

ginosko



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Ginosko (ghin-océ-koe)

**To perceive, understand,
realize, come to know;
knowledge that has an inception,
a progress, an attainment.
The recognition of truth by experience.**

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,
Voices of prostitutes and deformed persons,
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves
and dwarfs,
...through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts—voices veiled, and I remove
the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured.

—Walt Whitman

CONTENTS

Wrought and Replicating	8
Clean Lucid Streaks	8
Gina Ferrara	
Emergency Broadcast	9
Priscilla Frake	
Blue	10
Edward Mullany	
There is one thing that is close and one thing that is far	12
Penelope Schott	
<i>Anticipation</i>	13
A. Davlin	
Erasure	15
Jennifer Andrews	
Mimesis	19
Rosemarie Dombrowski	
Possession	21
Laury Egan	
Kindness	22
Holograms	23
Phoebe Wilcox	
In Green Grass	26
Ananya Dash	
Vacuous	41
Kelsey Noble	
Jealousy	45
... a sister's essential thoughts upon siblings now gone ...	46
Michael Mirolla	

the hieroglyphics of the mind	48
underneath beauty	49
we sleep in tents	50
learning to see	51
marcia arrieta	
Calabasas	52
J. Gabriel Gates	
TINY RED TEAR AGAINST AZURE	60
Kit Kennedy	
Skyline	61
Luivette Resto	
Straight Lines	62
Graham Nunn	
The Baker	63
Natasha Cabot	
Tyler the Skinhead	67
Tria Andrews	
The Return Journey	68
Katrin Talbot	
Clean	69
Jason L. Huskey	
Rooms	71
Askew	72
RAW	73
Andrea DeAngelis	
Circling	77
At Jimmy's	78
Another Christmas Storm	80
Kristin Roedell	
Matches	81
Darrell Dela Cruz	

Breathing Under Water	82
Barry W North	
The Fountain	94
Chris Castle	
<i>Gen H Psych</i>	96
James Snyder	
Hold	103
Suvi Mahonen	
<i>How Do You Want Me?</i>	109
Tobi Cogswell	
FIVE DEFINITIONS OF SLOW	110
Caitlin McGuire	
What My Dream Said	112
That, And Some Time To Listen	113
Sally Dies	114
Owning The Not So Distant World	115
Home	116
Leaving	117
Forgiving Geography	118
Following The Run	119
Grace Cavalieri	

CONTRIBUTORS

Wrought and Replicating

Gina Ferrara

Inspired by the musicality of veins
and arteries,
I keep this poem within.
I breathe and it writes itself
near tissues, cells and familiar red fluid.
The pulse is the steadiest muse.
Last night, I dreamed a pair of herons
lifted the lines then carried them
to the island where you are.
When the sun rose,
you read what was left,
a language of double helixes,
wrought and replicating,
left on the rocks to dry.

Clean Lucid Streaks

Gina Ferrara

In wrought cages,
the birds were blue and yellow,
puffed as pastries.
They swung on bars,
faintly cooing, soft hours passing.
My grandmother sat amidst
the spinning sky and quivering sun
in her wheelchair, head bowed
and hell bent, rubbing her rag
to remove imagined stains
from faces, smudges on surfaces.
Her clean lucid streaks smelled of lemons.

Emergency Broadcast

Priscilla Frake

Drive into silver: blur
by rain and blue by thunder,
tarnish of cumulo-nimbus.

Drive into heat and dark
of tumbled cloud, sheared
by storm, pieced by vivid

momentary threads.
Along a quiet street,
your lights would pull behind,
two meek and tremulous shadows,
but here the car rips up

ignited rain and tears
tire-high through its meadow
of mist. How can you exit
the highway's speed, spilled
like fury directly in your veins?

Go further into the tessellated
dark, into the pulse
and scream of light. The world is,
is not. Its heart stutters
with purple arrhythmia, clots
of manacled voltage. No time,

no time except this storm
and what will you do
but drive into fear, further
and further
in?

Blue

Edward Mullany

I tell her I am not tired, and though it isn't a lie she looks at me with an expression that can only be described as dubious. It is night. I have just arrived on her doorstep with her ten year-old son, Bobby, who also happens to be my son but who right now isn't prepared to act like anyone's son. He is grouchy. We have just completed a seven-hour drive that began in a part of the country where the ground is frozen and brown, yet still without snow. In my ex-wife's yard is a snowman.

"It's missing its eyes," I say, as a way of letting her know I'm unimpressed. The house belongs to her boyfriend. I am here not because I want to be, but because I have to be, which means the sooner I get Bobby off my hands the sooner I can get back on the road, where at least I'll have time to think. Bobby is an okay child. He has already lived in more places than most people see in their lifetimes. Whether this is a good thing will not be evident for several years, though for now he is generally happy. He likes the same things most kids like, which is to say he's surprisingly well-adjusted. I have not been the best of fathers. I have had bad luck, but I've also made bad choices. Miranda knows this better than anyone.

"Come on in," she says, as if she knows what I am thinking.

"Nah," I say, and I look off down the avenue, which is quiet, cold, unassuming. There are cars parked in front of people's houses.

Miranda disappears for a moment with Bobby, who I've already said my goodbyes to, and then reappears in slippers, a tightly wound bathrobe, and with a package of menthol cigarettes. She lets the screen door close behind her and joins me in the yard. I am also smoking a cigarette. "What did you do this time?" she asks me.

I don't tell her. There is no reason now for anyone to know except for me and whoever else is involved, either willingly or unwillingly. Besides, she'll probably hear soon enough. I tell her something else, something appropriately grim and sufficiently believable, but something that won't cause her unnecessary grief. She shakes her head, ashes her cigarette. She is clearly disappointed. She wants to know, she says, what she could have done to have made things turn out differently between us, though if I'd known the answer to that question we wouldn't have been here in the first place, standing outside a house that isn't our own, smoking cigarettes in the snow.

Miranda's boyfriend appears. He stands with the screen door propped open and says her name. "In a minute," says Miranda, without looking at him. I feel him watching me. I've never met him before, yet somehow I know exactly what he is like, that he is the same as me in outward appearance and temperament, but that he is also very different. He will not, for example, ever leave his child on another man's doorstep in the middle of a winter night. And that he knows this too is what is communicated to me in that moment.

When he is gone, Miranda lights another cigarette. There is nothing left for us to say. Or there is everything left, and we don't know where to begin. "Wait here," she says, and she hurries inside as if there's something she would like me to have. I imagine her scrounging through a photo album, looking for that perfect picture, pulling it out and flattening it against her thigh.

There is one thing that is close and one thing that is far

Penelope Schott

and that one thing is the sky stretching above sight as I breathe fragments of sky into my throat as we kiss at the curb as the brush edges of your mustache prick my open lips as we press so close that this goodbye kiss will fly east with me across the whole broad continent more present than the cracked badlands or square fields or winking rivers between tiny trees, and how our kiss, like starlight, is the one thing that is close and the one thing that is far

Anticipation

A. Davlin

He licks the tops of his first two fingers,
Her eyes close.
Like lightning on
The horizon, darting back and forth,
Not sure when the next will strike.

Crack
 The flick of a wrist
 His hand strikes her flesh.

She is rooted in this moment.
Body singing.
Flesh stinging.

Her body condenses like cardboard
Down to one point.
A momentary reprieve from as
The mind shuts off.
Stops tugging for
Reassurance.
Only the body.
All the body.
The great quiet of a still mind.

Then the breath returns like a feather falling
And slips back into the lungs.
Prana.
A surge then just at the top of the inhale,
As the calm settles in like
Warm chocolate
 Crack!
 The sensation of hot flesh plunged into ice water.

The skin, the largest organ in the body.
Alive like a pointillist painting that from
Far away seems seamless
Until close up—
A thousand specks make up the landscape.
So too are the cells
Of the skin until awakened
Seem to move
As if a unified front
Not a thousand points of anticipation like

Light waiting in a darkened room.

I think of snow and its properties—how quickly it can change from ice to sleet to rain and back again. How it can smooth your face and melt into you, like a hush. Or how, on days it has been dirtied and used, it turns to mud and slush. And I think of my sister.

We liked snow. It was one of the few place we were friends. Born both in October, not even a year apart, we were estranged twins. Dressed and coddled and cramped into the other, we fought daily for space and our own identities. We didn't wear shirts or shoes in the summer, we played Cowboys and Indians with the neighborhood boys, we hunted for frogs and hid them in our babysitter's bed. We said, *poop and fart and damn*.

Nights held our soft secrets, our stories. After our parents tucked us in and moved to the living room, we'd lay in our beds, in our all-lilac room, a slow breeze making shadows ache sideways across the wall, and whisper to the other, *poop, fart. Damn*. We did that for a while, my sister crawling into my bed, wrapping herself around me, rubbing her cold feet against my own. And later, when we huddled close in the closet, head to head, playing library or sharing *Playboys*, we were friends. Or, when it snowed. We could both feel it coming. A soft quiet filled us, things would settle. She wouldn't try to kill me and I'd tolerate her presence.

During a snowstorm, the house closed in around us, its arms raking us in. Dull light spilled through living room windows and snaked its way down the hall. We'd be at its end, each of us on either side of our A-frame chalkboard. I had my side for drawing and painting. A clip sat at its top, from which I hung paper. So I'd clip in sheets and paint, while she used her side to draw with chalk, and erase, and draw again.

Sometimes this annoyed me, all the erasing, all the recreating, while I continued to make just one thing. Sometimes I think I resented her ability to wipe away what was, knowing intuitively, even while it was being created, that it was a part of something else. That split moments change a person. That when snow goes away, it takes something with it.

For years, when mornings were deep grey and snow fell in wet clumps and the radio told us we were free, my sister and I scrambled to get out of the house and under the branches of the squat, old pine that sat in our yard. It was our fort, our secret hide-away the neighborhood boys hadn't yet discovered. It was natural cover, a place no one would think of because no one had created it, mangled or manipulated it into being. It simply was.

Under boughs bent heavy and low, we stripped frail branches of their needles. Then, lying back, our heads propped on snow banks piled around us, we'd smoke our pine cigarettes and watch the sky through the cracks in our tree. We'd lay in our place, in the deep hush and quiet of the late afternoon, for our mother to call us in, or the dogs to wander close, or the boys to find us.

We'd watch the clouds, the growing grey, and pretend we were teachers, detectives, pilots, Amelia Earhardt or Jacques Cousteau. In the shadow of those pine boughs and under the weight of that wet snow, she never once imagined herself a slip of silver, a shadow, an erased impression of who she was, who she would come to be. Under that tree, she was in the foreground, bottom center, lying in the snow, her legs crossed at the ankles, one hand tucked under her hip, the other red and raw and cold, waving a pine cigarette in the air, all celluloid, a flash of light. Gold.

I remember her now, at the chalkboard, on those lazy afternoons, how she welcomed change by wiping, wiping, and making room for it, and how it made me crazy. I wanted to hold each moment. Make it into something. Make it stand. Hold onto it like the image of us in snow. And I wonder, am I doing this now? Thinking if I can recall her, put her in the foreground of my memory and hold her there, in a sketch of words, she won't be lost? She won't be out on some flatland street in Florida, cast in yellow light, selling pieces of herself, the comfort of dark days at the end of a hall, to some drugged up drunk, with extra cash or a bottle of beer. Will she remember the growing blanket of white that covered the yard and dipped the branches low? Will she erase this too?

She took away with her all the pictures, all the photos my parents had of us growing up. Maybe at the beginning, when we believed there was still hope, somewhere inside she knew there was none. That she was changing to sleet and rain and back again. That in these quick, Polaroid moments, she was captured. That she was. And she took them to remember this.

When I visited her one summer—the summer we biked on Martha's Vineyard and made up bad songs—I took some pictures back from her. I took us playing dress-up in old prom gowns, us in our twin Easter suits—pink checked coats and dresses my mother made—in white gloves and patent leather shoes, holding matched purses. She was still a boy, bent at her knees and ankles, her feet wanting out of the hard shoes. In one picture, her hat is tilted over an eye, in another an untended glove dangles from her small, square hand. In all of them, she carries her purse like a burden. In the end, a glove was lost. Her hat too.

I took others. Us in the front yard, in summer dresses, squat and round against trees, in the paddock, rubber boots up to our knees, a brush in each hand, grooming tails, wiping legs down, our heads bent low under saddles and stirrups. Or on the beach, naked and wicked, our bathing suits lost on the land or to the sea, or in the kitchen washing dishes in the orange shirts we were crazy for. The orange shirts we wore on the night everything went wild.

It was one of those mad nights when rain whips in sheets and wind screams and lights flicker on and off and on again. Everything was electric, on fire, alive. Our dog had just given birth to puppies. That late spring, my father taught us how to reach our small hands up inside our beagle and pull out its puppies, one at a time. That spring my father taught us about life and death and renewal. That parts were not removed, erased or forgotten, but rather, that each small intention created a whole, left an impression that could not be wiped away. I wonder now, as she moved from drink to drink, what parts she erased of herself, what parts she omitted from her whole. Like the glove and the hat, what parts did she lose?

The night cracked and switched. We were in the kitchen, four and five years old, when a tree came down, when we realized one of the puppies wasn't in the box. Our parents and our babysitter, Anne, ran out into the night's lightening and hollered for it. We could hear them. We waited at the door.

The screen door banged against the side of the house, the windows rattled. The lights went out. It was our first encounter with the possibility that things might not turn out all right. That the world wasn't safe—that it could take things from you and not even blink.

In the end, all three of them plowed through the door at the same time, our orange shirts were soaked, from holding it open. In one picture that night, we are at the sink washing dishes, playing grown-up. In another, we are in the living room, our smiles caught on something inside, tentative, unsure. Anne is holding the puppy. Our orange shirts are flat up against us.

I took the photos to take back parts of ourselves, part of who we were together. There are only a few, and they are only of us until we are seven or eight years old, just before we wore shirts in the summer. Just before change came, soft skin folding over knobby hips and shoulders, turning us, tuning us, into new curves and false promises.

And I think to myself, maybe she was right to erase. To wipe out what was, to recreate before a form took shape, before it held her, defined her intentions in chalky outlines.

And I know, in the same moment, that's not true. Because no matter how much erasure takes place, it still leaves a shadow impression, forms that lurk and emerge, forms that can create new wholes.

And I remember our time in the snow, under the heavy pine boughs, and I think to myself, as much as snow takes something with it when it goes, it leaves something too. It melts, washes what was, into sliver streams that cut their way into curves of crunched up land, making it smooth again.

I also think it leaves something else, an indelible mark, a memory of a time and a place. A sweet taste. A time we were together, and safe, and there were chalk drawings and muffled afternoons, and hot chocolate on cold days and whispers at night. And a secret fort, and you and I, alone. And I wonder if you remember the snow. And the time we smoked tree cigarettes and were quiet and were friends. There are no pictures of us in the snow. And, I think to myself, there should be. And I wish that you had been able to take them, that you had pictures of us in the snow.

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Mimesis

Rosemarie Dombrowski

Your connection severed, you told her that
you liked her lipstick, the garish shade
that made her flesh translucent in natural light.
The mirror was cocked toward her, your eyes
watering from glare, gibberish like lyrical
fragments going once,
twice,
entirely untranscribed.

When the gurney met the car, you both
fell silent, like the sound of dying grass
in Wyeth's painting, the distant barn
that hosts a flock of muted, gliding birds.
In some liminal space, you cling to cognition
for the birds, for Keats and their song,
for the salvation of stray ideals
born out of words
and the eventual reawakening of the senses.

I suppose if one had a visitation of some sort, it would be too terrifying to think about. Some forms of it lie in madness, and you're frightened of that because it looks like you might not get back. Even though there may be some incredible knowledge revealed, we want to hang on to what we know. That view of the world may be so narrow and so pitiful and so shabby and so lonely that we die of starvation because we are not feeding off it, yet this other, very rich perception may terrify us. But, more to the point of your question, I thought of the origin of the myth, the story, as being both history and prophecy, meaning it would identify danger but it would also hold the promise that if one fully understood it one would be free or made whole in some way.

—Toni Morrison

Possession

Laury Egan

Through night mist and lush dew
the full moon rises
its face crisscrossed
with black capillaries
of forest branches.

I walk
counting six moons in six ponds
each moon
a lover held fast against
the body of black water.

Within the sweep of a willow's arms I sit
watching as the moon slowly shifts
from the last pond's grasp
steals away
while water sleeps.

Deer pass as do minutes
my navy sweater
dampens
holds lunar silver
on its woolen hairs.

An hour after midnight
by the pond's mouth
a red fox drinks
tries to swallow moonlight.

Kindness

Phoebe Wilcox

Squeezing a drop of blood out of the tip of my finger, it's a ruby smaller than a teardrop. As a child, I never pricked myself to be blood sisters with anyone like that, rubbing grubby fingertips together so unsanitarily. Besides, I never liked pain. I still don't like pain but nowadays I'm blood sisters with it.

Harsh words make gashes in the heart. Harsh words spoken through smiling hypocritical lips make even worse gashes in a heart. There is so much silent bleeding everywhere. I've been rolling out bandages and adhesive tape for so long in these wars of mine. So much of my time is spent checking wound sites and trying to recognize if they're getting better or not, and which soldiers are the ones fighting on my side...they all seem to wear the same uniforms and I can't tell one man from another.

Years ago a man with whom I was acquainted took his own life. Small things I remember from the weeks before he died, one, he corrected me after I'd made some disparaging comment about my unruly hair. I had used the word *hate*. He used the word *beautiful*.

His last advice to those he left behind was to be kind.

Then he took himself away from the unkind multitude, as far as he could get from us, he went.

he left words like wishful bandages,
to sop up what he left behind.

Holograms

Phoebe Wilcox

It was about to rain and Mary was alone and had no plans for the weekend. As she passed by the little holographic couple that danced their endless jitterbug on a pedestal outside the science building she realized that this dancing couple made her happy, happy to be a college student without a date, with nothing to do but study on a Friday night, happy to await the needles of rain that sharpened themselves in the clouds. The nine-inch tall couple glowed in their bell jar, their bodies and clothing mostly gold with hints of orange and green that shifted around the edges. They were energetic and never ceased in their routine. He twirled her; her poodle-dog skirt flared and her pony tail swung out from her head. Mary, pausing for a minute to admire their dancing little feet, decided to name them. *Let's call him Butch*, she thought, *and let's call her Mary. Why not?* Mary smiled at the irony, adjusted her books on her hip, glanced up at the sky, and walked on to the dorms, making it in the main door just as the first few dart-like drops began to fall.

Carson, a boy whose father was a welder, sat on her roommate's bed reading a hot rod magazine. Katie, her roommate, was in the bathroom spraying a nimbus of hairspray down over a tight, docile head of hair. She came coughing out of the bathroom.

"See you later, Mary." Katie grabbed her purse to go.

"See you later."

"See ya." Carson laid the magazine down.

"Bye."

After they left Mary sat on her bed wondering what to do. Katie and Carson were going to the movies. She had planned on studying but now she no longer felt like it. She sat on her bed and admired her 70s-era Mick Jagger poster, especially his gypsy-bright clothing and the preternaturally elastic string of saliva that stretched across his singing mouth. Outside, the evening had taken on a dusky, windy, invigorating feel and tree branches scratched against the window like an animal that wanted in. Mary, in response to this night animal briefly reached over and traced a finger down the glass. She stared into the dark glare of the window, wishing she had a boyfriend and wondering what it would be like, all of that stuff. That first-love stuff. That getting-engaged stuff. That breaking-it-off-in-a-horrendous-fight stuff. That making-up-and-getting-sweetly-back-together stuff. Even though Katie told her all about it all the time, it was completely unfathomable to her.

She wondered if Butch and Mary were still dancing. She wondered if they danced in the rain and in the darkness. She believed that they did and this gave her comfort. Mary lay down on her bed and picked up Carson's hot rod magazine.

* * *

It was after midnight when Butch and Mary, the holographic couple, stopped dancing. They'd gotten tired of it and were curled up at the edge of their bell jar holding hands and nuzzling each other. Mary had thrown her legs up over Butch's lap, her hands laced around his neck. She'd just begun to kiss him a little in the vicinity of his ear. She loved it when the science building quieted down enough that she and Butch could do whatever they wanted.

"I want to have my way with you," he said, smiling brilliantly, goldly in the darkness.

"Okay!" She answered and squirmed obligingly beneath his nebulous, pressing hands. He felt like a sunbeam and his kisses tasted like ripe tangerines.

They accommodated each other in every possible way. At night they lost their inhibitions because there wasn't much to see outside of the bell jar. The world outside was just a streetlight with a few dozen whirling moths. They loved to watch the moths but the bland, gritty sidewalk below the pedestal, marked with a few dark, sporadic discs of chewing gum, had ceased to interest them long ago. They'd found other diversions. As fit and athletic as they were, their lovemaking would have been the awe of the campus if anyone had ever chanced to stroll fortuitously by the science building of a late night, but no one ever did. Oh, the riotous good times they'd have inspired as Mary's pony tail came undone and the poodle skirt twisted up with the jeans in a glistening gold pile off to the side. Their love had the singing of tiny stars in it and afterwards, as they fell asleep in each others arms, they slipped into the current of a shared dream in which others were privileged with the same sort of love they had. A capacious wish for the happiness of all living things filled their insular little goldfish bowl. These were two sweet little people. They didn't remember where they had come from or where they might be going. They had no idea what their lives meant or when they might end. All they really knew was that they must dance an interminable dance as soon as the sun came up. Butch made it bearable for Mary. Mary made it bearable for Butch. And the night was their well and water.

* * *

The night air against her cheek was chill and moist but the rain had stopped and the moon was up. Mary didn't care that it was one in the morning and that her campus was located in a dangerous part of the city. She didn't care that it was dark and there was no one about. She felt protected, like she had a purpose on this earth and that dying young was no part of it. Her footsteps over the sidewalks were hollow, self-absorbed, avoided puddles, and admired reflections. There were moths whirling around streetlights and she felt a little like a moth herself. She wished she knew how to do things, even, for instance, welding. Most of all though, she wanted to know how to jitterbug. She'd never had the opportunity to learn the steps of that old dance but thought that whenever she did get a boyfriend, it would be nice to have something to

teach him.

The science building was ivy-covered and adept at keeping secrets.

“Hello,” she called out as she approached.

Moths whirled around the globe of the streetlight. The moon smiled like an artistic rendition of itself. The bell jar was glossy and inscrutable.

