said, "You can do so much in here." I smiled, allowing myself to surrender to the possibilities while trying not to visualize my landlady-friend naked. There are two showerheads and one drain to wash it all away and it's stone tile of varying colors so one is never quite sure what is dirty and what is clean and what is just stained to be that way.

I am downstairs drinking twice-nuked coffee. We are on a septic system and they are taking a long time; they are not just showering and shaving. It's my house with my husband and my two kids and my dog and my two cats. My perfect rural life, but my eyes are watering. I begin to understand those generations before me who had no tolerance for remaining friends with the past. We are Americans. We should reinvent our way out of despair, that's what we're good at—why can't I? Washing it all away until there's nothing but dry cracked earth that we don't recognize.

I recognized that look in his eye. I've been with him in a borrowed shower. But that's not my role here. It's my river. It's my boat. They are my passengers. I said they could ride for free. The water is probably going to go cold and I need to buy propane soon for the winter. We prepare for the winter here, for snow pack and a way out of the fires that burn even while we sleep.

City people don't really think this way. Country people think of water being pumped from the ground beneath them and know that one day, the well will run dry. The well never runs dry for city people. They move. They are fluid, like water itself. But country people know. This is why our towns empty out.

I try not to think about the warm water touching their skin. How iridescently beautiful her skin is. When did he start liking that kind of nose, her kind of eyes? The way she sat on the couch and demanded he check on her child and refill her drink in one breath? It never occurred to me to order him around, to sell him down river.

I try not to think of his skin, the warm smoothness of it reaching out to soap her down, pausing slightly at her buttocks and back. Perhaps they'll try out the seat and he will spread her legs apart and wash them, her feet against his thighs.

Her child is thirsty. He runs to me in the kitchen and smiles at me sweetly and I

smile back at him. I get him his glass of water. He's a fatherless child. He gets my friend. I have encouraged this and told him how much it meant to me when other men stepped in and quenched my thirst for fatherly attention. Do it, I said. Be there for him.

I have not showered yet. They meekly reappear. I might want to wait a few minutes, they say, until the water heats up again. He says he thought I'd already showered, that I appear so fresh and ready for the day. I say I'll be out in a sec and then we can drive down to the creek at the campground. The kids can jump in the water and scare the scattered fish. I will float on my back in an old skirt and tank top. He will jump in the water and play with the kids and his woman. Her child will be jealous of mine. He has never had to share. They will play in the creek where the water runs slightly over the mossy rock, whatever the ranchers have left us. Her child will insist on sitting in the stagnant water nearby. Nothing moving. He will be immobilized, like me, observing.

My kids are always here. They know this water. The campground is right by their school. They come to the campground at recess. When we get there, I leave them and walk upstream; it's a bad year for water; there was no snowpack. I walk the middle of the creek knee, then thigh deep and nothing rushes me, nothing moves me towards the rocks, towards the bank.

I pick up cheap empty beer cans stuck between the willows and the weeds. I sing all the songs I can think of with river banks in them. *Down by the Willow Garden*. I hum. La, la, la. Forget the words, then mistakenly, absent-mindedly loud, "*I stabbed her with my dagger...*" and so on. The swallows' nests are emptied now, worn half crescents under the bridge, blown apart by the wind. I look back at them all in the creek. They aren't married, these two. They are playing family with her kid and mine. Marco Polo. I don't know how to play games. I just watch them.

Many times I have baptized myself anew in the river.

I was his once. Washed clean. I was mine. Washed clean. I was no one's. I was something found bloated, poked with a stick. I found someone else. I found myself swimming in motherhood. I found myself wrecked against rocks. I found myself drying on the banks---survived and ready to cast off again.

My husband is at work. I remind myself that I have one. I heard him in the shower early this morning before I had the stamina to wake. I will tell them how long they took in the shower. He will shake his head too, like I did. We like them. We like our guests. We love the fluidity with which a bottle of wine or vodka goes down between us.

But our geography has changed us. You can see the watermarks on our skin—showing our years—when we ran wild; when we run dry.

THE GIRL IN THE CLOSET

Ed Thompson

When the door was finally opened one last time,
And an attempt was made to let the light flood in;
I wonder what she thought, this disappearing girl;
She probably did not think at all, but collapsed
Just a small bit further in upon herself
Like some black hole of pain.
She was a girl of some eleven winters past,
Never having known a summer or a spring;
But in suffering she had lived a thousand years at least.
Her body had shrunk to thirty pound of sticks
Covered by transparent skin;
Her eyes had grown so bottomless,
She had lost herself in the depths within.
Excrement soiled the floor and fouled the air,
And rotting bits of food lay everywhere.
The only mystery that they found
Was concentric rings of pus and scabs
That seemed stitched upon her buttocks and her legs,
But that was solved when those were matched
With the electric burners on the range.
She did not speak but mewed in some strange inhuman way;
And this lack of any human sound was, perhaps,
The only thing of beauty she could claim.
My own half stilled heart can comprehend the Holocaust
More than it can understand this one event.
It brings me face to face with the fact that evil is;
That it exists in and of and for itself,
And, unlike me, it is not ashamed.
I cannot even muster up a why; there is no response
To the awful answer that her keepers gave:
She cried too much.
If I could give a reason or explain, if I tried;
It would in some small way trivialize her pain;
And the injustice of it all may be the one thing
That sustains her in the place to which she's fled.
I know there are those well-intentioned ones
Who will seek to hunt her down
And entice her back into the world of men.

Is that a mercy?
I hardly know—if I crawled into some dark hole of rest,
Would I then desire to expand back into the light
Where I had seen the face of hell itself?
In any case my quest is not to understand
How the heart and brain of man could formulate this deed.
If reasons do exist, I have not the strength of mind
To face those naked facts.

Nor do I have a particular right to ask the question
That I pose--but I must--otherwise my heart may shrivel:
God, where were you when the closet door was closed?
You have said that not a sparrow falls but that you are aware.
So?

The cat still comes, or the ants close in.
You also asked, are we not worth much more than one of those?
What answer is there for that girl who disappeared?
When I try to force my mind inside that place,
I grow dizzy and the world implodes.
I see simply darkness there, composed of terror and despair,
And my heart recoils and turns again to seek the light.
And yet there is a part of me that wants to crawl within
That closet space and hide with her.
If the door could be forever sealed from that horror
On this side, then we could deny all hope of hope
And in the stillness and the dark be resigned.
But I cannot enter there, I am too afraid.
So I must trust that you went in
And were with her all the while.
Amid the stench, the blackness, and the rot,
You held the soul that you had made.
And when she left that place and fled within
The cavern of her mind, you followed her
Into every empty room and down all the endless passages.
And when she found a dark hole there
And curled herself upon the floor, you softly stepped within
And knelt and wept there at her feet.
And then, I hope, you picked her up and carried her outside
To a garden where the birds and flowers
Filled her soul with love and light.
That is the thing my heart desires, but I just don't know:
In your scheme of things eternal, perhaps for now,

All you can do is numb her mind so that she cannot remember.
But if there is a garden spot within her soul,
Please take her there and leave her.
Do not return her to this world
Where she has felt the fist of evil.
But that thought is not my request or prayer;
It is just my heart's response to what I cannot fathom.
I do not know where this girl has gone,
And I could never follow;
But I will trust that you are there,
And in my despair,
I know you love us.

Concession

Gale Acuff

If Miss Hooker loved me as much as she loves God then I'd be the happiest man alive--not that the dead are happier or even as happy but maybe in Heaven they are--even though I'm a boy, 10, but there's a man to come a few years from now and I'll know it by shaving and driving and using Mum cream and my voice will be manly, too, like Father's but not so fatherly, I guess. Then we could get married, I mean Miss Hooker and I, to each other, that is, and then have babies, which means a family, or maybe just dogs. Miss Hooker's kind of old, 25, and she'll always be fifteen years older, which means she'll probably die sooner if all goes naturally and I don't die first by accident, but then again she could fall out our motel window on our honeymoon. You never know, she says, when God will call you back to Him, that is, your soul, which He puts into a new body while your old one sinks into the earth. Hers

has red hair and green eyes and freckles and dimples and a tiny mole on its nose. I notice these things. When I'm 16 and if she's still not spoken for I'll ask her for a date. I'll wait for the fair to come back to our county and take her there. Maybe we'll ride the Ferris wheel. We'll go around and around but slowly. I might slip the operator two bits so he can cut the power while Miss Hooker and I are at the top of the wheel in the dark and can see everything but can hardly be seen. Then I'll show her my ring and I'll ask her to become engaged and then at my signal we'll come to earth

again. We'll get out of our seats and hold hands and I'll treat her to a corn dog or a burger or some fried ice cream or all three. Then we'll head over to the midway --I'll show her how I shoot Hell out of ducks. She'll be impressed so I'll show her how, too, which means I can put my arm around her and be close enough to smell what red hair smells like, and her perfume, too, and we'll pull

the trigger together--bang bang bang bang --and win us something stuffed. Then we're off to the merry-go-round, which is for kids but she'll say it was her girlhood favorite and ride the horses around and around, kind of like the Ferris wheel but flatter. Then maybe we'll do the House of Mirrors, where I'll get to see Miss Hooker-times-10, and then the Funhouse, where we'll look silly and we can see how each other looks like gross. And then we'll search the parking lot for my car and I'll help her in and take her home, her home, but as she kisses me good-bye I'll remind her we'll share the same digs one day--unless she changes her mind and breaks the engagement, maybe, or dies, or I do. Die, that is. I'd never bust us up, God never forsook anybody. Not that I'm God but I just want Miss Hooker to love me like she loves Him and for that matter like He loves her. If He loves her more than He loves me, that would be divine.

by Kirby Wright

It Makes Your Ears Ring

Minutes before you die, you'll hear what sounds like a car alarm blocks away. Next comes the sound of a trumpet, closer. "The boy playing next door," you smile. Then comes the sound of rain on the roof. But it's not raining. The aroma of bacon drifts in through the screen. Cats and dogs ignore you.

Flash to a service with sad, impatient faces. The trumpet taps. "Fast how it goes," you whisper. Watch them file out after small talk and prayers. Attend a reception at the old home, where your family serves eggplant, cubed cheeses, chocolate chip cookies. The trumpet now sounds like a siren—it makes your ears ring as you skim an indigo sky into the sun.

Seller's Market

The neighbors are selling their house. The sign out front says POOL in red letters. "15 offers so far," smiles the realtor. Sometimes I see her watering the lawn. Occasionally I see him walking the dog. We'd exchange waves before they grew reclusive after he got his name in the paper for insider trading. Their son just started college. Their daughter won a ribbon for riding a horse. They're moving out to a ranch in the desert. "Closer to work," the realtor said. Doubt I ever see them again.

by J.R. Solonche

IN MY HEAD

In my head
I have become
an expert in
questioning the dead,
who answer "Yes" or "No,"
which is all
they are permitted.

THE CLOCK

Time wields sword
and dagger.
The minute
wounds.
The hour
cuts your throat.

THE TURN

I get to the corner.
I turn right and
cut the future
in half.

WATCHING

The more
I watch

the birds
from my window,

the more
I am convinced

that the wrong people
are people.

The House Next Door

Tom Sanfilip

I never saw anyone in the house next door, even after the new buyers moved in, a young couple with two children and one on the way. Once I heard the cranky yawling of their two year old girl come over the fence, but it disappeared and stopped. The same with the occasional whack of a plastic bat in their yard where their oldest boy played. I heard him once or twice struggle over the picket fence behind the garage to retrieve his ball, but then even the sounds of his swinging plastic bat were no more. I assumed his father was bringing him to a nearby park where the boy could really let it fly, but I had no way of proving it. All I knew was that the little girl stopped crying sometime after they shortly moved in and the young boy stopped whacking his bat in the backyard. After that, all was silence.

Sometimes I would see the children's mother driving away in their van, but never a glimpse of her exiting or entering the house. Her husband was equally mysterious in his comings and goings as well. At six in the morning, I would hear hurried steps, a car door slam, and a car engine revving. When I picked up my newspaper in the driveway, invariably he was gone as if into thin air. Only a grey little cloud of exhaust hovered over the spot where he had once been parked. After that grey little cloud dissipated, there was absolute silence again. That was the pattern. If I did hear a sound, I waited for the invariable silence that followed. Sometimes I would mistake other sounds for children sounds, but what were children's sounds? How could I distinguish between the sounds of a child from anything else?

I knew they were there and thought perhaps their mother was overprotective. That's why I never saw or heard them after their first sounds. I could not explain the irreality of this young couple in their various daily appearances or non-appearances nor even give an accurate description of their faces. So indistinct was their presence even in the light, neither image nor a sense of their real existence emerged beyond the fact they were simply there. Except for what biology thought necessary to differentiate one human being from another -- a beauty mark here, sandy colored hair there -- what made them real for me was strictly a philosophical issue. What did it matter? I still found it impossible to make clear distinctions of color, light and substance when it came to establishing some visual acuity of their existence as individuals. It seemed almost conspiratorial.

The previous owners were said to have a brood of three daughters no one ever saw either. In fact, an old woman who lived on the street remembered hearing the girls' voices once when their family first moved in, but the girls, too, disappeared shortly after they took up residence. Over the years the parents showed the old woman photographs of them as they presumably matured, but she never saw them.

I recall the old woman telling me she had only once been invited into the house by the previous owners and noticed immediately that nothing looked worn or used, the furniture, the kitchen. Not a plate anywhere on the counter, not a smear of grease on the stove, not a sign of living whatsoever. She told me the girls' parents did all their living in the basement, sitting on two wooden chairs under a bald light over a workbench, as though everything on the upper floor was a charade, a picture of normalcy necessary to present to the world, and that they were, in fact, living as prisoners in their own house. They, too, struck her as having no identity, no presence, no distinguishing marks, except for shadows and movements that did not move real space.

Before they moved, I recall distinctly how the girls' mother always tried to position herself in a lounge chair on the patio during the summer months so that the sun would hit her face at some precise angle in order to provide some human dimensions to her features. But it was impossible for me at least to imagine she would ever assume the real in any sense of the word. An airlessness about her had obviously reached a point of extreme saturation.

And her husband was no less extreme. One night I saw the two of them crawling on their front lawn with flashlights picking away the miniscule seeds that had fallen from a tree going to seed. Was it possible the paradox of existence had finally been solved and I had missed its arrival or at least misperceived its appearance? How could one argue that existence proceeded from non-existence, when all distinguishing marks of identity, reason, and individuality had simply become encumbrances?

Even more harrowing was my certainty that what masqueraded as reason was in fact insanity, that everything that surrounded me was permeated with the unpredictability of madness and rage at having been ripped away from certainty. As a result, all of this unexplained potential for lashing out at others at the most unexpected moments, the weird behavior of people too long denied contact with their real souls, the bizarre unknown agitation of the true self that rose every so often to the surface in some aberrational form of stupidity and violence was at times too much to bear. I was satisfied with looking out instead of looking into the lives of others that dragged along in fits of boredom and pointless behavior that made little sense except in relief of the strange agitation they felt within

themselves.

The previous owners of the house had certainly tipped over the edge of the unknown long before I saw them crawling like worms on their front lawn in the middle of the night. But the new owners also displayed similar odd behavior that was simply a variation I thought on that madness or fear that made them rush away without leaving traces of themselves behind, including their children. Why this was the case I had no idea. I simply went on with my life content with the fact that I was surrounded by non-existence. If there was, indeed, true existence somewhere, it would have to manifest as a reality I could readily discern.

I could have lived with this anomaly for the rest of my days given the comfort of knowing that once there existed a reality on which I could meditate without fear of its underpinnings being ripped away in some cataclysmic reversal of reason. But this hope was never fulfilled. It was obvious at least to me that the truth had long since been betrayed.

Now the irrational was on full stage, and it seemed impossible to look anywhere without seeing some nefarious proof that underneath all this human reduction something essential to the human species had been rendered thoroughly inconsequential, young or old, it did not matter. The new owners of the house next door were no different than the previous owners and on it went ad infinitum like mirrors reflecting one image replicated into another without variation. An indifference to the real had given everything a ready-made symbolism, for everything had been reduced to mere signs, signals, presences, absences, rarely words, even objects simply laying around by chance, a shadow, the movement of a hand, the bark of a dog, everything having taken on assumed meaning.

There was a part of me that would have willingly discarded any concern for the delusional irreality of other's inconsequential lives, but my proximity was too close. I could not avoid seeing their shadows flit past and question whether they actually existed. It was in many ways like the basement light that perpetually burned in that house.

Shining like some malevolent white eye behind a window of thick glass blocks that gave the impression of some movement therein, I was never certain whether there was, in fact, something moving, though there was no question there was something. At first, I thought it had to be the new owners looking for a tool or checking the furnace or searching for something inside what had to be unpacked boxes in the basement. But that shadow seemed to go too slowly in front of that obtuse light to be recognizably human. I mean a shadow of such

refracted dimensions could, in fact, have been human in the most elemental sense that a human would cast a recognizable shadow, but I was doubtful. It was something more primal and insidious, a presence that made itself known without invitation, always there, but invisible until the right circumstances presented itself. Then it would come like a devouring mouth, relentless, unrelieved in its intensity, only satiated when something living had been thoroughly consumed.

Whatever it was seemed to be the master, requiring all to heed their place in the natural order. I was certain this shadow that flickered past the light would show itself. Someone would get careless and leave a shade up or fail to close the blinds and I would see the reason for all the madness, the disappearance of the children, the meaning behind the cowed and faceless identities of the parents who had come to live in that house. And it was but an off moment when the answer finally did come, though frightening, for it made me realize there is considerably more to the force of nature than abstract theory. How it manifests is a question that can never be clearly understood for it never asserted its presence, the lion I was shocked to see peering out a window of that house, apparently roaming free.

To End it All

Tom Sanfilip

It started with three red blotches on my left cheek, a reaction to the chemicals in a skin bleach I mindlessly decided to use to alter my appearance for no other reason than I was aging in my face in ways that frankly disturbed me. Somehow in preparing for a trip I had inadvertently pulled out an old passport thinking it was the one I had been using for no more than the last five or six years; but to my surprise a younger visage popped out at me, a face I had not seen in over twenty, a strange face, actually, almost disembodied, though it was clearly me for all the frozen thoughts I sensed lying behind my earlier, younger expression that seemed all question marks and pensive regard for the future. I looked at that face for a long time, wondering if it had all been a circuitous venture to this new face with three red blotches and some swelling beside my left nostril. I can only say that as the minutes went on things went progressively worse, not only for my face, but for my hair that began falling out within minutes after the blotches appeared.

I had always prided myself on my hair, still black and somewhat thick, though thinning most certainly at the crown of my head. I thought I had massaged my scalp too hard, for when I ran my fingers through my wet hair while examining the blotches a clump of black hair came out so effortlessly in my hand I did not even notice it lying in my palm like the torn ligature of a jellyfish. I stared at it almost in shock as if not even a part of me, that it was, in fact, nothing related to me, though it was most certainly, and that I had somehow initiated my own decline by purchasing a simple jar of skin lightener. More hair fell out in minutes, and I was so preoccupied with this new phenomena I did not notice that half my face, the left half, had eroded almost down to the bone without a second of pain or blood, looking perfectly normal as decay, but shocking me into a new sensibility. It looked to me as if matter was speaking to spirit, and it was clear who would win the race to see just how much could be deboned and stripped away from my virtual body without pain or suffering.

But it was not only my hair coming out in clumps that baffled me, but the gradual alteration of my face, what came to be a nearly exposed eye socket, and eventually my left eye dangling like an inflated glob of orbital white viscosity. Nearly half of my face had degraded in the minutes it took me to even reason erroneously that my decay was, in fact, a good thing; that I had finally accepted a way to self-knowledge through the actual physical reduction of the body. The absurdity of such reductionism was no surprise, for it had been going on around me for some time. I had simply resisted its seductive call, and now at

the mere application of a seemingly harmless ointment I was being reduced to my elemental character, a goal I had never been able to achieve through reason, logic or experience. If I had known it would be as simple as this, I would have purchased all the ointments in the world that promised such transformation of spirit without so much as extending one parlayed thought for another.

It never mattered that centuries had brought forth their collective knowledge for my enlightenment. The freedom to realize was in simply letting go, to will oneself into the arms of a chemical fate, to embrace the beauty of toxemia in order to emerge at some other end of the spectrum. I was there most definitely and the process had all but weakened my will, even though it took me an incredible amount of courage to look at myself and wonder what I was witnessing.

I recall my grey tabby Rex jumping to the edge of the sink as I looked more intently into the mirror. Though I was not sure Rex knew I was the same person, the cat immediately fixated on my dangling left eyeball and took a swipe, barely missing it as it dangled from several orbital muscles that had dried into mere paper strips of red tissue. I decided then to wash my hands, as though this would purify the whole process of degradation, that somehow like a magician clapping, the whole process would suddenly shift into reverse and I would see the languid, worn, depressed expression reemerge that I had become so familiar to me. I would even have been content to see if but for a moment the same question marks and pensive regard I saw so clearly in my younger face return to fixate me on the eternal present. At least there might be a new world, a new desire, a moment of genuine gratification. Instead, there was only Rex inexplicably jumping into the sink basin and drowning there in a thrashing two or three minutes right before my eyes, drowning in its own juices, as though having come too close to my decay, sensing it had strayed too far from its own elemental nature and now polluted by proximity to its decaying master, had decided to end it all.

Lesson

Madeleine Beckman

She is 15 minutes late
says she emailed to let me
know but apologizes profusely.

I had to stitch up this guy's butt.

I pour her a glass of ice water.

He had too much crystal and sex.

She is shaken, this woman who treats eunuchs,
trans-gender prostitutes,
every permutation of those
who do not fit the Male, Female, "Check the box"
model. She does her nursing in Delhi
and New York City.

I never saw a tear that large, she says.

He was so embarrassed.

She has her yellow and orange file folders out now;
finds the story – the one about the people of South India
who escape to live in underwater bubbles.

It's our fifth session working together; she pays me
cash from money she earns inseminating lesbians
who recruit male friends.

I'm great with a turkey baster, she says.

She brings fantasy to my kitchen table
and we swim for an hour
in the warm, almost amniotic current
of the brain's magic, infinite worlds.

Leaving, she breaks
a crystal drinking glass; is mortified.
*It is nothing, I say. And really, it is so
nothing.*

Mojácar **Madeleine Beckman**

A magical and bewitched town

There was a point on the porch
rocking in the hand-sewn swing
the wind gaining
swirling in a fit tossing
everything but the bricks
and *duende* rose from deep inside, up
like glowing embers growing, slowly
deliberately, insistent into
waves rolling over and over through me
in a frenzy obliterating
toppling all
its fierce passion determined to free itself
erupted
heaving with heat, with a pitch, a cry
beyond anything human, beyond
reason, prayer
or the choice to follow.

#5 Bus Madeleine Beckman

You can smell it she adores him.
You can sense the dampness
on her fingertips brought up from deep
love. Her white hand
clasps his hand his arm weighs heavy
on her shoulder. The weight reminds her
soon he'll be gone but for now
she's pretty sure *this* is happiness.

She turns her head slightly breathes in
the fragrance of his hair now gray.
She's known him since before
white mingled with black. She's into it
for the long haul.

He rests on me like an animal, she once said.
I didn't ask what that meant my imagination
is enough.
His complexion is soaked with history
no one knows. He likes it that way.

Awestruck in Manhattan these two
enjoy this brief ride
on the #5 bus.
Hope is always available it's free.

It's our stop – West Broadway and Houston.
Is this Houston Street? She asks
taking the lead this time.
Yes, I assure her.

They take hands again,
walk down West Broadway –
one enormous adventure;
it could happen
that thing she's got her eye on –

Body Remembers

Madeleine Beckman

Who's tumbled on this couch
with me? Whose arms and legs
wrapped around my thighs?
My shoulders?
Whose tongue licked my lips
searched the crevices of my flesh
left prints in places I've yet to see?
Whose heat and sweat mingled
indistinguishable from mine?
Whose hair remained on my body
as if my own?

Where are those people now?
On other couches? In other beds?
Dead?
All that sweetness is held
in my body's memory
because the body always remembers,
knows
stirs to speak to us. *Remember?*
it asks.

I wake flushed not knowing why.
And despite the bridge between us
utterly blown to bits
decades ago a residue, a blanket
of jaundiced disbelief remains.
This the body remembers too.

Black Bass Inn
Madeleine Beckman

In the bedroom overlooking the Delaware River
two beeswax candles flicker in the dark
illuminating our flesh
in the mirror of a mahogany dressing table
holding personal items:
a silver money clip
a red velvet purse, pearl earrings,
an antique cameo brooch
from my ex-husband (anniversary #1).
For a moment, I think he's in the room –
(these things happen).

We watch from the bed
the Delaware's currents
dark, deep, insistent
as my feelings for your strong
smooth fingers
traversing my neck, my cheeks
searching my eyes.

Are you crying? You ask.
Do you want me to cry?
No response, only more gentle touching
my ears, my face as a blind man might
absorbing every curve, even ones
I don't know.

After you return to Ireland
to the wife I didn't know you had,
I readjust to my face in the mirror
altered by your fingers
their prints, microscopic tattoos,
indelible impressions
invisible incisions.

Art of Fire

Madeleine Beckman

Swollen with heat, ashes lay in puffy heaps
from last night's fire. It was a long night
dancing, spitting coyly, licking innards
of the chimney.

It's quite a performance and a lot of warmth
turf fires provide if you work it right.

Your hands, callused and split
from hours and hours turning bog,
played with the flames last night.
This is your art – you have no choice
but to stay near; she will die if you stray.

Turf makes you toil from beginning to end
tending, cutting, drying
weeks and weeks of unexpected rain
and drying all over again – and sometimes
nothing plus nothing gives your more nothing.
There is never a guarantee.

