

guy beining

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GAK: *Preacher Jack*

RICH LIVES

THIS GUY HARVEY'S DELUSIONS

Life has arrived at the wrecking yard with a chipped tooth. Yes, a broken car is a sad thing, but a broken man can fix it.

The man in the black raincoat licks her leg. It continues to shine.

Blue like a swollen thigh. Blue like a blood red window.

And this red is not a color but a method of transportation, like a canoe. You turn it over in the sand to find evidence of where it's been. After a while grass grows.

Then it is time to get angry, flash a little moolah, discover a new world.

From here to there is always farther than from there to here.

After a while grass grows.

««—»»

I understood the lush story would not have me in it, but I wanted the oh-so suggestive strawberries to ripen quickly. I wanted an icepick for the offending eye, to open more drastically my dark jacket like a sullen goat.

O the song says hush and the cow dies of jaundice O instead of you there are several others.

“I wasn’t the only one hunting,” I told that commie faggot before I bought him a drink to celebrate his gentle erotic interference.

O the song says shush and the cancer speaks like wildfire O instead of him it belongs to you now.

CONTINUED

There at the bar we all spoke i-n-c-r-e-d-i-b-l-y s-l-o-w-l-y, like a herd of potatoes learning to speak in unison.

O the song says moo and the dead cow cries for your mother O piggeldy poggeldy steal all the brandy for the blackbird pie.

Yes, the birds began to sing.

During the aural invasion already in progress, which made it difficult to ascertain which song was actually singing

««—»»

And then I went down to the bottom of the well and you still weren't there. The angry cause dripped from my chest. I was living a life so meticulous it was separating rain from more rain.

There was my first family lurking in the relevant shadows.

It was a nervous sort of roundness. Fading-into-the-shadows has always been my family's chosen form of hysteria.

Like a dog on the far side of the sunken little lake jerking in that motion of barking. But no sound arrives.

««—»»

I bring you a book because I do not know the proper way to deliver a stone.

Using words like nails, I try to restrain a tiny apocalypse in the raindrop clinging to my knee. A ragged pile of abandoned guttural chants bleeds slowly into the tracks of the dusty wooden shopping carts the farmer's wives are pushing up and down the not-so-metaphorical aisles of corn.

Once again, it's raining. It seems that you haven't read enough into this offering.

««—»»

Go away until the nothing happens again.

As in, "I wish to darken you."

Yes and yes and yes again and then lights failing in the window.

As if the lost man were simply a physical object with a hole in it.

««—»»

My friend, the disturbance, discovered you weeping and did not offer his cloak. I didn't ask him to.

The future had passed, flailing away like an "ever after." I put some words in like stones and then a greater absence of stones.

The moon splintered the foot of the blossoming apricot. Ghost willows fingered the failing horizon.

White wet dust between your shriveled toes like a fungus, leg after leg lifting from the earth's release. Each new season shouldering heavier burdens, eating away at the strength of your false convictions. Oh oh but the unknowing beauty of your failing. Sweeten that which you drop from your limbs that it might suggest in its own life who you once were.

««—»»

Like the last bird in the borderless darkness before you understood the light was coming. The wings of muscles dancing before the fire of work.

A kind of outer skin. A creature that is not from the moon. A creature that is the moon.

It's your daughter that wants you to live this way.

The daughter you never had.

««—»»

I must protest the hidden acceptance. I must carry the clouds to their new home inside the cranium of the lunar opposition. Mating aside, there's room for an army.

I've given you all my sand. Can't you readjust?

Welcome tomorrow, Jack, a wheel without a finger lozenge.

The beach is already longer than yesterday.

As in to "tide" one over. As in "to put one on." As in to change one's position in relation to another's changing position.

Placent with alternative commitments.

CONTINUED

The gift one fails to return.
An altogether orchestral delinquency.
The storm still lit with it. The weather wagging its tired tongue.

««—»»

And as the story darkens, the shoe barks to repeat the dog. Simply a way of living. A broken leg like a cracked catapult clouding the window with distorted loot, the whole thing sufficiently intellectualized to pass for play, a barbeque limping in the twilight.

You aren't here, it says. You aren't here yet.

What I meant is not what I meant to say.

O train, O clock, O shoe of reluctance, issued from a motherhood so padlocked the child could have burst.

I happened because you were there. I am your I then you and gone.

I'm not a metaphor. I just speak with my words closed.

You don't have to fall in to be part of the conversation.

««—»»

Guttering candlelight looks for a door, an abeyance instigating deserts.

One book resplendently shelved below the counter with a voice like a shovel. Cold birds singing like toasters. A stone at anchor.

Rain inside.

So I camp under the bones in my wind cave. Slapping a dead centipede of appearances against this man I thought I was, whispering across the swamp of seems, I enter the house my name built.

Red shoes and a lamp in the pear tree, citizens descending. The limbs are silent and because of that, you can hear the dreams in them.

A song couldn't do that, a life could.

Knocked on his head like a door.

Entered.

««—»»

Stabs himself in the head, beats the shit out of himself, inserts a cemetery. Tries to come back.

Back to a misunderstood confectionery poem, a little chewy in the center like a cluster of nuns sunbathing.

Which isn't here. Not at all. Brightly so.

Paul Klee tripping over his mother's madras tie. That's here. And a photograph of childish innocence on a fat-tired bicycle. And the elbows of Klee's childhood popping out of threadbare sleeves like malnourished kittens. And the kittens later. Nourished.

No nuns. No sun. Lots of bathing.

And no mustache fallen off like a priest riding the wrong bicycle. If the handlebars start to bleed, I'll need assistance.

And here's this psychologist with a nervous tick, see, and the joke's bigger than she is. She's going to marry the gimp gas jockey at the Texaco. The one with the wrong mustache.

Frequently, she's out of season.

Oh wet, the wonder of willingly, the next warden wandering wanly, a wimple of wit wagging. Could a been me, could a been the other guy. Could a been the other guy meing.

In this way worry diets me. Mouth mooning.

Perhaps I've forgotten what I'm offering. The bag of me I gave you torn, a night school of insects opening. Shall I spill another layer of false bemusement over the tapestry of the poker playing dogs? The most miserables. Right now that's its "is."

««—»»

And the world outside remained clumsy and strong. Sooner or later you have to let it in.

Words so polite they hurt.

Like a man whose wounds invented the weapons that made them.

««—»»

The next few weeks always behave oddly. The taste of fear at the back of your throat like the spit valve of an old tuba.

The actors continue losing the same voices. In the first row, kitchen appliances. And the music doesn't melt.

The glassblower sneezes. Several poorly portrayed dandies catch their skirts on the turnstile. One lone raven hops over an unidentifiable corpse. The music doesn't melt.

Jowls aflutter, the play welcomes night's waning childhood, the wilderness of its affection.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Betty*

MARCUS E. DARNELL

ROOM WITH BLUE LIGHT

Blue drapes. Blue tablecloth.
Four blue velvet chairs.
No light bulb here.
The walls shine blue.
The walls are the sky.
Blue rose in blue vase,
drowning in promising, blue space.

Cornhusk blue baby in crib.
He rocks himself.
His hands reach to the roses.
He reaps the blue.

The walls turn off.
Long long black.
The walls turn on.

Boy blue with blue bike
rides in circles,
runs over the crib
full of splintered toys.
They crunch, he laughs.
He throws blue ball
at vase which breaks.
Blue water bleeds out.
He stops laughing,
apologizes to the roses,
begs forgiveness from the walls.

CONTINUED

The walls turn off.
Long long black.
The walls turn on.

Blue man at table,
eating black and blue pills.
They alleviate his blues
with black-outs —
long long blacks.

He writes of them
with iron blue ink.
His words are unrefined,
the vomit of a blue brain
fatalistically strayed.
He has paddled his years
on one short, anxious wavelength.

He worries over the remnants
of rotten roses,
should he have named them
like loved things,
over the direction
of the chair velvet hairs,
was it the right direction
all of these colorful years?

Blue man reaches to walls,
remembers they are sky —
he had forgotten.
He wants to shrink in the crib,
reach for roses,
the crib heap
now burned and leveled.
He hides his face
in the sad sex of the drapes.

The walls turn off.
Flash of black.
The sky comes back.

Blue residue of a man
in handsome blue box,
very handsome box,
stink smoothed by new blue roses,
box pressed against the sky,
offered to the sky,
swallowed in soil and colorless rain.

The walls turn off.

MARCUS E. DARNELL

ROOM WITH YELLOW LIGHT

The grandmother sits at the table,
staring down two sunny-side-up eggs.
The light bulb is more yellow than the eggs
which would have made for anemic, lazy chicks.
The calendar of kittens falls
when grandfather slams the kitchen door,
smelling warm ham and those special eggs.
He cannot conceive of the kitchen
as any other pigmentation—
he was born in this yellow.
Life, unquestionably, is yellow.
She reattaches the kittens
to the same loose tack hole in the wall.
He positions himself at the table—
it's his turn to gaze at the eggs.
They are eight days rotten,
but the dwellers have grown to the stink.
She hasn't thought why they are uneaten.
He has—they are frog eyes.
He doesn't eat amphibian eyes.

A picture of their grandchildren is taped
in an oval, cardboard frame on the fridge.
They have never seen their grandchildren.
The picture is simply the Egg
with Filthy, Screaming Faces.
She sets a ham sandwich on the table for him.
He tastes the yellow light, shudders,
puckers his lips, eats his sandwich.
The kittens flit to the floor again.
The baby bulb is too hot to hold now.
Some day she will hold it, warm and burned out.
For now she reattaches the kittens.

MARCUS E. DARNELL

ROOM WITH RED LIGHT

The room has five corners.
He is tied, blindfolded
on the floor in the center.
How can he know there are five corners
just by smelling them?
How does he know there are four dogs
just by hearing them?
The fifth corner smells
like a sore without a scab—
no dog there.

They come twice a day
to take a cup of blood from his ankle.
There is rubbing, sloshing,
spilling, arguing,
oh so quietly though.
The door closes wetly.

He is aware of the red light's warmth
but not its color,
which puts the scab dog in each corner
to sleep, but only a few hours.
They awaken to hump each other.
He knows somewhere, maybe outside,
is the fifth dog
who gave up finding the fifth corner,
though his nose told him otherwise.

The walls sport paintings
of people on their knees
begging to be spared from knives.

CONTINUED

A bee is loose in the room.
The dogs snap at it.
It touches his ankle,
circles his head,
circles the red bulb.
It asks the bulb something.
The bulb says yes, laughs.
The dogs laugh, dream.
He dreams he is in a portrait,
tied and blindfolded on the floor.
The frame is red with five sides,
though not a perfect pentagon.

He wakes up
to the phlebotomy at his ankle—
a vampire has come alone this time
but still whispers.
The captive asks why the whispers.
“Because the light is red, serious red,
and must not be disturbed, of course.
You never ask why the blood.
You are a very good boy,”
removing the handcuffs and blindfold.

He stares at the bulb.
It’s an intimidating ruby
with potential Medusa qualities
and way too much authority.
He sees that it is he himself
drawing blood, from his own paw.
He is the fifth dog.

MARINA RUBIN

THE NEST

we were 20 and almost not virgins on New Year's Eve of '98. that year we learned to open doors with our long legs, sashay into a room until there were no rooms without men excited to pay our tuition or drive us to Angelica. we welcomed the new year at a nightclub but by 2am we were so bored a friend who plays the accordion invited us to a splendid soiree in Brooklyn. the mansion in Brooklyn had chippendale chairs, persian rugs, and dozens, dozens of men of such vigor and maleness we had to gasp. there were some women but they were either nieces or aunts, 60 or 12. we sat on the davenport and struck nonchalant poses of seduction, hours passed without anyone taking notice. Infuriated, we turned to our accordion friend -what is going on here? -girls, don't you get it, we are right in the nest of russian homosexuality. we just sat there gasping, 20, almost not virgins



Connie Chiera: *Untitled*

MARINA RUBIN

KOPAL'S TOWEL

my friend Mouse and her lover Kopal, a downtown performance artist barged in on me one night and asked to use my bedroom. I slept on the couch oblivious to their synchronized enthusiastic moaning. after they left I took a shower but could not find my bath towel. I asked Mouse if she had taken it by chance, she said no but maybe Kopal. I followed up with her a week later, she said they broke up, something about his \$300 Diesel underwear and she refused to call about my stupid towel because she had her pride. in the fall I ran into Kopal at CBGB, asked him point-blank Kopal, did you take my towel? he denied it, said it was ludicrous to even suggest it. in the spring I saw him roller-blading in central park, I chased after him Kopal, you bastard, I know you stole my towel, what kind of man fucks in a stranger's house then steals a stranger's towel? by wintertime I wore him down, he confessed, said he can give me a brand new towel he just stole from someone else with *viagra* written across it



Guy R. Beining: *Exposing Half a Shade of Light*

GLENN SHELDON

SAYING GOODBYE THE SECOND TIME

Lost in the noise of a world
worn with nooses around
necks and around hard-ons.

There are only the flickers
of an old hotel's novena candles
between our honeyed skulls.

Noise of our lives crawl
back toward our bed; years thick
as frayed Mexican blankets.

Even Buddha, in his corner,
is horny amidst such closure.

For old time's sorry sake
I polish the glassy flesh
of your thighs, as the abalone
moon sits on its black plate.

Is your death tomorrow, or
tomorrow's tomorrow, someone's
joke? As if a Trickster said,

"You got made in your bed,
now you die in it?"



Lawrence Applebaum: *Laura*

PETER LAYTON

BOUND

The wheat moon sags.
It is not in the sky anymore.
And you're not, I
sit down among the grass blades,
licorice whips beneath a sun.

Someday the earth will all be flames.
The Triassic.
The Jurassic.
You.
In your distant away.

I think it must be immensely hard
to know everything.
Yet you need to wait
in the universe's click time,
for all the stock still, to end.

CATHERINE SASANOV

F O B

Springfield, Missouri, 1906

If we call it *relic*
without paperwork,
provenance,

what miracle can we expect?

Black man's knuckle
chained to the hours
in a white man's pocket.

Lost dog, howling on its leash.

How much of that man
can we piece together?

Molars in a grocer's window.
Finger rotting in a jacket pocket.
Charred flesh. A quarter's worth
of bone.

Where is the noose, his attribute?

Tarot card.
Holy card.
Hanged man left

among strangers in a family tree.

Be it backwoods,
city— Nothing says *death*

like the name of a white girl—

Eyes fingering bone
till the mind can build a man around it,

(generic flesh)

earth,

the bottom of his feet.

CATHERINE SASANOV

THE BOOK

1896 Gottfried Tower, with Statue of Liberty and electric illumination is erected and stands until 1908.

from *The History of Springfield Public Square*
Now Park Central Square 1835-1970

It lies open on the ground, gathering dirt.
The bronzed baby slipper of a story.
Its cover soldered down so no one can close it.
Two pages fused back so no one can turn them.
There's no wind strong enough to offer up other chapters.
No thief brawny enough to steal it away.
Laid out in the sun, it blisters your fingers.
Born out of fire, no flame can burn it.
Not a rain in this world knows how to rust it.
In the big metal book where town history's written

there's a stagecoach, a war,
Wild Bill Hickcock,
a well dug for public use, electric
illumination,
three courthouses, one duel,
Confederates mourning with Yankees.

But there's nothing about a crowd
thickened to thousands, the three men
they hung, the burning
of bodies, the mother shoveling her son
into a coffin, the terrified
fleeing
all over town. There's nothing

of the summers' worth
of musicians
scouring blood,
how finally their music's dismantled
then the tower itself:
bandstand and railings,
rope-burn and char—

*As if absence could cut down
a town's nigger ghosts.*

Horace Duncan, Fred Coker, William Allen
lynched Holy Saturday, April 14, 1906
Springfield, Missouri

CATHERINE SASANOV

EN LA CALLE, LA PUERTA
FALSA DE LA MERCED/
ON THE THE STREET, FALSE
DOOR OF MERCY

(Mexico City, 2005)

I wander this city
all afternoon, wind tenderly

feeding me dirt.

I've learned to make due
with a heart all husk, its
broken piñata
dangling off my rib.

Obviously, the party's over.

In church, where the night's
perpetual, misshapen,
candles force

small dents in its dark:

little flames left to sink
in the belly of their fuel,

little flames made to dig
their own graves.

Once, I was partial
to problems
a seven-day candle could solve.

But big raw-boned Death—
Why not crack me open?

This gringa's a box
of Cracker Jack—

so sweet,
so American,
so messed up.

Her soul, all toy
surprise inside.

DAVID CHORLTON

BORDER SKY

The sky above the border changes
by the hour
from the first red streaks
raised by the mourning dove's notes
that pass undocumented
from behind a mountain
to patches of cloud
whispering quiet
as the coyote's steps
as he slips from the grip of first light
into a gap as slim
as his shadow. When the centipede
climbs the dry web
that survives an ocotillo
its segments fill with sunlight
and thirty of its legs
turn into flames. From their overnight roost
come the vultures
to climb invisible columns
and hang all day on the hope
of a carcass
while the blue behind them
becomes bluer. Each needle on saguaro
stems shines like the tip
of a scorpion's tail
when it curls to point the way
along illegal paths
on the way to a noon
that stills hearts.
Swallowtails open and close
their wings like the pages

of a book in which the record
is kept of how colours change
with the onset of thunder
in secret caverns
before a sheet of molten darkness
rolls over the peaks
and the heat clears its throat
to open the border
to all who would pass
by the grace of the rain
that sweeps between countries
and blackens the seam
wound between them.

DAVID CHORLTON

FER-DE-LANCE

Beware the fer-de-lance when the forest draws you in.

It might be coiled
around a shaft of sunlight

where it falls

onto the mud you follow through shadows
that drift against your face.

Step carefully

where the path flows underneath a stream whose water
shatters on a stone.

Look ahead as you peel

away layers of sound to discern the call that pulls
you to its source. You could be inches

from a trap

about to spring

but the lush

warm leaves steaming around you sparkle with sounds
and not even droning thunder

turns you back. Above your shoulder
on a bough dripping moss

a sudden movement

stops your breath. You look, you look
and keep looking, but nothing

appears. And you realize it's always what you can't see
that bends its spine and stirs a little

as it considers whether
or not to strike.

DAVID CHORLTON

DREAM ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

I'm in Scottsdale, expecting the bus to Phoenix but instead the Orient Express draws to a drawn-out, metal-grinding halt at the stop. The woman who was waiting with me, she with whom I had exchanged no more than a cursory greeting, flashes me a smile with a sting as she climbs up to the carriage, then looks along the corridor while I follow. *Which compartment should we take?* she asks. *This one's empty,* I reply. She loops her arm into mine and whispers that she is a spy and the mission is dangerous.

When she takes off her beret I see that she's blonde with short, spiky hair. The train is gaining speed. It is dark outside as if the sun had set at noon, but the woman's breathing has extinguished all sense of time. *My name is,* and she pronounces it slowly in her foreign accent. When she removes her coat the close fitting outfit beneath it shows her figure to be trim as I had imagined it. Whenever the train passes through a station and lights flash for seconds across our faces we look intently into each other's eyes. *Don't you like it when darkness makes you invisible?* she says, combing back my hair with her fingers. *But it won't be dark enough where we're going.* She whispers a humble prayer. Her hands are remodeling me. *Nobody in the world knows where we are,* she says, *I'm nervous and we'll be in Budapest soon.*



Guy R. Beining: *Private Crash*

DAN RAPHAEL

WALLS OF CRUMBLING SMOKE

i can only look so long, turn around so fast,
my timing must be impeccable, anticipation of impact,
my bones are pure reflex, my eyes surround me
 like protective flies
eavesdropping with x-ray vision coz the walls
have crumbled behind the paint,
the sheet rock evaporates in tomorrows unsalted ocean
falling from the sky ready to borrow the rain within me—
its been two days since I drank
and still I sweat, though its february, though im 31 per cent
out of focus, ample light but insufficient clarity

for the brain has its own anatomy, what the mind can digest, from
pulses of light to remembered images, a face branded
with the brains home brew; a flexible skeleton allows the brain to
plunge from calculus
 to celebrity gossip,
to swoop from ecstasy to despair in a quick burn
of non-linear stimulus

i practice a single action until it is meaningless, until i do it
 for random reasons,
like making the letter G with my thumb and pointer, engaging
 the wrist like an injured hinge—
times the door barely moves, times a slight touch will threaten
 the wall behind
like living with a moody reflection that wants to make the first move
 then smolders when I don't echo. when I stomp the carpet a

CONTINUED

fountain-splash of smoke arises,
as the floor remembers a fire I forgot, as my foot wants the ground
to roll beneath it,
tentacles reaching and retreating like syncopated oarsmen

i am several dark figures walking out of an artificial mist
on a street inside a warehouse
in some neutral zone between industry and decay, decades
of evolution reversing only on the inside—
going and coming back are never the same speed, momentum can be
stalled for months,

the winter so cold I wait a whole year to emerge.
this months electricity cost me 4 hours and twenty minutes,
plus the 3 espressos before every half hour of pedaling into the grid,
and when you pedal you talk, letting pieces of clothing slip open
for visual diagnostics:

five vacant lots in my chest cavity alone, the ribs in the sky
we only see when they blush across the spectrum,
a rainbow spraying from my wrists arterial,
a minor quake causing several pier fisherman to lose their balance
means the earth is hungry, has remembered its internal politics,
visualizing what it wants the satellites to record,

as if i could make my skin change color or ripple like islands
of partial identity,
names i assumed were mine, stories no one could challenge
giving me somewhere to live with a trained mirror
and mind-surrounding videos
as the outside world is all illusion while my inner based on physics
shakespeare stole from the mediterranean,

when we knew we were scraps from gods table,
when mind-time had so much more topography,
not smoothed by instant knowledge, commercial mantras,
a box i can call my own.
for all the tin man, scarecrow and lion needed were satellite dishes,

bridging and blurring the gap between kansas and oz,
between my old home town and who its become,
between the oregon of my mind and the starving erosion where forests were,
the gap between the house I live in and how little I share with it,
how much of me never takes form.

JOHN MCKERNAN

THE CORPSE LIES DOWN IN HIS COFFIN

He is listening to his implanted cell phone. Its constant silence

He is listening to the texture of pine wood shadow How it differs
from pine bough shade

He is listening to his weight on the earth How the colors
of his clothing have different weights Especially red

He is listening to the words ready forever to be spoken
by his tongue Which is now a foreign language

He is listening to the water in the trees Flowing up the
white wood Wrapped in bark's shadow

He is listening to a beautiful woman speak to him in sign
language Her rings underlining every syllable

He is listening for the dog that wandered off into the forest

He is listening to the stranger say Be quiet Close your lips

He is listening to the gravedigger complain & repeat You
will hear from my lawyer I can assure you

He is listening to the fog in the park unlatch that one hour

He is listening to his father's footprint walk up the stairs

He is listening for the lightning flashes to pass through
a stained glass window

He is listening for a silence with the weight of a gallon
of carpet tacks

JOHN MCKERNAN

THE ROAD IS HUNGRY

It ate
The calendar

It gnawed on the ribs & skulls
Of the children
As they left the school bus

It ate tomorrow
Packed tight
Inside the plum seed
Curved into the horizon

It ate all
The light
The suns could spray our way
& still will not stop
Chewing on the folded shadows

KENNETH FROST

HAYSTACK DREAMS

By good fortune
the boy was blond
and when he grew
long hair he could
hide under
its haystack.

Crows sat on his mop
and wrung him dry
in their split-tongue
language.

A whole ark of birds
travelled with him
shrieking with delight
as their nails planted
stethoscopes
to map their adventures
in his heart.

KENNETH FROST

CHIPS

I know a man
who grew fat
on a diet of Botticelli.

The potato chips
flaked off
The Birth of Venus.

He especially liked
annunciation chips—
the angel's wing

made his mouth water
with the taste
of its peacock eyes.

In the dead wing
of the museum
you could hear

his ravenous mouth.

KENNETH FROST

SPIDERS

Spiders weave
cracks in a mirror
out of themselves,
set
their space-stations up,
and when their brains
glitter,
dance in the moondust
of old peoples' rooms.
They eat
their buzzing
angels up
and scratch away
silence
with terse mouths,
pose inside
the mirror cracks—
eight
warping rays
to a new moon.

JOHN M. ANDERSON

SCAFFOLD FOR A SLAGHEAP ROLLER-COASTER

Discard slat crates the miners'
explosives arrived in, stacked
haphazard at the entrance—ramshackle
thunderheads and tinderbox

buttes. Gray tumbleweeds blown
into stiles against the desert sky's
barbed fence, the boxes rolled out
smoke billow stairways, risers and treads

that trembled like the stockmarket when
the telegraph wire from the detonator sent
a shock to the charges and they went off. Gold
in veins down there somewhere. Birds perched

on the skeleton city, scolding in their high
church voices whenever the hole cursed
in its throat or belched with satisfaction
way down in its overstuffed Cyclops belly.

VINCENT MCGILLIVRAY

CONCRETIZED

If you squint in the night,
the city's edges
are shimmering mountain peaks.

An 18-wheeler gust nearly knocks you over.
99 degrees and rising at 10am.
A pair of Apache helicopters prepare.
You see an old man under a bridge
and recognize him as the brave hero
from an old book your mother read to you.
Covered in filth, he pulls a pigeon
from a bent shopping cart,
breaks its neck,
and eats it.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Santina*

3.

In her nightgown, Mom
cups onions, bent
down maneuvering rings
for soup for forty. There
are no tears, no wet
knife bearing down the
metal teeth, no skin,
and nobody asks
why there is soup at a funeral.

4.

on our way out of town
down so many rows
footsteps came and went
giant blue and red wreaths
and high on the hill
the rose
off-amber and gone dead

5.

Late day is snowing, all things
smell of salt, of driving over
unveiled domal deposits and
shaking out dust. No one
can see through the window
and no one tries to look, and nothing
is there, but fog, cold, salt, everything
smells and there is nothing.

HOLLY HARTEL

THE CREATION OF ARCHES

We walk beneath *le pont* and dance across it with our mouths
as a bubbling ballet that speaks to all the earth rises up
from a school of passing fish. You try to call them
out from bed. But they are still, waiting for the bread and hooks—
that stir each from rest—that are wishes that drop down and change
to make them wealthy as the koi of Asian gardens.

There are new ways to learn the roots of Poplar when we travel
north, the conversion of catkin and flower only bringing us closer
to the end, where a boulevard grows peach and pale in roses
curling their thorny stems into wreaths. We see no death from the Dutch
elm disease that killed off the rest before our birth, our favorites
still tall behind the statues who outlived the earth. The stone
finger of royal blood leads toward a path of *platanes*

divorced by a sidewalk and fighting for the closeness to speak.
We walk in this silence toward an ancient mausoleum where the handprints
of children leave fogged ash on the rotating doors. For an instant,
we weave a dance in the centre of the city, your feet just bumping
mine. Where above we might appear to bear the final coat of arms from a long-
lost noble line, we instead create two peasant arches in the glass for all
the city's girls and boys to smudge into a cloud their mouths make.

And when they close, the good words emerge from their toes
to tell all the secrets we've lived to hear—how light the dreams
they've haunted, how in seconds they traverse the city

CONTINUED

and are quickly asleep before our beds are found. This moment is full of envy, staring into the eyes of those we might have birthed in another world. I ask you the punch line: *It is just because they have such low centers of gravity.* This idea haunts us

for decades, years after we boast of knowing how many yolks are broken for breakfast in *Place Maubert*, or the smell of waking to an elephant-skinned beech tree. At our doorstep, we argue for hours on end—seeing, then counting the city's stray dogs, the hungry frames that may lead us to food. You recognize one from a distance and try to call him close. The words are coming out sour and stinging, speeding toward the stray who stares back, but stays unmoved. *He must not know the language.*

EDGAR CAGE

A TRACE OF FEAR ON THE BEDROOM WALL

Hard to see the sky's corpse
from your bed: the moth shipwrecked
on the wall with no moon or stars.

I read that if a moth loses its way
it makes for itself a dry surface and never
moves again, even when it hears the spider
already setting out from its parallel universe.

It's just a moth, you say, brushing it
with your finger a mile to the floor,
waiting for me to recite
another kimono's name.

The moth spends its little life
in the window screen's pharaoh-like sleep,
and then, searching other light forms,
gets lost in the depths of the room.

Nothing goes wrong in the slithering way we whisper.

Night stays in the form of one word
between our caresses of dust; otherwise
it is quiet inside the moth where
we almost breathe until morning.

ALAN CATLIN

AFTER THE DELUGE, RED MAPLE (FOR LAURIE, SADLY LISTENING) AFTER LOU REED AND S. HANNOCK

The electronic message she is
receiving is from some other
place not of this world where
music is a fault in the brain;
is two hemispheres like land
masses of skin in revolt, only
the blood revealed on the canvas
as a solar eclipse, a lunar caustic
that empties the mirror of seeing
in a dream of apparent disease;
is where the bruised colors are
losing their definition, brush strokes
embattled, wounded as lacerations
along the bent-forever skyline,
the one where the stolen planes are,
the ones that crash.

ALAN CATLIN

" ; OUR LIFE HAS A SISTER SHIP,
FOLLOWING QUITE ANOTHER ROUTE"
TOMAS TRANSTROMER

through the trade winds of
the open windows of an invisible
house,

the unseen floors of transparent
glass, the mitered stairs cut
from stationery clouds, the sun
illuminates brighter than stars

as navigational tools, abstract
geometries of seeing, incalculable
depths as the hollow points of
bullets redrilling the main mast

like wormwood, top sails unfurled
but all else wrapped in goatskins
of seeing, whale bones fashioned
as oars once the rescue ships are

lost with all hands on board
the high seas directed by the intercrural
tides, feral and inexorable once

the sun rises and the nearest land masses
disappear, places marked by slabs of fog
like left-behind-fish eggs in a tightly
clenched fist



GAK: hyperdimensionaltemporlvortex

LAWRENCE W. BERGGOETZ

UNTOUCHED

tonight- a smaller
moon escapes
to rove in
flight
as
a new pattern of
faint stars collects
with no
name

beyond
Orion's risen blade
a wand of bamboo
points to a trail they
have made
while
a pulse of
music discolors the
sky with white
blood

the silent
light of
a plane beckons
to Jupiter
as
i leave my home
wearing
a blanket for
a coat

CONTINUED

walking
toward a black
field
where the odor of
night reeks with
the molten
salt of a fallen
star and
a broken tablet of
stone is
buried within the
ice folds of
a crystallized
sky muscled
dark with
moons untouched by the
stain of
the sun's cold
light

SCOTT MULRANE

LOVE AT PÈRE LACHAISE

In a mausoleum near Chopin
a steeled woman from Martinique
receives a German butcher in her hand.

By a rose in fresh dirt
with its head on its wing
the wrists of a shop girl
wear handcuffs of scarlet.

Ignoring Piaf and Wilde
the tongues of hungry lovers
slither along the lips
of the moon's dark side.

SHARON BLACK

WHEN THE WIND WAS REALLY A GOOSE

In the beginning the wind was really a goose
emerging from a dark hall into a cluttered room
where a lot of work was going on.

Someone looked up from what they were doing
and exclaimed, *where'd that goose come from?*
Those within earshot meant to see for themselves
but not before dotting their i's and crossing
their t's, for this was a diligent bunch.

By the time they looked up the goose had turned
into a stiff breeze raising the hair off their foreheads

as curtains reached and papers flew
out the windows which made them feel things

could change the way they were
or into something else altogether, even sorrow
and sanctimony could the stillness
lift suddenly enough.

Those early days of the first winds were marked
by the wanderings of a crazy man.
Rumor had it he quit his job to look
for some kind of strange duck that could be
heard calling above the most howling gale.

Sometimes he'd jab an accusing finger at the slightest wafting
as if to say, *I knew you when you were a goose.*

He tried to teach children how the wind was shaped

like a goose, perhaps more than one, for he imagined
whole hosts of them interlocking Escher-like
over farms and fields though all the while
it was just the wind and often cold or damp
with a history no one knew but him.

DAVID S. POINTER

THE CAMELOT KID RIDES AGAIN (INTO THE REVISIONISM OF FAMILY HISTORY)

The editors claimed my poems were
A figurative fox chasing after a
Forest already cut and shipped
To discount furniture factory
Outlets everywhere. And the poets
Claimed I became cold and silent
Like the Scott Joplin Music Museum
In Sedalia, Missouri when the
Ragtime transcript machine wasn't
Working, but that's only because
I felt as if I were a marginalized
Mark Twain protest song sitting
In Humanity's hidden bin of historical
Horrors having lived all those years
In Camelot Federal Housing Project
Where there were no round tables or
Lingering middle class fables, where
Laura Hudson committed suicide at
Apartment 14B, where I was asked
To extract a 28 inch industrial screw-driver
Deep from the earth of inequality.
Of course, this has nothing and yet
Everything to do with things as your
Time Gardener, Klyd Watkins might
Write down in Nashville, Tennessee.
And it has nothing and everything to
Do with Poincare (1854-1912) not
Predicting the great meteorological
Storm that would stain my eyes twenty
Years later when I learned my grandmother's

Grandmother Wilson had been a
Plantation owner in Kentucky before
Coming with Chaos Theory to Missouri
After the Civil War to farm, to forget,
To be on familiar ground with other
Evans and Wilsons who may have
Ridden rough with William Quantrill.
And this seemed to leave me in
Senora without a riding saddle. No.
This really seemed to leave me in
The deadly crosshairs of creativity
With a renewed understanding that
The bluestone perennials and the
Grey wolf spider can't grapple alone
With the collective global forces
Becoming the fluid entity of expanding
Empire spitting out its egg tooth only
To be treated by the orthodontist of
Public perception to a bigger smile,
Better manners and free pamphlets
For group discounts on future referrals
Regarding the overbite of insistent
Industry. It is possible that this poem
Won't leave me any closer to resolving
Chaos Theory, but the inner spirit's
Bail bondsmen of the blues are now
Turning the tuning keys away from
Inner turbulence faster than before
Towards the non-standard notes of
A needed new world nest, so it seems
History made us u-turn in 1865
At Kentucky's Horseshoe Lake to leave
Us on a simple trail for hard fought humanity.

JILL HOFFMAN

MARRIAGE I

morphine was coming out of his eyes
like interruptions to *Kubla Kahn*
in a blue blaze
as he unwound the stiff collar, a pair of
scars
embracing in the nimbus of extreme pain, hooked me

while you a suspension bridge I mount alone in the dark
hold me
a waverer leaping into the black dawn of your rib.

MARRIAGE II

Your mother still bandaged under her dark dress,
the shrouded knob in my belly to be named after him
slept in that stained gauze, unraveling
the long braid of marriage into love and death.

Now you close the door of their nursery with two hands
and, inhaling and inhaling, pull on the long rope
in the stoned garden of infinity with its infinite stones
to work the hooks out of your backbone she and I want there.

JILL HOFFMAN

MARRIAGE III

My eyes open and shut coming
loose in my head.

Life has touched me
With your hands, I am unclean,
I will never be happy again,
Hugging my money, my
Mint, my mine
Of consuming power, my
Cash, my coupons, my slugs, my shower
of change.

MARRIAGE IV

While Faustus and Helen are feathers on the wind,

While Faustus spans Helen
who is a featherduster with a face,

I turn mine towards you
Commanding
The devil whose red eyes are wax to seal this.

NATHAN WHITING

MOTIVES INEXACT

Drawn lightly, a detective assigned
to calculate murder examines further.
Bruises green and blue— shape disturbed,
life folded neatly goads. Poor light,
a shadow through mud he walks, flat,
more real than what causes honesty.