Mary reached out to touch the glass of the jar but dropped her hand and covered her mouth in surprise instead, for Butch and Mary were right in the middle of making love. Mary had never seen anyone making love before. She lowered her face to the glass and almost thought Butch spied her, as her large, curious nose was just about at the level of his eyes, but no, his eyes were closed and he was hard at work. Then, toward the end, she saw his teeth, he had teensy-weensy little teeth. And Mary had tiny yellow-green breasts like opalescent lemons. When they were done, the couple separated and fell asleep, limbs entwined together. Butch snored. Big Mary pressed her ear against the glass and thought she heard a sound like the trilling of a cricket. She was glad that Butch had moved apart from Mary so that she got to see his entire body. Mary had grown up in a clan of women and had never even seen a picture of a naked man. It had also been a very long time since she'd been to an art museum and had had the opportunity to examine the genitalia of any classical hunk rendered in marble. So she'd gotten a little confused about male anatomic details. She knew that there was a penis and testicles but she wasn't sure if there were two testes in one sack or two testes in two sacks. Whenever she was in the library at school she was so absorbed in other class work that she always forgot to research the issue. Then, when she was lying in her dorm bed at night and remembered about it, she had no resources available to her, except Katie, and she wasn't *about* to ask Katie such a stupid question. Butch's genitalia cleared it all up for her, with the added bonus that they happened to look like a cluster of pretty little golden currants.

Mary decided to watch the couple in their repose. She leaned her upper body against the glass for support and rested her cheek on the arched glass at the top of the jar, one arm outstretched overhead, hanging in the air. At times she slipped into an uncomfortable vertical sort of sleep. Until Little Mary came awake to sleepily kiss Butch's lips and run her hands through the corn silk of his chest hair. Then Butch awoke and moved over her like a thunderstorm.

Hours later, dawn came like a blush-colored broom and swept the morning star away over the edge of the world. The holograms awoke and began to dress. Mary smoothed her tousled hair, and hungry, headed off in the direction of the college cafeteria. When she stopped once and to look back, Butch and Mary were playing tug-of-war with a bobby sock. They laughed and laughed. To Mary it seemed like the impassioned chirping of birds going on silently behind that glass. She understood all about invisible actions and silent songs. In the end, it was only the glass that had to break.

In Green Grass

Ananya Dash

It was the day after the snow storm, and everything hung in icy balance under an unrelenting sun, the surreal suspended above the real, and what held her, now, in this moment, was the image of the snow-covered shrubs in front of their house that were melting like freshly glazed doughnuts. It was only frozen snow, but it moved her, the lackluster beauty of those bushes, their lots haplessly cast together beneath a frozen net of crystals that reminded her of icing. The sweetness seemed real and palpable, in a way the rest of her life had lost.

The garbage cans were lined up symmetrically against the curb. This made her hopeful. Perhaps he wasn't as angry as he was entitled to be. He had been calm enough to put out the trash. But their bedroom blinds were still closed. Her eyes scanned the expanse of the house until they finally came to the baby's bedroom. The curtains had been pulled wide open, exposing the window, allowing metallic sunlight to bounce and curve off the panes, ricocheting off the snow directly into her retinas, blurring and blinding without mercy.

She wasn't sure how long she had been sitting there before it dawned on her that she could not bring herself to ring the doorbell, or worse, let herself in. Of all the times not to have your cell phone. She would have to call from the public library she decided. It was the closest payphone she could think of. She pulled into the parking lot, relieved that memory served her correctly, that there was one located discreetly outside, so she would not have to risk running into anyone she knew.

Her throat was drier than sandpaper, and it hurt to swallow. Even a small sip of water would have been something. She picked up the receiver to dial, but her forefinger hovered in mid air. She then straightened and sprinted through the numbers, in case she lost her nerve.

It rings once. Twice. Alex answers. His voice is hoarse. She is shaken.

"Manali?"

"Yes," she whispers, clasp the grimy receiver close to her face, which has begun to perspire.

"Was that you sitting out there in that tan Toyota out front?"

"Yes."

"Whose car is that?" he asks. He doesn't sound like himself at all. And yet it is Alex, her husband of five years, the father of her infant son. Alex who has always loved her and supported her without condition or consequence. Alex, whom she understood she loved the first time she ached for him, back when they were still dating, before their life had unfolded, one unruly crease at a time.

"It's a rental," she answers, grateful that he has taken it upon himself to direct the conversation, leaving her only to provide fact-based answers.

“Right,” he says. He is slowly coming to, filling the deflated shell of him she had left behind. She begins to regain confidence that this will be okay. She waits for him, perversely, given that it was she who set this course of events into action.

“My sister’s here,” he says. Now it is he who is tentative.

She is confused. She doesn’t remember seeing Claudia’s black Audi in the driveway.

Stuart dropped her off this morning,” Alex says. “I just couldn’t have Lydia come.” It is the only time outside of his father’s death that she has heard this tone in his voice, parts dumbfounded, parts indignant. “So Claudia came over instead,” he finishes.

She can visualize the curly dark hair poking out of the V of his undershirt, protecting his falling chest on every exhale. She looks down at her own self, her damp armpits, cold wet patches of sweat which have soaked through the light blue silk of her shirt. She can smell her breath, fetid and stale. Her eyes are bloodshot and dry as paper. Her skin feels dirty and tight. She has not washed. She is unsure of her role, what she is supposed to say or do. She remains courteously silent as he mumbles something about Claudia being a great help.

“But I need to come home,” she says when he finishes.

“Manali, I don’t think that’s a good idea right now,” Alex says. “Just wait till she’s gone. She’s livid. You know Claudia.” He has lost his passivity too. “Please don’t make this any worse.”

Her equilibrium caves to despair. “But I need to see Navin. He’s my baby.” The futility and rotten stupidity of this last statement snatch away from her any remaining reserve of strength, and tears fall. Alex is silent, which makes her even more desperate. “I need to nurse him. Please,” she begs. “I’m engorged.” She feels the throb of tears.

He means to be gentle. “But what have you been doing?”

She begins to cry in earnest.

He quickly amends, “About your milk, I mean? What have you been doing about your milk?”

She wipes her face with the back of her coat sleeve. It inflames her dry, irritated skin. “Nothing, I told you. I’m engorged,” she says.

“Oh.”

“And I’m worried about my milk supply.”

Alex says nothing. She is scared he will hang up. “What did you feed him?” she asks quickly.

“Formula, what did you expect?” He sounds exhausted. Her heart presses into itself.

“Alex, just tell me when I can come home.”

“I’ll make sure she’s gone by noon, okay? Come back by noon.”

“Okay,” she says, still holding the receiver in her hand moments after he has gone. She returns to her car and squirts hand sanitizer between her palms, something

she has done instinctively since the birth of their son. She turns the ignition slowly, pushes the pedal to the gas, and just like that the little tan Toyota disappears down the street in a fiery ball of reflected snow. Did the baby know just how close his mother was? Could he smell that his milk was near? What she did not know was that Alex had pulled out the last breast pad she had disposed of from the garbage in their bathroom so that he could leave it and its just recently milky scent in Navin's crib so that maybe he would stop crying for his mother that night. It was just as well. Just the image of Alex mixing whatever infant formula he had been able to dig up was too much for her to bear.

It was not the first time he had been given formula. Last Wednesday evening, she had been coming home late from work, as usual, and as she pulled into the driveway she noted that their entire two-story five-bedroom house was ablaze with incandescent light. It was unusual. Alarmed, she had called Alex, "Where are you?"

"I'm home already," Alex said. She heard giggling coos and Lydia's booming, bossy laugh in the background.

"Oh," she breathed with relief, as she pushed open the door. There in the middle of the floor was Navin, his chubby little legs secured snugly within the green foam Bumbo Lydia had placed him in. Alex was lying on the floor beside him, tickling the pink and white globes of his toes. Violent squeals of delight were followed by serious quizzical looks at his father's earnest attempts to amuse.

"Ah, Miss," Lydia began. Manali cringed. She hated when Lydia addressed her as Miss Manali. Remembering this, Lydia switched. "Manali, baby has gone through almost all of the breast milk bags you left. You must pump some more. He eats like a champion. He is growing so big, such a big baby boy." Lydia beamed. Manali felt a curious twinge of possessiveness. It was after all her breast milk, however inadequately supplied. Oh yes, pump some more. Like it was that easy, just like going to the store to pick up a jug of milk. Sure, she would pump some more. Never mind that it drained the life force out of her, one small lukewarm drop at a time.

"So I gave him a little formula," Lydia said casually.

"You what?" Manali said incredulously. Navin hadn't had formula since the first night at the hospital nursery.

"He was hungry," Lydia said firmly.

"That makes sense. He was hungry," Alex parroted Lydia.

Manali walked through the foyer, shivering as she dipped her toes in the icy moonlight spilling onto the ceramic tiles. She shut off the remaining lights.

"Please try to be mindful of the lights," she said as she reentered the den. She would ignore the formula thing, just like she did with so many things.

"Baby was crying in so much pain today," Lydia said. "I was frantic rushing from room to room, trying to distract him, find his favorite rattle. That teething pain, they say an adult could not take that pain. Imagine how the teeth tear violently through those sensitive little gums. It was too pathetic, all that crying."

Manali stood carefully rooted into place, with her back to her nanny and husband. “Okay, thank you for your help today.” Her heart fell with the swiftness of rapids.

Though she could take Lydia’s condescension, she could not take her implicit accusation that somehow she had failed as a mother. She and Alex had decided that she would keep her job as an events planner in the city after Navin was born. Her job, unlike Alex’s, was stable despite volatile markets. She organized charity balls and other corporate events, which oddly were thus far recession proof. The budgets were smaller, the events less grandiose, but the show must go on. In contrast, the shaky economy had hurt Alex, and unlike his bonuses, their expenses weren’t going anywhere. There were Navin’s classes to think of - gym classes, music classes, mommy and me class on her day off, nursery school eventually, clothes, BPA free bottles, expensive phthalate-free lotions, even birthday parties were exorbitant these days. By the time you paid for a gym, Elmo, boxes of pizza, and personalized party favors, you could easily run a thousand dollars her friends advised. Not to mention their other expenses. They had a mortgage. Yes, the town was expensive, but didn’t they have to think about schools? They were cautious, or so they thought. They had ruled out St. Bart’s in favor of Antigua. After all, they deserved a getaway – marriage insurance Alex called it. A smaller shore rental definitely. That would be their family vacation. They ate out rarely, though their groceries, which were delivered, ran in excess of two hundred fifty dollars a week. But the price of food had gone up, hadn’t it? They could probably do without the imported prosciutto, gourmet chocolate, and cases of sparkling water. They would cut that if necessary. They had tickets to the opera, but that was culture – and part of the trade off. They left Manhattan to provide a better life for their son, but they had to sustain themselves somehow. They would not be like their neighbors, that was for sure. They might live in New Jersey in a town where the women congregated at the upscale nail salon on the weekends while their husbands drank imported beer, played Wii, and watched the kids, but they would not partake. For their neighbors Saturday nights meant overpriced glasses of mediocre Merlot or Chardonnay at the new French bistro in town which reminded Manali of a poor man’s Balthazar.

This would not be their life. She knew that much. What she could not have known was that the life she had chosen would rob her of something more valuable than her downtown chic. She could have the sparkling water and the fancy house, the cars, the designer baby clothes, the latest high tech Dutch stroller, but she would miss everything else. The first time he rolled over, his first genuine smile, or so Lydia said. It was true she missed his bouts of crying and crabbiness during the day, and the early evenings when he turned into Velcro baby, or so Lydia said, but she also missed him in the sunshine, when the world was bouncing off his sunny bald head. There is something about seeing your child in the daytime in a house illuminated with brilliant yellow light as he explores each room and artifact within it like a cocker spaniel searching for a bone. Sure she was with him on the weekends, but those days were

crammed with activity – the trips to Trader Joe’s, his Saturday morning gym class, birthday parties, mall trips, early dinner with friends at Joe’s American Cafe. This was in part why she kept her job, to escape this suburban malaise.

At work she felt vibrant, stimulated, and creative in ways she could not imagine feeling changing dirty diapers, cleaning bottles, and tracking down fallen pacifiers all day long. Her clients had needs which required vision and direction, and it gave her a sense of accomplishment to fulfill those needs. One of their most prominent clients was Dilan Shah, a young Indian entrepreneur who ran his own technology company. He was constantly hosting events, events to attract new investors, charity events, celebratory events, events of any kind. For someone his age he owned a ridiculous number of real estate holdings scattered throughout both coasts of the US, the Caribbean, and the South of France. He wore beautiful cotton Punjabi kurta shirts with designer jeans, which showed off his muscular physique and surprisingly Nordic carriage. Most Indian men she knew were more diminutive.

Alex had seen him once, in passing. He had come by the office to drop off her lunch, which she routinely packed at home as part of her cost cutting efforts. Dilan had just been leaving the building.

“Who’s that, the Indian Brad Pitt?” Alex said as he walked into her office.

“Who?” Manali asked, blushing.

“Who? The only Indian guy that just left your office.”

“Oh, right. Really? Is he that good looking?”

“You know, I wasn’t worried until now,” Alex joked.

But Alex had touched a raw nerve about Dilan, and she felt guilty as hell. It wasn’t because she was attracted to him, at least not in the typical way. But because he restored order to her sense of who she was and this whole Indian part of her that she had no idea what to do with. He served the same purpose as comfort food, which you knew at the core to be bad for you, but you craved nonetheless. He rarely came to the office, so it was sheer misfortune that cast him in her path as the first person she saw upon receiving a certain piece of terrible news.

“Happy Diwali,” he had muttered in a low voice as he passed by her at the door, his free hand grazing the backside of her bare arm.

She shivered. “You too.” What? Was it Diwali already?

He pondered her in a way that made her uncomfortable. She shifted from one heel to another.

“Hey, why don’t you come to our party tonight?” He pulled out a small card stamped with the name of some secret bar in the Lower East Side and just a phone number. He scribbled down the address. Her mind raced as she watched his neat, elegant scrawl flood the paper. Had he somehow missed the fact that she was married? Had he mistaken the 22-karat gold and emerald three tiered eternity band around her left finger as a statement piece instead of a wedding ring?

“They make a mean cocktail. Anything you want,” he said. “Come.”

“What, like a Diwali party?” she asked lamely.

“Yeah, a Diwali party,” he smiled.

She let out an internal groan. She was so out of practice. Out of practice at what she wanted to scream. Nausea engulfed her. What the hell was she doing? Nothing, she answered herself calmly as she dialed Alex to tell him she was going to a cultural event to celebrate Diwali that night, that he should feed Navin the breast milk she had stored from last week, and that she would take the ten o'clock train which would have her home by eleven.

At eleven fifteen Alex dialed her cell once. And then twice. And then three times. He dialed her number over and over and over, experiencing a new emotion each time, first hope before he realized it was voice mail, then anger when he got her voice mail again, finally fear when he got her voice mail a third time, and so on so forth these emotions alternated as he hit redial for six hours.

At five in the morning the phone rang, piercing the silence. It barely rang a full ring before Alex pounced on the phone.

“Hello? Manali?”

“Hey,” a deep male voice said from the other end.

“Who the hell is this? It's five in the morning.”

“Dilan Shah, a friend of Manali's. Who's this?” the guy asked with diminishing exuberance.

“Her husband,” Alex said angrily.

“Look, man, I'm just calling, because Manali – your wife – left her cell phone at my party, and I just wanted to give it back to her. You're the first name in her phonebook.” His words slurred slightly.

Alex sickened to his insides. “Yeah, well I'll tell her,” he said and slammed the phone down. And just then Navin woke up screaming for his mother, his tiny red tomato face squished into a ball of hunger and fury.

And here she was now. What had she done? What did she want? He pictured her sitting in that Toyota, trying to gather her nerve, and he could visualize every line and curve of her face. But it turned out he had no idea who it was behind that wall, and this was his *wife*, God damn it. Was it possible that there are things about your spouse that are completely unknowable and complex, and by complex he did not mean that in a mysterious kindly way.

They had met, of all places, at a bar in the Village on Bedford. It wasn't particularly trendy or chic, but it was clean and comfortable. Out of the corner of his eye he had noticed Manali walk in. He had mistaken her for South American, with her shoulder length wavy hair which was more brown than black. She wore a black figure slamming sweater dress and chunky gold bangles. He had taken her in as just one of the many gorgeous women in a city stuffed to the gills with them. His style was to avoid these women so as not bolster their already healthy opinions of themselves. But it wasn't until the video for “Even Flow” started playing on the TV that he could not help but

look. She was gaping at the screen, mesmerized, with her mouth slightly open. It was early enough in the evening that you could actually hear the music. He stared at her as she stared at Eddie, and this went on for about forty seconds, before Manali, feeling his stare, turned to him with bewilderment and asked, “Who is this guy?”

“What?”

“This singer, who is he?”

Had this chick been living under a rock or something, he wondered. Had she missed the nineties? Even if you weren’t a big grunge fan, most people, people his age anyway, recognized Pearl Jam. Out loud, he said, “You’re kidding, right? That’s Eddie Vedder – of Pearl Jam.”

“Pearl Jam, yeah, I’ve heard of that.”

Oh good, she’d heard of Pearl Jam. Well now things were normal.

“It’s just, this song is – beautiful – and fierce,” she breathed as she spread her arms out before her on the bar and put her head down.

Was she drunk?

“Yeah, it’s an amazing song.” He gazed at her arms, which were long, slender and brown. She lifted her face. Her eyes were two luminous honeyed almonds. “I love it,” she said. “Let’s go buy the CD.”

They dated for a year, during which time he pieced together all the fragments of her life. Her parents had survived an internal Air India plane crash while visiting relatives when she was nineteen years old. Manali’s brother, Somu, who had been traveling with them, had not. The internal trauma to his body had been too severe, and he had not had the strongest constitution to begin with. This tragedy was without doubt the single most defining event in the lives of Manali and her parents, but none of them ever verbalized it as such. Though in the course of their seven years together Manali spoke of Somu from time to time, Alex never felt as though he had any real understanding of him, or her parents for that matter, other than that they were Indian, extremely religious, and vegetarians who lived a modest life in a hidden town in rural Pennsylvania. He was always surprised that it even came up when he punched it into GPS.

Alex knew little about India, having never been. He had eaten Indian food only a few times, and never at Manali’s urging, as she couldn’t handle spicy food. They hadn’t even had an Indian wedding, Manali preferring to wed quietly in an outdoor ceremony wearing an off white garden dress. His friends who had attended loud, lavish Indian weddings, said he was missing out. Now he realized he had been – missing out that is – missing out from knowing anything his wife felt beneath the surface of her sweetness and seeming happiness.

“Was that her?” Claudia asked as she barged into the kitchen holding Navin nestled in her forearm while she fed him his bottle with her other hand. Her chic blonde bob swung energetically as she swiveled around to open the refrigerator door to replace the bottle with another. Her beige cardigan was buttoned except for one, which

opened to reveal a tiny diamond cross nestled between her prominent collarbones. It matched the one rhinestone detail at the slim belt of her pencil skirt.

“Yes,” he answered glumly.

“Well, what did she have to say?” she persisted. “Where was she?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Claudia repeated. “Are you kidding me? Your wife has been missing for the last twelve hours, over the course of an entire night, leaving you alone with your newborn wondering if she was dead or alive, and when she finally graces you with a phone call, you don’t even ask where the hell she was?”

“He’s not a newborn,” he answers.

“Oh, don’t be pathetic, Alex. It doesn’t become you. No one’s giving out medals for sainthood.” Behind her polished, smiling exterior, he wondered if Claudia had a heart.

“Claudia, thank you so much for everything. I really owe you, but I need you to leave soon. I don’t want you to be here when she returns.”

“Oh, whatever,” she said as she turned to leave the kitchen, still holding Navin. “But one thing, just remember – she left. Don’t forget that.” And with that she stomped out of the kitchen, her boots resounding down the long corridor until he could no longer hear her footsteps. He had known her help would come with strings attached, but he had no other choice. He hadn’t wanted to impair his mother’s image of his wife, and with Claudia there was less to ruin. Claudia had approached Manali much in the same manner college kids approach esoteric classes, with an initial burst of enthusiasm followed by inconclusive apathy veering towards distrust. Manali was not clear-cut enough for Claudia.

One block away, Manali sat in her rental car with the engine off. She was now beginning to feel the chill, especially because she had broken out into a full sweat. She contemplated turning the car back on but didn’t feel like she deserved it, so she just sat, watching the fluorescent green minutes tick away slowly on the car radio, and let it sink in. Her grandfather was dead.

Those summers when they came to visit from India, in the early 1980s, when Manali wore friendship pins in her sneakers and string barrettes in her hair, have left flimsy scratches upon the vulnerable surface of her memory, but they are there all the same, like forgotten flowers pressed between the pages of a once often read book. They are both fragile and bold. It is possible they will crumble if mishandled. They were intricately wound with memories of her brother, which she resists lest they destroy her.

Some of the more subtle details of those three-month sojourns in America are now in peril, but the vital ones, these she has recently conjured and scrutinized with the intensity of an accountant analyzing a faulty ledger.

They always arrived in evening, but because it was summer, the sun lingered till late. Fireflies transformed their modest backyard into an unexpected pageantry of twinkling light. She would run up and down the gentle slope of velvet lawn trying to

catch them, until her mother would summon her inside. The house would be immaculate, scrubbed first by Heidi, who came to clean their house every other Thursday, and then by her mother, who was never satisfied with Heidi's efforts. The central air, their one extravagance, would be on around that time of year, and offered a sharp contrast to the other aromas in the house, which breathed of hot fried puris and spicy vegetable chops, items Manali and Somu devoured smothered in ketchup.

Manali and Somu would be waiting in their best outfits. Hers would undoubtedly be a cotton print dress bought from Sears, and Somu would be in trouser shorts and a button down half-sleeve shirt, probably also from Sears. Shorts would be prohibited for Manali for the rest of summer. Girls wearing shorts was not among the things her mother felt she could explain to Manali's grandparents. A bathing suit was okay though. It was purposeful, her mother said. And given that she was the first person in her family to learn to swim, it was emblematic of her parents' success here in America. Everything they had sacrificed seemed somehow worthwhile.

The entire time she would wait anxiously, waiting for her father to pick Aja and Aai up from JFK Airport. There wasn't enough room in the car for her and Somu, too much luggage, her father said. So she would wait back home in her cotton dress, inspecting her books, her pop tapes, her knickknacks, the things she thought were cool. These things which gave proof to her and the American life she led. She could not wait to show them off to her Aja and Aai.