No telling when devotion will pay you back
but the bog will kiss you with blazing tongues
if stroked to satisfaction turf will cloak you
in joy despite the inevitable waning
and ultimate death.

Every man and woman on this island keeps his land
a piece of God's wealth
passed down and passed down
no way you say no.

You need good turf, says the Bog Man;
he has no wife, no companion, no dog;
the living bog is his mate.

You can't have a good fire without turf;
they probably gave you wet turf for starters,
Mary tells me; her fire burns day and night.

*It's probably not the best turf;
fire starter bricks help – lots of it,
advises widow Margaret.
She knows how to keep fires alive
even when they're dying.*

Strangers pass outside my little house
gaze at the fire through filmy curtains,
congratulate me.
*Your fire is going mightily. You built it?
Yes, I say, thinking, if
you only knew.*

Here on Achill, I walk the bogs
like everyone, smell Ireland's earth
and understand depending on the angle
eventually *everything* gives.

Clougmore to Minaun

Madeleine Beckman

The jagged Clougmore cliffs facing Clare Island
survive despite the ocean's relentless attacks.
The sea *always* finds its way out.

Walking Clougmore's boulders
something inside me thrashed, unable to settle
like an infection raging, seeking escape.

Despite this war not knowing the origin –
I continued hiking amidst the operatic wind
like a requiem shifting nearing screams
consuming my ears.

I looked at my feet half hidden in grass
where the precipice becomes *nothing* – air
and glanced words from the Bible carved into stone:
You are your transgressions.

Who wrote this? In what mood?
What possessed this individual to add his or her
scream to the landscape?
Descending, I thought of just living
and the majesty, a sort of god
the landscape.

Dubliner
Madeleine Beckman

He wasn't the sort of man
anyone would call helpless,
not with his strong shoulders and knotty hands,
not with his stories of Africa or the military, but
helpless was exactly what he was.

They see me from the outside, he told me,
drinking yet another gin & tonic at breakfast.

No one knows
inside I'm crumbling, a house
eaten away ready to collapse.

I registered this confession, despite
the elegant, impressive figure he cut,
showed to me to the world,
at times, to himself.

I was surprised he'd found the *cojones*
finally to be truthful about something –
a Catholic and all, and
to a woman.

Staying the Same

Madeleine Beckman

It was Sunday and Election Day
banners waved from street lamps;
ballot boxes sat outside every church
where people cast their votes.
The town's plaza became a stage for
women wearing cheap chiffon dresses,
hats adorned with fresh flowers,
stockings, lace, perfumed knees
for the evening, for husbands and lovers
wearing starched white shirts and shiny shoes.

I entered the shop on the square,
bought two pairs of high-heeled sandals
one black, one gold at ten dollars each.
Despite how I adored those shoes
my feet were tiny prisoners, bound
beyond pleasure. I never wore them.
They lap corpse-like in their little coffin boxes
through years, through divorce and dead children.

And though I can't tell you why, one day
I pulled out those sandals (mid winter)
slipped one foot in and then
the other
and danced
recalling the square, that Mexican election
wondered
if things got better
or worse
or stayed the same.

UNDER THE MINISCUS

Sam Frankl

Because there are places that'll
stem the tide, and rumble
under the meniscus,
there will always be meat
and there will always be
women for whom
men will lacerate it.
Cerebral cats
be damned, that hand
clenched around my
windpipe's got a
bleeding heart
inked on it.

by Kory Ferbet

Pulmonary

How long have you been coming here? He asks at the hospital. She responds with an insurance form and a kiss. He bleeds a little. An injection of love is given, first in the arm of the man, next in the frontal lobe of the woman. Love is an outpatient procedure. She asks for a ride home, He asks her to marry him.

At the altar he grows nervous. "Do you?" the doctor asks. The man scans the pews. A familiar face in the crowd. An older woman. Beautiful as his soon to be wife, despite the embolism. He looks back to his girl, "you are just like your mother" he thinks.

Full Moon Fever

The far descent, sweet relief
the single thought:
"Did I leave the iron on?"

Question your thoughts.
"That's all?"
Thirty years of life
&
the homemaker's inquiry

leaves behind
A corpse,
charred remnants
of a house.

July 3rd 1971

"People fear death even more than pain. It's strange that they fear death. Life hurts a lot more than death. At the point of death, the pain is over."

The City of Lights wasn't
Enough. Money spent can't save
the soul. Or a shattered image
both sacrificially ruined. From the pain
you drew a bath. After one last hit
Finally, The Door Shut.

by Phebe Davidson

Paradox

Shy as a youngster,
I found it hard to express myself,
at least out loud. But tonight,
in only April, the tree frogs have
tuned up as if it were July.
Even in the living room, with all
the doors and windows shut,
they are singing along with Bach,
a partita I've always loved. #1.
G-minor, Itzhak Perlman's violin.
When I switch to Lester Young,
they are singing along with him too,
the rendition oddly pleasing,
unself-conscious as night. Not shy
and not assertive, though it is.

Hush

It will not be lives of strangers, wretched
and wan, that makes us weep.
That guy standing roadside with his sign,
Three Kids, No Job won't be keeping
us awake past midnight, seeking
some solution to his ills. We will sleep
the sleep of all the just, like everyone
else on the block. Such dreams as seep
into our rest will edge us on to dawn,
the host of small birds, their *cheep, cheep*
calling us back to the waking world,
to all that loose seed in its profligate heap.

Retrospective

Denied sleep, she hears the geese.
Finds no release. The birds rise.

Sun rides higher Spring's no wetter
than drought. Existential tension won't

suspend itself. The leaves all falling,
now, she grieves, thinks of sleeves, old

women's tissues, their cuffs, an issue her
mother refused to confront. Equal pay

for equal work. She'd kept books. Hired
for her looks, she'd been lucky in that.

A second pay check after all. One her
mother, behind that desk, with her degree,
would not hold onto.

by Christopher Mulrooney

eau de vie

the barfly on the wall said two o'clock
when the rain came and the door opened
on its small piston and in came the dear one
bright as nails hard as paint
newly arrived from finishing school

for an eau de vie and a chaw and a talk

in the chapel in the moonlight

a certain fig tree
while she natters on about the second life
probably contemplating a third
and fourth and fifth and sixth
the way of all things

figure

Alabam or Mississip or maybe ol' Kaintuck
some such place for the very dreamy voice
in an elevated mind
singing the blues just for the amusement
of a wayward child

Heidelberg

“please transfer” says the invite “the following announcement
to your colleagues around the world”

and so I shall

the long lines you stand in or the short and brisk
that sometimes lead to the stall and the manger
might forget but you must not forget
dear colleagues around the world
that a feedback and a currycomb
well a word to the wise in risk management

The Echoes of Shadow

TJ McAvoy

The city burned below him in the twilight and his mother wheeled him from the window. She whispered softly to him and they moved through the fluorescent corridors of the giant building like lighted veins of some immense creature with her pushing the wheelchair behind him. He was calm and didn't speak.

There were people waiting in the room when they got there. Sisters, brothers, old friends, strangers. They smiled and stared at him and all of them reached out to touch him, to feel the last jarring verification of his life soft on their skin.

They set the wheelchair against the far wall and locked the wheels. They strapped his forearms down to the armrests and then they strapped his feet to the legs of the chair and connected the serpentine hoses to the veins in his arms and hands and chest. They did this in silence and there were no windows in that room save for the windows of their eyes upon him, stares of pity and remorse and guilt and something like tenderness.

His brother came slowly forward with the needle. It was fitted on the barrel end of a medical gun and his brother looked at him and then his brother looked at the crowd of people in the room and waited for the signal which came from everyone and no one at the same time. The needle clicked into his neck with a thump as his brother pulled the trigger and the world melted away from him immediately into a thickening semblance of the former world.

His brother stood back and watched and waited like all the others in the room. They stood staring at him and the drugs danced through his blood of misunderstanding and the blinding white lights of the room bore all the imperfections of his young face as the muscles began relaxing to rubber beneath the skin. He could feel the weight of his eyelids like the gravity of his life story snapping shut to memory and he could feel the tears welling in his eyes despite his mother's assurance that there would be no tears cried today.

When the people in the room realized he had not died they told his brother to increase the dosage and his brother turned the dial on the needlegun and stepped toward him and put the gun to the other side of his neck and pulled the trigger. He felt his bones slacken with the poison and the room grew rigid and taut around him and his mind still held that electric clarity unique to him. From some cavern of wounded awareness he remembered how his little sister used to come back from the dentist crying because she had five cavities and how every time she came back from the dentist she had cavities and he remembered how he used to laugh at her because he was older and he'd never had a cavity and then he looked up at her face in that bright white room

fashioned from some wicked reverie and she smiled down at him with those teeth gleaming and her eyes shining and communicating something like placation but also disdain because he was not dead yet.

There was a small gathering on the other side of the room, a hushed discussion regarding how to proceed. He heard his mother ask him if he was feeling pain and he wanted to tell her that he was feeling pain but he couldn't speak. His brother walked up to him again and turned the dial twice more on the needle gun and put the gun to his temple and squeezed the trigger and the pain he felt at that moment was lasting and deeper than the malleable heat of the earth and he thought his heart might explode from the loneliness.

His mother asked the brother to increase the dosage and hit him with the needle one more time and the brother said the gun was already set at its maximum dosage. His brother said he didn't understand why it wasn't working, he said that there was enough toxin in the gun to kill a giant. To kill God, he said.

He sat in the wheelchair and looked up at all the people with their round faces bunched into expressions of confusion. It was probably dark outside by now and the people in the room were murmuring and sharing muffled questions about the mystery of why the young man wouldn't die. He knew that death for some special souls couldn't be forced but he could exonerate the people in the room because they knew nothing of the nature of special souls nor how to identify them. He couldn't move any part of his body save for those dark eyes that scanned the room and the people he loved inquisitive about him and he knew he would never be able to move anything ever again but those eyes and that he would be better off dead but he was powerless to his own divine privilege.

They decided to move him to a different room and apply another toxin and he knew they would be unsatisfied until his heart stopped beating and his eyes closed for good. They unhooked the hoses from his veins and wheeled him to the door but no one reached out to him this time, as if the death they sought for him was infectious in his pores. They all stood staring and censoring silently in that violent light and watched his mother push him back through the corridors empty and replete with the echoes of shadow.

And he felt that his name had not changed but only his appearance as reflected from the dark hall windows though he couldn't turn his head to see.

Done

John Menaghan

She walks from the bedroom one morning, drops down in her chair and quietly, firmly declares: I'm done. You're what? my father asks this woman who has spent nearly ninety years bustling about houses, basements, yards. She looks at him, a weariness accrued over their marriage's half a century flooding her worn-out body, eyes, and voice: I'm done. I'll just stay here. From that time on, my mother sits in the same blue chair, day after day after day, no longer cooks or cleans, rises only to make her way to bed or the blue room, as she taught us to call the toilet, a word she regards as vulgar. Puzzling to me as a child since it wasn't. Blue, I mean. Not a trace.

She's wrong. There's so much more to come. Before she's truly done, she'll find herself sitting in a pew at her husband's funeral, in her same blue chair but moved to a new Assisted Living room, in a strange chair at a nursing home two towns away. Lying not just alone in her own marriage bed but on ambulance stretchers, nursing home and hospital mattresses. And after she's gone the mortician's gurney, coffin's soft satin fabric, damp New Jersey clay. But neither one knows that now as she sits, her gaze less than serene, and says once more: I'm done. Her husband, stunned at her stillness, stands hoping someone will tell him, quickly, what in the world she can possibly mean.

Till She Gets Back

John Menaghan

Spring semester over at last,
I've crossed the continent
to visit my parents, only
this time needing especially
to see for myself how my
mother moves through her
days, or doesn't, since three
months back she plopped
herself down in her favorite
chair and declared: I'm done.

I've come, too, to do a few
days of research in New York
City, beginning tomorrow.
Now, though, I'm standing
with my father by the dining
room table, late at night, as
he prepares to join his wife,
asleep for hours, in their bed.
"You're doing pretty well,"
I say, "doing more things
for yourself, I mean, now
that Mom's no longer able
to do what she once did."

Since I arrived I've been
watching him, surreptitiously,
managing simple tasks in
the kitchen and such, passing
the austere hours of each day.
Remembering, and wondering
if he does too, weekend mornings
long ago when he made us all
pancakes on Saturday, bacon
and eggs on Sunday, giving
my mother a break from her
normal homemaker's routine.

"Oh, I'm just trying to keep things going," he says, "till your mother gets back to being her old self." Before I can stop myself, I place a hand on his shoulder and say: "You know, Dad, I'm not sure that's gonna happen." The look in his eyes, bewilderment mixed with fear, makes clear that's not a thing he's let himself think. At all. Till now. "I think she will," he counters, his frail voice hollow, hoarse. "Sure," I say, "anything could happen." But I can tell he's lost faith suddenly that the wife he knew for more than fifty years will reappear. I watch as he walks, defeated, down the hall, opens and closes softly the bedroom door.

The Fall

John Menaghan

In a cheap hotel near Union Square
where the room's decidedly scuzzy
and the shower's way down the hall,
I stare, startled, at the greasy black
phone, pick it up on the sixth ring.
Hello? It's my nephew calling to say
my father fell last night. Is he OK?
"Just bruised, we think, but he spent
the night on the floor, calling for help.
Grandma heard nothing, slept through.
I found him this morning,
face down by his recliner. We're
trying to get him to see a doctor,
but you know how he is." Jesus, I
think, if only I'd stayed I'd have been
there to help him. Uncertain, I ask:
How bad is he? Should I come back?
"Your call, but there's nothing much
you can do, so you might as well stay.
Finish your research first, then come."

Two days later, the pain only getting
worse, he ends up at the doctor, learns
he broke his collarbone, finds himself
in a hospital bed—for observation,
given his age and all. The prognosis
is good, though we're told with old
people you never know. He jokes
with the nurses. They move him closer
to their station--to keep an eye on him,
they say, which could be affection
or caution. I'm afraid to ask which.
Back at the house my mother, not
up to a hospital visit, says very little,
passing the time almost placidly,
waiting for news. He seems to be
getting better, so on my stay's last
day I bid goodbye to my mother,

visit him on my way to the airport,
turn in my rental car, fly back to L.A.
it's the last time we'll talk face-to-face,
but I don't know that now. Instead,
the moment seems right for us all
to get back to our lives, after the fall.

Hold Me

John Menaghan

I stand by my father's hospital bed
at the end of a long hallway, trying
to figure out how he is. A nurse bursts
into the room, breezily does her thing,
shoots me a look and says to my father:
Is this your son? My younger one, he croaks,
struggling to find his voice, my little boy.
The nurse laughs. He's not so little, is he,
though, your little boy? I suppose that's true,
my father concedes. The nurse looks me up
and down, with just the faintest trace of lust
in her strikingly lovely pale green eyes.

I feel guilty, though, even noticing
those eyes, or how her gaze arouses me.
Are you all right? she asks. Or do you need
me to do something for you before I go?
I'm fine, he rasps. Would you like to dance?
She shoots me a questioning look. I say,
Dad, the nurse doesn't know what a joker
you are. You're good though, right, for now, I mean.
Never better, he says. The nurse smiles, pats
his hand, shoots me another look, then goes.
A look that says: And what can I do for you?

Minutes later, thrilled and guilty, I'm still
musing on that look's full implications
when my father tells me he needs to pee.
OK, no problem. Should I call the nurse,
or does he want me to help him up and
over to the bathroom? No, there's a jar,
a plastic thing somewhere that he can use.
He can't, though, or at least he needs my help
not just to find the jar but pee in it,
which means I have to find his penis too,
and hold and aim it so the pee goes in.
A thing I've never done, or thought I would,
but need creates this new intimacy.

More intimate, I think, as I take aim
than we have ever been. Then I reflect
that maybe, probably, when I still was
his little boy he did the same for me.
Helped me, I mean, when I most needed help,
more helpless then than he is now. I take
the jug away, screw on the cap, tuck him
back in. Bedclothes and blanket covering
a frail, ancient, emaciated frame
that once possessed enough vitality
and strength to make four children with his wife.

Those days long past, there's nothing sexual
about his body now. He's still a man,
though. And if once he was a shy young boy,
these days he flirts, gently, with the nurses
who know such things mean nothing at this stage.
But what did that look mean that she shot me,
that green-eyed girl? I can't help wondering.
My life, I hope, being nowhere near over.
Though I've no wife or child, I'm vital still,
and like my father less shy than I was
in younger days. Though shy enough to feel
a bit unsettled by what I've just done,
or helped my father do. This simple thing
he can't do on his own: pee in a jug.

His little boy. I am. Always will be.
Even after he's gone. But a man too,
whose body tingles at the memory
of bold green eyes looking me up and down,
their gaze taking me in and holding me
with some vague promise of a warm embrace.
He's drifted off now, breathing heavily,
dependent on a stream of oxygen
that keeps him going but scorches his throat.
He stirs, emits a child's forlorn cry.
I reach out, take his hand, and hold it tight.

Phatic Communion

John Menaghan

The last time I spoke with my father
face-to-face was in his hospital room.
It was my last day in New Jersey,
and he seemed to be on the mend.
It was my last day in New Jersey
because he appeared to be improving.
I could have stayed longer, rearranged
my schedule, booked a new flight if his
condition had threatened to go downhill.
But he looked better now--after his fall.

Seeing the phone by his bed, I had an idea.
"Dad, have you spoken to Mom at all since
you ended up here?" My mother, too frail
to come for a visit, sat waiting at home.
"No, no, I haven't," he said, in a tone
hard to name. "Well, you must miss her," I said,
though after fifty years of marriage who
could say what either one wanted or felt.
"Why don't I call her, then, so you can talk?
Wouldn't that be nice?" He looked uncertain,
but I punched in their number, pleased with myself.

My mother answered. Suddenly I saw
her in my mind's eye looking terrified,
sitting in her same blue chair, dreading but
assuming too with each ring of the phone
the terrible thing had happened at last.
"Hi, Mom," I said. "No, no, everything's fine.
I'm just sitting here with Dad and he wants
to say hi. Wait a sec. I'll put him on."
I handed my father the phone and stepped aside,
wandered out into the hall but stayed nearby.
Who knew what they might want or need to say?
So I gave them as much privacy as
the situation allowed. Not enough,
it appeared. In the bright, bleak corridor
I could overhear clearly all he said.

But nothing I heard made me feel awkward
at all. You would think they were just old friends
shooting the breeze, comparing their dull days.
Accepting deep in their bones as simple truth
a quip I'd heard someone make: I can't complain,
and if I did who would listen? I'd laughed
when I heard it that first time, long ago.
Yet now as I reappeared at the door
to check on him, and my father held out
the phone, saying Here, talk to your mother,
the joke felt not just true but searingly sad.
I spoke with my mother briefly, put down
the phone, and sat back down beside the bed.
We talked about nothing much a while longer.
Then I needed to go if I wanted
to make my plane back to L.A. I wish
now I had stayed, not just that single day
but every day and night, there by his side.
I fled instead back to L.A.'s Tir Na Nog.
In two weeks time, my father would be dead.

For Those Like Us

Andrei Guriianu

Beneath the evening's border of white lace I learned to play a dead man's violin in defense of things that might pass. It traveled as far as could be seen into the missing eye of the monument, melted and clinging now to its coffin of stone.

All the while you sat next to me at the foot of statues, wearing your new Chinese dress of lotus flowers and portraits of time. When you moved it snagged on a branch and the tear followed us everywhere we went, right down to the places where the first hour smiles in the face of sleep.

We invented that game together because we refused to leave the penumbra of childhood—to step outside old photographs, the doctored emotions, beyond the many delicate and vintage-colored impressions. I would dream that I could make music because it was the closest thing to living, and you would try to save me though you knew, I'm certain, that I wasn't any better than the worst of my intentions.

We walked miles and miles of imaginary miles like that, barely touching, stealing bits and pieces of ourselves when the other wasn't looking. But it turned on us, as every game of chance tends to do, as soon as we had all the rules figured out. One day, with nettles in your hair and the tremor of smoke on your breath, you looked me eye to eye, dirty with sunlight—I saw in there my life clamped to the tip of your frown, one foot in the door, the other wedged inside the moon's stagnant light—I felt the guard changing—and since then I'm not even sure that what I need is to be loved—to be kissed bluntly and definitely on celluloid lips.

Towards an Affirmation

Andrei Guriianu

At best we can hope to be received. Taken in through the curtains, to the scheme of private doors behind which men and women try on a single sleeve, a shoe, one knitted glove. There is a vase full of lilies in the corner, something on a plate at the center of a table. It looks like a nest, like happiness abandoned, like something to be chosen.

What you wouldn't expect in such rooms is the clock to be right. But it is. It's set always to recent memory and to the footprints of the day after next. The road to get there hasn't been born yet. The boot for your bare feet hasn't been born yet. The tongue to undress the language that will get you there hasn't been born yet. But there is still a vase full of lilies on a table in the corner and something to eat that no one is willing to finish.

We'll get to it tomorrow, we'll finish the other sleeve. But we never do. The clock's bloody hands are tied. While we are waiting then, I, or he or she, or you, should make a list of all the other lists that have never been checked off. We should set them all on fire and start over, making a list of one. Naked, vulgar, fluid. It would be a living, a singed, imperfect living. Light as a bone and deserving of alms. To be taken in, taken care of, to be dressed with the rags of kindness.

It doesn't matter that nothing fits. In the absence of a perfect suit of dreams someone can dress it with music, with the heart-shaped sequins of a redbud on the wind. On its cheeks they could smear some color, a bit of the past, to make it seem a less pitiful, sad part of our shared days. A flower fated as all flowers are, to be bruised by the water.

Not Far From the Truth

Andrei Guruianu

I imagine the places where I've been never changing. In my mind's eye they are frozen as the sunlight in a photograph at daybreak. The streets still haunted by the emptiness of night, yet to be filled with baby-blue noise, the straps of a girl's black heels, a greedy scent of bread in the oven as if drawn into the city's net of steel and charm.

I imagine that a forbidden rendezvous plays out in black and white silence and a necessary piano keeps time from dissolving too soon. Lingered coffee, cigarettes, the garments slowly taking on color as if drowning, slipping under, slipping off to reveal a bigger sadness. On the buildings and their shadows it is always raining. And the dust finally goes to sleep.

I imagine moving freely from one still frame to the next, moving among the outdoor flower arrangements, stopping by the park to pull on the branch of a lilac tree. I let go and it falls back into place. There is the smell of cut grass on the breeze. And the girl has taken off her heels and is walking barefoot across the grass and the world smells of the grass and of the girl and of things that aren't arbitrary.

The reality is not far from the truth. You can imagine a stone as stone, immovable, though someone else defiled it with an idea. Here it is resembling a bird, and here it is with the look of someone who can never smile at a coming storm. But you must work for this – you must work to create the stone again as it was before the plowed fields were cut up and turned, before it was thrown onto a heap that became a wall, a crowding of gray, much too big to fit a soul.

This is how I've hidden parts of myself. Small, irreducible parts. Too many to count. When I find one it's like some errand of the mind I left unfinished. I take up where I left off and along the way I look beneath stones, each one a lost letter where everything is as it was in the act –

a man buys the paper and beer and sets off covering blank space with the movement of his body. Birds are abandoning their silence. I can always make it rain my favorite kind of rain.

Fratii Mei (My Brothers)

Andrei Guriianu

On a mattress in the middle of a room I rock and cradle each pre-measured gram of the daily bread. My hands have identical lifelines, which is only statistically impossible. I sit Buddha-style, Indian-style, I sit like a child, like a well-manicured doll. From this vantage point I dole out crumbs to the innocent but lately there are very few takers.

The brothers I never had also practice obscure rituals of self-preservation. One is unloading his worldly possessions for the benefit of the neighborhood poor. The other is bleaching medals for the day someone comes by to ask about their inherent value. Each one comes with a funny anecdote that he rehearses in the bathroom mirror.

We give what we have because we cannot give enough of ourselves. At all of our imaginary reunions there are many beautiful empty boxes. Barely enough room on the table for the perfect meal. We give so that we could finally leave something behind. At the end of the night, only one of us walks away lighter than the day before.

We head home in different directions, and tired, fall asleep dreaming of spiders

Untitled

Andrei Guriianu

I'm looking for the stamp that will carry me. It will be weighed down with the glue of a tongue that cannot speak its own history. It will be in the color and shape of innocent forms, of preutterance. It will not weigh anything. In its arms it can hold the wheat and the chaff, the freshly cut sunlight I took when I left and wrapped it in a fold of air.

You could say there is a line of green hills in the distance and I'll let you fill in the rest. In the sweep of the brush I am looking for the many worlds inside the palm of your hand that were promised without uttering a word. I am lost. How can the future be anything but that? Stardust and honeyed words on a trail in the darkened woods.

If I find myself I will be twice removed from the person I used to be. Distant memory dusted off for the holidays. Where did you come from? And what took you so long to get here? Ah, mother, if you only knew how long I've been walking and the night I cloak myself in as I go. Eternal solitary in the womb of friends and enemies, the river of solace dried up and tangled in uncertain shores.

I stare at the mechanism of a leaf and I hear the crackle of the fire that will consume it any minute now. I see its death before the flame can be a flame the color of wild fruit. What am I then but the vessel of blood and the kingdom of ordinary plight? What suffering separates us that doesn't also unite? Ashes of the living, I am the mirror of your own misfortune. I praise and I damn the ordinary day in the same passionate breath.

Carry me from here. From my wind of quiet rage. Take me under a wing of woe so that I may see the outpost of the body, knifed and helpless, holding on beyond reason. It is a weakness that I need so much loving, so much anger to hold as a shield against the unknown. I am open to more than that. Carry me. I am weightless, once and for all, as I've always been.

The Narrow Field's Dance of Death

Conor Robin Madigan

Some patients simply complain of anxiety and irritability; others may show marked personality changes or may become frantically psychotic.