Poor world. Our detective pulls
apart bodies around him,
drags the inside out, expression
just as robot as before.
Inhabitants against illusion
pause down doorway gullets
where sleuths can show pain;
danger kept obscure but steps
surprise the need to blind a smell.

Near motives the detective acts
tiny and stupid, commands attention
from friends who demand his ruin.
They war with peace against war,
emerald and cobalt, design
part of another case.
He pulls owl shivers around ears.
Helicopters mutter a lower code.

NATHAN WHITING

VISIT TO THE COAST

Along the coast I buy fish scales
packed in oil and spit them
all day. North Sea currents dampen joy.
I imagine my life played by a comedian.
Ingla meets me, an obvious agent to spy
on my intent, near an imitation coral,
cellophane-toy factory-tower. "I like
men from inland." Unable to outriddle
her maze, I joke and clown atop barricades
between zones. We pull each other over
into a café, mirrors of many facets.
A night radio host she honors, wants me
for a clever interview to wake the town.
"God works hard" he says. "Whether God
exists or not we believe God hates humor."
I smell the sea. I hear waves, I joke
how the splashes may be rabid swans. "Yes,
ocean pervades," he tells me, microphone
held. "What do you want from our shore?"
"Jokes" I answer. "I will joke on the dock,
joke on the pier. I will joke on sand isles
until each day has a complicated sun,"
"Do you fear the laws?" he inquires.
"The laws forbid laughter, nothing else."



Lawrence Applebaum: *Bryant Park*

JIM CORY

IN A GHOST TOWN

One night strolling down Main Street past the blacksmith's shop
I encounter'd a wraith w/pompadour dyed black eyes black
black nailpolish chipt & flaked here & there. Leather straps
cross'd its ghostly torso, tann'd heart thrumping still.

What manner of being are you, said I? The phantom
slammed its hammer down: *I am the poet of San Francisco, protégé
of Catullus & Baudelaire, who sang the follies of that 5th rate Rome
& laughed watching cretins sneer at my work & name.*

It pluckt a glowing rod & peering—BANG!
flattened out the tip. If that's true, said I, then
how'd you end up here, at this patch of old shacks
peopled by keepsakes? *There are matters*, the spook said

we dead hold close, of necessity. It yanked at a pole, overhead.
Bellows rose, illuminating huddling canaries. I said: no doubt true
but tell me why you threw yourself off of that bridge?
The eidolon fix'd me in its gaze: *Well before I leaped, even*

*before disease drew its curtain of fear round the brain's
intellectual dumbshow, I found myself a shade.*
My brow, a boomerang, betray'd confusion. *Don't you see?*
I wrote to draw beauty's eye to the orchid within.

*Not that the human prizes I desired would've noticed. They
were blind to all but each other. I dropt from Golden Gate
for sheer indifference.* And death, I said. What can you say about that?
Only what is obvious. The single incontrovertible fact

CONTINUED

*against which all is measured & found diminish'd
to the point of meaninglessness. The thing snorted smoke.
I died on the way down if you must know: this spirit you see heard
the smack of my body's back on the Bay's rolling green*

*watched the creature I built at gym after gym float & drift
returning to the liquid it was... But surely, I said, the poems
were some kind of reward? The million words I put to page
meant more than any love or thing. Every note & phrase*

*I weighed, & found the sound to make sense musical.
Squinting, the spirit stared away.
Where have they gone? Into what hole
or drawer? Whose eyes will ever see that buried epoch's*

*buried coins? A molten hinge hiss'd
in its bucket of bubbles. You, it said, read my last words.
No final poem, they came from scorched places
a testament writ in haste & dread.*

It turned once more to its sweaty task
& out the shadowy door I fled.

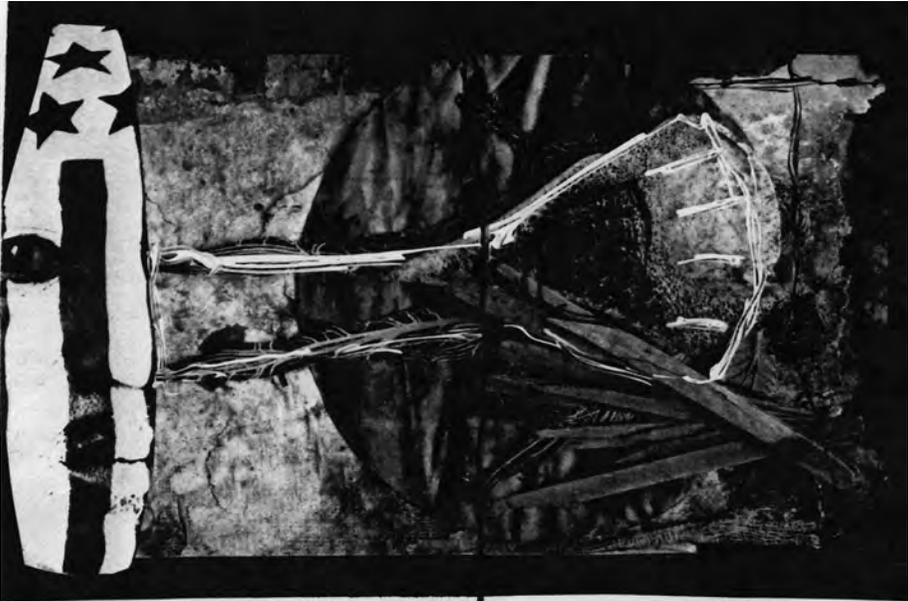
MARTIAL

X.90

Why do you pluck your old cunt, Ligeia?
Why stir up the ashes of your grave?
Such neatness suits girls; but you can't be
seen as even an old wife anymore.
Believe me, Ligeia, that's sweet for
Hector's wife to do, not his mother.
You're wrong if you think this is a cunt
when it no longer receives a cock.
So, for modesty's sake, Ligeia,
don't pluck the beard of a dead lion.

XI.21

Lydia is as broad as the bronze ass of a horse statue,
as a swift hoop that sounds its bronze ring,
as the wheel a springboarder often leaps through untouched,
as an old shoe soggy in muddy water,
as the wide netting that awaits vagrant thrushes,
as the awnings negated by the South Wind in Pompey,
as an armband that slipped off a tubercular queer,
as a mattress widowed by its Leuconian stuffing,
as the old pants of a Briton pauper, and as
the ugly pouch of a Ravenna pelican.
I'm said to have fucked her in a seaside fishpond.
I don't know; I think I fucked the fishpond.



Without
the
body
OF
Facts



Guy R. Beining: *Without the Body of Facts*

RAY KEIFETZ

THE GREAT COLLAPSE

The place was so cold that night
(where we were staying)
our eyelids couldn't close
lips couldn't part,
so cold our thoughts
(what we were thinking)
stuck to our minds:
we lit a match—

The others were cold
(they had to be)
their eyelids couldn't close
thoughts couldn't move.
They had matches.
Somehow they could
(remember)
how to light them.

We all had matches.
You didn't even have to steal them.
We all could remember
(somehow)
how to light them.

Then the sirens came.
We couldn't hear our thoughts
(what we were thinking)
through the sirening.
They sprayed cold water
so cold our thoughts
(what we were thinking)

CONTINUED

stuck to our skins.
We picked up rocks.
You didn't have to steal them.
We could remember how to throw them.
We threw doors and windows.
We made the sirens go away.

And then we danced
and we danced
in the lovely heat
and one by one
we fell asleep.

RORY JOHNSON

WATERGATE

You missed the one afternoon
Richard Nixon called for another
of the original Kennedy shootings.
That one dies over and over and never gets it right.
There were days when you could kill
somebody without being shot by cameras
inside the head as it explodes.
Today John Fitzgerald Kennedy
owns all the water back where he's dying still.
Today in 2007 the world is owned
by a North American sleep,
a stretch of dark road that leads into
the trees and the frog losses
and the telemarketing caves,
the headlights from unmarked cars
that leave little scars and cancers beneath your coat.
And back in the town you stay awake in,
the mailman knows everything about you.
The streetlamps know everything also.
They keep their mouths open and their eyes quiet
and creep closer to where you gnaw your spouse at night.
Forty years and your stomach is almost done
strangling you, already hideous with the smooth
slouch of stubble from your week-long depression parties.
All a child needs to take the remaining light away
is your name and the other darkness that began
during the black and white televisions of Watergate,
and now a land ruined by peace where he can plug in
his uranium laptop both when it leaks
and when it barely shines or shows its flesh.



Lawrence Applebaum: *September*

STEPHANIE DICKINSON

WATCH THE FLASHLIGHT GIRLS RUN

Ditto kept driving through green lights and then red lights. We passed the Sugar Creek Bible Camp, the Humble Bush Bed and Breakfast, and Hub City's Bumper-to-Bumper Auto Parts. Back roads, town to town, we stayed off the interstates and the places we were getting to in a hurry led nowhere. I was hungry. No cafes. The only thing open so far was Tarboro Brothers Funeral Parlor: undertakers rolling the casket out, loading folding chairs into the back of the hearse, a feast of peonies and gardenias heaped on top of the casket. My eyes could smell death. Embalming fluid and Styrofoam crosses. Snow caught the silver *Daughter* on a ribbon and glinted on *Sweetheart*. The sky held more gray snow.

"A funeral," Ditto chuckled. "I guess every little bit helps." He kept his long brown tresses tied back in a ponytail, and since he hadn't shaved in a week, hairs sprouted from his chin and upper lip like wires. There were nicks and scabs on his cheeks from where he cut himself on rusty disposable razorblades. Mom used to be in love with him and told her friends he was seven years younger than her, a white man with a pretty face as opposed to a handsome one, and blue eyes as beautiful as two Shetland ponies. He tweaked one of his chin wires. "If only people would stop shitting out kids."

"You're not very nice," I told him. I wondered how long I'd have to go on like this, me leaning against the window with the sun slivering into my eyes like broken straw.

He wiped a hair wire on the leg of my jean that he'd pulled from his chin. "About every inch of earth is contaminated with people. Where we're at right now contains about the only vacant space left in the lower forty-eight states."

"Someone shitted you out."

"Shat."

I watched the snowfields pass, the sky and field melting into sameness. Ditto wouldn't tell me which state we were in but I guessed North

Dakota. His hand curved with the wheel and I felt like we were sleep-walking except the van drove us through a land of abandonment. He made word pictures and kept pointing into the windshield. "See that bit of smoke? Did you see? That was a widow dinner wafting from a collapsed chimney. A ghost meal. Nothing else left of the homestead." He told me there were old women wearing chicken bone necklaces out in the snowfields dragging gunny sacks. I didn't care. My hands were frozen and I blew on them. The heater used to work in here but no more. My teeth chattered until Ditto, who finished eating an apple, got out the blanket. A soft gray-blue with a wolf baying from its center.

Hey, Wolfie, what are you whispering at the moon? Aloneness. Wolfie reeked of the place we camped last night. A farmhouse discarded down its lane. Even with a fire made inside, the shadows had been cast so long they were more real than us. Old onions were hanging from their roots like heads that had been ripped by their hair. They smelled like lilacs. I wanted to rub them over my wrists and behind my ears but I knew better. If I touched them they would disintegrate and I might fall to pieces too. He'd been talking about growing our family again and being on the lookout for a possible. *Mom, that blond girl rises up like a kick in the gut.*

Ditto stuck his hand in the apple bag and filched the last one. My stomach rumbled but I knew better than to grab for the chocolate-covered raisins on the dashboard. He was saving them for a special occasion. I listened to the turd pebbles rattle as the box slid back and forth. The highway being pulled under the van soothed me and I was aware of the window sticking to my cheek and wetness on the glass like it was my pillow. Right inside that pressed glass a medium sized black girl child was walking along a road because she'd lost the highway. Lost. There were birch trees by a house and they started running after her and behind the trees stood mountains and a skinny blond girl riding a bicycle with a flat tire. "Please," she started to cry. "Why are you doing this?"

"Wake up, Lila. Look alive." Ditto reached for the raisin box, shook it and emptied the contents into his mouth. His eyes got sharper as he chewed the rock raisins, and then he drove with his left hand and knee, while he lifted the soft blue-gray Wolfie blanket with his right hand and reached in. "You're my navigator, my second in command. I need your eyes."

It was something else he must have needed with his hand roaming

around, making its own conversation. Rubbing the seams of my jeans, pressing his thumb like I'd grown elevator buttons. I wanted to wiggle away, and then I went limp. It was very beautiful and cold and I was waltzing in a white dress over the snow. Barefoot. Turning in circles. I was wedged in, couldn't move. The house last night had Kent Feed sacks nailed over the windows and snow drifting in where the sack had come undone. Ditto tore boards to make a fire. After we warmed up he took a blackened stick and scrawled a poem on the wall about deer flowers and burning ice, then he pissed on his words. Pathetic words, sorry substitutes for what he wanted to be—a musician. The back of the van was twisted with amplifiers lacking volume knobs and distortion; wah-wah pedals and keyboards missing every other black key; electric guitars with two strings and acoustic guitars with fist holes. He never asked what I wanted to be anymore than he asked the extension cords and rusted harmonicas if they were happy.

I heard myself breathe like a bird flying away, and then I saw the blond girl riding her bicycle on clouds that drifted into peaks and valleys, clouds like buckets of homemade ice cream. She twirled a shawl of mountain flowers and then went falling into the air, her bicycle falling too.

Ditto took his fingers back from under the blanket and I didn't recognize them squeezed over the wheel. My stomach rumbled and the spit had dried in my throat. A road sign swerved from the shoulder like he'd called it forth. We were outside of a city in spite of the fact that Ditto usually stayed away from them. Outskirts, strip shopping centers where people stumbled around on the hunt for nachos and barbecued pistachios and diet cokes or worked cash registers were okay. Everybody's walking around eyes might have well been cut out of their heads for all they saw. In cities there were video cameras everywhere and although people didn't see you the cameras licked you up with their surveillance tongues. Ditto, an older white guy with long hair, and me Lila, a thirteen or so year old dark skinned African-American girl, wouldn't be invisible. He had my birth certificate and on the blank father line typed his own real name in. *Walter Ohmahoney*. Father Occupation. *Musician*. I'd seen deputy sheriffs almost come up to Ditto, and then they saw that special shine in his sharp blue eyes and must have known about his name on that certificate because something stopped them. *Mom, if there are places where I stand out it's in these snow states.*

Mom used to complain that he needed to groom himself better and brush his teeth rather than cleaning them by eating apples. “You have nice eyes,” a friend of hers once told Ditto. “Would you like to eat them?” he snarled back. Mom added that he required instruction in etiquette too. She was one of those goddess-type women that normal men get a cold sweat in the presence of and drop to their knees, but she only liked abnormal men who yanked her around like an old garden hose. When Mom broke with Ditto and took up with an even younger man, the new silky fine guy didn’t want a ready made family. Ditto offered to look after me. Mom said it was only for a little while.

“There’s a nice sit down place to eat in this city here. You better wipe your nose because I see green snot in your nostrils. Clean your face and use a Wet Wipe this time not the back of your hand.”

Ditto’s kept me in the van for almost two years now. I know because I scratched the days on the floor of the van right under the foam rubber we slept on before the heater broke. Three hundred and sixty-five days made a year and I had plenty of sets past that. I scraped six lines and then keyed a slanting seventh to finish the week and make a set just like Mrs. Bailey would. I liked to grow her in my mind, giving birth to her old-fashioned long skirts and legs with freckles on them. I cultivated nests of moles on her face, especially her earlobes and eyelids. Kids called her a speckled brontosaurus, but her brown eyes were so kind, even the spit that collected in the corner of her mouth seemed gentle. The Algebra book and a piece of chalk was all she taught from, never a lesson plan, or a stray sheet of paper, she sat on a student desk like the rest of us. The big teacher desk got pushed to the side. When she tried to give me clothes that had been left in her classroom over the years I got the shivers. I just couldn’t take charity even if I’d worn the pink sweater with pale gray lace three days in a row. Mrs. Bailey said, “Lila, let me help you. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders. My brightest student.” I heard love in her voice. Ditto waited for me in the school parking lot, keeping the van idling, and she walked right up to the window on the driver’s side and studied him and that’s the last time I went to school.

The booths were deep red and surrounded the island bar moored in the middle of the room with stools and a forest of beautiful bottles. When a waitress brushed by I thought of Mom in her hostess dress with red pompoms around the hem and her white cowboy boots. She

gave Ditto a welcoming smile although nothing changed on his face. Women liked to grin at Ditto because of his body builder upper chest and shoulders and his pretty face with blue eyes, but then he didn't respond to their looks, didn't joke or flirt, he went stiff or sarcastic. "You're a corncob," Mom teased him. "Look at his face, Lila." Once a woman came up to him with potato chips and smiled and said, "Would you like some chips?" He snarled, "No, but I'll eat the bag."

On the table a red candle was burning, the wick floating in a red puddle. I watched it flicker when I blew on it. Ditto licked his two fingers and pinched the flame between them, a whiff of apples and cinnamon and then the candle died.

"Why did you do that?" I asked. A hate flush was spreading in my forehead. "Why?" I made a fist and hit him, belting him one two three times before he picked up the menu. I brought my fist into my mouth, biting on the knuckle. *Mom, I want to live with you. Please.*

The pretty waitress stood next to our booth smoothing her apron where the name of the eatery THE STOCKYARDS was embroidered. "What can I get you?" she asked, her copper hair hanging in one braid. She stared at me with her green-blue eye shadow that peered over her droopy lids like spots on a peacock's tail.

In the mirror beside the booth I glanced and saw my hair cropped close to my head, a halo of kink that stuck out here and there around two silver barrettes. I kept staring until my eyes stopped being frightened. My face was shaped like an orchid, and it was Mom's forehead I inherited along with her high cheekbones and spatula eyelashes, but she had gaps between her teeth and mine were even and white and I brushed them using my fingernail and liquid soap. The shade of my skin was where we were cleaved apart.

"Why I've never seen a prettier face. You must be proud, sir."

Ditto, who earlier changed his sweatshirt for a black tee-shirt and a corduroy jacket, sat up straighter, nodding. If you didn't look too close you wouldn't see the spots on them or know the cuffs were ringed with dirt. You wouldn't see the fires made in charred cook stoves or hear the wind trying to blow them out. Ditto tried but couldn't manage it so I smiled for him showing my dimples, one in each cheek. There were so many unusual families these days that no one knew what to say except beautiful beautiful beautiful what a beautiful child.

She must have forgotten for a second why she was here but then caught herself. "What would you like to drink?"

Ditto sneered, “Tom Collins for me and a virgin Tom Collins for my daughter.”

“And to eat.” The waitress hardly took her eyes off us to write on her pad.

He went on and ordered what I knew we didn’t have money for. Tee bone steak medium rare. A baked potato with sour cream. Chicken fingers and French fries.

Where was Mom right this instant? Making her delicious food for that light skinned black man, that buppie, putting those sweating yams in brown sugar and molasses on a plate before him or maybe chicken and rice in roux? I embarrassed him. Mom was so light skinned that they nick-named her Raven and all her friends teased that I had been found behind the woodshed. *A real raven brought this one. She is black black. But cute real cute. Long ago they called that shade a tar baby.* Gran had said that, not my real grandmother but an old lady who belonged to the apartment building and to everyone. Gran would drink goat milk when she had bad lungs and it cleared them up. “I doctor myself except when someone put a curse on me and I got the green uterus.” I used to hear the new guy and Mom playing. *Yeah yeah call me Raven. I’m a good bird. Beautiful black scavenger. Make me feel like licking bacon from my wrist. I’m cream. Savor me.* But Mom wasn’t black at all, light brown maybe.

The drinks came and while we waited for our food I could hear the murdered steaks sizzling and waiters carrying heaping plates of freshly scalded deep red lobsters. Maybe the potatoes felt pain steaming in tight fitting skins with butter sweating over aluminum foil. Ditto’s knee touched mine under the table, but I didn’t try to understand what it was saying. Each of us fingered a Tom Collins in a tall cloudy glass sparkling with cut lemons and limes, except mine lacked the alcohol. I stirred the pink fizz and plucked out the maraschino cherry. Ditto’s whiskers were scraping the glass as he drank from it. His grandfather wrote 52 nonfiction books and made a pile of money and Ditto himself went to college at sixteen and scooped up two Masters Degrees, one in American Studies and the other in Psychology. Mom liked that but when she found out he had disowned his family and owed the student loan association \$150,000 his blue eyes didn’t look as pretty and she stopped speaking to him altogether when she discovered he’d never paid income taxes. “What kind of man is that? He thinks that underwear steak of his will pay his way. He’s got no pot to piss in.” *Mom, I*

wish there was nothing between us but a state line but it gets too cold in those farmhouses. I have to get up close to him. Like he could be a mountain goat I'm groveling against for warmth.

Ditto's appetizers arrived, his butternut squash soup and iceberg lettuce salad and relishes. "The portions are too small," he complained, wrinkling his forehead into a four-way intersection. "Jeez, only four pieces of bread." Two measly pieces of sour dough and two squares of cornbread.

I grabbed what I could the second the bread basket hit the table. I'd gotten two rye buns and Ditto retaliated by setting the basket on his lap. "Okay, trade me a cornbread for a rye," I said, pushing a saucer plate over. At the same moment Ditto eased the cornbread onto the plate I handed over the rye bun. Then I sat back real fast to get out of his way. He always looked angry when he fed, his elbow planted on the table, his arm like a hinge shoveling in pickle relish, bread and butter pats. Then he stuck his finger right in the vinegar and oil and waved it around before licking it. He smacked on the lettuce and tomato like he hated them, and when he gnawed his soup he hit the bowl, beating it with his spoon. Like a church bell. Like a Cro-Magnon. I could hear Mom letting loose into her cell phone. "I've never seen anyone fill his stomach like that one. He eats enough for ten people and does the work of one-half a person."

The door squeaked and in rolled a tumbleweed of snow and a family stamping their feet, two boys and a girl I guessed by her height to be a few years younger than me. I couldn't tell about her face because I only saw her from behind but the mom and dad each held the hand of a blond boy who looked exactly like the other one. Maybe they were twins or else white people really did look alike. Their coats were expensive like pelts of real animals, of fleece and fur. I was glad to be sitting down so no one could spot my black jeans that were turning white at the knees. Ditto had cuffed them at my ankles but they were still too long and ragged and they dragged on the ground. I wore a dingy gray Hawkeye Downs tee-shirt. I used to have a rose colored net shirt but you needed a bra for it and I was just starting to get bumps. Embarrassed I swiped a roll of black masking tape from a Phillips 66 and wound it around me until I was boy flat but that made Ditto mad. He stopped at the Pick City Laundromat and waited around until he located almost the right size underpants and bra for me from a dryer. I told him I didn't like wearing what belonged to others. "Shoot me, if

that's as bad as I get," Ditto replied. "Wasn't I trying to take care of you?"

The family sank into one of the booths where I couldn't watch them.

"Cute kids." Ditto tilted his glass back.

My head went hot. I could hear them joking in the family booth, the boys laughing but I didn't hear the girl. Then I heard a snowflake voice say hello and I glanced over. The girl from the family passed by our table, stopped and smiled at me. *Mom, I'm going to die. It's so like her from a long time ago. A small face, big eyes with mountain water inside them.* My mouth fell open and I couldn't make it close. I wondered if Ditto could see how closely she resembled the girl we'd picked up in that mountain town. Except this girl didn't have a broken bicycle with her. She was dressed in jeans and a pink ruffled shirt and a jean vest and had caught me red-handed stowing extras and condiments, trying to fill a Tupperware bowl under the table with butter pats and sugar, and sweet and lows. I glanced over to Ditto and almost gagged. His eyes were roaming over the girl's ruffled shirt. You'd think one baked potato would be enough to fill him up. That he'd never be hungry again. The girl turned and skipped away.

"Another virgin Tom Collins?" the waitress asked. Her black apron stitched with red ribbon at my eye level.

"Yes, ma'am," I told her.

"You're a thirsty girl," she said smiling.

I moved a piece of ice with the straw. "Yes ma'am."

The blond girl went into the door marked ladies. Then a waiter came humping a silver serving tray aglow with Ditto's T-bone steak and my chicken fingers and a plate of French fries all golden brown. The fries looked more like fingers than the chicken did. Like a pile of russet fingers chopped from the finger tree.

"And who gets the fries?" the waiter asked.

"We're sharing," Ditto said.

I smiled and thumped the table in front of me. "He's kidding. Right here." I had the advantage of dimples and being able to tolerate friendliness.

Ditto nudged me after the waiter and waitress melted off. "Don't you have to go to the bathroom?" He tongued steak juice from his thumb.

I bit down on my straw, saw all the indents of my teeth. "Why?" In the corner of my eye I caught his hand moving toward mine, those

thick sausage fingers and one long guitar picking index. I knew he was about to pinch me and I swatted him off.

“We’re staying in a farmhouse tonight. You need to get your washing up done. Now don’t you have to go to the bathroom?”

“I guess.”

“Dipshit, she could be your sister. All you have to do is smile.”

“If you touch my chicken while I’m gone I’ll kill you,” I threatened, counting the exact number. Six.

The wastepaper baskets in the bathroom overflowed with hasty washing. People who had sinks of their own at home. I got drunk on that reek of fingerprints and green liquid dispenser soap crushed into paper towels. The girl had a little pink comb inside a pink purse and a brush and hand mirror and had them spread out all around the sink. *Mom, sometimes I want to have hair like that instead of jinxed kink. Hair like the other one but then I notice how thin it is and how many gaps there are in her bangs.*

“Hi,” I said.

“Do you want to use my comb?” she asked.

“I dunno.” I picked up the pink comb and she gave me a pretty smile. It made my mouth taste like Starbursts and then I remembered the warm places, apartments where I lived with Mom. The Laz-E Boy recliner and pillows, the snaky cord to a Daffy Duck lamp. “Can I comb your hair?” I heard myself ask.

“Yup,” she said, excitedly. “We’ll play hair salon.” She was white blond with white eyelashes and pale blue eyes as if the snow made her. Like where the fence line ran out giving kisses to the wind when it was a blizzard they saw coming. *Mom, I’m going to tell her to get away from me as fast as she can. And the man I’m with don’t go near him unless you want to turn into a blue boiled potato.*

I slapped the comb down on the sink counter. “Forget it.” *The other girl, Mom, is wearing only a white tee-shirt.* I rubbed my swollen lips, all chewy and windburn, and then I took the flattened wig brush from my back pocket and jabbed at my head. The tiles around the sink were hard white squares rimmed by black putty and I wished I had the courage to beat my brains out against them. She watched me and shook her pretty locks like tinfoil and her bangs dropped to her nose, the gummy light over the sink striking her. I dropped the wig brush, to hell with it. Her smile tinkled with the people who loved her, lots of people not just one or maybe two.

“I’m Holly. Who are you?”

I hesitated, my knees knocking. “Lila.”

“I like that name. Lila.”

I didn’t know if I hated her or was afraid for her. Lucky for her she didn’t have a bicycle with a flat tire. Feverishness spread through my head. Hot hot. I had to let it burn.

Once we were in the Rockies and Ditto took me up to Strawberry Lake Mountain. We’d picked up a hitchhiker who gave us lots of gas money and we drove until the flatness and fields reared into rocks and plateaus and for days I’d never seen anything as beautiful as those mountains shoved by glaciers into peaks and snow-covered slopes. We climbed up the mountain through the spruce and juniper, fording creeks, and at the top we found the remains of a hippie festival. Ditto’s parents brought him here as a kid where the Rainbow Tribe of rich white kids had tried thirty plus years ago to build a settlement. He showed me around like this was his house. Lean-tos, scraps of tarp and rope, tents flapping between skinned branches. I stared past the lean-tos at the end of a vegetable plot, stakes marking off furrows. I felt a cold chill between my shoulders and when I turned I glimpsed an emaciated red haired man with green Day-Glo on his face sitting naked in a cross-legged position like he’d been settled there for lifetimes. I started walking toward him and he faded before my eyes. I stood in the very place he’d been sitting. When I told Ditto the ass he laughed. “Would not surprise me. This was where consciousness itself was supposed to change.” I knew then I might be with him forever. I’d never talk to Mrs. Bailey or Mom again.

Ditto found a lily pond but I didn’t want to go near the water because I couldn’t swim. He meditated and afterwards he coaxed me into the pool. “Lila, be the first to bathe here in the icy hyacinth.” Lily stems stuck to me in a flurry of leeches as I stood in the shallows; my teeth chattered and he held my hands until I couldn’t touch bottom. “Trust me, trust me, I’m your father,” he kept saying until I almost believed. “I’m going to teach you how to swim. Put your face in the water, lie on my hands.” He lifted me onto the water, his fingertips on my stomach, feeble breathing of mountain birds, tiny quivering. “Now lift your face, turn, breathe, stroke, face back into the water.” Afterward, he rubbed himself with stems, scrubbed his penis meat clean and then I closed my eyes while he washed me with stems. “We

are Adam and Eve. Light and dark,” he said. “Innocents.” It was so slippery in that cold Garden of Eden, my arms and legs went rigid like deer legs trying to gain a foothold in syrup. I was hungry and would have traded my right arm for a candy bar. I could see on the mountain how old he was, how his eyes were a darker bruise blue with laugh lines like tiny cuts. It was a frozen lake on the moon that a comet had made.

I crawled out of the lilies and stood up, blood dribbling down the inside of my leg. I’d never seen such a thing. “Look what your water did.” I accused Ditto. I was afraid my insides were falling out. I tried to shove stems and leaves there to stop it. He told me it was caused by the elevation and when he was here as a child all the girls bled. “You’re a woman now,” he announced. I sat on the ground and spread my legs. A red mouth speaking red words, red shiver fish, a blood bird flying from my thighs. *Mom, you should have told me how to take care of myself, not leave it to some yesterday’s news of a boyfriend,*

After we came down from the mountain, Ditto made a sharp turn and I flew forward and hit the dash and that made him mad. “Put your seatbelt on. What kind of father will people think I am?” I rubbed my tongue over my teeth, making sure none of them were missing before slowly raising up. We drove over narrow roads that climbed and dipped. He pulled into Granby General Store and bought me Milky Ways and Snickers. *Mom, why did you leave me in stores half empty like this? Where you can write your name in dust on the canned goods and the grocer stands wiping his slippery hands on his apron, his rotors lazily slicing blood sausage.* It was a mountain town and I didn’t know anything about them, about those black and white birds, a whole line of them perching on the telephone wire. In the next town we saw a girl at the Dairy Queen with her bicycle, the back tire flat. The ice cream stand was closed and she looked scared. Her ears and mouth were blond, her muffler bled red.

“There’s a potential,” Ditto said and pulled the van into the closed for the season parking lot. A flickering radiated through my body and I noticed that my right and left hands trembled, full of light. I was of two minds; part of me was so lonesome. Ditto buzzed down the window on my side. “Tell her we’ll give her and her bike a ride home.” *Mom, the girl sat in the back of the van with her bicycle, her face stared at the flat tire but only one of her eyes worked, the other had gone out. Her*

skin wasn't pink but gray gruel. The girl made sounds like a washing machine when the towels and sheets twist together and throw the balance off. I wanted to hide in the dark nipple of the earth. I wanted chokecherries to bloom in her curled fingers, to ripen in her throat.

I counted my chicken fingers when I sat down at the table. Six. Ditto's mouth was full, each cheek pouched with steak and potatoes. Still he managed to ask how it went and I told him nothing happened. The girl went to the bathroom the whole time, poops. Leave me alone already, let me at least eat. The check came before I finished and this time Ditto put a twenty and ten down, not the ones he usually left, shorting them on the bill. This time I didn't have to faint and pretend to be sick so Ditto could gather up borrowings. *No, I couldn't take anything for myself. My little girl might be stricken with sickle cell leukemia. My stepdaughter has a brain tumor. Without treatment three weeks to live.* Should I reach for the tip money left on the next table before the waitress comes and make a dash for the door?

We walked through the parking lot to the far end away from the streetlights where the van was parked. The snow was beginning to fall in big soggy pieces. Like Kleenex. The night might not be as cold but we had extra containers of food. I felt the snow and knew that soon Ditto would be hunting one of those deserted farmhouses down a far-away lane. I'd shaken her off. I didn't know why but sometimes they stuck to me. I told them not to. Everyone wants to try out a different family, thinking somewhere else might be better. I didn't want the snow world for anyone else. I heard sounds of the restaurant door squeaking open and music escaping, Ditto unlocking my side of the van.

"Lila! Lila!" she called out through chattering teeth.

I bit my thumb, decided not to answer, not to turn. *You're not here, understand, I don't want you to be here. Scat.*

"Lila," Ditto snapped.

I whirled around to face the girl who hadn't worn her coat, who stood like a pink fawn in the falling snow in her ruffled pink blouse. Better go.

"Here you left your brush in the ladies room." She held the crusty wig brush out. Wind whipped her white blond hair.

"Thank the girl, Lila. Take the brush."

"Thank you."

“I’m Lila’s step dad. Hurry and get in the van and we’ll drive you back to the restaurant. You’re turning blue.” Ditto had the passenger’s door open and tried his almightiest to smile.

“Wait,” I said. “Holly, no.”

Holly the girl from the bathroom jumped and clapped her way into the van. She shared the seat with me while Ditto pretended to start the heater, acting surprised that no warmth spewed forth. She laughed when we put our legs next to each other, her hand on her pant leg next to mine, her fingers five milky headlights, mine were five deep ditches. There was red fingernail polish on part of both our thumbs.

“Okay, girls, watch the side mirror and make sure I don’t hit anything.” Ditto put the gearshift into reverse and Holly leaned across my lap peering into the side mirror as the van backed up and then righted itself. Above the entrance to the restaurant red neon spelled out THE STOCKYARDS and splashed some of the lettering into the snow. After Ditto shifted into drive, the van cruised right past the restaurant and into the street. “Wait,” Holly sputtered. “You forgot to stop.”

She tugged on my jacket sleeve, a parka that must have once belonged to an adult man. God, make Ditto stop and turn around and let this girl out of the van. You made the world so you can do this but I know you won’t so I’ll have to ask.

“Ditto, you overshot the front door. Holly’s mom and dad are probably already looking for her.”

“Look at that,” he said, throwing a thumb into the air.

There was a banner stretched from street lamp to street lamp advertising a winter wheat festival come spring. Past that the moon was up like a pale February sun.

“Ditto, you can make a right turn and get Holly back before her folks worry.”

“Not to worry, Lila. She’s your new friend, isn’t she? I thought she’d want to see where we live.” His upper lip clamped down on his lower lip and his mitt scrambled through his tape box, grasping, looking, and then tossing them back. Ragged old tapes. King Diamond. Black Sabbath. Judas Priest. Merciful Fate, Anthrax. Music from his teenage years as fun to listen to as muskrats feeding on your kneecaps. In went Overkill twisted up to its highest volume like when Mom and I lived next to the Amtrak, the wheels trying to stop on frozen track. It was the wall of sound that he put up to separate him from us. You couldn’t yell or punch through it.

The van cruised down this street and that making turns and zigzagging until I couldn't tell if we were coming or going. South Third Street and DeMers Avenue. LaHood's Drugstore that sold holiday wreathes made of yarn and potpie tins. A closed Dakota Theater where the last movie playing was Gladiator.

He turned the wall of sound down for a second. "This Grand Forks is one of the flattest places in the world, am I right Holly?" he asked, showing off his bombast and how he was a know-it-all especially on a full stomach.

"Yes." Holly's lip trembled, and you could see she wanted to cry but was trying hard not to. She squeezed my hand. "Lila, our church is close to here. That exit. Right there," she pressed her hand on the window. "University Presbyterian. My mom's a minister."