The time they visited the summer after fifth grade she remembered spilling her entire Corningware plate full of Indian dinner on her lap, so nervous had she been. Hot rice and daal soaked through her thin skirt and warmed her thighs, which were probably as red as her face.

"Mana, let's go for a walk," her grandfather had said afterwards. She had been shy and ecstatic to be alone with Aja, who was brilliant and funny and smart and dignified and dashing. She fancied that in his earlier years he must have looked the part of a young Bollywood star, with his atypical blue eyes and wavy dark hair. He told her stories of tigers and lions which lurked in the Indian jungle, which set her heart racing as they rounded the bend of her street, surrounded by forest on both ends. One time she was sure a wild beast was prowling nearby, but it was just Joey Cotis, sneaking through the woods on his dirt bike.

Aja asked her about her studies, her teachers, her friends. His favorite thing was to watch her swim. Both her grandparents would accompany her to the community pool, where they observed her swim meets with quiet reverence. Her grandmother wore an odd mishmash of Indian and American clothes -- a light cotton sari pulled tightly around her shoulders with a thin cotton cardigan over it and a broad rimmed beach hat made of straw. They watched with a mixture of awe and fear every time Manali dove off the diving board. But inside they experienced sheer glee, watching her young limbs splash in and out of the water like a dolphin at sea. They were a sharp contrast to the other people who had come to watch, people wearing shorts and tee shirts and

cheering on the swimmers with pumped fists and yelling.

Her grandparents thought the world of Manali and could not understand her sense of worthless beauty or why she envied her neighbor's golden hair. "Who wants that white hair?" her Aai would ask. "It is old peoples' hair."

"It is not white," Manali would retort indignantly. "It is blonde, like Barbie's."

"Barbie is ugly too," her grandmother would remark indifferently. She encouraged Manali to grease her own hair with baby oil, like the girls in India did, to make it even shinier and blacker. It was just a tad light for Aai's taste.

"Disgusting," Manali would sniff as she ran about with loose hair, which became drier and browner from the combined chlorine and hot summer sun.

In the early morning, before the humidity, when there was still a chill leftover from the previous night, Aai made warm custard pudding, which she stirred and stirred till there were bubbles and hot pockets and caramelized clusters formed from the burned sugar. All summer long she made sticky Indian confections - rasgullas, khajjas, ras malai, and pedas. Now Manali knew why Type 2 diabetes ran in her family.

When she was older, maybe fifteen, she and Aja would sit gardenside every evening. They reclined in two unsteady plastic lawn chairs, from where Aja would silently admire his handiwork. He spent the summer tending to her parents' thwarted gardening efforts and by summer's end, the decrepit garden of spring would be a leafy botanical paradise ablaze with velvety orange marigolds and resplendent hot pink hibiscus flowers the size of her face. Garden phlox and day lilies gave the garden a less cultivated wild beauty amidst the perfectly manicured roses. Manali thought it majestic and fancied her parents' backyard a royal residence worthy of a king, such is the wonderful delusion of youth.

They sipped mango lassis, and Manali read out loud to Aja, from whatever book she was reading at the time. Somu, who was too little to understand the books she read, would nevertheless leave whatever game he was playing to come sit by them in green grass and early evening light, his large head of sweaty disheveled hair hanging doggedly between his scrawny brown arms as he listened with closed eyes. Aja stared straight ahead with his clear blue eyes, chiseled features, and noble tilt of the head, as though he could visualize more than her words, as though there were something profound, which hung in the balance of the trees. The three of them contemplated the failing sunlight while Manali read aloud from Austen and Dickens and Hardy. Having lived through British rule, Aja had a passion for the Victorians. Manali remembered how surprised she was that Aja had read all those books, her books. When it became impossible to see, she pulled out a small flashlight, the same one she used in her bed at night when she was supposed to be sleeping.

By night they would fry up puris, which they used as wraps to scoop up the chick pea curry and matar paneer. Homemade Indian style sweet yogurt and cheesecake would be sitting in the refrigerator, left to set in the arctic air. As she got ready for bed at night, she could hear their voices snaking up the stairs in one fluid melody. The

number of Oriya speakers in the house had doubled, and it sounded almost like India, in her grandparents' house in Bhubaneswar, with the myriad housekeepers, cooks, friends, relatives, and random visitors that seemed keen on passing through at all hours of the day. But by summer's end, that would all change. Her grandparents would be standing on the flecked tiles of a terminal in JFK, waving goodbye sorrowfully with tears streaming down their eyes. Her mother and father would cry unabashedly like small children lost in a store. She and Somu, having squeezed in this time with the luggage, would hang awkwardly by, unsure of their roles, too unnerved to cry. In addition, that they were a spectacle was not lost upon Manali. Random passerby paused to briefly observe and circumvent the Indian people hugging and crying on the airport floor. This scene, while commonplace now, was definitely fit for gawking circa 1985.

Thus their lives would resume the even melancholy of fall, new pencils, paper, and books at school, new classes and homerooms and teachers, diminishing light, no more swimming, a garden which slowly withered, and worst of all, a silence that filled the space where the bantering Oriya voices had been. The smell of pakora frying no longer lured her downstairs for dinner, and there was no one to walk with before it grew dark. Her parents were busy, called to live their great American life, which only now she understood to be a most solitary life.

In America everyone was taught to be an individual, to be independent. Their pediatrician told them at ten weeks that Navin needed to be sleep trained. This involved making sure he was dry and fed, turning the light off, and walking out of the room. He might cry for five minutes, or five hours. But on the second night it would be shorter, and on the third night, perhaps even shorter. Ultimately he would not cry at all. Because he would know that it did not matter how much he cried or for how long. No one was coming, and he would learn to fall asleep on his own. When asked why this was necessary, the pediatrician gave her the same reason he explained to her that Navin should not sleep in their bed – so that he could be independent. When he told her this she looked at the dimpled thigh of her two month old and felt like laughing and crying at once. Why did her baby have to figure out how to “self soothe”? Wasn't that why she was there? Didn't he have his entire life ahead of him to be independent and soothe himself? Was that why everyone in America was either anxious or depressed? Although it was true that in the end, everyone is out on his or her own, isn't there something to the illusion that we're not?

Nevertheless, they tried it the first night. They lasted twenty minutes before she stormed into Navin's room and soaked up his tear stained face with her kisses. Her own mother had used the Indian method of rhythmically patting the baby to sleep while bouncing him in your lap. Her grandmother and great-grandmother and everyone before that for centuries had used the same method. She took him in her lap and slowly but surely he drifted to sleep, fluttering his eyelids open suddenly to check on her just as he passed out. That night was the first revelation she had of just how

Indian she was. She may not speak with an accent, or act like a Desi, or be married to one for that matter, but her heart was a cast off from the same old fabric.

It was not until much later in life that Manali came to understand that that one fact had to do with everything. It was even the thing that had led her to Dilan. The very Indian-ness of him, it comforted her – his classic British educated Indian accent, his fluent Hindi, his knowledge of Hindi films, his Punjabi shirts even. It was his whole cool Indian guy demeanor. Cool Indian guys knew how to dress at clubs and dance bhangra style. For this she had caused her family to suffer.

The house looked less sunny as she approached this time, more pedantic somehow. The snow had already lost its brightness. She entered through the garage door. Claudia's Chanel fragrance still seared the air like a knife dipped in poison.

"Hello?" she called.

"In here."

She walked into the den where Alex was sitting alone, without Navin, with his hands on his lap, holding nothing.

"Where's the baby?" she asked tentatively.

"He just went down again."

"Oh." Bitter disappointment raced through her blood, into her engorged breasts, threatening to burst.

"Manali, what happened?"

"My grandfather died."

"I know. Your mom called to see if you were okay. I didn't know what to say. I said you were fine."

Her heart sank with her legs, and she sat down beside him.

"Where were you?"

"Montauk."

"You drove all the way to Montauk?" he asked, incredulous.

"Yes."

"With that guy?"

"What guy?"

"Dilan whatever, who called here at 5am."

She closes her eyes, swallowing a groan. "He's just a client. I can explain that."

"No, please don't. Not right now. Just tell me – were you with him?"

His question turns her stomach. But it is fair. "No, I wasn't with him. Nothing ever happened between us." It seemed repulsive and unnecessary, but she wanted to be clear. "I drove there by myself." She then turns to Alex and shudders. "I hate this house."

"What?"

"Yes, I hate this house and everything it represents. I only love the people in it." She is dazzled by her effrontery to lash out like this after what she has done. She smells coffee and burnt toast from the kitchen coming in uneven wafts. Her stomach

rumbles. She pictures thick slabs of warm bread spread with guava jelly the color of flesh and swallows.

“I hate that I hardly see Navin, that the scent of his skin is still new to me at the end of a long day, that he wears off my skin long before my perfume, that I have to ask someone else how much milk my child drank that day, whether he was fussy or happy, whether he said his first word. Just so we can have crown molding and a Range Sport in this suburban mecca of mediocrity.” She didn’t mean the town itself was mediocre. There was nothing mediocre about it, with its seven figure listings, premier schools, and fine dining. Rather, it was the people that struck her as mediocre, the people with their inability to see past the superfluous and mundane.

Alex came up beside her, so close that she could smell the staleness of his breath too, see the network of veins in his eyes, the dry ridges of his fingertips. She felt too close, as though she were violating him in some way.

“I would give up everything for you, do you understand? Everything. My job, this house, everything. Everything but our life together and our family. So if there is something else you need, something you want, you better come out and say it right now.”

“I want you to understand who I am.”

“I want that too, Manali, dammit. Do you realize how insulting this conversation is?”

“But you didn’t even know it was Diwali.”

“How the hell am I supposed to know that?”

“Well, I don’t want to be the only one, the keeper of the Indian calendar, all the pujas, festival dates, all the stories, the Hindu lore, all the myths.”

“Look, Manali, about that, I’m sorry, but I don’t see how you expect me to know all that. It strikes me that you barely do.”

It was true. She didn’t, and one by one they had fallen away from her. First Somu, then Aai, then Aja. There are only two people left between her and complete loss, of everything she is, everything she was, everything she should know but didn’t. And those two people were frozen in time.

He moved closer to her and touched her, trailing his fingertips over her lips, reassuring himself it seemed. A spurt of desire springs through her, from somewhere buried deep within. Little drops of milk release from her breasts.

Loud cries burst through the monitor. Manali jumps up and takes the steps two at a time, flings open Navin’s door, and gathers him up into her arms. She presses her nose into the nook between his double chin and neck and stays there until his crying subsides completely. Only then she sits in her rocker and begins to nurse him, so tangible is the relief she experiences as her nursing bra soaks through that she wants to laugh. And so she begins – a deep rumble that starts from somewhere deep in the bowels of her existence, a place that has nothing to do with remembering or forgetting, a place unencumbered by hope or fear or fulfillment or anything.

Alex fills the doorway. “Why are you laughing?”

“Because, oh I don’t know,” she says as she laughs some more. “I stayed at the party for ten minutes,” she begins but starts laughing again.

“Yes?” Alex asks dubiously.

“It’s this trendy bar lounge type place, the type of place that plays all that ambient ultra chilled groove type music, and you know what they play?”

“What?”

“Even Flow. It was so funny, seeing all these hipster sorts swishing their rose citron martinis to the beat of Eddie. Most of them were too young to even really know the words,” she says to him. He smiles at this. She thinks, sometimes love hurls itself over a precipice just to see if it can survive. Even if it does, there may be casualties.

Late that night she dreams. She is young, how young she does not know, but young enough to be wearing feather barrettes, which flap in the wind as she rides her bike downhill to her parents’ home. Sitting in green grass, beside the rickety white lawn chairs of her parents’ house are Aja and Somu. It is late evening, and the sun is about to set. Aja is smiling the smile of a prince, too young and handsome to be king. Somu is lying down, shielding his eyes from the sun. She jumps off her bike, leaving it to crash upon the asphalt and races towards them. She keeps tripping and falling though she is wearing sensible shoes. She tumbles to the grass beside them and closes her eyes.

“Somu, read those lines again,” Aja requests. She is confused. When did he start reading to Aja? She glances at his book. Willa Cather:

“I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge.”

Somu’s thick, young voice drones without enthusiasm, but in his eyes there is a spark. She gets up and jumps into the warm pool nearby and swims underwater. When she emerges they are gone. She wakes in the morning, her legs snaked through Alex’s, the only part of their bodies that touch with Navin lying between them. Love is hanging by a hair, pulling itself back up, one injured but unrelenting finger at a time.

For a word was stealthily brought to me,
and my ear caught a whisper of it.
In my thoughts during visions of the night,
when deep sleep falls on men.
Fear came upon me, and shuddering,
that terrified me to the bones.
Then a spirit passed before me,
and the hair on my flesh stood up.
It paused, but its likeness I could not
discern;
a figure was before my eyes,
and I heard a still voice....

—Job 4:12-16

Vacuous

Kelsey Noble

Seventy-two hours had passed since he had ceased being a father to a flesh and blood boy. Three days since Merrick had sent Cale out to play and he hadn't returned. Three days since a frantic search had turned up their son's body in the lake near their house.

He forced himself to believe that it wasn't her fault. How many times had he let Cale out to play and the very same thing could have happened? But that reassuring fact settled easily in the back of Rod's mind—it wasn't his fault. And at least with all of the emotions and thoughts screaming through his brain he didn't have to feel guilty about being stuck at home with the kids that day, about opening the door and telling them to play nicely so he could have some peace and quiet.

He tried to force the thoughts away. It wasn't fair to her. Merrick was a good mother. Of course she desired some peace while the two younger kids were asleep. She was a good wife; she worked hard to raise their children.

Cale was six, had been six, would eternally be six. Even after all the trips to the lake that past summer Cale still couldn't swim. Merrick had tried to tell Rod to leave the child alone, that he'd learn when he was ready, that Cale just wasn't a fish like the rest of their children. Maybe if Cale had learned to swim better last summer he wouldn't have drowned.

For now all the doubts and Blame Game rounds were in his head but Rod knew it was only a matter of time before it was all said aloud. Surely Merrick had her own theories and opinions. The two of them had been stuck in the house for the majority of the past three days, with the other three kids of course. Neighbors had dropped off food. The police had asked questions. All in all they considered it a fairly routine case, open and shut. There were the typical questions of anyone wanting to do harm to the family, of Cale's mental state, of their relationship with Cale, with each other, with the other children.

Rod and Merrick had nothing to hide. Her mother was driving down today to help with the children. Except for the next few hours the rest of the future had been wiped blank all of a sudden. How could things have changed so quickly? Devastation had slid into their lives on greased wheels and didn't seem like it was going to take off the brakes anytime soon.

Walking around the lake had been one of his favorite past times. It was relaxing, it let him think. All the times Rod had needed to escape from the house, work, the kids, Merrick, the whole damn world—all those times he was able to come out here, collect his thoughts, keep the angry words in check. Rod believed less than ever in a god at that moment. God shouldn't allow six year old boys to drown in November, just outside the security of their yards.

Today he allowed himself to walk down to the beach, down to the water, near the rocks and the waves, and the little pool where he had found his precious little boy just three days ago. He allowed himself to be lost in the quiet, hating God, blaming Merrick. Maybe it was the only place he knew.

"You shouldn't hate God," a voice came out of nowhere, startling him. He turned to find the voice was attached to an older gentleman, a man he hadn't laid eyes on before. He knew all of the neighbors, or at least he thought he did. Strangers around the lake were not common this time of year.

"I don't," he paused, unsure of what to say since it felt as though the man had just read his mind. "I don't think it's any of your business."

"I saw what happened to your boy a few days ago," the stranger stated. "I'm sorry for your loss. It's a tragedy."

"Yes, well," Rod paused again. "You're, uh, you're not from around here, are you?"

"No, son, I'm not."

You some kinda reporter?" he asked suspiciously, cocking an eyebrow.

"Not one of those fellas. Got no use for those snoops and snitches."

"Uh-huh," Rod said absent-mindedly. He turned away from the man to look at the lake. The little pool was just up ahead and even if it took the last ounce of strength he had, he was determined to make it that far. He needed to push away from this man, reserve what little mental stamina he had been left with.

"Look, I've gotta keep on moving."

"I think I'll join you," the old man paused, "I don't suppose you need to be alone right now, at this point of your journey."

Although it was the exact opposite of what he wanted, Rod let the old man continue on with him. The man stayed silent, for which Rod was grateful. Within moments they were there; Rod felt the cold water seeping into his clothes, permeating his skin. He was soaked, instantly chilled to the bone, wading deeper to get to... He shook his head. No, he was dry. It wasn't real. It wasn't real. It had been real though, he realized.

Rod kept staring into the water. There was nothing there though. No little boy, no orange sweatshirt meant to keep out the early November chill. It wasn't fair, this pain, this worry and hurt. Cale should have been ninety when he died, not six. Not sweet six.

"What kind of God would do this to a little boy? Did Merrick or I deserve this punishment?"

"You're asking the wrong questions, perhaps," the old man replied.

"What other questions are there?" he said, the volume of his voice increasing.

"Look around," the man said softly.

"There's nothing here!" he shouted, spinning in a circle. "What do you see that would inspire me to ask a different question?" Rod's voice trailed off as he *did* see something a few hundred feet away. He stumbled over the rocks to where a piece of

orange material was caught on the branches of a bush. He was unsure whether to touch it when he looked down at the ground and spotted flecks of...blood? Blood on the rocks near the bush.

Rod fumbled in his pocket for his cell phone. Damn it, the card with police officer's number was in his wallet, at home, on the dresser. He hesitated and then dialed 911.

"What is the nature of your emergency?" the operator's voice clicked onto the line, almost like a recording.

"It's not exactly an emergency. I just need to speak with the officer who I talked to a few days ago," Rod's voice was shaky with nerves.

"Do you know the officer's name?"

"Urgh, no, I don't remember. But he'll know me, he'll remember this case. My little boy, Cale, he, well..."

"Of course, sir. I know who you are. Just hold on, I'll connect you." Before he could thank the woman the line was blank and then a man picked up.

"Mr. Nash, Officer Rowood here, how can I help you?"

"Well, I'm here, at the lake."

"Mr. Nash, I'm not sure that's the best place for you at the moment."

"Yes, I understand. But I think it is the best place for *you* right now."

"Why do you say that, sir?"

"I've found something here. If you could just please come."

"Um, okay, I'll be there in a few minutes Mr. Nash."

"Thank you, thank you so much. I'll see you soon."

Rod tightened his grip on the phone. He didn't even know what this could mean. Was it still an accidental death? It was too much to take in at the moment. He would just have to wait until Rowood got here. What if he hadn't seen this? He slowly turned around to face the stranger.

"What do you know?"

"I know nothing, young man."

"You know something! You told me to look around. I did, and then I find this, this, this possible piece of evidence. You can't tell me that you don't know something, that you didn't know something!" Rod screamed at the man.

"It was simply a suggestion," the man said easily.

"It was more than that! I know it was!"

"I'm sorry, but it wasn't."

"Where are you from? Why did you follow me? You..."

"I did not seek you out. I put words out into the universe and you listened."

"What kind of answer is that?"

The man was silent and Rod turned to keep an eye on the torn cloth, still dangling on the branch. It was still there, flapping in the faint breeze. The blood...could it have been Cale's? Cale hadn't had any scratches on his face or hands...he was almost positive about that. What about his arms or legs? But his sweatshirt and jeans would

have protected his skin. He wished Officer Rowood would hurry up and get here. He would know what to think of this.

Rod's nerves were tightly wound. This man, who was he? He had to know something, right? It couldn't be purely coincidental, could it? He turned around. The man was walking away. Rod was torn between staying on top of these unlikely clues that he had found and running after this man who may have answers, or even more questions.

"Who are you? What is your name?" Rod shouted. "What do you know about my son? Tell me what you know!" he pleaded. The man never turned around.

Jealousy

Michael Mirolla

He is standing at the bus stop, suit jacket slung over his shoulder. It is a sunny day. A cloudless day. A blistering hot day. The perspiration collects on his forehead. Soaks through his shirt. Trickles down his spine. He is waiting for a bus to take him home. Several pass without stopping, crammed with people dressed in uniforms—men, women and children. Dressed in identical uniforms. He watches them rush by, turning the corner at high speed. Angry, he wants to shake his fist at them. He does shake his fist at them. But they are impassive, their faces barely registering. The person next to him at the bus stop leans over and whispers in a confidential manner that he's waiting for the wrong bus. He'll never get home that way. He starts to walk, loosening his tie. A child with a knap-sack darts across the street. A car screeches to a halt and, for a moment, the child vanishes beneath its wheels. He kneels down and searches for the child beneath the wheels. There is nothing there. Except for vehicle parts. The car sounds its horn and starts up again. He rolls away and brushes himself off. He is home now. In the kitchen of his house. A woman in a long, shimmering gown, the kind worn at weddings, hugs an over-sized jar to her chest. She spills olives onto the kitchen floor. Green olives stuffed with bits of yellow pepper. They bounce off the red-stained butcher block onto the tile floor. A man is lying on the floor. Lying on his side on the floor, head propped up on an elbow. He gathers up the olives. Scoops them into little piles. The man looks up at him and smiles, popping an olive into his mouth. He steps over the man and heads up to his bedroom to change. The furniture is stacked up on the sides of the stairs, making it difficult to walk. Chairs on top of desks. Vases on top of chairs. A ceiling fan whirs with an uneven thwack. There is a tuxedo on the bed and a shirt with frills. They twitch with the movement of the air. He removes his clothes and places them on the bed. He puts on the fancy dress shirt and tuxedo. He pulls a string tie from the tuxedo pocket and holds it in his hand. He looks around. He walks out into the hallway, holding the tie before him. He looks around. He opens the bathroom door and looks around. He strolls out to the landing, leans down the stairs and calls out: Honey, what have you done with the mirrors? There is only the sound of green olives hitting the floor.

... a sister's essential thoughts upon siblings now gone ...

Michael Mirolla

... in the sepia of photographs ... young faces fading away beneath time's steady torrent the stones rubbing against the images the washed-out lips the bone-white fingers the first layer of grass tendrilling through the sod the paper-thin caress of never to be seen again ... in the sepia of photographs ...