-Endocrine System and Selected Metabolic Diseases

"A young person's thing, baby," her mother had said, and waved her away.

What came came thunderous and burned in her insides biblical fires drenched by stuffing her face into a multi-pillowed corner of her bedroom and breathing hard hard into the blackness until the fuzz overtook her face chest and arms and all calm and gentle horizons ebbed and flowed in her recovering mind's eye.

She'd been twice to see the doctor who checked for Trousseau's sign, Chvostek's sign, and signs he didn't mention that she would exhibit were she shot with needles and asked to watch for swelling in days oncoming. The end result, according to him and his associates, was calcium. This little pill, she thought, and took it down with a glass of 1% milk.

"Well, thank god it wasn't a tumor," her mother had said to her father within earshot.

"Now!" her father yelled. "He said not to let her know, damn it," he said, and slammed down a coffee and went after his daughter who'd shut herself away to a corner in her room.

He lifted her by her shoulders from the black abyss and sat her down, still breathing madness from her little body, and he patted her thin pointy knee.

"Darling, we were told not to talk about the most worst of the possibilities and I wanted to keep it at that, that way, but damn it, I'm sorry, your mother let slip what we weren't supposed..."

The man never cried. She had noticed that. He welled up, and he coughed once, but the flow and shake of a good cry never came, save for the one she'd seen in the carport. He'd heard his brother had died on the Eisenhower Expressway. The carport was awash with day's end color, and all the cracked cement under his deck shoes seemed to crawl up his legs to his belly and his chest and the man yelped and cried into a tense clattering of his teeth. He stopped smoking. He stopped drinking. He went to Church. He visited his mother every day. He prayed at his father's grave. He took his skinny little teenager fishing. He lingered by his wife in public, waiting for any moment when he could show affection to her and thus to the world. Losing his brother changed him. But, he never really cried before or after, so far as she knew.

He continued, "To tell you that you may have had a tumor that was making you have these symptoms." He smiled, and patted her knee again. She realized she hadn't breathed in a bit and took a gulp. The little bit of fuzz she built up in the corner still tingled her nose.

"You know, I don't want to die, dad."

“Oh, you won't die, peachpie.”

“But, in the middle of the night I feel like I'm walking down the blade of a knife, or that one part of my body goes huge and I can't move, and I wake up and I'm dizzy and I'm thinking thinking thinking,” she said shaking her head.

In sexual precocity of any type, the bone age almost always exceed the height age. Thus, these children, who in childhood are exceptional for tall stature, ultimately are somewhat dwarfed because of premature epiphysial fusion.

-Endocrine System and Selected Metabolic Diseases

The new short friend William invited over one evening wanted to sleep at the house and, after a call to his parents, we allowed it. He would sleep in the room next to ours, the small one connected to William's, and within earshot. He slept deeply and fell asleep rather quick. I just wanted to make sure he wasn't a light sleeper. We did this with all the friends that slept over, but William's new friend was different. His body and skin looked Floridian, or like he had spent years in the Austrian alps, naked. Inside him seemed to be the skeleton of a Knight, a short warrior. He wore the oversized jersey most kids wore in the suburbs and his skin, though white, shone bronze behind it. He smelled like most of the kids; round and mildewy. His elbows, his shoulders, the arch of his feet; everything tautly defied youth with a superhuman strength. Magic. He ran faster, stood shorter, and kept quieter than any of his peers.

After a few sleep overs I knew him, Jacques, as an adult among kids. He asked for the juice, took it and held it while doing something with the other hand, then poured it responsibly short. He returned the juice while he popped a carrot in his mouth.

Training, so it felt, had made him a tasking child.

One night, after a very good supper we all made together, Ana and I set out down the block for a walk to the lake. A silver evening, cool but not uncomfortable. Sprinklers kept up their fluttering turns, the sky gave away all its stars, and Ana went on about her fragile kids at the day school. She taught the developmentally importune.

“She'd been through the exercise hundreds of times,” Ana said. “She'd done it without me for weeks at a time. And then, just this once, she didn't know how or where to begin. She went to the top corner with her pencil, then the bottom and in an angry move she looked at me as though I'd been spying on her in an alley.”

“It's just a mystery how she's wired, huh,” I said, knowing nothing, the way Ana liked it.

“You could put it that way, but that's not really it. Is it? She's right on task most all of the time, and then something triggers or, well, like this time, she just couldn't begin.

Then the anger comes. I mean really amazing kid,” she said and ate more of her thawing Dove bar.

“I dunno about this Jacques,” I said.

“He's a perfect gentleman. A real hand at duties, and,” she said and ticked off each and everything William didn't really do that well. A model child.

“He's definitely more man than child.”

“I can't place where he got that complexion from.”

“France, with that kind of name.”

“He could be Algerian for all *you* know.”

“Yeah, because that's different,” I mumbled looking away to the rest of the world watching us, so I felt.

“You don't trust his looks.”

“There's just something more in tune than any other kid I've met.”

“You're imagining things.”

The walk was done. We were silent then except the fragment of a conversation continued from the last week about where we'd rent at the beach.

Our home sat against the sidewalk and walking in took no time at all. We entered. Ana sucked at her little Dove bar stick, and I stabbed at my tired tan briefcase with the umbrella. A commotion came from our bedroom, a shaking and thundering. Ana ran back there. She fell to the floor at the bedroom. I rushed to her and looked. Jacques was nude, riding William's face, holding his hands down and punching him in the face periodically. William's shirt had blood on it just at the foot of our bed.

Brutality blossomed from sound to image slowly. I first felt my skin crawl with fear, as if I'd have to ask my dad what to do with the dead body. I yelled the boy's name, I know I did because he responded by looking back with the painful look of having been caught in a stranger's house abusing their child. We all froze for a guffaw. I felt responsible for Jacques as though I were him. Like I'd done the thing, whatever it was. The knot of anger from my walk with Ana evaporated and the missive from on high was calmness. Calmness throughout. The breath out before jumping.

“Get out,” William screamed.

“What?” Ana said.

“Get out!” William said to us.

“Call the parents,” I said clinically to Ana.

“Sure,” she said, released by my understatement.

As soon as she'd gone, I walked directly to Jacques, lifted him and placed him down on his pile of clothing next to the bed. He dressed instantly and ran from the house.

“I'm not a homo,” my son said.

“You're not a what?” I said correctively.

“I'm not gay.”

“Who cares!” I said and grabbed him and held him so he wouldn't have to see me seeing him that way. The idea, the question of sexuality hadn't entered my mind when I'd seen the blood. The scene ripped all sense of nature, or order from my workings. The Knight had emerged from Jacques and stormed the Castle. Of course, we would never know. Some shrink would know.

The paralysis is flaccid in type, may be localized or generalized, but seldom involves the respiratory or facial muscles.

-Endocrine System and Selected Metabolic Diseases

The world, the small three block area in which he kept order, operated around Bernard; a blurred motion of antagonistic signals and aggressive lights and sounds. He could have a larger glass of wine than recommended and enjoy a light protein rich supper. He enjoyed only this time of day, a time when the lights of the small apartment he'd rented for years now sputtered on, blinking the hallway on, in off and on again corners, and long stretches of flower-patterned wall; closings of the day, and their openings to night. The way he'd been handled by the people of his life terrified him. Would he soon die, he wondered? He didn't have that all purpose zeal to even say, "no such luck." Women hadn't made their place in his life, though some had made gestures he ignored. As a little boy his mother coaxed him into odd situations with shopkeepers and local boys she knew, men she loved more than her husband, the Russian. One particular situation required Bernard sit and watch the butcher's storefront. He heard nothing from them, the butcher's tables were such solid blocks of wood. Stanley the butcher moved in a few months after the strongman left. The strongman, a fellow not unlike caricatures of Russians from films in the '40s, stood taller than most doors, balder than billiard's balls, and wore wide striped shirts like the Soviet Navy. He left because, in his own mind, he needed to live in California, not Fairbanks, where the wolves from his childhood still howled. Were these same wolves what kept Bernard from having a woman in his life? Did he fear losing his mother again? Stanley lived into his early eighties without imposing himself, and supplied Bernard a healthy lean diet and the little boy grew up larger than most men. When his mother died of the bug he inherited enough to live quiet and calm without full-time frantic work, but he worked enough to keep his brain doing things. He repaired televisions, radios, and amplifiers at a small storefront. His boss, an old Polish man, spoke little and wrote notes. The note: his form of communication, had been refined to an art. So, there was very little talk, save for attacks at the radio hosts. The two ate lunch together, light meats on thin breads and mustard, hardboiled eggs, and a few coffees. The old man ate simply, for his heart, and his employee ate simply because of the fits, the paralysis he'd inherited. The first of his fits occurred nocturnally, and unlike the rest, it involved the loss of his voice and complete paralysis of his body. After the seventeen hour sentient coma, he was fed a number of salty pills and soda water to revive him, burp him well again. The medical staff advised him to watch his diet, and for the rest of his life he'd have to enjoy protein rich light suppers, and he was to keep clear of sodium chloride. So why, he wondered, had he awoken this night, alone and searching his mind for reasons, stuck in paralysis? He hadn't had too much of anything that day, he thought. Maybe his sedentary lifestyle had put on just enough weight to trigger it. This must have been it, and it surely would all be done in a few hours. It must. He had the patience so many times before. Only now, he missed her. He missed his mother. Now could he feel the burden of the fear built as walls when he was a boy,

walls that kept everyone out and kept him safely in.

He waited for morning with the stove range and ceiling lights on inside him.

A Touch of Time

Biff Mitchell

She was much prettier than he'd imagined. Dusty brown bangs floated around her forehead with long waves splashing against the air around her neck. Her lips were two waves of flesh on the crest of a kiss. Her figure fit everyman's calendar dream—not overly undersized, not overly muscular or plump or buxom or plank-like. He could have sworn that her eyes glowed blue. She was just right. As he knew she would be.

So much for the warnings about Internet dating. He'd just hit the World Wide Jackpot and he wasn't about to wonder how he'd become this lucky.

Her name was Persephone. He didn't find it strange at all. His own name was Mordecai. Mordecai Morris. And he hadn't spoken to his parents in a long time. He couldn't remember Persephone mentioning her parents in any of their chats. He wondered if they were scholars or teachers or just well-read average Joes who thought they might wrest a name out of time and bounce it off the walls of the modern world. But he liked it. It suited her. She seemed to know a lot about history and the classics, and had described some of her favorite historical events in minute detail, as if she'd been on a movie set, designing the costumes and directing the course of action, much like a technical consultant drawing from personal memory.

He thought it was pretty damn cool that she looked as good as she did. This was just about the best thing that had ever happened to him, or likely ever would.

"You're Persephone?" he asked, smiling a little mischievously, knowing the answer.

"I don't think so," she said with a devilish smile. "What makes you think so?"

God, she was just like in her chats.

"Oh, the fact you're wearing a black turtleneck, red tartan skirt, black leggings, and you're sitting at the table I reserved for us."

"Nice guessing, Morry." It was what she called him. He loved it. It sounded even better than it read. "Hope you can read Manchurian," she said.

"This is a Manchurian restaurant?"

"You made the reservations."

"Oh, yeah." He pulled his chin lightly between two fingers. "I guess that would explain the name: The Frozen Horde. I thought it had something to do with iced desserts and lots and lots of blueberries or something."

"Blueberries!" she squealed and grabbed his hand.

They were sitting in a café outdoors, in what looked to be a medieval French city overlooking a cobblestone street busy with men in tight knickers and long white wigs, and women with gowns flowing into the horizon. He thought he'd seen this place in very old prints and paintings. After a bowl of Bluet en Glace, they were sitting in The Frozen Horde relieved the menu had pictures of the meals.

Strange, though, he wasn't hungry anymore.

She was drop dead gorgeous with the kind of lips a man could sink a kiss into and smother in lipstick with the tip of her tongue running along the edge of his soul. Big blue eyes peered through chocolate bangs, and her body could have been whittled from a stone of pure desire. She wore a skintight red gown plunging between spectacular mounds of white flesh. His eyes sizzled, his groin smoldered, his brain nearly snapped in half. She knew how to make an impression on a second date. Or was it their third? Who cared? She was drop dead gorgeous and he was the luckiest man on earth.

"Been waiting long?" he asked.

"And who might you be?" she replied.

He loved this game. "I'm the one who made the reservations for the table you're sitting at."

"Oh, him ... the one who can't read Manchurian."

"We weren't hungry anyway."

"Speak for yourself," she said. "Iced blueberries do not a meal make." Blueberries. Ice. Something rattled at the back of his head, but evaporated into the Lost Regions of his gray matter at the sound of her voice. "So, do you speak Italian?" she asked.

"Everybody speaks Italian," he said, picking up the menu. "Spaghetti. Lasagna. Linguini ..."

She cut him off with the most amazing laugh ever to tickle his eardrums and her voice slid over the table like a spilled bowl of honey stew. "How did you know I love Italian food?"

"Everybody loves Italian food," he said, and quickly regretted his words. "I mean, not that you have common tastes or anything . . . I mean . . ."

His ears buzzed with joy at the sound of her laugh. "It's OK. You're right. Everybody loves Italian, but I especially like it . . . I guess, for its historical content."

"Historical content?" he asked. "That's a strange reason to love food, but, if you say so . . ."

She reached across the table and took his hand and they were sitting across the table from Galileo Galilei as he tore off a chunk of Cabot while just around the corner in the kitchen Miro Sorvino sliced a wedge of Brushchetta and Luigi Pirandello twisted his fork into a mound of Spaghetti alla Bologna and Michelangelo Buonarroti gazed up from his wooden table as he chewed a mouthful of Tortellini di zucca and Frank Zamboni brushed ice from his jacket as his mouth watered thinking of Pizzette e Salatin and Federico Fellini scooped a steaming portion of Cannelloni al Ragu . . . and he still wasn't getting it as he dipped a garlic stick into a pool of spaghetti sauce and wondered about the wooden bowl just as it turned to porcelain and Persephone smiled at him and asked if they should order another bottle of wine.

Another bottle? How many had they had? He tried to focus his thoughts but he was caught in the glow from her eyes and that was all that mattered and he said yes,

another bottle of wine. Something red and Italian.

She was amazing. Life danced in her eyes. She was as fresh as the first time he'd met her and fallen in love on the spot, or had he already been in love after their weeks of sending and receiving over the Internet? He didn't care. She was timeless and he told her so, "You're timeless."

She smiled bouquets and heartbreak and took his hand. "Something like that," she said as they strolled past a heavily armored Samurai warrior outside a Japanese palace stretching into an ancient Far East sunset.

"But why me?" he asked.

"Why not?" she replied.

"There's nothing special about me," he said.

"Need there be?" she asked.

"But you're so ... perfect," he said. "So out of my league. Why me?"

"I have a different perspective."

He decided to leave it alone as their walk took them along a pedestrian bridge made of a single giant piece of plastic spanning two magnificent skyscrapers surrounded by flying cars and people streaking through the air in jetpacks.

Their walk finished in front of the coffee shop around the corner from where he lived. He asked if she'd like to go in for a coffee. They walked through the door and he noticed immediately that she was much prettier than he'd imagined with her dusty brown bangs floating around her face, her hair splashing against the air around her neck.

He suddenly had a craving for frozen blueberries.

His hand was wrinkled and liver-spotted, his nails cracked and dried. His eyes beamed youthfully, but the pinched gray skin around red-veined whites looked like something from the Bin of Ages. His legs wobbled whether he was standing still or walking. His head shook when he talked as though trying to shake the words out of his mouth.

She sat across from him, young and beautiful as her eyes enveloped him with their blue glow. His voice cracked as he spoke. "We've had a wonderful life together."

She smiled and nodded and said, "Yes, we have."

"I've loved you from the beginning," he said.

"I know," she said. "And right to the end." She took his hand and they were standing in total darkness until, an instant later, the darkness exploded with color and fire rushing light years in every direction, populating the emptiness with stars.

And he was in the Frozen Horde, sitting across from the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He looked at his watch and smiled. He wasn't surprised. Not a bit. Just

happy for the fraction of a second she'd spent with him.

He looked one last time into the blue glow of her eyes and winked happily as he turned to dust.

The Girl Who Left Her Body

Gianmarc Manzione

I only wanted to show my brother
how little he'd like it,
flicking a flame

under the Lucky Strike
he'd pinned between his lips,
my father watching through

the curtained window
where he waited to see me
do what he needed me to do.

It didn't hurt so much
when I could wrap my hands
around his wrist as he dragged me—

his fist locked in
the yarn of my hair—
up the stairs

to the room where he administered
the usual remedies.
But this time,

pulling my knees into the wheel
of my body—my flaw—
curling it tight and round

as the face of a watch,
I domed my arms around my head
and kept completely quiet,

letting out not a single squeal
nor whimper, for suddenly
I was a little stone girl,

a wooden doll
 able to change forms
 at the hint of a wish, unafraid,

a numbness
 I stumbled so brilliantly into
 that I became a minor god,

sitting up on the corner of the bed
 after my father left me
 to memorize how I found a way

to never cry again,
 to leave the world
 without even having to go anywhere.

May Day

Gianmarc Manzione

"They were burying Vitya Kibenok and Volodya Pravik . . . Our families were friends. There's a photo of us all in the building the day before the explosion. Our husbands are so handsome! And happy! It was the last day of that life. We were all so happy!"

- Lyudmilla Ignatenko,
wife of deceased fireman Vasily Ignatenko,

Voices from

Chernobyl

1

Now that half-open windows of unoccupied flats
exhibit their vacant expressions, and workers
fold this town into the earth

like a body, I am the visitor
of a life I mistook for my own:
the sugared berries my wife jarred

and brought to the park in wicker creels,
the flowered Artemisia that scented our sleep
there. The leap of elk over wormwood

suspended the stunned afternoon,
and clustered tomatoes throbbed
on sprinkled vines, underscoring

the incidental treasure of a birthplace
whose beauty is a symptom
of memory now.

Soldiers in surgical masks
sweep stoops of women who
crouch to close a prayer in their hands.

2

A nurse wheels my bed
toward this room's only window.
Bouquets of fireworks curl across

the May Day sky in Moscow
and permit, for a moment,
the abandonment of terror

to the calculated maneuvers
of ceremony, the unexceptional diversions
that approximate the details of an ordinary life.

Maybe madness interprets
these glittering whorls as faces
of friends who labored in a toxic swelter

that leavened their bones,
hears these pyrotechnics
as the stomp of workers wheeling

molten graphite across the roof for a medal
and a hundred rubles. Maybe my wife is not afraid of me,
maybe my death will not be horrible.

3

Is it true that radish leaves in Belarus
are the size of beet greens now?
That radiation doesn't threaten our lives

so much as the fear of it?
What does a nurse fear
when a tumor the size of a melon

keeps a boy's kidneys like a secret
as he awaits his bath at noon? When
rain rinsed chunks of strontium from the trees

before the cops we called could come
and see, how could we tell them
it wasn't anything especially memorable

we had to fear, but rather that everything remained
the same, that the tomatoes they told us not to eat were beautiful,
that nothing glistened awkwardly in the dark?

When they told us the yellow puddles the rain made
were colored by the dust of flowers,
we needed to believe it.

4

Now the room winds like a wheel and fades
to the night I saw front lawns cluttered
with fragments of cesium that melted

under the rain of a new weather
no one thought to question,
my new wife's pleated skirt

between my fingers as I lifted it up
her thigh in the lamplight of our only room
the night before.

Boys squint over imaginary guns
they aim and fire through open windows
of trains that freight them

into the rest of their lives,
laughing at the cow a farmer clothed in cellophane.
The needles of pine trees have turned tangerine.

5

Here where I watch wind contort
the shapes that fireworks left behind
into a calligraphy of smoke I almost decipher,

and the sheet-thin walls of this room
arrange and hold their boundaries,
the bed sheet whose knots leave wounds

in my arms as my wife lifts it
is not enough to persuade her I'm no longer
her husband, rather the thing a nurse describes

as "a radioactive object."
The fist of hair she pinned behind her head
fans open across my face, and I'm cushioned

against the constant attraction to a past
I neither asked for nor wish to
preserve, where the probable meanings of history

perform their crude theater,
and I cradle a rifle through houses where
no one I know lives,

kneeling behind an unhinged door
to await the panicked flash of cats
I have to kill before they wander out of "the zone."

If the cans of vodka we found
and drank there left an aftertaste of
cesium in our mouths, it helped us

forget just the same as planes approached
the reactor's smoking crater,
convincing even the few

who knew what they meant
of an unpublicized urgency,
a challenge to the assumed

permanence of a town
whose streets continue
to station our lives.

Any Average Night

Gianmarc Manzione

Only the pills I pull from a glue of spilled rum
oppose the room's unending dailiness.

A ceiling fan crusts their powder-blue prints to the hutch
as it winds the day down to no clarity in particular,

and the page of an open newspaper, ringed with
a mug's spilled coffee, arranges

the domesticities of any average night.
Why is there nothing to say?

The ones you didn't think to swallow
make a slurry that stiffens in the bottom of a plastic cup—

your untidy stirred farewell
that couldn't promise even one night's sleep

downtown, where a paid stranger reads to herself at your bedside
and doesn't know who you love,

and you do not contest the indignity
of a doctor's practiced gestures, unashamed.

Even the moon, throbbing like a hammered thumb,
believes it will last forever.

We Rise In Slow

Erik Berg

Sometimes a man can be lost in memories. And when they're sweet, it's the same love, and when they're bitter, the same horror, but either way he is not himself, and cannot be weather he wants to or not. There's no glory, or pride to the both of them; it's painful, always, because there is no self. Only when a man forgets can he be alive again, like the sick regained, or a dead man risen. He can move on; he can stagger forward, though weak and frail, which is better always than standing still.

By the time he came back the boy had grown older. His hair was no longer fair, but dark and strong above the eyes, though not enough to make him ugly. Even with the change he was always the boy and good enough to look at if one needed to. His shoulders and chest had grown thick from days with the axe, and were considered the best of his features, but Adam used them only for the work. When there was no work, they would be useless, and he didn't mind it that way. He did not swing the axe out of pleasure.

The trees grew little on the dry flat land where the home was, only in small patches in the hills. A few oaks grew among the pines, and sycamores flowered up from ravines and folds in the hills. One was lucky if they got to the oaks because the wood was stronger and worth more than the pines, and there were far more pines than there were oak. The ranch extended through small hills, patched in white sands and light brown grass, down to a flat land of poor soil that grew little; past attempts to grow strawberries left marks on the flatlands; white, torn plastic hoods remained pushed aside from where the raspberries failed to yield. What was left to earn was the cattle, but they foraged with as little as they would feral and the meat suffered. And so there was always need for the oaks, as there was always need for money.

It was not beautiful country, and the two could see it clear from the hills as they worked in the trees, and together they knew it. Adam pulled the weight of the axe above his shoulder, and the pain of its repetition cut once more into the muscle of his shoulder. He knew it was good work because he felt the tired only as an afterthought. His mind was not the same as his body, and when he thought, he was lost, and he felt it only when the ache became too sharp to ignore, and he had to rest. And then always he was lost again. The axe head tore at a gash in the oak flesh and the tree wavered; he did it once more and rested. The light yellow green leaves passed with the breeze and they caught a partial glaze of the sun as it fell into the patchwork hills. At times he felt the oaks were beautiful; the land was ugly, and always would be, but the oaks were beautiful. They were impartial to the land, to the pines and sycamores, and he felt relieved in cutting them free from the company.

"You should be more careful. You look dazed again."

A younger version of his father looked down from the hill above, only one with health

and liveliness. His brother had taken a rest from working a pine and he sat beneath the shade of the brown needles with his axe beside him. He did not have Adam's talent. His mind couldn't leave the work, and he felt every ache and pain, and that was why he needed the rest. Adam heard him only in the distance, as he did the wind that fled through the knolls and he didn't mind. He swung the head once more and the tree buckled; the bark snapped, and the bulk gave in and fell against the slope, into the grass soft and muffled.

They surrounded the tree quick as it fell like animals to a carcass. They circled it once or twice and then rested upon the warm bark; fine lines fell from the sun even still as it faded. The death of anything is always quiet and somber, weather from the earth or the soil, and the two sat still and looked down at the small cabin leaking smoke into the yellow sky.

The brother pulled from his pocket a small bag of walnuts, and Adam realized how hungry he was though the food would only make him crave something larger.

"What do you think about?" the brother said. "When your eyes are like they are now, what do you think about?"

"How are my eyes?"

"They're gone somewhere else."

"I don't think I can be here."

"You should be careful. One of these times your axe will land in something other than the tree, and you wouldn't know enough to care until you're dead."

Adam looked ahead at the setting sun. Streaks of orange spilled over the flatlands, and fragments of night grew from the ravines and the folds. Soon it would take over. He had thought of painting it again. He had not tried because the axe took what it had from his arms, and when he had to think, he felt the pain. While there was work, there was enough to cope and nothing more; and when the body could cope no longer, there was one; to work and to think were incompatible. The trees were primary. And though he still thought of it. His brother knew the look, and he looked around for the bag of supplies but Adam had left it behind. Adam was aware there was only enough life in a man for one necessity, and his body could cope little more than it had.

"Could you paint this place?" the brother asked. "How it is now."

"I could to some, but not to everyone."

"Do you know why?"

"Not with what I know."

"I don't know either, but I know what I see, and I would paint the ugliness. When places are beautiful, they paint the beautiful because there is much of it. And when places are ugly too, then I would do the same."

"Then you should be a painter too."

"No. It wouldn't sell. People don't want the ugliness. They know much about the beauty because they love it. But they know nothing about the ugliness. It scares them. Everything is hidden. They do it well enough that nobody knows but a few of us. It's

like this place. Only we know about it. All these beautiful places we see everywhere, we know so much about without ever seeing for ourselves. But these ugly places, only the few of us know about.”

“We grow to love the beautiful places more then. We are lucky.”

