

*the* MEADOW





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2012

TRUCKEE MEADOWS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

*Reno, Nevada*

*The Meadow* is the annual literary arts journal published every spring by Truckee Meadows Community College in Reno, Nevada. Students interested in the literary arts, graphic design, and creative writing are encouraged to participate on the Editorial Board. Visit [www.tmcc.edu/meadow](http://www.tmcc.edu/meadow) for information and submission guidelines. Look for notices around campus, in *The Echo* student newspaper, or contact the Editor-in-Chief at [meadow@tmcc.edu](mailto:meadow@tmcc.edu) or through the English department at (775) 673-7092.

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*The Meadow* is indexed in *The International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*.

Our address is Editor-in-Chief, *The Meadow*, Truckee Meadows Community College, English Department, Vista B300, 7000 Dandini Blvd., Reno, Nevada 89512.

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Meadow Non-Fiction Award: Nancy O'Connell, 1st place.

Meadow Poetry Award: Victoria Kellie, 1st place; Brandon Darkis, 2nd place; and Angelo Perez, 3rd place.

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ISSN: 1947-7473

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# MORNING, LAS VEGAS

*by Jane Rosenberg LaForge*

Look at me: I'm on narcotics,  
quoting Chekhov about guns.  
I can quote other men too, whose  
compulsions were so worthy  
they were driven to greatness.  
Not like me, pure of the body  
Yet besotted of spirit, since it  
Has taken me this lifetime to  
Learn that it was not the spirits  
Of great men that were besotted,  
But their material compositions.  
All the wafers and wine in this  
universe could not deliver them  
from corruption so they took up  
arms, or they took up gambling.  
I know how they feel, as depressed  
As a Las Vegas sunrise, the mustard  
seal on the dome's horizon and  
the caking over of what used to  
be desert, but now is merely  
necrotic. They came for the  
uranium, to beat eternity, to be  
reborn as weapons, but they are  
as trapped under a crust of vellum  
and counterfeit wrapping as I am,  
like an echo prohibited from roaming  
from out of the infinite present.

# OUTSIDE THE STARLIGHT THEATER

*by Cameron Aveson*

*Terlingua, Texas*

For months now you've been camping in the cemetery painting portraits of the dead, of cactus and barbed wire, the Chisos mountains and the desert beyond the fence line. I watch you running the gauntlet of local dogs on Sunday morning, circling the dirt parking lot on your motorcycle in your green top hat and torn pants, letting them close in then quickly speeding off. I cheer with each pass, arms rising like ocotillo branches, beer cans blooming in both hands. The dogs sit in the shade, waiting for another chance, pink tongues stitching invisible patterns into the heat until you return, temporarily framed by the rising dust, back lit. This picture you will never paint: hand on the throttle, feet pointed to the sky, gravel flying, you disappearing into the hands of agave and the sound of barking dogs.

# ON THE STEPS OF THE BAR, BOQUILLAS, MEXICO

*by Cameron Aveson*

*for Christine*

When the old man hands me the guitar  
I give him my pouch of rolling tobacco  
and he tells me to play something. So  
I wrap my arm around the hollow body,  
stiff neck in my palm. It's been years  
since I've played, since I've been home.  
Out of tune—my fingers find the frets—  
each one thinking about the last time,  
how I held the pewter jar that held you,  
like I never did while you were alive.  
He cradles the dried leaf in thin paper  
between his fingers, suddenly delicate,  
then kisses it closed and lights the end.  
I watch the ash glow red, then grey,  
then gone and play the only song I know.

# DOWNTOWN STOPLIGHT: RENO

*by Zebuel Christopher Stecker*

Odors inside a Ford Escort: half empty  
coffee cups, lazily tossed garbage, falling

ashes from a nervously used cigarette.  
Idle anticipation, foot crushing the brake, waiting

for crimson street signals framed  
by neon-gray skyline casinos, abandoned

and full. On this street of wayward ambition, stunted  
Sycamores sparsely dot the void

of Virginia Street, a failing forest laments Bob Ross.  
The city landscaper, bloodshot eyes from imitation whiskey

given freely the night before by a thirty-something waitress.  
She brought him bouquets of Camels.

Her sunken face betrayed her dreams,  
fishnets trap a sagging money-maker, cruel

pulls of missed opportunity, unrelenting gravity.  
City workers eagerly dug

shallow holes like graves for youthful trees  
that were to line the sidewalk painting.

Now steel grates surround the bard, shackles  
above the roots. They never grew tall.

Restrained by the traffic light, a fiery horticulture  
nightmare surrounding my car, teasing

hope into the horizon, beyond here.  
To a place where those trees and I

can sway in wild unpredictable winds.  
Breathe air rich with lavender scents and drink pure water.

So the aimless stand on the other side  
of a traffic light fence, feet purposely stuck

to the sidewalk drenched with last night's  
Mai Tais and indulgent romance.

All the while Journey plays on every town's static  
classic rock station while I plead

for that light to turn green like that tortured tree—  
*anyway you want it* slowly fades to silence.

# BEYOND THE SEA

*by Nancy O'Connell*

**First Place, Non-Fiction Award**

I live just east of Eden. Not all the way east but far enough to appreciate the miracle of refrigerated transport. Life without lettuce, orange juice and a smooth, cool avocado would be grim indeed. At first glance, it's an odd place to call paradise.

On this side of the majestic Sierra Nevada Mountains, the foothills sit in a rain shadow and here begins a vast high mountain desert covering most of the state. Once, we were on the edge of the forest. The lingering snow pack provided enough moisture for the pines and cedars to survive two months of blistering heat. Then came the railroads, gold and silver mines. The trees are coming back slowly, but my life in and near this part of the world bears witness to the span of time it takes to grow a stand of timber.

Horses, cows, sheep, goats, llamas and emus share the land in this part of town. The flock of feral peacocks nearby manages to survive despite the coyotes still roaming free. I have a small patch of lawn but most of my property is covered with wild purple sage. Trees provide some shade for the roses but the dirt here will tell you the west is still just a little wild. The land is still raw and unkempt in places. We've tamed the horses, we sleep on soft beds and revel in the luxury of indoor plumbing, but not so long ago, not very far away, it was a different story. Louis L'Amour's Comstock Lode is just over the ridge. Mark Twain slept there and it's still easy to imagine Marshall Dillon and Miss Kitty at the Bucket o' Blood saloon.

The snowpack lingers on Mount Rose while July temperatures on the valley floor hit triple digits. Just about every night, I sit on my porch in a big oversized white rocking chair and watch the world move from day to night. Sometimes with a cup of tea, other times with a nice merlot. In the evening, the sun dips behind the mountains and shadows march down the eastern slope, across the valley floor and up the foothills on the other side. The deep red clay dirt fades to a softer peach then to pale pink. The sky moves from clear blue to periwinkle and finally an indigo that deepens to ink as the stars come out. I'm discovering the things I thought I knew about myself, only to realize the fantasy has nothing to do with reality. I have, for example, always maintained I had to be either on the shore or in the mountains. It's a great concept, really, but bears little validation by the life I live now.

When I moved here, my friends thought I'd lost my mind. Richard is in Manhattan in an elegant 2,000 square foot loft in SoHo living a charming, trendy, well-dressed life. Michael is in the Hollywood Hills, his home featured in the June 2010 issue of Architectural Digest, tanned, fabulous and driving a vintage white convertible Porsche down Doheney Way. Kathleen is in Seattle on Mercer Island. She takes a boat to work every

day, drinks fourth generation coffee and spends every spare moment sailing, wind surfing or roaring around on her jet ski. I left San Francisco and career madness behind in 1993 to move to a small town a few miles down the road from Lake Tahoe to raise my family and be close enough to the forest for a daily hike in the woods. That they could understand, but this makes no sense to them. They said “Reno? Where Johnny Cash sang “I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die?” Yes. Reno.

After the initial shock subsided, my friends wanted to know about the car. They heard about the three car garage and were hopeful. “You did keep the Camaro, didn’t you?”

Sorry to disappoint you, but no. My bolero red 1967 original Camaro SS 350 was gone. I left it when I left him. Logic told me since I wasn’t sleeping with the mechanic anymore, and I was clear I would never sleep with him again, I’d need a new mechanic. Having the guy you’ve just served with divorce papers work on your brakes doesn’t seem like a winning combo. Although it was a birthday present from him some years back, I was just the driver. He was the one who cared for the car, maintained it and loved it. I thought about putting my wedding ring in the ashtray but decided that was too mean and bitchy, even for me. It was his mother’s ring, so I opted for tying it to the key ring with a twisty and leaving them both on the counter.

It was the car that got me into that whole mess to begin with. A sexy guy driving a sexy car. He cruised by slowly as I was walking back to my car after work. Employee parking was halfway to Mars and he asked if I wanted a ride. I declined. The next day, he was there again, this time with a dozen roses. He handed the flowers to me with a card that said, “Luciano’s - Friday night at 7:30. Please?”

I fell hard and fast. There were plenty of warning signs - big huge giant red octagonal signs but I was lost in a hormone induced sex haze. At the time his moodiness and temper made him seem like he channeled James Dean. He ran hot and cold and he was always sorry. When I couldn’t remember loving him, like a sad country song, I knew it was time to go.

He didn’t let me go easily or quietly. The day I left, he eyed me coldly, the way a raptor sizes up its’ prey. “Who do you think is going to take care of you? You’ll end up living in a trailer park. Don’t worry though. I hear McDonald’s has great management opportunities.”

My friends were glad I left him but couldn’t understand why I didn’t stay in Tahoe or keep the car. “Is there a new guy?” Kathleen asked.

But there wasn’t. Not this time. It’s just me and my daughter, Katie. This is a first for me. I’ve never actually been on my own, without a man. I thought Reno would just be a layover, until I figured out what to do next and where to do it. The truth is I didn’t have a plan beyond leaving. I wasn’t homeless but I was desperately searching for more than a room of my own.