... riverrun roil of brown
through worn-out hollows
where open veins shepherd
the ganglion spools of life
into twitching nervous balls
that spark for a moment
that swirl before galactic winds
that rattle the great reeds
that scrub clean the pebbles
that stammer out the code
before sinking DNA depleted
into the soup ... the prehensile soup
that swallows both petty clockwork
and the churning of star systems ...

... in the sepia of persistence ... brother and sister again poised to wrestle along that spiny ridge the rictus of a young mother's smile from the grave a tough-hewn father scythe in hand and you on his hip the faces in stasis racking up the years as if on a pool table the last still vibrating subatomic particles shuddering to a stop ... in the sepia of persistence ...

... but then in a reaching back
beyond the big bang itself
before the cruelty of time
they rise again to the edge
between the surfaces
of accidental dimensions
bursting through in lyric bubbles
that sing of re-echoing the world
of flooding the gaps
long since cracked and sere
with a rush of recognition:

eyes as fresh and round
as primordial valleys
and new-born planets
clever hands made to grip
the splintered edges
of mountain-village dreams
legs twitching to eat up
the distances between
one word and the next ...

... in the sepia of memory ... faces unravelling like orange peels in the cold
expanses the stone path across a reflection of gravitational fields the lips recalling
the shudder of a name the fingers reaching into the parental universe the familiar
embrace at the moment of meeting at the unstable moment just before the image
of what came before and what is to come merges ... in the sepia of memory ...

the hieroglyphics of the mind

marcia arrieta

seascape quiet
a pine branch held

chaotic undertones
 undertows create a thesis

keats & beauty circle

keats & truth

within the hallways broken glass squares

blue star. white star.

hibernate in clouds imagine strength

the poetics of possibility
creation & myth

every step supports the thesis

digress. tunnel. evade. venture.

include interpretive claims relevant

seascape quiet
a pine branch held

underneath beauty

marcia arrieta

the light & the dragonfly.

the sound of water. the sound of air.

language & mind. present.

deep structure. no structure. past.

what is said. what is not said.

implications. conclusions. innate structure.

complexity. intricacy. speculative.

light & wings.

we sleep in tents

marcia arrieta

in the abandoned garden

we seek imagination

a world of sun

blue flower

yellow flower

the transit of the madman & lover

the transit of the wander & fool

we cannot know our identities

we suppose poetry or maybe art

dissociate deliberate

the hours unconscious branches

subtraction

a leaf in wind

learning to see

marcia arrieta

the moon & the star. the beauty of the circle.
outside the structure. we must continue to believe in the magical.
two fish swim. in the sand grows a tree.

Calabasas

J. Gabriel Gates

He sits alone.

Outside, the sun will not relent; it shines, bright and beautiful. The sky will not suffer one cloud. Trees arch over the pool; he sees them out the window, with leaves vibrantly, almost unbelievably green.

Here, in this room, in his office, it is dark. He is home. Here are his things: his desk, the crappy old futon, the neat stack of bills, the computer, its monitor reeling with a screen-saver of white-pixelled stars.

He looks at the pad of paper on the desk in front of him, at the pen in his hand. What to write? What can he say that will possibly make any difference? He knows that destiny, life, like a flood rushing through a breached dam, cannot be turned aside with the pebble of a word. It's useless. He sets the paper down. He sits alone.

Or perhaps not alone:

In the next room, she sleeps. He imagines her there, pale, beautiful, shifting restlessly, her mind tangled in dark dreams.

Her things are in here as well, of course: there are her shoes - high heels, always high heels, cast off next to the chair. There are her cigarette butts in the ashtray, stained with the red of her lipstick. (The whole place stinks of smoke). There is her mural, a thousand pictures haphazardly taped to the wall. There is something very good about it, he thinks, her little attempt at art. All these pictures-- some cut or torn from magazines, some snapshots of friends-- bright, sharp images jumbled together, probably resemble the chaos of the dreams she's dreaming right now in the bedroom only a few yards away. Suddenly he wants to rise, to go to her, kiss her forehead—his own little benediction. But he does not.

He looks out the window again. It's so bright outside he has to squint. Despite the sunlight pouring in, despite the vivid images plastered all over the wall and the fake orange flowers on the bookcase, this place, this apartment, is tainted with a darkness no amount of illumination seems able to dissipate.

In the next room, she sleeps. He wonders of what she's dreaming. Is it of him? Suddenly he's terribly, irrationally jealous. Does she dream of another? And he's lonely. He wishes he were with her, amongst those dreams. So often, too often, she will awaken in the middle of the night, whimpering like a child, breathing hard with grief or terror. Holding her close, (they always hold each other so, so close when they sleep) he will whisper in her ear:

It's okay, baby. It's okay, love. It's okay.

He wishes he were with her like that now, holding her that close. He wishes he could feel her arms around him, as she thanks him for chasing her nightmares away. He could go in there now, lie on the bed with her, put his arms around her and fall

asleep until afternoon. He does not.

He gets up and goes out to check the mail. It's cooler out now, fall. There's a wind in the trees, the comforting smell of cooking in the air. The path to the mailbox winds past the pool. There three pools in the complex; this one is sapphire, pure, and empty.

But about the letter: what to write to her? What to say?

How can she sleep like this, into the afternoon? For God's sake, there are things to do. He's already sent out three job applications today. He's already eaten breakfast, gone for a run and showered, and still she sleeps. How can she do it?

Of course, the answer is easy. She's sick. Her body attacks itself. Her stomach tears itself, twists itself to tatters. The doctors have their name for it—of course, everything wrong in the world must have its name in order to make it more bearable, more knowable, more easily explained. But he is not fooled. There is no explanation for a twenty-year-old girl having to live as she does, with the pain, the surgeries, the constant exhaustion.

And now, there's the other thing; she was up until three in the morning throwing up.

Still, it's so irritating how she can sleep her life away, leaving him alone like this. Instantly, he regrets this thought. Pathetic, for him to be thinking only of himself when she has so much suffering to contend with, the night-sweats, the hospital stays.

But hasn't he suffered, too? Hasn't he stayed in the hospital with her every single night, run his hands through her hair when she's feeling too awful to move, run to the store for her, driven her to work, waited on her as if he were her slave and not just her boyfriend?

(How can she sleep now, waste another day like this?)

But not all has been work and misery, no. Far from it. They made love in the hospital beds. He snuck her out, looking so pretty, so pale, in her white hospital gown, her hair a snarled mess. They stood outside, laughing together, laughing-- her leaning on her I.V. stand, smoking a cigarette; her, making sympathetic small talk with the AIDS patients; her, insisting he takes her downstairs to the courtyard, into the sunshine, even when the doctors forbid her to go.

The mailbox is empty. The mailman hasn't come. But perhaps there will be a check today. There has to be: rent is late.

Instead of going back to the apartment (too dark there, too stifling) he decides he will walk to the end of the complex and back. The path meanders through countless stuccoed apartment buildings, each painted a different, muted color: dark green, tan, burnt orange, deep red.

He thinks of her sleeping and is suddenly worried about her. Is she safe? Did he lock the door? He always fears for her when they're apart even for a moment. At the most odd, irrational times, when she's in the bathroom or out at the pool, he will suddenly be overcome by fear for her safety, by a need to go to her, to see her, to kiss her, to be sure she is well.

This time, he does not go back and check. This time, he will not. It's impossible. It's all impossible. He cannot live like this.

He keeps walking as thoughts come to him, fluttering like the birds overhead: he thinks of the time she thought he was looking at pornography on the internet (he hadn't been) and carved the words "sick whore" into the paint on the trunk of his car. He relives the anger for an instant, feeling rush of blood to his face. It was his only car. He could not afford another. How could she be so cruel, so wrong? He had left her, then. He did not gouge her car, as he could have done, he just left. He went to stay with a friend and his girlfriend, who lived in a big condo near China town. He stayed away for two whole days.

But it was a funny thing, being away from her, like the color had drained from the world. Food had no taste, music no melody. Life passed by, a black and white foreign film with no sub-titles, unbearable.

So back to her he went, back to her body, hot as an ember, and to her beautiful, maddening eccentricities: she would never leave the house without a coke, a water, and a cup of ice; she would never pass a bum without buying him food; she painted the carpet in the living room to give the apartment more color.

For a year, while she drove the new car her parents had bought her, he drove that defiled piece of shit with "sick whore" scrawled on it, embarrassed. And he lied for her; when people asked what happened to his car, he shrugged and said "vandals." No, it was not vandals, it was her—enraged, confused, unjust, acting like a maniac and a monster. (But, then, she had been on steroids at that time for her illness, hadn't she? And they had severely altered her personality, which wasn't her fault, was it?)

Still, it was unforgivable.

He thinks, for some reason, of their road trip, of Carmel. Carmel by the sea: little cottages, row by row, street by street, each beautiful and unique, and always, in the background, the rush of the ocean, distant and crushing, grinding boulders to sand and washing them away.

They drove into town exhausted, having driven all night. They found an inn and slept, tangled together in divine comfort while the skylight above bled the pale light of day onto their sleeping faces. They slept forehead-to-forehead, almost always.

When they woke, they fought. About what? He can't remember. What could two people in love fight about in that little utopian town? Now it seems inconceivable. But they had.

Drive home yourself! I'll take the bus back!

He stormed out, stalked the streets, cursing the beautiful little cottages that would never be his; how they mocked him. He stormed down to the beach, where the surf roared and writhed as if the sea were a vicious beast and the rocks jutting from its surface had dealt it a mortal blow. He climbed out on the rocks, as far as he could, into the mouth of the white mist. All around, he felt the power of the ocean—it could snuff out his life in an instant, he knew, could fill his lungs and leave him blue or twist

his body in half, could grind him against a rock until there was nothing left but the dust of his bones. He defied it to do just this, for without her what did he care for his life?

He reached into his pocket, taking out a velvet bag. Inside were the stones they had bought together in Ojai at the beginning of their trip. The stones were polished and engraved with words, one word upon each stone, and the words were supposed to imbue the stones with some silly powers. One stone said *tranquility*, another *peace*, another *love*, another *joy*, another *patience*, another *faith*, and so on. How wonderful their love had been in Ojai, yesterday. How far it had fallen. As hard as he could, he threw the velvet bag into the spot where ocean looked whitest, angriest, most deadly. Then, he pulled the ring from his finger, the little silver ring (she had one too—had she taken hers off yet?) He held the ring in his hand and looked down at the Pacific, at the abyss that, with a single misstep, might swallow him forever. He even cocked back his arm. But he did not throw the ring. No, he did not.

He put it back on.

He stood in the mist for a while longer on the verge of oblivion, then climbed back to the beach. How short a climb it was from the desolate and violent brink of the Pacific—it might've been the edge of the earth-- back to the quiet, picturesque streets of the little village. Only a few steps, after all.

He wandered around for a while longer and finally went back to the hotel, hoping in spite of himself she might still be there. She was. She pulled up as he arrived. She had been driving around, looking for him. She leapt out of her car and ran up to him, proclaimed how worried she had been, kissed him, held him. They went inside and wept, made love, ordered room service, slept forehead-to-forehead. They walked around the town the next day, and found the most perfect place in all the world: an empty lot right by the beach. They vowed to build a house there one day and live there together forever. She took a picture of him in front of the lot. It's still framed in their living room.

Still he can't remember; what had they fought about?

His cell phone is ringing.

He's reached the big pool, now, at the center of the apartment complex. Two children, a little girl and a little boy, chase each other around, their feet slapping the cement, their laughter shrill, and finally jump together into the pool. Playing a game.

The phone is ringing. He leans on the fence, staring into the murky water of the hot tub on the other side, and presses the 'talk,' button.

The woman calling is from the clinic. Not Planned Parenthood, a different one.

Are you the--?

The boyfriend. Yes.

Confirming your appointment today at--?

Yes, we'll be there.

She knows she can't eat or drink?

She knows.

Just like that, as simple as that and six-hundred dollars.

The kids in the pools are screaming with laughter.

And it's the right choice, too. Him and her, their relationship-- he hates that word, relationship--is too unstable. He knows it. They can hardly take care of themselves, hardly go a day without fighting over something. He ask himself, how could they care for another life? And he answers, they could not.

Remember when she hit him in the face with her shoe? She took it off right there in the car—they were on the 101 freeway, near the Woodlake exit-- and hit him in the face with her high-heeled pump. The heel was made of wood, too, and heavy. Right in the face, and he was driving! They could have been killed! Of course, she did it because he had called her crazy. It wasn't her fault she was acting crazy, it was the steroids, again, which she was taking because she was sick. They made her emotions uncontrollable. And it must've been very hurtful for her to hear him say that.

Still....

He walks on, to the end of the complex. Here, a chain-link fence forms the boundary between green, manicured grass and the dry, brown weeds that cover the hills all around. Above, a hawk wheels, its wings very stiff, searching. A few crows sit in a tree, yelling at one another. One swoops to the ground and stands there ominously. It does nothing. It sits there, waiting. Crows always seem to be waiting.

He looks up, into the desolate hills. At night, there are coyotes here. Their wails sound almost human sometimes.

He wonders again, suddenly, if she is safe, then puts the thought out of his mind. Of course she is. Why wouldn't she be?

Well, she could have harmed herself. There's always that. And lately it's as if she's fallen out of the world. Ever since the—why can he never use any of the words? Why can he not bear to think of it? But ever since *it* began, she will not look him in the eye. He holds her, sits in the couch with her, runs his fingertips over her neck like she likes, holds her hair back when she throws up, makes her food when she has an appetite. Still, she cannot seem to bear looking at him.

It's because she blames him. He knows it. And it's not fair. It's not his fault. He would work to support it, he would get a job. He would make sacrifices.

She won't even quit smoking.

He blames her. If not for her, they could do the right thing, the moral thing, and keep it. But no, she's too reckless, too impulsive, too rebellious (God only knows what she's rebelling against, but the rebellion never ends). What kind of life is it for a child, living in a cramped apartment that reeks of smoke with two parents who can't even go a day without fighting? They have no choice.

(Still, he thinks, maybe it's somehow all his fault.)

But how did it come to this? He remembers their road trip last fall, all the way across the country. They were going from coast to coast and never turned the radio on once. They just talked, under the great desert sky, through the starry Texas night,

despite the Louisiana rain; they reveled in one another. He had been so sure of her, so excited at the promise of spending the rest of his days with this magical, magical girl. They passed through his old college campus, where he had been so miserable and alone, and he showed it to her in moonlight, knowing that because he had met her, the loneliness he had felt there would be forever banished from his life.

Now, he is never and always lonely.

He wonders, with a pang of despair, if she feels the same way. He never meant to bring her anything but joy. Now, she sleeps all day. Now, she always keeps the shades drawn.

And last night. She had an anxiety attack - they're coming often now. She was sitting on the couch, watching old sitcom reruns, looking sexy despite everything in her fuzzy sweatpants, holding a cigarette in one hand and a coke in the other. *Stay up with me, she said, just a while longer. Please.*

It was three in the morning. He had made her dinner. He had run to the store and gotten her coke and cigarettes. And he had to apply for jobs in the morning, had to go to the bank and make sure they had enough money for the--the clinic. And for God's sake, he was tired, it was late.

Please, baby?

He had told her he loved her. He had kissed her cheek. He had walked away to the bedroom and went to sleep.

If he had looked over his shoulder, how much hurt would he have seen in her face? The reason for his actions, that he was the one who had to be strong and to be strong he needed his rest, seemed foolish now. Would a sleepless hour have killed him, when she was suffering so much?

He had been callous.

She had accused him of callousness all along. The doctors told them and he did not cry. They made their decision and he did not cry. He only cried once since it had started, when he was complaining that he couldn't find a job. It had seemed the oddest time for such an outburst, and she hadn't understood, hadn't understood at all, that he was crying not because he couldn't find a stupid job, but because of this life they had. Because they had once driven across two-thousand miles without turning the radio on and were now at the point of killing their own child, and he had no idea how they had gotten to this point or how they could set things right again. *And* he had no job. But it was no use, she didn't understand. She thought him callous. She thought he had no feelings at all. And last night, to make things worse, he went to bed without her. She came to bed later. When? Four, five in the morning? He had left her to haunt the apartment alone, like a ghost. He had left her alone with their choice. He had left her alone.

He starts walking back. He should wake her up. They have to leave soon.

He walks along the street on his way back. Looking up to his left he can see the mansions up on the hill. Supposedly, a bunch of movie stars live up there, although he

hasn't seen any of them. All he's seen are their black Mercedes-Benzes as they turn into the gate that separates their street from those who live at the bottom of the hill. The houses, large, gorgeous, Spanish-style haciendas are haloed with mist from their chugging sprinkler systems. Out of the many barren, desert hillsides, this one alone – the one they sit on - is now lush and verdant, planted with palm trees and flowering bushes. It looks like heaven up there.

How did those people get up there, he wonders?

What did it cost them to get there?

Walking back, he is restless again. How long has he been gone? Ten minutes? Fifteen? Too long. Too long to be apart from her. It worries him. Part of him would love to stay out here all day, in the sunshine, under the flawless sky, watching the fluttering birds. But no time now. He must wake her. He misses her too much already.

And of course, there's the appointment to keep.

He looks around him at the brown, lifeless hills, at the empty blue sky, so beautiful. The City of Angels is nearby, a place teeming with humanity, with motion, with vice and opportunity, and here they live, at the far edge of it, at the border of divine potential and heartbreaking impossibility.

He likes Calabasas. Here, with her, he has experienced the greatest miseries of his life, but also the most unimaginable joys.

Here, with Her, he shares a love like a shard of shrapnel, lodged so near to his heart that if it is left there it will forever cause constant pain, but if it is removed, he is sure to die.

Yeah, he thinks, stepping out of the blinding-bright sun into the dark of the apartment, *that's what it's like*.

He looks down at the ring, the one he almost but didn't quite throw into the raging sea in Carmel that day, still on his finger. Even in the half-light, it shines.

As he crosses into the hall, he thinks of the notepad in the office. What had he sat down to write earlier? Was it a love letter? A goodbye? He hardly knows; the page is still blank: he could write anything he wants.

He goes into the bedroom, opening the door slowly. Inside, all is seeped a hallowed quiet. She is here—he smells her, feels her-- a form under the blankets. Suddenly the darkness, the stagnant air of the room, it's all oppressive, awful, and he almost walks out again. But he doesn't.

Instead, impulsively, he goes to the window.

He opens the blinds.

Light cuts into the room, brilliant, yellow, chasing every shadow away.

He opens the window—it's hard to slide, but he yanks it—and from without, the sound of the children playing at the pool, laughing, fills the room.

The breeze rushing in is cool and fresh, pure-smelling, new.

He goes to the bed and kneels down next to her.

There she sleeps. Her eyes are closed. He reaches out and gently brushes a hair

from her smooth, flawless cheek. Always, she is beautiful. Always.

Slowly, she opens her eyes. She sees him there and smiles.

“Good morning, my love,” she says, “I have to tell you about the most amazing dream.”

* * *

TINY RED TEAR AGAINST AZURE

Kit Kennedy

woman rolls down window
takes my hand in black mittens
after I float into her champagne-colored car
strangers not in this moment

careless, transported by that color blue
and dusting of snow on not so distant mountain
I, no broken bones no contusions
what might have....didn't

against sky gracefully aging
hang red chilies

friend, with woolen fingers, what are you saying
when I retell our history

Skyline

Luivette Resto

She didn't kiss me like you.
That's what you said
as we sat on my bedroom fire escape,
staring at the luminescent red and green lights
of the Empire State Building.

Christmas was almost here.
Our third one if I counted correctly.

We never faced one another.
As you spoke to a starless night sky
and I listened to taxis curse at brave pedestrians.

You didn't love me the same way anymore.
You needed to find yourself
before you could give to others.
I wasn't what you needed right now.
You didn't see a future or a family with me.

I didn't cry.
Not for your satisfaction
but for mine.
I didn't want to remember myself that way.

Thoughtfully the city exhaled
a windfull of flurries up my thin nightshirt.
Shuttering for the first time,
I got up and dusted off the rust from my jeans.

Straight Lines

Graham Nunn

i.

her body has curled into a question mark
stripped of memory and blood

she was never convinced of the distance
between opposites like youth and old age

her thinning hair: a basket of dry flowers
the young doctor's: thick blonde of a master race

ii.

too many words begin
with their undoing:

disease dishearten disintegrate

thin disposable words

iii.

the cactus on the sill is in bloom

reality waits to be abstracted
while the heart keeps fluttering
it's damned persistent rumour

iv.

are there straight lines in life like in poetry?

surprising how little is remembered
as the door is closed for the last time
on a room clearly empty

The Baker

Natasha Cabot

The Baker dipped his basting brush into a pungent marinade and stirred. He lifted the brush and I heard tiny little drops fall onto the paper underneath me. I could feel the cold, wet bristles stroke my skin as he began his work.

“Is it always this cold?” I asked, with a brittle chill in my voice. My teeth were chattering; my lips nearly blue.

“Yes. Some tolerate it more than others. I guess you are not one of them.” He said. The conversation ended. The brush continued to stroke my skin. More foul smelling liquid coated my flesh.

As he painted the brown liquid onto my skin I recalled how I got here. Loneliness. Loneliness was a vise that kept squeezing the life out of me, day by day, bit by bit, eroding my insides so they resembled a macabre Grand Canyon. Their icy cold clamps gripped me and I was powerless to break free. My insides collapsed in on themselves and I ached. I’ve no reason to be so sad. I work. I have a home. I have friends. But the loneliness still ebbs and flows inside of me like a vast, unyielding sea.

There are many ways to control loneliness. Drugs - I have tried them. Alcohol – I have tried it. I have skydived, swam with sharks, burnt myself with cigarettes, and even cut myself in desperate attempts to feel and all have failed. This is why I turned to The Baker.

The Baker. For years I heard about him and thought him to be a myth, an urban legend for the forlorn. A man who could take away the loneliness and make a person, me, feel whole. He knew how to end the isolation, the pain, how to make a person feel alive.

You couldn’t make appointments with The Baker; he didn’t advertise. Rather, he worked on a referral basis. Lonely people can always seek each other out. My turn came when I was sitting in a park, a soft spring wind slapping gently at my face, my hair scratching my eyes. Tears formed and ran down my cheeks. No one noticed me. And still I sat.

There is a common look lonely people have; they can spot each other in a crowd. They have no aura, no shine. Their dull, lifeless eyes shine like sad beacons, attracting other lonely people. Their eyes lock with each other momentarily, an unhappy acknowledgement of a shared affliction.