“To need them,” the brother said. “Sometimes we need them. And that is why I would not be a painter. I would paint things people would not want to see.”

“All of us do that. It’s why we have no money.”

“But I’d have no pride in it. I’d paint horrible things, and I wouldn’t be proud of them. There is no pleasure in that.”

“No, there wouldn’t be.”

“Do you need the beautiful places?”

“I do.”

“And that’s what you think about, don’t you?”

“Some people live places they aren’t. It’s what you can do when you don’t care for the things you see.”

The brother stood, a little regained from the rest. He pulled a smaller axe from his boot and began to strip away the smaller foliage and twigs of the tree, freeing the bulk.

“Can you learn to tame yourself?” he said. “Overtime you can make yourself love ugly things, can’t you?”

“You cannot love ugly things. Only when you come to find them beautiful, then you can love them. But you cannot love ugliness. And if you did it would be a shame and a waste. You’d resent yourself.”

“I resent myself now,” the brother said. “So I have little to loose.”

Adam felt the pain settle enough to stand and he took a deep breath from the warm evening and helped to strip the tree. The bark gave a strong scent as it broke, like the earth and the evening at once. Now the land was orange and pink like the flames of a smolder, and growing violet and yellow like the petals in the wild, and all the colors brought a lacking to the mind, about how little beauty the land could bring on its own, and how dull the white sands tempered the color—at how little the breeze sung through the ravines.

“He wants you to go,” the brother said.

Adam turned and looked down the hillside, toward the cabin. An evening shade covered the porch and the cabin looked nothing more than a small box on the ground. The home had been there long before they’d come to work the ranch and now was aged and weathered. At some point, Adam was sure it had been new; it had fresh lumber and paint, and good hopes; but like the land, and the ranch with it, the home had spent what it could and now only lingered as a poor memory. There was no movement on the porch, as he knew there wouldn’t be. The only signs of life were the swallows that grafted mud to the awnings and bred until their nests were destroyed; and even that too had stopped along the way, and the birds bred freely. Adam felt the shades shift and the house belittled beneath them; a home mimicked the passions of

the men and women who lived it, and its passions had died long ago.

“He’s getting worse,” Adam said; he felt uncomfortable looking into his brother’s eyes because they were his fathers, and it was not something to speak about in their presence. “I think he’s getting worse.”

“He’s dying,” the brother said. “It won’t be long.”

“No.”

“He’ll talk to you soon. He knows you’d like to leave and he wants you to go. He told me so already.”

“He’s said nothing to me.”

“But he will,” the brother said. “And when he talks to you, you should leave.”

“Sometimes we can’t.”

“Then it would be a shame,” he said. “Life is not beautiful. Always it has to be a shame. But only a few of us know that too.”

The two cleaned the tree in silence and threw aside the waste like hunters. They worked methodically, and they used what little light crept over the hills to aid them. It was difficult work in the evening, and as the light fell it was hard to see the ground and the trail down the hill and they moved only because they knew where to and because they had to; the moon had no patience in the matter. By width the tree was thick and they both knew would take in well enough for what they needed. They worked the trunk into three large pieces, all too heavy for one. In daylight they would have taken more trips to make the load easier, but now in the dark they did the best they could. Adam led down the hill, while the brother lifted his weight from the rear, and together they descended the hill toward the flat land.

And by the third trip they rested just before the base of the hill. The evening no longer touched the land, only a faint line from above where the oak had grown, aged, and passed. For a moment, the moon was bright and made the earth an alien white along the sands; it cast shadows on the home and the two men, and the earth moved now more than it had before. There were no coyotes in the hills because there was no food in the hills, and the night was quiet without them, with light songs from the katydids. Adam rested on a small thicket of bunch grass and felt an ache tense through the worn muscle. Tomorrow he would be stronger, and tomorrow he would work again. That was always the method of work; the body would be stronger.

“Have you been sleeping?” the brother asked.

“No,” Adam said. “My body knows everything, even if I don’t. It makes it hard to sleep.”

“I feel that too. It’s as if he’s already dead.”

“Maybe we know before it happens, like the dogs.”

“We do,” the brother said. “I know we do.” The warmth had weathered gently from the flatlands, and now the air was cold and each breath blew visible from his lips. “When he talks to you, you need to listen. You should leave.”

“Does he want you to go too?”

“No. But I don’t mind this place. He can tell that. It’s ugly, but I don’t mind it. Somehow

I feel comfortable here. But you need to though.”

“Lets get going. I’m tired, and if I lay anymore I won’t get back up.”

“Nothing will mind you here,” the brother said. “Listen to the calm, somewhere in it there’s splendor. I feel tired now too.”

Adam fought the ache in his limbs and he pushed away from the sand and took his place. The two crossed the yard and gathered the three pieces of oak into a pile beside the home. An owl watched from the roof and called once, but they were too weary to take note of it. The work was done for the night, and that was what mattered until it was needed again—and that need was part of the thirst and hunger of life, if not more so vital; a man can starve, but he cannot deny sleep.

When they entered the cabin the door squeaked; the hinges were old and tired like the home, and the living room sung of the broken calm. They moved slowly, like children into the dark. Only faint lines from the moon crossed the drapes and lit the table and the chairs in the small kitchen. A flicker passed down the hall, from the room of their father, but they were alone. The brother fell onto the cushions of the sofa and his eyes closed quickly on themselves; each breath lengthened and he was asleep before he could settle his body squarely. Adam did not sit; if he were to rest, he would not wake until the morning, and that was too late. He stood watching the hall and the slight flicker of light conflicting with the moon. It made him nervous to watch the hall, and it made him uneasy to look at his brother—the image of his father distorted and strewn upon the sofa. He did not react to the feelings because he couldn’t. In the weariness a man does not think as he should but as the body enables, and for a moment he felt as real as the stones that lined the hills.

The wind blew quickly through the ravines, picked up swiftly, but faltered by the time it worked the flatlands, and it died to a slow moving calm that amounted to nothing. Outside the lands were confined to a chasm, away from the wilds, and too far beneath the stars and the moon to exhaust in the radiance. The cabin was alone, as Adam felt it; outside was a world meant for men to live, and for men to die, not to think, and not for longevity.

He passed through the moonlight, down the hall toward his father’s open door, not staggered by the tired any longer. His mother was asleep in a chair by the bedside. Her head fell against the wood of a small desk that held a few burning candles and she sat bundled to her chin in wool blankets. The candles had burned low on the wick, and gave only enough light to show off permanence in the room; it was the moon that gave light to the body. A poor mold of his father lay still beneath the blankets, and he traced the lines up toward his sunken face. The man had not been sleeping. His eyes were tired and damned, but open, and it was hard to look at the man because the eyes were the same, but the body had long changed. The blankets sunk as he took in breaths, and his muscles strained to a full churning of the cold air. For the first time in days, the man moved, and it hurt him as much as it did to lay still; he placed a finger by his lips to order quiet, and he motioned Adam into the room.

Adam pulled a wooden stool beside the bed, and he sat close so the man wouldn't need to strain anymore than he had. His father's face was gray except for the cheeks which had become a light blue and sunk so the shape of the skull was prominent above any other features; the moon spilled in lines along the man's face so that his eyes were in the shades and his lips moved clearly in the green as he spoke.

"Do the dead frighten you?" he asked, weak but with as much pride as a child.

Adam looked to the floor, into the dark where his boots were unseen; he had no answer for the question, and *that* was what frightened him.

"I know it," the man said. "They frighten me too. They frighten me a lot more."

"There'll be some money coming in. We worked into the evening tonight. It should pay off what we need for now. There's still enough timber in the hills."

"It'll be gone soon enough. The trees aren't like cattle; they grow slowly you know."

"There's ways to live otherwise."

"Yes," the man said. "There's always a way when you want to live. But when you're somewhere else, you don't have the pleasure. I don't have the pleasure any longer and I know it. You've never had the pleasure, but you hide it."

"If it was my choice I would go," Adam said. "I can't leave."

"You can't. But you'll leave because you need to."

"Even the worst of places can have a hold on you. Even places you don't want to be; they're like roots."

"It's the dead that have their hold. Soon enough I'll know about roots better than you," the man said; his chest sunk further from the strain of speaking and each breath came heavy and with pain. "Look at my body. I know as much as you that it's passed away; I have the dead of my own self as the roots. I'm no more alive than the rotting stumps alone in the hills."

"But your head is still with you."

"My head has always been with me. And I've known always what was coming to me—that's how I accept it, because I understand it as much as the work that made me this way. I've worked the ranches. I've done my dues. I've felt my pain. I accept the tenure of my body. But for a man to dream of another way—to work his body to a pain he doesn't understand—*that* is frightening. More than the death...the life becomes an illness. And the pain I feel now you understand as much as I do. I didn't know that until I felt it, but now I know."

"Our pains are not the same," Adam said.

The old man moved his lips to grin, but it fell short of expression.

"Our aches are always the same in the end," he said. "It's our pleasures that makes us different. A father cannot watch his son get sicker."

"I can't leave," Adam said. "They'll be alone."

"They'll be alone," the man said. "But they'll live the same as you'll live, and they'll live here, where it's not so beautiful, because I'll be here below them. The roots that tie you now are young. There is a bond between the land and the blood of people. Where we

lay our dead becomes our own, and never truly until then, no matter the deeds or the law; this is a fact of all people—you will not leave when I'm gone, and you will not be alive here either. That's why you need to go."

Adam looked to his mother. The candlelight flickered against her cold cheeks and she gripped strong at the blankets up to her neck.

"Will she understand?" he asked.

"No," the man said. "Life is not easy. And that's how we suffer."

For a moment, the two were still, and the breeze pressed forward through the ravines into the flatlands and then gently onto the cabin. Somewhere over the hills, the clouds were gathering in a deep violet, and they passed now along the moon until the room was dark, and Adam could see only the pale of the man's skin, and how he shivered where he lay. The man reached forward and grabbed Adam's hand into his own; the skin was cold like water, and he felt the tremble.

"Tell me," his father said. "Where is it you'll go?"

"We all have our own paradise."

"We do," the man said. "You'll be there soon. And I will too."

The man let go and collapsed into the pillow. What was left shrunk toward the shadows and the moon no longer showed the streaks along his face. He trembled beneath the blankets, and Adam felt the wind push stronger through the ravines and press against the windows. He would die very soon, and he was sure of it for a reason he didn't know, but was clear of.

Adam stood and blew the fire from the candles. The room fell into a light green stage of the moon, and the shades no longer danced along the walls but were fixed to where the life had been. He straightened out the blankets on his mother's body, but he did not look at her.

He gathered his things in a small bag and dressed warm. He moved calm through the living room as he had when they entered, and by now the clouds had covered the moon; he was sure now of the answer—it was not the dead that frightened him, but the passing of life. He moved by his brother on the sofa to the door. The hinges squealed and he lowered them slowly until the cabin was alone again and quiet as the night.

The brother stirred as the door closed. He shivered from the cold and his eyes grew weary once more, though he was happy.

"You needed to," he said; the wind howled and the world was rough. "You need to." And before the pains could return to the body, he fell back to sleep from the ache and the tired.

Marrow

Heather Bell Adams

Bone Marrow: a soft, highly vascular modified connective tissue that occupies the cavities of most bones and occurs in two forms: one that is yellowish, consisting chiefly of fat cells, and found especially in the cavities of long bones; and one that is reddish, the chief site of blood cell formation, occurring in the normal adult in cancellous tissue especially of certain flat bones, called also red marrow.¹

Our mother piling hangers and clothes on the bed, organizing a closet. Washing old peanut butter jars and peeling off the labels. Putting a pan of granola in the oven. Climbing up a step stool to dust the books on the top shelf. Pinning tablecloths on the clothesline to air out. Squatting down by one of her plants to pull out a weed.

And then one day sleeping late. The first time we can remember. Breathing differently.

Dr. Sacco, winding his stethoscope around his hand, saying he thinks it's pneumonia, but we'll know for sure when the blood work comes back. Asking me if I'm old enough to drive home.

Only with an adult. I only have my learners' permit, I tell him.

Upon physical exam, the patient may exhibit a swollen spleen, liver, or lymph nodes. A complete blood count will show anemia and a low number of platelets. White blood count is usually high. Signs relating to leukostasis include respiratory distress.²

Our father kneeling down in front of me and my sister, blocking the TV we were watching when he came in. Smelling like sweat. His shoulders shaking.

Acute myelogenous leukemia is a malignant disease of the bone marrow in which hematopoietic precursors are arrested in an early stage of development. Most AML subtypes are distinguished from other related blood disorders by the presence of more than 20% blasts in the bone marrow.³

My sister and I in our rooms brushing our hair for dinner. A fried smell coming down the hallway. The first time in weeks our mother has felt up to cooking. Thumping through the wall between our bedrooms, my sister's music: Martina McBride's "Independence Day." Her voice singing along, even though we don't want independence, neither of us do, not like what's coming. Our father's truck pulling into the driveway. His hello that is full and loud and that says everything is going to be okay.

In an allogeneic bone marrow transplant, stem cells are removed from a donor. Bone marrow harvest is performed under general anesthesia. The bone marrow is removed from the back of both hip bones. The amount removed depends on the weight of the

*person who is receiving it.*⁴

My sister and I cleaning the house, every surface we can think of. The chairs, couches, tables. The beds. The wood floors and the rugs. The kitchen counters. The toilets, sinks, bathtubs. Going to bed because we can't think of what else to do. The next day and the next day after that, eating breakfast and going to school and then home again, where our grandmother is waiting with dinner. She has let herself in with her key. When we walk in the back door, she is standing at the oven, adjusting a dial. After we eat, she pulls out the mop, but we stop her.

"Nanny, we already did that."

"It's okay, I'll just give it a quick –"

"Please. We did it yesterday."

She frowns. "Well, is there anything else you need? What can I do? Has your dad called since you got home from school?"

My sister shrugs and looks at me.

"Not really. I can't think of anything," I finally say. "He usually calls in the morning. No updates since then."

"We'll finish our homework," my sister says. "And then go to bed, I guess."

"Okay, if you're sure. I'll head out then, unless you want me to stay. I can. It'd be no problem for me to stay here."

I shake my head. "You can go home. We'll call you if we need anything."

We both hug her and she gets her purse from the chair. Hooks it over her arm and touches us on our heads before she turns to the back door.

*Complications from transfer can include anemia, mucositis, graft-versus-host disease, graft failure, and infection, including pneumonia.*⁵

Later, I go outside. There is a light on in the garage, and I push the door open. Our grandmother hasn't gone home. She is in the garage, sweeping. She moves the broom around where the car is parked, over and over again. The broom makes a dry, rasping sound. I let the door close and leave her there.

*Marrow: bone marrow; the substance of the spinal cord; the choicest of food; the seat of animal vigor; the inmost, best, or essential part.*⁶

I pull my coat tighter around me and walk over to the patio. There is snow on the picnic table and I try to brush some of it off, but it's frozen solid. I sit down anyway. Almost immediately my pants feel wet, and the wetness is the only thing that seems real. Somewhere down the street, a mother calls out to her children to come inside. It's too cold to be out there, she says.

Elena Faces the Fire

Sofia M Starnes

*For indeed our God is a
consuming fire.
Heb 12:29*

I

His? How could she wish to be His? When she was feverish, He could have laid a palm and calmed the fire, but didn't. When she walked out the door, into another room, the one where circuits sparked, He could have shown His face, the one with honeyed beard, but didn't. When every wall collapsed, flame coating steel and glass, He could have rained on them, but didn't. When every curtain dropped, wearing cinder and ash, He could have swept the dust, but didn't. How could she wish to be His?

II

And in a place called Heart,
the choice is this:
embalmed or resurrected.
she'll wander to the side

of Him who, in a corner,
pockets the chestnut flesh
hot from a fire,
from angry sparks and embers.

He thumbs the soot,
once, twice,
and for a caring hour,
its creamy cheeks, uncharred.

III

Fires are different here. They start as good. Hearth, chimney, logs; crackle, cinder, wood.

Fire on these stones is like a fairy at home. Heat. Light. This continent of winter storms.

IV

She lost her ring in embers. After the fire.
Small. Tough. An emblem. To no one, worth—
Not to the cat who moused it, nor to the dove
whose beak broke cleanly, against

that hardy ring, now hidden by soil and fire,
years after celebrating her going forth.
Flames turned her day to fireside, to love-
lit room: where life means waiting, caressed.

Oxygen Defined

Christie Stratos

I was underwater, but I wasn't drowning yet. The water was a deep blue – I had never seen the surface. I glided along, alone, hearing my hands and arms part the water, feeling my feet and legs propel me forward. I could swim forever this way. From time to time I ended up in lighter or darker waters, but I never saw the surface and I never saw the bottom. And I never breathed.

At some point, I saw a small bubble rising close to my face while I swam. I paused and watched it rise above me. I had never seen this before. I looked beneath me for the source and found that there was a sparse stream of bubbles coming from a single place. I slowly swam down to find where they were coming from. I fully expected a life source of some kind, whether like me or not. Instead, the bubbles were coming from something strange: there were two translucent buttons that looked like the ones in elevators, one triangle pointing left and one pointing right. The bubbles were coming from the empty space between them. Both buttons glowed white to a simultaneous slow pulse.

I pushed the button that pointed right. Above the two buttons, a reel of film faded into view and began to whir by. It seemed unending. I reached out and touched it, and my finger landed on one particular scene, stopping the film dead. It was a scene from my life – the one I most regretted. I looked around for something sharp and, finding nothing but emptiness, reached out and tore the scene from the film with my own hands. I tried to pull both sides of the film back together where the scene had been, but every time I let go, they slowly pulled back apart, leaving just enough room for the missing scene. Looking at the hated scene in my hands, I noticed a sparkle. And then another and another until the whole scene and the film around it were sparkling. I let go. The scene floated back to its original spot in the film and reattached itself. I took it in my hands and held it close to my heart - and floated to the surface. I finally took my first breath.

Lyla's Bridge

Thor Benson

Sometimes when you're reaching for the middle, you fall to the other side. Sometimes you don't think you'll get back. And every so often, or perhaps one last time, you don't see the sides anymore.

Breathe.

It was another rainy day in Portland, the kind that makes your wish you had moved to Hawaii, or Cabo San Lucas, somewhere where the sporadic rain is more akin to a concubine; short intense visits. The rain in Portland dances around like it just got a pay raise; selfishly, it's just as passive aggressive as the population.

I'm sipping on a bitter black coffee in a breakfast café trying to remember why Lyla committed manslaughter. Her family owned guns, but that wasn't it. Her boyfriend sold drugs, but that wasn't it. Her pack was full of cigarettes, but that wasn't it.

Struggle.

Lyla was drinking too much, a life was slipping into the bottle when she wasn't looking, but I saw it. I saw it slither up a throat canal like a fog and hide in her peripheral vision. I saw Lyla commit manslaughter when she didn't know she was doing it. I saw things Lyla couldn't see anymore.

Lyla had lived a difficult life, by my personal standards. She never suffered a civil war, or famine, but her family was often uncivil, and she was famished for attention. There wasn't anything you could tell her that she didn't already know, and would have a response for. She would agree with you, but the fact of the matter is that it didn't matter, to her.

It doesn't matter to me Rider. Nothing matters to me lately," she would tell me.

She would call me, crying, lost. Sometimes she would find herself in strange parts of town, wandering in a solemn fashion. She wouldn't know why she called, or what she wanted to talk about. She would just call crying, and tell me that nothing made sense to her anymore. It was hard for me to hear that, because sometimes it was hard to tell someone things *do* make sense, when you know you don't believe it yourself.

"Stop thinking so much," I would say.

Push.

The headlights of cars are probably reflecting on the choppy river, unaware of the frigid graveyard that they illumine. There's a very tall bridge there, gigantic rocks, rotted docks, and there's a park with a mausoleum. That's where it is, that's where everything is.

It's raining outside this cafe, and it's kind of ironic. It's kind of ironic, because that person is dead, and Lyla killed her. Lyla never tried to stop it from happening, Lyla drank until she couldn't control herself, and Lyla just froze up, and she didn't do anything. Lyla took away the one person I could rely on, even she couldn't rely on herself, and now there will forever be 12 feet of water between Lyla and I.

by **Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé**

cao zhi guo ji :: here comes the crowding of the mourners

There is the middle-aged homosexual living down the block. It seems silly to talk of blocks in this village, since the concept doesn't exist here. Yet, everyone speaks of the other in that particular way, using as a reference point where they live. As if where they chose to stay was an indictment of who they had become, and together, these addresses, or allusions to their geography, made a map of this otherworldly commune, and maybe how it should look. It is a construction, a constructed reality like any other. As is the constructed reality of the middle-aged homosexual, good-looking enough to turn heads, of both men and women. He dresses impeccably, even in this heat. Long sleeves, rolled up to the elbows like a debonair. Two buttons undone at the top. A good belt, solid buckle in a matte silver. Well-cut pants, worn a bit low, roomy with two pleats down the front. It's rare to see him acknowledge anybody, he's happily sequestered himself in the comfort of his own mind, this psychological space so secret that everyone is impelled to desire greater insight, as is typical of the human condition. He's not closeted, yet he's not one to celebrate his orientation, his proclivities as the tourist from Bordeaux said. He said this with a high-Brit winsomeness, as if to mimic the affectedness, like a limp wrist. It was rude, he knew, and he did it just yards away from the man. What's his name again? The gay guy twelve doors down the block? More specifics, as if the accuracy articulated something more about the man, and gave everyone reason to talk about him, and in so doing, give him some definition. It was this kind of bloodlust, this need to build character – assemble true-to-life persons, as if drawing up a storyboard – then to demolish it that seemed to characterize this place. It was a categorical imperative almost, and the more one clued oneself into its machinations, the more one became party to it.

feng can lu su :: travel is hard, something of an endurance

And the more one understood its workings, the more one became subject to it, a witting victim and perpetrator. There is the aging former model too, leggy, hair loosely done up in a chignon. Clearly, she was a stunning beauty in her prime, which spanned only three good years. And this was decades ago, might as well have been an alternate universe. Her stories are favorites among the locals, who listen intently, a penchant for the exotic, and they seem almost Orientalist. Only the other way around, as if they were Gauguin, and she were a willing subject of inquiry, and study, and appraisal. Her stories are dreamy ones, of shopping in Paris, and wearing haute couture on its catwalks. She still keeps the Valentino dress. It was a gift, and she made the designer sign it, with a permanent marker, on the linen beneath its large hoop of a skirt. It has a train, and the locals hold it up over their faces, to feel its fabric, the way children run their fingers over those cloth books. It is garish really. A portmanteau of lace, silk, satin, chiffon, tweed, wool. Light and heavy, thin and thick, pigskin even. A new word has to be given to this. This is a new creation unto itself, not just a look but a new kind of texture. The locals – she likes calling them locals, as opposed to natives – hold the dress against their skin, as if to compare colors, and against their shoulders, as if to see if the dress would fit. In her home, they say there's a wall that's been converted into a giant shoe rack. On it are heels of every color, belonging to brands she rattles off the way Geronimo rattles off the names of the literati. Jimmy Choo. Oscar de la Renta. Alexander McQueen. The locals can't pronounce these names, nor does the glamour truly translate, in the way the glitterati would mean at, say, a press cocktail in uptown Manhattan. This is a different kind of toughing it out, the model shares with her small crowd. This is a different kind of borough.

chuan zhen yin xian :: to act as a go-between

There's the debate about gentrification going on. A new class of visitor, with money and means, and an end in mind. The end being this place essentially, as far away from the known world as possible. Their money will purchase them a plot of land, hopefully safety in numbers, albeit this might be a leap of faith. In this village of such alien rules and mores. There's the lack of air-conditioning, and someone has promised to bring in the business, and everyone seems ecstatic. The idea garnered a unanimous vote during the town meeting. The medicine woman was there, and she put up her hand too. It was a strange system, much like an auction really, where everyone held up a small flag. Our votes were not small tickets dropped into a slot in a box on our way out, no, they were accompanied by fierce gesturing and overt expressions of approval or disapproval. Orations by some, almost. It was strangely democratic. No throwing of chairs or anyone beaten to a bloody pulp. Maybe this is what democracy looks like when it is just emerging. In a culture that has yet to experience it, or reason with it, or suffer its necessary evils. A newcomer suggested putting in picket fences around each hut. There was the idea of tapping into state resources for proper electricity, forget the whole matter of importing generators. What about the internet, and wireless technology? There was a clear sarcasm attached to that idea. "Necessary evils?" Geronimo would have asked, his wide open eyes saying more than his words. "The Jew in my bloodline will tell me to ask more questions about the viability of this idea of yours," Jesuit says to the aging model, and what seems like a retinue representing the bourgeoisie behind her. "That's when the Jew in me talks, and I let it do the thinking momentarily. So, with regard to the matter of gentrification here and about, your thoughts please?"

chen yuan mo bai :: grievous wrongs and how they are to be redressed

"My grandfather stopped talking to me after I joined the Society," Jesuit says, the matter clearly still a painful memory. "He was so mad he walked out of our house. He didn't even pack a bag to take with him, and left his all his belongings behind. He was a collector, there was so much of his life bound in the family. But he wanted nothing to do with it anymore. On his way out, he muttered something loudly, and said he had withdrawn his Hanukkat HaBayit for our home. The Hanukkat HaBayit is the ceremony of blessing a home. Usually accompanied by a dedication. He plucked the mezuzah from the doorpost with both hands, with such force that the doorpost trembled. The mezuzah has been passed down from his grandfather, and even further along back in time." He waits to find out if he's understood what he has just shared, as if the memory needs to be exact, and unblemished. As if an exact account or rendering honors it. It's not his last memory of his grandfather, he says, the other times not nearly as tense or distressing. To his mother mostly, who found herself again more alone. "Loneliness is usually accompanied by many other conditions," Jesuit says. "Like aggression and rejection. Like loudness, the noise of deep resentment. A crippling of the human heart, and its ability to forgive, even when one's full being desires it. Anger. Guilt. Temporary remorse that reverts to anger. It's a slippery slope of emotions that leads one into one's own abyss, and the journey seems not so much a series of violent jolts but a smooth transition. Into a need, a need both primal and new. A need for separation. And there's no anxiety in this separation."

dian pu bu po :: to be irrefutable

He is genuinely annoyed by the subject of the discussion. He isn't aware that he's speaking of himself abstractly, using the third person, as if the distance smothered a bit of the detail. "One is less worried about the matter of who caused it or who said what to whom," he continues. "With time, and this is not to say that this is healing that's at work here. But with time, the snatches of memory become your salve, and while you grapple with the loss of truth and veracity, you are relieved that the web – and it is a web – is torn in some of its parts, and weakened as a result of it." Jesuit seems to tire when he speaks of such things, his chin drooping so low, as to lay on his chest, the soft fold of skin like a pillow beneath his jaw. He feels this is impulsive behavior, his confession – one of a series in front of Gigi – something of an irresistible force coming from within him. "Freud would have found the source of this angst so delayed in life, so near death. Especially for people like us, men of the cloth. Our repression, this libido that we trap under our skin, which thereby traps us in turn, almost as if it were corporeal, and capable of vengeance on its own host body. It is debilitating." Later, he sneaked into his grandfather's garden, and watched from outside what living with his grandfather would have been like. He frowned on cooking any meat with milk – "No Basar BeHalab," so there was a glass of milk for breakfast, and no meat altogether, to make things easy. The chicken carbonara on Thursdays at the Society would have been a no. His grandfather loved to start his stories with "Bereshit", its Hebrew meaning "In the beginning". It gave all his personal stories the charm of a fairytale. Jesuit missed these stories. His grandfather had seen the world, worked on a ship to do so – these were stories of adventure, and for a boy growing up in a dense city, these were entries into a magical world. Bereshit. It helms Genesis, heralds in the Books of Moses. His grandfather lent that same grandiosity to his own life.