After Katie and I crash-landed at my cousin’s place in Reno, I was walking around the neighborhood one day when I stumbled across a rambling, vintage 1968 Spanish style Mediterranean ranch house on just under two acres, with a large coral, a small pond and water rights. The

house is so out of date it's now funky and cool. Large archways frame the living room and dining room, echoing the curved windows. Thick slat plantation shutters complete the look and keep the hot sun out while inviting the breeze to blow through. Every room opens out on to a center courtyard with hops covering the portico in the summer providing dappled shade and a lion head fountain spitting water into a Roman style bath.

I've splashed paint on the walls, a daily testament to my freedom and having the courage to leave him and his white walls. The kitchen is deep persimmon red, my bedroom - Tiffany Box blue and Katie's room is honeydew, as in melon. The living room is pale mocha latte with the trim and wood beams painted the darkest chocolate brown.

I have horses again and a garden with beans, carrots, potatoes, onions, berries and a peach tree. I have learned that horse manure does great things for roses and tomatoes but the other vegetables prefer the bovine variety. I over plant zucchini so that I can pluck the blossoms, dip them in batter and pan-fry them to a crispy golden brown. By all accounts, gardening in the high-mountain desert is not for the faint of heart. It takes courage, skill and patience to compensate for the dense clay soil, extreme and sudden temperature changes and a general lack of natural precipitation. In March and April, it isn't uncommon to have snow one day and hit a high of 72 degrees the next. The area is prone to late frosts which will kill tender plants and the growing season is typically only 90 to 100 days.

I spend more time these days at the Garden Center than I do at my therapist's office. I should probably give Barb, the nursery manager, a check for more than plants and supplies. She is a petite woman, barely 5'2", with a lean, compact frame. Her skin is a deep golden brown that comes from being outside all day every day. "Sun is nature's Prozac," she tells me, and she's right. Digging in the dirt is therapeutic in ways I can't explain. I reconnect with my inner child, on my hands and knees covered in mud. Weeding is not a job that can be done standing. It is down and dirty, up close and personal. At the end of the day, I have tangible proof that I got something done and I watch my neat little rows of plants grow bigger and stronger every day. I tend the garden and the garden tends my soul.

I gather some carrots and beans for dinner and think about the first time I heard Gerald O'Hara tell Scarlett the "land's the only thing in the world that matters!" Gerald assured his daughter that one day, when she was older, she'd understand "this love of the land." It was 1970 and MGM had just re-released a restored print of *Gone With the Wind* for the film's 30th anniversary. Mom took me to the Castro Theater, one of the last elegant old movie houses in San Francisco, with red velvet drapes framing the screen and rocking seats up in the loge. The videocassette recorder and memberships at Blockbuster were still a couple of years off, so if you wanted to see an old movie, you had to catch it at a Sunday matinee. Gerald was right. At 8, the idea of loving a place made no sense at all, but now I know how it's possible to be completely connected to the earth; to savor the soil sifting through my hands the way I treasure the scent of

warm breath as my horse nuzzles my shoulder.

The Castro, like most old movie houses, had a slightly musty smell that was laced with occasional whiffs of the faint burnt, crispy odor of hot projector lights, and the click-clacking sound of the projector in the background. There is a collective experience of sitting elbow to elbow in a room full of strangers, watching a grand, larger-than-life story play out on the big screen that cannot be matched by even the largest plasma flatscreen home viewing system. I miss that.

When I come across an old movie projector at a surplus sale of old equipment from the local school district, I can't resist. With a little luck and a credit card, I find a print of *Gone With the Wind* on eBay and decide to start a new tradition. I clean out the pasture, put the horses in their stalls for the night and hang a king-sized sheet from the two shade trees by the eastern edge of the fence. My pickup truck does double duty as a projector stand and sound system. About an hour before sunset, the neighbors start wandering in the front gate with lawn chairs and blankets, a side dish to share and some meat to throw on the barbecue. "Welcome to the El Rancho Drive-In." I smile, shake hands and give out hugs, while directing traffic. John, the Sherriff who lives next door supervises the grilling. He pokes the meat with his forefinger to test for doneness, the way professional chefs do.

We mill around on the deck, chatting and catching up on the news of the day. As the light grows soft with dusk, we take our plates loaded with food and move down to the coral. John and his wife, Gaylene, have a new nifty two person chair with built-in foot rests that elicits murmurs of wonder and appreciation. Clearly, these two know a thing or two about creature comforts. While I'm changing reels, John whips out a fancy gizmo and pops up a huge batch of popcorn on the coals still glowing in the barbecue while Gaylene delivers S'mores into the waiting hands of us chocolate junkies. There are almost two dozen people here tonight. When I moved in four months ago, I didn't know a soul. Now I have a family.

Life is easy and quiet here. Most of the boxes are unpacked and I have settled into a routine. Each day, I work some, garden some, talk to the horses and even go for a ride. I'm sorting laundry when I hear the screen door slam. No knock. My ex-husband walks in. I've got to get a dog. A big dog. He surveys my eclectic mix of furniture, some of it vintage and some of it modern retro-inspired. My own furniture. When I bought the love-seat, it reminded me of Holly Golightly's Manhattan atelier. At the furniture store, I looked in the mirror and asked me "Do you like it?" I've never done that before either.

He hates it. No leather, no barcolounger. The wet bar has been outfitted with mirror tiles and glass shelves hosting a martini glass collection culled from the best thrift stores and garage sales in town. No beer. No Hank Junior or Senior. No sixty-inch plasma flatscreen. Just gin, vodka, olives and onions with Frank, Dean, Sammy and Ella swaying to the beat on a vintage stereo console.

"The sixties called and they want their furniture back," he says.

I don't miss that.

“Did you paint the brick around the fire place? You’ll regret that.”

I painted the brick white and it gives the room a modern edge. It wasn’t hard. A trip to Home Depot and I figured it out. Primer, paint and then sealer. I’ve been educating myself on how to do a lot of things. I’ve mastered irrigation and plumbing and I’m thinking of building a linear particle accelerator in the garage next week.

He almost seemed sad when he couldn’t find that wounded look in my eyes; confused that I didn’t take the bait. “You should have called me. You needed to sandblast the brick first. That was really stupid. You’ll regret painting it. You should have at least called a professional.”

I tilt my head to the side. I’ve discovered a huge upside to taking the high road and dropping the proverbial rope. It does take two, and when I don’t engage, when I don’t fight back, it really pisses him off. I like that. Mother Theresa would be disappointed, but she’s not here.

“Is Katie ready?” He walks into her room and again, he doesn’t knock.

Katie loves her Dad. He can be charming, funny and he is fiercely devoted to her. But today, he is dark, brooding and mad at the world. She gives me the “Do I have to go with him?” look. Yes, you do. That’s what I regret. The cat pads silently into her room. She jumps up on Katie’s bed, looks at the ex and hisses at him. He hates cats.

He walks out the door and reminds me again that my pond is a giant mosquito breeding ground. “We have confirmed cases of West Nile in the county. You need to do something about that.”

Still, I say nothing. I’ve mastered the art of a Mona Lisa smile that betrays little. My life, my thoughts, are now my own.

“You’re going to go bankrupt trying to water all of this. You’ll never get anything to grow. That garden is really stupid. You do know that, don’t you?”

I shrug my shoulders. I have a well. I own water in the desert. Yeah, I’ve come a long way, baby.

# THE WATER FOUNTAIN

*by Catherine Auger*

We stopped, at your request, on the way home.  
You barefoot with your shorts and t-shirt,  
and I'd be under the big tree watching in amusement  
the cold water splashing all around you.

Within all the chaos you momentarily got lost  
among the other children. I remember the heart-stopped  
fear while I waited to catch a glimpse of you.

You weren't going anywhere. I knew that  
with the enclosed fence and me sitting near,

and then there you were: laughing and screaming,  
ducking, trying to miss the big splashes of water,  
not knowing, that for a moment, I thought I'd lost you.

# DIET SODA JESUS AND OUR LADY OF CONSUMPTION BOOK OF RONALD 4:99

*by Zebuel Christopher Stecker*

Begat from a black plastic womb dispenser  
of the virgin mother soda machine.  
My life poured into me, surrounded by greasy walls  
of a small town fast food tabernacle  
amongst the flocks of lunch time pilgrims—  
immaculate diet conception.

*Lacking sugar, but still able to wash down those French fries,  
my faithful follower tells herself.  
Extra bacon on my double cheeseburger to celebrate  
the coming of our aspartame savoir, he will absolve  
me of my caloric sins.*

A pock mark saint took Our Lady of Consumption  
under the *Order Here* sign  
to hear her mealtime confession:  
*Forgive me, shift supervisor Jude, for it has been twelve Slim Fasts  
and six green salads since my last confession...*

Having received Our Lady, Jude's voice rang out  
crackling through the heavenly ceiling:  
*Take this order unto yourself and please enjoy your meal, amen.*  
Free of the sin she prostrated for her redemption,  
*Thank you for your grace.*

And so I came to pass, on a tray,  
to fill out God's order.  
Carried away by Our Lady to a private  
table where she took me lovingly  
into her rounded hand. The cruel stab  
of the stripped straw plunged inside of me to stir  
my contents, drawing greedily on my refreshment.

And as Our Lady gracefully devoured  
salted potatoes and fatty meats, a portion  
of her salvation spilled over my rim  
onto her exercise shoe with a half-rounded sole.

# COULD BE A CHEF

*by Nathan Sowle*

It all started when I watched Chef Ramsey  
pick a five star restaurant with a thatched roof  
on a cobblestone road. Inside, on a fireplace  
mantle, porcelain cats reflect the cheaply made  
antique furniture.

Through the swinging double door a French chef owner  
surrounded by immaculate stainless steel  
garnishes a plate with three types of puree's  
and fried fish tail to foie gras artichoke pheasant.