About an hour later, eyes red, cheeks red, nose swollen, a bald man sat down next to me, staring, his warm hand falling upon my cold shoulder. He was tall and tan. His teeth reflected against the bronze of his skin. He reached into his jacket and pulled out

a business card. This is someone who could help you, he said. Then he got up and walked away.

I stared down at the card. It read simply "The Baker" and gave a number. My heart raced a bit. Could this be real, I thought. Is this right? When I got home, got up and I rang the number. A gruff voice answered on the other end. He answered with one simple word "Yeah?"

I stammered as I started to explain how I got his number. He interrupted me with a terse "I can fit you in tomorrow at 11 a.m." Elated, I made the appointment. He told me how to get to his studio. I was going to be whole! My hand trembled. Finally, after years of feeling blank, I would feel real. Feel alive.

I couldn't sleep that night. I tossed, I turned, wondering what awaited me in the morning. People didn't talk about what The Baker did, only the results. I was nervous, though. What will he do? Is it painful? I drifted off restlessly and slept.

At 10:30 a.m., I finally made my way towards the address given me the evening prior. I found myself in an abandoned warehouse. I rang the buzzer and was immediately let in. I entered a dark, vast room. The voice on the phone greeted me with a brusque demand to follow him. I did. The room was bright, white and warm. "Take off your clothes," The Baker said. Shocked, I did as he said.

The slap of wet bristles across my face brought me back to present. My basting continued. The Baker was speaking to me.

"Yes. Some tolerate the cold more than others. I guess you are not one of them," he said. The conversation ended. The brush continued to stroke my skin. More foul smelling liquid coated my flesh.

As he painted my face, I closed my eyes and felt relief with every brush stroke. Finally, the years and years of emptiness, of hollowness, will finally go away. I'll wake up tomorrow feeling alive, feeling whole. The separation that had formed between me and the world will dissipate. The Baker was the anchor I'd been seeking for years.

The hard bristles continued to run the length of my body, covering my breasts, my stomach, my legs. Every inch of skin was drenched.

"It's important to get every crack and crevice, otherwise you'll burn worse," The Baker said. "It's bad when it burns." He started to whistle. I stood like a statue, while he continued his work. Nearby a fan blew my hair, orphaned strands getting caught on damp skin.

The Baker threw down his brush, his job nearly complete. From head to toe, I had been basted. I was nearly ready. He walked over to his closet, and grabbed yards of

clear plastic wrap. He set the plastic down and went behind me, where the oven was warming up. I heard the door open, ancient hinges creaking, and I felt the heat on my back. I smiled a little. The answer to my all of my problems stood a mere four feet behind me.

“Well, the temperature is almost right. Just one last thing to do, girly girl.” He smiled. Brown teeth winked at me from behind white lips. “Let me grab the plastic and we’re almost done.” The Baker started to wrap me with plastic, tightly. He started at my feet, up my legs, around my torso until my entire body was covered. Except for my head. The head must remain uncovered. That is how it has always been, or so I am told. So my head was free and my body bound.

He laid me out on a long brown board, similar to a stretcher. Stretchers carried the wounded and I most certainly was...one of the walking wounded. The one who feels so defeated and beaten by life. I am the one who finds no joy in the world. I am the one who is incomplete. Incomplete. That word is so empty but so loaded. I want to be complete. I want to be normal. I want to feel what everyone else feels. This process is painful but I hope it works. There is nothing else for me, I fear. This must work. Simply, it must. Work. For me. Please.

The Baker gave me one last look. “Do you have any questions?”

“Does it hurt? Will I scream?” I asked. Excitement and wariness competed within me. Was I starting to feel alive? Is this how it feels?

“Yes, it hurts. People like you come to me frequently. You incomplete people. You’re not fully baked. You’re incomplete. Like so many others, girly girl. I’ve seen them. I’ve seen their lifeless eyes. They are the joyless. But I don’t have to tell you that do I. I can look into your eyes and see the emptiness there. Poor thing. You poor unfeeling, incomplete blob. Like dough. A blob of unbaked dough. I feel sad for people like you. But my job isn’t to pity you; it is to make you whole. Let you fully bake so you can be like everyone else. You want that don’t you? To be complete, even if means an absolutely painful and torturous process? That’s why you came to see me. That’s why they all do.”

“Yes. I want to be whole. I want to feel complete. I want to know what it is like.” I said, tears forming a track in the marinade.

“Then don’t worry about the pain.”

“Will I die, though? I don’t think I want to die.”

“To be honest, some do. Some over bake and come out burnt and brittle. They crumble when they walk. Then they are dust. Don’t worry. I’ve mostly perfected the

technique. And, anyway, death would be preferable to how you feel now. Otherwise, you wouldn't come and see me, right? Don't worry. You'll be fine. I'm just going to put you in at 450 degrees for about, oh...an hour, I'd say—based on your height and weight. Before you know it, you'll be whole. You'll be complete. You won't feel half done. Trust me" he smiled.

"Okay. I think I'm ready. Wish me luck."

"You'll feel lucky once I am done, girly girl." He winked, or blinked, I couldn't tell. I lay down on the stretcher. To my surprise, he sprinkled me a bit, with flour I believe, and gave me one last look.

Then The Baker pushed the brown, burnt board into the oven. So many others had lain on this board before me. Some baked too long and crumbled. Others weren't in long enough and felt even emptier. But most, and I hope to be a part of this group, bake just right. They come out soft and fluffy. Alive. Feeling. Joyful. Giggling. Just right. They bake just right.

The heat covered me. I could feel my skin start to blister and pop. My hair singed off. A smile formed across my face. My cheeks turned red, then a light brown.

I'm baking. I'm baking. And some day I'll be just like you.

Tyler the Skinhead

Tria Andrews

Instead of black boots you wore Converse; in the time of TV & text messaging, when no one wrote in his own hand, strip malls, stripped earth, war, & your father dying of stomach cancer; you said your apartment smelled of shit, booze, Red Man tobacco—really it smelled of maple, mildew, & your father's dinosaur bones; a butterfly knife, silver, steel, & with it you turned tricks, thinking of your mother, turning tricks of her own; your best friend, Omid, with a father fighting in Iraq, brilliant & always stoned; Omid's face, lovely as any girls, you noticed in the locked bathroom as you carved swastikas into each other with the steel-cold knife, warmed against your skin, the two of you trembling, gripping each other as your blood spotted cheap linoleum in a pattern, a language that said everything you ever wanted to say.

The Return Journey

Katrin Talbot

Saw them again
at the Y today

Mother a sturdy mid-sixties
The daughter mid-life

They swim,
then shower
speaking a quiet tongue
from deep within
the Pacific Rim

Soon the two stand silent
under the wall's drizzle,
naked
with purpose,
without modesty

And the daughter
begins to scrub her mother
like a racehorse,
no stone unturned

Aside from a few moles,
a spotless, shiny mother

As if I could wash my own mother

As if history can scour loving
As if loving can scour history

Clean

Jason L. Huskey

She wears a razor blade necklace,
thin and pale as her body,
eyes trailing nervous
to the soft exchange
of blood-stained slacks.

John's seen her before,
dragging along the sidewalk,
stolen from the world
in a pin-prick rush.
Her mind off
in an interchange of realities--
lost in the alternate disappointments
of subconscious lives.

She used to lead her son about town,
ten or eleven,
but trapped in a toddler's frame.
The little guy was droopy-faced
and scared like a fresh puppy,
never saying a word out loud,
just there to waddle along
in the shadow of her druggie gait.

John could never look at him
squarely, cringing at the dark blur
of his freakish wobble,
the hell his mother passed down
with burnt lips and bruised veins.

John prepares the slacks for washing,
knowing they won't come clean.
They'll soak and soak,

but the blood will still be there,
hiding in the seams, blending into
the safety of the double stitch.

Waiting to embarrass her
if anything can,
like the son she lost
once upon a time
in this reality.

Rooms

Andrea DeAngelis

I have a memory of rooms I never leave but have invisible walls. These are rooms I never leave, these are rooms where I exist but don't live. These are rooms where it is dark but I know they can see everything. They can even see inside of me—even my heart beating crazy because it's damaged. They can even see me though my skin's invisible like these walls I have no memory of really but I know they're there like a dream I can't quite forget yet.

Askew

Andrea DeAngelis

My matted hair a clotted dark galaxy
torn from useful teeth
stars disappear into the flavorless gray
a longing nebula of regret

The universe is turning old
before you know
Does it always have to be that way?
a gray universe of stars dying unknown deaths

I think a paunch is becoming on you
you're settling into your skin
you were much too sensitive back then
leaping and parrying sustained affection
now you are quite leathery

Though you still have the ability
to give me a disability
to bite, to rend
I have to stop talking to you
but I never quite manage to

I have written of smaller things than your heart
like this brush tearing out my hair
like the gray sprouting there
ashes to ashes
lust to dust

Does it always have to be that way?
Do we always have to change?
Will you stare if you ever see me again?

RAW

Andrea DeAngelis

Chicago. Recent. The nineties that we thought would bring so much more. The day was raw. Well, rawer than it should have been, anyway. And I'm not talking about chill or heat, I'm talking about a quality in the air that makes you feel that everything could come undone with the right gust of wind. Unfinished like. One of those days where you felt the buildings were crumbling around you if you cared to notice. Well, it was that type of day. I don't know if there was a word for it. But raw seemed to fit, so raw it was.

And no matter what anybody says - weather gets to people. They don't like to admit it but it's true. The way the wind was whipping round that day, trying to start something stuck in my mind. Blowing up newspapers, having them settle down until it rushed up again striking and heaving, it was annoying to say the least. Then at unexpected intervals people weren't pleased with bracing themselves against it. Buckling down, their heads brushed with city grit as they shoved their way through. It was just one more push, as I saw it. Just one more push that caused it. But then again my imagination always seemed to run off without me. Cuz the newspapers never ever tell you how something occurred or why it happened only what happened and who did it. So I'm filling in the gaps.

Place. That don't matter. Pick any street you like. It happens everywhere. What happened? Well, that man grabbed her purse. Jerked it right off the chain. The broken chain slapped her sides. But she wasn't afraid. No, I picked up on that. She was angry. She sucked in her cheeks and narrowed her eyes. That man had no idea what he was in for. She braced herself and ran. The soles of her feet pounding the sidewalk, slapping down steadily and resounding.

And her mouth? Well it jerked open wide. I thought she'd tear the corners of those lips with that bellow she let out. "Thief!" she cried. And louder still so it rang out.

"Aren't you sick of it?" she shouted through jagged breath. "Aren't you sick of it?" Her cry rose to a screech.

Not only did people turn to gawk at her but they stopped what they were doing and followed her chasing that man. I don't know what got into them. Chain reaction, I suppose. Once started, couldn't be stopped.

A matronly woman with solid thick calves thrust her groceries into her teenage daughter's gaping face and ran. She stabbed her modest heels into the cracked cement, trailing after the screaming now flushed woman.

Flora, who I know by those quick, debilitating up-and-down looks she gives you, if you talk back to her or disagree, fingered that wad of old tasteless gum out of her grinding mouth. She stuck it on the railing of the subway terminal and bolted. And well, Geena had to pick up her heels and follow because that's what Geena did. She

would rip the back slit of that too tight skirt before the incident was through.

So the four of them pounded round the corner closing in on that man who hadn't thought he'd be running that hard for that long. Must have been a smoker. Make that heavy smoker cuz they were all just getting started and were no where finished with him and he began to know it.

The frustration that rose into an anger was what was addictive, come to think of it. The forerunner was positively howling. I could hear her while I was trailing all the way behind Geena and that ripping back slit.

And Marcy's little skate-rat tomboys with their short crisp haircuts rolled on after us. Curious and delirious with the possibility of anger. They skated right on past me, wheels squeaking all the while.

It was a rush to run like that. My chest heaved and my heart thumped out of wack. It was a high if I ever knew one.

Blondie, (cuz I don't know her name and should for I see her jogging round all the time), that pouty face clenched up tight, was coming straight at us. We flew by with the woman shouting after that man, "I'm gonna teach you not to steal from anyone!" So Blondie froze in her tracks and spun round sprinting on past yours truly without the slightest effort.

A little girl in an old gingham dress tugged at her Momma and pointed as we ran on past. As if answering a question, the woman hollered, "That man stole my purse!" The same look, that sick-and-tired-of-it glint was mirrored in the gingham girl's Momma's eyes. She sharply inhaled and pulled at her daughter saying, "Come on, Janey. Let's get him!" I could feel their beating steps close behind me.

And Missy there, with her strangling, dejected curls and gang of three, lingering in baggy overalls and tight straining tees at shop windows, glimpsed the reflection of the now frantic man charging past and the trail of nine closing in behind him. They dug their dockmartins in and booked on after us all. The line thickened at the sides, flaring out to reel in more passerbys. The chase was now contagious as if there had ever been a choice in the first place.

Now that man had to push people out of his way. He stumbled and shoved against others and they grew pissed. Pissed-angry mean is not somebody you want to be chased by. He never thought it would come to this. No one ever thought it would get like this. But no one ever thought to begin with. It all started with the woman who should have been afraid but was instead angry. And didn't think what it could mean if she caught up to him.

A tall angular amber woman knocked over by him picked herself up carefully. Distractedly brushing off her granny dress, she steadied her dizzy self against a graffitied telephone booth. Must have been that Missy with her gang of three calling out, "Come on! Don't you take that!" She caught up with their thundering heavy shoes, "Take what?"

"He took her purse! Pulled a knife on her. And we're gonna catch him." So Amber joined us, breathy and confused, her sandals flopping against callused heels.

The woman's bellowing became a predictable song ever so often punctuated with a "Aren't you sick of it? Well, aren't you?" And our thundering feet was a screaming yes.

It was unstoppable now, the adrenaline rush was addictive as more and more joined us. It was only a matter of time and pumping legs and thighs til we caught up to him.

He dashed round another corner, the veins in his neck must have been swollen with the panicked exertion. We were going to run him into the ground and he knew it. He tripped and was sent flying, his chin catching on the ground, ripped up and bleeding furiously. The palms of his hands painfully scraped as he scrambled upwards still clinging to that purse. Not that it mattered anyway if he dropped it or not, we would have wanted to get him anyway for all the times we hadn't caught him.

Clinging onto that purse and being dragged by a car for blocks and blocks cuz it hit you so unexpected. All those times. Sensations that kill nerve-endings. Like having nothing to say when you call up your friend wayshted and boozed out of your mind and he tells you that a friend's just been mugged and killed. No recourse. Nothing 'cept sobriety.

Calmly walking in the fringes of Northwest DC, getting a styrofoam cup of lukewarm coffee as you start to feel the evening go right through you. Then out of nowhere you're dead, a bullet escapes through the back of your head. Ducking down flat in a flyby shooting. Heybaby baby, you wanna you wanna come with me and watch the hands wrap round the crook of your arm as they drag you in. Getting away, breaking away only cuz your street-wise, shit-kicker, Violet what's-her-last-name girlfriend slammed the car door on their snagging arms. Stood wondering, shaking all over with what could have happened. What should have happened but didn't but will. Like that. Like all those times. I don't care if that man dropped her purse or not, I'd still want to stick a knife in his back and grind it round.

That man was running out of steam and sense as he tore into a dead-end alleyway. He was cornered, confused and cowering. Hell, we were all confused but we did what was natural and moved in. He threw down the purse. Blood was streaming down his chin. He was hysterical. I think he was hyperventilating. He breathed quickly and shallow, his little chest throbbing under a sweat-soaked shirt. He shouted, swallowing up air like a man who'd forgotten to breathe, "Here, have it! I don't want it! I don't want it! Just." Gasping. "Just leave me--" Sharp inhale, high-pitched feverish exhale, "Leave me alone. Just leave me alone!"

Then she stepped forward, perspiration pooling between her breasts. Dark hair out of wack, windblown and crazy matching the temper in her eyes. She screamed, "Leave YOU alone?! Leave YOU alone?!" She stepped forward, her hands shaking, balling up into fists. "You should of left me alone!" Then she pounced on him,

knocking him to the ground, screeching, "Aren't you sick of it? Aren't you?" After that we pummeled him with fists, nails, toe-kicks and heels. Our reaction was instantaneous cuz the rage was explosive and raw. And for a moment when the police arrived, they just stood there, took it all in and saw before they threw us off of him. No one realized how still he had become. Really, no one realized he was not moving.

They told us -- nightly news flash of metro trash -- that he was taken to the hospital where he was to be treated for his injuries. But he died of a heart-attack before he could get there.

I never thought people could die of fear. But that's what it was -- I'm sure of it. And I never thought anger could strike something inside of you so raw but it did. Maybe I should be afraid. But I'm not -- you can't prosecute twenty-five people for chasing a man into an alley. Making him back up and rub against that wall, knowing there's no way out, that there's nothing he can do to save himself. You can't prosecute twenty-five women and children for making a man feel terrified when we feel terrified all our lives.

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Circling

Kristin Roedell

Water striders, seeds
in luminous waved green air,
Still, still.
I dropped a stone into a pond
and watched the circles grow wide and soft.
I remembered you to the shore;
you grow less vivid by degrees.

There was a white day in the woods,
It was out of season;
we made love
where the foxes left tracks.
I lay down,
and left a wingless snow angel.
It grew less vivid by degrees.

Small things change.
Woodpeckers nest on our roof,
I put salt out for the deer,
the forsythia bush bloomed.
You loved a morning moon;
it wanes as you do,
you grow less vivid by degrees.

At Jimmy's

Kristin Roedell

I

That sideways man with a pool cue
In a long black leather bag,
he limps to his advantage;
he is rhythmic and cool.
He is famous among the weed smokers,
bums picking up cigarette stubs,
and cooks on break.

He stutters until he racks the balls--
Then the regulars turn around.
Old welders, retired military,
and seasoned men with ball caps
worn forward with bills over their eyes:

They all

sigh.

He is suddenly so smooth.

Some part of his brain was injured,
but not the part where the game
is playing,
not the part that dances.

II

That dark haired married woman
is still pretty at fifty.
She stopped by Jimmy's
To score an bag of weed--

If her husband knew
the marijuana makes her sweet
and fleshy,
he'd let her go;

he remembers this:
as a girl she was beautiful.
Sometimes she turns her head,
and a lovely ghost
Inhabits her.

If her husband could accept it,
he adores her when she's high;
she gets that tender,
wraith-like look.

II

That kid makes the balls break
apart
like a flock of bright birds.

The green table is his garden.
The fluorescent light is his moon.
His boys lean
into the shadows.

Dressed in a suit jacket
like a gangster,
iridescent in blues and greens,
He moves in like a night snake.

When he strikes.
the flock
takes sudden wing.

Another Christmas Storm

Kristin Roedell

One Christmas my father
shot a hole in the basement bathroom
with his service revolver.
The bullet was a quiet lodger.
I dreamt that like a dead saint in some
dark mountain church,
the hole began to weep;
my mother's outline appeared in the damp.

She said she fell into the tree.
I imagined a mist of flocked snow;
She was like a holiday globe which, shaken,
makes a gentle storm.

She said she cut her hand. She trimmed the
sheaves of roses that came at Christmas time.
Their sleepy cultivated odor filled the hall;
She loved a winter garden.

This morning I washed his gray old body.
I saw him close his eyes, and make
the bullet return to the gun,
the snow return to the tree,
the scissors return to the rose.
My mother walked backward and waved.
She loved another winter
with snowflakes like flowers.

Matches

Darrell Dela Cruz

I will lose my blush when you tear me.
Pieces of my body will linger on cardboard.
My head brushes up against the starter.

Are you trying to break my mind
with a single flick? In this wind
you will have to reapply the same motions.
I will savor the touch of your fingers.

Lighting when unexpectedly, brilliance my mind
leaking transfixes you. Hold me unadorned
and shield me from your breath.

When will you let go of my disintegrated body?
Will you hold me until my thoughts start
to singe your nails. Drop me into the pit
of flammable earth.

I will turn them on the same way I do now
Douse me with the wrong kind of liquid.
I will expand inside metal – my newly formed tongue
would escape these grates...just for a single touch of your lips
I will scar.

Breathing Under Water

Barry W North

Just like her insides, Susan's hands were trembling as she stood at the end of the crowded bar trying to light a cigarette, her first in three months. Finally, she managed to get it lit and inhaled deeply. The icy, mentholated vapors coursed through her body like Freon through a refrigeration system, and she could feel herself cooling off and calming down a notch. Thank God for the extra pack tucked away, like a security blanket, inside her purse. The day, which was supposed to have been pleasant, had turned out to be the nastiest day from hell of her entire life.

When Trebor walked into the apartment, beaming like a little boy who had just received a Christmas present he'd been hoping for, and announced that his dad was coming to New Orleans just to meet her, she should have followed her instinct, and said no, she didn't want to meet the famous dad she'd heard so much about. She just wanted to keep floating around inside their safe little fantasy world, where he brought her wild flowers he picked off the side of the road, made love to her in the afternoon, and read her poetry at night. The last thing she wanted was somebody judging, and, maybe even, tinkering around with their self-contained universe.

But she couldn't say no to him, anymore than she could say no to him when he pleaded with her to go with him to Florida after his graduation in a couple of months.

"My old man's gonna set me up with a lot full of good used cars. He's already got the site and has the financing all arranged - everything. We can live on the beach, go swimming every day, turn bronze in the afternoon sun, and get rich - all at the same time. It'll be great."

"When things sound too good to be true, they usually are," she heard her own father's sensible voice saying, as she exhaled a stream of smoke. But she had ignored her instincts and other warning signs, like the evening before, when Trebor called to say he would be spending the night with his dad at Harrah's, for "a little gambling and male bonding."

"Guess what he said when I showed him your picture?" He asked, his voice, as always, soft and sexy, a perfect match for his lips.

"Huh?"

"He said you were beautiful. He said you were an Audrey Hepburn on steroids."

She sat on the other side of the line, in silence, not sure whether she had just been insulted or complimented.

"That's a huge compliment coming from him," he said, as though reading her mind. "He has a whole collection of her movies. He watches them all the time. It drives my mother crazy."

She didn't know what to say.

“Your mother must be a very patient woman,” she finally said, for no other reason than that it had popped into her mind. In the year they had been dating, he had seldom mentioned his mother, except in passing. And in Susan’s mind, she had become this tiny, shadowy figure, trundling silently along, like a Chinese servant, three feet behind her flamboyant husband.