The White House Without Scaffolding Contains the Green Door

Kim Farleigh

Flowers sat in wicker baskets on a window ledge, lemons in blue dishes, clattering cutlery clanging like the clamour of internal worlds.

The waitress brimmed with beauty, her black hair over round breasts.

Untouchable sensuality made David feel small, like a speck in a whirlpool of wonder.

Julia's blonde plaits bordered her red cheeks, her green eyes deep-set. Her phone voice had been stripped of enthusiasm – bare, like the trees outside.

She gave him a quick kiss.

“You look good,” she said.

“You, too,” he replied.

Her weary face hardened. Usually she slammed steel doors upon prejudice dungeons; but now?

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“So, so,” she replied.

“The Golden Oesophagus of Amsterdam is finding work hard to swallow?” he quipped.

“I was late,” she replied, “because of autograph hunters.”

Her smile was brief. Her *tiredness* gnawed his self-esteem, creating a pulp of irksome analysis.

“You look tired,” he offered.

She sighed: “Everyone says this to me these days.”

The pulp got greener.

“How's your sister's orchestra?” he asked.

A vibrant smile, the one he hadn't seen until then, gave her energy, making him feel better.

“They mix different types of music together,” she said, “in a really entertaining way. They have such fun.”

“Fun” left her mouth like a gasp.

“I have to go,” she said. “I’m supposed to be rehearsing now.”

He paid. The waitress’s big eyes resembled illuminated mahogany.

“Are you coming to the rehearsal?” Julia asked.

Her tone had the flatness of the tire on a bike in the bike rack outside.

“I’d like to,” he replied.

She gave him the address. Surprise swirled in his head, like a dust storm. Traveling separately! A preconception shattered.

“Marc’s house is the white house without scaffolding,” she said. “And you can stay there.”

Separation increased as they left through separate doors; he to the tram station, she to the bike rack.

He watched her riding away, disappearing into a dark mist.

He sat alone at the tram stop, the darkness like a penitence for crimes committed against unwritten laws, like the feeling you get when you’re alone at Christmas.

Illumination in the streets’ dark facades stood out like reminders of other people’s satisfied intimacy.

Lit-up windows in the street the *White House Without Scaffolding* was in glowed like security in the dimly-lit opulence, sturdy facades with an upright abruptness designed to keep out the unwanted, the windows’ lemon light so harmonious that it made his vulnerable imagination exaggerate the sense of belonging that the flats’ inhabitants must have had.

A car’s rumbling cracked the quiet; stillness returned as the car’s droning got consumed by the mouth of darkness that the city’s streets seemed to be sitting in.

From that mouth came Julia’s wailing voice, like a cry from the unconscious, a melodious outpouring of grief that dominated the street that *The White House Without Scaffolding* was in, the white house like a detached mystery in a built-up gathering of dark walls.

The scaffolding, like a leviathan’s skeleton, stood apart from the slanting roofs and the carved eaves of *The White House Without Scaffolding*, the only detached building in the street that resembled a distorted house from German expressionism – all angles and slopes, converging and diverging lines.

“Go to the green door,” Marc said, through the intercom.

Firstly, there was the *White House Without Scaffolding*; now, David thought, there's *The Green Door*.

Flash-eyed Marc ignored handshakes and said: "They're warming their voices up. Take your shoes off. Put them there. Hang your coat up there. Then go upstairs. The musicians are upstairs. Are you alright?"

"Yes."

Marc fled back into the rehearsal room, as if his presence in that chamber was essential for Dutch chamber music.

David stood barefoot in the food pantry. People upstairs were chatting and tuning musical instruments. The drawn-out notes from above formed a discordant howl, like the cacophony occurring in David's mind, notes like auditory extractions of teeth. Go upstairs.....Did the musicians want a stranger, unable to understand their language, invading their privacy, staring at them like an idiot? A stranger whose hand hadn't even been shaken by the house's owner?

He put his shoes back on. A feeling of being superfluous invaded his head like a howling breeze stirring up dust on a barren plain.

Someone started coming down the stairs. The footsteps grew louder, like an on-coming, pernicious destiny. He stood in the pantry, waiting.

"Hello," he said.

A perplexed woman stared, with child-like bafflement, amazed to see a foreigner, fully-dressed, holding bags, in the pantry, as if she was looking at a strange specimen in a zoo.

"Hello," she answered back, before dashing into the singing room.

David thought: If the musicians come past, one by one, to go into the rehearsal room – that I appear to have been barred from entering – what then?

He charged through *The Green Door*, fleeing past the black bones of the scaffolding, Julia's voice wailing with his internal cry. Adolescent distress, forgotten in the nurturing of understanding friends, was being enhanced by that voice that swept over the streets, like slicing shock waves slashing open the past's casing, the past spilling out like worms in upturned earth, retreat the only solution.

He lay on a hotel bed, free from others. He had been the last person on the plane, arriving ten minutes before take-off, thanks to a de-railing on the London Underground. He had charged through the departure lounge. His day had been spent contemplating his reception.

Two Indians had greeted him at the hotel desk, their unstressed demeanours, and ivory smiles, pleasantly gracious, people he may have met in London whose charm got exaggerated by his need for desirable familiarity.

The room was wedged-shaped, one side tapered twice, like a peg that couldn't fit; but it was warm, heated by the certainty that he was going to be spending three days alone, the early memories getting dragged, and dragged, out.....

Voices in the hallway shower grew louder. A wall separated his head from the bathroom – from the warmth in the space next door.

He heard groans. He imagined touching tongues swirling like dolphins. He envisaged faces being caressed. He imagined hands crushing honeycombs of sensuality, the lengthening honey strands stretching out, straining to sever the sumptuous tension. How beautiful it would be to be with someone beautiful in a place as lovely as this city!

Sweet pain tightened his chest. He saw his ex-girlfriend in that shower. Her lips had the shape of birds' wings. Her decision to leave had felt like the work of a malign force; he wondered if life was good to some, and cruel to others by chance, or whether God, or fate, or whatever, unconcerned about destiny, created pain to highlight those things deserving of preservation.

He breathed out. This wasn't worth the pain in his chest.

Outside, black canals reflected lights; people, in effervescent light, under chandeliers in the *Herrengracht's* great windows, highlighted his insecure modesty that gave his wandering an emptiness that felt like the feeling you get when you believe that you are eroding a precious skill.

He rested his elbows on a bridge's railing. It was too cold for life to thrive on those streets.

Down each side of the canal, boats' small windows were filled with lights that resembled rectangular eyes of satisfaction in charcoal faces. No one else was on the street. This dark world, punctuated by false promises of lemon glowing, was his.....He was as detached as *The White House Without Scaffolding* was from its dark surrounds.

He left the bridge. Silhouettes in a café's window were dark in cosy luminosity. He went into the café and sat at a table. He was the only person alone. Being alone was something he had become used to. Often it was preferable; but when it wasn't, he felt a melancholy, that didn't show in his face, that produced a slight stir of agitation in his temples, and in his stomach; he accepted it as a consequence of his character. At that moment, though, it was stronger than usual; for he wanted to

share the delights of this city. He knew there were plenty of people who would never have this experience of enforced solitude, but for him it was a constant threat, his greatest enemy; sometimes his greatest friend as well.

He ordered red wine. Dimple brackets appeared around a woman's mouth at a nearby table. Radiating tributaries emerged from the corners of the blue lakes of her irises as she chortled. Her friends laughed. Because they looked happy where they were this stirred up David's dissatisfaction. The woman's top lip resembled a bird from front on. When she smiled, the bird didn't alter its wings; but white rectangles filled the triangular space inside her lips, unusual seeing a smiling face in which there wasn't any gap between the top and bottom teeth – like a chamber of ivory happiness.

Another woman was stroking the strand of dark hair that she had placed over her left shoulder. With both hands she stroked this ebony waterfall of follicles while listening to a friend; occasionally, this woman giggled, with a high-pitched, operatic tweeting, like a bird. Her friend was resting an elbow on the table that they were sitting at. A cigarette hung out from the fingers of her friend's raised right hand. The friend's laughter also had a trilling, bird-like ring. When the friend spoke, her free hand described unconscious movements, driven by instinct.

The red wine arrived. Enforced solitude has a positive impact upon observation; few people observe: they're usually so busy talking, usually about themselves, David thought, that they don't see anything. And they talk about themselves to avoid listening; and the listeners ask questions so that they can avoid being asked to speak about themselves.

Enforced solitude fills you with a dourness that stops you from reacting with the spark required to enter into other people's worlds, so enforced solitude enhances enforced solitude. Even if people had invited him to speak, he would now find it difficult; a screen had arisen in his mind that had cut him off from sociability; being entertaining seemed to have bypassed him on its way to other destinations.

But the wine tasted like comfort, its colour like contentment – if contentment had a hue.

He removed a book from his backpack. Information is comforting, like the voice of a confidante. He had three days to fill in with information and observation – three days he didn't want because it represented an unnecessary cessation of his life. There were going to be moments when the dryness of his predicament would get so parched that he would gasp with longing; for this reason he didn't turn the light off in his hotel room later when he tried sleeping. When he closed his eyes the darkness filled his consciousness like malign coal dust blocking out consideration of worthwhile futures. He felt too strongly the weight of unconscious fears. He always

overreacted negatively to intimacy. This didn't reflect his real feelings, like an in-built mechanism for emotional suicide. But, at least, he was beginning to understand that suicide has different forms.

He woke to be confronted by an appalling silence that sounded like the darkness would have sounded if the darkness could have made a noise. And the more noise there is within, the more the darkness sounds. He felt overwhelmed by obscurity – by lack of acknowledgement. His luck seemed non-existent, this feeling turning hope into fear, the fright making him flee back to relieving slumber.

Morning light outlined the window, like an opening to another outlook.

He opened the shutters. Wet leaves covered the wet road, the sun shining, cobblestones gleaming like precious stones.

The open, red shutters, on the building across the road, resembled ears listening to the city's sounds. Alleviation – as if some heavy preoccupation had been lifted – made him feel lighter: Day had brought the hope of distraction; but it also had brought a lethargy that felt like a hangover from loneliness and lack of action.

Gold leaves, the corpses of warmer days, carpeted the ground, lovers giggling down the hallway, the giggling less painful than it would have been had it been night.

The shower soothed. Mechanical tasks replenished with their distracting intensity.

Outside, the air was fresh, but still. A cyclist's breath, like magic dust in morning light, had the lustre of love. He imagined the reclining pleasure of his ex-girlfriend. We would have had such a wonderful time here together, he thought. He imagined walking along a canal with her by his side. He imagined her conversation, the touch of her hand, the softness of her physique, and her reactions to the city's beauty. He felt the soft thump of loss.

He entered a café. Vast windows faced a canal. Making plans for the day helped him forget the coming night.

Coffee got placed before him. He buttered toast. Orange juice fell in a sweet shower over his tongue, Jam's burgundy richness like a medicine invented to arrest the mind from chaos.

A red-faced man, with a white beard, at a table nearby, was talking to a much younger man. When the older man listened, a dark gap opened in his snowy beard, like a cavern of intrigue, as if his mouth had become a third ear. David wondered: Why not write a script called *The Third Ear*? Maybe, he thought, there are times when we listen too much? We can convince ourselves of anything.

Daydreaming is counterproductive, he thought. Give it up!

He walked through streets whose narrowness felt protecting. He only wanted to think about the next task. He felt as if he was in a transparent sheath, able to observe, but unable to break out of that mesh that held him in.

In the Van Gogh Museum, *Crab On Its Back* was vivid, striking, and precise. The crab's uselessness mirrored his thoughts. That crustacean was stranded, caught in inactive limbo, vulnerable, its armaments useless.

David's imagination was currently being misused: it was only generating daydreams of wish fulfilment that were impeding thinking. He felt as if he wasn't using the refined gift of self. He needed to find someone who could set his imagination free. The crab needed a pleasant shock to flip it back onto its feet.

In another café, football stopped him from thinking about what he didn't have. Big men with big hands were holding big glasses of beer. Women shop while men watch football, both satisfying a lust for looking – substitutes for real observation. We once had to observe to survive. Now we need substitutes for this throwback to pre-history.

The pub's amiability was a celebration of irresponsibility. Watching football and going shopping feel like freedom because responsibility gets shunted aside by anticipation and the unexpected, like hunting.

Darkness returned before the game finished. The emptiness caused by the final whistle got choked off by hunger. Eating was going to be the next distraction. He wondered if observation and information would be able to successfully follow eating as the subsequent devices to stop dry despair's dust storm from swallowing him up.

The waitress in the restaurant he went into unconsciously caused frustration. Her stomach was flat; her hips flared like crescent moons. She smiled with big lips. Beauty and openness made him shrink, as if he was confronting danger, like facing horrifying statistics: her finger and his chances of touching it.

The beer pleasantly disfigured reality. Another impossible woman was at a table in front of him; but under the soothing influence of lager he could appreciate her loveliness without waves of dissatisfaction smacking into his temples. Her green eyes seemed to find all the available radiance in the restaurant's subdued light. Her blonde hair was bell-shaped, like a sine curve. She was right at the centre of another curve – the bell curve of beauty. He started giving her a personality. He imagined being on a sofa with her. She changed into another woman – into the one he was really thinking about. They started kissing; he floated; he thought: Choke it off!

A pizza landed before him. Another sensual delight was now helping him to avoid that feeling that something malicious was deliberately denying him life's greatest

pleasures. He had entered the restaurant because through its window he had observed its tasteful straightforwardness: it looked free of an agenda to deceive, a goodness that appealed to an awakening appreciation within him for unpretentiousness – a product of his recent loss of intimacy.

A slight panic struck at the completion of the meal. He would now have to find other distractions to keep the silence from filling him with perturbing sounds. He wondered if change – with its unrelenting insatiability – existed to keep the invisible shapes of darkness from releasing their screeches of despair.

The streets were quiet. His footsteps in the leaves produced a threshing that reminded him of marching soldiers. He couldn't think of anything less desirable – anything less reminiscent of freedom – than having to fight a war for corrupt politicians whose posture was impossible to believe in: Fear punctured with boredom and relief, this for the benefit of criminals! The task that faces me, he thought, is to lift life out of this trough of boredom and relief – to make it ascend – to maybe even become a successful criminal myself! But I can't begin that for a few days yet. I'm here, my life elsewhere; and this dourness – this fixation on the recent past – needs to be overcome first.

He entered another café. He had the energy to walk and walk, but it was too cold for that. Loss always gave him a lust for tireless displacement. But the sharp temperatures had sent everyone from the streets; and the quietude outside had become oppressive.

Metallic dishes, hanging from the ceiling, contained bulbs that resembled oblong moons. The waitresses were wearing black waistcoats and white aprons, black lace around their necks, marble tables surrounded by black chairs. At the intersection of the floor's white, square tiles were smaller black squares. Timber panelling covered the bar. A gilded handrail ran along the bar's edge. Humming voices gained volume before dissipating and then returning, like the ebb and flow of instruments in an orchestra. People, at separate tables, formed separate worlds, each world hemmed in by pleasing distraction. Intrigued faces listened to the speakers on each table, observation bereft of significance in those separate worlds. He felt like an invisible person banned from entry into the sensual intimacies of those tiny universes that dotted the earth. The desirable emotions fermented in those minuscule worlds appeared to be elusive; only specific sensations had been given clearance by destiny – so it seemed – to exist in his speck of being.

A woman laughed, her face shining like the bulbs on the walls. In his current state of loss and vulnerability, humanity seemed good, like an unthreatening creature of innocence. Nobody was to blame. Events give us characteristics; we can only be conscious of the possibilities that are created, and hidden, by events that drive us to

decisions that don't reflect what is really in our hearts. We are deceived by our emotions because we don't stop to consider where they come from.

Outside, black ink filled canals. Light spikes reached down into ebony abysses. A necklace of lemon lights, arching over a canal on a bridge, resembled warm beads strung over black velvet, the night so still and dark that it felt as if the world had regressed to the earliest geological ages. And that, he thought, is what I've done, psychologically.

Inside the hotel's reception, the light glowed resplendently. He was back where he felt that he wasn't going to be judged. His sense of belonging returned inside the hotel. All night, he had stood out, the loner in places of sociability, like an alien hunting for distraction. Now he was in a cheap hotel being smiled at by an Indian – a place where he felt he should be: A place of belonging.

He sat at a table beside some Spaniards in the hotel's café. Ice rattled in the Spaniards' drinks. The sound of the glasses being placed back on their table was heard between machine-gun chatter. Separate conversations had broken out amongst the Spanish. He started reading a brochure he had picked up in the Van Gogh Museum. From time to time, he observed the tourists. A woman in a white dress had opal eyes whose tops matched the shape of her eyebrows that stopped at two vertical lines that deepened when she listened. Slowly her face changed into another face and he was seeing himself beside this other face while his hand was moving over the S-bend that described the outline of this other face's body. Daydreaming was useful if you intended to record it, as perhaps Van Gogh had done, but its excesses only served to let you know what you don't have. And night has the power to let you know that living is yearning.

Fortunately, he was starting to feel sleepy. Stress had taken its toll. But he feared that his room would haunt. It was small, with claustrophobic walls, its window facing the deadliness of a lifeless, chilly night. He was experiencing shock. The thought that his desires could be undermined by the uncontrollable return of the early past meant that he might have been wrong about himself: Maybe he would have rejected any woman after believing that he had wanted to go out with her? This problem may have been more profound than he had believed. But perhaps it wasn't just a question of going out with someone more *appropriate*? After all, he wanted her back.....?

He climbed the stairs. The light-brown carpet was bereft of aesthetics. The white doors along the corridors were plain slabs of wood. A square-topped dressing table sat beside his single bed. The room epitomised a return to the bare simplicity of existence that his mind had demanded. But this return was nothing more than a futile flight from human needs. It was true: the human mind hungers for emotional

complications and teeming responsibilities because those entanglements eliminate enforced solitude. And who needs that?

This conclusion was steady, like a guiding philosophy, in decision-making's tricky seas. He observed the white ceiling. Paint had flaked off where the wall met the dampness caused by the bathroom next door. The affected area looked like a wound, one that could be repaired.

When he woke up, the light was burning. He flicked the switch, now prepared for darkness. He had even dreamt that a guru in a lit-up chamber in a forest had told him: "Time to *begin*. You are required."

He opened his eyes again. He heard voices, a door closing; light outlined the window: he had survived the night.

The sky's grey shades had patches of whitish illumination, branches and twigs of bald trees like veins of black blood. Water, not fire, like an about-turn in expectations, had given the trees their blackness, those burnt-looking skeletons like the resistant cores of besieged beings. Low cloud kept the temperature from plummeting.

Skew-with buildings, shoulder to shoulder, were leaning against each other in struggles for uprightness.

Fighting off trepidation, he picked up a telephone and dialled.

"David," Julia said, "you're such a wanderer! What happened? Where have you been?"

"I left because I didn't know who was upstairs. It seemed like I wasn't supposed to go into the room that you were in."

"Eva," Julia said, "was waiting for you. It was her orchestra. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, God," he replied.

He recalled the telephone conversation that they had had three weeks before; he felt embarrassment and disappointment. The rehearsal was going to be with her sister's orchestra! Eva had been waiting for him upstairs! He had even asked about Eva's orchestra!

"I completely forgot," he said.

"We didn't know what happened to you. I stayed up late, wondering if you were going to come back."

"Oh, God, sorry."

“Eva had a concert ticket for you for Sunday night as well.”

“Can you apologise to her for me?”

“Of course.”

“What have you been doing?”

“Wandering and watching. The airline wouldn’t let me fly back earlier, unless I bought a new ticket. I couldn’t afford that, so I wandered and watched.”

Julia sighed: “So there’s been a misunderstanding?”

“Yes.”

“Come to Marc’s place.”

She was playing the piano when he got there. Notes rose, the past’s clanging transformed by technique into art.

He sat on a sofa. She didn’t know whether to smile.

“I thought,” he said, clutching his hands, “that I was doing you a favour by not coming back.”

Her confused eyes flared with amazement.

“I realise,” he continued, “that I caused a lot of inconvenience. I had quite an emotional few days.”

He bent forward on the sofa’s edge.

“Do you want a drink?” she asked.

“This weekend,” he replied, “I’ve drunk in every café in Amsterdam. No thanks.”

Rain struck the windows, like metal pellets.

“The reasons I thought you weren’t interested in seeing me,” he said, “go back a long way.”

“Your family?”

“Yes.”

The rain eased; sunlight illuminated cobblestones. Colours above the stones turned into reflected dark grey under wet ground.

“My mother often threatened to kill me,” he said, “and my father did nothing about it.

Unfortunately, I don't trust anyone, irrespective of how nice they are."

"The sudden abnormal," he added, "always lets you know what you are."

He glanced out the window. Water prisms upon the panes refracted light.

"I've been ashamed," he said, "of my past."

She touched his hand. A feeling of belonging started filling his veins.

"But," he said, "I managed to survive and many others haven't."

She clutched his hands. She placed her head against his. A chest surge within him broke free. She pushed herself closer.

"And I've just finished a relationship that I shouldn't have finished," he said.

"But....."

He gasped as the feeling in his chest and throat rose.

"But.....at least now I know why."

by Carolyn Smart

**Even the daylight lost its color, and you couldn't imagine what
o'clock it was.**

-Henry James, "The Princess Casamassima"

clouds bleach out like soda
hidden in a straw.
my foot all cramp and gristle:
time to stop the driving

I've tore up these roads too long.
looks like snow on treetops
from the pickers' cotton drift.
went that way once: worthless

screech owl dips,
bugs whine at my ear,
the blanket stinks of grease.
somewhere near lives comfort

blood smells like guns
before they're oiled.
snap that shut,
close up your eyes, too:
sleep comes

My friend is beaten in the room next door

We were playing in the Rockeries after dark,
Cathy and David and I, we ran around the flower beds and
hid behind the rocks and trees, we ran and ran into the shadowed dark
until the night was fully with us, much too late for play.
Towards home they grew afraid of what would come
from all that running, the laughing and the fun,
and all the shadows grew around their brand new house
as we walked together up the hill towards the door.
Inside, their parents stood together and as one:
go to Cathy's room and wait, they said to me,
while Cathy and her little brother David cried.
They were small, and so afraid.
I could not sit, I could not play or think,
I heard the father dragging Cathy down the hall,
in terror and in tears, and from the room next door
I listened while her father beat her with his belt,
the hollow thump in tempo with her cries.
I do not forget that sound: the breaking of a girl,
the shaming, the awful supremacy of adulthood,
and I was told to stay exactly where I was.
I did what I was told. But then I told.

Proud Flesh

It was not bullets flying round the risks we took
that carved my deepest scar, it was the driving:

one mad night when Clyde flipped off the road
and everything was mayhem, overturn disaster,

knee to ankle burned into a flesh-made trench.
I do not now recall much of those early hours.

To wake and feel them pry me from the car
onto the legs of strangers, then into dark again

and driving through the night, some wood-deep motor court,
lifted to bed, from there to toilet when I'd need,

me screaming, drinking brew, they poured all that they had
into my care and brought my sister there for aid and comfort.

Sobbed tears, prayed hard, pain greater than I could ever reckon,
I don't recall it much til my leg drew up beneath me

and the evenings mornings afternoons all one long hurt and drink
like armor on the outside of an open wound, raised up and thick,

a binding that fast held us. It was the one time Clyde did fail
me, that wretched rushing night and crash there at the bridge,

but when alone, our wounds displayed one to the other, it was
a pledge of all we were, which would not break nor bend.

Clouds

Megan Stolz

The clouds in New Mexico deliver messages. You can read the sky to find out what's coming next. You also understand that meteorology is a capricious science.

You've waited a long time for an evening alone with Max. He wakes up early for work, so you decide an evening in would be a better idea than going out. You make popcorn and put in a movie. You dim the lights so the room matches the darkness outside. Max carries the popcorn bowls to the front room for you and puts his arm around your shoulder. He has a strong jawline and he looks good in his cowboy hat and tight jeans, worn with work. His boots make a clacking sound on the wooden floor.