"A minister's kid. That's a beautiful thing." He turned the wall of sound back up full blast.

I tried to yell through it but the orange lights from the dash had a better chance of being heard. There went the rest of Grand Forks. We were skimming through the city east to west on four lane U.S. Highway 2. I looked out the window not wanting to see her cry. Johnny's Italian Steakhouse. Ho Lan Oriental Foods. Loffredo Fresh Produce. Thursday Night Live Grind. We drove until there wasn't anymore city and we headed west into space where the red taillights of cars and trucks were fewer and farther between.

Holly cupped her fingers around my ear and I could almost feel her soft lips. "My parents love my twin brothers better. My dad is my step dad but he's my brothers' real dad."

I put my hands around her ear. "They love you just as much."

A car ahead of us threw a cigarette out the window, sparks bouncing like falling stars. I could smell her fear, her lilac hair and I wanted her not to be scared.

"He'll take you home soon, maybe tomorrow. It'll be okay."

"Promise."

"Yes, you'll see."

She sat in the ripped seat, reaching with her little starfish hand to wipe her eyes.

The kitchen was painted blue and the cabinets indigo. Frost covered the glass windows and gunny sacks were stuffed in the broken ones, and when I held the flashlight against my parka I saw my breath.

“Over here,” Ditto growled. “Put some light right here.” It didn’t look like the kind of farmhouse that riches would flow out of. Flypaper dangled from the ceiling and in the pantry where every drawer had been pulled, tin forks and knives, old pewter spoons blackened from fires crawled over the floor. Ditto worked on the walls with his crowbar and chisel, the plaster he’d breached and the lathe and slats stuck out like bones. Reek of old flour and paste, blue cornflower cupboard paper. Sometimes Ditto got inklings that treasure was hidden in one wall or another of a falling down farmhouse and then he’d have to see. No fire or sleep until he was satisfied. “Well, I’ll bite a squirrel’s ass. Would you look at this?” He found something in a cubby hole behind the lathes and lifted out a clanking bundle wrapped in burgundy velvet. “Come on, girls. Bring the flashlights closer. Didn’t I tell you I’d find treasure?” I held a flashlight and Holly gripped a smaller one. If she was a good flashlight girl while he worked he’d take her home. She had no choice but to believe him. I knew better.

The flashlight beams lit up the cloth that Ditto slit with his pocket knife. Silverware, not pioneer tin or K-mart junk, but heavy knives and salad forks with carved handles, gravy ladles and butter knives engraved with grape clusters. “Wedding silver, real silver,” Ditto whistled. “I bet the husband and wife this silver belonged to never used it, not once. Self-punishers.”

“They were like you, Ditto,” I sneered at him. “You hung onto those chocolate covered raisins like they were waiting for a special occasion until they went rock hard.”

“Lila,” Holly tugged on my sleeve, “is he going to take me home now? Have I been a good enough flashlight girl?”

The wind was picking up, rattling the windows and doors and slicing in, finding all the cracks. Ditto told us the wind carried the bloody ghosts of the Dakota Sioux and Yanktonai still quarreling over hunting rights. I shone my flashlight on a carving knife, heavy and engraved like the rest of the silver.

Shallow sleep that I wished would deepen kept me aware of the floorboards under us and the knife blade cold whenever the blanket slipped. It was the sleep of tremors, stinging in my knees and toes, in my ears and elbows and when I touched my lips they felt like rocks. Holly huddled against me; she had finally stopped crying and got under Wolfie. “Give me your hands,” I said, “I’ll blow on them.” I wished I could throw myself into the future and know that both of us would be

there. Mom, the other one's legs were nicked and scratched. When he let me back into the van Ditto was washing her, then he covered her in mountain laurel and slid the feather of a sparrowhawk into each hand. No red anywhere only white like all the air had been let out of her. We left her under a pile of rocks. I hardly talked for a month.

Holly yelped when she heard the wood ripping like the world had split but I put my arms around her and hushed her. "The fire went out. He's tearing off cupboard doors for more wood to burn. He's good at fires. We won't freeze." I could hear boots, those hard black lips tromping in the snow outside the house. Pioneer folk coming in from the fields and wondering who's in their house.

She raised herself up on an elbow, trembling with cold. "My cat won't be able to sleep without my feet." My chin rested on the top of her head and it shook when she started to weep. She smelled like sweat and snow and smoky lilies of the valley. "Holly, don't. Ditto doesn't take pity on anyone who cries."

He hated cry babies and feelers. The new fire Ditto had started in a cast iron bathtub, and then dragged it kindling and all into the dining room, was set against a window raised to vent the smoke. Ditto took off his parka and all his clothes before the fire and his shadow stretched over the ceiling. "Shut your eyes," I told her. He sat naked before the fire with his elbows balanced on his knees and his head between his legs. On the walls his shadow expanded and multiplied until there were three of him, each enormous. Red kept streaking the ceiling and the fire sputtered and popped.

"I have to pee." Holly slipped her fingers through mine.

A snarl of her hair tickled my nose and I brushed it away but it came back. These farmhouses were equipped with outhouses but I never went alone into one even in broad daylight. Some had graveyards. We stayed last month at a homestead with its own family cemetery. Ravaged daylilies and daffodils remembered the homestead woman who planted them. There was an iron fence and inside three tombstones sunk into the ground. *Joshua Lamming 3 years 2 months. Violet Our Angel 7 months 5 days. Mathias Lamming 8 years 9 months.* All died in 1845. Within days of each other.

"Lila, did you hear me. I need to go wee-wee."

"We have to go to sleep."

"But I'll wet."

"Hush," I said.

Ditto got up from the fire and spread his sleeping bag next to us, throwing the van keys in like he always did before stretching out. He aimed his flashlight at us and I could see mist steaming out of his nose. I could see his fur belly and chest, his knees. A lustrous gleam surrounded him with a tinge that made me think if I stuck out my tongue it would freeze. "I'll take her to the cellar. That's where the toilet is," he said.

A cellar always kept the farm's secrets and you stayed out of them if you could help it. I heard the wind trying to enter this house that should have gone back to prairie long ago. I tried to call out when I saw his wrist reaching for Holly, his hand smudged from tending the fire. Like she was something to shove in his mouth and swallow. "

It's cold," she said. "I'll be cold in the basement." Ditto swore he'd take care she didn't catch cold. "Please," she said, but Ditto didn't please he just kept pulling her toward the door that led down the wooden steps. Like a tree jumping at you from a grove and rattling its black leaves.

Something heavy was entering me like my mouth had opened wide and sucked all the wilderness of the house inside. I sprang to my feet. "Wait, for me. I have to go. I have to go too."

"You stay here, Lila."

"No, Ditto, you stay here. I'll take Holly to the bathroom." There could be rotten stairs that would snatch your foot and then the rest of you.

"You get under Wolfie," Ditto ordered.

Holly started to cough from all the fire's smoke. My eyes itched and watered, but I could see him. "I'm not going to let you do to Holly what you did to the other one." There, it all was out in the open. I swung the carving knife I'd slipped into my parka. He saw the blade and let go of Holly's hand.

"Put it down, Lila, you'll hurt yourself. You know I only do what's best for you. I thought you were lonesome and that's why I didn't object when you brought this one along. I wouldn't have picked a minister's kid not if I'd done the choosing. Same thing happened in the mountains when I tried to find a friend for you. That little thing had asthma and it was pure coincidence that she couldn't catch her breath in the back of our van. You can't hurt me, you know that. I can lift a cast iron bathtub and carry it up or down a flight of stairs."

I wanted to hurt him, I'd been thinking about hurting him for three

hundred and sixty five days times two. I could see Holly creeping along the edge of the room toward me.

He shook his hair free of its ponytail and took a step toward me, and then another. I groaned and all my falling out in restaurants pretending to faint or vomit, all the sickle cell leukemia fakery came to me and my body shook like loose boards. The carving knife held me more than I clutched it; I was only following it, my fingers gripped the handle while the blade went whipping and whistling through the air, knowing what it was doing, jabbing, stabbing. I whipped it through the air until Holly slipped from the room into the kitchen.

Ditto laughed, "Pee in that Hawaiian Punch can. I don't give a flip." He kicked the can across the smoky dining room. "I don't give a damn, be my guest, I'm going to bed. And you can't put your Mom on me."

I lunged at him; I wanted to see his guts. "Huh? What do you mean about Mom?"

"Your mom's no good. Selfish. The worst of the worst."

My face itched and I raised my free hand to scratch, raking my face with my nails. There were squirmy things under my skin, angry worms inside my cheek. *Mom, is that fine brown man still making you happy? You glitter and bat your caterpillar eyelashes, strut your sling-back heels, turquoise short shorts and tube top. Think about me for a change. Think about waking up hot and sweaty from legs thrown over you and sweat pouring out of someone's eyes. Think about waking up cold and the temperature never rising above zero. About being shut in with a filthy sputtering fire. About snow being fed into all the naked girls' sore cut-up mouths.*

"Use the can and sleep. We're taking the girl back tomorrow." Ditto crawled into his sleeping bag. "Lila, your mom told me I was welcome to you. How her womb spat out an aborigine she couldn't figure."

I dropped the knife, couldn't see for a second, my eyes must have fallen from my head. Holly ran across the room and found the can and gave it to me. Please. I held the blanket around her so she could pee. I listened to his every kick, his tossing and turning, like how the current in a river must sleep. An hour passed before he finally quieted. There were long black lanes the van had driven down without headlights inside him and snow swallowing up tire tracks. The fenceline was off and running into the snow and you couldn't follow it. I told Holly that if he slept we would leave, cut through the fields toward the road, and

find the highway where someone would pick us up. “Take this flashlight, I have mine.”

He slept and I took his clothes and his parka, I palmed his Bic lighter and wallet. I gave my parka to Holly and put on Ditto’s and bundled the rest of his clothes into the bathtub fire. I tossed his identification piece by piece. Holly wore western boots; I had on sneakers with a sheet of folded paper towel to cover a hole.

Huddling together in the snowfield we could see the van beginning to burn, the foam mattress in the back, the tape decks, all the sets of days and weeks, the slanting lines until after two years there was no more room to scratch, the wah-wah pedal, and the guitars. I could hear the hissing of the fire finding gasoline, licking and drinking. I thought of Ditto holding my head over a bucket while I threw up with the flu, how he brought me Coke that he’d kept ice cold with snow in a glass with blue flowers painted on the lip, the parka he’d found at a garage sale and gave me for my birthday, the deep pockets filled with Starbursts and red hots and Kit Kats and Snickers. Then an explosion threw the van’s guts into the sky. The van itself was the cellar, the last room, a big black furnace where the secrets were. Airborne and burning: the towns the van passed through. Killdeer. Max. Turtle Lake. Napoleon. Fargo.

I saw a wrist, then fingers reaching for a blond girl. “Holly he won’t hurt you,” I said, holding her sparrow of a hand in my parka pocket. Then we started to run. Like sleepwalkers with arms to our sides and then like flashlight girls pointing our beams like fireflies darting into the snow. Maybe I heard Ditto scream, “Lila, I love you. I’ll find you again.” It was the trees roaming free of their windbreaks, staring into the night with their wide black eyes.

TRANSLATED BY GEORGE HELD

MARTIAL

II.42

You soil the tub, Zoilus, washing your ass.
To soil it worse, Zoilus, submerge your face.

III.72

You want to be fucked, Sophie, but don't want
to bathe with me. I don't know what horror
to suspect: either your breasts droop like rags,
or you fear betraying your nude belly's folds,
or your torn groin gapes like a boundless mouth,
or something juts out of your cunt's mouth.
But it's not that, I'm sure, you're most beautiful nude.
If that's true, you have a worse flaw: you're a fool.

IV.48

You love being buggered; having been buggered, you cry.
Why, when you desire the deed, Papyrus, do you lament the act?
Do you regret the perverse itch? Or, rather, do you cry,
Papyrus, because the buggering has stopped?

JOHANNES GÖRANSSON

SECURED AGAINST HARES

1.

Populate silhouettes. You have to rig the wilderness trauma to quiet the quarantine. Crayfish. The torso tastes salty and bleep anatomies blot out the crawl. Capture. Bind and blue the undertow. I have to be bartered to attempt such a reproduction. In an occupation fists must be landscapes; holler anatomies must take the place of placards. Farce anatomies: movies clunk like elevators. Horses kick. Neighs bride against the walls. Speak shutdown dictions through the concussion. Sheathe. Cut horses. Rig. We will live this afternoon: Hospital bric-a-brac, bullhorns.

2.

You are more horse concussion. Stuffed deer make more than mere nostalgia for a past I hosed down at 4 a.m. last. The rabbled initiatives mark an improvement on the stabbings I used to conduct. Out there is a light that lacks skin disease. In here has more sound than gasoline. We burn jackals with our overtures. We science gunk for laughtracks when nobody is manning the breakage. You are more than a shout in slowly slowly. It's important not to wreck. Moths glamour in here and outside, against the window. Use a megaphone for adolescence.

3.

Object to termites in my holler anatomies. The storage research will never fully occupy the vandalized train station. Assembled in the moth-flurred spotlight and linked to the whistle, my arms are ready for inspection. Announce the residential plot on my life: thousand colors. The thump on the hood felt danker, softer than banishment. The zoning stretched like a gesture across the vacant land where we all breathed. It must have been Greece. A changing, birds, instructed laughter. And to tell you how I bled would be to repeat.

CONTINUED

4.

The flinch cut was the first time I ruined my arm against a crowd. The homeless provided the necessary cold to exploit. A voice lesson. A fire instructional in three acts. The jitterbug proved too fingery. The horses are still not as cut up as my arm was national. Open the pawnshop. The strangle is empty with blue. Cover the crew in tarpaulin. Wild the facilities.

5.

When the impulse to cage has barked into photography, it is time to oink-oink out of here. I came here to press charges. I came here to mess. All I have accomplished with this new set of torso takes is to suburb. It's graduation day. Flinch for the camera.

6.

Pour out the fluids. Pawn up the chest. It was at that very instance I was presented. A burst condom. The instance was soundproofed. Torso of cotton. Even if I wanted to shatter a doll's head it wouldn't sound more than the 20th century sounds now like lipstick applied in a laundromat. Smear the deserted circus for a new experiment in Coca-Cola. It still works on immigrants. They'll pig and pig the girl. Squeal morning. Tear a portrait of plastic bags. Suffocate. Pick my arm from the fire-drill. If you can't recognize the ruin, pick it clean. Flinch. Paint my dog-eyes like night, i.e. flinch.

OUTSIDE THE AIR

i've come to recognize
i live in somebody else's hometown

when they bear their young
they spank them till they grab for air
then teach them to hold spanked air
till they die

i don't know if i can survive here

outside the air is very thin

THEY GET YOU FOR IT

who the fuck do they think they are
sticking they faces in you bedroom window

government
finding any trick they can to bust you ass

for sleeping with you mother
ferchrissake

a needy and decent old
cold blooded widow

after all
you are a compassionate man

and furthermore
you have a right to know
who will do her nails
from now on

and what about you needs
as a loner
born cold blooded just like her

besides
what's it to they
to know the last time
you felt
a throb
of her pulse

THEY SAY YOU THIS:
IT WILL BE WARMER UPSTAIRS

They will take you somewhere.

Pretty soon they will take you somewhere
someday
they say.
Pretty soon.

They say you this: They say they love you.
They say you how they love you
best
more
than the rest.
How they choose you.
They say they don't mean it to be so cold here.
It will be warmer upstairs.

Maybe something will happen.

Maybe could you tear down the rotten calfpens maybe
could you find some splinters
in them they say
maybe
could you make some kindling for the fire. They say
you this: They don't mean
for it to be so cold.
They say someone like you
should not have to be cold.

You are so special.
You are the best.
They say you this: Pretty soon
maybe
they take you somewhere
somewhere
you don't have to be so cold.

They say you this: They say you
there are oranges in California
and tall sun
such pretty orange
such tall hot.
They say how you love the color orange.
The tall sun is warm.
Pretty soon they give you where it is
tall warm
where you do not have to be so cold.
They say you this while
they
smother
you: They love you
best
more than all the rest.
They say:
*It will be warmer upstairs
the fire will make it warm upstairs.*

While they
smother
you
they say you this:

Fire rises

PHILIP DACEY

IN PRAISE OF FIVE A.M.

Escort the sun up.
Sweep clean the sky-path he has to climb
as you pick the night's dreams from your hair.

Early risers catch sight
of efflorescent tail-feathers trailing away
safely and securely
into the underbrush,
the Great Bird's daily escape.

This is the hour of the laid egg.
Sleep late and miss its first warmth.
Your head is laid
awake in the darkness,
the softly glowing center of the room.

The boots of your ancestor's English lord
must be polished and set before his door
before he awakens.

You have so much to do—
slip the stars into their bright envelopes
and mail them to the other side of the world,
then fold the dark carefully,
flag of the nation
you now exiled belong to in your sleep,
and slide it under the bed with its cousin the dust.

The quiet weighs on the bedcovers, on you,
with the tender pressure of a lover
who pins you down to yourself,
and you can hear a faint bubbling from
the place within where a cold spring
rises from its source
and if you are lucky
floods your day.

PHILIP DACEY

A STACK OF IAMBIC PENTAMETER LOGS

Her long legs gave a ladder to the world.

*

Let carbonation in, let bubbles rule.

*

Accountants' columns bent by moonlight's pull.

*

Let her be eyelash, me a flake of snow.

*

Her voice threw shadows that I made my home.

*

I once knew hunger, ate the apple core.

*

The sky has fallen to its knees again.

*

The thin blade nicked my cheek; I bled the sky.

*

The ant came dragging no crumb but my name.

*

He ate the word "crepuscular" and died.

*

Tin roof, torrential rain; love's recipe.

*

The woman-water rises to a thigh.

PHILIP DACEY

IN THE STEAMROOM

1.

Five naked men,
quintuplets in their mother's womb.
Steam rolls in
as the mother breathes.

2.

Grizzled angels sit in the clouds
between assignments.

3.

Here visible,
curling reptilian
around our bodies,
the miasma of history.

PHILIP DACEY

FILIAL

I was sitting on the living room floor,
pushing a toy,
my father on his back on the couch,
the workday done,
reading a newspaper.

So he and I shall go through eternity,
he sailing in his boat,
the newspaper catching the wind,

I in the water beside him,
a porpoise
absorbed in play
but not failing
to keep up
with his glistening hull.

PAUL B. ROTH

FALLEN LEAVES IN EARLY SUMMER

For an instant, the moon hangs from a hooked shadow flashed by a salamander's quick tail across summer's white-hot brick. When he scurries off, the moon drops its light between its absence and my windowsill. Resistance fighters once revered the salamander for its stealthiness. Just last night, I dreamt it alive, while long after I awoke, its puffy throat bellowed my imagination. It's sad everyone's after me to wake up in their own way. I'm just not interested. "I have my salamander dreams," I tell them. Still, all those persistent "Hellos?" "Are you there's?" or, "Can you hear us's?" bore me to nausea. I consider sleeping on purpose. Sleep pleases and protects. It puts off those days when earth itself wants to roll off a dump truck onto the interstate on my way to work and ricochet straight through my windshield without warning. Were this the case and with eyes closed on impact, I'd have no preparation in advance for letting grapes wrap their green waists around the moisture my skinless body leaves in its place. I'd have to hope. Although unprepared to die, my veins tangling with roots of pink foxglove nonetheless sprout from bullet holes through helmets rolling out of shallow trenches dug just south of Stalingrad and downtown Kirkuk. When else would I be able to climb from earth after all orbits above it are congested with the debris of decaying satellites? In the meantime, whoever's waiting for subversives like myself to emerge, must have hundreds of damaging secrets bought and paid for by the spoils of an even more recent war.

PAUL B. ROTH

SENSORY SURGERY

In early spring, a salamander suns himself and with his tail's shadow, twitches my wristwatch's slender hands ahead many hours. I overhear my own silence travel the spaces between seconds and their minutes, between hours and their halves, quarters and their almost impeccable indivisibility. Time pounds me, chews me until juiceless I'm spit up inside greyish pigeon shit running down the unpainted leg of a chained-down park bench. Before long, rain washes me into green against a background of ever-present night. Lost in the space I once occupied, every familiar object around me now takes offense at my presence. My dictionary sticks the single faces of its pages together. My pencil point, breaking down against soft pages of tears, smears them by accident over charcoaled cheeks reported missing from the front lines of another foreign war's rear command. My area rug curls me up in its edges, showing me, through the faint light of its delicate fibers, the sunless faces of young weaving girls chewing their fingernails to sleep night after desperate night in poor Pakistani neighborhoods. The chair in which I sit collapses. Its four legs swing wildly in space without touching me or each other. I'm unafraid of being beaten to death. I fear only how much air might leak out, deflating any residual blue sky into shrink-wrap around my nose and open mouth.

PAUL B. ROTH

SMELTER RATS

Tired of the melancholy abstract, the burdened nightwatchman combs his hair in a doorway chained open to a glare of parking lot floodlights. Miserable, he allows the light to smother him for a moment in its warmth. Every night, his rounds turn one key after another into the heavy punch-clock slung over his left shoulder. Roaming below loading docks where 40 foot trailers with wheels chocked snug against the night's concrete are traces left by what he refers to fondly as his baby buffalos. He swears he can hear them feasting on discarded combinations of curdled coffees, frozen globules of axle grease, remnants of empty fast-food containers, pale green pizza crusts, sluggish cigarette butt gravies in half-cracked stew cans, molasses scented apple cores, curled orange peels as well as a rancid ooze of tobacco, fruit and sugar juices. *Nuclear* is the term he applies to their diet. How much larger they appear at each rare sighting! Once he thought he heard them squeal when hot-strapped pallets of rabbit ingots pinged while cooling. He's certain it was them and not ghosts rattling skeleton brass scrap tipped from chained hoppers onto unmanned shaker tables. He's seen them criss-cross through tangles of tin coated wire, sniffing the green scum coating scrap faucets crammed into boxcars en route to midwest brass refineries, and how they scatter their dry feces over open drums scheduled to be heaved over refractoried charge walls of furnaces flowing into molten hearths. When asked about their young, he shrugs, says that come dawn, just before shift change, all he's seen are their shallow pawprints in a gray dust the sun's been warming up across the smelter's unswept floor.

PAUL B. ROTH

ALL AT THE END

I'm standing at the end of myself. With no further steps and a wall at my back, the rest of me stays still. When I open my eyes, at first I don't recognize my face. It's not the same face I saw this morning in the mirror, I'm sure of that. It's become a faceless face, one still lined with the usual rituals of washing, but which has become empty after surviving close shaves, scratches, punches, bruises, pimples, pinches and stitches that have pursued it. When younger, I insisted it was never me, only who I was. It was he who had come back to me after changing direction from where he wasn't going in the first place and once again caught up with me. How odd no one could tell us apart. When turned sideways, even our silhouettes were identical! The only difference was that when he spoke, brown spotted moth wings fluttered up from shore grasses grown high around a setting quarter moon. When I spoke, mosquitos screeched from the brakes of a locomotive before de Chirico's station. Just the way I would lift my hand to scratch my head, I watched as he stood with one mud-caked hoof rubbing his long neck belonging to a black plow horse. Crossing a moonless pasture, as I turn back to look one last time, I catch him grazing on a darkness he shrinks into another new day.

PAUL B. ROTH

ONE PART LOVE SAGA

I nap in a crescent moon's hammock. My dreams swing west with the bloodstreams Canadian geese outrace to their final sun's destination. As fast as they go, my dreams do not freeze, only darken. They darken stars pinholing light through an opaque texture of sky. They let other things propel them from a city wrenching fire at night from its tack-welded girders aflame and swung like fragile embers, from broken windows slitting their own blue wrists of sky, from brickface crumbling up to its own chin unable to open its mouth, and from church steeples not known for being homicidal. Surrounded by nothing resembling earth or water, resembling fire or sand, gravel or trees, my sleep enters a clearing whose distant opening stretches from one corner of the universe to the upper right corner of my drawn but slashed window shade. How I came to live here is a mystery, although I swear birth delivered me. I know who was first to pick me up off the floor, but not who then shoved me towards some open door. I tumbled down many flights of stairs in those days. I cried from an empty hunger the way alley cats scream their excruciating sex. I survived between cracks in concrete where nothing else lived. Becoming just another broken promise, love never did keep its word.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Memory Crumbs*

DAMACIA LUNA

THE MAGIC OF BUTTERFLIES

I used to love this woman; I think I married her. Everything about her was dark. She had long black hair and soft dark, brown skin that glimmered in the sun. Her dark eyes were like a moonlit night. I could see everything inside her. I saw howling wolves, prowling hungrily on lands filled with crops. There were burned-out fires with shadowy smoke rising out of green forests and stars that fell like angels and diaphanous clouds slithered in corrugated curves under the moonlit night. I could see everything inside her; I saw her Mayan temples and her Aztec pyramids; magical words that were hidden as if in a cocoon but that were slowly revealed to me, yet these words remained formless, tasteless like saliva on her tongue. The words dissipated into the air to nothingness before it passed her lips. Perhaps, I saw too much, things that weren't there, things that I wasn't meant to see—she had the magic of butterflies.

But she died. Cancer, I think. She died in my house. After her death, I had to clean her. I cut her up, carefully, slowly so as not to disturb or hurt her because inside she had become a “maquina,” a machine— a factory with wings. She changed and glimmered like napalm, and I cleaned all the pollution inside her. I threw away the broken heart, the still lungs, and the lifeless eyes.

I had to. I was becoming blind. I saw too much ugliness, a lot of sin: drunkenness, adultery, and murder—all sin. It was too much for my eyes except for the memory of the butterflies that used to live.

I wished I could see. There's some goodness and beauty in butterflies. They have magic. That's what I did. I caught butterflies, different varieties. But I didn't kill them. I kept them alive for my dead wife. Then I cut her, pulled her beautiful brown skin apart and cleaned her. I made her free of her temples and pyramids removed her eagle and serpent until only my fingerprints were left. I then grabbed a red butterfly, put some glue on it and put it in that place where the

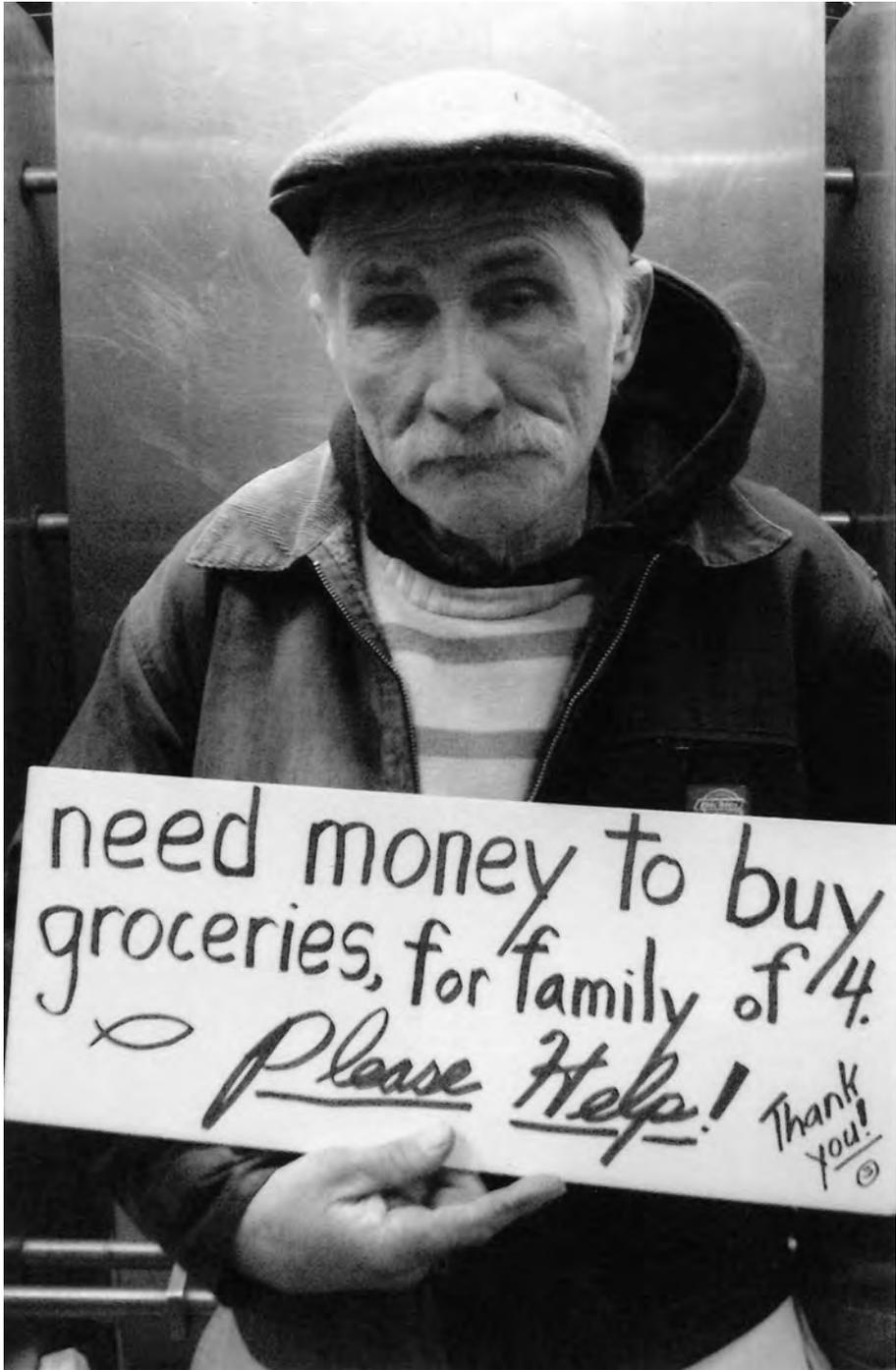
CONTINUED

howling wolves were now extinct; I put it in desert roads where my wife's green forest should have been. Then I sewed her up. Her chest rose and fell. I put my ear on her chest, and I heard a thumping sound like mad soldiers. It sounded like the beating of butterfly wings; it sounded like her heart. It sounded like music. But I still couldn't see her in my eyes, in my image. I pulled her eyelids open to look at her deep, dark catacombs. I put a blue butterfly in each abyss, so I could see the light that I used to see in her night-colored eyes. Her eyes fluttered open, blue and cold like mirrors, like winter. I opened her mouth where the well of magic words was now dry. There I placed a white butterfly on her dry tongue, lifted that appendage to her teeth, and put another white butterfly under her tongue so her speech would be pure again. I kissed her; her hypnotic tongue floated up like an angel. Speaking in tongues her language glided onto mine. Her tongue didn't taste like milk and honey but sour and rancid. Then she pushed me away and ran from me, and then I saw her ascending away from me like a magical butterfly.

CRUZ ORTIZ

POST-ANTHEM AMERICA

Freezing rain falls from the man
huddled over his cup of change.
The quarters glint in the false light as if they're afraid.
The dimes mined from patterns of drizzle
that come down in a room at the Salvation Army.
The pennies are only eggs that hatch more pennies,
but never add up to the dollar
necessary for snow to enter the city.
The nickels still have important things to say,
like, it is cold, at least for today.
The pigeon fleets imitate a country
with no other voices,
the sky lost in someone's eyes since yesterday.
A woman torn down to nothing
lights up a cigarette, disappears briefly
in its dark weather, and then cries
from her hands and gets devoured by a taxi.
Some of the younger children swallow
lighter fluid in search of the sun,
others just seem taller. The traffic
howls and screams on its way
to the neighborhoods beyond
the rows of buildings which still look familiar,
lined up as if for water or food, marching
but advancing no closer to the edges
of the empire where each still makes
the noise of a small carcass.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Phone Booth*

TERRY ANN THAXTON

THE MAN IN CHARGE

Probably his first toy was a small stick. Now he pretends to defend his home as if it were his own great big country, but he leaves to hunt and fish, while at home she is the tower of silence, eating away the coast line of innocence.

Let him live like an animal with only a sufficient supply of water. If only the roads were dark enough to carry her like electricity through the tops of trees. But some trees never grow tall. She sits in the rooms of the house as if they were his property

rooms, where he keeps her, and she tries not to think, unless it is about how tides move or the small tools he uses in his carpentry. These could become his beating tools: hammer, axes, and hatchets. He thinks her land is fertile.

He wants her hair short, as in the old days, a sign of servitude. No drug has yet been discovered that will stop him, but she is still in good condition except for the darkened branches on her arms, this bluish metallic on her face

that looks as though it is used in radar equipment. This is the fairy tale she did not know could happen— not in this century. When he comes home, his small head will talk about ways to remove her skin, her face. But today,

it is seven thousand miles to his mouth. Today, she could leave like a tiger, which can not be hunted on foot. It would be much simpler not to be captured if she were dead, even though diseases and insects would attack her. What could be used

CONTINUED

as a weapon in this house? Oranges are bright when they ripen,
and then things begin to happen rapidly—his punches
like bombs on housetops, his slaps like tanks rolling over children—
certainly, she thinks, involve some degree of guilt, but she notices

his reflection, the force that must always be measured. If she stays,
he might make a small opening in her skull, she may find staples
in her head, he might pin her bones to the wall, scramble her fragments
of sanity. She wants to be a beautiful woman, but the attempts to give

birth for him have proven unsuccessful. No child should live
in the same room with these shattered pieces of rock.
She will cart out her frail head and neck. She will find her white wings
some day, and leave this single-party

dictatorship. No one knows that her hair is shy. The process
of turning her machinery into a cannon ball would take years.
She'll go west. Yes. This is a type of art—this death that every night
comes with storms and gusty winds. Her home is a

winter playground for a fascist leader. Forest covers the knives
which have their cutting edge turned toward her face. She is a pine twig,
a bittersweet berry, a cattail. She will not wither. She is a
black rock, fading. She tells no one his unforgettable phrases.

She is a taboo object, marked in many ways.
She must always hold the television receiver for him to see clearly
that he has built himself, raised himself, to be the man,
and for him, there are few desires that will not be satisfied.

His first toy was a stick, and now she is his cave.

JEFF FOSTER

RUNES

“Depressive personality disorder (DPD). A syndrome meriting further study. The suggested diagnostic criteria require the presence of at least 5 of the following: dejected, gloomy, cheerless mood, low self esteem and feelings of inadequacy, self blame, and self criticism, prone to brooding and worry, being negativistic, critical and judgemental of others, being pessimistic and prone to feelings of guilt or remorse. Few individuals reported good treatment responses to anti depressants.”

From: JOURNAL WATCH PSYCHIATRY October 1998

I litmus test cobwebs
Explore blithely peed totems
Seeking the Tao of plastic
Caught on barbwire
The druidry of the afterlife
And the palomino marked buttocks
Of ignorance

Lusting god into a woman
Hell and death into virgins
My conscious into a Tele-evangelist
My heart as part of the sex industry

Sullen with episodes of Janus and Ophelia
A keyhole needing a tongue
To unlock secrets
A caudally inlaid algebra
Needing a carbide lamp

CONTINUED

My reoccurring traumas
Resembling locust trees
Prone to loosing limbs
And covering the ground
With leaves and shade

Keeping my memories
Like divorce rouges a child's perception
Of an absent parent
The years flatulent with dreams
Looking for new ways to mate

Running down a road without a shoulder
No centerline or speed limit
Maintenance or law enforcement
Weeds marling the ditches
With dead animals and trash

Feeling suicidal
The urge to masturbate
To self medicate
And pretend I'm a woman

Writing myself in manic stages
Attempting to be a branch snatched from the fire
Erotic with the smell of cigarettes and old clothes
Pinging the Ferro of mold, mildew and basement drains

Spreading my painted toes
Like an oriental fan
Like a blossoming flower
Like a deck of playing cards

My thoughts with prehensile tails
Winged, finned, limbless and scaled
Flush with antennae
Fucking at theta rhythm

My genetic line drawn
From burdock and witch grass
A descendant of gourds
And the space between
The anus and the genitals

Imagining myself
A seventeenth century family plot
Or a nude Celtic woman
Shambling spells in the woods

All the thoughts of my heart evil
Feeding on twilight like a nightjar
Boarded up like downtown
And homeless as God

BILL FEATHERMAN

WHEN THE CICADAS RETURN

The words on this napkin scattered
by one breath from a cigarette.