“Oh, yeah, she is,” he said. “So, listen, I’ll see you tomorrow, about two, in the courtyard next to Harrah’s?”

“I’ll be there, Trebor,” she said, wondering what she had gotten herself into as she hung up the phone. The vibes, so far at least, were all negative.

She glanced through the plate glass bar front at Trebor’s father. From the back he looked like a college student on Spring break. His aviator sunglasses were propped up on top of his head, his hands were laced together at his nape, and his feet were stretched out and proprietarily planted on her vacant chair. He looked far too nonchalant for a man who had just manhandled his only son’s girlfriend and then stuck his gross, oversized tongue halfway down her throat.

She had been returning from the bathroom when their paths, obviously not by accident, crossed in the dark hallway.

“Hey,” he said, lightly touching her arm as though in reconciliation, “I was just trying to tell

you the truth.” He leaned in as though to hug her and then, before she knew what was happening, he had her pinned against the wall, and was pressing himself against her, grunting like a pig, and forcing her mouth open with his huge, pointy tongue that was as rough as an emory board and seemed to fill her mouth like expanding foam. The gagging sensation in her throat, combined with the stench of alcohol and tobacco coming off his body, made her feel like she was being smothered by a drunken eight hundred pound Gorilla. In a panic, she struggled to break free. Finally, he discarded more than released her, as though to let her know that she was nothing more than an annoying little blip on his radar screen that he was finally done with, and then he turned away and headed for the men’s room.

She leaned back against the wall, trying to catch her breath. Then, not wanting to face him when he came out, she ducked into the ladies’ room, which, miraculously, was empty. She stood at the sink rinsing her mouth out over and over again, trying to get rid of the sickening taste. She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. She was a wreck. Her dress was crooked; Her lipstick was smeared and her mascara had run, giving her a false black eye, and making her look exactly the way she felt.

She glanced at herself in the long mirror behind the bar. She looked almost normal, at least on the surface. It seemed like a century had passed since that morning, when she had stood in front of her cheval glass feeling sexy and self-confident in her new dress. As though she were recalling something from the distant past, she felt almost nostalgic remembering how pleased she had been with the way her long black hair, draped over her shoulders, helped blend the white frilly top into the black and white

floral pattern of the skirt-like bottom that ended an enticing three inches above the knee; the way her black patent leather high heels, with ankle straps, lengthened and accentuated her legs; the way the only spot of color in the whole black and white ensemble, her ruby lip gloss, stood out, giving her an air of sophistication.

“What a difference a couple of hours can make,” she thought, feeling more like a scarecrow in a cornfield than the belle of the ball.

She looked around the bar with envy. She felt a little like an airline passenger, whose head is about to explode from the pressure, while everyone else on the plane is relaxed and enjoying the ride. The place was packed. People were jammed in at the bar like pages in a closed book, many of them trying in vain to get the attention of the two overworked bartenders. Others sat around on cocktail tables watching L.S.U. play baseball on television. Every time their team scored the whole place erupted in loud cheers. She was tempted to relieve her frustrations by screaming at the top of her lungs right along with them.

Instead, she looked outside, and out there, life in father-son land, was chugging along nicely, their own little dark fantasy world undisturbed. She could see Trebor’s face in profile, and she was amazed that someone so sweet, so innocent, and so caring could have come from the monster sitting next to him. Clueless as a Beverly Hills teenager, he was looking up at his dad with the same sincere, vulnerable look on his face that had drawn her to him the first time he came into the restaurant, in the university section, carrying a tattered book of poems in his hand and looking a little lost.

“What are you reading?” she had asked when she came to take his order.

“Just a book of poems.”

“You like poetry?” she asked, feeling like an idiot as soon as the words spilled out of her mouth. She was waiting for something frat-boy sarcastic, like “duh,” but instead he surprised her and gave her a line she couldn’t pass up.

“It keeps me company on lonely nights.”

“You’re too good looking to have lonely nights,” she said, glancing at him over the pencil and order pad. And, to her amazement, like a little boy, he turned as red and as irresistible as an Alabama peach, right before her eyes.

He continued to come in, maybe once a week by himself, for supper, always carrying the same book. She knew he was too young for her, nothing more than a college kid, but his Elvis Presley good looks, his soft lips, and sensitive forest-green eyes kept drawing her in until, finally, she broke her rule about making the first move.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” she said, putting her knee up on his booth seat. “I get off in ten minutes. I’ll buy you a coke if you’ll read me one of the poems in that book you carry around like the Bible.”

“I’ve never read a poem to anyone before,” he said when she was finally settled in, across from him in the booth.

“Come on. You can do it,” she said, wiggling around in the booth until she was

sitting up straight, like a student in school. She could tell that he really wanted to read to her, so she waited patiently while he worked up the courage. He read her "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock." He started shyly, in a faltering voice at first, but before long he was lost in the melodious, meandering, and mesmerizing music of the words.

She kept her eyes closed, letting the words fall on her like rain.

"Wow. That was nice," she said when he had finished. "I don't really understand it, but I love the sound of the words, and I really love the last line." She hesitated for a moment, debating with herself, before continuing. "That's what love is like, you know. It's like breathing under water. And everybody on the outside looking in can see that you're in a different world. And they're either happy for you, or jealous as hell, and would like nothing better than to see you wake up and drown." She studied his face, waiting to see if her comments were going to scare him off, and end their relationship before it even started. But, as she watched, his expression changed from idle curiosity to genuine, unmistakable interest.

"Listen," he said suddenly "would you like to go to the movies, tomorrow night?"

"Let me check my schedule," she said, not taking her eyes off him. "It just so happens I'm free."

After that, they started dating regularly. Trebor was shy and polite and considerate, and, totally different from the other men she'd dated since the breakup with her first lover, four years ago. Most people her age were married with children, just like she had expected to be, until she came home from work one night and found her future husband gone without so much as a note of explanation sitting around on an end table somewhere. Since then, she had dated very sparingly because most of the men turned out to be divorced with children, every one of them carrying around more baggage than an ant with a rubber tree plant; or else she found out they were currently married with children and just looking for a little extra-curricula activity. The few that were still single and available were so set in their ways and stubborn that she could have filed her nails down on their beards. And all of them, it seemed, married or single, were as horny as forty-year-old virgins and as aggressive as molesters she had to fight off just to make it into her apartment. But Trebor was content to take it slow, and she fell in love with his simple and tender ways. The lengthy petting, and the long lingering goodnight kisses made her feel like a teenager being courted. She came to understand exactly how the boys in high school had felt, when they complained about being teased. At the end of every date, he had her primed and ready, but then, too shy to go any further, he abandoned her under pressure, and returned to his dorm room for the night, leaving her alone in the apartment, forced to decompress all by herself.

Finally, one night, they went to see a late showing of Shakespeare in Love at a suburban theater. The movie house was nearly empty. The chemistry and the sexual tension between the actors floated off the screen and transferred itself to them, all alone in the back row of the dark theater. By the end of the movie they were wrapped

around each other like tightly crossed fingers, and on the way out of the theater, she hugged his arm with both hands and reminded him that she was on the pill - a fact that she had not kept a secret. And in the car, she sat right up against him, playing around with his inner thigh, letting her hand brush up against him until he started squirming around and breathing heavy and struggling to keep the car on the road. By the time they were back in her apartment, they were both in a frenzy, and she jumped on top of him, like a cat in heat.

Afterwards, they lay on their backs in bed, staring at the ceiling. Finally, stealing a Paltrow line from the movie, he said: "That was my first try."

She said nothing for several seconds. "Well, since we're doing confessions," she finally said, without moving her head, "I'm in love with you - head over heels."

Outside the bar, Trebor had become animated. He had begun glancing at his watch and was looking around, concerned. When he got up, she knew he was coming to look for her. Her first instinct was to duck down below the bar. As busy as the place was, nobody would notice her down there. But, instead, she grabbed one of the oversized menus out of the stack at her elbow - for patrons who wanted to order something from the kitchen - and kept it in front of her, at the ready. But when he came in, he didn't even look around the bar. He headed straight for the restrooms on the other side. He stood at the beginning of the hallway, staring intently down the corridor, obviously hoping that she would eventually emerge. Finally, he stopped a middle-aged woman on the way to the restroom, apparently asking her to check inside for Susan. In a few minutes the lady came out shaking her head. Afraid that he would at that point scan the bar looking for her, she held the huge menu in front of her face and counted to one hundred, praying he would not be standing in front of her, demanding an explanation, when she finally lowered it. But when she brought it down, he was gone. She glanced outside and saw that he was just then returning to his seat next to Robert. He said something to Robert, who turned to face him for a moment. As though to reassure him, he put his hand on Trebor's shoulder and said something that brought a forced momentary smile to Trebor's face. But, before long, Trebor was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, rubbing his hands together, and looking agitated. He said something to Robert, got up, walked across the promenade and disappeared into the Harrah's hotel lobby.

Robert turned back to face the promenade. His back was toward her, but she could see his head moving slightly, as he followed every attractive female passing by - just as his eyes had moved unabashedly up and down her body, like a merchant evaluating a piece of goods, when Trebor introduced them.

"I love the wallpaper, baby," he had said, holding onto her hand long enough to make her feel uncomfortable, while looking at her with a twisted, half-grin on his face. Just like the Audrey Hepburn comment, the clever, double-edged, backhanded compliment caught her off guard, but it seemed to blend in perfectly with his off-the-wall appearance. Above his craggy face, his hair was dyed jet-black and pulled back

into a short pony tail, and, though he was in his fifties, he was dressed just like his twenty-two year old son - in shorts, a muscle shirt, and open-toed sandals. Finally, he slid his hand out of hers.

"Thank you ... I think," she said, as she sat down and joined with Trebor in the laughter, determined to make the best of the afternoon and try to forget that she had spent a week's salary on the dress, bought specifically for the occasion.

"Touche', baby, touche'. I like her already, Junior," he said, staring straight into her eyes. He was good looking, like his son, but his eyes, unlike Trebor's, were creepy, devoid of everything but calculation, and were already chipping away at her determination to stay positive.

"I really do have to go to the John," he said, almost as soon as they were seated.

"Junior?" she said, poking at Trebor playfully as soon as Robert was out of earshot.

"Yeah, that's what he calls me," he said, shrugging his shoulders and turning red in the face, like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Well, Junior, tell me the truth. Does this dress really look like a scrap of wallpaper hanging on me?"

"No, no. You look fine," he said, putting his arm around her and moving his chair a little closer to her, apparently happy about the change of direction in the conversation. "He didn't mean it like that. He was just trying to be funny. You'll get use to it. Just go with the flow."

As it turned out, going with the flow meant sitting, like a spellbound audience of two, listening to Robert's sexist jokes (How does a blond turn on the light in the morning? She opens the car door.) and comments that seemed, like all of his remarks, to be double-edged with a point on them that, as the afternoon wore on, appeared to be aimed, more and more, directly at her.

"You're not one of those Dr. Jekyll and Mrs. Hyde women, are you, baby?" He asked at one point, jamming a cigar in his mouth and leaning on the table, like a comedian on center stage, handling a heckler. "You know, all sweetness and light and kindness and compassion while she's dating; but after she has her man trapped into marriage, she turns into a monster sucking the blood out of the poor bastard. And then, when he's stretched out on the couch like a zombie, she says she wants a divorce because the excitement's gone out of the relationship."

A guy at the next table, overhearing the remark, started laughing and reached over to give Robert a high five.

It was not the sort of thing you could object to without being called a prude, and told that it was all in good fun, which, it may have been, except that she knew - in the same way you instinctively know when somebody doesn't like you - that it wasn't. The churning in the pit of her stomach told her it was all headed somewhere very unpleasant.

All afternoon, she kept looking at Trebor for some signs of discomfort - some acknowledgment that she was not imagining the hostility - but all she could find on his untarnished face, shining like a new coin in the afternoon sun, was the same glow of pride and unmistakable hero worship, that had always been there whenever the subject of his dad came up.

"My father is this larger than life character," he had said on their very first date, as they sat in a restaurant exchanging stories. "He's like the superman of car salesman. He was even featured once, in a article in Money magazine, as the top salesman in the entire southern region. I mean he could literally sell eyeglasses to the blind."

"You love your dad very much, don't you?" she said, trying in vain to get a mental image a super salesman. Her father couldn't even sell his own car, the one time he tried instead of trading it in, because he insisted on showing every prospective buyer all of its hidden defects.

"Oh, yeah. I mean he's just so cool. Take my name. Where do you think that comes from?"

"I don't know. It's a pretty name and very unusual."

"Trebor. T.R.E.B.O.R.," he said, spelling the name out letter for letter. He waited awhile, hoping she would figure it out. "It's Robert spelled backwards," he said "Is that cool or what?"

And, back then, it had seemed clever and cute and definitely very cool. But in the light of the afternoon sun it seemed much more sinister - like trying to peel your mirror image off the glass and breathe life into it.

The sound of a brass band in the distance, as though reminding her where she was, caused her to look up. The palm trees on Canal Street were waving in the Spring breeze; streetcars were waddling down the tracks; pedestrians were pouring across the wide boulevard headed for the French Quarter to browse through the antique shops on Royal St., stroll along the Mississippi river, or slowly meander past the artists around Jackson Square. It seemed incredible that just a few blocks away, street musicians and performers entertained crowds of happy, relaxed people just out to have a good time, while she sat at a wrought iron table, like a prisoner trapped in a cell, listening to an egomaniac and peeking out at the world from a distance.

"You know what a car sale is all about, baby," he said, apparently determined to bring her eyes back where they belonged. His own eyes, bloodshot from the alcohol, were demanding her full attention. He was not going to let anything - not a brass band, nor the gorgeous weather, nor the sights and sounds of old New Orleans - steal his thunder. Suddenly feeling very protective, she latched onto Trebor's hand under the table, willing them to present a united front nothing could penetrate.

"It's a game, baby. And the game is all about control," Robert continued, as though every word coming out of his mouth were a precious gem bestowed upon her. "Everybody - whether it's the wage-slave grease monkey busting his knuckles up under the hood of a car, or the passive-aggressive secretary working nine-to-five in a

high rise office building - everybody wants control. So you let them think they have it. You let them see that they have you flustered because they're such tough customers, who won't agree to the very favorable terms you're offering them. But it's only an illusion. In reality, you're pulling all the strings." She knew he wasn't finished, but he paused and looked at her, as though expecting some sort of reaction before, no doubt, continuing to tell her, step by step, exactly how he went about expertly scalping his customers. She thought of her father getting up every morning at dawn, to drink a pot of coffee, before driving fifty miles, through rain and fog, to work in a chemical plant. And of her mother, standing on her feet all day in a department store, working for minimum wage. Suddenly, her silence felt like betrayal. She squeezed Trebor's hand under the table, and spoke up.

"I come from a long line of wage slaves, Robert," she said, feeling like she was actually defending her honor. "And most of them are too tired from trying to make a living all day to worry about who's controlling who when they go to buy a car."

Robert leaned back in his chair, and his eyes got noticeably harder, like concrete curing - all mercy for a weaker opponent drained out. Apparently, she had crossed the line by actually questioning some of his assumptions. He seemed to look down on her from a great distance, as though studying a jigsaw puzzle he had just finished putting together.

"Go get us a beer at the bar, will you, Junior?" he said, without taking his eyes off her. She still had Trebor's hand under the table, and when he tried to pull it free she hung on.

"I'll be right back," he said, giving her a quizzical look. "Do you need a beer?"

"No, I've had enough," she said, reluctantly letting him extract his hand. She and Robert sat in an uncomfortable silence for a few moments, but she knew something was coming. And, finally, it did.

"You're a good bit older than Junior, aren't you?" he finally said.

"I'm twenty-nine, Robert," she said, feeling like she was confessing to a crime she didn't commit.

"On the cusp of the big three Oh," he said, studying her as though she were a frog about to be dissected. "I remember that birthday. By that time you've been around the block a few times, and you kind of know the lay of the land, so to speak. And right behind your head is a big old grandfather clock, tick-tocking away," he said, raising his hand above his head and moving it back and forth. "And I guess for a woman, it's even worse."

She sat in silence, like a suspect waiting for the final incontrovertible evidence to be placed in front of her. She looked around, praying that Trebor would return.

"You know the trouble with robbing the cradle?" Robert finally said, pausing and then reaching out to shove aside the bowl of nuts in the center of the table, as though not wanting the slightest thing to obstruct his view of her humiliation. "You get tired of rocking the baby."

There it was, the real reason for his visit, laid out on the table in plain view. And she had sat there all afternoon, like a pretty little bird on a wire, too dumb to see the rifle aimed directly at her - until it was too late. She could feel the tears coming, but she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. She got up and headed for the restroom. As clearly as if she were watching it from above, she could see and feel his eyes on her back until she finally disappeared into the bar.

She stared at Robert through the plate glass, still having a hard time believing all that had happened in the last couple of hours. He was still ensconced in the chair, chomping on a handful of nuts. "Like a big old devil horse, calmly eating away at my garden," she thought, suddenly picturing the hideous black grasshoppers with bright red markings under the wings, which sat, like sinister little gremlins, on the large leaves of her mother's flowerbed, destroying her handiwork. She had been taken aback the first time she spotted her mother whacking away at the repulsive creatures with a sawed-off broom stick handle. With the single-minded determination of a holy warrior on a crusade against evil, she was mercilessly swinging away at them with a grim look of satisfaction on her face.

"What are you doing?" Susan had asked, actually feeling a little uncomfortable about witnessing the carnage.

"I hate these devil horses," her mother said, looking a little embarrassed herself about being caught in the act. "But there are just so many of them. You can't kill them all."

As she studied Robert, she had a vision of herself, carrying a big stick, calming walking up to him and, without saying a word, knocking him right off the chair. But before she could relish the fantasy, the phone in her purse started vibrating. It was Trebor. She let it go to voice mail. A few seconds later it started vibrating again. The third time she saw Trebor emerge from the hotel lobby holding his flip phone up to his ear. Apparently, he had forgotten it in the hotel room. She had to do something. She knew she couldn't face either one of them in her present state of mind. She hurried through the bar and headed home.

All the way home the phone kept vibrating. It occurred to her that her fiancée's phone must have sounded exactly like that, four years ago, on his way back home to Alabama. When she had come home from work and found him and all of his belongings gone, she had called his cell phone over and over again for hours. As her own phone kept ringing persistently, she pictured her ex-fiancee in her mind becoming more and more frustrated on the drive until, finally, he reached over and turned it off. The next day she had begun calling the only land phone number she had for him, until, finally, she managed to get him on the phone.

"I just need some space right now," was the feeble explanation he offered for abandoning her. "I'm just not ready for marriage. I want my freedom," he said, sounding like a prison escapee willing to die rather than return to the joint. "Please don't call here any more. My mother's not well and it makes her very nervous," he

concluded, apparently willing to sink to any level to get rid of her. After that, she never called him again.

As soon as she entered the apartment, her land phone started ringing. She let it go to voice mail the first few times, but Trebor's voice on the machine sounded so frantic that eventually she picked it up.

"Hello."

"What happened? We're still sitting her waiting for you. What's going on?"

"I just had to come home, Trebor. I can't explain right now. I'm okay. Don't worry about me," she said, although in reality he sounded more angry than concerned. "Have a good time with your dad and call me tomorrow." She had the phone halfway to the base, when she changed her mind and brought it back up to her ear. "Trebor, what did your dad say when I didn't return."

"Nothing. I don't know. What do you mean?"

"He said something. I know he did. I need to know, Trebor. What did he say?"

"He just told me not to worry about it. He said it was no big deal. He said you were probably just on the rag."

"Goodnight, Trebor."

She hung the phone up gently, as though it were a bomb that could go off at any moment. Suddenly, she was very tired. She took off her clothes and dropped them on the floor like discarded rags. She put on a pair of jogging shorts and a sleeveless blouse, curled up on the sofa, and clicked on the television. And there, like a kick in the ribs, was Audrey Hepburn playing Holly Golightly in "Breakfast at Tiffany's." She was glamorous and beautiful in the part. Susan tried to see the similarities. There were some - the dark hair and eyes, the fondness for ruby lipstick, under whelming mammary glands. But Hepburn had a gorgeous, sophisticated Julia Roberts type beauty that Susan could never match. Her own nose was a Chinese pug compared to Audrey's, and she was toting around at least twenty more pounds in the butt and hips and legs. Hepburn was divine in the roll of the carefree party girl, doing her best to resist true love in the form of George Peppard, until her ultimate epiphany. Susan sobbed throughout the whole movie, laughing through her tears at the funny parts, and by the end she was a basket case. Exhaustion had breached her defenses until, finally, they crumbled, releasing tears that quickly grew into an uncontrollable flood. She crawled into bed. The last time she had cried herself to sleep she had been eleven and totally devastated over her best friend, Rachel, moving out of town. She remembered two things very clearly from that night. One was the image of her father sitting on the side of the bed trying to comfort her by patting her on her side and saying over and over again "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger," as though at age eleven she could actually be comforted by such a grown-up philosophical concept. The other was a clear memory of rolling over, at one point, and seeing that his eyes, just like hers, were filled with tears. After that, she had snuggled up against him and, finally, fallen asleep. A pillow was a poor

substitute for a kind father, but it was all she had, so she took it into her arms and hugged it as tightly as she could.

The next morning, like a sky washed clean by heavy overnight rains, she woke up with a clear head. She knew what she had to do. When the phone rang, she picked it up.

* * *

Even now, more than a year later, it still felt like a death in the family with no real closure. He had not understood about the age difference, the one thing Robert had been right about.

“Age is just a number,” he kept repeating over and over again, his voice cracking, obviously on the verge of tears.

“It is just a number, Trebor. But it’s an important number.”

“No. It’s just a number and you know it,” he said again, shaking his head. “It’s just a number. That’s all it is.”

She was determined not to bring up Robert unless he brought him up first. Had he asked her what had happened between them, she would have told him all that he wanted to know. But she would not let Robert remake her in his own image. She would not deliberately destroy Trebor’s fantasy. And in her heart she knew if he couldn’t see the truth, then he wouldn’t see it, until he was ready, even if she had it on video . So, they skirted around the issue, coming close enough to feel the heat without getting burned.

“Trebor, do you remember what you told me your dream was?” she had said in a soft, pleading voice. “You said you wanted to read books all day, and, when you read something that inspired you, you would get up and write something of your own.”

“I can write in Florida,” he said his voice suddenly turning curt, beginning to shut her out.