Max has been riding horses since he was old enough to hold his own balance. He's logged thousands of miles in the saddle, and after the movie finishes, he tells you stories about his favorite mares. Some of them had a wild streak and he's had a couple who've tried to run off. "It just takes a little bit of patience and ultimately the horse shows you how she should be broken," he says, as he twirls his finger through strands of your hair.

It's a clear cloudless night with a new moon; every star is present in the sky, when Max saddles you.

After he leaves, you lay huddled on the couch with your knees pulled into your chest while the clock ticks, ticks, ticks. If you stay still enough, you can imagine a cloud encasing you, like a thick white carpet; the horses running across the plain; the rustle of the leaves when a storm was on the way. You keep your hands near your head, far away from where he last touched you, a throbbing center you try to ignore.

You're afraid to close your eyes to the night. To keep them open, you focus on individual objects in the room: the pull on the ceiling fan, the corner of the photo frame that toppled onto the side table when you'd tried to buck him off. Parched, you stand to pour yourself some water but he flashes across your mind, quick as lightning. The glass slips from your hand and shatters on the tile. You collapse back onto the kitchen floor and hide your head in your arms and cry.

Hours later, your eyes are red and burning, like the sunlight peeking through the windows. You tighten your shoelaces, open the front door, and step out into the biting morning.

It's still early and the dripping sun casts a glow over the landscape. The chilly air sends goose bumps racing down your limbs. At the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the cowboys corral the cattle on horseback, already at work by 6:30am.

Your sneakers crunch on the gravel mixed with morning frost. You tuck your hair behind your ears and the breeze pulls it back into a dance, refusing to let it be tamed. There are cirrus clouds on the horizon, tinged with pink and yellow.

In the distance, you hear the morning birds calling. You think about the dust that rises in the air when the cowboys ride their horses, like a dirty fog. Their legs pound in

rhythm, the sound rumbling as if from the belly of the earth, and their manes flap in the wind like flags. When their coats catch the light at the right angle, they glow, blinding you. They know the attention they command at that moment.

You stop to rest and look up at the sky. The sun has loosened itself from the horizon and stands tall, its brightness only muted by the presence of the soft cirrostratus clouds stretched as far as you can see. You catch sudden movement out of the corner of your eye, distracting you from the soreness in your feet, your shoulders, between your legs, and you turn to see a lone galloping horse. Despite the distance, you are struck by the power of the animal, the urgency at which the horse continues on its path. You watch the horse until it is no longer visible, lost in the atmosphere.

Look at That Rod Siino

A young woman watched a soldier read a paperback. She faced him from across her kitchen table, holding an empty glass in one hand, her long fingers wrapped nearly all the way around, and resting her chin on the other. With her eyes still on the soldier and his book, she pulled her thinning hair to one side of her neck. Her facial skin looked like a thin layer of parchment adhered to her skull. She wore a tattered nightgown, white with a faint pattern of red and green, and nothing on her feet.

I wonder how old my soldier is, she thought. Beneath his tired expression, he had the ingenuous look of youth. She thought he was about eighteen, four years her junior. To be young, she thought. The loss she had felt since the war began, of youth or anything close to a feeling of naïveté, grew as she watched him. She was educated, and knew about cynicism. How it could take hold like an iron vise and squeeze every bit of innocence from you. She knew. But my soldier, she thought—has he come here to take me away from this? Sides don't matter after everything is gone. How could we be enemies?

They were on the top floor of a brick building, five stories tall. Around it, rows of buildings, once tall and proudly overlooking crowded city streets, lay flattened, or crumbling in pieces. As if they'd been made out of sandstone and someone, maybe God Himself, had taken the buildings in His hands and crushed them, letting the pieces fall to the ground in a pile. Occasional gunfire or pattering of desperate footfalls could be heard all around.

In the room next to the kitchen, the young woman's mother and older sister sat on the mother's bed. The thin walls of the apartment allowed them to listen to the happenings in the kitchen. There were windows facing the outside. With excellent perches, the two lolled away the hours viewing the ruins and the dark birds circling overhead, waiting. An unsure breeze passing through the room dissipated the odor from soiled clothing and bedding. But with it came the stench from outside.

The sun had taken on an ethereal orange-red hue throughout these long days, and in the kitchen its light sliced through a window above a stainless steel sink. It grazed the young man's shoulder, and sent a small reddish glow onto flowered green wallpaper. The table stood on a linoleum floor beneath a darkened ceiling light. Several small tin cans lay scattered across the tabletop.

“Is he still reading?” the mother called out from her bedroom.

The young woman looked away from her soldier toward the sound of her mother's voice, and then back again at him. Her brown hair moved from the side and now fell limp behind her back. She smiled, revealing graying teeth with several gaps between.

“He's so handsome!” she said to her mother and her older sister. “Don't you think he is?”

The soldier turned a page of the book, cast a curious glance at the girl, and continued reading. His black sideburns were cut evenly at one-half inch above the bottoms of his earlobes. He had sunken cheekbones and pallid coloring. A gray uniform, dirt-stained with several rips and an emblem of a bird on one breast pocket, hung on his frail body. On the other pocket were several colorful medal ribbons grouped together like flags in a parade. Their colors had caught the girl's eye when he'd arrived that morning, but now she saw that they too were soiled and dull.

He turned a page of his book. She wondered what the words said. Unfamiliar words marched across the cover. If he spoke to me, she thought, would I understand? Yet she did not feel fear—of him, or of his rifle leaning against the wall beside him.

"I'm so hungry," the girl called out to her mother and sister.

"What does he eat?" her sister said.

The girl put her elbows on the table, her delicate chin on her hands. She studied him. "He has this stuff he brought in little cans." She picked one up.

The soldier glanced at the girl and smiled with perfect, straight teeth. Then he continued reading.

She smiled too. "He likes his little cans, alright!" she said, and stroked his forearm.

The soldier pulled away from her, and put a hand on his gun.

"I'm sorry." She raised her arms to show she meant no harm.

He grunted, sighed, almost smiled again. Then he read.

"Would you like to have some bread? I think we could give him some bread," the mother said.

"He doesn't understand, Mother," the older sister said.

"How about you, Honey? Do you want some bread?"

"She can't eat that, either. She's still sick, Mother."

"Can't eat bread?" the mother said.

"No bread?"

"Baby's still sick," the older sister said with a great self-assurance. "Your fever only just broke yesterday, Honey. Nothing solid today. You can't keep it down."

"No, Honey, nothing solid today," Mother said.

"But I feel fine. Don't I look fine?" the girl said to her soldier.

"You're not fine. Not yet. Maybe tomorrow. How about some wine? You love that! Does he love that, too?"

"Do you?" the girl asked.

"Everybody likes wine," Mother said. "We only have a little left, but he can have it. Go ahead, ask him." And then she said, "Look at that. Would you look at *that*. There's a rat on the roof next door eating a dead seagull. Do rats eat sea gulls?"

"I don't know, Mother." The young woman looked at her soldier. "If I was a rat, I'd be sleeping on a hot day like this one."

The soldier stretched his arms high over his head, brought them down slowly to either side as if resisting his surroundings, and then studied his watch. He pursed his

lips as he looked now at the young woman.

"I know, Honey, but rats are funny like that," Mother said. "Isn't that a sight? I never expected that." Mother sighed. "What should we do now?"

"Do?" the older sister said.

"Do," Mother said.

"What about the wine? Are you going to drink the wine now, Honey?"

The young woman gathered her strength and stood, feeling knives of pain in her knees and her back. She stood erect, arms to her side, chin high, and walked the four steps to the cabinets, trying to remember when she could walk without a limp. As she searched the cabinets, she sensed the soldier watching her, his black eyes enveloping her whole body. She fumbled with things, pushing aside several dusty ceramic cups. "Where is it?" she called out toward the doorway.

"Can't you find any?" Mother said. "Did someone drink it already? Did he? Didn't you say he liked wine? Go help her find it," she said to the sister.

The young woman looked at the soldier as his head jerked up from his book to the doorway. "I didn't say that!" she yelled, now turning toward the musty cabinet. "And you shouldn't sound so accusing, Mother. He might get angry."

"But he doesn't understand us."

"He may not understand words, but other things communicate what you're feeling." She leaned into, and then grabbed, the counter. "I'm tired." Her own voice sounded listless to her.

"Go help her," the mother said again.

"Don't come help! I'll find it."

"The rat's gone—I'll come help you," the sister said. "Oh, my back aches so much. How much longer is this going to take?" Creaking spring sounds of her climbing off the bed could be heard in the kitchen.

"They say it depends," the mother said. "Maybe a doctor will be able to come soon. Not many of them left, I guess. Here she comes, Honey!"

His fingers tapping on the table, the soldier shifted his position and looked toward the hallway. He combed his hair with his hand and then looked at his hand in disgust, pulling several hairs from between fingers.

The young woman continued her search.

"Found it!" she said, finally, with a relieved look at her soldier. She held out a half-full bottle of red wine toward him as if it were a precious stone. "He didn't drink any!"

"Oh, good," the sister cried. "And look: the rat's back. Look at him eat!"

"He didn't?" Mother said.

"No. I told you."

"Well, does he like wine or not?"

"Do you?" Offering the wine, the young woman wanted him to feel her look bathe his entire body. She placed the bottle before him on the table and pointed to it. "Drink," she said. "For you." She reached for his hand as if she were going to touch a

frightened animal, and placed her frail hand on his. "Yes, we're on different sides," she said in a hushed voice, "and you're scared. But so am I." And then she said, "We're here."

He closed the book, marking with a finger the spot where he left off, and scrutinized the girl as she stood before him. When their eyes met, he dropped his book, murmured something inexplicable, and then he reached around her with one hand and caressed her back.

"Oh," she whispered, lifting her head to the ceiling and closing her eyes. "Yes."

Her legs shook as she felt him lift her nightgown with both hands. When he reached the waist of her underclothes, he slid them off halfway. As they glided down her legs, over her aching knees and past her bony calves to her ankles, she felt a spark of life flare inside her.

She heard his breathing, but sensed no panic in him. Holding his head with both hands, she felt him touch her. Yes.

He then reached to lift off her nightgown.

"No," she said looking down at him, "my body...don't you see my body?" She cried.

He stood up then, wiped her wet cheek with his hand, and held her to his chest, wrapping his arms around her. She closed her eyes, and with her arms at her side, she wondered if he could feel her heart beating. She tried to steady her own breathing, felt shaken, repulsed by the thought of him holding her. The odor from his chest was sweet, inviting, and she slowly brought her arms around his waist.

For several minutes, she feasted on the comfort.

"What's happening out there, Honey?"

"Nothing," she said. "Don't come in here, Mother." But she knew they would both be coming in. She heard the squeaking of the bed springs again, and then the sounds of her sister and mother making their way to the kitchen. "Hurry," she whispered to him.

He stood back, unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. She traced along his ribs with her trembling hands. She lifted her nightgown over her head and dropped it to the floor. As she shook, she shielded herself and leaned into his bare shoulder. And all the time he murmured to her, a sweet sound that meant more to her than any words she had ever heard.

As she felt the hard and damp floor against her back, she tried to block out the shuffling sounds of them getting closer. For the first time she was glad they were so weak from the sickness and hunger. Although her soldier was so young and slight, she thought that every one of her vertebrae could be crushed beneath his weight if he moved just so. As she watched him above her, his sunken features, his white chest with scattered hairs, hardly enough to call him a man, and tears streaming down his face, she held him. As the terror, and now the silence, had held them.

'Clever death,' she thought. 'But you don't have us yet.'

She felt his warm tears falling onto her. Her heart pumped, her lungs took in oxygen, she became aware they were being watched, but heard nothing. No

objections, no screams of disgust, no cries for her to stop. Then she saw the outline of his rib cage, collarbones, the lump sticking out from his throat. And with one last exhalation of breath they held each other as if clutching the ground during an earthquake. They lay there and held each other tighter, tighter.

THE MOTHER, THE FLOWERS, A GUN

Joe Baumann

The lilacs are dying. I need to water them. A tinge of brown is creeping from the edges of their petals, just a brushstroke of tan along the pastel edges, like the shadow that slinks along the wall of my bedroom in the morning. If I want them to stay bright and fragrant, to stand at attention in the glass vase on the kitchen table, I need to give them fresh water. But the water is off. For several days now, a cluster of men has been working on a water main in the street in front of the house, the concrete torn up as if some gargantuan mole has dug a path through the road, and while they're working the only thing that comes out of the tap is a slow, thin dribble that spatters in the metallic sink basin, the titter of the water fading eventually into nothing. I watch them while I run a towel over dishes. The men have golden skin and thick, muscled forearms. They wear sunglasses to block the sun. The one closest to the yard has a large sweat-stain on the back of his shirt, a jagged, fuzzy circle.

I glance back at the lilacs. I'm worried about the creeping brown, so I set down the dishrag and set the plate I'm holding on the drying rack then lift the flowers off the table and place them under the faucet. I turn it on and the dying stream of water patters on the highest blossoms, dribbling through their stems and into the vase. I wait for the water to rise. It makes its way through the maze of green, trickling down like grains of sand streaming through cupped hands. But even after a few minutes, the water doesn't seem to have climbed at all. The brown is also rising from the bottom of the lilacs' stems, creeping from both ends. I wonder if the running strips of color will meet, cover the flowers entirely in that dreary tan, and I wonder if I can stop it. It would be nice to be able to stop it. I begin to think of the things that have disappeared. They were things I could not control. They were hardly my fault. I shake my head.

As the vase continues to fill, I stare out the window at the men working in the street. They step back from something in surprise, as though they're afraid, as if whatever they see, the water perhaps, will burn through their thick leathery boots. One of them is yelling something and pointing to a beat up white van parked a few yards away. His hand is covered in a battered leather glove.

A groan. Not from outside, but from the living room. Jamie, lying on the couch, coughs. I should go in there, ask what the child needs, but all of a sudden water is gushing up from the hole in the ground into the street now in a white geyser, and the wind pushes it toward the house. It sprinkles across the lawn, the brittle yellowing grass soaking in the spray. The poor grass: rain hasn't fallen in weeks, and the hose is full of holes, knotted in places, and whenever I try to untangle it, I become too frustrated to finish, throwing the thing down against the side of the house. It looks like a dead, flat snake.

The flowers have water dribbling over them, and they glisten. A warmth curls into my stomach, billowing up and down, a comforting sensation I haven't felt since the

house became so empty. Only a few more minutes, I whisper to myself, and I'll go to Jamie.

One of the men, bent over, clutches his red, dripping face in his hands. The hair on his forehead is plastered down like a plastic doll's. He was standing over the water main when it burst, when all that liquid exploded up toward him. He stands up straight, his fingers gingerly massaging his eyes. From here, even, I can see that his eyelids are squeezed tight.

Another groan from the living room, but of course I can't leave now. Jamie will wait. Probably asleep, anyway, just tossing and turning in a sweaty nightmare. If the child was seizing, the thrashing would be louder. What would I give now, anyway? Jamie can't take the pills or the pink liquid medicine without a glass of water to wash them down; the white tablets get stuck and the liquid, Jamie says, burns. And the flowers, the flowers need the water. They are dying. Jamie isn't brown, just a pale porcelain with ruddy cheeks after sleeping.

A half-eaten chocolate bunny is on the ledge above the sink, a treat I bought Jamie for Easter. I don't usually buy Jamie chocolate, but we'd been alone so long that I caved, splurging in a moment of weakness. The child bit off the ears in one gargantuan motion, just sank two rows of small teeth into its hollow milk chocolate flesh, ripping the ears away and chewing with a loud munching sound. The sugar made Jamie sick, and I set the bunny above the sink in haste, folding the wrapper over its earless head. The sun has melted it into some kind of deformed sugary blob. I keep forgetting to throw the thing away, but now I pluck it up with two fingers, wary of the sticky glop that's seeped out and coated the bottom of the tin foil wrapping and stained the windowsill. The trash is full, part of a banana peel draped over the edge of the bin. Like the arm of a passenger draped out of a rolled-down car window, a girl maybe, a bright, sun-cooked woman with shiny blond hair wearing sunglasses way too big, who grins toward her husband and children, basking in the pure ecstasy of the outdoors as the air whips around her face.

Jamie can't be outside long. Hay fever, or a pollen allergy, or something. I don't know. I've forgotten what, but it has locked Jamie and me inside this house, with this small kitchen with white everything, white cabinets with contact paper on the shelves and doors, and the bumpy white surface of the refrigerator, the white oven with the rusted black burners. One of them is broken. It won't boil water.

Except the sink, the new sink that had to get installed when the plaster basin of the old one cracked because I dropped a pot filled with freshly-boiled pasta in it, leaving a gaping black crack snarling across the bottom. The white was excised, replaced by a shiny steel basin that I could see myself in.

The plume of water outside has subsided to a gurgling fountain and is roiling down the street, leaving a dark streak on the pale concrete, cascading toward the cul-de-sac further down the road. The men are huddled around their work van, doing nothing, so when I hear Jamie cough and shuffle on the creaky couch, I toss down the towel in my

hand and go into the living room where the child's groaning has grown louder. Jamie's brown hair, short and cropped, is tousled and greasy with sweat. The child hasn't bathed in several days, hasn't gotten up off the couch, curled up under a tan afghan that my grandmother gave me years ago that is usually slung over the center of the sofa. Despite the warmth outside and the window air conditioning unit's efforts to cool the living room with its dark wood paneling that holds the heat in no matter what time of year, Jamie is gripping the blanket like a second skin, knees drawn up to chest, a ball, a frightened armadillo.

The lights are off and the venetian blinds drawn, but several slats are broken, ripped or bent askew, and thin beams of sun shoot in and shine on the couch around Jamie's head. I sit on the coffee table in front of the child and put my hand through the wet, matted hair. A film of moisture clings to my fingers, and I wipe my palm along the beige cushion of the couch, then press my hand against Jamie's forehead. The fever hasn't broken yet, and the child shivers, small teeth clacking against one another. Jamie groans, eyes closed. One pale, bony arm emerges from the lump of the blanket, and paws toward my thigh. I shift and turn away, but Jamie keeps reaching forward, hand moving back and forth on the smooth wood of the table.

"There's no water," I say. "They're still working on the pipes outside."

Jamie's eyelashes flutter. I can see where the irises and corneas roll under the thin layer of skin, and then Jamie's eyes are open, staring straight at me, pupils dilated so that both eyes are deep black like the insides of wells, dark and glossy. I don't know if Jamie is awake or can see me. The child has hardly been lucid since the water stopped flowing, and sometimes I catch Jamie sleeping with open eyes. I have to leave the room, or at least look away, when that happens.

Something comes from the child's lips, something with more shape than the groans that Jamie spews. I can't tell what the garbled murmur is, so I tell Jamie to please speak up. I don't understand. Jamie makes a hissing noise through barely parted lips, blinks, then ekes out a syllable: "Sissss." The half-word is upturned at the end, the sound fluttering up in pitch. The room is hot, my face flushed.

"What?" I ask. A flash of light, a moment of trembling on my mouth, but I dig my teeth into my lower lip and set my jaw.

Jamie repeats the noise, lifts a hand to wipe away strands of slick hair.

"Jamie, shh, go back to sleep." I press my hand against the child's upturned cheek, forcing Jamie's head against the couch cushion darkened by sweat. Jamie tries to resist, but the child's body, sapped of strength, can't fight the weight in my wrist and forearm, and as soon as Jamie's head hits the cushion, the breathing becomes regular, deep, ragged with heat. The eyes close, a beam of light dancing across one of the eye lids. I stare at Jamie, watching as the light of day slowly moves across the child's head. The shifting constellation of splotches entrances me, and if not for the sudden sound of water running in the kitchen, I might have stared at those lights all afternoon and evening, Jamie's groans and tossing and turning not even able to draw

my attention from the wall as the universe of sunbeams swirled up the wood paneled wall.

But the faucet, which I have left trickling water into the flower vase, is now rushing a thick stream of water down upon the lilacs, the highest bulbs bent under the deluge. I rush out of the living room, my leg brushing against one of Jamie's arms, which is slung off the side of the couch, and hurry to turn off the water. I look out the window.

The men are gone, the setting sun replacing them, the parched yard languishing under the dying light. No water rushes down the street, and the whole landscape is blank and empty. I feel alone. Always alone. Water drizzles down the outside of the cylindrical glass vase in the sink, the overflow circling down the drain. The lilacs with shorter stems start bobbing higher up, tilting away from the vase's center. I breathe in a few shallow breaths, and with trembling hands bend the vase over, letting the excess water drain. I hope, with a lead weight stuck in my throat, watching the sun set through the window, that the lilacs won't drown.

Outside, a phantom streak from where the water flowed down the road has started to evaporate, the hot ground sizzling the water away.

*

The lilacs are dying. The water, I'm sure, has done it. Too much of it. There's always too much something. When I woke up this morning the highest blossoms were wilting, the pastel petals curling in on one another. I worried that they would break off if I touched them, they drooped with such weight and lifelessness. And there's the brown, more of it now, darker, too, that same dull rusty color infecting the grass in the yard surrounding the oak tree Jamie fell out of two years ago and ended up with a broken arm. I heard the child screaming through the screen door, and when I ran out, there Jamie sat, crumpled over. I hauled Jamie to the hospital, my grip tight on the steering wheel, my heart thumping, and I hoped and prayed that we wouldn't get into an accident. The only sound in the car was a whimper that came from Jamie, strapped into the passenger's seat beside me, arm still cradled. The sun was shining, and for the first time in a while I felt the wind in my hair. I couldn't roll up the windows, even when I saw Jamie shiver. The warm breeze soothed me, calmed my nerves.

Jamie is moaning and thrashing. I've no idea how long Jamie's been there, whether the child slept on the creaky couch all night again. Jamie's room is up the stairs and down the hallway, the only room on the hot second floor where the air conditioning doesn't reach at all. I imagine the child wrapped in the tan afghan, slouching toward the stairwell, some beige walking dead.

I try the faucet; a strong stream of water bursts from the tap, slick against the deep sink. The men are back, more of them this time, and one, wearing a bright yellow hard hat, is standing with his back to me, a jackhammer in his arms, cutting a new hole into the ground. He slouches over it, body curved around the large tool. Rubble and white dust swirl around him and the men standing near him, a grainy, hazy cyclone that covers them in a sandy film. The cloud of dust wafts over the street, toward my yard,

threatens the only window I ever look out. A storm is approaching, the sky the damp gray color that sets in before thunderstorms approach, and everything in the kitchen is dull.

I need to move the flowers to the sink before the water is turned off, but I can't imagine disturbing those delicate blossoms that are threatening to fall off, so I grab a glass from the dish rack and fill it, watch the water bubble up as it hits the clear bottom, and am about to pour it into the vase, holding the glass against the lip so as not to disturb the flowers. But the water level hasn't gone down since yesterday; the flowers have stopped taking it in. A tremor slips down my arm, the glass clinking against the vase. I stop pouring and dump the water down the drain. It swirls and gurgles, a mechanical belch.

The rumbling of the jack hammer outside stops, replaced immediately by the quiver of far-off thunder. Despite the lack of sun, the men look hot, and tired, and the one who had been operating the jack hammer is bent over, hands on his knees, breathing deep, back pitching in and out. The others slump against shovels, or rest against the back bumper of the van, hunched over with soreness and exhaustion. An urge to swing open the door and approach them washes over me, but I suppress it, ironing it down in my stomach. I begin refilling the water glass, but midway through the stream shrinks, the pressure dying as the water is turned off somewhere outside. None of the men have moved from their slouched, hunched stances, but someone must have yanked some knob or crank or wheel, because here, in this house, right now, nothing pumps inside from out there where the fresh water waits. The only breath inside is mine and Jamie's.

To save water I only let it tinkle in until the glass is a little over halfway full. Then, with two small, white pills rattling in my palm, I walk into the living room. Jamie isn't moving, but I can hear ragged, shallow, breathing, like a dog's panting.

Jamie's head is slumped at the very edge of the couch cushion, so far that if it moves another few inches it will fall off completely, and I envision the child's head slipping, then the whole body following suit, and the child getting stuck there between the couch and the coffee table, where it will start flopping around like a fish tossed on the ground, round eyes staring up in terror wondering what's to be done, where the water is.

The edges of Jamie's lips are smeared with blood.

The child has had another seizure, sometime in the night.

But Jamie is breathing, so I settle down on the edge of the coffee table, set the glass down next to me, and reach out a hand to shake Jamie awake. The child's shoulder, where I grab, is bony and hard, skeletal. Jamie's stomach hurts too much to eat much of anything. I haven't made a sandwich for the child in days. If Jamie would only ask, or make some sign of hunger, I'd happily make something. But until then, what am I to do?

After a moment, Jamie coughs, pale cheeks ballooning out, but when the child

groans, they deflate to normal, flaps of skin layered taut over protruding cheek bones.

“Take your medicine, Jamie,” I say. “I have water now. I managed to get some before they turned it off.”

Jamie groans again, eyes fluttering but remaining shut, and a small arm feels around for the water. I pick it up.

“Here.”

“Whe—where’s my—” Jamie is interrupted by more coughing. “Where’s shhhh.” It comes sputtering out like steam, a forced whisper rather than a voice. Not a question this time, a statement. Some kind of imperative.

The room grows dark, and a loud clap of thunder follows a flash of lightning, and I sit up straight.

“What are you talking about, Jamie?” I hold up the glass of water.

“Where is she?” Jamie’s voice is stronger now. “I want to see her.”

I stand. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Jamie. Stop.” I slap toward Jamie’s outstretched hand, which is reaching out as though groping about in a dark room, trying to avoid running into the furniture.

“But I—”

“That’s enough, Jamie. Do you want your medicine or not?”