Losing a Michelin star  
for an over complicated  
ego with a side of creme fraiche,

Then came Guy Fieri  
visiting a restaurant in my town  
that had a reputation for feeding  
doped up teenagers and dried up retirees  
at 3 a.m. on a Wednesday night.

A night with friends that support the local  
fire spinning dub steppers in furry boots  
talked me into eating at the esteemed

Food network aired eatery.  
They screwed up my eggs

But the simple joy of watching  
Adam Richman chow down  
six pounds of nitro atomic  
kickin' wings,

and visiting Alice Cooper's  
house of schnitzels  
home of the twelve pound  
loaded chili cheese dog

that made every day with my electric range  
a day throwing down with Bobby Flay,  
but after some criticism from my girlfriend

I feel a bar is a far better business opportunity.

# DRAMATIC LUNCH BREAK

*by Lynsie Dunn*

*Mommy?*

Yes, sweetie?

*Where do babies come from?*

Umm, well that's a very big talk we should have later.

*But my teacher said to ask you because you know and you need to tell me.*

And she's correct but we need to have this talk a little later.

*Like at nine?*

Maybe.

A chesty woman walks into the restaurant.

*Hey, mom? Why don't you have big boobies like that lady?*

Well, not everyone is as blessed as her, sweetheart.

*Seems like they would just get in the way.*

Exactly my logic, babe. Finish your soup.

*Did you know my teacher has a baby and she breast feeds him?*

Oh really?

*Yeah, did you breastfeed me? Is that why I'm smaller than other kids because your boobies didn't have enough milk for me?*

It's not nice to talk like that. Please hurry up and eat.

*It's only natural, mom. Just like Whiskers feeds her kitties, huh?*

Yes, sweetie.

*Johnnie's mom has big boobs, and he's fat because he ate a lot when he was a baby.*

It's not nice to call people fat or talk about them when they're not present.

*I'm just saying, mom.*

I know. Where the heck is our waiter? He's not a very good waiter at all.

*Mom?*

Yes?

*It's not nice to talk about people when they're not here.*

# BURN THE SILO

*by Sean Prentiss*

Since before your grandfather's time, the barn has leaned  
toward the stonerows. The silo, it stands like October corn.

Your boy, with muddied cuffs, buckets slop while imagining  
next year—an FFA blue ribbon in his bedroom, his best pig to slaughter.

Later, you and the boy drive Gravel Hill Road. You whisper  
at Crane's farm—*Foreclosed*, a word boys shouldn't understand.

He asks about Crane's rusting tractor, the bald tires gathering  
flies, the fallen chicken coop. You shrug and point out a crow.

The boy smiles.  
You wish you could.

All you have is forty years of muck to the top of your boots,  
a countertop of bills, and animals still birthed.

As your stalk-thin boy sleeps beneath his dead mother's quilt—  
dreaming of helping you birth difficult winter calves—

like a million fathers before, you are shaken by a very lack  
of answers—to questions the boy won't know to ask for years.

You do the one thing you can—you pull on a heavy winter coat, grab  
matches from near the woodstove and walk into the night.

You hold a match again the silo. Then another. A third. This fire spreads  
Quickly and burns brighter than any of your dreams.

# ONE TYPE OF LABOR

*by Lindsey Neely*

On a hot August night, my great-grandfather's  
82nd birthday, I visit him at his home.  
He is on the swing out back, gliding  
slowly, lit by fireflies flickering on  
and off inside the fig tree.

As a child, I spent my summers here,  
trailing behind him in his garden  
as he walked down the long rows  
of tomatoes, plucking each reddened bulb  
from its vine. There is no garden now,  
only a bare field behind his barn. He  
tells me he remembers his father's garden,  
how long each row of lettuce seemed,  
as if it never stopped, as if anything ever  
stops for a child. The precision of his memory  
surprised me: how completely he revisited  
this place in his mind. His father  
bending over soil, laboring, hacking  
at the ground until sunset or later.

When I leave, I turn back to look—  
we are always turning back to look,  
and remember myself as that little girl  
though it didn't matter who I was.  
I was just a life, something I shared  
with the stalks of corn—tender,  
unfinished, starving.

# DRY LIGHTNING

*by Adam Tavel*

A guppy mouth slit in the pudgy pad  
of James' pointer is all I see  
by the candle's dim flicker. Our power

out for hours & the downspouts  
whistle a slight breeze across their lips  
though Hebron thunder still rumbles

like a bookie's rage craving  
one more knee to crowbar.  
My cooing boy waves

his bloody finger at the bunnies  
winding their slow orbit  
above his crib. In the storm's gray

hangover there's a moment give or take  
between zigzags whitening  
sweetgums behind our farm

like the moment my palm  
streaked the beer aisle's wall of glass  
& I let a few fingers linger, stung

by the cooler's handle before finally  
I left with what I brought—  
a migraine & the shakes.

In the flash of each fractured streak  
I can just make out the slice  
from my silver hair wound

into his digit. How it boa-coiled  
in the tranquil sprawl  
of a nap I'll never know

but it takes three bolts of light  
to tweeze the strand  
& blot the drops staining

Spiderman's bedsheet glove  
redder, his wrist poised to sling  
its sticky web at the dark itself.

# VISITATION

*by Paul Hostovsky*

I make him the best lunches though.  
I mean I made his mother  
a lousy  
best friend.  
I mean I made her a little  
miserable.  
So she kicks me  
off the team  
for being what she calls  
a lousy team player.  
I concede I am a lousy team player.  
I never coached little league  
or basketball  
or soccer and I only  
make it to a handful of his games.  
But I make him the best lunches,  
a sandwich to beat all sandwiches  
every single Thursday  
and every other Monday,  
which he takes with him to school  
in a brown paper sac  
in a pouch on the abdomen of his backpack,  
a sandwich to make his friends say  
a little ruefully,  
a little wistfully,  
“Man, your mother makes the best lunches,”  
when really it’s his father  
who engineers these miracles,  
these visitations  
of the angel of lunches,  
these mothers-  
of-all-lunches every  
single Thursday and every  
other Monday when I have him,  
when he sleeps over and I have another  
chance to make it  
right.

# BLUE APRON

*by Catherine Austin Alexander*

When you're 11 and your mom sews for you, cooks almost everything you want and is your best friend, it's okay if she's a slut. But when she brings home a policeman who wants to stay for a while, that's a disaster.

Mom soaks in the bathtub a long time before she gets dressed and puts on her makeup. Before she leaves, she sets out something like a pork chop, noodles and broccoli. Our old Boston Terrier, Spike, loves the broccoli. Mom always kisses me good night, calls me her little girl and tells me not to let anyone in and to dial "0" for operator in case of emergency.

Madison Grade School is just up the street, so I come home for lunch almost every day. Mom has a peanut butter and jelly sandwich waiting for me. Tapioca pudding and chocolate chip cookies for dessert.

"How was school this morning, honey?" she always asks.

"Okay I guess."

"You didn't get chased on the way by Billy?"

"Not this morning."

"Well, if he tries it again, I'll pay a visit to his mother."

"Sure, Mom."

Billy the bully lives two doors up. He's fat with buck teeth and a butch haircut. He slobbers. And always chases me, but I know how to kick and where.

Mom made me a cute little blue apron so I wouldn't spill on my sweater and matching skirt. On the bib part of the apron, she sewed a little donkey pulling a flower cart, which I love -- even if it's something for a little kid.

At noon on real cold days, Mom walks Spike and meets me at school. She wraps me inside her fur coat for the trip home. But I'm already wearing my own fur coat and white muff.

Then one real cold and snowy lunchtime, a patrolman from the Lakeview Police waits with my mother and Spike in front of Madison School. I think he's gonna arrest me for kicking Billy in the nuts after he called my mother a "slut."

The cop wears a dark blue uniform with a gold star above the pocket and a patrolman's hat with a funny brim. He's tall, thin and blows out smoke from his Camel. His eyes are ice-blue with red spider lines in them. Before my mother even gets a chance to introduce us, he says, "Hi, I'm Clyde Moore. And you're little Liza. Your mom has been telling me about you. But I must say you're even prettier than she described."

I'm happy about not being arrested, but I don't believe the pretty part. Something was up.

Clyde walks us home and Mother invites him in.

Oh great, lunch with a cop.

“Won’t you sit down,” asks my mother, putting on the coffee pot. He yanks out a chair from the kitchen table, plunks down and takes off his cap. With that greasy brown hair, he looks like a billboard ad for Wildroot Cream-Oil.

“Mighty kind of you,” he says.

He sounds like a real hick.

Mom has my P&J sandwich all ready. I put on my apron.

“Liza,” Clyde says. “What’s that on the front of your apron?”

“A donkey pulling a cart,” I say. “Mom made it.”

“How cute,” he says, laughing. “Guess I’m gonna have to call you my little ‘donkey girl.’”

Very funny.

“A very beautiful donkey girl, I might add,” he says, winking at my mother.

I’m gonna puke.

“Darling,” my mother says to me. “I met Officer Moore at the corner waiting for you. We got to chatting. I told him I was going to walk you home for lunch. He wanted to meet you.”

“Meet me?” I ask.

“That’s right, darling.”

He wants to score with my mother. Everyone wants to score with my mother.

Suddenly I’m not very hungry. I slip Spike my P&J sandwich and tell Mom I have to go.

Clyde says, “What time do you have to be back?”

I want to ask him the same question. In fact, I want to tell him to get lost, permanently. But instead I hang up my donkey apron and open the kitchen door. A huge snow drift has piled up. Clyde finds the shovel on the back porch and clears the way for me.

“Why Clyde,” says Mom. “How very sweet of you to do this for us.”

Mother could really lay it on. Thick.

“Now,” Mom says. “Let’s walk little Liza back to school.”

“Never mind,” I say.

“See you later, alligator,” says Clyde.