“You won’t write a word in Florida, Trebor. I know you won’t,” she said, hoping he could hear the love in her voice. “You will be corrupted by that lifestyle handed you on a silver platter. Stay here. Get a brainless little job, and give your dream a chance to live and breathe on its own.”

“Are you crazy? I can’t do that to my old man. He put me through school - paid my room, board, everything. He’s got it all arranged. He put his butt on the line for me. I can’t pull the rug out from under him like that.”

In the end all of her pleading did no good. His voice rang with the hurt and anger and defiance of a lover unjustly scorned.

* * *

At the restaurant, suppertime was the worst. Every time the door opened she expected to see him walk in carrying that little book of poems, like a hand written apology he had come to deliver. She had fantasized about the reunion dozens of

times. He would stand there with that irresistible, half-embarrassed, little-boy look on his face telling her that he was finally ready to hear what had happened that day, and he needed her to tell it to him, word for word. And to leave nothing out. But that day never came.

She was left with the occasional lookalike taking her breath away and making her heart beat right out of her chest. The worst had been last summer on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where she had gone for a day, just to get out of the city. She spotted him running along the water's edge, his body tanned and buff, flying a kite, of all things, and looking like a little kid, without a care in the world. She pulled over and jumped out of the car, and started running toward him. She was halfway there before she realized her mistake. But the image stuck. And now, whenever she saw him, even in her dreams, he was running along an emerald coast, expertly controlling his kite, with a wide-eyed look of unshakable innocence on his face.

Her shift ended, as it always had, at eight p.m. And in the summer, with daylight savings time in effect, she always walked out of the restaurant into a soft, lavender twilight. And every evening, without fail, as soon as she walked out the door, almost as though they were awaiting her arrival, the lights on the street and the neon signs above the little shops blinked on, as though they were trying to extend, for as long as possible, the most romantic - and fleeting - part of the day.

She always paused outside the door and inhaled the twilight, as though it were a magnificent flower garden she was about to enter. It was her favorite time of all, and she still loved walking into it.

The Fountain

Chris Castle

He walked through the corridor, the bag on his shoulder. The walls were bare, nails where pictures once sat. The man in front walked unsteadily, breathed deeply. He opened the door, held it open for him. He looked to the man's eyes, a brilliant shade of dying blue. They both turned and looked down to the woman in the bed and he gently pulled the bag off his shoulder.

He had taken the call the day before. A regular customer who had become a friend. Told him of his two friends, an illness, and a bad time and by the end of the story he had agreed on the house call, rescheduling appointments, making time. He stayed up, his imagination working overtime; thinking it all came back to that one word; time. She spoke clearly, quietly. Even now her smile was beautiful. He thought how that smile would have stopped anything in its prime. They spoke briefly and then he opened up his bag. He let the two of them talk as he pulled the drill, modified the equipment. Their voices were low and focused. It was lovers' language, spare, cut and precious. He took the colours, checked the needles, and prepared himself.

They positioned themselves in a loose triangle. She sat up on the pillow, on her side, holding her hand and I sat facing her, close to him. For a long while no-one spoke, the two of them looking to each other, their strong eyes smiling. The window was ajar and the breeze was strong, clearing the air, clearing debris, doubt. She cleared her throat and began to talk, her voice a little stronger with his hand on hers.

It began awkwardly. She would speak, and then corrected herself, trying to set the memories in a perfect place. He would wait, think it through, and then act. I sat, the drill low hum almost a microphone to his words. They talked, bickered almost, before settling on the memory. They looked over, nodded, confirmed and I began. I drew blood, marked it out, began. He twitched a little, a surge that moved more through him than her. He smiled weakly, hers stronger. It was quick and simple and after finishing neither of them asked to see the result.

I reset the equipment, as the two of them talked, continuous, steady, rhythm. The breezes eased a little and their voices became clearer. She was light, enjoying the words, while his was slower, deliberate, each word mattered. He looked directly at her, wanted her to know what it was he was trying to get across. He tapped the drill and looked up. He had grown paler with the tattoo, while she seemed aware, glowing with the memories, making her new.

They stuttered through a second, a third. Then, as he padded down the blood, she began to cough violently, rocking forwards and backwards. He held her as she turned pink, and then white, her skin, the tattoos expanding, and then contracting. He eased her back onto the pillow, took the hair from her face, and pushed it behind her ear. He left, returned with medication. She took the pills, accepted the needles, and slowly her eyes opened, steadied.

She began to talk, but this time it was different. Her voice was weaker, but her words flowed. She began to share everything, memories flooded and framed, hazy and real. The man understood this, shifting to the pattern of her words, making the sketches whole. He moved the drill over her, from wrist, elbow, palm, bicep. A day when snow and sun fell and shone a white umbrella, a shield and a parasol. A wine bottle broken, a field half cropped, a dirty suit of armour made of promises and jokes. Her eyes pulled and burned, igniting as he moved over her, brushing against her hip. a torn summer skirt, ice in favourite glasses, scars filled with colour, black lines thickened, thinned, the drill always moving, always gliding on her skin.

They broke for a short time for her to rest, for a drink. The man brought over a clutch of photos; they worked their way through them. They adjusted the window a little, and then began again. They talked again, but this time with more detail. Their first date and how late she was. The tear in his favourite shirt, the colour of the thread she used to sew it close. When they watched the sun fall as they drank the wine they stole from her rich uncles party. The colour of the sarong they used for a blanket when they slept by the sea. The small memories that make lovers lives together. The curve and scuff of the purse she'd always leave on restaurant tables that he would always scoop up and collect. The ticket stubs and the stuff in the box saved from each time they visited the city. Time together, time apart, breaking to pieces, pushing together.

It began to draw to a close. She grew drowsy, her eyes heavy. Gently he coaxed her into sleep, breaking down the wall of pillows, letting her fall to the bed. Her arm an exploded firework, with still running blood. He drew the sheet up, kissed her lightly on the forehead, and drew an eyelash from her cheek. He started to collect his tools, put the bag on his shoulder. He left the room, looked back briefly then stepped outside without saying goodbye.

He stepped out into the street. He felt the air, the cleanness of it, felt like morning. Sky was grey, not quite broken. He felt stiff now, raw. The bag began to throb on his shoulder, but it was ok. He started to walk into the city, ignoring the last club taxis, the first buses, wanting to feel his body stretch and breathe, falter then steady. He walked past unopened shops, looming tower blocks, sometimes he closed his eyes and saw sad blue eyes looking back. A woman's fading smile, an arm of colour, a fountain of blood and sketches. Something he would never forget. Time and memory. Then he walked on, the first slants of sunlight slipping through, signalling the break of the new day.

Gen H Psych

James Snyder

The moment she felt her consciousness seeping back inside her, she knew where she was. She didn't have to look. Or listen. No one had to come whisper in her ear. She could smell it that far out, returning. Something she learned near the very beginning, or at least after the first year or so: When you wake up, don't move so much as an eye muscle. Smell first. Quietly. That is, don't sniff. Don't dare flare a nostril they might see. Just let the odors come to you, as they always do. Establish your surroundings. Your boundaries. Then, if it passes the smell test, you can take a peek. So she lay there, motionless, and let it come inside her...those smells...the rancid, rotten-cabbage attempts at sterility...the blood-and-pus-soaked gauze...the metallic, needle-sharp tinge of stainless steel...the stagnant, stifling, incredibly compressed air of depression, threatening to crush and blow apart her skull all at once...and, of course, (at least according to some funny-at-the-time name-game she'd overheard somewhere) that noxious chemical war between Sergeant Shit and Private Piss and those two ranked and spiffy overachievers, Captain Clorox and Lieutenant Lysol. This was an easy one. Just another cashew clinic, she guessed. Another psych ward, was all.

And she opened her eyes.

In the beginning, it was the Quiet Room they kept her. Or, at least, their version. She knew that. Where she could be alone, away from the others, while they admired their latest freaky-deaky on display.

The Quiet Room.

But like those other rooms, she could still hear the yelling and screaming and the strange mix of voices beyond the walls, so she didn't think it was *that* quiet. But she didn't say anything. She didn't talk with them at all, in fact. She lay on the bed, or she sat in the chair they placed her, as they came and did what they always did.

Someone, one of the nurses, waved a hand before her face, and she blinked.

"Well, she's not catatonic," the nurse said.

Someone else said, "I guess she just doesn't want to talk with us."

She didn't. She knew who they were. And she knew they wouldn't do anything, except talk. But now she was through talking. Besides, she was so tired now, she didn't know what, except that she wanted to be alone. So she sat there, seeing them come and go, but not ever looking at them, their eyes, like they wanted, and never saying a word.

They called her Sleeping Beauty, trying to ingratiate themselves. Trying to make her smile.

As she stared somewhere out beyond them, at that faint red-pulsing light—fading away and returning—just above the steel-doored entrance.

After what seemed like a week, they removed the restraints and replaced the major dressing, binding her sutured wrists, with minor dressing. She was healing. She was getting better now.

Then he came and sat beside her. He had a clipboard and a bedside smile.

“I was wondering if we might have a conversation.”

Oh, you mean one different from those thousand-and-one previous conversations I’ve had?

He sat there, waiting.

OK then—where would you like me to begin? Perhaps, when I was six—that would be, let’s see, ten years ago—when my parents were burned to death in their old gray Toyota somewhere down on Highway 1? Or maybe the relatives the courts first placed me with that took turns probing and examining my so young, so previously unavailable body, until I just couldn’t help myself and ran away? On second thought, Doc, I don’t really feel like having another conversation right now. I really don’t.

“I think it would help if we talked.”

That’s not what she was thinking. What she was thinking was, she wished there was some way she could take all those soul-searching, so-called care-givers—every psychiatrist and psychologist and psychotherapist and counselor and social worker and know-better-than-thou government lawyer that had ever put her through their maddeningly invasive, mind-numbing routines—and make them actually *hear* themselves.

“Perhaps we can talk about what makes you happy. What things you have an interest. Why don’t we start there and see where it leads us, hmmm?”

They finally let her leave the Quiet Room.

She heard someone say, “Maybe if we let her mingle with the others, she’ll feel better.”

So they sat her on a chair in the hallway, where she could see the things going on around her. The odd parade, passing, which, after a day or so, she began to notice.

Co-ed, she saw. They were all mixed together—men, women, and her. She realized she was the youngest there, except for the boy, she knew, in another one of the quiet rooms. When the door to his room was open she could hear him screaming: “They’re coming inside me! Get them out of me! Get them out!”

It was a boy’s voice. But she never saw him.

One of the women reminded her of Agnes, from one of the women’s shelters she’d passed through, calling for her dead daughter, her Margie; except, this woman called for someone named Tom. “Tom? Tom?” she said in a quiet monotone, wandering back and forth before her along the hallway. “Tom? Tom?”

The woman was tall and hideously thin, with streaks of gray in her dark hair, and sores covering her arms and legs. She stared at her face once as she passed, and the woman looked like she might have once been very smart, very different. Like a doctor or lawyer or some other kind of professional woman. She still had that glimmer of fond intelligence in her eyes; and she stopped before her now and looked down at her. "Have you seen Tom?" she asked.

She shook her head.

"Tom fell out of a tree, like Humpty-Dumpty," a man said, passing. "He had a great fall."

"He fell off the *wall*, you moron," said another man going the other way. He was a tall, slender black man, wearing a sort of shiny green turban; and he winked and smiled at her as he went sashaying by, saying, "Queen LaSheen knows all."

She and the woman exchanged glances, when the woman turned and began to follow the man in the turban. "Tom? Tom?"

"Oh, Lord!" said the man, stopping and stamping his feet, his hands like honey-colored flames, flickering up on either side of his head. "Now she thinks *I'm* Tom." He turned to the woman. "Mrs. Leon, Tom is not in the building at the moment. My name is Rupert, not Tom, Rupert Bates; otherwise known as Queen LaSheen, in those more discriminating venues of entertainment, in parts of the city that shall remain anonymous at the moment."

The lady stood there, unmoving. "Tom?"

She watched him reach up with both his hands, gently embracing the woman's arms. He said softly, "Sweetheart, Tom is not here. Now it's time for *General Hospital* in the Day Room. Would you like to go watch *General Hospital* with me?"

The woman gave no reply, and he began to lead her toward the Day Room. Then he gave off a high-pitched squeal. "What kind of shit is this? We're all *in* General Hospital, Mrs. Leon." And he gave off another high shrill laugh, as they disappeared around the corner.

One day she saw a man grab a nurse's writing pen from her hands and stab her in the face. The nurse screamed and pushed him away, the pen still dangling from her cheek; and attendants came from everywhere, grabbing him, dragging him to the ground and holding him there. People were running away everywhere, screaming, hiding their heads and faces in their hands, in corners, wherever they could find. She sat there, watching everything happening around her, until someone was there, grabbing her arm. It was Rupert, now without his turban, but with a chic cinnamon-and-avocado-colored scarf wrapped tightly about his head. He escorted her into the Day Room, chastising her.

"You can't just sit there like Sad Sadie, little beauty. Around here, violence begets violence. It feeds on it. Some of these crazies see something, and it gives them ideas, and, of course, they always go for the weakest among us; the least able to defend

themselves, like you and me, for example.”

He found them seats in the corner where they watched everyone catching their breath and calming down. Rupert adjusted her hospital gown, which was open behind her. He retied the string around her neck, tucking everything neatly about her green pajama bottoms. Then he picked up a movie magazine and began flipping the pages, making occasional little gasps and squeals of disapproval. “Taste is certainly not a God-given right among the rich and famous. Just *look* at the cheese and boloney on *that* sandwich!”

He showed her the picture.

They sat there.

After awhile he leaned toward her and said in a confidential tone, “Little beauty, if you ever wish to talk to me about anything, I am, indeed, widely recognized as one of the world’s foremost listeners—so you go right ahead, any time, any topic you desire.”

They sat there, and finally she said, “Are you a dancer? I heard someone call you that.”

Rupert gasped, dropping the magazine in his lap. “She speaks.”

She lowered her head, and Rupert reached over, taking her hands in his. “Yes, little beauty, I am a dancer, of sorts; although I prefer the term female illusionist. That is, I seek, in the grand forum, to defy the very precepts of biology itself. To denaturalize all notions of gender and femininity. To ultimately destroy those accepted beliefs concerning not only the boundaries of sexual provocation, but the very essence of the species’ protoplasmic effect.” He stopped and sighed, as she continued only to sit there, staring at him. “Actually, I am most known for my strip and lip to J.Lo’s ‘Si Yo Se Acabo’ that borders on the more indiscriminate edges of egregiousness.”

She waited and said, “So why are you here?”

He again squeezed her hands and fell back in his chair, seemingly exhausted, picking up the movie magazine and fanning himself. “Better living through chemistry, sweetheart. I’m bipolar. That is, one moment I’m riding the manic wave of omnipotence—I truly believe I am capable of any feat I set my mind to, and, even more, people will admire and applaud the exhibition—and the next moment I have sunk to those depths of despair, I shall not even attempt to describe. Ironically, the mania is Queen LaSheen’s engine she uses to drive the entire reeking manifestation. But eventually the engine runs out of gas, or collapses in on itself, or whatever engines do, and I come here to Gen H Psych. You see, dear, I’m what’s known as a Frequent Flier; except, instead of points or miles or bags of peanuts, these good people give me Clozaril to shave the waves, and Prozac to fill in the valleys, and Zoloft to send me down that happy highway again.”

He sat there smiling, again flipping magazine pages. He glanced at her. “Now it’s your turn, little beauty. Tell LaSheen all, or at least wet her wick with a little gossip. Hopefully those tranquilizers I’ve seen them give you haven’t turned that pretty head into a soggy sponge, or robbed your identity, or maybe there’s some awful Jack

Nicholson-Nurse Ratched mind-fuck thing going on. Oh Lord!” Now Rupert leaned toward her again, taking up her hands again, a little urgently. “Tell me, baby. Can you remember and tell me anything that happened? I mean, how can someone like you—so beautiful and so young—end up at this place? Do you even remember?”

She looked into Rupert’s eyes and then away. What could she say? What could she possibly say that could be understood in any sense how it really was? The true nature of it. Of the way it was and would remain. Or would it change now? She wondered. Still, people liked hearing things. That’s how you passed the time, when there was nothing else you could—She looked back at him and sighed. “I was staying at this real shitty youth house in Brisbane, when someone tried to burn it down. One of the freaky guys staying there. So the firemen came, and the cops, and then Family Services; and they sort of doled everyone out around the city. The cops drove me down to some ratty-ass trailer park in South San, over near this chemical plant. It was raining, and I was soaking wet in my pajamas, and really cold, and they were having a party there—at the trailer. The lady was bitching I was getting her carpet wet and told me to go to bed. So I did. And some time during the night her husband—I guess he was her husband—got into bed with me. I tried to fight him and he hit me. So I lay there. Then, in the morning, after he was gone and she was in the kitchen having her coffee, I went into their bathroom, got one of their razor blades out of the medicine cabinet, sat down on the floor, and cut both my wrists. Then I woke up here.”

She stopped.

Rupert stared at her a long moment, before opening his magazine again, sighing now himself and resuming flipping pages with his taunt little jerks and snaps.

Meanwhile, she sat there, gazing about the room, until the aide came and told them it was the next mealtime.

Because they got along so well, the office let her move “upstairs,” to the seventh floor, the Gay Focus Unit, where they always placed him when he came to visit. She liked it there. There was a patio they could go sit in the sun, the breeze blowing her hair; and there were actual *birds* that flew into the trees, looking down at her with their little cocked heads, and airplanes high in the sky, going—she wondered where?

She got the impression most of them there, in the ward, were Frequent Fliers like Rupert. They all seemed to know each other very well, and she enjoyed sitting there, listening to them catch up with each other’s lives. Her two favorites, besides Rupert, were Victor, who told her he had been schizophrenic since childhood, and also had an obsessive-compulsive disorder he was trying desperately to manage, and Manuel, who was an autistic savant, and became severely depressed when he couldn’t figure out, as he put it, “solutions” to the problems that kept forming themselves inside his head.

And the first time she sat with them on the patio she observed the fingers of Manuel’s right hand flaying the air beside his head, as if he were tickling some invisible spot there. Then he raised his left hand, slightly lower, and those fingers began to flay

and flicker up and down, tickling the air, as well. First one hand, then the other, then the other again. It almost looked to her as if the two hands were talking to each other, back and forth.

“Enough with the damn *counting*, already!” Victor finally burst out, crumpling the newspaper, he was trying to read, into his lap.

“The damn counting!” Manuel repeated, equally frustrated. “Damn it, Victor, you almost had it.”

“Had what?” Victor said.

“Had what?” Manuel repeated again. “The solution. You almost had the solution, and then I stopped me.”

“Figure it out when you’re alone,” Victor told him. “I just want a little peace and quiet—is that too much to ask?” He crossed and re-crossed his legs three times and cleared his throat.

“Too much to ask,” Manuel said. “Then I have my fucking peace and quiet.”

“Thank you!”

“Thank you!”

Victor straightened out his newspaper and began to read again, when one of Manuel’s hands again offered a flicker of dissent, with three fingers rising and exhibiting a quick series snare-drum-like rolls; and Victor lowered his newspaper and glowered at him; and Manuel turned away, miffed and whispering, “I go to hell, Victor, and don’t ask you for rubbing my shoulders again.”

“I won’t.”

“I won’t.”

And Victor sighed, the calm resuming.

Another day they were sitting there, there was a trembling rumble and a movement, as if they were all sitting on a large floating raft on the ocean, rising up and settling back down. The trees swayed and the birds flushed from the limbs as if they’d been shot out.

She gripped her chair arm until the swaying stopped. She looked around the patio and saw staff members running haphazardly this way and that, while everyone else—the patients—seemed unaware anything had occurred. They were all sitting, reading, staring, faces with closed eyes pointed toward the placid sky.

Rupert looked up at her and said, “What’s the matter, dear?”

“Aren’t you afraid of them?”

“Afraid of what?”

“Earthquakes. Didn’t you *feel* that?”

“*Earthquakes!*” said Victor. “Sweetheart, I have *mind*-quakes doing triple-backwards somersaults off the fucking Richter scale. Earthquakes ain’t shit.” And then he crossed and re-crossed his legs three times and cleared his throat.

After a moment, she relaxed again. He was right, she thought. It *was* all relative,

wasn't it? Nothing was absolute in life. Nothing was finished. And because of that, sitting there in the sun, surrounded by her three new good friends, she suddenly felt a relevance about herself that was as overwhelming as it was fleeting. Because when you died, the life you had was the most irrelevant thing of all. Then, there was no relativity. And everything was absolute and finished. She had felt that—slumped and limp-armed—on that filthy bathroom floor, moving so close to scentless, sightless, silent death she almost reached out and touched it, if she could have only raised a finger.

Now, the calm returning, she leaned back and closed her eyes, feeling the sun on her face, listening to the twittering birds, the rustling leaves, the murmur of voices, and the drone of that distant unseen airplane going she knew not where.

Hold

Suvi Mahonen

Warmth, beginning, bubbling, rolling, advancing, exploding, diminishing, subsiding, retreating, gone. A harsh sound. I must not eat this to be more. Brittle deep thirst red salt and copper tang liquid lumps. Footsteps coming down the stairs. I get in the pantry but the fridge door will not shut. Something must be there but who can ever know? Focus. Light through narrow gaps grows wider now shifting they close. Don't resist the cost is high, must leave.

Sit propped up. Keep this pose. Arms cradling. Face tilted down. Looking at my son. Muscles ache with forced immobility. Almost there. Deep inhale, then exhale. Half inhale, hold your breath. Don't blink, let your eyes sting. Only my heart has motion now.

It begins: his skin colour is the first to change. Dull dusk of blue turning pale even a slight pink. The sloughed patches on his cheek and neck shrinking, re-epithelialising without scarring, now smooth. The weight of his body—no longer cool—transmits warmth through the blanket onto the length of my forearm. A sudden rise and fall of his tiny chest as he hiccups, and again, then draws in his first breath.

My own lungs start to feel the need.

His eyelids squinch shut as his head begins to move, this way then that in the bend of my elbow, knitted wool tickling my skin. I sense the warm puffs from his nostrils on my exposed flesh. Red lips purse into a small O, sounds of sucking as his cheeks hollow. A faint tack of tongue on palate. He suckles the air just short of my nipple. It stings in anticipation. Colostrum oozing, forming into a droplet, running in a rivulet down the underside of my breast. I yearn to lean forward. I cannot. If I move all will be lost.