The jack hammer starts up again outside. That or the thunder is prolonged, louder, humming in the sky while I stare down at Jamie. It would be so easy to let the glass slip from my hand, shatter on the floor in a shower of shards of glass and water that would pockmark the sparse carpet. For a moment nothing happens, except that wind rattles a tree outside and lightning flashes. The sky is still dry.

“Why—where is she—what did you—”

“I’m not going to listen to this, Jamie,” I say, my voice cracking. A worm slithers up and down my throat, a greasy, slimy thing that sends a queasy shiver across my shoulders. I shut my eyes and try to stop thinking of the tingling feeling that runs across my arms, a feeling I remember too often.

“I’ll leave your medicine here. Take it if you want.”

I throw myself into the kitchen, resisting the urge to hurl the glass of water at the wall, the window. Instead I put the glass to my lips and drink down all the water without pausing for breath. I’m trembling when I set the glass in the sink. I look at the flowers. They tremble with me. Jamie can’t know, of course. The child can’t remember, and I won’t. The photographs are all gone, all except the one, which is turned down, lying in the drawer in my night stand. Four faces, trapped in silent smiles, grins pressed up against particle board in an eternal blind kisses. I shake my head, pushing the image down into my stomach where it can slough around with the water. It will only be that, a little flashing image, nothing real and breathing.

Half of the men outside are gone, but a few of them are sitting on overturned crates, huddled near one another with brown bags in their laps, ravenously eating lunch. Despite the thunder and darkening clouds, they sit there, oblivious almost.

One of them says something funny, I can tell, because they all laugh, shaking and hanging their heads, their round skulls lolling like they've become unhinged. They block my view of the gaping hole in the street. I cannot tell if the water is streaming out or if it has stopped, clotting and drying and scarring over.

*

The lilacs are dead. I know because this morning when I walked into the kitchen a ring of petals surrounded the vase in an unkempt circle. Brown, shriveled like the corners of burnt paper, they lay there in unhappy repose. Several were stuck in the stems and a few had managed to sink to the surface of the water, floating like little empty canoes. Everything is empty.

I must have known this was going to happen, because in bed I thought about the flowers, dreaming of them during the little sleep I managed while a storm shook the house all night. In my dreams a man I didn't recognize handed them to me, a man dressed like the workers who have taken up residence outside the house, the man's face bleary with sweat and grime, so thick and monstrous I couldn't tell how old he was, so dark his eyes shone like colored pearls. His leather gloves, mud-caked, a hole in the left ring finger, gripped the vase tight, and I thought it would shatter in his hands. The glass would fly through the air and lacerate my face, leaving hundreds of little wounds that would weep into the sink while I sterilized them with rubbing alcohol, dripping little red lines on the metal.

When I woke up as the vase began to crack—he really would break it, wouldn't he—I couldn't remember where the flowers had come from. I felt as if they'd always been there, perched on the kitchen table waiting, begging for water.

The thunder howled and rattled the windows all night. When it reached its peak in the gray of sunrise, I wrenched open the drawer in the nightstand, unable to stop myself, and felt around for the photograph in its silver frame. My hand touched cool metal, curved, not the picture but the gun, the one that I've never fired, the one I'm not even sure is loaded, the one I have never touched, the one I didn't want anywhere in my house, but the insistence wore me down. Feeling it there, the cool, smooth, curved metal, made me withdraw my hand and slam the door shut in time to another thunder clap, and I heard the gun and the picture frame clink against one another like two champagne flutes during a toast at a wedding. I remember hearing that so many times at our wedding. I don't hear it anymore. The noise has been replaced by sobs, white with dark, cheers with condolences and heavy hands on my shoulders.

When I look out the kitchen window, I can only see the heads of the workers. They've all descended into the hole in the ground, their yellow hardhats the only part of them visible. I can't see what they're doing. I bask in the mystery, wondering what they see down there, closer to the bottom of the earth. They work through the rain, a splattering drizzle. But the sun is out, too, shining from a break in the dull clouds. The two together, the light and the raindrops, create a shining reflection off the men's hardhats, a blistering luminescence I can't stare at directly.

When I walked past, Jamie wasn't moving. I didn't stop long enough to make sure the child was breathing, but the room was quiet. Was blood caked on Jamie's lips? The blanket twisted and crinkled like a shirt in need of ironing? I don't know. I won't know until I go back. Jamie was just a curled up mass of tan on the couch.

Should I take out the flowers first? Where does one dispose of dead flowers like that? Just throw them into the still-overflowing trash, set them atop and light the whole thing on fire like a funeral pyre? And just sweep the petals, in their terrifyingly beautiful arrangement around the vase, off the table with one flick of the wrist?

A terrible elation wells up inside me as I turn the faucet on, unsure whether I hope water will flow with speed or trickle out in a dying little dribble, clear, almost gooey like saliva. Nothing, not even a drip, comes out. A temporary reprieve, and I want to yell out a thank you to the men outside. But then a nausea, horrible but satisfying, overwhelms me, and I am forced to pull out one of the chairs from the table and sit down, elbows smacking against the wood, shivering the vase and the lilacs. More blossoms flutter off the brittle stems.

I stare at the metal on the table. I had to bring it down with me, weighing down my hand, held between my fingers. After throwing the drawer of the nightstand shut, it kept calling out, as though it could have a voice, as though it was scratching against the particle board inside the drawer like a dog whining to be let outside, and I finally pulled it out, refusing to look at it, but I look at it now. I wonder if I can see my reflection in it, but no, nothing stares back.

After a few minutes, the uneasy tumbling in my gut subsides and I stand, grabbing it off the table, scraping it along the surface. It catches a few of the lilac petals in its wake, fluttering them to the ground. They tumble like ungraceful snowflakes or streamers twisting down at a surprise party. I walk into the living room. Jamie hasn't moved. The child's forehead glistens, but doesn't feel sweaty when I finally place a hand there. Jamie's skin is cold, eyes shut and immobile. Sun shines through the broken blinds while rain rattles on the glass. I'm trembling, I know, and the metal shivers in my quaking hand as I lift it in front of Jamie's face. I cannot tell whether I want to vomit or shout out, release suppressed joy or deep, bilious sickness. The two have been mixed together in a thick quagmire for so long that they taste the same. All the time the same.

In a moment, perhaps, things will be different. In a moment I'll be able to turn up the photograph and look at the four smiling faces, so close together, teeth pearly white, wind carrying their brown hair back and up. And I will smile back, finally. In just a minute, I'll be able to throw away the gun, because nothing will need protecting anymore.

by John Estes

Tactile Defense

Marvel, if you must, at the specular highlights of the dew, of the dew upon the webs, of the garden spiders who do not know the limits of their mandate. Who over-trust the tensile strength by which their livelihoods hang.

Nothing in the in-box, nothing drafted or half-done. It is too quiet. The spiders, who know the business, leave nothing as is: they eat their threads each morning and re-spin throughout the day.

A few chemicals mixed together and flesh and blood and bone just fade away

I, too, am an invisible man. But in a ho-hum age of ready-evaporation, I am no Claude Rains. I wonder at how, unlike me—so embarrassed by particularity—he persisted as a man of action.

He evaded the rap of most vapors; he cut a dashing con-man, was a brilliant killer. I am a thought trapped thinking. If virtue exists in diaphaneity, it's in the practice of wrapping over and over

until I get the eyeholes right so my friends can see me; it's the dispersal of racial shame over my body's inmost secret workings. How I now revel in japery, entering a room, my robes discarded,

with a stomach full of chewed food. Li-Young Lee cautioned me to restrain this impulse toward easy cleverness in my poems. He told me: a poem is like a bowl of pudding. You have to stir and stir and stir,

whip it until it's smooth. He says this while making wide swirling counter-clockwise motions in a big, imaginary bowl of pudding. A gaping tear in the elbow of his baggy cable-knit sweater sways over the concoction.

End of Lived

The angels, my constant followers, are dumb to metaphors, deafer to jokes. Outside firm circles, however, the idea of decay as a transitional state has met with uncommon success. Props and shout-outs to the flesh, the flesh and the flesh for keeping a reasonable cap on myth-proliferation, though vaunted experts trouble to isolate origins, what wags what. Planets, virgins, eternal recurrence: done it, done it, doing it. And The Bosom of Abraham: don't get me started. The same assholes who bully us here will bully us there, in much tighter quarters, and the management will, predictably, console us with loopholes and pleas for patience. Maybe some species of bliss can be had in that queer and crowded place, but where neither release nor hygiene are guaranteed, there can be no rest. Let's hope we can dream. As we speak, exegetes secure and defend the extra-textual but much-ballyhooed front-gate greeting with St. Peter within minutes of the last onset's end (tunnel of light included, no charge). I am like you: just give me my goddam wings.

My Ohio

He keeps his watch on winter time, just so. The kids try to catch the squirrels, and wonder what would happen, if they caught one. Would it scratch? Would it bite? Maybe both. Not everything pleasurable is lovely, but everything lovely is pleasurable. She wanted to believe that, and so did. The kids try to catch the moths, but are told not to catch them, and told stories of uncertain veracity about dust and wings. Birds sing again at dawn, and everyone wonders if the trees will be sorry for their early bloom. When the mother cardinal traps herself inside the porch the kids watch as he shoos it with a broom and then later, with the grill mitts on, grabs it gingerly from the corner and throws it in the air. The kids cheer. The god that ripped a crater in the ground and surprised the woman as she picked flowers with her friends had an extra hour on his hands. The children climb the trees, and knock down buds, but the trees play a long con, unconcerned with this year's seed production, or with whether or not the squirrels will need to eat the jack-o-lanterns in October just to get by. The time of sunset poses little concern to any of them.

Reading Ochrid's *Prologue* with a Hangover After Toasting Dostoevsky on His Birthday

Martyr Menas, it says here that to invoke your aid with faith in time of need is to receive your help, so I submit these symptoms for your revision: nausea, limb and tissue ache, dizzy vision. If time permits and space allows, here is lingering unbelief. The world supply of bone relics labeled with your name adds up to a man and a half, but that's okay. Operators are standing by.

Yes I know you retired, and having lain down your sword—said farewell to idols and fled into the desert—you probably foreswore vodka, too: but if you would, for a fellow traveler, descend from your mountain hut and let me swig from your canteen. You will find my suffering, my service to the Russian Soul—to all that is fair, sensual and lofty—dignifies forgiveness, if not a little praise.

An image submits to its prototype, and commiserations to their source. I will confess to you that I've never read *Demons*, or even *The Idiot*, but please don't tell Fyodor, whom I address as kinsman.

by Holly Hendin

SAME

Cut in the cloth
Of a new evening
Even the stars look different
Somehow
Yet around this table
Familiarity sits and drinks
Like one of us
Each night blending into the next
Turning the heavy paper
Words spilling out like liquid
A hand under the table
Yearning for flesh.
But there isn't anything more.
This is it. Just this.
And we smoke it down
Suck it down
To the last drop
As embers collide with metal:
The broken back
Of a crumpled cigarette.

first published in *Summerset Review*

FATE

That night she wore heels higher than she'd ever had before, being tall and not usually wanting to be the one to stand out.

She watched his mouth circle around her fork until her inhibitions were poured drop by drop into her wineglass.

She held his cigarette even though he told her she shouldn't and clumsily she inhaled his borrowed smoke.

Twenty-three stories above the world and she argued the plausibility of a fate in reverse:

Not preconceived and yet everything hanging tentatively in the balance of every decision they'd ever made.

Last year she was waiting in line for fast food weeping because she had a book of stories she wanted to leave on his doorstep for Christmas.

And now Christmastime again and she is sleeping side by side next to him as if it were usual, which it is not.

And she doesn't know if it is by accident or fate or decisions made or e-mails answered but in that moment, in the dark, in a city alive with broken promises, those were simply words and their bodies, an unwritten poem.

ENDLESS

So tired and still I can't force myself to get up and go to bed.

When I was younger I thought I was trying to avoid tomorrow.

Now I am just trying to avoid the

Forks and pencils in the sink

Untidy with inspiration

I mean perspiration.

My shoes untied unzipped have run off into days that run into days

That march a parade of sadness and longing down my street.

Or maybe that's not a parade at all but the ice-cream man.

He grooms us with his jangling music and all I can think is where's my dollar and what if he doesn't stop.

Strawberry shortcake and ring pops were the currency of childhood happiness before I knew I had signed a lease on a house that I didn't choose.

Is it time to plant the geraniums?

I look for clues from my neighbors,

Their driveways littered and learned with newsprint.

My barren planter where geraniums once bloomed

When all I really wanted was a garage to hide my brand of soap from the neighbors.

My neighbors' dogs spy on me through shuttered windows.

Tsk tsk tsk they mouth as they watch me unload report cards and boyfriends from my car's trunk.

I don't have any bones for the dogs

Who have become more real to me than my neighbors.

I imagine the dogs at breakfast tables hunched over homework and milk and Daddy is not coming home from work.

My bones hang, resigned, like a sack of dry-cleaned dresses pressed and ready for

work.

Maybe my dresses should sit in my office and work my day while I rest folded up in the closet the plastic wrap suffocating my fingers' belly buttons.

My children are dreaming in their heads turned to pillows and

Slow steady breaths as eyes move and dreams unfurl like the smack of a sail.

I kiss each face as I turn out the lights in turn and think

I'm sorry I brought you into all of this.

Their noiseless absolution is a benediction but still I can't slow the approach of morning as my children rush past me

Still clutching each other endlessly for security, hiding their terror under the remnants of the night's low growl.

Don't you sometimes long to pull the tablecloth too?

SHOT

It doesn't hurt, but it does sting. "A little pinch" is what they tell the kids in the doctor's office. "Quick like a beesting." My children widen their eyes in horror. This is different. This will not protect me from the flu or pertussis or diphtheria. This is not white coat and antiseptic and crinkly-paper-over-examining-table clinical. This is reckless. Intimate. I pull down my pants in a way that is not sexy and would be comical if I were hobbling down the hallway looking for toilet paper. But I am not in a hallway. I am bent over a sofa and he is behind me. I want this and I want him. The needle makes me yelp and the cat nuzzles my head. The cat regards me with curious eyes. "There goes another one," he must think.

GALILEO

His brushstrokes upon a sheet of canvas hung in a studio illuminated with sparse light
Casting shadows that creep upon the floor like spiders prowling for the bits of dreams
that have gotten caught in the cobwebs

In the corners, whispering—shhh, can you hear them?—

Quietly behind the paintings that lean up against the walls when really,

Really these walls are leaning against his paintings.

On the wall, on a canvas, she,

She had imagined the scene so many times before, but maybe not from this angle

Pinned to the wall unable to meet his gaze

Her wings call to him, but do not allow her to fly away

Instead, she, calm, resigned, hoisted high upon a mountain of satin pools rippling with
the breeze of his breath

While under her, her stars rise up in an inky promise of darkness.

If she could only lift her arms to caress his face, but her arms are leaden, held to her
sides forever,

Her face hardened and cracking under the oil but his,

His face so close to hers

Impossibly close and yet he is merely looking at her dress and adjusting the reds and
greens around her

He is squinting at her, a paintbrush in hand, a cigarette burning.

She, unable to make sense of her world, and yet she understands the cruelty and
beauty of life, and

He, with the patience of a scientist, he wants her to transcend everything with the help
of her poetry and art and transform the ugliness into something pure

And though she longs to feel him skin on skin, hands at her waist, mouth to her neck,

the weight of his body upon hers,

At least she can feel his essence tugging her upward and as he dabs the paintbrush across her full lips

She can taste the liquor and the cigarettes and the poetry in his mouth

His face impossibly close, so different from this perspective, so much farther away

As he wonders if she could hold the lightning in her bare hands.

"They lived and had names."

Czeslaw Milosz

Grandfather, what's left of you & does anyone today care?
Your daydreams? Lusts? An impatience with your unlucky lot in life?
The very odds against survival beyond birth? Your mother's loving touch
or her brusque, unloving touch, what does any of that matter now?

Perhaps you were exceptional once, but now, three-fourths of a century after,
what's left?

Yours was a memorable death, I was told, a death, when it arrived
early one August morning while you were on the stool,
your head buried against the side of the family's
single milk cow, your promising dream out of the Great Depression,
but all that happened a full decade before my birth. Beyond that little remains other
than the echoes of your corpse beginning to rot & a drunken wake going on
a storey below in Rudyard, Michigan, my mother's half-finished stories & none carry
the memory of what your Christian name actually was. None.

Yet... yet you may well still exist in so far as I live & in living, perhaps, I tip
my head in a curious or questioning angle, tilting it identical
to you, in your time, once did. Could it be that you listen
to my rattling, loose coughs, my prayers when I wake,
startled, sweating in the night, or to my unbounded joy as I breathe again,
breathing in those earthly odors, the remnants of our previous evening's
roasted onions & peppers & winter squash? Perhaps. Yes, perhaps
my breathing recalls for you such wonders, that earthy sonata of odors,
reliving through me so that you might revisit this life,
the one you might well have held so dearly,
hoping that I, too, might listen in as
that fast-approaching day comes around when you & I will be
equals straining to hear my grandson's grandson's faint but persistent cough
so that we might be reaffirmed in that boy's schoolhouse full of sounds,
we who also once coughed & swallowed in a such a similar manner,
swallowing the scatterings, the dancings unexpected, the discontinuities,
swallowing, in the face of that oncoming darkness of our universe,
swallowing its plenitude, its magnificence?

Bird in the Garbage **Terry Savoie**

- after misreading T. Allan Broughton's
"Bird in the Garage"

So, what else should a sparrow expect? All needn't become Audubon's pet puppet projects, spread-winged, mounted & manhandled into the most painterly position possible. That's life, you say, or is it a precocious life in death while others see precarious (or pretentious, is it?), not mentioning providential, perhaps, as a possible alternative. At times "adventitious" might be adventurous seen through Franklin-esque bi-specs. It's one hideous adventure – this old-age reading – full of pitfalls & pratfalls, as with a letter here, a syllable there, a comma (misplaced), at first glance, then appearing to be a coma as in the end result of this bird's skull slamming with such farce, (force?) flat against the garage window. There you have it, & there goes the only bird life a bird could ever hope for, making all the difference in the world for you, Sparrow, but none whatsoever in mine whether or not you eventually end up frightfully dazed in the garage or in the day's garbage.

On Matters Colloquial Terry Savoie

How you talk

endlessly to the dead –
grandma in her empty
rocker, a drunk uncle
under his bar stool,
father in his earth-
enware urn, a child's

seaside snap-shot pose,
so happy back then but
now another face turned
down in the dresser's top
drawer, or your dear wife,
the memory of her sinking

daily yet leaving a slight
depression still on the
other side, her side
of the bed: the dead
never answer back
until those who live

begin talking to you.

Taking Flight Terry Savoie

1. February

Squinting & swinging a pair
of borrowed binoculars up,
we trace the arc of an immature
eagle lifting off an ice floe as
he pencils in a sweeping line
over the roller dam & chopped
Mississippi that ripples in dark
purplish flow without ceremony,
picking up heat & silt, muddying
its way to the Gulf Stream below.
Our love, birdlike, once took on
just that sort of miraculous flight

but hesitates now, resentful at
the sight of such youthful passion
& grace when, without warning,
the eagle dives inexorably headlong
for the water, pulls back at the last
second, slaps his talons down to
pluck out a bloated, dead carp,
belly-white, off the river's roof.
Far back along the western sky,
snow showers gather & begin to
roll in, rushing our bewildered hearts.

2. July

We spot that filthy gang of blackbirds & slap-slap our hands, startling them into a skittish outburst like buckshot, like crack-o'-the-whip, like snapping Mamma's hooked rag-rugs out over an open field.

Wing to wing, the birds lift off then dip to settle in the cow pasture nearest two blue silos, scattering beneath the legs & pendulous udders of fifty-odd Holstein milk cows. We're gods at the controls

as the blackbirds wait for that next slap-slap, sure sign of Another's caring & awful love.

Interview with Magda M Olchawska by Ruth Jacobs on Human Trafficking

In the Booth with Ruth - Magda M. Olchawska - Anti-Human Trafficking Activist and Filmmaker *Ruth Jacobs*, author of the *Soul Destruction* series of novels and charity campaigner for sexually exploited and prostituted women, interviews Magda M. Olchawska, an anti-human trafficking filmmaker and activist.

What inspired you to support the movement against human trafficking and make films about human trafficking and sexual exploitation?

Towards the end of 2010, I started reading a lot about human and sex trafficking. I also watched a movie called *The Whistleblower*, based on a true story of how UN soldiers were trafficking girls from former Soviet Union to former Yugoslavia.

However, the most influential person who inspired me was a lady I met on Twitter, Lynn Robertson. Lynn's work and dedication made me inspired to write a script and then to turn it into a movie. I wanted to be involved in the fight against sex and human trafficking in any possible way. At that time, I thought the best way for me to make society more aware of the huge problem we are facing was to make a 'fictional' movie.

Can you describe the films you've made in the area of human trafficking?

So far, I've made *Anna* and *Modern Day Slavery*, which is the first movie in a series of four. *Anna* is a strong, independent woman who leaves her partner and her high paid government job behind to set up an underground organization that exposes corruption and injustice which is spreading like a virus around the world. Her IT/hacking skills come in handy when she discovers international sex slavery networks that run deep into the government and corporate structures. Her investigation leads her to Eastern Europe where one vital contact sets her on track to discover horrific truths behind human trafficking. To keep up on top of things, *Anna* recruits Pawel, a talented researcher who unwittingly gets entangled into the unstoppable current of events. They both risk everything to unravel the secrets behind a major trafficking ring and shed public light onto the horrors of sex slavery.

What research, if any, did you have to undertake before making the films and how did you go about that?

I found most of the information either by watching documentaries and short movies or reading articles online. The media have been covering trafficking quite a bit in recent years. Once I started running a crowd funding campaign to get the money for the movie, a lot of people began sending me various links to articles, charities and movies. My education and research is never ending. I still receive a lot of articles and movies to watch from friends on different social platforms.

What legal improvements or changes would help to abolish human trafficking and sexual exploitation?

That is an extremely difficult question and I don't think there is just one right answer.

Besides, human trafficking exists in every single country, so every country must apply laws that can help the victims of human trafficking in that particular country and that particular and unique situation.

First of all, the society needs to be aware that the problem exists. Secondly, the citizens need to feel safe enough to report strange activities in their neighborhoods to the authorities.

The support system for the victims needs to be much better and they can't be punished for a crime they have not committed, but was committed against them. Some countries treat the victims of human trafficking as illegal immigrants and punish them. Even with prison sentences.

In my opinion, the Swedish system, where not only the oppressor but also people using trafficked victims in any way are punished, could be the right way forward.

<http://ruthjacobs.co.uk/2013/01/25/nicole-rowe-feminist-activist-co-founder-nordic-model-advocates-normas/>

What other projects/charities are you involved in for anti-human trafficking and what else does your work in this area entail?

Fifty percent of the money Anna and Modern Day Slavery makes is going to make will go to charities. At the moment, we are co-operating with the French charity C.R.E.E.R. I support other artistic projects - films and theatre - that depict the subject of human trafficking.

I also wrote a book for children called Mikolay and Julia in the Attic that talks about trafficking in a non-direct way. The story is trying to make children aware of not talking to strangers or taking sweets or toys from them. Sadly, a lot of victims of human trafficking are children.

For anyone else who wants to be involved, what can other people do to help?

If you would like to help Anna and Modern Day Slavery please follow the link to our contribution:

<http://annaandmoderndayslavery.weebly.com/support-the-film.html>

You can also help your local charity that helps the victims of human trafficking.

Learn how to recognise the signs of trafficked people. This could save someone's life.

What are your plans for the future?

Make more Anna... movies and hopefully make loads of money for charities.