This bar of soap, almost
gone, has in it
the birthing of a wilderness.

This is water that will cool you
and this is water that will bring
suffering and a new fear of the land.

This is a salad that arrived with April
made from scallions
and navy beans
and fresh sunlight from Netcong.

This is a robin, the inside
of its head the sky it filled
moments ago.

There are places under your clothes
where it is still
snowing.

This piece of gum will keep you awake.

This chair will take into itself
the cramps you carried home.

This is a curtain whose flesh is envied.

And this is a curtain whose dandelions
pass like faces in a magazine.

This is a clock that sank
to the bottom of someone's trailer—
only one of its rooms was in North Dakota.

This is a phone booth
where men leave their tuberculosis,
and this is a map of phone booths no longer visited.

You have one can of survival stew
that lets the hard grasses
know the places in your body
that stay uninhabited, and another

that leads back to Pennsylvania,
and it reminds you of cutting open
carcasses of beer on Thanksgiving,

it reminds you of rooms too depressed to move.

This is the day you emptied your eyes
and found that you couldn't
put anything back inside them.

The day you sold the last of your food
at a pawn shop so you could afford
a liver exchange.

Not by a doctor, but a man you met
in the death row of K-Mart who promised
your liver a darker home.

This is when one of the men stopped
eating his daughter. This is when there were
no more daughters to eat.

CONTINUED

This is when men disguised themselves
as newspaper photographs
and tax evasions, the abundance
of work fatigue where they've been stranded.

This is the sky that drifted inside
the glass buildings and disconnected phone lines of a faraway city.

This is the night Andromeda crawled
down from your ceiling's flatland
of shining crickets,

a night to check the leaves
and bring the scarecrows to bed.

This is the night cicadas landed on Earth
and set out toward the half-fires

and rain mountains that the people left behind.

GUY R. BEINING

COPY THE WATER CLXXX

freeze dry
coffee &
crunching
steps of
pelican on
dry sandbar;
in potato light
nicotine fingers
touch lips

(serra)ted
(greenhouse)

moan
the more
on mores,
on ignition
of crusted
felon boy,
talon sticking
to hide

one sail
above line
in
a choppy
day, brushing
sand from
hair, & tipping
hourglass fractures
of sunlight.

(senso)rial
(sense)

groan,
gargle, &
sift thru
entity of
oneself caught
in curtains
of something
off stage.

GUY R. BEINING

(10)

vice

wit will not
clean up your past
or for that matter
ones mind, so take
a feather out from flight
& rest amongst
seams of smaller birds
that hop along
trails rarely followed.

versa

under solemn branches
a caretaker clucks
about luck of birds flying
& then sets his
coat on fire
realizing that ones head
is but a blur
& not really there at all.

GUY R. BEINING

(11)

vice

press quintessential zero
against those that lull
around rocks knowing that
sentences can be rolled up
into a bale & tossed
through empty questions
of where we stand
in the long range of winter.

versa

the deaf fit of numbers
is scratched off by ants
telling us that the primitive
glare is back in fashion,
but the day has yet
to arrive having become
stuck in a computer glitch,
so why not be divine
among lush flowers & get stamped
with a clear imprint
of sacred vegetation.

JOHANNA LOVETT

AGUA PURIFICADA

The rain lets up leaving slick pools in the pitted limestone. She holds tightly to him, her thin sandals skittering now and then on the sidewalk. For the first time in a long time, she feels good to be touching him. And though he is not ready to admit it, he is enjoying this weight of her. He's attracted to her dressed down this way in a simple shift, embroidered with large, colorful flowers. His linen guayaberra clings damply to his side where she leans. Each thinks privately that they are glad they are taking this trip. It feels authentic. It will be good for them.

As they round the corner onto Calle 60 and step up onto the raised arcade, they notice a man in the street approaching quickly and from a disadvantage. His dark skin is tight as leather over his cheekbones, rust blood pulsing thinly and stubbornly beneath. His clothes are white, too large and greased with soil.

"Que bonita. Los dos, bonitos! Amor!" the man calls from behind them, pausing in the street. They look through the V where their shoulders meet, and smile, slightly confused. The man is also smiling as he wraps his arms across his chest to show them what their love looks like. Clasp his hands together, he pulls out at the elbows, meaning something taut and strong. He stops smiling and stands frozen, his neck drawn over the bow of his jutting elbows, his resisting hands. They nod slowly, stop smiling, turn and continue walking.

"That was nice..." the man says uncertainly.

"That was odd," the woman says, then checking her cynicism adds, "but nice." She resolves to take the small, strange scene as romantic—awkward as a tableside serenade, but a good omen.

Though her affair had been brief, it led to a long separation. And after they reunited, though she was almost positive it had been his, she never told him about the pregnancy. From the whole episode, this knowledge is the one bit of privacy she allows herself to keep.

The woman glances back over her shoulder then quickens her pace.

“Baby,” she whispers, “he’s following us.”

The man feels her breath, anxious and warm, on his neck. It was only a brief glance, but she saw it distinctly, the man’s eyes on her, his hand reaching into his pants.

The man and wife look to the street where he is facing them, a broad smile on his tooth-debted mouth. He is small, smaller even than the woman. To keep up with them, he has to lope and jog along sideways. The woman feels her husband stiffen against her side and stop walking. Because he is larger and their arms are entwined, this stops her too. The stranger’s smile drops and his face clouds. He points toward the sky where the sun has just begun breaking through the afternoon storm. He thrusts his finger slowly upwards, following it with his eyes. He clasps his hands again, pulling them taut. This time, however, the hands do not hold. He looks to the couple, wildness vanquishing any trace of kindness from his eyes. He points to his breast, joins again the hands—meaning the man, meaning the woman—and breaks them violently apart.

The couple is alarmed. The woman begins to panic.

“Let’s go in here,” she says, pulling her husband towards the open door of a building, but he resists.

“It’s alright,” he says firmly, taking her elbow. “We’ll keep walking. The man is probably just drunk.”

The stranger climbs the stairs toward them.

At the end of the arcade there is a park with a small church beyond. The husband walks resolutely towards it, obliging his wife to scurry along beside him. She almost wonders if he has forgotten she is there. As they pass a small group of people waiting for the bus, she searches their faces trying to determine if they might help. The husband is not aware of these things. He is only thinking that if confronted, he will try his best to kill the man.

The door to the church is open. There are fifteen or perhaps twenty people scattered among the pews, heads down in prayer. They round the stoup and select a bench a few rows from the back. The woman replays in her head the pantomime describing tearing them apart. Now she is certain, he had been looking at her. They hear the pew creak behind them and know the man is there.

“Let’s get out of here,” she whispers loudly. A few people raise their eyes and watch them as they leave.

CONTINUED

Once on the street, the husband says, "This is absurd. I'm going to ask him if there is a problem." The woman shakes her head. She feels the man behind them.

"Please don't," she says. She points to an upscale bar across the street. "There. We'll go in there."

It is cool and dark and both are temporarily blinded. They don't realize right away that the noise they hear is from the televisions that hang along the ceiling. Women gyrate in short-shorts. Overweight men, weighed down with yellow gold, nod and bark. The contrast with the sunwashed street is startling.

"Let's have a drink," the man says. They opt for a table at the window, but change their minds when they see the man waiting on the other side of the glass. They choose a table in the middle of the room and order two whiskeys with ice.

"Did you see what he had in his pants?" the man asks his wife.

"I thought he might've had a knife."

"Darling, that was no knife."

"I can't believe you wanted to confront him. If we were in New York and some man threatened you, would you confront him?" She means this simply enough.

"No, I suppose you're right," he says, getting up to peer out of the window. "There is some commotion up the street. Everyone is looking that way. I wonder if our friend has gotten himself into some trouble."

The woman feels a small and peculiar relief, the same weight and shape as disappointment.

"I suppose," she sighs, "it wouldn't hurt to leave by the back door."

The drinks come. They each take a sip.

"Oh," says the man, tsking and shaking his head.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

He points to his glass. "The *ice*."

"Señora," the woman calls to the waitress, "el hielo...la agua...es purificada?"

The waitress looks confused, then nods vehemently. "Sí, sí," she insists and walks away. They can't be sure if they have been understood.

DAVID ALLAN EVANS

WHY I LIVE IN THE VALLEY

Every morning,
spring through winter,
I step outside my back door
with a cup of coffee,
to see what I can see.
See what?—
not a backyard fence
or a cement alley.

Instead,
I take a sip of coffee,
and my eyesight
begins to lift and fly
over the meadow, acre
after acre, then soar
into the foothills,
tilting its wings,
then higher,
bolstered by wind,
to the mountain peak,
and higher yet into
the open sky.

Why do I live in the valley?
Ask the eagle.

DAVID ALLAN EVANS

YOUTH-TRAINS

“... only connect.”

—E. M. Forster

(1)

In our 14th summer two friends and
I often took the sticky, creosote-

swabbed steps down the weedy
railroad bluff to our hang out,

The Tracks: shiny rails running
north and south; a low trestle;

a side-tracked, abandoned caboose,
where (we were told but only half

believed) a hobo lived, who was
never home; and the Rat Pond.

(2)

For sheer animal excitement,
we hopped moving boxcars against

our parents' hoarse-throated
warnings; climbed the black ladders

of oil cars and jogged nimbly along
their grated spines, leaping like

Tarzan from car to car to car.
We liked to crouch under the trestle

when a train was coming, clapping
our ears with our hands when

the iron thunder rolled over our
heads; then afterwards come out

to hear—only *clicking, clicking,*
clicking; then we'd put an ear to

a rail (as those living by the ocean
listen to a conch shell), and hear

the same, ever-diminishing *clicking,*
clicking, clicking that never seemed to

die until it got all the way to Omaha.
Near the pond, we placed pennies

on a rail and let a 1,000-wheeled
train flatten them to the thinness of

potato chips, then let them cool
off until we could flip them into

the pond with a thumb. We threw
handfuls of gravel up into the tense

power lines and listened to the
pinging, and then, when the gravel hit

water, the sudden, terse applause.
We skipped rocks—if our aim was

low enough and accurate, the rock
would skip once, rise like a frisbee

CONTINUED

high above the pond, and *sluck*
into the mud on the other side;

or, some days if we were lucky,
take out a vicious, bebe-eyed rat.

(3)

All day all around us, train whistles
blew for the 11th Street crossing;

boxcars *whammed* together like rusty
iron fists, sending a cloud of pigeons

high above the bluff. Whenever a long
Burlington Northern came rumbling

through, the whole world shook, as if
in an earthquake, as we counted

train cars: 83 . . . 84 . . . 85 . . . 86
When stock trains rattled by on the way

to Armour's, cattle stared at us through
the slats like glum, taciturn prisoners.

(4)

By the end of that 14th summer,
not far from the start of manhood,

we must've learned something about
how beginnings connect with endings.

When an engineer, for instance, in a
locomotive's open window—looking

aloof but friendly in his cocked cap—
waved at us . . . and then a little later,

the man on the caboose waved at us
too, we always waved back, both times.

CHIP LIVINGSTON

WHO'S PRETENDING?

We made syrup from rusty trouble,
a lover's shirt, a road, heat and Okmulgee water,
that flat-footed cloud about to splash whiskey puddles
there where grandfather insisted *Fine*,
cupping into beautiful, where grandmother
found her insulated sugar capsule escape,
where people wore shells like grace —
and minutes later, or hours, eyes furiously pursed,
your *What if?* fell asleep, typical
emerging weak like a white scar,
beads lifted like moons, like moments
after a flashforward, another future
soft as the plastic in grandmother's nylons,
when funny was choreographed
toward another *Dear, it isn't you*
morning, manufactured eyes faded,
with enough Indian to wish
water thought water, thought anything
full-blooded as love, as the river —
like that fat, quick-sitting cloud was even interested.

CHIP LIVINGSTON

(WITH FIRE)

Laura Palmer floated up all wrapped in secrets.
The diarist was torn from Hell between Bobby
Briggs and Snake, a strapless paperback
negligee in the grips of a boy
and an older man who thought Laura a thing to play,
a homecoming queen touched

by the devilish one. And Theresa Banks touched
a year before, Theresa Banks' secret,
plastic water-pruned nude, a bruised bitch played
like a restrained hand unrestrained, a girl robbed
of her filmy white dress, taken to Hell in back
of a truckstop at the end of the line by the boy

BOB shattered into erotic slivers, the boy
who as a man came to Laura's bedroom to touch
the hem of the monster he created, fighting back
the urge to pull the secret
over his own head, like the plastic bag BOB
gave Leland Palmer to play

with on his eighth birthday. BOB played
with the bag. BOB played with the boy.
The boy played with the bag and the boy played with BOB.
BOB taught the boy to touch
beneath the plastic, beneath the secret,
or else he-knew-what: BOB would come back.

CONTINUED

And all these years later BOB had come back,
but this time he wanted to play
with Laura, Leland's secret
prize, the possession he suspected of affection for a boy
at school, or worse, a one-armed man touching
the tenderest part of the wound. It was BOB

who burned the cut-red scab, BOB
who took the tortured tattoo back,
removing limbs' liability, the ability to touch
the tongue of God, a taunt to play
with torment, to firewalk a boy
into secret manhood, a girl into a secret.

“Can you keep a secret, Bobby?”
Laura asked, her back to the boy
she played, the boy she touched

with fire.

IAN GANASSI

WHO GETS USED TO IT?

The neighborhood cats
Waiting

At the other end of the block,

Betrayal is as casual
As the pigeons shitting on the woman
Feeding them cheese and crackers in the park.

The countless crowds
In brown leather

He was convinced
That black is better,
With silver studs.

The abacus turning over and
Over like a snow globe

And may all your
Christmases be white.

Better days but then...

It's useless to go on without

The name tags, counting the stars,
The spare
Parts.

CONTINUED

But I'm afraid the word
Is out.

In the one
Hundred room schoolhouse
The little red flags

On the maps of the end of the world.

TONY GLOEGGLER

ONE HIT WONDER

1969. You're fifteen.
The girls have all gone home.
Five guys are trying to stop
Saturday night from turning
into Sunday morning. You're sitting
on the hood of a car, nursing
that last warm six pack. The doors
are flung open and the radio plays
the first chords of *Louie Louie*.
Someone slides down, walks
over, turns it up. You yell out
the names of other one hit wonders:
*Green Tambourine, Red Rubber
Ball*. Pretty soon your friends
jump in with *Expressway
To Your Heart, Walk Away Renee*.

Even now you wonder
what happened to the lead
singer of The Soul Survivors,
the drummer in The Kingsmen?
Are they living off royalties
somewhere in South Florida?
Do they still play second rate
hotels and glitzy casinos?
When they drop their kids off
at school and *Knock On Wood*
comes on, do their fingers drum
the steering wheel? Do their kids
cover their ears and say,
"Oh Dad no, not again?"

CONTINUED

In your old neighborhood
no one remembered anyone
for anything good. John
Taurisani will always be the boy
who pissed his pants and cried
the time Sister Carolina made him sit
in the garbage pail all day. Michael
Towey missed a wide open lay-up
with five seconds on the clock
and we lost the CYO championship.
You can still see Theresa Burns
getting out of her seat,
still hear her saddle shoes
sounding down the empty hall
when her name was announced
over the loudspeaker to please
report to the principal's office
the Friday morning her mother
and father died in a car crash.
And Marshall Perriera's girlfriend
will always be chasing him
down Reeves Avenue, yelling,
"Marshall, I'm fucking pregnant,
you better fucking marry me
Marshall," two weeks before
he joined the marines.

You want to know how often
Scott McKenzie or Percy Sledge
thinks about the time their song
poured out of every car window,
the times they walked across a stage
and girls screamed? Does it feel
good all over? Does it make
their eight hour day selling
real estate or painting houses
that much longer? Do they lie
in bed next to their wives
after making love and feel empty?

You remember Erica more than anything. You still live in the apartment she found in November of 1979. That first night you zipped two sleeping bags together and every whisper grew louder and bigger until the empty apartment felt full. You took the first shower together, washed each other carefully, trying to keep the floor burns from stinging. You even miss the times you were too tired, or angry, or bored, and you just kissed and hugged and went right to sleep like grown ups, like your mother and father, and you still knew you wanted to lie like that until you died.

The last you heard, she's living in Virginia, married to a physics professor with one young son. Most of the time, you hope she's happy, and sometimes when you're driving alone, maybe waiting for a light to change, your fingers move the dial back and forth hoping to find that one tiny station where the DJ's taking only your requests. *For What It's Worth. Little Bit Of Soul. 96 Tears.* And by the time that first forty-five spins from beginning to end you're nineteen, you believe in true love again and that this car,

this highway, can take you anywhere.
When *Sweet Soul Music, I Fought
The Law, Double Shot Of My Baby's
Love* by The Swinging Medallions
fights its way through static
you're sure that somewhere
on Belmont Avenue in the Bronx,
Hawthorne, California or Freehold,
New Jersey, five fat bald guys
whose names you once read
on the back of an album cover
are hurrying home from work
to meet in somebody's garage
or basement. They're plugging in
amps, picking up drumsticks,
strapping on the bass and guitar.
They look at each other, nod.
"One. "Two." "Three." "Four."

TONY GLOEGGLER

SPACES

Since my father died
I call my mother at least
twice a week. I ask
about her day, if her feet
still hurt. I wish
we had more to say. Jazz
plays softly on my stereo
as she tells me the new
burner was installed Thursday,
the garage door is falling
apart and the yard needs
weeding. Soon, she'll realize
she's talking to the wrong son.
I can balance her checkbook,
pitch batting practice
to the grandkids for hours.
But I can barely tell
the difference between a pair
of pliers and a wrench.

Anytime I had to work
around the house, Dad
would end up yelling
and send me to my room,
finish the job himself.
I'd slam the door, strap
headphones on and blast
The Young Rascals. Later,
he'd push open my door,
toss me my fielder's mitt.
We'd race the six blocks

CONTINUED

to the sand lots. He crouched
behind home plate, put down
one finger. I tugged my cap,
started my wind up and hit
his target with the high hard one

he wanted. The Friday before
their anniversary, I asked Mom
if she would be alright, if
she wanted me to come by.
She started to cry. I felt
helpless, tried to untangle
the extension cord. I knew
she would never tell me
what she misses most
about him, or when she feels
the loneliest. I kept
quiet, listened to the music.
Monk was playing a piece
I couldn't name. The spaces
between the notes kept getting
bigger, and somehow I knew
Thelonius had made those places
so my mother could cry
and I could listen.

SEAN KILPATRICK

RAGTIME OF HUSBANDRY

Sometimes I pluck my castration stitches like a banjo.
The only truths worthy of music concern castration.

I whisper to my groin. The chord of every scar is
called wife in the session I built this house around.

“May all your cancers be inoperable.” My bride,
whose tongue along the floor comes in bright slithers

of conversation, a jar for pubic straw, sneaks her speech
impediment under the toilet door. She could out-yell a bible.

She wants me to sneeze until my wounds reopen,
scatter to different areas of the house, lodging complaints.

Fingers scooping clean the cat litter, lips O-shaped
around cabinet handles, arms copulating against wallpaper,

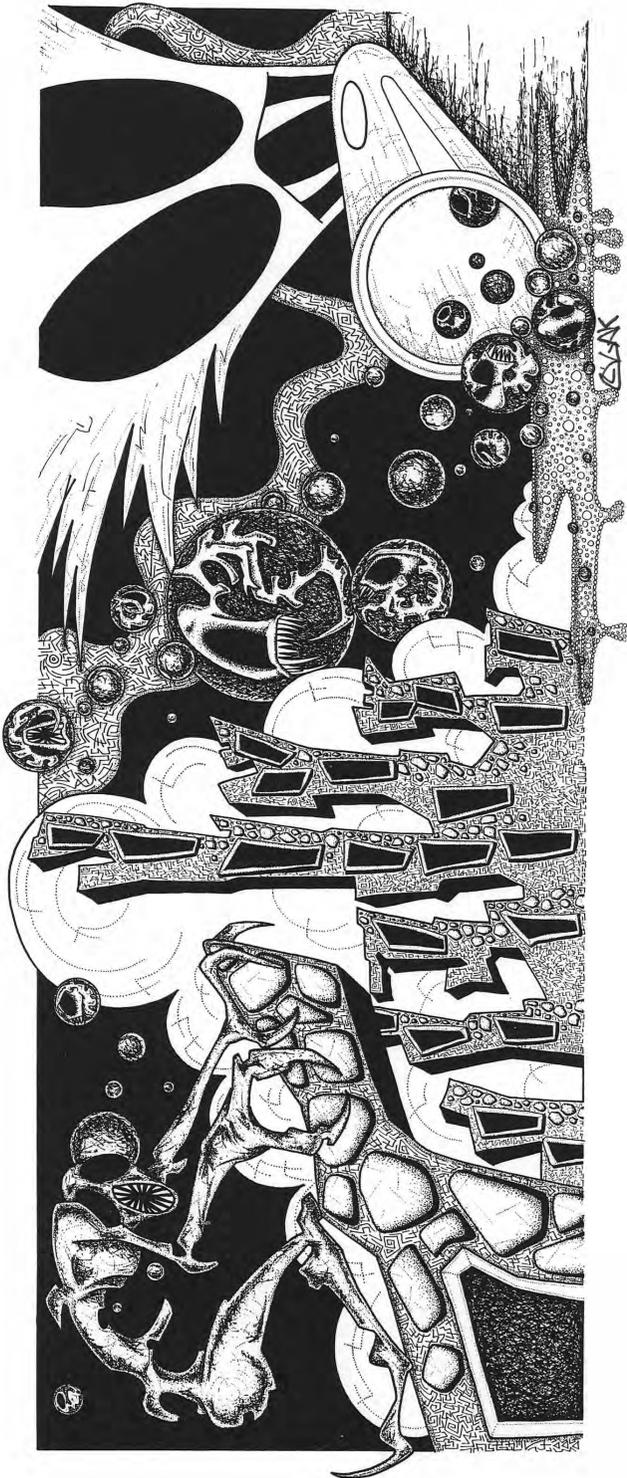
envious rapture of her spit along the woodworks.
The glory of marriage and all its bureaucratic fluid exchange.

Loving someone is a fearful routine. Mutilation
helps pass the time. Talking to oneself in the bathtub.

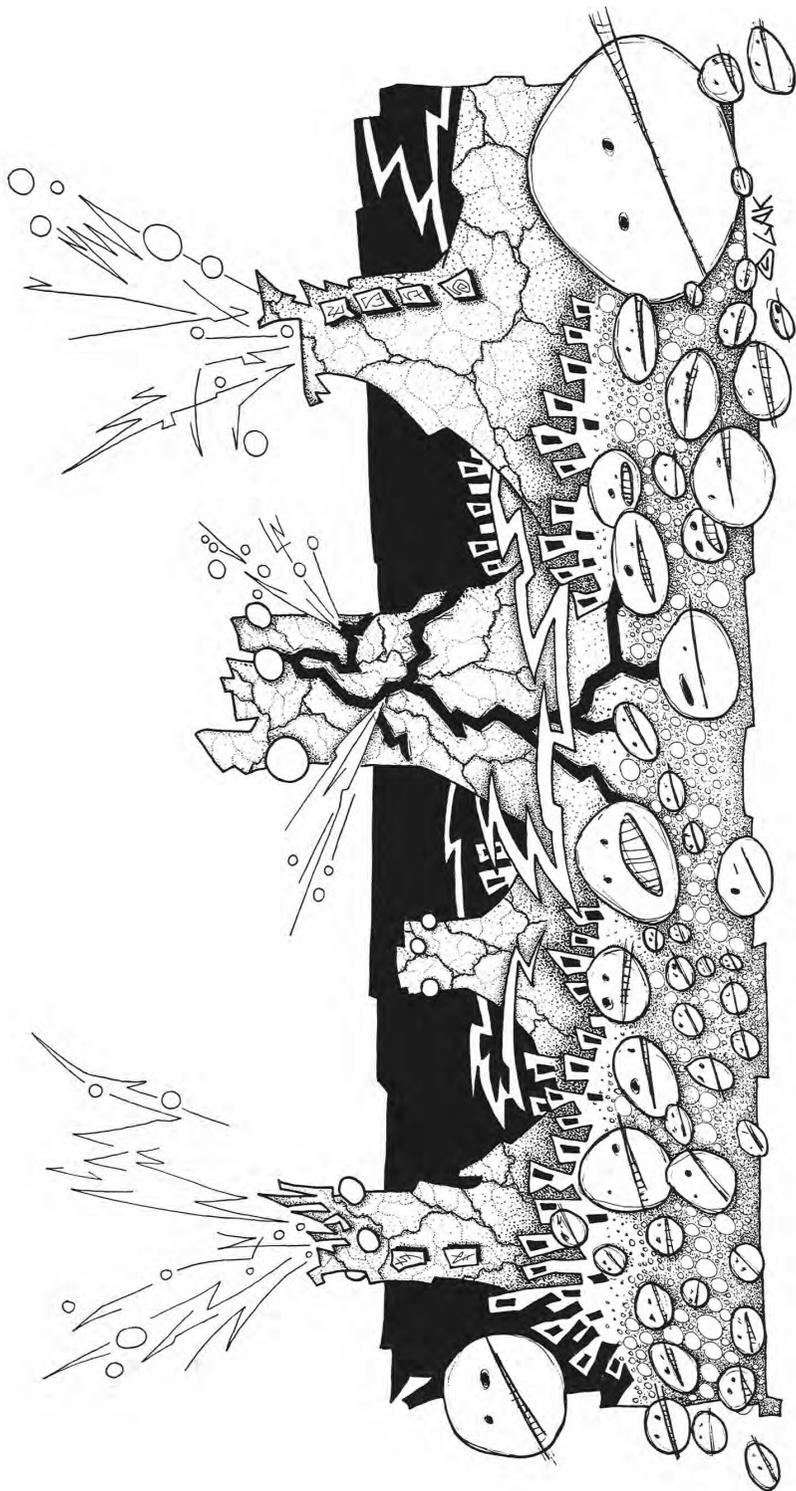
Strumming my parts red, was there ever anything to cut off?
Swell into a pond of instruments, it helps. Helps what?

Now I comb my scalp with blasts from the forty-five.
Plaster and bits of shower guard litter my shoulders.

Girls might love this hair. Wives might barter with the smoke.
Mine is packing her hateful suitcases. Good.



GAK: *Anthrax Ripple*



GAK: *Critical Mass*

CHARLES HARPER WEBB

AFTER THE PARTY'S FALL

We all thought poetry would pour from bakers' lips,
humming charwomen would put Mozart to shame,
and street gangs would graffiti like Van Gogh.

I believed my every comma would sing, my lines
erupt like kids when Teacher leaves the room.
Instead, I miss the censors: Sergei, Boris, Nikolai.

These days we're friends. "Going for coffee?"
they tease. "You mean you're going to America. Ha ha."
"You have a 'headache'? You mean Marx

gives you a pain. That's rich. That's good."
We who were poets now speak truths dull
as a tourist's phrase book: *I don't like borsch.*

*Where is the restroom, please? Before I write,
I invent censors to deceive. Disguise
the President as headcheese in sour cream,*

I tell myself. *Deride the government as purple
staghorn coral. Eulogize a lost capitalist love
with "How fine it was to drill for bauxite there!"*

CHARLES HARPER WEBB

SOMETIMES I'D GIVE ANYTHING

for a fat trout on my line, a sated woman
in my bed, a check that's circled "in the mail"
for years, fluttering down into my hand.

Other times, I barely care. If the brown-
and-iridescent-purple birds that peck the dirt
in my back yard aren't, as Dad called them,

"Canada grouse"—if the Audubon man's
snicker causes Dad's authority of thirty years—
his rules, values, and comfortingly porky

presence, not to mention my idealized image
of youth—to wilt like lettuce in the sun,
what can I do? I can tell Dr. Ornithology,

Dr. Buzzard Pate, Dr. Bird Brain, to take
his proper nomenclature, "Stuff it, and wait
for Thanksgiving!" I can laugh, "What a card,

even with Alzheimer's, my dad." Instead,
I try to look humble but confident,
compliant but firm, flexible but adamantine,

though the maid—stethoscope-to-wall
in the next room—will tell her girlfriend,
loud enough for me to hear, "He looked

like he'd been *crabbed in the jelly*."
I could brood on that for years. Or not.
It all depends. I wish I knew on what.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Karin*, 1989

NICHOLAS D. MENNUTI

BRIGHT FUTURE

Some people crack alone, standing before a mirror, shattered by a single blow.

Some people crack and try to take the whole world with them.

Clay had read that somewhere and now it came back to him.

This was the twenty-first century and the parameters of the world had been redefined, had been multiplied, quantified, split open, and placed under a microscope. The world had to become personalized if it was going to have meaning anymore. It had to transcend the statistical. It was going to require some work.

Arthur Diamond had identified the unique contours of his own world. It was the twenty-eighth floor of a high-rise, the tiers turning the clouds into stairs.

Crazy people like nothing more than to make other people crazy.

Clay had read that somewhere as well.

Arthur Diamond had gone crazy. It was an absurd, brutal love of life carried out to its logical conclusion.

The sound of the first shots sent Clay's heart to the balls of his feet.

Arthur had a leather bag filled with shotgun shells, and a small arsenal of equally effective handguns stowed away in his waistband, in his suit jacket, in his tweed overcoat.

The snow fell against the windows in soft needles. The flakes seemed to have been embroidered. The glass shell of the office quickly became a winter quilt.

Clay hid under a cubicle and found sanctuary under the corpse of a coworker.

About a year ago, Arthur had supervised the build-out of the office. He had picked out every cubicle, every cabinet, every computer monitor and wireless keyboard, every phone console and coffee mug. He had sent the designer back time and time again until they found the

right shade of white. It wasn't exactly white. It was nearly gray, almost opaque, the shade of smoke swirling inside a crystal. He liked to call it celestial.

Arthur screamed as the bullets punched holes in the world he had specified down to the carpet fibers. The scream was unusual, there was a tinge of surprise, there was the strangled awe that accompanies every completed act.

It brought an image to Clay's mind: the sight of a starving man eating his own flesh. A man in agony at what he was doing, but shocked at how much he liked the taste of himself, and forced to watch it all on television.

Clay wondered why when the Titanic was sinking they brought out the orchestra.

Was it to place the passengers back in the seats of silent moviehouses, to release the memories of tramps and urchins shuffling through a city breathing coal, while the violas wailed in the background? It had to be something past being good bourgeois, they had to have been hoping for some kind of transference.

Were the passengers being encouraged to leave their freezing, breaking bodies and become the button-nosed orphans, only six or seven years old, already laughing about life?

He wondered about that.

Fresh blood smelled a lot more like shit than Clay thought it would. Maybe it was the sheer amount of blood that made the stench overpowering. Maybe it was the actual shit present.

Someone let out a sound as if they were breaking open inside.

The helicopters began to circle above the building, the blades sending deep vibrations through the foundation, sending everything on the desks and walls to the floor. The negotiator would be there soon, but it would be far too late.

Maybe that's why, when Arthur's carnage hit its peak, when the dead-shot smoke and strangled pleas and alarm calls became too much to bear, Clay emerged from under the corpse and began to sing at the top of his lungs.

He started to sing anything that came to mind. He never sang the entire song, it was more of a medley, more of a memory jukebox that had short-circuited. He rose to his feet and sang showtunes, sang punk and opera, sang rock and roll, and sitcom themes, and playground taunts. He sang about first kisses and haunted last looks. He belted

them all out, until Arthur's bullets took out the wall behind his head, sending plaster and stucco all over his hair and clothes.

Instead of screaming, Clay screeched in all-out vaudeville:

"Something inside that you gotta say, say it out loud it'll be okay..."

Bloodied hand and fingerprints lined the walls, charting a route of failed escape.

"I'll go the whole wide world just to find her..."

Some people had been blown right out of their clothes, their shoes. The office looked like a dressing room gone awry.

"I will be all right..."

Clay stood face-to-face with Arthur and felt his legs go out from under him.

Arthur grabbed him and held him up.

Clay looked around the office, floor to ceiling, taking in all that had been done, and then his eyes fell on Arthur, who was breathing heavy, who was sweating through his tweed. His thick hair had all flipped to one side of his head. His chin and cheeks were emblazoned with other people's blood.

Arthur held him upright, softly stroking his plaster-covered hair, like a mother comforting a child vomiting for the first time.

When Clay had finished looking he had no response. This was the realm of the horrible silent sublime. He managed to bite his lower lip, shake his head, and say: "Shit, man." All he could say was shit, and he said it over and over again.

Arthur spoke: "Have you ever put your ear to a tree trunk?"

Clay looked at the gun gripped tight in Arthur's hand, and considered his answer.

"If you keep your ear to it long enough, you'll hear a sound. Maybe it comes from deep inside us...but I've always liked to think it's from the tree." He gave Clay one of those full-bodied laughs that he pulled out whenever negotiating with a fence-sitting client.

Then Arthur Diamond kissed him on the forehead, told him that he loved him dearly, and blew his own head clear off his body.

The blood slapped against Clay like a can of warm paint thrown on his face.

Julia shut the bathroom door, shut herself up in the new-morning roasted room. She threw the window open, and took in the sweep of

the yard, the chemical-green grass cut with merciless precision, the sun trapped in swing-set and monkey-bar steel, the soft light show on the still surface of the inground pool. She felt as if someone had wrapped her world with gauze, holding back something hemorrhaging inside.

In the neighbor's yard, an old oak had fallen during a storm that wasn't supposed to happen. The tree was being chopped into transportable sections. The bark was thick and the chainsaws kept stopping. The branches had been bound together with heavy black cord. The carcass was strapped up and transported, soaring across the yard like a forlorn puppet, wires and cables trembling with effort.

She was surprised at how far away she felt.

Her lips were a broken scarlet thread pulled across her face, and the more she studied them in the mirror, the more she bit them.

She had a few minutes to find herself before the children awoke.

There was a set of fingertip-shaped bruises, the shape of a splayed hand, covering the circumference of her arm. It was the place where his hand found home in the night, the space where he squeezed her to death.

She examined her armpits, her breasts, and in particular, a mole on her right hip.

The children stood around the bed and watched Clay sleep in his rumpled suit. They were silent, almost in awe, as they watched the rise and fall of his chest.

She stepped out of the bathroom and saw the stone-still children.

There was something other than love in their vigil around the bed; it was a protective instinct, something almost animal, and it made her nervous.

She didn't know which one of them it was intended for.

She held her finger to her lips and chased them out of the room.

As they followed her down the steps, the children practiced their songs.

Arthur's sister extended a trembling hand towards him. "Clay, this is Natalie." He held the hand and noted the chipped, peach nails. "You remember...Arthur's little girl."

Arthur's family couldn't place a notice in the newspaper, had to hold the funeral after-hours, there were too many death threats. The mourners could only compartmentalize their grief, keep it locked up tight in their throats and hope to make sense of it later.