I’m getting sicker.

∞

Tonight I’m brushing Mom’s long, blond hair. The blond comes from a bottle. I stand behind her at the dressing table, watching her in the mirror. She’s wearing her black lingerie. Her eyelashes are longer than Rita Hayworth’s, her cheeks real rosy and she got a complexion like cream. She uses a lipstick brush to draw on her lips and pencils on her eyebrows. I pat her wavy hair; wind the curls around my finger, careful not to spill the whiskey glass on the vanity.

All of a sudden Mom clears her throat which always means we’re going

to have a serious talk. "Why did you leave like that at lunchtime today?" she asks.

I decided to ask her a question. "What really happened when you met Clyde?"

"Just as I said, honey."

"Mom, you mean the cop just came up and started talking to you?"

The ice cubes clinked as she picked up her drink.

She lit up a cigarette.

"Tell me," I say.

"Why do you need to know?"

"Tell me, Mom."

"Well, I was late and knew you'd be worried. So I ran across Madison Avenue. Clyde came up and threatened to give me a citation for jaywalking. I had to use my charm on him."

I know Mom can charm the pants off any man. Take the Lakeview garbage guys, for instance. Everyone on our street carries out their trash to the curb the night before. Not us. When we first moved into the house, Mom saw the garbage men coming down the street, threw her fur coat over her lingerie and went running out to meet them. "Oh, gentlemen, I wonder if you'd do a lady a big favor . . . I don't think I can lift those heavy cans from the backyard." Then she opened her coat just enough to flash her black lace underwear. "Brrr, it's cold out here," she said with a squeaky voice, and buttoned up real quick.

"Why, sure, Ma'am," the men said, snickering. "We don't mind at all."

Now the garbage guys always pick up our trash from our backyard.

Mom finishes her cigarette and lights up another.

"So what did you say to Clyde when he tried to give you a ticket?" I ask her.

She blows a perfect smoke ring.

"I looked up at him and said, 'Why officer, I'm only here to fetch my little Liza. You wouldn't want her to walk home alone on such a cold day, would you? I was hurrying so she wouldn't freeze to death.'"

"Oh, Mom," I say. "You're a born actress."

∞

It doesn't take long before Clyde shows up on a regular basis. He stays overnight. He stays a week. He moves in.

Pretty soon, he's making all the rules. My bedtime for instance. What 11-year-old goes to bed at 8:00? What kid has to do dishes every night? What kid can't have a radio in her room?

Not only that, but he starts a fight with Mom.

"You've been cheating on me!" he shouts in a drunken voice.

"You're soused," Mom said, gulping down her own whiskey.

Then one Saturday night, Clyde and Mom yell so loud I wake up. I run down to the landing.

“You spoil that kid too much,” says Clyde.

“What business is that of yours?” Mother says.

“I’ll tell you what’s my business. You’re screwing around, that’s what! Don’t think I didn’t see you. Why I can’t let my eyes off you even for a second.”

“Clyde! That’s not true at all!”

“Slut!” he shouts.

Nothing I hadn’t heard before.

∞

I have a four-poster bed from Higbee’s, all white with a pink lace ruffle on top. Lots of soft sweaters, velvet dresses. Spike has a real leather coat. I wear boots that zip up the side, instead of those four-buckle galoshes. When Mom comes home in the morning, she tiptoes in, kisses me and leaves some money under my pillow. Sometimes just a sweet note.

But Clyde has to change the arrangement. Mom stays home at night. We have dinner at 6:00 pm sharp and I have to be there. He makes meat loaf and vegetables that taste like carpet.

I take a bite and set my fork down.

“Eat your dinner, donkey girl,” he says.

“I hate it,” I say. “And stop calling me ‘donkey girl.’”

“Eat it, donkey girl,” he says.

“You can’t make me,” I say, pushing meat loaf through the spaces in my teeth.

“You’ll sit there until you do.”

I move the food around with my fork. Then I check to make sure Clyde isn’t looking and put the plate on the floor.

Spike’s happy.

∞

The next disaster is Alcoholics Anonymous. Clyde and Mom decide it would be a good idea to join. They preach all those twelve steps to anyone who’ll listen, namely me. And I can’t steal any whiskey because they’ve dumped it all in the sink.

But they quit AA on New Year’s Eve. Clyde and Mom get into it about going to some nightclub. He wants to get a babysitter.

“She’s perfectly capable of taking care of herself,” Mother says.

“No 11-year-old should be alone at night,” Clyde insists.

“She’s more like a 14-year-old.”

“She’s 11.”

“She is and she isn’t. Besides there’s Spike,” says Mom.

“He’s not a babysitter.”

“Liza’s not a baby.”

Clyde finally gives in.

Before they leave, Mom rattles her same old speech about not letting anyone in and to dial “0” in case of emergency. Clyde tells me to keep the

drapes drawn and to check the locks twice before I go to bed.

“Why twice?” I ask.

“In case you forgot the first time,” he says.

Yes, Officer.

At first, I’m fine about being alone on New Year’s Eve. It’s just like any other night. I listen to big bands on the radio and dress up Spike in my old pajama top. But then comes the fireworks. Spike’s barking his head off. I have to open the drapes to peek out. Billy and a bunch of his friends are racing down the street throwing lit firecrackers. All I need is one to explode on our front porch.

No whiskey to settle me down. I turn off the radio and dive under the covers with Spike. For the first time in my life I want a babysitter.

I don’t know how long I’ve been asleep before the racket starts downstairs. I rush down to the landing. Mom and Clyde come in, followed by three guys carrying black bags in strange shapes. Gangsters, I think.

The men unzip their bags. For a moment I’m sure they’re going to shoot mom. I wouldn’t mind if they shot Clyde.

One guy brings out a keyboard, the other a trombone and the third guy has a clarinet. Then I figure that Mom and Clyde have brought part of the band home from the nightclub.

The guys set up their instruments in front of the fireplace. First they open a stand and put the keyboard on it. Then the clarinet and trombone guys take out hankies and wipe off their instruments. Soon they’re playing some real fast stuff. The place is rocking. Mom and Clyde jitterbug all over the living room, just like in the movies. After a couple more fast tunes, the band changes to a slow number. Mom grabs the clarinet player and starts dancing with him.

Uh oh.

Clyde tries to yank her off, but Mom and the clarinet player fall into a chair and start kissing. I can’t believe it.

Then just like that, Clyde pulls Mom away and drags her to the floor. He has her by the hair.

Clyde hollers, “You and that cheap ass clarinet player. Why I outta....”

“Stop! You’re hurting me,” my mother cries.

The band guys just stand and stare.

I shout, “Somebody help my mother!”

“Your mother’s a goddamned bitch!” Clyde shouts back.

“Don’t hurt her, don’t hurt her!”

My heart pumps like crazy. I think the heart’s going to shoot out of me like a cannonball. But just as I think to dial “0,” Mom gets away, runs up the stairs and grabs me from the landing. We fly into her room and shove the dresser in front of the door. We wait to hear Clyde pounding up the stairs, but it just gets quiet. Mom and I hug each other. Spike can’t stop shaking, so we hug him too.

By this time, it’s getting light outside. We slowly move the dresser away. Mom opens the door just a crack and tells me to stay put.

“Mom,” I whisper. “If you’re going downstairs, I’m going with you.”

“You stay here.”

Instead, I tiptoe right behind her. She turns around and puts her finger to her lips.

“Shhh,” she whispers. “Now go back.”

I can’t.

“Go back,” she says again.

I keep creeping after her.

When we get downstairs, we find the davenport and chairs turned over, glasses and bottles thrown everywhere, ashtrays upside down and cigarette butts spilled all over the rug. But no Clyde.

We turn the chairs and davenport back on their right sides, take the glasses to the kitchen and the bottles out to the trash. Mom vacuums the rug.

We go upstairs and I creep in bed with Mom. I stay home all week. I don’t know who’s taking care of who, but Mom and I can’t be separated. She cleans till the place stinks of Murphy’s Oil Soap. Then she takes out her sewing machine and makes me some new pajamas and a robe.

∞

Eventually, Mom goes back to working nights at her old “job.” I have my dinner of pork chops and noodles with some broccoli for Spike. I stay up all night if I want, listen to Sergeant Preston of the Yukon, but I never tune into *The Shadow* or *Suspense* again. I learn to brush my own hair. I help myself to whiskey sometimes, but things aren’t the same. Spike has arthritis and I sleep next to him by the fireplace.

I start junior high, Billy gets fatter and uglier with lots of pimples and Mom buys a television. I watch *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Honeymooners* and *I Love Lucy*. We never find out what happened to Clyde.

I pass Billy’s house one day. He’s sitting on the porch. “Hey Liza!” he says. “Come here!”

“Why should I?”

“I want a feel of those nice tits!”

I walk straight up to him, smile into his pimply face, kick him good and push him off the porch -- right into his mother’s rosebushes.

∞

Mom puts my little blue apron in a box with all the rest of the clothes that I’ve outgrown. She’s going to ask if any of the garbage guys have a little girl who could wear them.

She ends up taking the box to the Salvation Army. Before she does, I sneak into the clothes and pull out that adorable blue apron. I stash it in the back of my closet. One of these days I’m going to see if it’s still there.

# THE KISSING DISEASE

*by Teresa Breeden*

In fifth grade we  
huddled in the girls restroom,  
whispering the most  
exciting word we knew:

*mononucleosis*

We spoke it somberly, lowering our voices, husky  
and breathless, believing that's what  
sexy was all about.

*mononucleosis*

The mantra began and ended with Priscilla our  
high priestess of love, with her long  
legs, her flat brown hair, Priscilla,  
the first among us to speculate on  
the Virgin Mary, the one who  
pronounced *boys*  
with no preceding article, as  
casual as *shoes*, or  
*homework*.