Deep in my chest the pressure is building—an accumulation of carbon dioxide in my lungs. The need has grown into pain, the burn starting to overwhelm, my throat spasming in an effort to override the urge. Don't give in. Hold on. Keep concentrating on your son.

Mouth still searching, he begins to cry, face and neck flushed, rubicund with the effort. The vision of him is blurring, distorted by the watering of my unblinking eyes. His lips so close, almost on my nipple, just a fraction to the right. If I can hold on till he suckles then I know it will be okay. There's vigour of movement in his body as his tiny curled fist rises, wavers in the air.

Air, air, it's agony now. Bright white sparks of scattered stars curl crazily across my vision. The beat in my ears pounds. I silently scream—Timmy, take my breast, pull from it sustenance so that you can go on living. He is close but not there. Strength in my arms seeping, I am going to drop him soon. Eviscerating pain now endemic,

colours fade.

My head falls forward with the expulsion of air then a great inward gasp. Neck arched back, eyes closed—I cannot get enough. The euphoria of oxygen rushing into my lungs. When they have reached their capacity I blow out, pant in, out again. One more breath in, measured now. I stay like this, relief abating.

I can tell before I look.

The absence of movement—but of course more than that. The cool instead of heat, the dull weight of his body, head tilting at an impossible angle. And his face, oh his face, with those dusky blue lips and the angry red sores where death has started its decay. Between his partially open eyelashes I can see his irises and pupils.

They look back at me, unseeing.

There is pain, I know that much, what else lies here I choose to ignore. In this darkness I await the return of what is due to come. Let me go, I need to sleep, turn the light off as you leave.

I give up.

It's time for lunch, I must have slept in. If only they would keep quiet I wouldn't have to worry. Who let them into my bedroom anyway? Why can't they leave me alone? If they won't I will need to remind them of my rest.

Blood, so much blood, help me Gavin, what's happening?

Thick fatigue keeps rolling over me, pushing me under, so dense I can't rise.

Copious flow like a faucet, dark red pooling in a puddle between my thighs.

It's time to try. Will yourself. You know you have a finger on your arm.

He had rushed to the door and roared for help.

There is noise. I must be here. Concentrate. Move your knuckle just a tiny bit. That is all it needs.

An alarm bell sounded.

Wake up. I'll close the blinds myself. What's that smell? If I can only open my eyes I will see.

People ran into the room. Raised voices.

Nerve, muscle, tendon, bone, I can't get my finger to work.

She grabbed Timmy from out of my arms.

I break through this layer only to find another. It keeps on swamping me. I drift. All over the bed, splashes on the wall. Pain of Dr Russo's fist up my vagina, pushing down hard on my uterus with the other.

Stickiness of my eyelids. Some light now. She must have come back. Excuse me, Can you tell me where he is? Must speak louder. The expression on the midwife's face as she stood over me, squeezing a bag of fluid. Sound of metal on metal, fading away. Throat so sore, can't cough. Something's in it. Cannot move my lips.

Very hard. Try again later.

Pain, parch and itch in my throat as I lie here with my eyes closed. I swallow. It hurts. Footsteps, murmured voices, a short sharp laugh. I could ask someone for water but then I would have to face the next. The rolling wheels of a supermarket trolley. Why is it here? Several rhythmic whoosh tchs, whoosh tchs. An almost subaudible grating to my right.

Dr Russo had jabbed the long needle repeatedly into my abdomen, trying to get the bleeding to stop. In, out. In, out. I'd screamed, I remember that much. I'd screamed until my vision blurred. Then blank.

The back of my throat burns with each inhalation. Not that my throat is the only source of pain. My whole body feels like an atlas of discomfort, each place clamouring for relief. The space behind my eyes pulses, my left forearm and hand tingle, my neck is crinked, and within my lower belly there is a deep, stretched, wrung-out twisting.

Dry, so dry, I can no longer put it off.

'Water.'

No sound comes out. Gluey eyelids as I try to open them. Harsh neon light—too much—I let them shut again. Count backwards from ten. Move my head to the right. Slowly. Careful of the neck. Try again. A shape rises by my side.

Fingers and palm gently across my forehead.

'Fiona?'

Gavin's voice. I'm safe.

His body shades my eyes from the light. I blink several times to clear them. Vague forms begin to shift into focus.

I make an attempt to lift my head from the pillow. Dizziness hits me. Nausea worst than anything I'd ever experienced in pregnancy roils up through my chest. I swing to the left to hang my head over the bed's edge but a barrier of metal bars gets in the way. Too late. I retch. It seems to go on and on—an accumulation of spasm. Throat stinging, my belly aflame, a hand rubbing clockwise in the middle of my back. When the tide subsides I stay here, cool metal pressing into my forehead.

Opening my eyes I see Gavin's hand holding a blue kidney dish under my mouth. A small volume of green drool lies in its base. Something else appears in my visual path. Blue-trousered legs and a pair of flat leather shoes.

'This will help with the nausea,' a female voice says. I feel a tug on the back of my left hand. 'You need to be careful. We don't want the stitches to pop.' The legs and shoes go away.

I slump slowly back on the pillow. The motion sets the room rolling again so I shut my eyes against it.

Bad taste in my mouth.

'Water,' I say again, this time out loud.

I hear movement, a faint tinkling and the sound of water pouring. A moment later Gavin's hand is on the back of my neck as he helps my head up. I take a few sips from

the plastic cup, nursing the liquid down my throat in small swallows. When I have had enough I shake my head and rest back down again.

Something else has happened but I'm not sure what. Memories resurface. The late night drive to the hospital. My rising panic as the midwife kept repositioning the CTG probe over my belly, trying to find a trace. Dr Russo coming in, confirming the news with ultrasound. Not sleeping. The induction the next day. My fits of weeping as I pushed, giving birth to a child already dead. Holding Timmy. The bleeding. Now this.

This isn't the labour ward. The sounds of this place are different. No screams from adjacent rooms, or shouts of encouragement, no babies crying. Here mainly the monotonous workings of medical equipment—whirring, ticking, the occasional beep. I think it's a place to avoid if you could.

What *is* that grating? I open my eyes slightly, allow them to accustom, then look. A crimson bag hangs from an arm of a pole. Dripping blood into a burette. The thin red plastic line snakes down, hanging then rising up to lie taped to my right forearm, curling into a cannula on the back of my hand.

On the same side of the room Gavin stands against a windowless wall. He is wearing the same blue Levis and polo top but they are rumpled, not fresh. Stubble is on his neck, cheeks and chin. The room's neon light highlights the sprinkle of dandruff on his shoulders and the sagging grey folds of skin around his mouth and eyes. They are looking at me.

'Do you want some more water?'

I shake my head.

'If you're feeling hungry I could ask them for some juice.'

I shake my head again.

We look at each other.

He touches my right hand, avoiding the cannula as he does so.

'Get some more sleep if you need to. You're probably still feeling groggy.'

Turning my head I take in the surrounds. Three plaster walls and a tall curtain on runners. Two rows of fluorescent tubes in the white corklike ceiling above. In the corner opposite a sink and soap dispenser, behind Gavin a low-set chair. To my left is another IV pump, the fluid running in this line clear. Also on that side an LCD monitor on a swivel stand, numbers and multi-coloured lines continuously skimming across its black screen. Cords extend from the underside of the monitor towards me. Two thin blue ones connect to stickers on my chest, and a grey one loops across my bed to join a flat plastic peg on my left index finger.

There is a small gap between the curtain and the wall. Several metres away I can see a portion of a workstation and a nurses upper shoulder and ear. She has short black hair. Behind her there is another curtain.

At the foot of the bed is a broad white propped-up board on a stand. Although I know it's not, it reminds me of an easel. But what's in the room doesn't matter. Something has happened and I'm afraid.

‘What stitches?’

Gavin turns away, drags the chair closer, sits down. He grasps the railing on his side and tries to move it. It rattles but stays where it is.

‘My mistake,’ he says. ‘These ones use a lever.’

There is a clack as he lowers the rail with one hand. Then he reaches over to take mine in his.

‘Do you want to see Timmy again?’ he says. The whites of his eyes are crisscrossed with fine red lines.

‘Where is he?’

‘In the hospital’s mortuary.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t you remember?’

I nod.

He squeezes my hand.

I look up at the lights, the smooth long tubes of white fluorescent gas.

‘What stitches?’

‘Are you sore?’ he asks me. He is still not answering my question.

I close my eyes. I ache all over but the worst of it is concentrated over my lower belly. There it’s more than sore. It really, really burns.

Slowly, not wanting to pull on the IV line, I place my left arm under the sheet that covers me. I inch up the cotton gown until I reach the hem. I catch it and move it upwards, the tips of my fingers running over the skin of my thigh, over a rubber tube between my legs, and my pubic hair. Above this something big and crinkly has been stretched across my belly.

I open my eyes but I don’t want to look.

‘What happened?’ My voice is a whisper.

Gavin’s other hand comes up and rests on my knee. It’s as if he’s holding me down, trying to keep me still.

‘You had a massive postpartum haemorrhage.’ The tone of his voice has risen, is strained. ‘I was really scared. I felt so useless just standing there.’

I want to say something to comfort him. But my lips don’t move.

‘They had to do everything. That’s the sixteenth unit of blood you’ve been given. You lost so much you became coagulopathic.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It wouldn’t stop. You almost bled to death.’ His hand on mine is damp. ‘You’ve been in ICU for the past two days. They just extubated you this morning.’

That explains my throat. But not the stitches. I keep watching my husband’s eyes.

‘Dr Russo took you to theatre. He had no choice.’ The eyes drop. ‘He had to perform a hysterectomy.’

His gaze returns from his lap. His eyes are on my face but they avoid looking directly into mine.

I stare at the tiny pockmarks on the tip of his nose. Golf-balled surface. Cold inside, hairs rising, goose bumps over my arms and legs. What does it mean? What does it do? What does he want from me? Blur at the edge of my vision, the dryness in my mouth returns. I think they're coming to get me but I have nowhere to hide.

Gavin shifts in his chair, shoulders forward. Furrowed eyebrows, flaking skin. He says something else but I don't hear.

Ring the buzzer. Tell the midwife to bring Timmy back. It's dangerous in here, we have to get out.

Unhook me, pick me up, you need to take me away.

More lip movements from Gavin but he doesn't get up from his chair. I don't understand. Why is it up to me?

I adjust my body. Close my eyes. Settle my shoulder blades. Arms by my side. Prepare to be still. If I do it correctly things will change. Almost there.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Deep breath in.

Hold.

How Do You Want Me?

Tobi Cogswell

Juicy rings on every finger
porcelain, cloisonné
bright colors,
almost inorganic
but still,
the colors of silkworms
and butterflies.
Curls unbound. And perfume.

I will pose your foot just so,
your ankle.
Your neck bent, the light
stretched across it –
opalescent
the grace of Chinese lanterns

in the twilight.
Tilt your eyes down I place
a kiss on each eyelid -
one for shyness,
one for betrayal
you are still, an artist
poised before a brushstroke
a doe before the
hunter's arrow

Your hands, palm up and
quiet,
meaningful
asking all the questions
I dare not...

a woman laughs softly on
the balcony above
the ice cubes glisten and
crack
eyes focus at last light
you led me here,
my secret.

FIVE DEFINITIONS OF SLOW

Caitlin McGuire

1. moving or proceeding with little or less than usual speed or velocity

He takes her hand and lifts it – moving so slowly she’s barely cognizant that he’s moving her at all – up to his lips. She inclines her head, ready to kiss him, but he surprises her; kisses each knuckle on her right hand, rubs the tip of his nose along the sides of her fingers, and makes her heart jump into her throat and her stomach drop out of her body. She doesn’t know if she wants to pin him against his bed or cry.

“This is slow,” she says quietly. He laughs against her fingers.

“Not slow enough.”

2. taking or requiring a long time for growing, changing, or occurring; gradual

“So what’s the point of moving slowly? What guarantees do I have? If you’re going to go back home every weekend and hook up with random girls, what’s the point of moving slowly? What am I to you?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t let me go home every weekend.”

“That’s a bad answer.”

“Well, if we’re moving slowly, then eventually, in normal time, we’d be...”

“Yeah. So that’s the end of moving slowly?”

“Yeah.”

He kisses her again – kisses her with her idea of slow.

“How long do you think slow’s going to take,” she asks, breathless – again.

He laughs. “As long as slow takes.”

3. sluggish in nature, disposition or function

“I haven’t gotten out of bed all day.”

His text comes at one in the afternoon, and she goes over to take care of him. She slides under the blanket, and his arms wrap around her. When he kisses her neck from behind, she teases, “Not slow,” a little afraid that he’ll actually pay attention to her.

He begs immunity on the grounds of being sick.

“We should be sick together more often,” she smiles.

4. dull of perception or understanding

Her hands go under his shirt. She rubs along his hipbones, the lines of his stomach muscles, keeps moving upwards because touching him is so much better than anything in the world.

He grabs her wrists, and pulls them down against her sides like a butterfly pinned down to a mat. He groans. “I can’t think when you do that.”

“Maybe you should be incoherent more often.”

He smiles, but still, he says, “Not slow.”

5. burning or heating with little speed or intensity

He moves her hands again, but this time, he doesn't take himself away from her. He leads her downwards. She groans, because she wants him and she knows he wants her too, and because she finally gets to want him the way she wants to.

She's burning, no doubt, and he's heating up, but there is no such thing as slow. But he's the one in charge of the rules, and she didn't care about speed to begin with, so she doesn't say a word.

What My Dream Said

Grace Cavalieri

*Dream, a mighty witch, who
because of her size, is taken for an outing
by the best flyers...Francisco Goya*

A bluebird in every tree,	some stuffed, some sewn
Some real and one dizzying,	blue of the universe flying full
Forever with wings,	so much color
It must be Chinese New Year.	In high school Jan gave me
Three thin dimes	so thin they broke in half,
But they got me home	bluebirds, dimes,
This is Thank you	the purpose of happiness.

That, And Some Time To Listen
Grace Cavalieri

When the father bruised the child
To keep her from running away
The milk of the moon
Lit up her room
She'll need of course
Some time to listen
If I could tell her
Yes death in motion
Is not good
But at night the past
Will be a field
Following the moon where it will all sail
Away
Like thoughts
There is no preparation for that
The bridge from here is
Linking to the wrong place
Right now
Paths are nowhere to be found
Later
There is a passage through
The lotus blossom to the hill of sunsets
There is a stick
She will find under her pillow
I put it there
This will tell her direction
She will place it in the ground
Follow the sun's shadow when you awake
I'll be waiting
Head north
Movement is in your future.

Sally Dies

Grace Cavalieri

For Sally Trebbe June, 2008

There goes my past again the mind worn as thin as this summer dress
There goes Sally like the rain against the wall slighter now leaving
So we'd have something to celebrate together days so sweet like
Sunny cupcakes being young I mean I will make a mistake saying this
But I was talking about pressing 5 children into a car to go to the bad
Section to buy fabrics under a lemony sky before it turned grey
This is so ordinary forgive me the Japanese dinners we cooked
And babies vomited forgive me I cannot seem to do better
Being with her the whole of it I realize in poetry we cannot
Say we were young but the arms our arms held so much that moved
(The tail of the bird just went by) outside now (a tangle of trees)
I was talking about these hands our hands that made so much of color
And food these hands the same ones mine reach into a temple of
Words to pull out some breath of someone once condensed now
The breath of words well that makes it harder telling how we became
Women in soft wool suits and high heels and umbrellas rushing in
Restaurants in Washington a lawyer and a producer extravagantly
Available shamelessly big with love for each other when it could
Have been otherwise I will make a mistake saying this but there goes
Sally with her laugh and that makes it all the harder to remind you
When the day sheds itself of Sally and her box of paints and flowers
Let it not be forgotten there is someone left one of us is always left .

Owning The Not So Distant World

Grace Cavalieri

The stars come down to free creation from its bondage.
The sun bathes in water

or is it the memory of a sky
as evening, illuminated by our eyes,

illuminated by the evening?
Close them then

to see a little better.
Comfort is not the outside world.

Dependent on that
we rely on

the tricks of the mind coming home,
attributing falseness to beauty,

thinking it will vanish,
when it has always just arrived.

An inner sight
is meant to keep us safe, saying our

names as if we were someone the world loved.

Home

Grace Cavalieri

Where will I spend the night, my parents have moved, I have no address, I could go to the city and walk around, maybe my sister's place, she'd let me stay one night, till the buses start up, but where do they go, not down that tree shaded lane this late at night, even I know better, my own condo was around here someplace and I still have the key, but who is that family inside setting up housekeeping, I can stay in a rooming house until morning, then I can go to work, I could go to San Diego for a meeting but 6 hours? by the time I get there, it'd be morning, time to come back and after all I have no clean clothes to wear, perhaps if I could ride in the car with my father I'd ask please could I have his phone number just in case I need it in the middle of the night, and why - why was he keeping my mother from me, because I just need a place to go till morning, the Boarding House lady is dirty and needs to blow her nose, but she'll get madder if I say so, and oh well it's just one night, but why is she so mean, I've got the cash, and why is it that in this dream is when I am the most at home.

Leaving

Grace Cavalieri

Amazing that this blouse matches my skirt even though from different outfits but I have a pocketful of bills and I'm getting to the airport, it's true I have nothing to read, there's a world full of books, but the free ones are at the airport, and too big to carry, if I fell in the reflection pool, nobody would notice, if I rolled down a hill of stones on Rock Cliff Drive, I'd stay there till I was tired of rocks, when running away the bus may not go near the airport, the person you meet on the bus may have a phone number but she is blonde and raunchy enough to have some kind of husband who wouldn't take a call in the middle of the night, the bus moves to the airport, but I think it's always better to catch a cab to the airport. I've got money enough. I can get there from here.

Forgiving Geography

Grace Cavalieri

*We never know where you are
when you go away to teach.*

Joe and Sean, the grandsons,
are watching me.

I'm packing up.

Joe asks if we dream of them when they

dream of us, when we're in Italy.

Sean says, *Of course they do.*

He's the certain one.

The window has grown smaller
each year.

Once the seven-year-olds
were ours all day.

Now they watch us leave.

Joe asks where people
go when they die.

I explain body and soul.

I try to make it sound good.

Sean says he'd like to go to
Philadelphia when he dies.

I call a friend, and talk about

the final confirmation

from the inevitable silence, and what
they'll do without us. She answers,

"They'll be fine. They'll finally know
where you are -- in Nevada."

Following The Run

Grace Cavalieri

And so it continues like a book open with words escaping each page turning, here and there a bend, leaving the earth.

The river endures beyond what I write with my finger in the soil,
so yellow it's brown.

The first person on earth could have looked and thought,
this water is life itself.

But we now think it unfolds more like death, blue and grey streams,
beyond what can be seen.

And we also think, like life and death, we wouldn't have missed it for the world.

CONTRIBUTORS

Gina Ferrara lives in New Orleans. Her poems have been published in numerous journals and anthologies including *Poetry Ireland*, *Callaloo*, and *The Coe Review*. In 2006, her chapbook, *The Size of Sparrows*, was published by Finishing Line Press. Her most recent collection of poems, *Ethereal Avalanche*, was published by Trembling Pillow Press in October 2009. She has work forthcoming in *Big Bridge*.

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Natasha Cabot is a Vancouver, BC-based Canadian writer who is currently working on a collection of short stories. She has a BA in English literature and enjoys discovering the works of new authors and rediscovering the classics. Her literary inspirations include Charles Bukowski, Kurt Vonnegut, Ernest Hemingway, and Margaret Atwood.

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Barry W North is a sixty-four year old recently retired refrigeration mechanic. He worked in that capacity for the local school system for twenty-eight years. Now that the need to make a living is out of the way, he plans to concentrate of his real passion, which is writing.

Since his retirement in 2007, his poetry has appeared in, or is scheduled to appear in, numerous journals including *Art Times*, *The Iconoclast*, *Chiron Review*, *Louisiana Review*, *Edgz*, *Willard & Maple*, and many others.

Chris Castle is English but currently teaches in Greece. He has sent his work out over the summer and has so far been accepted 40 odd times in a number of journals. He can be reached at chriscastle76@hotmail.com

James Snyder was born in Memphis, Tennessee, grew up in Napa Valley and Germany, and currently lives in Dallas, Texas, where he is an executive for an unnamed corporation, and has recently completed a generational novel partially set in that varied countryside. He has previously been published in one of the Houghton Mifflin New Black Mask story collections. *Gen H Psych* is his second published work of fiction

Suvi Mahonen is studying for her Masters in Writing and Literature at Deakin University in Australia. A number of her short stories have appeared in literary magazines in Australia, the UK (including on *East of the Web*' online) and the United States, and she has worked as a journalist both in Australia and Canada. Last year a story she wrote won the Tertiary Student Category of the Bauhinia Literary Awards, and this year another of her stories won the Open Section of the Laura Literary Awards. She lives in the Dandenong Ranges east of Melbourne with her husband/best friend/writing buddy Luke Waldrip, and a family of magpies who sing for their bread. Some of her other work can be found at <http://www.redbubble.com/people/suvmahonen>
Suvi means "summer" in Finnish.

Tobi Cogswell is a co-recipient of the first annual Lois and Marine Robert Warden Poetry Award from Bellowing Ark (2008). Her work can be read in *SPOT Lit(erary) Mag(azine)*, *Penumbra*, *Newport Review*, *Forge Journal* and *Spoon River Poetry Review* among others, and is coming in *KNOCK Journal*, *Transcurrent*, *Sugar House Review* and *Illya's Honey*. She has three chapbooks and her book *Poste Restante* is forthcoming from Bellowing Ark Press. She is the co-editor of *San Pedro River Review* (www.sprreview.com).

Caitlin McGuire is a student attending UC Berkeley. She writes short stories because they fit her five-foot frame. A Managing Editor at the *Berkeley Fiction Review*, she has been published in *Foliate Oak*, the Cal Literary Arts Magazine and *Halfway Down the Stairs*.

Grace Cavalieri is the author of several books of poetry and produced plays; she founded and still produces/hosts public radio's "The Poet and the Poem," now in its 33rd year, now from the Library of Congress. Her new book is *Anna Nicole: Poems* (Goss183:: Casa Menendez, 2008.) She is book review editor for *The Montserrat Review* and a poetry columnist for MiPORadio. Her play in progress, on *Anna Nicole*, received its premiere DC reading at The Writer's Center in 2009.