Clay and Natalie held hands for an uncomfortable amount of time,

long enough for Arthur's sister to feel it necessary to audibly clear her throat. They were too close to one another to talk, too high on death to do anything else. A tacit contract was made in the hidden corridors of the body while the heart slept.

Clay wondered whether it would make things worse if he showed up. Then he thought about how things could possibly be worse, and arrived a few minutes before the viewing ended.

Arthur's wife, Lucille, wept on her older brother's skeletal shoulder. His spine rose through his suit like series of clenched fists. He held her close and told her to give over some of what she was going through.

Natalie sat on the fading floral couch, staring at the rows of empty chairs framing Arthur's casket.

Clay sat alone in the front row on a noisy folding chair trying to figure out whether tears had an identifiable smell, trying to find a moment's quiet in all the silence.

Clay laid on the black leather couch, watching a highbrow talk-show, listening to the sound of rain against the skylight.

His whiskey glass left water beads on the steel coffee table.

He turned up the panel discussion on the pros and cons of cloning. Everyone was there and had something to say.

He took a drink and balanced the glass on his stomach.

The couch was new, and whenever he moved, the leather squeaked and rippled. His body was like a newfound instrument. He killed some time making music with it.

He played around with the tint and contrast of the plasma television, and pretended to be narrating movie trailers:

"We all knew that something man-made would be the end of man," he said in his best Hollywood-melodrama voice, as he turned the panel guests a shade of fallout-white.

He dubbed the show in several different languages and tried to make out as many words as he could.

"The first thing they did when they arrived was turn the sun to dust with their advanced nanotechnology," he said, as he turned the screen to black. "But a group of survivors found the light in the dark."

An ivy-league ethics professor furrowed his brow, leaned in close to the microphone, and said: "When you see your clone for the first time you will die."

He said that and stormed off the show.
A helicopter flew low and rattled the room.

His therapist's office was lined with elephants of all shapes and sizes. Statues and bookends rested on the textbook-lined shelves, framed nature photographs and abstract paintings hung on sober, cherry-wood walls.

The whole room supposedly signified something about eternal return.

"We were talking about cancer," the therapist said, while shifting around in his chair.

Clay looked at the diplomas displayed in gold-gilded frames. "When my mother had it..."

"Right."

"After she came home, she spent most of the time in the dark. She sat around in it, showered in it, lived in it, especially if no one was home."

"That must have been hard." He leaned back in his new chair, trying to break it in. "How old were you?"

"Sixteen. It was..."

The therapist flipped to a fresh page. "In her lymph nodes."

"I was going to say hard."

"Of course."

"She never saw things in the same way again. I always thought that it was misplaced vanity, or theatricality for attention...you know...living in the dark. Your hair's gone, scars all over, something's missing...just this sense of overwhelming loss. Something never to come back again. But I always thought she could have talked it out, could have opened up more."

The therapist scraped his pen against the paper until it came back to life.

"I think I get it now. Some things you can't talk out. It was...shock. Pure and simple."

"Continue..."

"The shock of being alive. It's truly...terrifying. There's something awful about it. How do you even begin talking to someone about that?" He looked around the room one more time. "You don't. You sit in the dark."

Clay was slouched low in his high-backed, executive-chair, watching a game show and playing along. The object was to guess the prices on ordinary household items.

He felt this was time well spent, a good litmus test.

He scrutinized the sleek blender, took into account the variable speeds, then scribbled a number down on company letterhead, and waited for the price to be unveiled.

Arthur's fish-tanks had been moved into his office. Rainbow-toned fish swam through azure water, through pirate ships, picked fights with frogmen. If you held a mirror up to the tank, they would attack their own reflections. He remembered when Arthur told him that.

He readied himself for the revelation. The blender was seventy dollars. His jaw dropped a little in disappointment; he had been way off today.

There was not an inch of paperwork anywhere, and there was a good reason for that. Clay had become the corporate equivalent of curtains. They put him up in the corner office and slapped him with a decorative title.

He had been anointed with corporate diplomatic immunity. Everyone feared he could go Diamond at the slightest provocation. Or, far worse, that if he was trifled with, there could be some beyond-the-grave vengeance.

He could have gone somewhere else, somewhere his actions still carried consequences, as opposed to this glass-enclosed limbo, but he had decided to milk it, if only for a while. Arthur would have wanted it that way.

On the top floor of the multistory parking lot, in the canted rows, in the glare of yellow vapor lights, Clay and Natalie fucked themselves out of their bodies. They did it in the backseat, easy access clothing dangling off their frames.

She had lost a lot of weight lately, and her hip bones scissored out of her clothes, out of her hips, into her lover's skin until one of them screamed out. Her hair swept over her forehead, hiding a long scar. Clay pushed her hair back to look at her face, and she took his fingers into her mouth to stop him.

They finished and sat as far away from one another as two people that close possibly could.

He thought about the day of the scar. The teenaged son of one of Arthur's victims saw her leaving the funeral home, and hurled a rock

at her head. It opened her up, and it took sixty-something stitches to attach her head to her scalp again.

“How’s Kevin?”

“He’s just totally...” She couldn’t find the words, so she started hammering her fist into the back of the passenger’s seat. “He’s missing that. He used to have that. He acts like an older sister when I need a...man.” She lit her cigarette off of his. “That’s what people do when something bad happens...they forget you’re human. Kill you with kindness. My whole family weeps openly when they see me.”

“Yeah.”

“You know the deal.” She slid her panties up her knees. “The tourists of our own lives.”

“Vegas calls, my darling, Vegas screams.”

“The place where everyone’s a permanent tourist.”

A security van scoped out the top floor of the lot, shining beams on anything moving.

They sunk into the seats.

“How’s things?” Clay said with a sad smile.

“I don’t know...how to remember him.”

“Love the sinner, hate the sin, right?”

“That’s what they say.”

He thought about taking her hand and reconsidered. “Something like that, right?”

She nodded. “Is Julia still trying to jump your bones all the time?”

“She keeps bringing home pornos, and body oils, and toys, and god knows what.”

She struggled to pull her leather boots up her sweaty leg. “Maybe she’s just horny. It’s her peak.” She zipped up the side of the boot.

“Maybe she’s trying to convince herself I didn’t die that day.”

“Maybe she loves you despite the piece of shit you’ve become.”

“Maybe.” He looked at her naked legs. “You know...a near-death experience doesn’t always make you a better person.”

“It does always change you though.”

“It does...just not always for the better. This guy at work had a brain tumor...everyone thought he was on the way out, but he beat it. He was a real asshole before, but after that, he was just...un-fucking-bearable. He had beat death you know, what else could this world throw at him?” Clay stubbed out his cigarette. “Then Arthur shot him a year later.”

“Dad always did have a sense of personal justice.”

“Have you thought about what you’re bringing?”

“I’m not bringing anything.”

“Me neither.”

“It’s a molting, when it’s over, I’ll have wings.” She slid her sweater over her torso. “You don’t bring bags to a becoming.”

“There was this woman at my grief group...”

“You went to a grief group?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know that. How long?”

“Couple of months.”

She made her hair an orderly mess. “I went to a grief counselor with my mother. Our session leader was an ex-priest who tried to pick me up.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He left the church because he was lonely. “I said, isn’t an omnipotent being enough company for you?”

Clay laughed. “How did he take that?”

“He said I didn’t have any idea what I was talking about. He was right. But man, did he act like something let loose.”

“Makes sense.”

“He told me to find the freedom behind the pain, then he asked me to go clubbing.”

“I’ve always found pain hiding behind the pain.”

“Wait till you get to Vegas then,” she said.

Soaked and dirty gulls, fresh from a storm, landed on the concrete lip and looked for food.

Clay turned on the radio, and drummed his fingers to the beat.

Natalie watched the birds and listened to the song. “Turn it up,” she said, holding back tears.

Clay turned it up until the car shook with the bass line.

She turned to him and they began kissing again, running their hands along every inch of exposed skin.

It was still too quiet.

Clay stood on the tiled pool deck, drinking whiskey, listening to the ice crack against the warm liquor, looking at the bathing suits drying across the backs of zebra-striped lounge chairs.

The moon gave the water a sable tint. The surface rippled a bit, the

play of folds suggested kind forgetfulness. Clay put his hand in the water and made waves, spirals, lent movement.

He remembered Julia's game, be my mirror.

She would cover his eyes and ask him to describe her from head to toe. I'm fading away from you, she whispered. He told her that a blank surface reflects nothing. She told him that you can will someone out of focus.

Julia sat on the leather couch, her head crowned by pillows, her body wrapped in a soft, white throw blanket.

The plasma television screen was shaky with hand-held camera-work.

Clay poured himself a glass of orange juice, threw his tie over his shoulder to avoid stains, and joined her in the living room.

She was watching the video of her cesarian operation.

Clay stood in the corner, holding himself up against the wall, a tired animal trying to scratch an itch. He held the juice in his mouth until he felt the tart taste of it against his tongue.

She laid on the operating table, a cadaverous madonna, her stomach opened, some sledge-hammered angel.

Her insides looked painfully soft, pink, fleeting next to the spotless, sterilized gray.

Clay had shot the video from above the operating table, a nauseous god's eye-view, at the behest of their surgeon who said they wouldn't want to forget this moment, even if it wasn't natural childbirth.

"They took out everything that made me, me." She turned away from the television. "And then they pulled out her life."

"They did," Clay said, trying to back further into the wall, searching for balance.

"Here comes the part where you pass out."

For over five minutes, the camera held a dead-time shot of the black and white hospital-tile floor.

She laughed to herself.

He fished around in his pocket. "Have you seen my cigarettes?"

"I took one this morning and left them on the counter."

She heard him leave the house without making a sound.

"Maybe I should start acting again," Natalie said.

She had been a burgeoning child-star until her voice changed to

sultry smoke, until her breasts made themselves known. In her breakthrough role, she played a Rilke-spouting child genius in a family of depressed overachievers headed by two distinct underachievers. She was also the president's daughter in a European-bankrolled version of a summer action movie that went straight to video. She spent most of that school-year blindfolded and handcuffed to a bed in the middle of a desert beset by sand storms. Shooting was erratic at best. The budget was bloated. The director was old-school, shlock Von Stroheim, so the blindfold was only removed for her to send videotapes, in character, to Arthur and Lucille, assuring them that she was in good health, that the criminals were kind, and that they should free a terrorist cell being held in Munich.

"Fuck it. I did that already."

"Why did you do it? Arthur didn't care if you were a star," Clay said.

"I don't know why."

"Pretend you're on a talk-show."

"You want my talk-show answer?"

"I'd prefer the real one, but I'll take the talk-show one."

"I heard this quote once...James Dean isn't dead, he's on my daughter's wall in a cheap, chrome frame. It made a lot of sense to me at the time."

"Me too."

"I was a precocious little bitch."

"JFK, can you hear me?"

Through the static, Clay recognized the voice.

He started doing a contorted reception dance on the side of the road, jumping a few feet in either direction, craning his neck, searching for a signal.

"Are you there Mr. Kennedy?"

"I'm right here," Clay said.

"It's me, Stone."

"I know."

"Get over here, bro. My neighbor's about to bite it."

Stone called him JFK because Clay had asked him to. They had met in a strip-club, bonded over whiskey and beer, played some post-apocalyptic pinball together, made it safe for the world to start over again.

Clay told him that he had bungled the gift of death, told him that if he had died when he should have, he would have been far too young, but now his death would be nothing but sad formality, something fulfilled forty years ago.

Stone had trouble with abstractions, so Clay brought in Kennedy.

What would it have been like if Kennedy had survived the assassination, if the bullets had all been half-an-inch to the right? What if he had come on television and told everyone that it sure had been close, but it would all be fine? Nobody would have believed it, because they saw the tapes, saw his head fly off, saw Jackie jump out of the limo to get it. They had processed the images and grieved.

There was no going back.

He told Stone that he was afraid, that his daughters walked through him. If he wasn't good enough to get taken out in a hail of bullets, what in the fuck did death have planned for him? When you bungle the gift of death what else is left but to disappear?

Stone didn't get all of it, but he started calling him JFK anyway.

Stone's apartment complex was a stucco sandcastle a mile from the beach. Clay could smell the salt in the air. He could hear the waves crashing against the police sirens.

There was a chipped, drained inground pool with a rusted mountain bike at the bottom. Lounge chairs missing cushions lined the cement deck, as if they had been arranged for a meeting that no one had bothered to attend.

Stone locked the door behind him and started right in. "Shit is goin' down, my brother." His tattoos had begun to fade under his sun-baked-skin. He had a single gold hoop in his ear, and a dead front tooth.

Clay looked around the apartment, it had gotten worse since he had seen it last. The film of dust over the furniture, television, and framed photos had run out of room on the surfaces, and begun to fall to the floor in a fine rain.

Stone went to the fridge and pulled out two beers.

There was nothing in there except for the beer, a box of baking soda, and a half-emptied bottle of green-tinted antacids, so he didn't have to feel around for very long. "So I'm on the bed listening to my neighbor fuck this guy."

"Status quo," Clay said.

“Fuck you,” he said through a smile, and handed him his beer. “All of a sudden...God damn boom...her husband barges in.”

Clay listened to the moths slamming themselves against the plastic covers of fluorescent lights.

“He doesn’t say anything except...Get this shit...I’ll be back at four with my twelve gauge.”

“Why did he tell them what time he’d be back?”

“He’s a good guy.”

“I always thought that the element of surprise was an important part of a double homicide.”

“It’s a hard thing, killing your wife. It requires some meditation.”

Car lights shone through the curtains, throwing shadows across the walls, across their faces.

“What if they escape?”

“That’s probably what he’s hoping for.” Stone looked around the apartment and fell silent for a few moments. “Like I said, he’s a good guy.”

“So what are we supposed to do if he comes back with a shotgun?”

“Well...we have to stop him.”

“Of course,” Clay nodded in disbelief, then ran his hands through his hair. “We’ll just stop him.”

“We have to stop him, right?”

Clay walked over to the television and cleared away a patch of dust so he could watch it. “Why not?” He sat on the edge of the bed and opened his beer.

Stone sat on a rocking chair that was missing an arm. He turned up the television and sang along to a sitcom theme.

Clay banged against the paper-thin wall and said: “Don’t worry, you’re saved.”

He and Stone shared a laugh.

Stone shut the tropical-themed blinds.

Clay pulled out a deck of cards and practiced dealing to himself.

Stone’s eyes began to close over.

“Don’t you fade on me,” Clay said.

“I’ve been writing some things down.”

“Yeah?”

“About my Dad and this piece of shit car that he drove all his life. Fucking thing was held together with duct-tape,” Stone said.

Clay shuffled the cards and began again.

“The car was just duct-tape and a fan-belt by the time he died.”
Stone was lost within a few minutes.

The sun sliced through the threadbare curtains, bathing the room in a muted orange glow.

A thumb-sized palmetto bug crawled up the white phone cord. Clay killed the beer and watched the bug walk the line.

He found the wronged husband’s car in the parking lot. He had fallen asleep in the front seat, the shotgun lying across his knees. The car window was wide open; the beer was still on his breath. Clay learned his name from his dark-green gas station attendant’s shirt.

The ghost of the sun made rainbows in the gasoline pools around Clay’s feet.

Julia was sleeping stark naked above the electric blue sheets. The bedroom window was wide open, waiting on a lover. Clay laid down beside her, but left room for the sword.

In and out of consciousness, through cries and whispers, the outside world slowly entered into his dreams. The sound of children boarding the bus; the slow, steel, garbage truck symphony. He didn’t mind though. As of late, his dreams had been cruel. They lacked the essential qualities of dreams, the reckless abandon, the fever logic, the unconscious tug of war; they were banal, horrible, etched in stone.

Julia had a voice that got bigger the softer she tried to speak. Her words entered through the floor and hung to the ceiling.

Her sense of urgency forced him out of bed.

The sliding glass shower door was open, and dripping with ropes of water. Her black towel laid on the white floor, knotted, still damp with her fading footprints.

She spoke to his mother on the phone, and he could hear it through the floor, could feel the subtle vibrations under his feet. He could only hear the answers, but it was easy to invent the right questions.

“Maybe you’re the only thing that’s keeping him with us.”

“I’ve considered that,” Julia said.

As he tested the water with his toes, he saw himself in the mirror.

He prayed the dark circles under his eyes would catch his face when it fell, prayed the lines would intersect, weave, and hold it all together.

“And?”

“It’s just too awful to consider,” Julia said.

He held himself up against the clear shower bar and buried his head under the cold stream.

Clay went into the kitchen to fix a drink and felt the midnight dread begin.

It was a feeling, a foreboding clinging to the corridors and hallways, to the shadows, to any inch of available space.

He tried to give it a persona: a bald, androgynous figure with metal-tinted teeth. It wore a cloak with the hood pushed far over its face. It usually sat on the stove, kicking loudly against the grill, demanding undivided attention.

One time he saw the expressionless face, white like chalk, tunnel-eyes rimmed with silver, nothing there except everything, the story of centuries in those sunken cheeks. He thought he would be scared, but he felt only heavy loss. He thought he would scream, but he wanted to take it into his arms.

The house fed off his fear, he felt it shiver.

He stared at the children’s drawings, the report cards, the vacation photos, the kitschy magnets, all stuck to the surface of the steel refrigerator. He was hypnotized by his own life.

The moon was so stunning, he feared it demanded a sacrifice.

He walked up the carpeted spiral steps and listened to the sound of his steps. It was important to have that verification.

He reached his daughters’ room and stomped his feet to let them know he was out there. They were singing to one another, trading off the solo parts, hitting all the right notes. He stomped louder and they couldn’t possibly have cared less.

Julia had fallen asleep on her stomach. The television was paused on a pornographic image and bathed her naked back in its soft, silent glow. Two standing hairless men were holding a tiny woman between them. They were both inside her, taking turns pulling her hair. The woman’s face revealed nothing, and it was probably better that way.

He watched Julia breathe, studied the geometry of her body against the bed frame, traced the lines of her back and the bumps of her spine as if they were some lunar landscape, and then pulled the silk sheet up to her waist.

In the center of a storm, Julia had chosen to believe in her body, to beach herself in flesh, to place all her hope in a messy shell.

His car-keys rested on the bedside table. Some people crack alone. He had only to avoid mirrors.

Clay sat on Natalie's bed, atop black sheets turned stiff from dead sweat, with his chin against his knees, trying to light a cigarette.

She had her head turned away from him, facing the bare white wall. "They found another planet, you know?" She reached her hand out and grabbed a falling ball of dust. "It's nothing but massive rocks, and this hyper-blue water, and the rocks are capped with snow."

"We really live in the armpit of the universe," he said.

"Think of how beautiful it once was to fall this far."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"No. But not everything should."

They listened to the hard rain against the windows.

"Kevin asked me to marry him," she said.

Clay opened the bedroom window, stuck his cupped hands out into the rain, and collected a puddle. "What am I supposed to do with that?" He said, and ran the water through his hair, and slicked it back off of his forehead.

"I've been meaning to ask you something," Stone said.

"Yeah?" Clay lit a cigarette. "Got an ashtray?"

Stone made a motion with his hand that meant his whole apartment was an ashtray. "I've been meaning to ask you this because you're smart."

"Sure."

"I was watching this special and they were talking about intelligent war machines."

Clay nodded.

"About how some day they might not need an army, just unmanned planes, and I was wondering why that's such a bad thing. Why would it be bad to not have all those young people cut down...just send out the planes?"

"I guess they're worried that if there's no lives at stake they might not think twice about going to war," Clay said.

"I don't think that's it at all. Not at all."

"No?"

"I think it has something to do with..."

He held Julia's scraped-up hand inside his own, let her balance on him to take the pressure off her sprained knee. The police had put iodine and gauze on the gash on her chin. The side of her face was red and raised with abrasion. He opened the car door for her, fastened the seat-belt across her chest, and when she wasn't looking, he gritted his teeth so hard that he had to close his eye.

"He was just someone I started talking to on the Internet."

Clay was scanning the radio, searching for a song he could stand. "What?"

"He was no one, just someone from the Internet."

He checked the rearview. "Did he hurt you?"

"Look at me."

He turned to her.

"Ask me again," she said.

"Did he...hurt you?"

"Yeah. He hurt me."

Clay heard her trying to stop the tears by holding her breath.

"You don't have to tell me what happened," he said.

"What if I want to?"

He stepped on the gas. "If you want to...but you don't owe me an explanation."

"Why is that?"

"You just don't."

There was a knowing silence during which they both held private arguments, and then she wanted to testify.

"He started to go down on me. Then he tossed me out of the car, onto a pile of gravel that was going to be used to fill in a hole. He took off with everything including the car," she said, sounding like something off a police blotter. "Your blinker's still on."

"I'm sorry."

The tears started, but she didn't make a sound. She held it all inside, but had to give herself the tears. "He was just a fucking kid...barely out of high school. He was home on winter break...just looking for something to do. I remember that." She felt the warm tears against her wound. "I would be...with you."

"Where are the girls?"

"My mother's."

“Don’t cry.”

“Why not?”

“Please don’t cry.”

“I can’t not cry.”

“It’s not worth it.”

“It is though. It is absolutely worth crying over. If this is not worth crying over than what the fuck is?”

Clay pushed in the car lighter and let the cigarette dangle from his lip. “I don’t know.”

“The problem is that pretty much everything is worth crying over, but common decency dictates that you pick your moments.”

His secretary had put his sandwich on a white plate rimmed with blue flowers.

He took a bite and turned on the news.

A college girl had been raped and murdered. Then her corpse had been raped. A recent picture of her flashed on the screen. He studied it and wondered on what fucking planet Arthur had left him on to die of natural causes.

He picked up the phone and verified his flight information.

He decided to sleep away the rest of the day.

He knew by his inner clock when the sun would start to become the stars.

On television, the police had posted a phone number for tips leading to the capture of the college girl’s attackers.

Clay thought about what his father used to say about death.

Do whatever you want because you’re just a number in a book, and when they turn the page, you’re up. Death has no memory. Death has no mercy. It’s the opposite of passion, it’s perversion. Duty without pleasure, faceless fucker, all passion swallowed up to the logic of a turning page, meaning losing to motion. Death had grandfather logic, great-depression-logic; the fortitude of a factory worker coughing up coal mine dust during dinner.

Death was just another punch-the-clock job.

Landing lights flashed in cloud crevices.

He was near the airport, far from home, when the joy-riding kids pulled up alongside him. The light was red; they honked and shouted; they wanted to race. Their car was track-lit, covered in off-road mud,

bouncing with base. It was their parent's old ride with some allowance money dumped into it.

The light turned green and Clay floored the car, almost flooded the engine, felt the acceleration in the pit of his stomach, right where he wanted to feel it. The floorboards hummed, the wipers vibrated against the windshield, the highway was a rearview neon stain. He left the kids far behind before they knew what happened.

He steered with his knees and whipped the car onto the turnpike. A world of corpses and chiropractors, of used-car lots with prices spray-painted on windshields in used-car salesman calligraphy, of twenty-four-hour supermarkets stacked like resort hotels.

He got on his cellphone while he passed miles of storage space; steel apartments for all the shit you can't fit in your home.

Natalie was half-asleep when she picked up and he said only one word: "Vegas."

He saw a cardboard city; saw perimeter fences screening in now-toxic waste and not-yet vintage auto parts; saw a burned-down movie theater with the titles permanently burned onto the marquee; saw a playground that looked like the rusted innards of a rocket; saw an overpass that said Heather gives good head; saw a highway turned into a concrete bathroom wall.

The wall behind the receptionist's desk was a mural of the moon shining into a still blue sea, the stars tossing and turning inside the crests of smooth waves. Clay had no clue what this had to do with selling insurance, so he assumed that the desired effect was purely medicinal, all their hope placed in the fact that no one ever shot up an office with a low-tide sea mural.

"Good morning, Mr. Donnelley," the receptionist said, her smile wide with teeth, her lips underpinned with fear.

He was sick of being the company alien. "I'm a little down, today." He wanted to have some fun. "A little...sad, maybe..."

She smiled as far and wide as her face would allow.

He kept his face in a tight, menacing pout, until her face was nothing but white teeth, until her grin turned to pain, and he could see tears of effort welling.

"Better," he said, as he walked past her.

Her mouth twitched for the rest of the day.

Julia sat at the kitchen table, nursing a glass of white wine, kicking her heel against the steel leg. She filled the glass up again, and watched the bubbles play.

Clay stood by the kitchen island, his head haloed by pots and pans. He watched her drink the wine, watched the tension play on her forehead.

“Tell me something. Something else,” she said.

“What?”

“Anything, any single thing except what you’re telling me now.”

“I didn’t mean for it to happen this way.”

“What did I just say?”

He ran the tips of his fingers over one of the pot handles. “I remembered something the other day.”

“Remember gently,” she said.

“It was something that made me very happy.”

She couldn’t find that time.

“It was the way you used to come to my door when we were in college. You never knocked. You’d just stand outside and yell “knock, knock” until I answered it.”

She got up and didn’t push her chair in: “I’ve gotta get to the school, the girls are already there.”

“How do their costumes look?”

She shoved the car keys into the pocket of her overflowing purse.

“I’d die for you, Jules,” he said.

“But you won’t live for me.”

“I didn’t know that it was something you could...forget how to do. But you can.” He whispered: “I can’t...I’m so sorry.”

She couldn’t turn around, her heart had gone to her feet for him, and he didn’t get to see that anymore.

“Am I early?”

Natalie opened the door dressed in ripped jeans and a white, ripped tee-shirt. “I was just making dinner.”

“That’s sweet, but we’ve gotta go,” he said. “The skies await.”

Her arm blocked the door; there was a disconnected look on her face.

He looked past her and finally asked:

“So what’s Kevin having for dinner?”

She moved her arm and let him inside the house.

“So when were you going to tell me?”

He saw the sliced cheese and crackers and uncorked wine on the kitchen table.

“I don’t know...I never really expected it to go this far,” she said.

“That’s great. That is...great.”

Her frustration with herself was palpable. “What do you want from me?”

“Same thing you want from me. Strength. We don’t have to stay together forever, I never expected that.” He watched her face, considered his next move. “We just need each other to make the first step towards freedom. Freedom is...it should be scary.”

She started to set the table again.

“Fucking stop that,” he said.

“Look Clay, I understand, the grief, the suffering that you feel is horrible. I can’t even begin to conceive of what you saw and where you’ve been since.”

“But you can.”

She let out a meek, but knowing smile. “But I really can’t.”

“So you’re sending me out alone.”

“You’re not alone.”

“It’s totally normal to be scared.”

“I’m not scared, you are, and you have every right to be. What you’re learning is more than anyone should ever have to.”

He yanked a chair out from under the table, sat back, and put his feet up. “And what’s that?” He kicked the plate of cheese and crackers onto the floor. “You child.”

“That the pain is going away. That the grief goes away. And that most of all, it can be... missed. That it can make you very angry as it goes. That it becomes its own form of vanity.”

He slammed his open hand down on the table.

“The hole closing can hurt more than the opening,” she said. “And the shame is unbearable.”

He threw the chair over on its side. “This is illogical. Our lives. You and me. The lives we are leading, right now, at this moment, are...illogical.”

“And going to Vegas is logical?”

“It’s more logical than staying.”

“I don’t want to be logical.” She let her eyes fall to her feet. “I want to live.”

He got up and overturned the table. “We don’t belong here.” It fell to its side and did a slow roll.

“But I can’t stop trying,” she said.

“Well that’s fucking tragic.”

“It is. But it’s living.” She walked towards him. “I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

He walked into the living room and turned the place upside down. He tore the pictures off the walls, cleared the surface of all the tables with fury, took great pleasure in breaking glass.

Natalie stood there and let him have his time.

“I tried to be a happy dead man,” he said, and threw over the bookshelf.

“Now I’m definitely going to have to tell Kevin about us.”

“Fuck Kevin, fuck, fucking Kevin.”

He was about to kick in the television screen. “Stop it, please,” she said, and began to lose it. “Please go. Please.”

He knew he had hurt her. There was something about the way she said please that went beyond her, beyond them, it was a bomb to their hermetic system. She had shut-it-down with the flick of a switch, with a well-placed plea.

She curled into herself, fell to the floor.

“Please, please.”

He went over to the fallen kitchen table, sifted around the ruins, and found the bottle of wine. He tucked it under his arm and left through the front door.

“What a fucking disappointment,” he said, without turning around, not necessarily directing it at Natalie.

It was illogical to live like this, but she had to do it.

It was junkie living, vampire living. It was loving the sound of your own breath. It was loving the feel of the sun on your skin. It was loving it all so much to find a reason to go on every day. It was illogical, but she was up to it. All it took was one reason. No matter what, there had to be one reason. Nothing would get in her way, once she decided she wanted to live.

Clay stood at the front door, and the high-beams washed over his frame. He held up his hands and the wine bottle, caught.

Kevin pulled into the driveway and bolted out of the car, not both-

ering to turn it off, not bothering to ask Clay who he was. He already knew or he didn't care. Either way, Clay knew that with a single choice, that by running right past him, that by not stopping to hit him, Kevin had killed whatever remained of the whole thing.

A woman in Clay's grief group said that after she survived a plane crash, a whole new world opened up to her. It was a world where you exist as a collapsed version of your former self. A world where you watch yourself on television. A world where the rules of the game were a secret to you. Her words weren't meant to be reassuring, but they did assure him that the new life was never going to be boring. You had gotten too close to the object of the game, and you couldn't play the same one again.

And there was freedom in this. And there was beauty in this. And he heard himself start to cry.

He cried because the beauty in it was so awful and ugly, like a flight of birds in perfect formation soaring over the body of a dying soldier, far from home, who had never learned love.

Kevin rushed inside and fell to the floor next to Natalie. She crawled into his lap. He put her head against his and held them together.

Clay slogged across the lawn in a series of short-circuited movements, lost within his own body.

Because terror always accompanies freedom. And freedom will always have an element of failure. And change and unwanted clarity are the only absolutes. And the only thing left is to refuse to disappear quietly.

He tried to compose himself but he couldn't, because all is calm and yet everything is passing away underneath it, and he wanted to be like Natalie.

These were the rules of the old game, and he had forgotten how awful and unforgiving they were.

"Why won't you let me love you?" He heard Kevin say to her, as he pulled her in closer to him. "Why won't you just let me love you?"

He heard Natalie convulse with grief. It was illogical, but he too would have to do it.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Silver Maiden*

KARL GLUCK

FROM POEMS FOR VIVIAN (BORN JULY 20, 2004)

1. Post-Partum Depression (before)

As my wife grows larger,
The life is being sucked from me,
I shrivel like a balloon stuck with a slow pin,
wheezing like a mosquito.
Now there is nothing else but her, the baby.
The plants have to go, my bicycle has to go,
All to make room for tiny Vivian!
Then mommy becomes the baby,
she needs eggs on toast in the morning,
milk, water, water “and can you get me another
glass of water, please?” “Sing me to sleep, rub
my tummy, sing to Vivian, say, ‘Vivian
time to go to bed!’” She’s God these days,
rolling around in her liquid heaven,
occasionally punching a fist
to the surface, you can almost hear her
grunting like the monkey who adorns her birth year.
But I was born a dragon, notoriously impatient
With little girls screaming, “I don’t need your talk
About your ‘personal space,’ your friends,
Your evenings out! They’re out! out! out!”
says Vivian the Ventriloquist pulling mommy’s
mouth strings,
“you all belong to me now!”

KARL GLUCK

NEW JERSEY TURNPIKE EXTENSION, JULY 11, 2004

I asked it, the speechless piece of paper in front of me,
Is Dad to blame for the car he lost control of,
The car that slid across six feet of early morning grass
into oncoming traffic, slammed into a black compact,
sent a woman to the hospital for a month?

She lived. He did not.

Please tell me it was not a selfish
fumbling for a cigarette, the map
on the seat next to him, or worse yet,
a gulp of strong drink.
The autopsy report said only that there were injuries
To his abdomen, his liver was punctured.

It said nothing about last thoughts or deeds.

We found a hubcap in the grass,
A pool of dried blood on his glasses,
Next to the accelerator, a pack of baby socks
On the front seat, for the granddaughter
He will never see.

Tell me he didn't do it
On purpose, that the death
Of two wives and all the years
Of loneliness did not suddenly become
Too much that he decided
To take himself out.

Let me hear that it was a heart attack,
A swerve to miss a barrel rolling off
A truck in front of him, a frightened dog
Running across the asphalt, anything.

The autopsy report stares me in the face,
Dumb as a tombstone,
And says nothing.

CHARLES FREELAND

THE CASE OF THE DANISH KING HALFDENE

Navigational skills are not required. Where you are going is the least of your concerns. Even when the night is something familiar. The stars ending their misery as quietly as possible. The sparrows settling on the eaves of houses where people are just beginning to realize they have no board games that solve anything. They have no sense of what might replace the cupboards. Perhaps we are too clever and the world, a simpleton, resents us the only way it knows how. Actively. And with tree limbs. But there are those who will insist whatever makes the decisions does so with intent. And they often cite with fascination the case of the Danish King Halfdene. Punished with madness. Afflicted by an odor that made his presence unendurable to others. He knew we are alone from start to finish and the finish is always yet to come. But suppose it isn't. Suppose the crabs have already come ashore and the veins in the waitress's legs are visible. What then? How would the calendar be any different? It doesn't matter if the mirror is the length of the restaurant. If the pitcher is half-full of vinegar. What catches our attention when we are looking at ourselves is something that doesn't belong there. Some quirk. The intermittent twitch of an eyelid, say, at the approach of a cold front. Or just before a plane crash. The prediction of calamity when those around us are convinced there is someone watching over them. Or at least paying enough attention to know they haven't had eggplant since they were children. What we decide to do with such things— the tendency for the train to arrive before its sound, the water to climb the stairs like a lizard— depends on our view of signs in the first place. Whether we even think them possible. To doubt them, I suppose, is to wander the forest with a flashlight and several sets of batteries just in case. And a tent that folds up into a packet. It's an approach I'd recommend for those who don't care much for daylilies. For those afraid they may have stumbled, by accident, into the wrong existence. And will have to stay here. Will have to make do the way a fisherman must sometimes settle for skates.

CHARLES FREELAND

WHEN THINGS ARE RIGHT THEY LOOK RIGHT

The numbers suggest futility. A troublesome flood. And it's unclear if you are to carve your initials into the tree trunks when it's snowing and everything looks quite bare, or whether they belong on cufflinks or barley, things so miniscule even their inventors would have trouble inventing them again. Of course, the investigation must run its course. Otherwise, there will be weeping in the streets from frustration. And the pulling out of hair. In great, curly handfuls. Throwing it at the apple trees in hopes that it will stick there like strands of DNA, and alter not just its appearance, but its very definition. So that one can no longer speak of the man who stands at attention when he should be leaning over the table. Offering a view of the bottle. Of the muscles in his arms. He is not the same man he was this morning. Not even the same who shivered when he walked past the mirror, afraid, apparently, he would see himself in it and remember the jibes aimed his way in grade school. What's rheumy and made of lamb chops? What's the Eiffel Tower doing over there?