We voiced  
*Priscilla* with only slightly less  
dusk than we spoke *mononucleosis*,  
fantasizing, romanticizing that  
kissing disease, because in fifth grade,  
*mononucleosis* was as tragic  
as romance ever got.

# THE FORGETTING BONE

*by Rebecca Andem*

The summer I turned ten, I discovered the van wasn't locked. I had always assumed it was and never had a reason to check. It wasn't like I needed a hideout or a hangout or anything. I had my own room. Besides, the van didn't even have an engine. It wasn't going anywhere. But then that summer, maybe that was the appeal.

It was such a fixture in our backyard. Before that June, I hardly even noticed it, and it wasn't like I knew one car from another or even cared. At ten my world rarely expanded beyond the fourth grade or Mars Hill, Maine, and I had no reference point for cool beyond whether or not Katie Desmaris sat next to me in the cafeteria. An old blue Volkswagon with its weathered chrome and flat tires and all those faded tie-dyed curtains, for me it wasn't an emblem of an era or even something to mention on sixties dress-up days at school. It wasn't something to mention at all. For me that old van only had one meaning. It was a trace of our father. In other words, it was something I tended to avoid.

We all did. After he left we pushed it into the back corner of the yard behind the lilac bush that bordered the Kearneys' hayfield. I was six and Charlie was nine, but without an engine the van had no weight. Mom gripped the open driver's side door with one hand and steered with the other while we pushed from the back. We felt strong. Charlie even felt bold enough to ask why we were hiding it, and Mom answered that it was an eyesore. We both sensed it would be better not to ask why we were keeping it.

Most of the time, we followed her lead and pretended it wasn't there, but sometimes we didn't know if that was her lead at all. She was always on our cases to make sure to get around the van whenever we mowed the lawn. She said long grass invited snakes, but as much as I high-stepped every time I pushed the mower between the hayfield and the van, I never saw her acting nervous. Once I saw her actually standing in the field. The alfalfa was hip high, and her hands floated through the tickly tops. She twined a strand between her fingers, making a knot, but I don't think she noticed. I'm sure she didn't see me. She was staring at the van, her face all drifty and dreamy. I knew then that we'd be mowing around the van for years. She wasn't about to let it get swallowed up by time or forgetfulness.

We weren't allowed to forget, at least not when it came to the good things. "Remember this," she'd always say. Whenever we caught the giggles while playing Scrabble or if we all fell silent at the same moment while shelling peas on the porch, she'd stop us with a little squeeze, and then she'd get that float-away look in her eyes that made everything we were doing slip into the past before it was even finished. "Remember this." But by the time we registered the command, she'd already collected the

moment and locked it away for later. When I asked her not to say that anymore, I couldn't get the words out the way I was thinking them. I tried to explain that I'd rather forget something than chase it away, but from the look on her face, I knew I wasn't making sense. She shook her head and hugged me close. "When you're older, you'll understand." She said that a lot too.

The afternoon Mom found me daydreaming at the wheel of the Volkswagon, she didn't tell me to remember anything. She stared at me for a moment with that head tilt that always meant she was sizing up a situation, deciding on her reaction. Then she walked past the snub nose of the van and climbed into the passenger seat. I hadn't noticed she was carrying a spray of lilacs, but it must have been the snap of the twig that caught my attention in the first place. The smell, like old lady perfume, filled the van.

She didn't say anything. After a moment, she started humming, a little phrase here and there, "snippets," as she called them. I never could name her tunes. She was fingering the petals, and a few fluttered to her lap. When she closed her eyes, I started to relax. I didn't think I was in trouble, although the feelings seeping out of her felt heavier than trouble, more than I wanted to think about. After a while, she tore a thin stem from the lilacs she held and reached over to tuck it behind my ear. She smiled and squeezed my arm. She opened her mouth, and I saw the shape of the word to come, remember..., but she didn't say it. Instead, she lifted my hair and fanned the ends through her fingers, the way she checked for split ends. We had the same hair, baby-fine and blond, only mine had a bit of copper in it, another trace of our father.

"You're going to love the ocean," she said.

I shook my head. "I love it here."

She sighed, a sound I felt more than heard. "Charlie's already packed," she said.

"Charlie's a boy."

"What does that mean?"

I placed my hands on the steering wheel, at ten and two the way I'd heard Mom tell Charlie to do when she let him drive the truck up the driveway. I pretended to steer.

"I don't know what to say to him," I said.

She chuckled. "I don't think Charlie does either."

Ever since he turned thirteen in January, Charlie had stopped talking, at least to us. He grunted, and occasionally he rolled his eyes. At first I was hurt that the silence included me, but I followed Mom's lead. We joked about it and teased him a lot. Mom said adolescence must have snuck up and hit him over the head, struck him dumb, but as much as she laughed, I don't think she knew what to do about it. Maybe she was hoping our father would.

"He wants to see you," she said.

"Why now?"

Mom sighed again. She scraped the lilac petals on her skirt into a pile. "I don't know, Lorna. Maybe he finally grew up."

"It's not fair."

"What isn't?"

"That he gets to choose." I knew I was sputtering. Whenever it mattered, when I really had something to say, I could never steer my thoughts out of my mouth. All the best words got hung up on something on the way out. "We didn't get a say," I rushed, "about leaving. He left, and now we don't get one either. A say. About coming back."

The words were too fast, my feelings skidding behind them. I wrapped my arms around the steering wheel and pressed my chin against the top, my jaw locked. Mom didn't say anything, no sigh, no snippets. After a minute, I turned my head. The steering wheel dug into my cheek. Behind her, the door was still open. A breeze brushed through the alfalfa. She was rolling the petals in her lap into little beads, the way we used to play with white bread before she learned to make homemade. She nodded, like she was agreeing with herself, and then she turned toward me, her knees pulled in and her weight shifted onto one hip. The little beads fell to the floor.

"I'm going to tell you a secret," she said. "You're old enough to know."

I waited. I wondered if Mom had the same snags in her head that I did, if maybe she was trying to pull the words through without losing them.

"I did have a say." She stared me down the way she did when she wanted to make sure we were paying attention. I nodded, but it didn't feel like a nod with my cheek still pressed against the steering wheel. I couldn't move more than that. "I had to make a choice," Mom said. "Charlie was only in the third grade, and he had already attended four different schools, and you weren't even finished the first grade. We'd only been here a year, the longest anywhere, and I liked it. You liked it. But your father couldn't see that. He didn't even notice. He just got this great idea. He wanted to move out west, somewhere in the mountains. I don't even remember where. He said we could live off the land, build a cabin. We could teach you and Charlie how to survive." Her gaze had drifted away from me as she spoke. She closed her eyes. "I was tired," she said.

I sat up. "Of what?"

My voice startled her. She must have slipped into that memory. She blinked and shook her head a little. A sad squeeze of a smile lifted her cheeks, but her mouth didn't open. It looked like an apology kind of smile to me.

"Did you tell him to go away?"

Her face flinched, and I felt like I'd hit her. Her chin puckered, and I knew for certain I was in trouble, but she didn't do anything. After a moment, her chest rose and fell. The pucker dissolved. She shook her head again.

"No," she answered. "I didn't want him to go."

"So why did he?"

I was watching her face. I knew my mother was beautiful, although I didn't have a reference point for beauty yet beyond the women who filled the pews at church. I thought some of them were so pretty, especially Katie's mother, who looked like a painting of herself. But my mother was dif-

ferent. Hers was the only face that told me what the preacher was saying. I'd never seen a thought sit still in her face, and watching her, watching how her expression softened and expanded like it was opening its arms to hug me, I knew he didn't leave her. He left us.

"Lorna," she said.

My throat squeezed shut. I needed to do something, anything but cry. I grabbed the lilac stem still tucked behind my ear and yanked it from my hair. Several strands of hair clung to it, and I had to pull and scrape it free. The petals fluttered onto my lap, and I grabbed at them. I crushed them in my fist. My mom touched my wrist, but shaking her off, I tossed the petals out the window. They had no weight. With the force of my emotions, my fingers ricocheted off the top of the window, and I gasped.

"Let me see," Mom said. She held out her hand for mine.

"It's fine." I sounded like I was choking. But I still wasn't crying. With one last thrust of anger, I picked up the stem and hurled it out the window, but my elbow rammed into the door frame. I screamed.

"Lorna." Mom cupped my head in her palm. Somehow she was between the seats, and she was pulling me toward her, into her. I clutched my elbow, and she covered my hand with hers. "Okay?" she asked after a moment.

I nodded. "I hit my funny bone."

Pulling back, she smiled.

"It's not funny," I said.

"It never is." She rubbed my arm. "I don't why they call it that, except that it's sort of like a joke, the way it distracts you. I know whenever I hit my funny bone, I immediately forget what I was doing or why I was upset." With a little squeeze, she let go. "Maybe they should call it the forgetting bone."

"I didn't forget." I turned away from her. With one hand, I tried to turn the steering wheel, but it only moved an inch. It was locked in. Beside me, I felt Mom move away. I heard her on the seat again.

"We used to ride in this." I looked over my shoulder at her. It was a question.

She nodded.

"He drove," I said.

"Usually."

"So why didn't he take it?"

"It broke." Her smile was sad again, another apology. "We broke."

Once again I leaned forward and laid my cheek against the steering wheel. Only I didn't look at her. The lilacs outside my window were almost taller than the van. I couldn't see the house, but I imagined Charlie up in his room. He was probably on his bed, his feet propped on the headboard, his head hanging over the edge. Beneath his window, Cargo, my cat, was probably sleeping in the bed of irises. He liked the coolness, even though Mom chased him out every time she saw him.

"I don't want to go," I said.

"I know." Her hands gathered my hair. I felt her fingers against my neck, my back. She whispered. "Would you trust me on this one?"

I turned my head.

“You need to give him a chance, if only for yourself. You deserve to know who he is.”

When I shook my head, she tugged on my hair.

“It’s only for the summer, not even. Six weeks. And you’ll get to see the ocean.”