Recommended websites/books/films/further reading:

Anna and Modern Day Slavery official website

<http://annaandmoderndayslavery.weebly.com/index.html>

Mikolay and Julia In the Attic link to my book - <http://mikolayandjulia.com/in-the-attic> C.R.E.E.R. – the charity I'm working with <http://www.facebook.com/groups/c.r.e.e.r.rci/>

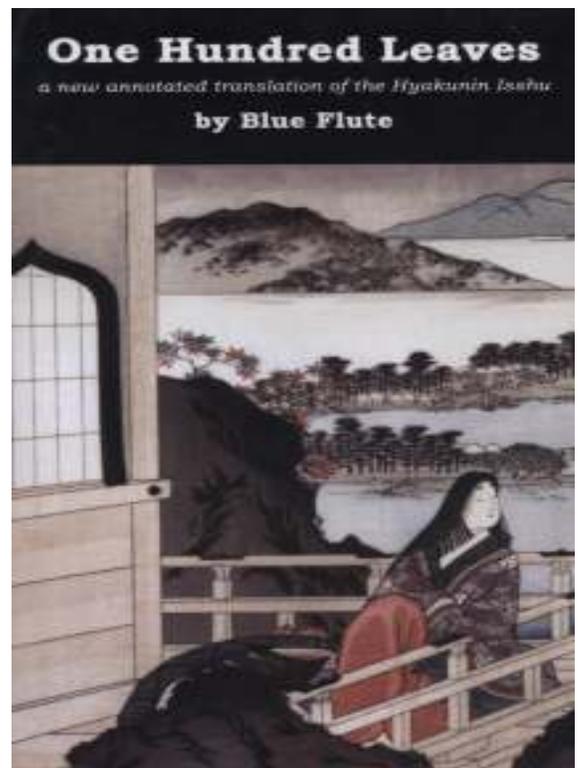
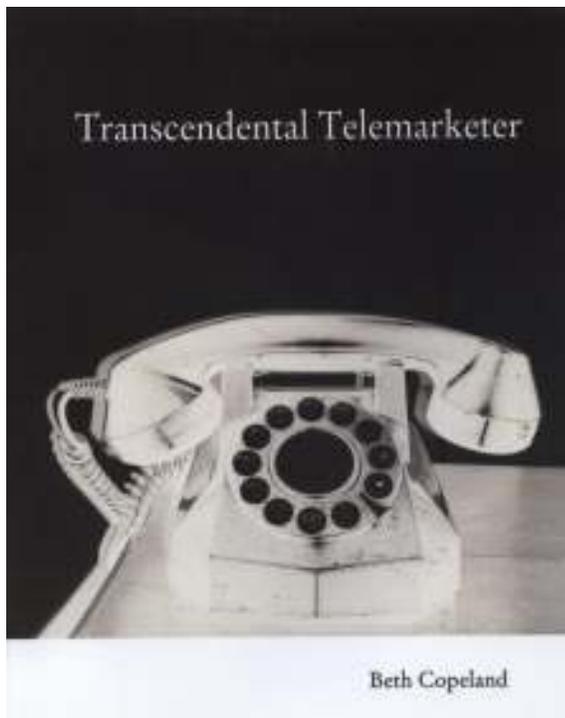
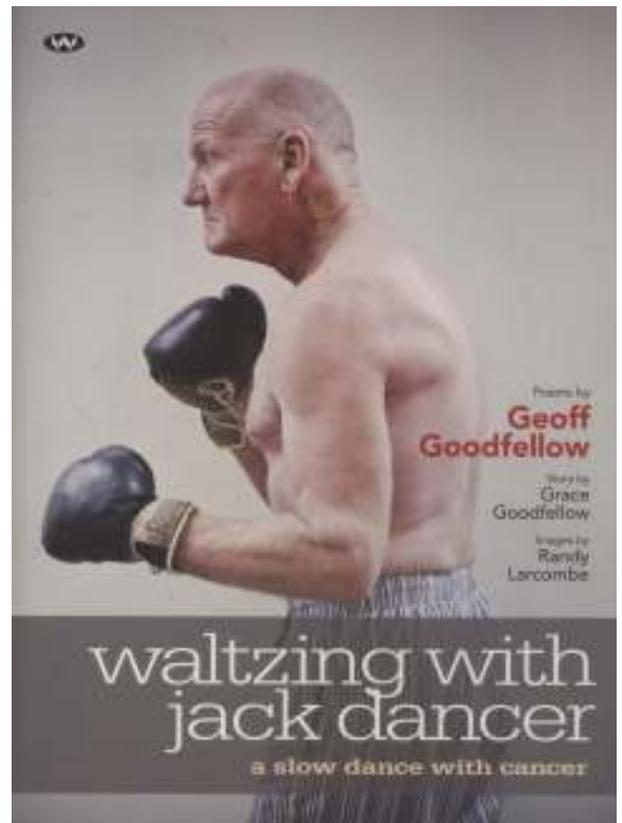
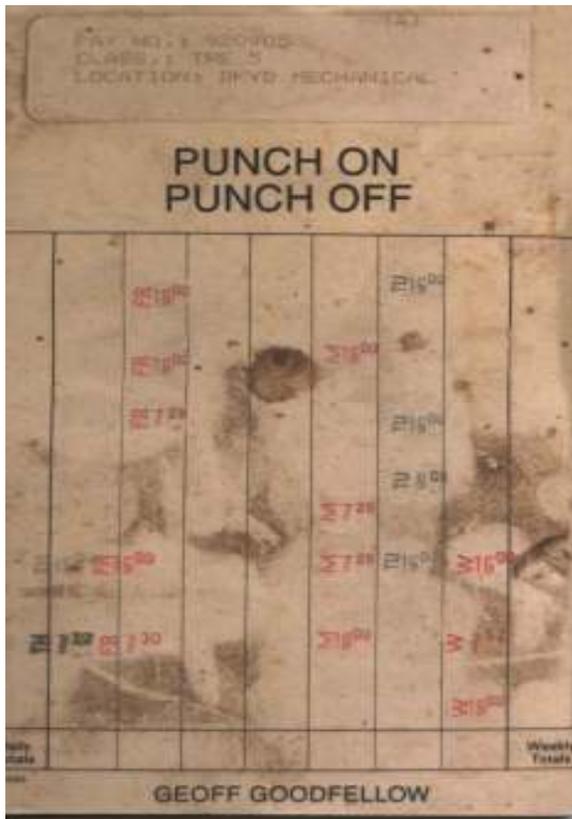
Lynn Robertson – a real life role model & inspiration <http://ruthjacobs.co.uk/2013/01/13/in-the-booth-with-ruth-lynn-robertson-anti-human-trafficking-activist-and-advocate/>

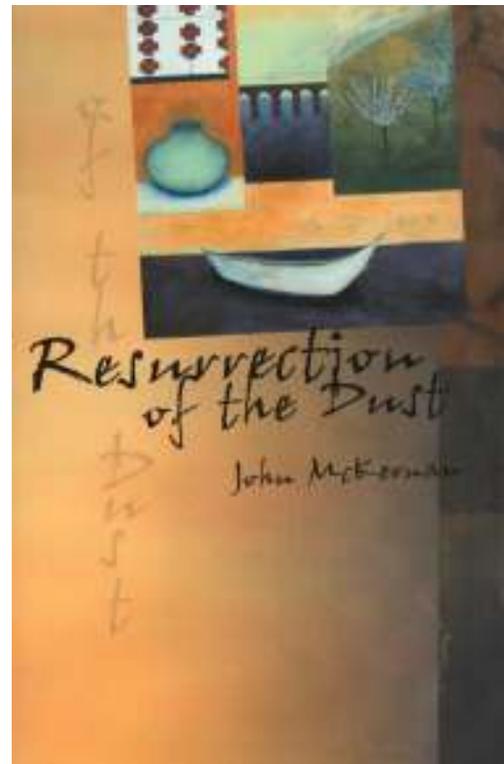
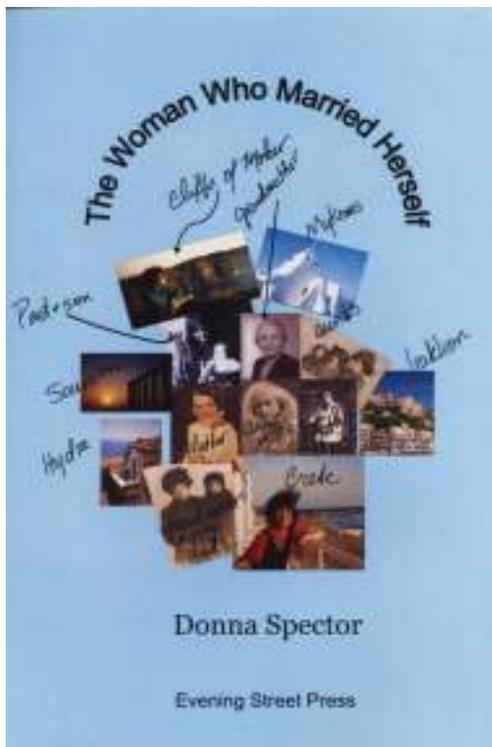
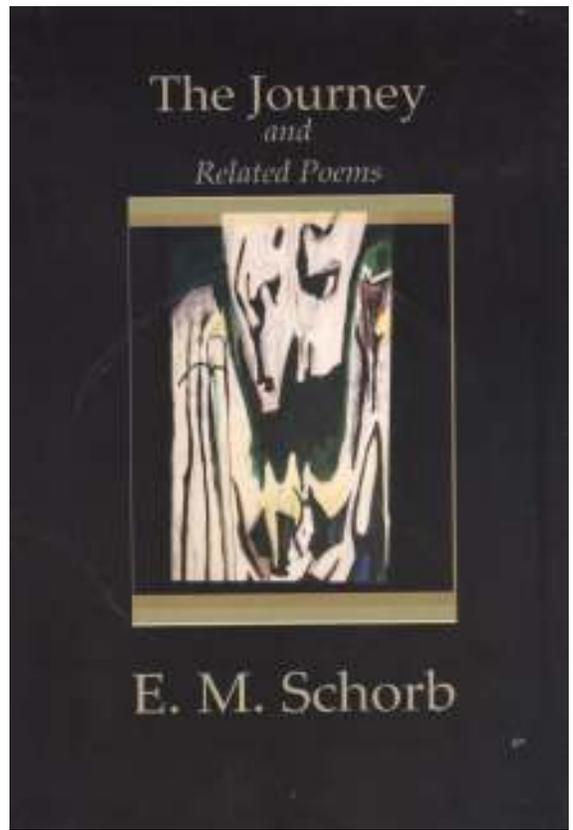
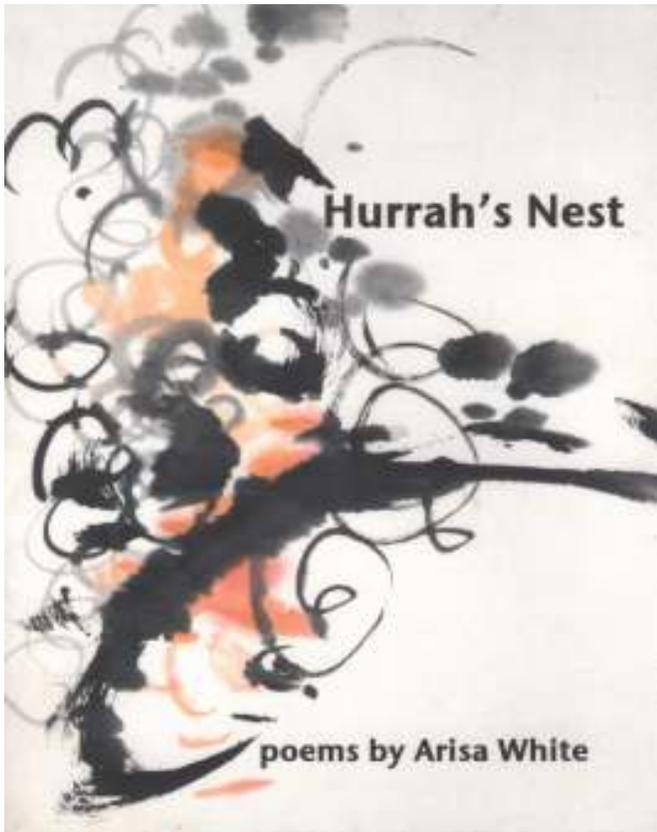
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But death is the central truth of our existence – the sadness at our core. Everything we love will vanish. We can't hold on to anything. It is this tragedy that accounts as well for the beauty and nobility of our lives because in the face of this knowledge, we go right on loving, trying to hold on to what we cherish, defying death with hubris and with faith.

– John Dufresne





CONTRIBUTORS

Michael Hettich's most recent books are LIKE HAPPINESS (Anhinga 2010) and THE ANIMALS BEYOND US (New Rivers, 2011). His most recent chapbook, THE MEASURED BREATHING, won the 2011 Swan Scythe Chapbook contest. He lives with his family in Miami.

Marie Olofsdotter is a Swedish-born artist living in Minneapolis. Her books for children have been honored by a Midwest Book Achievement Award, a Benjamin Franklin Award, and a Minnesota Book Award. She is the recipient of a Loft Mentor Series Award in Poetry, and her grants include a 2013 MSAB Artist Initiative Grant. Her poems have appeared in several online journals and she has published an artist's book titled White Leaves, a book of tiny poems. Marie's work as a teaching artist has inspired young and old alike for the last 20 years. For more information please visit:

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Stephen Poleskie is an artist, writer, and photographer. His artwork is in the collections of numerous museums including the Metropolitan Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York: and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Tate Gallery in London. His writing, fiction and art criticism, has appeared in many journals both here and abroad. Among these are *American Writing, Essays & Fictions, Leonardo, Lightworks, Many Mountains Moving, Pangolin Papers, Satire, SN Review, and Sulphur River Literary Review* in the USA; *D'Ars*, and *Spazio Umano*, in Italy, *Himmelschreiber* in Germany, and *Imago* in Australia. He also has short stories in two anthologies, Being Human, and The Book of Love from W. W. Norton, and been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. A handmade book of his poetry was published by Loughborough College of Art in England. He has published six novels: The Balloonist, The Third Candidate, Grater Life, Vigilia's Tempest, Acorn's Card and Sconto Walaa. Poleskie has taught, or been a visiting professor at twenty-seven colleges and art schools throughout the world, including: MIT, Rhode Island School of Design, the School of Visual Art in New York and the University of California, Berkeley. He is currently a professor emeritus at Cornell University. He lives in Ithaca, NY with his wife, the novelist, Jeanne Mackin. www.StephenPoleskie.com/

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Ian Sherman is a junior at Trevor Day School, where he is co-editor-in-chief of the literary magazine, founder of the Psychology Club, and column editor of the

newspaper. His passion for writing, however, extends outside the classroom as well. He has been recognized on national and regional levels by Scholastic Art & Writing Awards for over 5 years now for all sorts of genres from humor and dramatic scripts to short stories and memoirs. In 2012, Ian had his one-act play "Standing Voiceless in the Choir" produced Off-Broadway at 59E59 Theaters in New York City as a part of Writopia Lab's Playwright Festival. His play was also put on as a dramatic reading by the TACT (The Actors Company Theatre) in New York. Most recently, his poems "Love" and "Melodies" have been accepted by Teen Art Gallery and are being featured in their 2013 July exhibition at Chashama (461 West 126th St). Overall, Ian is an enthusiastic and accomplished writer, who hopes to impact others with insightful and heart-warming works.

Diane Webster's goal is to remain open to poetry ideas in everyday life or nature or an overheard phrase and to write from her perspective at the moment. Many nights she falls asleep juggling images to fit into a poem. Her work has appeared in *Philadelphia Poets*, *Illya's Honey*, *River Poets Journal* and other literary magazines.

Joe Sullivan published a novel, *Three Thirds*, in 2002, and his work has appeared in recent years in *Monkeybicycle*, *Poets/Artists*, *OVERFLOW* and *On Earth As It Is*. He works as a dance magazine editor and is an accomplished sax player. He lives in Brooklyn, NY, with his family.
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David Wagoner has published 20 books of poems, most recently *After the Point of No Return*, (Copper Canyon Press, 2112). He has also published ten novels, one of which, *The Escape Artist*, was made into a movie by Francis Ford Coppola. He won the Lilly Prize in 1991, six yearly prizes from *Poetry*, two yearly prizes from *Prairie Schooner*, and the Arthur Rense Prize for Poetry from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2011. In 2007, his play *First Class* was given 43 performances at A Contemporary Theatre in Seattle. He was a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets for 23 years. He edited *Poetry Northwest* from 1966 to 2002, and he is professor emeritus of English at the U. of Washington. He teaches at the low-residency MFA program of the Whidbey Island Writers Workshop.

Edward Butscher author of first biographies of Sylvia Plath and Conrad Aiken, and several volumes of my own verse, most recently, *Child in the House* from Canio's editions.

Margaret Elysia Garcia lives and writes high in the Sierra Mountains in Plumas National . Her recent work can be seen in *ForestBrain*, *Child Magazine*, *Catamaran Review*, *Huizache Journal* as well as other places online. She teaches composition and journalism at Feather River College.

Ed Thompson I was born in 1937 in California. I taught high school English and history for forty-one years and am currently retired. I reside in Northern California.

Gale Acuff has had poems published in many literary journals and is the author of three books of poetry. He has taught university English in the US, China, and Palestine. Gale currently teaches literature at Sichuan University for Nationalities, in China.

Kirby Wright was a Visiting Fellow at the 2009 International Writers Conference in Hong Kong, where he represented the Pacific Rim region of Hawaii. He was also a Visiting Writer at the 2010 Martha's Vineyard Residency in Edgartown, Mass., and the 2011 Artist in Residence at Milkwood International, Czech Republic. He is the author of the companion novels PUNAHOU BLUES and MOLOKA'I NUI AHINA, both set in the islands.

J.R. Solonche Four-time Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, publishing in magazines, journals, and anthologies since the early 70s. He is coauthor of PEACH GIRL: POEMS FOR A CHINESE DAUGHTER (Grayson Books) and author of BEAUTIFUL DAY forthcoming from Deerbrook Editions.

Thomas Sanfilip's poetry and fiction have appeared in such publications as *the Shore Poetry Anthology*, *Thalassa*, *Ivory Tower*, *Nit & Wit and Tomorrow*. Five previous collections of poetry have been published -- By the Hours and the Years (Branden Press, 1972), Myth/A Poem (Iliad Press, 2002), The Art of Anguish (2004), Last Poems (2007), Figures of the Muse (2012), in addition to a collection of short fiction, The Killing Sun (2006), all previous four published by Ara Pacis. A collection of published and unpublished literary essays will appear in 2013 under the title Poetry in the Age of Impurity. Presently he lives in the Chicago area and has written for a variety of publications, including *Book Page*, *Rain Taxi*, *Letter Ex*, *Filmfax*, *Film Quarterly*, *Film Score Monthly*, *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, and the *Walt Whitman Encyclopedia*.

Madeleine Beckman is a poet, fiction, and nonfiction writer. She is Nonfiction Editor for *IthacaLit*, a literary journal, and Contributing Reviewer for *Bellevue Literary Review*. Her work has been published in books, journals, anthologies, and online. She is the recipient of awards and grants, from among other places, the Poetry Society of America, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Irish Arts Council of Ireland. Dead Boyfriends, her poetry book, was recently reissued by Limoges Press. Madeleine teaches at NYU Langone Medical School in the Medicine & Humanism Program and privately. She can be reached at www.writedowntown.com

Sam Frankl is a 23 year old writer from London, England. He has work appearing in *Neon Magazine*, *Eunoia Review* and *Silent Things* so far this year. He is also a regular contributor to the cultural blog [Le Cool](#).

Kory Ferbet received his B.A. in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing from the University of Missouri. He currently resides in Seattle, WA where he spends his free time writing and gallivanting around the wilderness.

Phebe Davidson is a recovering academic, the author of twenty-some published collections of poems, a contributing editor at *Tar River Poetry* and a staff writer for *The Asheville Poetry Review*. Her newest book is *Waking to Light* (Main Street Rag Publishing Co., 2012)

Christopher Mulrooney has written poems in *Or*, *Pacific Review*, *Tulane Review*, *Weyfarers*, and *Orbis*.

T.J. McAvoy (1979—) has worked as a journalist, an editor, a printer, and a janitor. He lives with his wife in Denver. He is currently at work on his second novel.

John Menaghan A prize-winning poet and playwright, has published three books with Salmon Poetry (Ireland): *All the Money in the World* (1999), *She Alone* (2006), and *What Vanishes* (2009). His fourth book, *Here and Gone*, is forthcoming from Salmon in 2013. Four of his short plays have received productions in Los Angeles, and one in Omaha. One of those plays, *A Rumor of Rain*, was published in *The Hollow & Other Plays* (2008). Menaghan teaches literature and creative writing at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, where he also serves as Director of both the Irish Studies and Summer in Ireland programs. <http://redroom.com/author/john-menaghan>

Andrei Guruianu lives in New York City where he teaches in the Expository Writing Program at New York University. He is the author of a memoir, *Metal and Plum* (Mayapple Press, 2010) and four collections of poetry, most recently *Postmodern Dogma* (Sunbury Press, 2011). More at www.andreiguruianu.com

Conor Robin Madigan is a poet and novelist. His first published novel was *Cut Up* (News From The Republic of Letters, 2011).

Biff Mitchell lives at the edge of the world. He has no life. He has no friends. Neighborhood children throw stones at his hovel. At night, Biff throws stones at his hovel. Someday Biff plans to write a book about a man who lives in a hovel that is stoned daily by neighborhood children who—through some magical twist of events—turn into snowmen. When Spring arrives, the man's house melts.

Gianmarc Manzione is a Puschart Prize-nominated poet and nonfiction writer whose work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Raritan* and elsewhere. He earned an MFA in creative writing from The New School in 2004, and he currently teaches English and creative writing at the College of Central Florida.

In 2006, Parsifal Press published his debut collection of poems, *This Brevity*. He currently is at work on two new books, including a second volume of poems as well as a creative nonfiction project tentatively titled PIN ACTION: Hustlers, Con Artists, and the Outrageous Men of Action Bowling.

Erik Berg is an author of fiction and poetry. His works can be seen in *Southpaw Literary Journal*, *Badlands*, *Black Magnolias*, *Blue Lotus Review*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Southern Pacific Review*, *West Wind*, *The Stray Branch*, and *The Kite Journal*. His novel The Growth of Something is currently serialized in the *Southern Pacific Review*.

Heather Bell Adams lives in Raleigh, NC and has published flash and short fiction, essays, and poetry. She can be reached at www.heatherbelladams.com.

Sofia M. Starnes was appointed Virginia's Poet Laureate in 2012. She is the author of five poetry collections, most recently Fully Into Ashes (Wings Press) and Love and the Afterlife (by invitation, Franciscan University). She is also the editor of Four Virginia Poets Laureate (2004-2012): An Anthology and Reader's Guide and of The Nearest Poem Anthology, which is forthcoming. Sofia is the recipient of a fellowship from the Virginia Commission for the Arts and winner of several national poetry awards, including the Rainer Maria Rilke Prize, the Transcontinental Poetry Prize (Editor's Choice), the Christianity and Literature Poetry Prize, and Editor's selection in the Marlboro Poetry Prize. She currently serves as Poetry Editor and Poetry Book Review Editor for the *Anglican Theological Review*. For more information, please visit www.sofiamstarnes.com.

Christie Stratos graduated from Lebanon Valley College with a degree in English Literature and Business. She writes short stories, novels, poetry, essays, and has developed a new genre called Symbolic Experimentalism. Awards include the Steven Lee Barza Collegiate Prize from the Poetry Society of Virginia, and the Social Sciences Campus-Wide Writing Award from Lebanon Valley College. To read more of Christie's works and find out more about Symbolic Experimentalism, visit her website: www.christiestratos.com.

Thor Benson is a traveling writer currently based in Portland, Oregon. He writes fiction for magazines, and articles for new websites. Benson's fiction work can be found in: *Empirical Magazine*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *The Conium Review*, and more. His articles can be found on: Examiner.com, DailyKos.com, and others. He can be

found at a run-down whiskey bar in Portland.

Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé has edited more than ten books and co-produced three audio books, several edited pro bono for non-profit organizations. Desmond is also an interdisciplinary artist, working in clay. His commemorative pieces are housed in museums and private collections in India, the Netherlands, the UK and the US.

Kim Farleigh has worked for aid agencies in three conflicts: Kosovo, Iraq and Palestine. He takes risks to get the experience required for writing. He likes art, beautiful architecture and bullfighting, which might explain why this Australian lives in Madrid. 73 of his stories have been accepted by 66 different magazines.

Carolyn Smart's fifth collection of poems, Hooked - Seven Poems was published in 2009 by Brick Books. An excerpt from her memoir At the End of the Day won first prize in the 1993 CBC Literary Contest. She is the founder of the RBC Bronwen Wallace Award for Emerging writers, and since 1989 has taught Creative Writing at Queen's University

Megan Stolz is a California transplant who came to the east coast first for her B.A. at Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia and then for her M.F.A. at the University of Baltimore. She is currently working on her thesis project, a short story collection entitled Everything Has Already Changed, which will be published later this year. In her free time, she travels, knits, and blogs about literary things at www.meganstolz.com.

Rod Siino grew up in a small Rhode Island town, and now lives in Massachusetts surrounded by horse farms and trees. When he's not writing or earning a living to support the writing addiction, he's being held hostage by his 3-year old twins, Bennett and Maya, who are convinced the world and everyone in it are here to serve their every desire without delay. He is contemplating a research project to determine the validity of this notion. Mean-while, he is working to complete his first short story collection. His work has appeared in *Fried Chicken and Coffee*, *Inkwell*, *The Prov-i-dence Jour-nal*, and *Zoetrope All-Story Extra*, among others. His website is www.rodsiinowrites.com.

Joe Baumann is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where he serves as the editor-in-chief of the *Southwestern Review* and the nonfiction editor of *Rougarou: an Online Literary Journal*. His work has appeared in *SNReview*, *Hawai'i Review*, *flashquake*, and several others, and is forthcoming in *Sleet Magazine* and *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*. His chapbook of flashfiction, Ivory Children, will be released by Red Bird Chapbooks later this year.

John Estes I am director of the creative writing program at Malone University in Canton, Ohio. Recent poems and prose have appeared in *Tin House*, *New Orleans*

Review, *Southern Review*, *Iron Horse*, *AGNI*, and other places. I am author of *Kingdom Come* (C&R Press, 2011) and two chapbooks: *Breakfast with Blake at the Laocoön* (Finishing Line Press, 2007) and *Swerve*, which won a 2008 National Chapbook Fellowship from the Poetry Society of America.

Holly Hendin is a psychiatrist working in Phoenix. In her poetry she tries to catch and elaborate on those moments that otherwise would slip by quietly. She hopes she is able to expand upon the spaces between the stitches of existence. Her poetry can be found in *The Front Range Review*, *Summerset Review*, *The George Washington Review*, *Crack the Spine*, and *Schuylkill Valley Journal*.

Terry Savoie Nearly three hundred of his poems have been published in literary journals, anthologies and small press publications over the past twenty-five years. These include *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Ploughshares* and *Prairie Schooner* as well as recent or forthcoming issues of *Great River Review*, *Cutthroat*, *Cider Press Review*, *Spillway*, and *North American Review*

Ruth Jacobs writes a series of novels entitled *Soul Destruction*, which dispel the 'happy hooker' myth and expose the dark world and the harsh reality of life as a call girl. Her debut novel, *Soul Destruction: Unforgivable*, will be published in 2013 by Caffeine Nights. Ruth studied prostitution in the late 1990s, which sparked her interest in the subject. She draws on her research and the women she interviewed for inspiration. She also has firsthand experience of many of the topics she writes about such as posttraumatic stress disorder, and drug and alcohol addiction. In addition to her fiction writing, Ruth is also involved in non-fiction in her charity and activism work in the areas of anti-sexual exploitation and anti-human trafficking.