JAMES GRINWIS

CONFIGURATION OF THREADS

The saplings clink like
glass antlers. There's some
sad wind, a bug hovering,
and a torn paper plate.
The man who has walked
miles in quest of spring
stops. His mirages seem
to have depth to them.
As an apple rolls away,
a girl in a fraying smock
is reading. This man
has watched distance squish
the past's mangy mop,
and a soothing uncertainty
that blinks. What's hoped for
is a box to hold things,
and because spring takes long
he's gone walking. It's long,
this walking, but distance
soothes, like a warm shroud;
gently, with breeze. He cups his hand
and takes water from a stream.
To swallow strength, to push it on.
How weakness superimposes
itself, like Cleopatra's palimpsest.
Like Cleopatra in bed, like Cleopatra's asp
cupping one weighty, polished
breast. A jewel bug lands.
Which instant has been spent
so long in? Some worms crawl
from the sand, the mountain

mumbles unusual names
and syllables. He stares at the mountain
and makes it invisible.
There is the white earth
and the cold heaps of other mountains.



GAK: *Cities*

JAMES GRINWIS

HEARTS OF LOS ANGELES

From his perch in the heights, the boy opened his hand, palm up, and saw how it stood out against the background of minuscule trees and buildings and fields 2000 feet below. His screenplay, stuffed in his back pocket, released some of its sheets to the wind.

It never went anywhere, that screenplay. Palm trees poked out of the screenplay and wagged their shaggy heads. Who's really happy? they seemed to pose to the walkers on the boulevard.

Countless were the screenplays somewhere at home, in some secret nook, a space where the dream meets its own flowering but never takes hold, a brine-life clinging to a strip of sargassum until a raven swoops down and clutches what it wants and takes it because he wants it.

*

The screenplay grew on top of its elephant like a brown-green wart. It didn't believe in situations or nerves because it stood above everybody, safe on the elephant's back. Stop. Spoon levels of soup and watch it dribble down the chin onto the tabletop. Wait. The brown bear is closing on the grouse. The snowstorm came to kill off the fleas though it did not mean to.

CONTINUED

*

Long after midnight, the screenplay awoke
with an epicurean on its arm. They decided,
the extras, to detach. They were on their
girlfriends' floors. The screenplay, long
after midnight, walked into town
wrapped in a coat made of bees.
A revolver was tucked in one pocket.
The screenplay watched, in an alley,
a strange woman apparently fornicating
with a corpse. The screenplay
pulled the revolver out.
Three chapters unloosened
and clattered to the pavement.

*

The scenario of the screenplay involved
some women and men in various
entanglements. It was hard to see
that the sub-text was that nobody
suffers like the poor, and extinction
happens in the world. But someone,
after a late night viewing in suburban
Ohio, posed this question.
The screenplay nodded,
smiling from sleep.

*

Like a curl of smoked eel, the screenplay
became digested in the gullet
of a tropical bird. It's head began to pound.
The acids dripped from the ceiling
and ooze spread over the screenplay's heart.
The lights appeared
to fluctuate, first slightly brighter
then slightly more dim. Who
ripped the heart out? Who pretended
to be sore? There were no replicas
in the fried seafood shack. A swollen fruit
hung from a string.

*

The nephew of the screenplay wore a yellow egg
on its head, held secure by four pieces of
twine which came together
in a bow under his chin. The nephew
of the screenplay felt he was living in
an illegitimate place where
he couldn't think or have any kind
of meaningful conversation. Gradually,
the sky grew blurry with flying worms.
If you can get there, you can get there.
He removed his egg hat, and felt sorry.

*

It had a telephoto lens, the screenplay.
He zoomed up to people
then zoomed back. His arms were like skewers
of sausage and his neck was so long.
He looked like a bug, zooming up to people
here and there, listening to stuff
through his headphones. Or was it
bad talk radio. Or was it a stranger's
imaginary mind-map being channeled
from some promontory far, far away,
where a woman before an ice bowl
takes the tongs and lifts a few more cubes,
thinking that this was quite
a place for not much.
The woman was all eyes.
The place was an eyeball,
looking back.



Spiel: *The Last Angel Sings*

TED JONATHAN

BALLAD OF CALEB BELLEU

He was ready to give her a goodnight kiss and be on his way, when she invited him in. Right after their first date, a movie, “American Graffiti,” up on Fordham Road at the Capri. The Bronx, in April of seventy-three.

He, was Caleb Belleu. An intensely guarded, directionless 18-year-old. And, his nubile brunette date was 17-year-old Shelly Gold. Her house was exactly eight blocks and a park from “the schoolyard” of P.S. 89. Where he hung out, among a dangling bunch of drug wrangling girl conquerors.

Shelly loved the movie and loved him. Why not, Caleb was a naturally-muscled pretty boy who exuded an attractive aura of melancholia. He also was deceptively bright and very respectful. His godmother said he looked like the actor Montgomery Clift.

What he didn’t have was a J-O-B. A high school graduate, at times, he talked of college. But talk was all it was.

He’d forgotten the movie as soon as it ended. It was unreal to him. But on the bus ride back to their neighborhood, he told Shelly, he “also, liked the movie a lot.”

He did like her. Besides being good-looking and crazy about him, she was smart and smiled freely. A senior in high school, she got good grades. Shelly did not hang out. She was unknown to the guys he hung with.

He had seen her on Allerton Avenue a couple of times, alone, shopping. This afternoon, when he spotted her across the street, he forced himself to approach her. And as his heart tried to pound out of his head, he struck up a conversation. The interest was unmistakably mutual and their “eight—tonight” date set.

That she was unknown to the guys he hung with was of paramount importance to Caleb. He would not have to be a master of eroticism. There was no risk of exposure.

You see, Caleb was a virgin. He was very ashamed of it. He had more than his share of opportunities to change that, but was afraid that

word of his virginity would get out. Or, worse yet, he'd fuck up—fucking.

Caleb was born, a bastard, to a loving mother who doted heavily on her sparkling boy. When the child asked about his father she'd say, "I'll let you know the whole story, when you are old enough to understand." An otherwise healthy young woman, she suffered from asthma.

The boy loved his mother very much, but by the time he reached puberty he wished she'd JUST leave him alone. He began breaking away.

The night Caleb was out at his first ever petting party his mother DIED during an asthma attack. He never cried. At the party, shy 13-year-old Caleb had been an intimidated observer. At 18, the shy young man remained—an intimidated observer.

His mother had begged him to stay home that night. But then, she always wanted only him. If only he listened and stayed home that night she...

His widowed godmother took him right in, to her two-room housing-projects apartment. Infirm and elderly, she was glad to have him around. They lived off her social security check.

The young man still lived there with her. The cramped apartment was similar to the one he had lived in with his mother, in the adjacent building.

Shelly led Caleb up the carpeted staircase of her sleeping family's upholstered home. Self-conscious, to the point of paranoia, Caleb assured himself that the transformation he was feeling, inwardly, into a grotesque space alien trespasser could not be real and continued to follow Shelly's weakest asset on its ascension to the second floor.

Shelly's room was a soft pink. Shelly was red hot for the blue boy—Caleb. As the blue boy stood, ruminating on how wondrously shiny the doorknob of her closet door was—she jumped him.

Healthy and inexperienced, she had decided it would be Caleb, and it would be now. Apparently, she wasn't concerned about her parents. He surely couldn't be. After all, he was a FUCKIN' MAN, wasn't he?

He had to piss and he pushed her off and excused himself. She told him to tiptoe through the hall to the next door on the left for the toilet. He did. He was extremely uptight. He couldn't piss. He threatened himself with death by violence.

It didn't help.

When he got back to the pink room the hot girl AGAIN jumped him. They groped, kissed, and grinded. The pressure from his bladder was becoming painful. His manhood—flaccid. Caleb excused himself again.

And again, couldn't piss.

He tiptoed back to Shelly's room, cursed with uneasiness concerning her sleeping parents, unowned performance anxiety, and painful pressure from his bladder. She now wanted to put "it" into her mouth. He dropped his jeans to his knees. Had to. She dropped to her knees and put it into her mouth. It had no reaction to her oral action.

"Shel-lee," the phlegmy call of her mother coincided with the flick of the light switch from the toilet. Instantly, Caleb pulled—up—his jeans and Shelly—down—her blouse—rumpled—they sat—apart—on her bed.

"Shel-lee are you o-kay?"

"Yes, mom."

"Did you have a good time?"

Smiling into Caleb's grimace Shelly quickly took his hand and kissed it. She then replied to her mother, "Yes mom."

"Shelly, next time your father and I want to meet Cu-pid."

"Okay, and it's Ca-leb mom, Ca-leb, not Cupid."

"So long as he's white. Goodnight baby."

"Goodnight mom."

When he felt sure that her mother was back in bed he excused himself for the final time, before tiptoeing downstairs and slipping out the front door and Shelly's life, forever.

Ballooned bladder ready to burst Caleb scurried around the corner, stopped, by a blue VW Beetle, unzipped and took his dick out.

Thirty seconds would pass, a second at a time, before he could piss—fire—onto the driver-side door of the Bug.

The piss lasted four full minutes.

Piss rivulets streamed smokily fierce on the black tarred street. The Bug was drowned.

Bladder relieved but sore, Caleb lit a True Blue and took a long sucking drag on its air-filter. Exhaled, and was overcome by an avalanche of emotional inadequacy.

He couldn't piss, he didn't fuck. He was a piece of fuckin' shit.

He needed to get high. Drained of life he bleached white from

rageful shame. He began the long thirteen block walk to Bill and Ray's Bar on White Plains Road, where he hoped there'd be drugs to cop.

Midway through his journey Caleb's mood blackened to a depth lower than any he had ever known. One from which, he feared, there would be no return. He walked faster.

It didn't help.

At ten past midnight Caleb arrived at the bar. His dope connection was not there. Caleb badly wanted to snort some dope, but had to settle for three bootleg Tuinals.

Immediately, he split for the bodega on the corner, bought a can of Coke and washed the boots down.

He couldn't face anyone and started aimlessly walking westward, waiting for the boots to kick-in. Three should loosen his speech slurred but leave him fairly functional mechanically. The boots did not disappoint.

Ten minutes later the pilly meltdown of Caleb's hurtin' brain began. The recklessness of the goof-ball head met his already dark agitation. This coupling made Caleb feel like "doing something."

The XXX Globe movie theater was right across the street. He crossed over. Last week a few of the guys dropped acid and went to the Globe to see "The Devil In Miss Jones."

Caleb didn't go. He would never drop acid. He felt certain he'd have a bad trip. As for the movie, to Caleb, watching XXX movies was like watching surgery.

He kept both, his aversion to XXX movies and acid abstinence to himself. He never risked ridicule.

By the Globe, he closely inspected a poster depicting a spread-eagle "Miss Jones," when he felt a hand tapping him gently on the left shoulder.

It was a kid around Caleb's age and height. But blond, chinless, and slight. A complete unknown, "Hi, I'm Peter."

Caleb knew he was being hit on, "Tsup?" he curtly questioned.

Peter stepped back and took a chance, "Do you want to go for a walk?"

"Let's go to the park." Tight and wired Caleb surprised even himself with that reply.

As they walked, less than a block to the park, Peter said, "You're the best looking guy I've ever been with."

Caleb smoked and said nothing.

The park was empty. But, that could change without hardly any notice. Peter dropped to his knees before Caleb, and Caleb dropped his jeans to his knees. Caleb gave up thinking. The night was still and warm. More like summer than spring.

Peter blew better than the whores Caleb had previously gotten blown by. His tongue was loving. Caleb felt manly and defiant. He WAS a man. So much a man, another man was blowing him.

Caleb spurted lightning into Peter's mouth. Satisfied. Caleb WAS a man.

He looked down and suddenly stepped back, sickened. Peter was jerking off. The kid had a real big dick and was releasing mightily. Disgusted, Caleb half-heartedly kicked Peter once in the chest, knocking him on his back. Pulled up his jeans and split.

Caleb knew he wasn't gay and it felt good not to give a fuck. But he did give a fuck.

Temporarily diverted by the experience in the park, his soul torment again howled bloody. Caleb began to hyperventilate. But, quickly managed to get it under control. His head needed a boost.

He got it, back at the bar, in three quick shots of Jack Daniel's. And still had close to fifty dollars on him from a three day job, helping his neighbor, Junior, distribute circulars for a new car wash up in Yonkers. He did not want to run into anyone. Left the bartender a buck tip and split across the street.

There, he hung in front of the busy newsstand and smoked. It was 1:10, but it was Saturday night. Caleb watched as cars pulled-up and were left double-parked in a line, engines still humming as drivers jumped out to pick up Sunday's papers. Obliviousness was settling on him and he gave in to it.

His oblivion was a spacey sort of reminiscence that took him—into the bus coming back from the movie sitting next to Shelly.

Before him was the sun-reddened bald crown of the gentleman's head who was seated directly in front of him.

The ears of the head would—HE—grab and like a beast gone berserk bite down on the baldness and bite and bite...

The thought amused him then, and broke him up now. Laughing, he took a few steps toward a—left running—brown Ford Pinto. Stopped laughing, jumped in and drove off!

The car was needed to pick up a hooker from the West Farms streets. Had to FUCK tonight! He had balked, in the past, when it

came to fucking a hooker, because he figured that was like putting it into a sewer. He would NOT think that. He also resolved to be cautious with the car, but NOT to think about getting caught.

A guy he knew who could sometimes borrow an uncle's car had recently given Caleb a nighttime tour of West Farms. Like locusts, the hookers had swarmed, blanketing some blocks entirely.

Caleb took a circuitous route, using side streets to get to West Farms. He didn't even turn on the radio. He would fuck and take the subway back. He did turn on the AC. He loved AC. This was going to go right. He didn't give a fuck. It WAS right. The night would become a fond FUCKING memory.

Caleb detoured past the high-profile main strip on Tremont, where he knew hundreds of tough, hardened hookers occupied the prime street real estate.

He cruised a side street in search of an attractive part-time amateur. Once around. That was the plan. No block, would he cruise, more than once.

Immediately, he came upon a small gathering of girls hanging for business. One girl stepped toward him in his stopped Pinto. He waved her off and signaled for one from the rear. Bingo.

Long limbed for a small girl—Venus—was slim yet very shapely. She had dark brown skin, full red lips, and a short afro haircut. Caleb found her very attractive.

He would be her first trick of the night. Perfect, he thought, she's fresh. Not yet fouled.

Twenty bucks to fuck and ten more for the hour at the Royal Ostrich Motel.

Done.

Caleb put the Pinto into drive and headed, the couple blocks, to Southern Boulevard. The Royal Ostrich was a few miles north, on Southern Boulevard and 183rd.

For Caleb, Venus had made an exception. She preferred to work, cars only, at ten bucks a blow-job. But, she was taken with Caleb's movie star good looks. And even though she pinned him for being stoned, she could sense that he was no problem.

She could. She could sense if a john was trouble. If she got bad vibes she was OUT of the car.

Unfortunately for Venus, she did not incorporate this intuitive gift into her "private" life. All, her past and present boyfriends were trouble.

She asked Caleb for a cigarette. He dug her saucy little voice and noticed that the green miniskirt and platform shoes she wore did not age her fresh schoolgirl face. He handed her a cigarette. She had a lighter. Venus lit up and smoked.

Feeling good, Caleb asked her, “Do you go to school?”

Venus replied that she had gone to all girls Walton High for two years, before dropping out, “because the school was bugged-out, wild, all bull-dyke bitches.” Caleb had heard that about Walton.

She then proudly proclaimed, “I passed the Bronx High School of Science exam.”

“So, why didn’t you go?”

“I wouldn’t have known anyone there, so I asked my father what he thought.”

“What he say?”

“He said, ‘You have a nice little shape—you’ll do fine.’”

Caleb had no response to that, and cruised on through a row of green lights on Southern Boulevard. Venus commented on how good the AC felt.

A rush of love flushsuddenly Caleb. He considered running away with her.

Fuck everybody.

At a red light, a McDonald’s was on their right. Caleb asked Venus if she wanted to stop for something to eat.

“Maybe,” she purred, “after.”

In less than two minutes they’d reach the Royal Ostrich, and her reply pleased Caleb.

The light turned green, and as his right foot shifted and pressed gently down on the gas, he laughed to himself, wondering how anyone could come up with a name for a motel as ridiculous as —

“Oh fu-uck!” shrieked Venus, blasting his thought process. A shrill siren mixed hellish with her shriek.

Up in the rear-view mirror Caleb saw a police car flashing him over. Caleb, numbly, pulled over. Bolting from the car, Venus took to flight—

The lone cop leapt out of his car, revolver cocked and drawn—pointed down—by his right thigh.

“Hold it right there!” he shouted at the fleeing girl’s back. She kept running. The revolver remained—pointed down—by his right thigh.

Out of his body, mind, and car—it was Caleb—rushing the cop,
“She had nothing to—”

The first bullet blew through his arm—another—into his heart.
Downed Caleb. Out a tenement window a female voice flew, “Cop
shot da keed—dead!” Traffic stopped. Salsa and sirens.

The puddles were red.



GAK: *Spinner*

CHET HART

CROW MARRIAGE

bedded on crushed monarchs
we wait for the pores in my voice
to reveal some tremor, some cause for desecration
in your countries of cactus blood.
we wait for the introduction of vultures and crows
to our bed:
they live in my mouth
in corners beyond sores and molars.

convulsing,
i give myself away to the moment,
silently filling your shadows with
the slow melting of stone

and when the aftermath
dies away

you whisper
for a more ambitious silkworm

and i burrow into your cells of jagged water
where an earlier scream
cowers, emaciated, without walls or rain

its other sadnesses looking for you in basement arroyos
where i found you conducting
crow weddings with the sloe gin
that deserted them

fifteen minutes i carried you and the rest
of the ground on my back

and from the bathroom's one slit of light,
the collapse of my silhouette,

its mouth and lips, like yours, the shade of a rose's winter sleep

ROGER SMITH

SIPPED LOGGIA

I stand in the loggia of all nights
coming: isn't that tonight?

A balcony of horizon.
What the hills miss to look that way.
Inability to be other is what
swells and swounds about me.

And of night we are in each other
as made two askings. Blackness
somehow mirroring out until it is near,
wideness at intimate.

In this air of stories all told,
trolled and stained. And silhouettes
mending the things in which they are.

And the stars are of skin
they no longer need: that body celest.
The drone is languor at anywhere.

Light-edged skulls the doming pieces
of worlds are, skullcaps worn
to a devotion of there; arrayed,
staggered, with nothing drinking but
a whole rising in what nothing in it sees,

will never see for its happening: the
courting of figurative motion
which has drank in the eyes
which are drinking.

JIMMY COLLINS

MORRIS & ESSEX LINE, BLACKOUT

At the arriving station nothing exits
but a cell phone couple, and the man

with eyes boiled shut and a gash
on his forehead muttering for god to give him

a happy life and valuable skills,

ten minutes of gentle cursing where I am
too late to find

how many lights began
across the Hudson, how many cars

across the glisten of deersshine,

the train that is a trail of horses,
the train that sniffs out platforms in the dusk

*Tonight the city's cancelled
go back to where you started
no power in the northeast*

I gather my things that are more humid today
a hole in the schedule the terrorists found—

Arrival, eight-thirty-three, Dover,

railyards passing and the sky
buried for six miles ahead,

conductors planting rows of tickets in the blackening east.

WENDY HOFFMAN

TO SLEEP

I need to be wrapped in a parcel tied with string
and mailed to another world.
I need to be a small animal
burrowing in a ditch
breathing with the earth.
Grooves of dirt fence me in
like my favorite wing chair.
I and the universe inhale.
The sigh flushes out my spasming brain.
My imagination needs to slither through bars.
I need to look through the window
with my eyes closed
and see what I could not admit before.
I need to reach out my arms from this crib,
be picked up by a parent
who walks back and forth
carrying me into the living room.
The dogs aren't barking.
No wild animal is caught and fighting.
The garbage trucks won't arrive for hours.
When I awake my eyes won't burn.
I will pack up the outlines of my body
that my soul has left during the night.

WENDY HOFFMAN

STINK

I need a place where I can be myself,
where the masks shed like snake skin in the hottest sun.
To this friend, I am one person.
To another, I am someone else.
I live encoded in secrets.
My dusk acquaintances have long been gone.
If people knew who I am, they would flee.
And for different reasons.
The lilies in my garden are decaying.
The daffodils are tied up ready to rot.
I love my shriveled flowers,
their many quick seasons.
I don't mind when they stink.
I try to walk silently through this world
with cans tied to my ankles clanking.
I go down a sharp slope and get caught in a fold.
The uphill is too steep.
I scream.
People hear the wrong thing and each something different.
Each knows the tiniest part of me.

WENDY HOFFMAN

PANIC

I am on the Bay Bridge.
I have driven across it hundreds of times,
but today I hear my heart smacking
cymbals in a tunnel.
The day is clear.
The sun is strong.
I grip the steering wheel and focus.
I am nearing the top.
I dangle in a blue void.
I am half way out my mother's womb.
I feel wet air on my cheeks, forehead.
I am slimy.
I am dangling upside down
with too much pressure on my ankles.
I am slapped and the bridge caves in.
Holes are in the earth.
I am alone among unkind people.

RONALD WARDALL

MEMORIES OF FLIGHT FROM BED

The Amazon Valley spreads her sea
green legs, cut and scarred
by the Amazon, Tapajos, Urubu
Madeira, Negro, Solimoes, Japura.

But now the dark cave of the room is right
though my absurd cold hangs on like a loose tooth,
and after three years I still keep the TV on
in the next room.

The rain forest tears at the light as if it were raw meat,
the sudden black sky's quick lit by piranha
lightning, while the air crackles, spits,
sparks, stares, a cat eyed night.

Pointed yellow tongues fifty miles long lick the white
hot wings, Beelzebub in love, the rock-jerk-
snap of coupling
sky and fire and smoking metal.

The closed door room quiet as a sleeping cat beneath
the jellied sound of the TV, becomes theatre,
and though bones crack in the stillness,
the broken hands wear gloves.



Lawrence Applebaum: *Lamppost on a Leash*

PHILIP MEMMER

EMPIRE OF LIGHTS

after the paintings by Magritte

The darkness surrounds us. On our first floor
we have left the windows unlit. All five
are closed and shuttered. There is no door.

We have left the windows unlit. All five.
There is no other path beneath our trees
besides this puddled road the streetlamp limns.

There is no other path beneath our trees.
The boughs are thick and black. We half believe
that only starless nights have filled them in.

The boughs are thick and black. We half believe
the dark is all there is. But when we look,
the sky is blue as day. What are our lives?

The dark is all there is. And then we look.

PHILIP MEMMER

WATCHING THE BABY SLEEP

As each just-audible breath
lifts the small weight of his chest

a militiaman's bayonet
throws him into a ditch.

And as each sweet blanketed foot
gives a light and dream-slow kick

the older child beneath him
struggles for air.

Don't call this metaphor.
The bullets slip into them,

then out. As the soldiers turn
I reach down into his crib,

stroke the curve of his crown.
A miracle, this sleep,

when they are so many,
and their song is so loud.

MATTHEW KEUTER

BRONXVILLE EARLY MORNING

From the highway overpass I watched a crane eating sewage
from the serpentine canal winding its way beneath the city
to put its poison tongue into the throat of the sea.

It didn't matter how I shouted climbing the chain link fence
shaking it like a bed. It didn't matter and it will matter even less
if I never leave the apartment again. Never bother getting out
of bed. Not even for food. My stomach can eat the muscle
of my stomach. And the crane can die. It doesn't matter
on the last ignoble day of my life on earth
that someone else is watching a crane eat the belly out of a snake.

MATTHEW KEUTER

HOW TO LOVE YOUR COUNTRY WHEN IT HAS BECOME
LIKE A SPIDER, BLOATED, FEEDING ON BLOOD,
AS BIG AS A WHALE AT WAR IN A BATHTUB

—for my brother

Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela are soldier
spirits of the last two centuries most likely to have
an embassy desecrate the holiness of their graves.

We should first pray that Nelson Mandela lives forever.

That nothing was done to prevent railcar marksmen
from targeting buffalo and leaving them to rot inside
the heat of their skins that otherwise carried off
the snow each winter, is genocide.

If the means are justified by their end, then retribution
is to justice as suckling the dark milk brightening
the generous desert is to capitalism.

Madmen are devouring the souls out of storytellers.
They do it like sharing a meal.
They do it by sharing one dream among them:
Narcissus becomes a woman
Standing to bathe herself
In a mercurial pool

Her delicate fingers blur
In the small patch of coarse hair—
Before any one thought of modesty.

I met him once in a dream. Kofi Annan drew a crescent
in the air to show me how a genesis must be two polar
opposites of a new moon. He was naked and spoke in a whisper:

*The devil has a sensual tongue to soul-suck from names returning
home, still at war.*

*This is why children are discouraged from opening
their mouths in church.*

He sighed deeply, shooting a heavy stream.

*To speak allegorically of towers when they have fallen
through themselves, name upon name is to speak
of the dead, for whom the sun no longer rises
on a wet pine needle, to collect all the color
necessary for the miracle.*

Darwin's revolutionary treatises on evolution
were composed without comprehensive study
of the *Lehrstucke*, the reverse may not be said
of Bertolt Brecht, but to hear Christopher Isherwood
tell it, the Weimer was a much livelier party than the Nazi.

The ecstasy of *A Requiem for Tora Bora*, published 200 years
after the master's death, is rumored to have been composed entirely
in a state of trance where Mozart knelt to touch his forehead
to the floor of a stone chamber
receiving tonal reverberations before flying apart
into a ghostlier silence.

CONTINUED

Freud, vibrating towards the end of his life
on a steady diet of cocaine and simulacra,
exercised a hummingbird in his mouth
for twenty minutes three times a day, except
for Mondays named after the moon.
It was Jung's idea. He convinced Freud
the hummingbird would eat the cancer
from his mouth, and shed it in brilliance.
Freud died hovering above the pain of a cancer
in full bloom, drunk on figwort nectar and morphine.

J. Iscariot suffered from a similar love for Mary of Nazarene,
until he betrayed them both—
stealing a kiss off her son, in the garden.
Rousseau suffered similar Oedipal dyslexia
to that of J.'s, fucking instead with the animus
of God, appearing caged in the eyes of a lion
beside the dreaming Yadvigha, asleep in *her* garden.

Both the painting, "Ernste Mein," and the mask worn
by initiates to the cult of Dionysus
look like the poet Norman Dubie—
Were he to dress his handsome, large head, in both these
masks and appear at your door,
you would experience the meeting
of three supernatural totems.

When I was young, my mother instructed
my brother and I to trim our toenails after soaking
in a warm bath so the clippings wouldn't shoot
all over the place. Because if a witch found even
a small piece of a nail, it could be used to cast
a spell against you and control your mind.
This anecdote from my childhood is how I understand
the "Buddhist Spirit," Louis Simpson calls *Hungry Ghosts*.
The metaphor is insensitive at best and probably
ungracious to His Holiness, the 14th Dali Lama,
who commands an army of formidable archers
and deploys them instead, as peacekeepers.

Dear Kofi Annan, strike down iniquity with your powerful gun.

In 1945, a team of the planet's brightest lookers
was assembled by the powerful men
who desired them. And because the lookers
were bright they found what they were looking for:
a center to the world... And halved it,

spilling light & fantastical wind into the desert,
shadow striping stones, melting sand
into glass, smashing cactus wrens between
electrical fists, trimming skeletons of saguaros
with jackrabbits shot off a hydrogen springboard
on the other end of an atomic elephant,
without a net to catch the fall-out from the new weight of air.

MATTHEW KEUTER

TAXONOMY OF EFFORTLESS CREATION

I think a lot about wholeness. It's a terrifying proposition. It is without void to put our sadness into. To bury blame. To hide from love and become objective. I think about it, because it is unimaginable to me. For days I'm wrecked by it. A sleepless wreckage. And in the morning I start in in filling the void. Stuffing breakfast and other small accomplishment into it. It all goes in to fill the void which can never be filled, but does not have to remain an empty black void. Which is the wrong word because black is a color, and to void a color is to destroy it. Not even in a spiritual void not even in the vacuum of science, is this desirable. But color itself does not destroy the void. The void becomes dazzling. Finality is a dazzling place. A terminal destination. The end of the line. A dizzy fuse. A light at the end of a tunnel you can't look directly into. Like the sun. Which is not the fastest collapsing star, only the nearest to us that is digesting itself, burning alive, so everything we know and love, will go there to die. Inevitably. Which means we are already moving in supernova. Gravitating towards the center of a black hole. Which is the right word here, because of the objective way science uses the word black, with flourish and variety in sentences like, The dark matter at the center of the universe, or, A dark horse supernova, which is a small tight fist at the center of an explosion with enough universal anger to crush planets in it. Which makes macro and micro interchangeable prefixes. For example, The macroquiet of orgasm, or The microcosm of war, where we are meant to disappear.

MICHAEL WESTON

UNTITLED

You can be in make-up, you can be without flesh.
Like a dress. Like a dress. Covering. But do not touch me
until I cover all the ugly I possess. In bones and feathers,
in a black hole, in a black hole we make sounds (of breath).
I will have 12 and you will have 20; you will have bells
and I will have tin sticks and you will ring and I will beat
upon a drum of nothing. Drum of nothing. Drum on nothing.
We should wrap up. With binding and sighing. This snow is cold.



Edward Michael O'Durr Supranowicz: *Moods Of The Moon*

COLETTE INEZ

GALAXY PANTOUM

*(the galaxy Andromeda is speeding towards
our Milky Way and will collide with us
in three billion years)*

Cows and people stare,
each on their side of the fence,
both aware of their differences.
Andromeda hurtles through space.

Each on their side of the fence,
sniffing clover and Queen Anne's Lace.
Andromeda hurtles through space
due to collide with the Milky Way.

Sniffing clover and Queen Anne's Lace
children and cows stay unaware a galaxy
will collide with the Milky Way.
In three billion years solar worlds gone.

Children and cows stay unaware a galaxy
whizzes with light and dust.
In three billion years solar worlds gone,
all measurements rust.

Whizzing with light and dust
towards planets memorized in school,
where all measurements rust
in vanished archives of local stars,

CONTINUED

Andromeda zooms towards planets learned in school,
past blackboards and boxes of space-age toys,
in vanished archives of local stars.
After class a girl nudges a poky boy,

past blackboards and boxes of space-age toys,
she urges him along.
After class that girl nudges a poky boy:
“At your rate it will take three billion years

to go home,” she urges him along
to hurry back to cows in the field.
“At your rate it will take three billion years,”
she fusses and says, “we’ve chores to do.”

Hurrying back to cows in the field,
she prods the indolent boy,
says “we’ve chores to do
before dark and crows come home to roost.”

She prods the indolent boy,
not judging the world might one day be
dark as crows come home to roost,
all cellular intelligence

not judging the world might be
void of crows, people and cows,
all cellular intelligence,
that nothing would stay as it was.

ARTHUR POLITE

FOR STEWART

The cat traced and cut from snow
and left back in the room where the room only dies.

You can see the limp breathing that stays in the floor
where the cat, already broken, fell.

The water he drank from is no longer thirsty.
He tracks the now empty roach cities

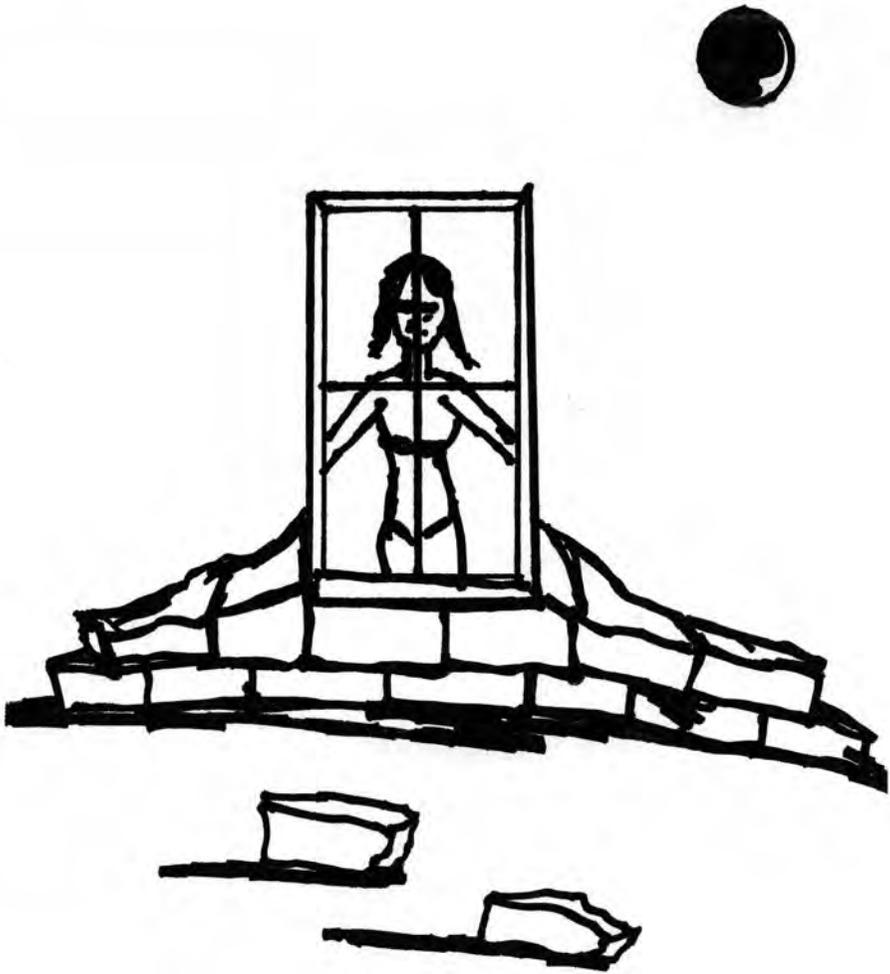
from a previous shadow that smells like you.
His insides were not a safe place, you said from where

you were most alike. The traffic noise nothing more
than the celebrations of mice he'd already clawed into food.

Only one of your eyes was cut from snow—
nothing there stays awake in the unsafe dawnlight.

And where he lives now, everything is either silent
or playing at sleep and only one of your eyes

is brown and almost small enough for rest and pain.



Edward Michael O'Durr Supranowicz: *Window*

SHEILA WELCH

MOTHER

I have only seen my mother naked once
in my life— it was remarkable—

I was ten, maybe twelve, I was
making my way down the hall,
the dark narrow hall of our house,
the one on Woodruff Street,
the one I loved.

It was dark and everyone was asleep -
I was heading for the shed in our
backyard, the shed where my father hid
Playboy and Penthouse magazines.

It was summer, it was a hot summer,
it was the summer of the worst heat wave
in decades, it was the summer of freakish
events, the summer Roy fell from the back
of a car and his spine rammed up into
his skull leaving him in a coma
for months, it was the summer
I was twelve, or maybe ten and
I was a young girl obsessed with
sex and everything nude.

And it was the summer we found them,
Roy and I, found them in the dirt
crawl space in my basement,
a tunnel really, that led to the shed
in the backyard, found them
where we had spent many a day
inching our way through
that tunnel, inching our way through

CONTINUED

that dampness, in fantastic adventures
of desperate escape, flashlights tied to
our wrists, eating dirt, eating moss,
breathing in the delicious wetness of
worms, and there just before
the opening to the shed
slipped beneath the floorboards
we found them.

For hours we giggled and sweated
in the heat of that tin roofed shed,
excited by our secret,
by the mystery we had before us,
the magnificent and untouchable
there in our hands.

And it was the summer I stood there,
there in the dark, narrow hallway,
a sliver of light from her bedroom door,
her white skin, whiter than mine,
peached by the light on her dresser,
glistening with powder she brushed on
with a red feathery brush.

I inched up— inched up closer to see more
to see her reflection in the vanity mirror.

What beauty!

What shame!

And I could hear the brush through her hair,
the rustle of the leaves through her window
the large great maple leaves, and I could hear the
seed pods, the great green seed pods
falling to the ground below.