“We lived by the ocean when I was three,” I said.

“But you don’t remember it.”

“I do a little.”

A bee dipped in through the window behind me and reeled past my head. Turning, we both watched its drunken flight, the way it darted and faltered and started again. It looked lost, but it was a welcome invader, anything besides the conversation we were having. It must have smelled the flowers we’d crushed, but of course, it couldn’t find the nectar. Eventually, Mom shooed it out the open door with the back of her hand.

“I’ll make you a deal,” she said, and she fixed her gaze on me to make sure I was paying attention. “If you don’t want to go, you don’t have to. But you have to be the one to tell him. I won’t do it for you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re old enough.”

I crossed my arms. “You keep saying that. I’m only ten.”

She reached over and tucked my hair behind my ear. “I wish I could keep you my little girl forever, but I can’t. I know you don’t believe it now, but sooner than you think you’re going to be so anxious to leave here. This place will seem like a jail cell compared to the rest of the world waiting for you.”

“So why do I have to go now?”

“Because he’s your father.”

She gave my arm a little squeeze and then turned and slid out of the van. I heard the door shut, but I didn’t look. I ducked my forehead against the steering wheel so I wouldn’t have to see her walk past the windshield, but I heard her footsteps. I felt her standing beside the open window.

“He’s a part of you, Lorna. If you hide from him, he’ll always be the scary part.”

I lifted my head.

“He’s not a bad man.” Her smile was sad, but it didn’t look like an apology anymore. Its soft edges looked like the beginning of a drift into memory. I could see it in her eyes. “Would I have loved him if he was?”

“He was the love of your life,” I said.

“He was my life,” she answered, and she leaned down so I could see her face full in the open window. “And now you are. You and Charlie.”

I sat up, leaned away. I knew she was trying to reassure me, but something in her answer scared me. It made me feel like running. With one last squeeze, she told me to come up when I was ready. She would start packing for me. And then she turned and walked toward the house, but the lilacs were too close, too tall. I couldn’t see her. I gripped the steering wheel and stared across the yard. Birch trees marked our property line,

and lupines grew on a small rise at their base. After our father left, Mom had filled the yard with purple flowers, all the irises around the house, the lupines. She bordered the garden with asters, and in the spring, purple tulips sprouted between the daffodils that grew around the mailbox. She loved purple flowers.

“Mom!” I yelled. I jumped out of the van and slammed the door. I raced past the lilacs and across the yard. On the back steps, Mom paused.

“What?”

I paused a few feet away. My breath was almost too short for talking, and I could feel my heart like a drum in my head. “What kind of flowers does he like?” I panted. “Our father?”

She smiled, but it was the wrong smile. It was too pleased. She didn’t understand. She didn’t see how scared I was of her answer.

Don’t say purple, I thought, but I couldn’t find the words to match the other thoughts, the ones that knew why.

“Honeysuckle,” she said.

My jaw clicked. It locked shut. I had forgotten. Pressing my face into a big bush that smelled like candy. Hugging it. Laughter behind me. Thick arms joining mine. I tried to swallow, but there was a lump in my throat, the kind that doesn’t budge. My eyes stung. I knew I was going to cry, but I didn’t know how to say why.

Honeysuckle was my favorite.

# HONEYSUCKLE

*by Peter Waldor*

By the old gate  
waiting for Do Sa,  
a huge bee flew  
from the honeysuckle,  
a shred of blossom  
stuck on it.  
As it knocked into the leaves  
pollen puffed out.  
Then a breeze released  
a cloud of the powder.  
The master forgot our meeting,  
but I saw this, waiting.

# JOAN OF ARC

*by Oakley C. Merideth*

After the burning  
you looked for her torn dress  
and found it cradled  
in the arms of a tree,  
a ghost burying its face  
behind yellow leaves.

# OUTSIDE THE WINDOW

*by Leonard J. Cirino*

At nearly ninety-eight  
my mother hears so well  
she says she can tell  
when the maple leaves  
drop from the stems.

# A QUIETNESS

*by B. T. Joy*

how quiet was it, that first night,  
before the membrane of the primal cell  
    quivered like the outskirts of a galaxy  
around its cold, nuclear sun?  
    how still were the kind, black oceans?  
and the unmeasured skies that made  
    the only love they knew  
above the waterline?  
    rain, cloud,  
drowned fire, kindled flame  
a river of sulphur or of surf  
and all not knowing  
not different or the same  
    just  
    a quietness  
and things too bare of mind for words  
debating with the universe  
which way to grow

# THE DIVINITY OF WASPS

*by B. T. Joy*

today the sea does not erase  
but folds indentations into memory  
the sharp prints of herons, across the sand,  
are esoteric poetry  
and the lines of the mountains  
are blue on the blue sky  
    every now and then  
the whine of ships transiting  
from the island to the bay  
    every now and then  
the oystercatchers rise  
and wings skim the water  
    a boy tells me  
of the nest in the brown house  
down at the shoreline's extremity  
where fingers of blackened kelp  
glisten in wave-washed sun  
    he tells me how he kicked it  
over and again until it smashed  
and then, curious for innards,  
how he crushed escaping bodies  
into the chalky stone floor  
    I listen and, for once,  
I only think of speaking  
    but the stillness  
is too beautiful here  
even to describe  
the divinity of wasps

# FRUIT

*by Cristina Crocker Escribano*

There are two types of Americans in the clouds: tourists and traitors. My mother and I are the latter. We say our Hail Marys, first in English then in Spanish, as the plane descends. We watch flecks of green form into palm trees. The tourist beside us chatters because she does not know that silence is better than cake in a country of civil war.

“How’s it fair that you guys have rainforests and beaches?” she asks. “In Portland, we only have Dunkin’ Donuts and snow.”

“It’s true. Colombia was paradise,” my mother says, “but then God gave us men.”

The tourist laughs, “Well, you know what they say. Everyone makes mistakes.”

Waiting for our taxi, my mother and I hear insects squeak inside a vat of oil. An American dollar will buy a bag. The wings catch between our teeth. The body tastes like a cashew but sweeter. Softness and crunch, honey and the salt of bones, this is also how my mother speaks Spanish.

“After you lose your language—what is there left to lose?” she scolds me. “There is nothing.” When I speak, my accent is mushy imported fruit, something for the flies.

Inside our taxi, the world opens itself like a mouth. The streets are clogged with teenage boys who whistle at our taxi and say “Hay que llamar a Dios, porque se están saliendo los ángeles.” Someone call God, because the angels are coming. The taxi driver smiles and tells me not to be fooled: the boys are whistling at my fifty-two-year-old mother and not her skinny, twenty-two-year-old daughter. “The men here—they need a lot of meat to fill their appetite,” he laughs and runs through a red light. It is a good thing Jesus is on the dashboard. The driver tells us it’s his birthday. There is rum in the trunk for later. He just turned fifteen.

Outside, the road is littered with fuchsia petals, dead insects, and plastic wrappers. My grandmother waits on the sidewalk where there are more holes than pedestrians. She carries a bag full of change for the driver, and a bag full of pastries for his passengers. When she hugs us, I smell the fried dough crystallized in sugar. “Bienvenidas,” she squeals.

In her apartment, Abuela shows off her disposable diapers and her new teeth. Reaching into her shirt, she pulls out one prosthetic breast and waves it in front of us. She grins, “See, it’s like I say. It looks just like a fillet of chicken. Too expensive though.” She asks me to take photos of these things. When I ask “¿Pero por qué?” she answers “This way you will not forget that all roads come to a close.” Passing around a camera, rum and a diaper, there is nothing left to do in this world but laugh. We take pictures of each other, each woman wearing the diaper. In every picture Abuela poses like Marilyn Monroe if Marilyn Monroe had been four feet tall and three feet wide. Giggling, we squeeze into a twin size bed and

smell three bodies: the skin we gave away or will become. When Abuela turns in bed, I hear her bones. They chirp like scorpions.

I ask her, "Pero Abuelita, don't you ever worry about coming to a close?"

"¡Claro que sí!" she says, "Mija, I'm not ready to be with your grandfather so soon. He was my sky but Dios Mio! Like I can handle that man going on and on about fútbol for eternity."

"In heaven you start all over again. You pick a new husband!" I joke.

"Don't you read the Bible, Abuelita?"

"¡Claro que sí!" She says, "Dios Mio, if it is heaven I might as well get who I want the most, no? My mind is sand. Mija, what is his name? He drew the woman with the necklace. Leonardo Da Vinci, no?"

"¡Que romántico!" I say.

"No, Mija, I remember now," she smiles. "Leonardo DiCaprio! In heaven, we will all marry Leonardo DiCaprio."

I lie in bed and listen to my grandmother sing the theme song of Titanic in broken English, accompanied by the scratch of iguanas falling off the roof. If we are lucky, there will be a dead one splattered on the sidewalk for breakfast. But it is not like they say. Death does not always come in darkness.

My sister and I were climbing citrus trees. We were watching the black-bird make nests from our mother's hair. When the wood from the house began to scream, we were feeding gardenias to the goats.

I fall asleep remembering how my sister and I stayed with Abuela after the fire. We watched her rip the wrapping paper from what would have been my brother's birthday presents. She put a ball and a tiny pack of Superman underpants into a plastic bag with the receipt. Later she came back from the store with hot pink sandals. We cried when she made us wear them.

The next morning, I wake up early because the cotton sheets are glued to our skin with the sweat. Kneading the dough of our arepas, the three of us sing. Always, the greasy sizzle of the arepas and eggs draws more company to the kitchen. As my mother and I set the table, my oldest cousin comes.

"How are the Americans?" he laughs, hugging and kissing my mother and me.

"Hungry," I say.

"Me too," he says, "You'll make me a breakfast, won't you? Or will you make me go to McDonald's now that you are Americans?"

"Go to McDonald's," my mother says, as she sets an extra plate and gives him our breakfast. "What are you waiting for? Go."

Carving into a cantaloupe, my mother and I share the insides and savor the juice as my cousin eats the breakfast.

"What is this?" he complains. "No salt. No meat. You are becoming Americans. The worst kind: vegetarians."

"Yes, I suppose it is worse," my mother says, "than being a thirty-year-old man who does not know how to cook at all."

My cousin grins, "It is good to see you're still a woman from the hacienda."

Closing her eyes and smiling, Abuela says, "After a rainstorm, when the sky is clean, I can see the hacienda from my bedroom window."

"Ay Abuela," he rolls his eyes. "This cannot be. You are getting old."

"You have truth," she says, "but I can see our mountains from my window when the sky is clean. I can even see the same peak where the hacienda was. This I swear on my husband's life."

"You tell lies," he laughs. "Mi amor, even Jesús knows you cannot see the mountains from the city, and Abuelo's already dead. I will take you to the mountain to see his grave if you want."

"I want," she says. "This way my granddaughter can see her brother's grave too."

My mother is the only one who will not go to the mountains. She peels an avocado with a paring knife and tells us, "Our mountains are tired. They have seen too many bodies. I'm tired too." She peels her hand by accident and does not say another word.

As if the dead were watching, my cousin prays before hauling my abuela and me across the city and up the mountains. Stuck in traffic, I watch people weave through the streets. Their faces are joy carved from grief carved from joy. It is the face you make after eating a salted mango. It is as if God whispered into one ear, "Today you will win a million dollars," and at the same time whispered into the other ear, "Today you will die." This is how we smile.

Looking out the window, Abuela asks, "Does your mother talk about your brother?"

"No," I say. "Sometimes she makes a cake on his birthday."

"And your sister? The hotshot doctor in Miami—"

"Maine," I interrupt.

"Miami, Maine—it's almost the same, no?" she speaks with her hands. "And does she talk about your brother? Does she go to church?"

"No," I say.

"In America there is no God," Abuela says. "No, I say it wrong. In America everyone is God. Can you imagine? Everyone needs no one. To make yourself God—I tell you—it is to make the world a lonely place."

On one side of the road, I watch five or six dogs open the smallest pup. There is nothing the living won't eat. On the other side of the road, two mutts are mating.

"Is it safe yet?" I ask. "In the mountains."

"It is like everywhere else in the country," Abuela reassures me.

"So, not really," my cousin winks.

Inching up the mountain, we pass by the old farmers milking cows with cold morning hands. We pass by the house of old widows whose family left them long ago.

"They sweep their dirt floor each morning and night. What else is there to do?" Abuela says. "I have heard it is the softest floor you will ever know."

With the rise of altitude comes the explosion of ferns and fat leaves. The trees are laced in white fungi. The fruit, so firm, is slick with rain.

"Remember these mountains, this jungle, those trees" Abuela points

out the window.

"I've forgotten everything," I say. "And the farm?"

"Mi hija," Abuela says. "There is no farm to go back to."

Parking by the side of the road, we pick flowers. "These are for Abuelo and the little one," Abuela says. My cousin holds my grandmother's hand, as she walks along the gravel road, filling her black shawl with orchids.

"Doña Luz!" a voice from the street calls and waves in the mist as we yank bright bromeliads from the bush.

"Who's there?" Abuela yells.

"Doña Luz, you recognize me, no?" he says. "I am the ghost of your husband."

"Doctor Manuel, you dog!" she laughs. "I see you are still Don Juan, even as an old man."

"It was worth a try, no?" he smiles. "What brings you back to the mountains?"

"We are here to visit the cemetery," Abuela says.

"Can I accompany you?" he asks. "If I don't visit my mother, she'll haunt me. Dios mio, knowing her, she'll cut off my huevos. Or worse, she'll make my wife pregnant another time."

In the car, the doctor and I are close enough to smell the other's flesh. His is the scent of sweat and fried food. Taking the candy wrappers littered in the back seat of the car, the doctor begins to fold and tear the aluminum.

"Did you know," he pauses and folds the wrapper into triangles, "I delivered your brother."

Smiling with his mouth but not with his eyes he adds, "The boy came out still in the amniotic sac. We looked at each other before he broke through." His chin quivers. "Here. Something for your collection." He leaves an aluminum flower on the stack of dead orchids.

Parking the car, we walk six feet above our ancestors, my brother and his wooden doll. I don't cry when my cousin, scrubbing lichens from a gravestone, tells me that my brother scribbled on the church walls with a tube of lipstick, and that after he died, my mother traced his graffiti with her index finger over and over again. While the others pray in silence, I hear the munching of a million ants as they shred the leaves from the trees. Hoisting their winnings home, they look like a navy of ships with tiny, green sails.

"You are your mother," my cousin tells me as we all drive away from the cemetery. "You forget things. It is easier this way, no?" He turns his head towards me for a second, maybe two, long enough for us to hear a thud, the slam of brakes, a scream. Getting out of the car, we see a teenage boy. His body is on one side of the road. Part of his leg is on the other. In between is red. My cousin could not pick the boy up without soaking his blue shirt with blood.

Taking the body to the car, my cousin stops—"Look at his uniform," he says, "the boy's a rebel."

"Hijo de puta," my cousin mumbles over and over again. He lays the boy back on the ground.

“¡Apúrate!” the doctor says “Drive him to the hospital. He needs more blood.”

My cousin looks down at his fingers. They are moving on their own. Below us, the rebel is shaking too. Above us, the trees are raining red petals into our hair. Abuela sits down to stroke the rebel’s face. She picks the fallen flowers from his wound.

“Our family, the ones in the cemetery, they do not need more company,” she says. “Trust me. The dead are not lonely. That is the work of the living.”

My cousin will not look at her face. Instead he watches the trail of ants on the dirt road. Stepping on one, two ants come to carry the body away. Stepping on the others, five ants come to carry the bodies away. Stepping on the rest, an army of ants come to carry the bodies away. Finally my cousin gives up and returns to the rebel. He jerks the limp arm to rip off the uniform, one sleeve first, then the other. The rebel opens his mouth to scream. No sound comes out. Abuela closes her eyes. Taking the fabric from the uniform, my cousin presses the cloth into the wound.

“Raise the leg. Lower the head,” the doctor says. “This will slow the bleeding.” The two begin to tie fabric between the wound and the body. Following the doctor’s direction, Abuela and I collect sticks from the edge of the forest. There, the mushrooms are like noses of children. Tying the sticks to the bandage, we begin to twist and tighten the cloth to the skin. As the bleeding stops, his face turns darker. What is left, below his knee, turns pale. I try to look away as we drive down the mountain with the rebel. Part of his leg is still holding onto the bone. The other part is peeking from Abuela’s bag along with a bouquet of bromeliads and two bags of cookies.

“Can you sew it back on?” she points to the bag and then to the doctor.

“Sew?” he says. “I wish he was a doll. This we cannot sew.”

In this country, it is always the same. There is always a driver, three passengers and a boy with skin like yellow fields. Perhaps this is why we keep the plastic over our seats. Driving to the hospital, I study the rebel’s mouth in my lap. It is like my brother’s. It opens, but only enough to say no.

In the hospital, Abuela snores, the doctor curses and my cousin sucks his cotton sleeve, trying not to weep. I eat oranges from the lobby. Unpeeling the outside, dipping into the fruit and leaving behind the skin: this is how the fire took my brother. First, the rebels cut the throats of our pigs. It was a polite way to say, “Give me your land. All of it.”

Devouring the fruit in the lobby, I can smell the hacienda. I spit the orange seeds into the ashtray where nurses flock to smoke, and think of his body. “Where is your brother?” my mother yelled as my sister and I watched the house dissolve. I was seven, she was twelve, and my brother was gone. When Papa carried him from the house, the skin was husk-like. One arm was okay. The other was a mound of skin clinging to the sliver of bone. The hair on his head was half there. He didn’t have eyes for crying. When my mother held him, she ripped the hair from her head and placed it on his scalp.

In the waiting room, my cousin rubs Abuela's fingers. Like a dog, she farts in her sleep. Laughing, my cousin and I wake her up. After the sun sets, Doctor Manuel greets us in the hospital lobby and says the rebel will wake up in a day, maybe two. Kissing us on our cheeks, he tells us to get some dinner, to rest, to go home, wherever that may be.

On our drive back to the city, I watch a boy ride his mule up the mountain. Attached to the animal is a cart full of horse heads. The meat will be used for soup. The skulls will be made into bowls.

Finally my cousin says, "I should have left him for the flies."

Grandmother's yawns, "And would you do the same to the men who killed your primo in the fire?"

"Of course," he says.

"And would you do the same to the people who took the hacienda?"

"Of course," he says.

"And would you do the same to our ancestors who took the land from someone else?" she asks.

Falling asleep, I listen. Outside the car, the crickets are rubbing their thighs. I think I hear one say, "If there was a way back to paradise, it is gone."

Returning to the apartment, my mother and I collect the dessert for our dinner: the fruit from our neighborhood trees. There is no order. One fruit falls after another. We never know if it will be a mango or an orange. Still our hands are open. "Did you see what you wanted to see today?" my mother asks, and I have nothing to say. I study the darkness of her eyes. It is like my grandmother's. It is like my own, and I know why the women of our mountains have forgotten how to cry.

From the neighborhood trees, we can see Abuela looking out the window.

"She always sees the mountains," I say.

"How couldn't she? It is the lies that save us," my mother says.

Walking on sand, we learn to love what is turning: the last light of day, the mangos on the ground, the flesh so fat. For the silence of an hour, my mother and I soften our feet in the grass. The wind quivers a branch of oranges. It is nothing. It is the lifting of another ghost.