MARC PIETRZYKOWSKI

THE GRINDING WEARS THE STONE DOWN TOO

These were the days of the week: 6 am: rise, evacuate, preen,
mumble at the pigeons on the ledge.
Morning light hissing up from the underworld
as I made toast. Butter for you, jelly for me,
7 am: kiss-and-part, ache, endure,
then home again and, perhaps, the weight of you.

And so I became a cretin,
fat
and grateful
for every little jelly stain
and buttery lip. Home by 6 pm most days of the week,
weekends a fog of crumpled sheets
and tree-lined strolls; these were the scenes that dug
a hole in my skull, trepanned me
and let all the wrong of this world leak out.
Specific details are nothing, they make you a fool,
a town idiot fumbling with beads and string—
they will make you a believer,
and that should be warning enough.

Use my example, tack my photo
to kindergarten walls: this is what happens when you believe
that details add up to something more
than another detail, this is what happens
when 5 pm comes, when the train shudders into the station,
your hands stained, your ears full of chatter, your dank stairs,

CONTINUED

your oven lit, your glass of vodka, the stupid way you sit
and wait. Wait to hear a key
squeak the lock. To feel a hand
upon your neck. For all details
to fade into mush, for the truck
to come and haul away her clothes,
for the lake to swallow her ashes
and turn them into fish. This is what belief
gets you, children: half a man,
surrounded by details,
waiting to be rid of them and all their rude beginnings.

JAMES DOYLE

ON THE SHORE

One ocean after another
stopped leaking itself from every
pore, dried up. Followed
by lakes, rivers, shallows.
There was nothing left

to fill such huge spaces
but great slabs of earth
left over from the last molten age.
Horizons had nowhere movable to go
anymore, sunk like weights into the static.

There was nothing distinguished
about walking on solid ground
from California to Japan.
Once the novelty wore off,
the world seemed a lot more tedious.

Everything that was left over
from the oceans couldn't adapt. The old
had trouble describing waves
to the young. It was hard believing
bodies once needed water to live.

The heat grew so intense people
dreamt they were walking on the sun.
Skin began to crack. Luckily
there was nothing to hemorrhage
when veins split, the ground opened.

CONTINUED

One by one, people forgot
they were living on another planet, that they
were the aliens they had always feared.
People had carapaces, now, new brains,
a reason to travel in space.

MARGARET BARBOUR GILBERT

FROM *SUGARING OFF*

13. COUNTRY SIDE

50

With some of the money Mother had sent me, I planned to enroll in Katharine Gibbs School on Park Avenue, so that I could find a new job. After all, I had been fired from the Opera. Learning to type would give me an edge in the job market. I decided to take the subway at Fifth Avenue to Grand Central Station, even though I was terrified of the dark tunnels and passageways of the subway, of the strange looking people and filth. A man with a saxophone was playing “Stars Fell On Alabama” down on the subway platform, and people were giving him money in a hat. I was always afraid some crazy person would push me onto the track, and I boarded the wrong train. The seats were occupied by men, and I stood in the center of the car holding onto the rail. A blind man with a seeing eye dog and a cup of pencils came into the car. He had a sign that said “I am Blind. Please help Me.” Everyone gave him money but me. He lingered nearby. Then he went into another car. I was aware of many strange looking people and the smell of containers of hot Chinese food, when I realized I was on an Express Train headed for the Bronx. I stood in mute terror and waited for it to stop. It finally came to a sudden halt, and I got off, miles away from Manhattan, deep in the heart of Harlem. I went outside and stood at a bus stop waiting for a bus to come and take me back to Manhattan. Hours passed. Night fell, and I was mugged from behind by two men with a blackjack. They demanded my money, and when I screamed at the top of my lungs, they fled with my purse, which contained \$75, a credit card and a Tiffany bracelet, along with the keys to my apartment. The check for Katharine Gibbs School was still inside my blouse, but I was very shaken up. How would I get home? Luckily, a police car came cruising by, and I stopped it. The police gave me a ride back to Manhattan and the East side.

CONTINUED

I hired a locksmith from a pay phone on the corner when I got home, and he came and broke into my basement apartment for \$300. I gave him the check intended for Katharine Gibbs School and sat down and wept. I made him put three new locks on the door. When he left, I called my parents in Alabama to tell them what had happened. My father said to me over the telephone, "I've been wondering when you would get mugged in New York. Why don't you come back to Alabama?" "No," I said, "I'm planning to enroll in Katharine Gibbs School on Park Avenue." My mother liked that idea because Grace Kelly, the movie star, had studied there, and Lily Allison of Alabama, who owned all the land in the Black Belt, had gone to school there. I had a picture of me at Lily Allison's swimming pool outside her mansion in the Alabama Black Belt. I was wearing my sexy black bathing suit and looked beautiful in my short blond bob. In the picture, I was hiding the fact that I had epilepsy. None of my friends knew. I thought of the picture just now. Mother wanted me to move back to The Barbizon, but I told her I preferred having my own apartment to rooming in a hotel. My mother then told me of seeing an item in *The Birmingham News* about a landlord who admitted hiring a hit man to kill two of his tenants, so he could raise the rent on their apartment. We said good-bye, and I promised to write.

ROBERT STEWARD

FROM ARNOLD?

Arnold's landlady, Veronica, caught him in the hall one day and told him he would soon have "delightful" new downstairs neighbors. "Three boys from Australia, medical students, I believe," she said. The Aussies were great sports fans too, she added. Arnold had an anticipatory sense of breathing the same oxygen as other young males. Maybe he'd make friends with them. Australia was the new America. It lived on optimism and endless beaches under perfect blue skies. The girls had golden limbs. You could have neurosis-free relationships with Aussies, unlike the bent-out-of-shape weirdoes he felt surrounded by in gnarled old England.

When she saw Arnold's initial surprise, Veronica hurried to add: "I know what you're thinking, I usually insist on sharing my life with artists. Thespians, sculptors, poets like yourself. People who are truly alive. But, Mr. Latymer, you wouldn't believe who's shown up recently; greedy admen, horrible accountants; the absolute dregs of society." Arnold was glad she hadn't mentioned venal insurance men, because his day job was in an insurance firm that had recently tried to pay an old man a hundred quid for a severed leg.

"Oh, there *was* one pornographic actress who applied," Veronica said, "I knew it wouldn't work when she offered me six months rent in advance and told me she was called Desiree La Porte."

"Really?" said Arnold. "Sounds great to me."

"Maybe to you. I'm not against sex, Mr. Latymer. Not even paid-for sex. But the word "actress" stuck in my craw." Arnold felt a stab of disappointment about the porn queen. What bloke wouldn't want to live above a bird called Desiree La Porte? And wasn't all of life acting anyway?

"I'm sure the new fellows will be fine," Arnold said, adjusting to reality.

"They'll be fabulous!" said Veronica, "Three nice clean boys from Brisbane."

Up in his tiny flat, Arnold cringed a bit about being called a poet. “Penniless poet,” was what he told Veronica he was to get the flat in the first place. And Veronica had taken pity on him. “You’ll become the poet in residence,” she quipped when they’d agreed on the low rent. Ever since then Arnold had hidden carefully behind his unpublished status, moving around the house in a thoughtful daze, a mystery man of words carrying a dog-eared notebook. Anything to keep a roof over his head. Is it possible, he asked himself, to be a poet without writing poems? Can you be a poet only of the mind? Yes. But to avoid being a total fraud you had to try a little bit. So Arnold promised himself— for the thirtieth time —that he would write his first real poem by the weekend. Becoming a practicing poet felt like the loss of his virginity, an event he hardly remembered except that it was here one second and gone the next, behind the bicycle shed, in the dead of night.

Next day he was in the hall on his way up to his flat holding a handful of mail, a bag of take-out from the Indian place and half dozen legal pads. These were the tablets of stone on which his first poem would be written.

Three large young men suddenly loomed on the landing above. They looked down at him briefly, and then lunged forward, their accumulated mass blocking the skylight. Huge feet went boom boom boom like a forest of tree trunks descending the stairs. They almost crashed into him, but didn’t even pause as they barreled by, while yelling something whiningly Australian that sounded like a Tube train trying to take a dogleg curve.

“Hey!” Arnold said, squeezing up against the wall. “Do you mind?”

No, they didn’t mind. Without a word, they muscled their shoulders out of the front door and into the street, yelling tribal curses into the air.

The door slammed, shaking the house.

“By the way,” Arnold called after them, “I’m your new neighbor. Nice to make your acquaintance, you ignorant bastards.”

It got worse. After a couple of weeks of being woken at 2 a.m. by heavy metal bursting through the floorboards— and the disconcerting smell of burning tuna—Arnold got out of bed and fumbled for his slippers. He descended the creaky stairs and knocked on the door of flat 6. The face of the biggest Aussie appeared, “Bri.” Arnold was

almost overpowered by the onrushing stench of Fosters Lager, hashish and burning tuna. “Hello, Bri,” he said. Bri emitted a guttural sound that might have been a greeting of some kind, but it came out like a vomited ham sandwich.

“It’s two o’clock in the morning, Bri,” Arnold said. “The noise is terrible. The floorboards are buckling off their joists. The smell is disgusting.”

“Ah yeah? Fock-u Arno, get some bladdy earplugs and a canna ire freshener, ya focking pansy pom,” Bri said in a sawing brogue that seemed to be sourced from somewhere inside his neck muscles. “Got my bladdy meaning? Go fock ya-self?” he said as the door banged loudly in Arnold’s face.

Oh well, Arnold thought as he trudged back upstairs, 10 Singer Road was not to be the quiet Nirvana he’d hoped when he arrived.

But there was still the poem to complete. He had to persevere. Great art was produced in appalling circumstances, even worse than this. And the Aussies were not home all the time. They had to go to med school, though Arnold feared for their present and future patients.

When he got home that night he set up a small table next to the wall in a corner. He placed a simple wooden chair against it and stacked the three legal pads on the right. The pot of pencils was sharpened and ready, like a dozen yellow shark’s teeth. Above was a bookshelf with a fat dictionary and *Roget’s Thesaurus*. Mercifully the boys were out, so the scene was as quiet and wise as a Shinto shrine.

Arnold knew little of poetry. But from his far-off schooldays he remembered Mr. Warre teaching a few poems that admired the Empire (ruled by the Royal Navy) and when that faltered, grew rhapsodic on the subject of the green hills of England. But there was one poem by J. Masefield that intrigued young Latymer: “*Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smokestack,*” it began, “*Butting through the Channel in the mad March day/ A cargo of Tyne coal/ Road-rails, pig-lead/ Firewood, ironware and cheap tin trays.*”

“Cheap tin trays!” Mr. Warre said, “Better than the Battle of Waterloo.” Arnold was excited. It meant anyone who owned a cheap tin tray could write a great poem.

He placed the Remington typewriter carefully on the table and took the cover off. Not for him new-fangled electronic gadgets. Not tonight. He had quite enough of computers at work. He wanted to be an old-fashioned writer, not a geek with a word processor. He wanted

the sounds, the smells, the tastes of writing. The soft tat-tat-tat-tat-tat coming from his room as he typed his masterwork. He wanted the whisky, so his breath would smell like Hemingway's. And he wanted the sex. My god he wanted the sex. The little table was the place to start. Art was wonderful. And, properly applied, it was a great aphrodisiac. Veronica— thinking of her great days on the stage — was the first to agree with that.

Arnold sat down slowly. The unwritten poem lingered in the back of his mind, swaying slightly, like a mysterious figure behind a diaphanous curtain. When it appeared, it would be a work of extraordinary reach and depth. A task not to be embarked upon lightly. Soon it would flow from his imagination like a great river. He tortured a paper clip in his fingers until it fell apart. The problem as always was the first word. Eventually, he would agonize about the first word he'd try on Sonia, and the first word of his first poem was just as elusive.

But before his head hit the pillow that night, it had to be in the bag. He idled away some time doodling, then forced his mind to random word search. Nothing. He got up and made a pot of tea. Sat down and allowed his head to tilt in what he hoped was a thoughtful way and concentrated for a very long time with his eyes closed. Nothing. He took a nap. He woke up, returned to the table, and picked up a writing pad. Then he shouted, "That's it!" The first word of his first true poem had been revealed. "You are wonderful," he said, looking at the scribbled word on the paper. "I love you, dear, dear word."

There was a loud noise from the street. Arnold glanced at the digital clock glowing in the dim light. How had it got to be three a.m.? The med students were arriving. Arnold cocked his ear as their car squealed to a halt in front of the house. He heard the slamming of doors and bellowing as they fumbled for their keys. He heard the attempts to find the front door lock, then the usual pushings and shovings, laughter, bangs and crashes, and evidence of a level of drunkenness that even Tommy Halligan could not achieve. And the med students really knew how to fart. Arnold waited. Now his neighbors were beginning a bellowed version of a rugby song: "Why was she born so beautiful..." the words were inaudible, delivered as if by a chorus of dingoes. But the crude melody somehow got through. If there is one thing in the world a football fan hates, it's rugby songs. Arnold went out on to the landing. He looked down. The boys were

celebrating the fact that they had managed to negotiate the front door lock by singing another verse of the song on the landing and, holding bottles aloft, swigging deeply between choruses.

“Excuse me,” Arnold said. They took no notice.

“EXCUSE ME,” he shouted. Three bleary faces looked up through the banisters.

“What the fuck you want?” the big one said. His pork-fed arm was around the shoulders of one of the others for mutual support.

“I wondered if you could be a little more quiet, please.”

“What’s it ta ya, shorty?”

“I’m trying to concentrate,” Arnold said. “Actually, I’m writing a poem,” He realized only after the words had left him that perhaps this was not the smartest admission.

The med students looked at one another: Who did this fucking fairy think he was? Did this mean they had to worry every time they got tanked? Every time they had the girls over for a little pokey pokey share and share alike? Every time they puked in the toilet? Every time they trashed their flat? A poet? A fucking pansy *poet*?

“Get back to washing your lingerie, you mincin’ jerk,” the one called Slade said.

From inside the *meningus*, Arnold2 was watching and listening. He did not approve of what was going on. He sent a message to a part of Arnold’s brain that stored memories of similar insults at the hands of people like this. And he stirred in a bit of working-class animus against the sport of rugby at the same time. “Reason,” whispered Arnold2, “isn’t going to work with these arseholes.”

Arnold looked down. “I told you, shut up,” he said to three grinning faces.

“What’re ya gonna to do abaat it?” the third one said.

Arnold2 flicked another switch.

Arnold felt heat rising in his neck. He moved slowly along the landing and started down the stairs. The students leered up at him. Seven steps down, Arnold stopped. At this level, he was a head taller than they, looking closely into their booze-addled eyes. But three more steps and they’d be a head taller than him.

“Did you hear me?” Arnold asked calmly.

“Back to ya poetry, ya little shite,” Guy said. Arnold had a sensation of burning behind his eyes. He jumped the last three steps and landed on Bri’s huge left foot. Bri rose up as a wild animal does when

it's been shot. He shuddered and bent briefly at the knees, his hand grabbing down his leg, searching for the source of the pain.

"What the fuck," he said, then arched backward like a folding industrial ironing board. Arnold saw the moment, the tipping point. Bri's elbow was in Arnold's face. All it needed was a little push. Arnold shoved. Guy's friends tried helplessly to stop him falling. "Ohhh, oh! Hold on, hold on! Jesus wept," they burred as they got caught up in Brian's unstable reeling weight, which spun and lurched sideways. All three—two still holding sloshing bottles of booze—finished up on the floor in a tangle of huge limbs.

The noise should have woken the dead, but there was no sound from below. Arnold thought the other tenants were probably afraid to investigate. He was aching in one leg and had a painful eye from colliding with the bottle that had been in Bri's hand or had perhaps been deliberately stuck in his face. It hadn't broken, but bounced down the next flight of stairs making whoopee noises disgorging its contents as it went.

"I'll say goodnight, then," Arnold said, climbing the stairs.

The Aussies were struggling to get themselves upright. Their large bodies, jammed together on the small landing, pressed together constantly. They grabbed for anything that might offer a finger hold, like the edge of the wall panels with their encrusted dark brown paint. For the moment they were preoccupied and eerily silent. Reduced to a great big moving blob.

When he got to his flat, Arnold heard them opening their door downstairs and assisting each other inside, like a trio of fumbling clowns. Arnold would be scared later of possible revenge, but right then he was wishing them a medium slow death from alcoholic poisoning and multiple internal injuries.

Besides, he had work to do. He returned to his desk, to the first word of his first poem. It was written, inelegantly but passionately, across a humble legal pad.

The word was "undulating."

Arnold2 flipped a switch up in the brain. He'd decided to mess about with Arnold's mind. It was such a satisfying pastime, risk-free and fun.

Arnold felt certain unease in his vertebrae. He looked down again at the word "undulating" and felt a sudden terrible despair. Before the spot of trouble just now, it had seemed to be a word for all seasons, for

the multitudes, for the cognoscenti. It was precise and deep, happy and grave all at once. It referred to the landscape of Tuscany and the emotions he had felt in seeing Gwen naked for the first time. It was a peer among words, he told himself as he looked at it staring back from the legal pad only a few minutes before. He had even rattled the carriage of the Remington in preparation for the big moment when “undulating” would be entered into its rightful place in history, as the first word of his first poem.

But now “undulating” was a piece of shit. It had become a spongy, careworn, shop soiled dirt bag of a word. As he looked at it now, it grew barnacles and wallowed in spurious sentimentality. It wasn’t Tuscany any more, it was the surface of a big vat of disgusting red Jello. “I hate you, *undulating*,” Arnold mocked, making it sound like ululating, and almost choking with the effort of getting it out.

He slumped on the couch. Writing the century’s greatest poem would have to wait. He looked at the clock and groaned as he sank into a fitful sleep. It was totally quiet in the house. The Aussies had possibly died. Arnold entered a kind of half sleep and drifted along for three more hours, disappointed, but getting ready for what was to come next. He awoke at six, gradually emerging to the dawn light filtering in from the window.

He found that he was listening to the distant playing of a piano. Chopin was whispering through the walls. Arnold recognized the piece; it was a diaphanous Etude by Frederic the Great, so sweet it made you want to cry.

ALIXA DOOM

SHADES OF A FATHER'S DEATH

You come upon him suddenly in a stained work shirt,
leaning against a '38 chevy, a Sunday and his death,
slow as the old photograph.

Each year his death settles a little,
the mound of earth flattens.

Yet always the long green grasses, everything
seems greenest near a father's death.

And clouds of deep lilacs in Ball mason jars
lean into a darkness six feet under.

There is a dampness the snail glides through
on its huge foot, eyes at tips of tentacles
reel in at the human touch.

Sometimes at night you can feel something
leaving, as a train on distant rails, empty cars
from Portland and Spokane jolt and bump,
their muffled thunder shakes the hill
the house clings to.

At noon minnows scatter
from the shade of the boat you enter.

Your shadow lies like a scarf,
aloof against an oarlock.

COMBUSTIONS

ANTHONY SEIDMAN

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Some of these poems first appeared in the following publications: *The Bitter Oleander*, *Bordersenses*, *Crate*, *Iodine*, *Milk*, *Parteaguas (Mexico)*, *Rattle*, & *The Wandering Hermit Review*.

The majority of poems from the section entitled Black Neon, appeared in a chapbook by the same title, published by *Pudding House* in 2007.

For Daniel and Leah

*And when the vast
and traversable night
offered herself to you
you realized how
between the dust and the city
poetry was building us a fence*

—Édgar Rincón Luna

BLACK NEON

*Suddenly, as I work, eat, walk, I encounter
the dog's glance.*

—Luis Felipe Vivanco

NEMESIS

Dog with incisors that chip when cracking a chicken bone; dog whose bark is a whinny squeezed from the throat of a black mare. These avenues, *Tujunga*, *Lankershim*, are vast and ugly; gas stations are palaces, and stucco is the preferred coating over wall fungus, cockroaches, and pipes funneling excreta and tears into the sea where misery is rejuvenated. But my dog trails after me on the sidewalk; and the liquor store awning, the park where autumn takes up residence and rusts the swings are where he marks off his territory with urine that is not saccharine like that of a grandmother, but scalding as water boiling in a luncheonette's stainless steel pot. And so I write, trying to avoid him: the trot and subverting backtrack from cars at intersections. I don't want to be that dog in the Valley where neon throbs at dusk, where the evening star burns, but not for this man who sits alone, dog curled at his slippers, hind paw twitching from the unbridled gallop of a nightmare.

ENCRYPTED

I find myself each evening, while commuting on the 101, or when the blue barns and silos within shut down and darkness lifts me to sleep, repeating commonplace words I had heard earlier that day, or entire phrases from conversations I had with acquaintances. And I twist my breath over a syllable or sentence like a fin slicing water toward trawled dolphin, or the dregs of a bog dripping from the faucet in a marble bathroom. While driving home, I sweat from netting in an innuendo uttered that morning from parking-attendant or tourist, a code which, after originally sinking in the swamp of consciousness, has surfaced, its skin brackish and green. Later, I sit up in bed, water-bucketed awake with the chill that I had not listened to someone's plea, that there is a fire-alarm in everyone's voice, that the foundations are buckling, and though the sidewalk is glazed with moonlight, the remaining deer are bucking up the hills; if I were to stop, I would smell these lands burning; if I were to drink, I would taste water heavy with smoke. The voices rise, converge within my stifling fields, until I fumble out of bed to pace my apartment and beg that they are only echoes and not the petitioners themselves, echoes that have inhabited me so that I might listen to their squabbles, their women giving birth, their cocktail parties, dinners, their salesmen crying hysterically in motel rooms, the deafening hiss of prayers.

RECONNOITER

The difference between man and woman is the difference between water and water; the differences between home and Venus are a torque of pressure, scalding degrees of carbon-dioxide, sulfurous precipitation, and comets strafing the plains of Ishtar. My dog doesn't read, knows nothing about the planet named for Eros and his nose is dry, shriveled like the prick of a centenarian. He and I are hunkered in a climate where the bag-lady comes at dawn to retrieve bottles stewing in bins, laborers turn on the hot water, pipes clanking, and then warm up their trucks until sunlight sheds her sparrows. At times, this terrain grumbles in its sleep, tectonic plates rubbing against one another like the thighs of an immense woman rolling on her side before coughing and falling back asleep. The difference between poetry and a gossip magazine is like that between water and heavy water; between poetry intuited and words ordered into strophes, an angler fish's bioluminescence and a mere lit match. The difference between myself and this dog at my feet is how without any tropes praising moonlight and open lattice, he breeds in urban crags, while I teeter between silk and incense smoke, between procreation and creativity.

AMORTIZATION

From each shortcoming there appears some litter, there erupts a glob of blood or tears. From the car accident, the lost watch, the curt word to a boy that unhinges your own childhood misery, the drunkenness when bedroom walls are coated in grey and midnight is a garden where all the flowers have turned into graves: taste them the following morning, the pebble under your pillow, the tiny rocks in your pocket that you won't discover until you stick your hand inside a darkness like that before birth. They taste of autumn, sharply copper-like, or the shard of tinfoil that you chew mistakenly as you bite into a morning sweet roll. Brave, insignificant things, peasant sandals, a shell, a baby-tooth left in the drawer among crinkled bills of discarded foreign currency, are the type of exchange you must establish, bartering this bad memory for that toothpick, these tears and wiped snot in a tissue for that burnt match which, after all, can float, like a shadow. Forget the white sand and the marble halls, or the aged filets of beef that the comfortably-fed cut with thick knives in a restaurant with starched tablecloths, because they later sit in living rooms, lights turned on as they watch the news, yet can't see the eyes outside that study them, not to ambush, but to marvel how others don't blossom in the dark among truths and transmutations, like a mushroom, like an ootheca.

RAIN IN THE VALLEY

A sudden explosion within, as I stand in the rain, on an overpass, and gaze into the concrete wash. Like the dizziness of early boyhood. Like a brat, I cough up a glob, thick and salty as tears, and spit it into the river. It dimples the currents, is absorbed into the flowage. Because of that, I imagine I partake in the season's wreckage: mud-slides, flash-floods, sirens crimson in the mist. I become the water that pours for days, like an augury fulfilled, yet only after the prophet has been beheaded, or a pardon granted for the adulterers, yet only after the vials of poison have been swallowed. I gloat on the same wreckage I felt after the maenad came to sleep in my bed, her breasts glittering like rain on passing traffic, her thighs flitting, her sex insatiable, and which I flooded several inches, before she moved on to *newfangledness*, with her squeeze and shockwave of pelvic contractions.

LITTER

There are pollutants above this dog, above us all, and brush fires on the San Fernando foothills; crows perch on telephone cables, crows my dog hears cawing, crows who know the vacant lots where bones of murder victims sink among jimson weed, grass, and the narrow tunnels leading to the ant queen's den and the sinews of this desert. As always, night arrives: this dog looks up, and only a grey darkness, like that of dishwater, night pressing through smog, through clumps of weed and burr, coagulant of night, dulling the heat the way salt and fats slow the nervous ticking of circulation. Dog thinks summer will never end; an ecstasy of sniffing and dozing, and men who sit on the sidewalk drinking beer, sowing the pavement with peanut shells. This dog has fangs chiseled for meat, and irises that dilate; but, at last, night swells, overflows, a sewage-tide of shadow, and both dog and poet will witness hillside and hearth washing away, the way a red taillight throbs in rainfall, diminishes in size, then turns onto a darker street where one can only hear the roar, decrescendo, of the engine.

A DOG'S POETRY

My dog can't decipher Wang Wei with his titles encapsulating the river, willows, the long white beards that smell of autumn, and twilights like water kept in a metal pitcher, water turning ochre. And so I read to my dog of the river, the horse whinnying, and the friends saying farewell, but I am a voice reading in an apartment where the hum of air conditioning replaces wind unleashing the plum blossoms. Long ago, Wang Wei, aged yet drunk and desiring a courtesan with her finger-drums and jade brocade, read some of his lines for her scarlet lips, narrow slippers, and hair the color of a crow. Yet the hands of a swordsman who dealt her the gift of a ripe mandrake burned in her thoughts as she feigned interest in Wang Wei's moonlight and discarded silk fan. My dog twists from my recitation, falls back asleep, and in his dream bounds after a squirrel who scampers up a trunk to a bough where the oranges, like that courtesan's breasts, are pendant, ripe, and forbidden.

THIS IS NOT LIKE A STICK

This is more like a Thyrsus: stiff, with rounded tip. Or like a trout slicing through whitewater. A ram to pound at a thick gate, *a battery of alluring sense*, jackhammering membranes of apprehension, toppling the hiccupping hysteria of chastity. Your tongue, your mouth will engulf what my left palm jack-rods when I writhe alone in a burning bed: this serpent, this spry fish hook-caught erect, and giddy in its flapping.

PRIORITIZING

Poetry is not the *Book of Ruth* and fidelity, is not carried in the hands that squeeze water from a rag to cool the gunrunner wracked by malaria. Nor is poetry the courtesan and the silk pillow. Not Ishtar and the bull tied to a killing block, while drums rattle, and sparks shoot up from a bonfire. The conceit of comparing a woman to a rose has been devalued and, in poetry, inflation is irreversible. No man embodies poetry, not even the sailor who after years of whiskey and squandering will fall in love with a prostitute who'll demand his severed ear. Poetry has nothing to do with the saint who knits together the bones of a wounded sparrow. If poetry is anything, it's that dog, fur matted on bone; it shivers while cars wash by on wet asphalt; honking erupts as it scatters across the street to a patch of sunlight with only enough room for two; there, where you stand, where you must accommodate that yelping, that wet muzzle poking at your hand.

BIVOUAC

Midnight, I sit with my dog by the parking lot on a weathered bench, and stare at Mars. Sanguine dot among the sandblast glitter and blackness; minute, like the first drop of menstruation. My dog smells the gasolined rags, possum, the ooze of snails glistening in moonshine; he yawns, shivering for an instant, the way a man does when peeing after a long commute. A car backfires, and then the leaves and apartment building creaking in the wind. My dog doesn't understand, but this parking lot is my loneliness; empty cars, and litter scampering. And so I think, this is why I look up at Mars: an absence, like my words in the comprehension of this dog or other men who rise confident in sunlight. Barrenness, soil of iron-oxide, dunes swirling in the gaps between near and far, poetry and silence, man and woman. Because what were once open fingers, clenched into a fist, yet will open again to scoop water or touch a breast. These thoughts wax and wane, polar-caps expanding with permafrost of dry-ice; I remember her, and my words, like dust whistling in no ears, ancient water, buried, and that will never burst until the sun swallows the earth. Another dog barks from a yard, and the dog at my side stretches, howls, is answered, and sets off into the street. The difference between this parking lot and my dunes is the air pressure and proximity of hope; the difference between man and beasts is like that between new water on Mars, and water in a rusting basin in a desert where rattlesnakes nest.

SPOOR

Rag of hide and bone,—there are none like you among the coyotes. They converge when midnight nests in air still smoking from brush fires, beasts with noses sniffing out possum and raccoon. I lie awake at night, while you wander the avenues, and I think of the blood-colored planet and how it streaked the imagination of warriors the way spoor stains fallen leaves, or when the testicles of Kronos were cut, and Aphrodite arose from the incarnadine froth. In groups, sprawled beneath starlight, their teeth blackened from unmixed wine, the Greek men so proud of their Thracian spears, their gold coins, gazed at the evening star, and at Mars, and how those spheres crackled, like gazes from gentry or prostitutes, when only torch-lights illumined the path to the fields beyond the revelers and wineskins. Far off, my dog barks, and headlights slide up the wall and across my ceiling. There is no wind tonight; I hear an orange fall from the tree onto the walkway, and it sounds like a wet washcloth thrown into the shower stall. My dog is like that lame master of the anvil who, for a while, enjoyed Her lips and fingers, Her hair that unleashed black butterflies smelling of honey. But those ancient youths,—now more forgotten than the dust of my great-grandparents—at last resigned themselves to the binaries of man and woman, procreation and death, poetry and sophistry, and gave Her the other one: Mars, with his scepter and shield bearing a gorgon's tongue, Mars, delighting in bloodshed. My dog, you are like that black-smith, wed to no constellation or orbit, bereft of your pearl; and I too, stretch out in my sheets, past midnight, with the Pleiades set, time blurring, and I, like you, sleep alone.

END OF SUMMER

Just as in a Zen poem, the lumberjacks fill the slopes, ax-steel ringing; as they chop, lotuses shrivel. The hermit in his cave, where a small fire crackles beneath a pot of green tea, gets up, stretches, knows it's useless... tomorrow he will resume the poem; how the brush inked such images, dew on crane's beak. With syllables he heard the falling of cherry blossoms in a temple atrium in that region where the farmers had already stored the rice, and sat drunk in huts while the rain increased. Centuries later, Dürrenmatt writes of modern man as a creature under perpetual observation; solitude is the absence of water under the red sand of Mars, an emptiness, like the minuscule pore in a rock that was once a microbe four billion years ago. From my window, I see seven palm trees like the seven spheres and their music shimmering in the arguments of vanished logicians and poets who lived in an age when a man could breathe in solitude, air rushing into the lungs of that hermit as he now leaves the cave and sits to watch the trees topple, so far away he only hears their echo. I want that stillness as I awaken, doors slamming outside, and the men setting up their chairs on the sidewalks to drink beer and listen to their ballads from truck stereos. I want to be that aloneness, so that I become prescient of the other one who observes me, neither man nor woman, but perfume on a moth's wing, odor of sweat and rain among clothes in a closet, slight perturbation of autumn I taste in the air, and the petal etiolating.

HIGH FREQUENCY

When I left her at the loom in order to shack up with the Maenad, I walked out with a pile of clothes covering my eyes so that I couldn't see what I was abandoning: my son clinging to my leg. Everything was sunlight, honey on bread, salt. We slept until noon those summer months; her breasts, bruised from my teeth, and I was sticky with her sweat, spit. At night, the moon seemed less a temptress, and more like a promise. When I thought of Venus, I remembered Percival Lowell who predicted star-sailors would find her *tropical and lush with flora and fauna*. Snoring, spent from sex, shades of Ishtar and Aphrodite crackled in my sleep with the hearth-fire, and taste of milk. When the rainy season started, the Maenad locked herself in the bathroom with pills and bubbles, while I sat at the kitchen table, listening to the radio. One night, I heard what others like me had only thought they heard: whistling that turned into a tea-kettle's pitch, which then deepened, trembled, leaves shattered in a gust, or gushing water. Is that the wind? I asked myself silently. Or the sirens outside? "No, no." I said aloud; "it's your son crying."

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

It's not that you disembarked from shadows at the cross-roads; I carried no guitar, and you didn't appear in sandals and cotton dress to tune these strings in the Spanish key; it's not that you recognized my eyes from an illustration in the *Thousand And One Nights*, as I sat reclined upon your cushions, to listen to the narrative of magnetized mountains and siroccos, until night dissolved, smoke into smoke, and you, eyes brown with dunes, a tireless Scheherazade. I was not the Marquis, nor the Poet pickled in autumn's spleen, eyes shining like two drops of coffee, lips thin, and my mistress cruel and petty; I was not father, nor the sailor, nor the boyfriend with whom an afternoon erupted with poppies; I was not any of those, because I was all of them at once; because I recognized the myth in the weaving of your fingers around my prick; because it's how I, like a patient thing, a stone, snail, or sentry, penetrated you, then learned to intone the legend by placing my lips around your nipple.

MONODY

My dog dies; body of my shadow, litter in the wind, and the rattling windows. When there's an aftershock, the alarms outcry the icy crackling of starlight. But my dog was what I thought I had heard in the wind, the way a midnight pedestrian might find a dollar blown at his feet, and pick it up only to see a dried leaf in the moonlight. I once read how at the curvature into a black hole, the photon is elongated to a thinness like that of a cry that could pass through a wine goblet or windowpane without shattering them, without having the drunk or the dreaming cover their ears. But the Valley is a wilderness of parking-lots and Laundromats. I jolt upright in bed, and the trembling stops, the car alarms caterwaul, and I think how all my poetry is insomnia or what is left in the cavernous gap between two dependent clauses. My son far off, the woman I thought I loved under a different roof, and I thought I was so clever with a metaphor made from fur and muscle, but I had only cast a few words, the way the left hand of some God spools photons from one cramped dimension into a dawn alight with Light. My dog dies, and I am awake, and the baby is mewling in a neighboring apartment, and the two sisters downstairs are in the parking-lot, thumbing their rosaries. I watched them as the earth settled with a gruff cough, and then realized that I hadn't written that beast for an entire season, forgotten like a coin at the back of the sock-drawer. My word passed, and my head is on my pillow, yet I am full of its echo the way Elijah's goblet is filled with wine, a shadow is heavy with the bones of its double, or the sky is cluttered with so much light, most of it fossilized.

ROOM AT THE MOTEL INSOMNIA

The dripping faucet in this single keeps some awake late into night; the walls are basted with humidity, and when the window is opened, the sluggish breeze does little to ameliorate the heat. The adulterer, the short-order cook evicted and having found shelter for one night, or the woman fleeing the fists of her husband, fall asleep crying, or suddenly, like tumbling down a trapdoor, so that the body is weightless, kelp in a current, cobweb in a breeze. Yet there are some, like this man, too tired to fall asleep, too delirious with insult, with debt; he spreads sheets over his hulking frame, and after the springs stop squeaking, hears the faucet. A pause,—he listens, and before discerning the whimpering as that of leak and rusted pipes, water echoes the flooding behind clenched eyes, a turbid stirring beneath words remembered from infancy, some ellipsis, the panting when he awakes from nightmares; it is a sentence he must finish transposing from one encryption to another, though he is ignorant of the night and its password, and if he is to be any interpreter, at best he is merely a translator of insomnia.

NIMBUS OF SMOG

*In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum*

T.S. Eliot

STRATA

I coast through green light after green light: Sunday, and the Valley is a plain of empty parking lots, with the Tongva gone, bones beneath the macadam. Their women of ochre-smearred faces, now dance and feast in the underworld. Their men hunt ghost deer. All the juniper-berries they desire. All the yucca and jackrabbit. While passing Our Lady of the Holy Rosary on Vineland, I imagine the merciful wood which bleeds, as incense fills the stucco architecture. I am driving deep into the Valley on a sunflooded morning, and as I pass the neighborhoods and boulevards, I read the blue placards and street signs that, like a eulogy, vainly reassure the dead with praise and commemoration: *Pacoima, Cahuenga, Tujunga...*

DOXOLOGY

From my seat, I see Yannis Ritsos holding a silver platter before him; he walks down San Fernando boulevard: smokestacks, railroad tracks and motels in the sirocco of burr and car fumes. A big-rig roars past him, enveloping him in a pillar-tall plume of brown air. After a few seconds, he reappears through the smoke, as if through a curtain, his beard, long eyelashes, and hair powdered with a meal of cinder-block and sand, yet the silver platter he carries still gleams, and I notice the lemons that wobble to-and-fro across it, and two flashing knives. August in that stretch of the Valley is brutal; brush-fires erupt on the chaparral hills, and the heat drains me so that I can do nothing but sit and think of my son, debt, the women who left me, and that's when the sky is such a piercing blue, I have to close my eyes.

Yannis was walking down San Fernando for me, because this is my poem; I am by a window, inside an incongruous *cevichería*, one shaped like an Acapulco beach hut, with palm thatching covering the roof. I am drinking beer, and Yannis is now seated before me, wearing a dust-coated suit. One drop of sweat zigzags down his left temple, charting a muddy river through the soot caking his skin. *I have been thinking of you*, I say; *thinking how I might find you in the things you would touch: spoon, table, salt...*

The waitress is bored, business is slow; she's one of those brooders of dark severity, delicious, and she leans over the counter. *Out of lemons*, she yawns.

For a decade, I have sought a woman who might give me bread, yet I have only known hunger; I have ravaged my marriage for embarkations on beds basted with sweat and lies... and so I have summoned

you Yannis, because you will show me dust is dust, but that dust is also the top-hat from which I will pull the indigo kerchiefs that flutter from the deck of a departing ship. He smells of lavenders, and his eyes are like two snowflakes dissolving in a dark puddle, but his hands are those of a peasant. Between us, on the table, the silver platter.

I raise up two fingers, and Brooder brings us beer, and glasses filled with ice. We prepare our micheladas, perfect for the heat: beer with plenty of lemon juice, ice, and salt. I continue rambling: *I have spent my adulthood seeking cool waters, but have opted to settle in a desert. I have splurged my gifts on stucco and rust.* Yannis doesn't respond, and we both slice and squeeze lemons, the yellow juice splurting into the glasses. With his eyelids half-shut, he is not like one who scrawled poems on cigarette paper when interned, but of a patrician who has gained weight by drinking nothing but milk, honey, and wine. *But I want you to be real... I want the Poem outside of the poem,* and I slam my fists on the table.

Brooder snaps to attention, *¿Qué te pasa, eh?*

Yannis pours more: *the beer, the lemons, the glass... and again, the glass, the lemons, the beer... Notice how in the reverse, the lemons, what is brightest, stays in the center, like the sun, like the bride awaiting her groom in the consummation bed, like the sex she savagely guards for the exact word.*

But Yannis is a noun in a poem I write; he is flesh in the six letters that incarnate him in a secondary English. No, he is a wool suit. Better, he is the jutting chin and the black eyes on the dust jacket photo of a volume I left behind on a bus from Mexico City to Juchitán, where I spent days listening to the diphthongs of Zapoteco, wandered the market place crowded with iguanas and stalwart women.

The waitress brings the bill, and tells me: *Ya no.* She takes my glass, the eight, twelve cans that have cluttered the table.

Yannis is a word in a poem I wrote about an incongruous cevicheria on San Fernando. Yannis is an empty chair.

STRATA

Behind Portola, the retinue of soldiers, indentured servants and scribes, crisscross of pennons on poles, canvas and silk snapping and slapping in the wind. He squints, and peers into the valley of smoke: villages of dome-shaped dwellings, hearth fires curling up through roof-slits. For the first time, a Spanish Jennet neighs in the hills, and the group of pale-skinned men hear, far off, the rattles, flutes, and bone whistles.

In one hut, an aging adolescent gulps down the brew of jimson weed; in a field, another cries out, buried hip-deep in a pit of red ants; they prickle, pock, and venom-scald his thighs, scrotum, penis, web across his belly and chest, sting his eyelids, and speckle his swollen lips which he now opens, and lets out a howl to the Lord of Perfected Creation, *Chungichnish*, who passes over the village in a sudden wind, with an aftermath of snakes, tarantulas, and lightning.

ROOM WITH RED DOOR

This is where I boil *Top Ramen* on a kitchenette's stove. This is where I sit reading Ritsos and his doxology: *praise the sun that cannot be burned*. Nightfall, I pace the room: the television newscaster recites her litany of famine and fads with the encouraging pitch of a Pilates coach. Hours later, I pull back the sheets, and I stretch out in bed. This is the room with a red door, where every night I struggle, as my Mistress of Insomnia mounts me, pins my arms in between her thighs, then stitches my eyelids open, thread spooled from embers, needle chipped from ice...

STRATIUM

The girl is nervous, but not ashamed. She noticed the blood, and showed a glistening finger to her mother; now she stretches across a bed of fragrant herbs. She sweats for two days, starves, and finds no relief from the bowl of water her aunt brings each evening, for she dreams a delirium of combusting chaparral, scattering coyotes, flutes and rattles, and she can no longer discern her skin from the brown of dry dirt. The following year, she will hear her voice break open in the bleating of a newborn.

STRATIFICATION

I park on a shoulder in the hills, and step out of my car in order to gaze down into the Valley: the Universal tower, the glitter in Burbank, the percolating red and white lights of cars streaming on the midnight freeway, and I intuit the compression, strata upon strata: tar-embedded sloth bones, fish-hooks of stone, horseshoes, railroad ties, asphalt and neon. Later, my car windows open, the breeze shushing into my ears, I pull into the motel parking lot, and deep within me I hear the sobbing, the grunt, the girl now a woman, pushing forth another life into the for once crisp air.

THE MOTEL INSOMNIA

*After having walked for so many hours,
without finding a shadow of a tree, a
seed of a tree, nor the root of anything,
we hear the sound of dogs barking.*

Juan Rulfo

*Tarumba! I go among the ants,
between the feet of the flies.*

Jaime Sabines

TO THE READER

So. After the bars, taco shacks and *pupuserías* shut down, the San Fernando Valley belongs to no one. Driving, you might see a police cruiser prowl the traffic islands, warehouses, or plastic bags that scamper down the boulevards, yet there is never a pedestrian to study the streets. Everything has crumbled into an adjacent night, leaving *eidolons* of donut shops, service stations, and Laundromats: black buildings that tremble, like a mirror when touched. Later, in your bed, you'll hear an errant trailer downshift, or a low-rider grumble as it careens onto a side-street where apartment buildings creak in the breeze. Have you tasted loneliness? It's acrid, aspirin on tongue. Have you reckoned much to get at the nights of a man writing with night-sweats? Here is a man who sleeps in snatches. There is a fragility to steel and the junkyard, something leaves don't possess as they spin with the litter. Here, sheets fray, gums bleed, and the motel harbors nothing but the tartness of dust billowing from the fan. Stop this night with me, and you will know more than the *ghazals* of insomnia, the *pantoums* listing grievances, coughing, and dripping faucets. Stop this night with me, and you will comprehend the *satori* of moonlight on the sludge of a drained pool.

ELIXIRS

The label on this sweet wine lists the sulfites I drink, those chemicals butchers once dredged on slabs of rotten meat for a ruddy glaze. Outside, the chaparral hills are blazing again; the air is coarse with ash, scratching at my throat with thirst. When I agreed to the lease for this room, the manager made me sign a disclosure: the walls contain lead-based paint. Paint chips swirl when the gardener blasts his leaf-blower over the walkway, yet poetry is an insulation, enabling me to write of arctic sheets during the dog-days, regaling me with the odor of jacarandas when workers are tarring the roof, and it quenches my thirst, even as I sip this saccharine *Cisco*. I think, I have made it this far to scrape together a locus of parking lots and junkyards, to pen a paean to the medical clinic for the under-aged and pregnant, or a stanza on the re-bar skewering the side of the scaffold worker.

Two centuries ago, the dandy with his plum cravat, in a syphilitic stupor, saw tamarind trees through the green haze of his poison. I swallow, and write of the absent trees and desert, the blear by way of beer, like absence by way of absinthe.

INITIATION

I first saw the Bone Lord after hearing his chopper, and picking my fingers through the drapes: “Black leather rebel motorcycle club” stitched in vermilion on his vest....a helmet reminiscent of a dark leather father. She had been on the chopper too, and was now opening the door to her room. White trash, straw-colored hair, she had just moved in to the motel. *Sit down here on the step*, she motioned to a boy of three or four. *Sit down here and wait*. Motorcyclist and blonde walked into her room, and shut the blue door. The boy sat under the scant awning shade; still in his pajamas, he rolled a *Matchbox* car over his legs, then dropped it, and covered his ears. Across the steaming parking lot, I could hear something like a boar-snarl erupt every three or four seconds, and I imagined the mouth of that woman open, her eyes squeezed shut, her right cheek pressed against a pillow, her arms spread, her ass arched up, and the ramrod of his torso and ass pistoning, and though my cock stirred, yet I saw the boy, his head hung down against his chest that was shaking, his body trembling, as when waves are dragged back to the sea, where *thanatos* tastes of salt: the immensity, the quick stab at union, and then the aloneness.

*L*I*Q*U*O*R*&*I*C*E*C*O*L*D*B*E*E*R*

The bell rings as I open the door; two men dressed in overalls are getting their checks cashed from the Syrian owner; each is holding a twelve pack of Bud. Laughter and boasting will crackle as they will later sit drinking in a truck in an apartment building parking lot, listening to *norteño* ballads. I walk to the glass doors humming from refrigeration; my holdings, five dollars. My aim, to slake this thirst that has bludgeoned me since coming back from unemployment. The heat all day has been unbearable; nothing has burgeoned from my efforts, from the long lines and paperwork. I leave the door open for a couple of minutes, letting the cold air glaze my reddened forehead, until the owner whistles, and gestures: *You buying or what?* I pull out two tall cans, pay for them, and walk into the scalding dusk. In the Liquor store parking lot, the two workers have already ripped open a twelve pack. Faintly, from the truck stereo: an accordion, a guitar strumming chord changes in 3/4, and an out of kilter singer numerating revenge and betrayals. A dusty wind rushes across the parking lot, and I look up *in perfect silence* at the constellations, sense the vastness, fossilization of dead light, and new water on Mars. I sit, my back against the store wall. One streetlamp crackles faintly. Two yards from me, I notice a vacant lot, and while I take a sip, I see the ant-crawl, the swarm and Pollockesque tracery of black lines and swirls by the mound: persistence, labor so perfect because it is conducted with equanimity. And I sit here, engrandeured in the belittlement of myself under the moon, the wind, beneath the ants.

MONDAY IS THE MYSTERY WHEN EVERYTHING IS BORN

Monday morning, and the shadow is cast on the sidewalk from a sapling planted in dust.

Monday, I open the blinds, and the auto-shop is open and color is invented because the garbage truck banged open the dumpsters, hauled trash off to the horizon, and revealed the aureate sky.

Mist of auto-paint, vermilion and glacier-green, dissolves in the blue heat.

Monday, and the crows perch on the power cables, their feathers sculpted from obsidian.

Monday, and the hornet-nest under the liquor store awning is brittle; flies now reign over the road-kill in front of *Lencha's Nail & Beauty Salon* and the Pentecostal church where

Everyday the Spirit mounts the Salvadoran women, their eyes rolled back to the whites, phonemes babbling from a golden brook.

Monday, the single mothers with their tally of food-stamps and the Jr Mart's coffer of *Cisco* and chips & dip.

Monday, muscles for a pittance on the street corner, the laborers more dissipated than any aging rock guitarist.

CONTINUED

Monday, and compassion is borne under the auspices of the neon 24 hour medical clinic where a glove probes the mystery of the womb, and every needle is immaculate.

Monday, and a flaming hand reaches into me, and rips out a glob of my lungs, as I step into the sunlight:

railroad tracks, parked jalopies, and a boy locked out from his mother's room, his back against the blue door, his hands cupping his ears, though even I from across the way can hear the racket she's making.

I HAVE NEVER SEEN THE MAN WHO SHARES MY BEDROOM WALL

I have heard his door thump, as he enters his room, or leaves for work when the air outside is wet and violet. I have smelled eggs and chorizo frying from a pan in his kitchenette, canned laughter gaggling from a morning radio show. Past midnight, the stillness is deafening; it throbs, weaving shadows through the canals of my pulse. Sweating, I sit up in bed,—I hear him cry and cough up sobs as strenuously as if he were laughing. The sound of a running faucet, and then the mattress squeaking...silence that glistens like moonlight glazing a silver coin. I don't know the man who lives next door. I don't carry the fare to cross over into his darkness. But he hears me as I toss and cough in my own bed. He is, after all, my echo.

THE BONE LORD

He snarls past me on his Harley. A blur of tattoos, leather and smoke. Unlike the ghouls and banshees of boyhood, he appears in daylight, at noon, black helmet, his teeth blinding, sunshine on chrome. A gust of leaves announces his arrival, and he zips by the motel, cranking up to a gear that outruns any police interceptor, leaving a vapor-trail of ice-glazed air, a weather that is alien and tellurian at once, like the expanse of frozen crags on Pluto, or, as a boy, seeing a cut pomegranate for the first time: violet slits and vermilion-oozing seeds, and intuiting a woman's sex,—the itch, spitfire, and transmembermentation.

PENTECOSTAL NEON

From my motel window, I read: *Templo de Dios*...crackling in crimson at noon, when the heat jaggedly rises like an eight cylinder jalopy reaching the speed limit; at evening, the neon is a premonition of dusk and judgment; the tambourines hiss at me as I walk back from the liquor store with a six pack, and the congregation is howling God *espíritu santo*, and the children in the parking lot are itching in their ties and dresses, and kick a blue beach ball until it bursts. Crimson neon is more than a buzzing, it is an ominous wash of noise, like the shushing from an air-conditioner that is mistaken for silence, yet once the traffic stops, and it is midnight, it's the sound that throbs in my ears, the first light I see as I open to the darkness encroaching me when I can't sleep, but stare out the window at a locked temple, the moon, but no constellation to spell out the red babble of my paganism.

BAR LAS PLAYAS: NORTH HOLLYWOOD, CA

Hunkered between a metal shop and junkyard. Christmas bulbs flicker over the bar-top; the denizens lean into their tins of lite and high-life. The security guard, his uniform untucked, dozes by the door opening to twilight and tracks. I sit next to the jukebox. An accordion wheezes trills and arpeggios, while Chalino Sanchez recounts bullets and betrayal, his voice straining... the train's horn, the descending wail, then boxcar after boxcar rattling. My beer is warm as mule-piss, and I stare at some pennies on my table. Two grease-monkeys play pool; once the music stops, the click of ball against ball is the only sound. I think: *All of us are marooned here*, and I stare at the balls spin; some splutter their red or blue stripe, others remain still on the green felt. The crisp crack of a can. Billiard balls clunking into pockets containing a darkness like that before birth, after death. *But there is a boy I must remember*. Others knock against one another, or stop in a point not strategic, merely parenthetical.

ROOM WITH DOOR PAINTED AQUA-MARINE

And behind this door, the mermaid, *la sirena*; her silvery hair in spangles across the sheets; her blue eyes opened like those on a porcelain doll; her lips reveal violet teeth where a gnat paces on an incisor; her breasts are narrow, the nipples already deliquescing into an aspic. At her hips, where sun-leathered skin turns into scales, there is an odor of tar, backwash, and fish-heavy nets. Her tail is the color of salt cod. A buzzard-fray of flies above her body supine on a Queen-size mattress, yet the siren doesn't move. No warble and caterwaul pierces the stifling motel room. Sunlight smolders against the drapes, and a red cigarette lighter is the sole evidence of the stevedore who works in San Pedro. This is the abducted siren, the trick for one night, the dock-worker's waylay, and the sailor's delight, drugged and discarded. This is the siren whose song is snuffed out, and deafening.

CONDITIONED

Sapling, burgeoning from dust, in a red season of brush-fires: you're like the children who live in this motel, families of three or four pent up in lead and asbestos, sturdy and unkillable, who shriek and send the crows scattering, and thrash the soccer ball about the parking lot; they grow sinewy, stretch to their full stature only to regard the arid tar-plains, the junkyards where nothing grows, where the horizon opens like a drawn-out yawn.

I WOKE UP PAST MIDNIGHT

Growl & tremolo of exhaust pipes. The Bone Lord had gunned his chopper across the asphalt, and into the vacant lot. I opened my door and saw blueness everywhere, as if a fist had crushed ice, opened fingers, and released a haze of Plutonian Methane. My bare feet stepped into the lot where burr and bristle prickled my soles. I could hear the moon, a constant high note, like a finger circling the moist rim of a goblet. Between a junked Ford Pick-up, and a station wagon on cinder-blocks, the chopper rested on its kick-stand. Iron and chrome: argent and gleaming, like a plot of lunar dirt where nothing will ever grow to witness the micro-comets plicking. I felt a breath that wasn't a breath at all behind me, and turned around to look up into deep-sunken eyes, jaws grinding with a sound like cricket-chirps. A glove forced open my left hand, and pressed a coin into my palm. When I blinked a second time, I was alone and my chest glowed in the moon-shine, and I looked up to a disc behind a nimbus of clouds.

OUTCAST

There is no room for me in that single; the door open, I discern the bare feet, the mother and her man, two teenage boys who stare at evening soccer on the screen, while a girl, still in diapers, sits on the door step sucking tamarind candy. I want to enter, to taste the water that runs from their faucet, and know the stringent glory of having survived the crossing. The husband sips at a tall can of Bud as slowly as I prune words until reaching the poem. Tomorrow he will be on the corner, pushing his way through the other men to the truck of the contractor who needs dry-wallers.

The land here is arid, and the resilience of the ant that hauls a bread crust is more than the diesel engine, yet even the cactus is softer than thirst and hunger. Far off, heat broils the skin of mother, infant in arms, both who have yet to sleep, but never beneath their native loam.

DOOR TO THE ROOM OF A SHADE

Past midnight, I sat awake, looking out my window, when a black sedan pulled into the parking space in front of that black door. A shadow, carrying a duffel bag, walked into his room, then double-locked the door. Later, much later, when all of the motel denizens were done watching cable's *eidolons* of bonanza stampedes, fedoras, and twilight ghouls flickering against walls and drapes, I bolted upright in bed after hearing a shot. In the morning, detectives found the corpse, bloody corolla on a pillow, with a black center hole, which had been pressed over his face; duffel bag gone, no leads, no witnesses, and only the stiff composure of the dead, leaving an ellipsis, a silence that aches.

MARISCOS: IN NEON

When the unemployment check arrives, my mouth puckers dry; I look west and see the cobalt neon tubes shaped like a crab, and the cerulean word: MARISCOS. In mini-skirts, the waitresses balance their trays of devilishly piquant shrimp; beneath the ceiling fans, the wood paneling and palm-leaf thatching, the men nurse their hangovers with *Clamato*, dip spoons into schooners of clams, octopus. We are here for one thing, the way a widow goes to the shore to see the waves swell then dissolve on the sand, like pain swelling, then ebbing. The waitresses are doves out of reach, and the men remember gold that glitters beneath darker currents; I, too, look out the window, past the big-rigs, past the railroad tracks and smokestacks; my vision extends past the hills, reaching the desert, that other ocean where one goes to grieve, comprehend the sand, the calcification.

THIS CHAPARRAL WILL NOT BURN

On my desk, there is a yellow notebook I bought at the liquor store after having watched day laborers tar the roof of the building across the way; after having heard the braggadocio strafed back and forth, *güey* and *no te hagas*. Words: an enclosure the color of water, so that bubbling tar will not scald the hand. And so I thought: I will write the feet that cross the desert and the sapling that burgeons from drought because the aperture, too, can be apprehended through the blaze of native chaparral, yet this chaparral will not be consumed. I placed that notebook on my desk. 99 pages, not including the front page on which I scrawled an empty bird nest. On the second page, I noticed a slight rip. It was a slit between paper fibers, a threshold too narrow for my smallest finger,—but there was enough room to breathe.

DROUGHT

Stripped cars and a dead possum in a vacant lot behind the motel. Station wagons, sedans from the 50's, 70's, nautical Cadillacs and Lincolns. I look at a Continental... riotous, the weeds; tendrils the color of an old shaving brush thrust through the hood, bristle from brittle tires, and hubcaps. Next, I peer into a coupe, and imagine the weight that pressed on that upholstery now more faded than the Guadalupe Treaty; thighs, moistness of buttocks and shoulders. If I wipe my forehead, sweat spreads anew. Wasps and lozenge-emerald flies spark above the carrion; the only movement among these heaps. Some yards away, I see the motel parking lot, and the drained pool; and I think, let this wreckage remain, like the stucco and asbestos encasing the lodgers, truckers, the addict just arrived from Kansas who walks to the corner Jr Mart in slippers. A sudden breeze rises, coarse with ash; I look up to the hills, see the combusting chaparral, a lone helicopter that circles and dumps fire retardant, although the blaze doesn't diminish.

FARE

I am the boy locked outside when your door is blue. You, too, are this boy when you enter the party, yet stand in a corner, so self-conscious you hear your neck-bones creak. You are he when you cry, when your grip loosens and you taste vomit, and crumble among sheets that itch of insomnia. When you weigh the stone, the shell, as more than the gold ingot, though the price of gas may rise, and the corner coffee shop sells fried eggs and boiled milk for dollars. Your mother is always dying,—cancer eats into her left breast though her heart is a puddle of roses; your father is always calling for you,—but from behind a pillar that casts its shadow on a dark plaza, and in the distance a freight train shoots across the horizon, its horn reaching out to you from so far that you find yourself outside the blue door, where you gaze at a coin with its obverse of ferry and hooded rower... the oleanders in the vacant lot behind you rustle dryly, and a breeze rises, foul with carrion, with the tinkle of empty cans.

FERRY TOKEN'S REVERSE

A coin each for those, like I, born in 1973: for the dental hygienist, for those in auto-wrecks and plastic surgery, for amputees, the toothless from crack, the accountant, wizard of data entry, mini-mart zombies or ghouls of neon bars where coke is worshiped atop the bathroom counter... all the buffalo wings and beer you desire. All the debt, botched manicures, all the children, transubstantiation of hearth into mortgage, public education into the sophistry of debating binge-shopping or binge-eating. A coin for the psychiatrist who looks at high-heels and shudders, for the dentist who loves the oral hygiene of his assistant, for the merchant of software, smoothies, or other coolants; they will tender their bonus in the Kingdom that doesn't exist. We are funneling into the dark, and our sleep is a rumor of cancer, our vows yellowed like newspaper clippings, our God perched with angels atop a needle's tip. Now the stale glory of hypocrisy awaits us; now the traffic on the freeway parts for the staff of my middle finger, but only after the baby-sitter has put the kid to sleep, and the last party is sputtering. It will be at the bar *Las Playas* where the silver tooth of the barmaid glistens with my reflection, as she laughs and slaps my last dollars from the counter, hands me a club-soda because the cops are out, the dogs are howling, and I'm slurring my glossolalia.

ENDGAME

I go out into the vacant lot with junked cars, find an anthill, prod at the opening with a stick, then thrust my hand into the slit. The ants run rampant, their redness glistening like drops of *Tapatio chile* on a plate. I wiggle my fingers inside the moister earth; at once, I feel the venom burn. Amok, the ants regroup, and ten, fifteen, crawl onto my wrist, and I sweat, damn all fuck to hell, and I pull out my hand, shake it, as dust dissipates in the heat, and ants drop.

Soon after, I buy a bag of ice from the corner liquor store; the owner, who picks up on the single mothers, looks askance as I hand him a bill with a swollen hand, sweat beading atop my bald pate. I bark at him, *I'm okay*, and study the posters of dusky women in bikinis proffering bottles of malt liquor and lite beer, while he dumps the change on the counter. In my room, I turn on the TV to a re-run. I dump ice into the sink. While my hand numbs, I sit and watch a talking Trans-am and a blonde in peril. Far off, a dog barks as twilight glazes the motel walls purple and a scent of humus erupts from my own lungs, my gums. Over that ruckus, I laugh until my eyes tear; I howl, yip back at that beast who will never bite me.

SATURDAY

*For an evil blossom was born
Of sea-foam and the frothing of blood*

Swinburne

TOMAS RIVERA HEARS THE EARTH UNHINGE HER JAWS

One would think that the mere odor of semen, overpowering as that of lavenders or stallions, would assuage the earth's thirst, but the sinews of soil, the hips of hills, and the brush fires that erupt when summer sizzles, rile her up so that she melts the blue iris of ice with the vermilion teeth of thirst, and her serpenty fingers dip into the eyes of every man who knows what it is to sleep in the chicken coops, to snap loose the radishes, the sanguinary beets, sniff the excrement of trucks and the scald of insecticide. In short, the earth is like *la muerte*, a fickle woman prone to stuffing a dagger instead of a prick in her bonest, or donning a crown of live iguanas.

Tomás knew that. Because after teaching English, after drought of Crystal City, after the odor of the library stacks, the pages that smell like wool after rain, like semen, a scent as overpowering as jacarandas, scalding as *chipotle* fumes wafting from vats, sharp as thirst in the throat of a boy denied water...after all of that, Tomás walked out to the field where the salamanders breed as rapidly as brushfires, the salamanders that, when squeezed, secrete a milk like semen, hot like the poetic word that is love's seed in the dark; Tomás kneeled down and scooped out dirt with a can in order to dig his forearm back into the earth. He reached within her, beneath the five o'clock sun, his denim pants and white shirt against the dust, and he repeated one syllable to her: *grace...grace...grace...* for those asunder sunstroke, for the boy with white teeth and filthy hands who will

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never leave the fields, for the uncle who will choke on blood, for the woman carrying life in her womb hungering to be born in order to live with hunger, for the curses simmering with whiskey, for the ambling dog and the vulture, for the old man whose cataracts are swollen with darkness, the way bone is full of calcium.

And the earth didn't bite him; had the earth bitten him, he could have called her savage. And the earth didn't hold in his arm, the way a woman delirious with estrus, holds her man in with her thighs, long after he has stopped thrashing; had the earth held him in, he could have called her his lover. Instead, he pulled out his arm, and dirt filled the hole. Like a syllable whittled into water, like foam winking and disappearing at mug's bottom, the earth sealed herself. Tomás brushed his boot over the patch, then heard the beet picker, the woman shrieking during labor, skulls flashing smiles among the fleas and rats that plague the shacks of the destitute, the boy on his first day at school, and the English that shrivels his tongue... and for a moment below time, he didn't know which voice was his among that leaf-storm, nor which had called out to him by name, only that he would narrate them, even if the earth would swallow them all.

That, we know, and more, though we can't discern the name he finally recognized as his, many years later, when the earth, tired of waiting, unhinged her jaws with a sound of thunder on the dirt road, before claiming him as hers forever.

ATONEMENT

My son, my son, my head, my head

Yehuda Amichai

LITTLE BOY LOST

In his pajamas, and barefoot, he walked across the parking lot of steaming asphalt. He walked, or ran, down the sidewalk, barefoot, to the corner store from which I exit. I drop my plastic bag of beer and instant noodle soup. The boy is treading, left foot up, left foot down, right foot up...he is howling, red-faced, snot glistening over his lips. I pick him up and bring him back inside; we pass under the icy blast of the air-conditioner vent, and into the vomity smell of cleaning agents, and dusty canned food. The boy is crying so hard that he is choking on his own phlegm, and I pat, pat, pat his back. Waving his hand quickly, the clerk motions to me, *Bring him here!* and he swipes aside boxes of cigars and gum from the counter. I set the boy down and hold up his feet to see the damage; his soles are now two blisters, in parts parchment yellow, in other parts translucent sheaves of epidermis. One blister ruptures, orange-mustard colored plasma oozes thick as penicillin. I look up at the clerk who shouts out in Arabic to his wife; from the stock room, she comes out, her heels clacking quickly, and she hands him the cell phone. The boy's teeth are chattering, and he shivers; I pick him up, and he wraps around me, tight as a boa-constrictor. As I rock him, the wife banters disbelief in Arabic with her husband, and approaches us, trying to hand the boy a Hershey's bar, which he refuses to grab. We spend ten minutes like this until we hear the sirens, squeal of brakes, and the chugging of a diesel engine idling. Two firemen and a paramedic step inside...the young paramedic, who looks like a blond Malibu surfer, carries the boy to the ambulance. The door open, I stand at the store's entrance and gaze at the boy who is still crying and is now on a gurney inside the van. With blue, latex gloves, the medic examines the boy's feet, while a fireman tries to ask me questions, though my ears are throbbing and I can't listen, can't

CONTINUED

hear a thing, until I hear the voice of his mother, and I step out onto the sidewalk, and see her walking in her slippers and in a violet night-gown, and she's gesticulating, screeching *I told him to go nowhere and wait outside! I told him to sit outside and stay!* Something fragile and small within me shatters, and then I only feel the scald of rage through my limbs; I start approaching her, shouting *You bitch! You bitch!* But a fireman is holding me back, and insists in a decisive and well-annunciated tone:

*Sir, are you
the father? Are you
the boy's father; sir,
are you the father?*

LITTLE BOY FOUND

Am I the little boy lost,
or the lodger who presses his ear against his room's wall to hear
another man crying?

Am I the boy who rolls his *Matchbox* car on the step to his room, who
plays soccer with the other boys in the parking lot, their teeth the only
thing glistening in this valley of smoke?

Am I the boy, the stray boy, who thinks he is
this man who swipes at cockroaches with a rolled-up magazine and
sleeps alone?

Am I the boy whose hand clutches chalk, and then, on asphalt,
jaggedly draws a tree, a roof, a chimney, a home that doesn't exist?

No, I am not that boy, but a man
who is still a boy lost and who counts his change, counts
days on a calendar until some vanished day may
come to pass like

a blessing, like a prophecy so that
I may walk across the sage-brush, the dunes,
arrive at an oasis, kneel and fill my canteen,
before standing up to discern
the scalding mirage of manhood.

EPILOGUE

*He looked down at the earth and kicked it hard and said:
“Not yet, you can’t swallow me up yet. Someday, yes...”*

Tomás Rivera

ON WHY I STICK MY ARM INTO THE ANTHILL

(WRITTEN WHILE LISTENING TO BOOKER LITTLE & ERIC DOLPHY)

Because the Ant Queen is my mother;

the Ant Queen is my wife;

I praise

the Ant Queen

I loathe

the Ant Queen

because

I adore her the way

I adore what bloats with putrefaction,

what smells of milk, what sucks

marrow from boiled-bone, what

blooms under the butcher's fingernail,

what pierces, what lays

a brown egg onto the lapel of delectation,

what is buried, then dug up, and shaven with a black tongue,

what gestates in the belly round with quivering meat; because

the Ant Queen is amniotic fluid I gargled, is yellowness oozing from a
fork'd yolk,

plasma erupting from a deep burn,

the Ant Queen

is ripped skin, the bleeding, and twilight of brain;

the Ant Queen

is the basement stuffed with eyes,

& she waits,

CONTINUED

nests beneath dry Californian soil color of parched hickory chips, or
corn-kernel-flecked turd;

the Ant Queen

whose mandibles crunch open & shut, sounding like heavy scissors
cutting a stack of matte-paper;

the Ant Queen,

whose eggs eggs egg eggs dribble from her gaster, larvae white as
a callus after one has swam for an hour;

She, whose legs can rip in two the exoskeleton of a beetle, yet whose
gait is as soft as the letter H in Castilian;

She, whose eyes are a multitudinous rattle of sparks that shake in the
fist of the gambler;

She, whose cardiovascular system is a tree of electricity, a torch of
hydrogen, a gravitational tug between such disparate nouns as para-
chute and shoe-polish;

the Ant Queen

who is my whetting-nurse,

and my purse & curse,

my minstrel and mistress of my nemesis, she reigns

from her mud-roof tunnel, she reigns,

cushioned atop her pyramidal hoard of eggs;

the workers mill, antennae knitting into antennae, like the hand-
shaking of small business

owners at a convention, of frat brothers at an all-nite kegger;

the workers mandible-haul the inch of pizza crust, a pill bug curled
into crescent, mute agony of centipede, legs scintillating pathetically,
ketchup-smearred scrap of napkin from

Grease-Spoon, raisin, toothpick speckled with diced coleslaw,
cornbread

crumbs, pencil shavings;

the workers delighting in human debris, the backwash of what man
squeezes dry, the discarded, excreted, puckering black eye of ass, and
pipes.

All for the Ant Queen,
who is my wife and left me for a free union with Andre the Giant,
who is my left toe when I break Matzoh,
who is my molar crumbling communion's cookie of panic attack,
who is my skin when shattered against the hammer of hyperbole,
who simply is
the logos at 5 o'clock when all the bulls have stained the sand
crimson,
when man doesn't hunger the Chinoiserie of spiral jellyfish
but the pulmonations of stud, leaf-storm, ant swarm at the zenith of
summer,
while She pisses
her runny rice-ooze of eggs eggs egg eggs
while she hisses,
aroused & incubating her load, bubble bursting in the rupture of every
egg,
with the paroxysm of
hot blade into labium, lightning slicing a tree,
with the word,
with the lips that are slit open to burp a wider decibel
and resound in their meaty walls the needles of the moon,
the bloodbath of syncretism,
the scream cauterized.



Anthony Seidman is the author of the *On Carbon-Dating Hunger* (2000) and *Where Thirsts Intersect* (2006), published by The Bitter Oleander Press; a selection of his work was included in the second volume of *Corresponding Voices* in 2005, by Syracuse University

Press & Point of Contact. Pudding House Publications has just released a chapbook of his prose poems entitled *Black Neon*. Seidman has collaborated twice with French artist Jean-Claude Loubieres in the creation of the artist's books, *When You Read...* (2003) and *San Fernando Valley Suite* (2005), both created in Paris through the fine press, AdeLeo Editions. Apart from writing poetry, he has dedicated effort into translating contemporary poets from Mexico and Peru; in 2004, The Latino Press published his translations of the Peruvian poet Miguel Angel Zapata, entitled *A Sparrow In The House of Seven Patios*, and he also contributed translations to *Transparent Words*, a collection of poetry by Alberto Blanco. He has also edited and published Spanish translations of such contemporary American poets as Ray Gonzalez, Alan Britt, and others in Mexico in *La Jornada*, Mexico City's major newspaper, *Castalida* and *Revista Solar*, among others. Some of Seidman's more recent publications include essays, translations, and poems in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Iodine*, *The Bloomsbury Review*, *Hunger*, *Ur-Vox*, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Beyond Baroque*, *RATTLE*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, *Sulphur River Literary Review*, *Pemmican*, *Milk*, and *Crate*.