# ADVICE FROM AN IRAQI

*by David Allen Sullivan*

*Sand bites the mirror  
even as it's blown away,  
scratches every face  
that peers in, shows what  
each will become—is becoming.*

*Like the lone Imam  
who dons the white robes  
of a martyr—he doesn't  
want to die, but wants  
to walk with his death  
beyond reach of the living.*

*All you ever run  
from is what's ahead  
of you, so put that behind  
and then start walking.*



That's why I said I'm crying like the world  
has just dumped all these strange and terrible  
things at my door. All at once  
    he could no longer live  
with the complications of his childhood? Or was he  
just too heavy with all those pictures on the mantle?  
I wish I could ask him, who is meek,  
    and who is strong.

# VISIONS OF THE PAST

*by Brandon Darkis*

Around me are four limp off-white walls bare of any intention. A few forgotten books, titles overturned scattered on an empty bed. The solitary motion of one heart beating out of time. Somehow, furnished of Spartans.

I smell diesel, a thin haze of acrid smoke and burning trash—cinderling plastic and smoldering Styrofoam masks—this scent of decay, human refuse and chai. Some other foreign spice both sweet and bitter.

I hear a radio as it sings out combinations of numbers and the abbreviated words it spells, not in letters but in a mixture of tangos and x-rays. The sound of children swarming about and the crowded wheeze of traffic. Then the ricochet of some deadly insect whizzing past my head and in the distance there's a noise like thunder—only malevolent like the voice of an angry people was present at its creation.

I see the faces of my brothers, of comrades smiling and laughing. They wave all around me now. Why do they look a sort of off-white in the distance?

I feel my nostrils gasp in the heat. The heaviness of the turtle shell. My arms long and hot, some dull black color, fingers that go on for miles. The length of time as it stretches out beyond all reckoning. A ringing in my head both coming and going.

# THREE YEARS AFTER A HUSBAND'S RETURN

*by Christine-Aeriella Crater*

When he came home from the war,  
every day was a nightmare.  
He would forget what country  
he was in, the white of Pennsylvania's snow  
may well have been Iraqi sand.

His brain had been bruised,  
and the doctors said the pain may  
or may not cease.  
The vision he lost  
by the blast on his optic chiasm  
would not return.

I sopped up his daily nosebleeds,  
unclenched his hands from my throat  
when he dreamed in horror.  
Each time he wanted to patrol  
our neighborhood for snipers,  
I hid his boots.

Last night, I watched a cicada  
molt out of itself—  
split its back in a clean line  
and climb from its shell.  
The new creature looked much the same,  
but carried wings.

It did not fly off, as butterflies bloom and alight;  
it stumbled up the trunk  
of a deep-grooved tree, and vanished.  
The shell still held its former shape,  
clenched the bark,  
weightless as a peanut-skin.  
Even its eyes still seemed to see  
through its hollows.

Is that what he is like?  
In part, limping off into the dark  
and an exact replica of him,  
somewhere, still clinging  
to whatever it held when it died.

# THE ABORTION

*by Christine-Aeriella Crater*

The doctor asked what I wrote about.  
It was June, I'd been gardening.  
Flowers, I answered.  
One lilac tree,  
clusters of bachelor's buttons.  
I had planted a spindly vine  
with small blue blossoms  
that, at a distance, looked  
like mist, I told him. And very politely,  
he plucked out the pink curl  
of a sweet-pea petal, not yet unfurled.

The garden was different.  
Zinnias tilted their faces to catch the sun,  
followed it east to west, and waited  
in their soft beds for dawn.  
I let a flat of geraniums die  
of thirst. It was too hot  
to plant them, too hot  
to carry water. Even at night.  
I was too sick.

Geraniums have no sense  
of self-preservation, I remind myself.  
They do not wonder about the meaning  
of their lives. A zinnia can't know  
that the sun it waits for,  
the sun that perks its dew-soaked bloom,  
the sun that pumps green into its leaves  
can shrivel bright blossoms to pale, brittle brown.  
No, flowers do not know the difference.  
But I, gardening with this empty jug,  
I do.

# PLAYING WAR

*by Jonathan Barrett*

My son sprinkles shredded cheese on  
a croissant,  
takes a big bite like he's pulling the pin  
of a grenade with his teeth. There's an explosion  
of spray-on butter and a spritz  
of yellow mist.  
He tells me why our team is going to kick  
the other team's butt in Iraq.  
*Their team is cranky. Our team has machine guns.*  
He says war is fun.  
He hones a gun with his hand and finger,  
the trill patter  
of bullets a tempest of tongue, spit, and lips.  
He acts like he's hit.  
The dining room thick with calls for help, the wall  
dribbling Dr. Pepper. He crawls  
on the floor, hides his face and limp limbs,  
jumps up and pumps  
his fists in the air, celebrates his fictive victory  
with a buoyant smile  
as if the primrose path of war were merely a game  
that little boys played.

# TOURING

*by Scott Tucker*

A person often meets his destiny on the road he took to avoid it.

—Jean de la Fontaine

The old village is awake near the sea, drinking from a chipped white cup and speaking Italian to its bees, which move from flower to flower, in numbered order, thinking always of the journey home.

..

Mikail and Olesya arrived in Italy on the overnight train from Budapest. They felt as hollowed-out and bankrupt by then as the New Russia they'd left behind. To save money, they were told, travel at night. Sleep on the trains and use your backpacks as pillows to avoid theft, but twice now they had been robbed of everything they owned while sleeping on the train.

A body will shift unconsciously as it dreams. A head rolls free of its possessions. Arms fall restless and alone to the floor. By morning, their backpacks were gone, their money, their passports, train tickets, clothing. They were put off the train again by the conductor, short of their intended destination.

The first time this happened, in the Ukraine, they were put off in a wheat field, and now, entering Italy from the north, on a goat trail leading down to the village by the sea.

"I am so tired of thieves!" Olesya shouted to the sky. Her name, pronounced "All-yes-yuh." This was Mikail's joke: "Olesya, I'll undress ya."

"Say it in Russian," she said.

"It doesn't work in Russian," he told her. "Let me teach you English," he said, "while we're riding on the train."

Then he explained to her in Russian what it meant, and she smiled.

No one pronounced her name correctly outside of Russia. "I don't care if people can say my name," she told him. "Our passports are gone again. Work on that."

They walked to the village by the sea. They looked for the name of the town but there were no signs posted. A place, too, without a passport. The village paid them no mind. The village sat in a white wicker chair and ate its breakfast, and over the mountains to the east a warm summer sun broke free of the earth like a child's balloon.

In the arms of the Adriatic, large pleasure boats slept at anchor, in a deep blue bay so beautiful it seemed to Mikail to be a computer-aided photograph. The boats were too large to be trailered ashore, and therefore had spent their entire lives at sea. Their clean white linen curtains were drawn closed against the ragged likes of Mikail and Olesya. Their smooth

teak railings were polished for no reason except to reflect the summer's bright clouds. Their dark wooden steps, rising from one deck to the next like a map of love seeking the object of its affection.

"Let's find a park bench and get some sleep," Mikail said.

Olesya had noticed, when problems grew too large for Mikail to take on, he became tired and slept. "You sleep," she told him, "I'm going to go do something."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Something."

She gripped his shirt and kissed him squarely on the mouth and walked away, her eyes as blue and unreal as the bay and its boats, her hair, bleached blond with store-bought treatments, harsh and unforgettable, dancing from side to side as she walked.

They'd been touring and sleeping together for a month. Mikail had found her name posted on a bulletin board in Moscow, matching up people who wanted to travel together to save on expenses. They had talked by phone and arranged to meet at the train station. If it felt right, they agreed, they would leave that day. It was summertime and warm and they slept outside in fields and parks, and on the trains, and once a week they found a small hotel in a village along the way for a hot shower and a night together in a real bed.

Mikail stood a foot taller than Olesya, and very thin—so thin that people looked twice at him to consider: Was his body growing properly? Had he been in an accident? Could he have an eating disorder?

In fact he suffered from a broken heart, as the saying goes. A girl who had left him in Moscow, he confided in Olesya. He had also broken his leg badly, years before that, and still felt pain when he sat for a long time in one position.

"Why do you rub your thigh?" Olesya asked him, their first night together on the train. He told her the story then of his father, a very large and powerful man, who fell one day on Mikail while they were ice-skating in Gorky Park, and snapped his femur in two like a chicken bone. His father had forced him to stand up on his good leg and try to skate again and not create a scene in the park.

"Let me rub it for you," she told him.

His hair was long—black and unruly the way she liked it—a wild and tzar-ish look. He wore the clothing she'd bought for him in towns along the way—a pair of tight black jeans and a black Ukrainian T-shirt, with a black leather belt made in Hungary, studded with silver points from one end around to the other. He looked like a failed rock musician now, a drummer tormented by his visions of art, corrupted. "That's the look I'm going for, anyway," she told him.

"I've always loved musicians," she said.

"I'm a welder," he said.

"You've got the rest of your life to learn music," she told him.

"Anyway, you're not a welder now," she said.

This was on the train from Budapest, in the middle of the night, before their backpacks were stolen for the second time. Now they were nobody

again, standing in the streets of a village without a name somewhere along the Adriatic Sea. Her bleach-blond hair walked away from him and he looked for a place to sleep nearby and she passed the local citizens lounging in their weathered chairs, drinking from their small white cups. She could hear the bees in the hedgerows and the sunflowers along the lane, and she thought of how hard her mother had worked in Russia to grow a little food in the courtyard of their apartment building, where the sunlight slanted through to a small garden for a few hours each afternoon. Here in Italy, God threw sunshine away like confetti, littering driveways and backyards with it, lavishing olive groves and vineyards and lemon trees already awash in a surplus of heat and light.

For Olesya's mother, growing summer vegetables in Moscow had been an exercise in futility. "At least it's exercise," she joked. She held up her old arms, like a bodybuilder, and pretended to flex her withered muscles.

"Do you have drinking money for me?" she asked. She was honest with her daughter about her alcoholism. No, she wasn't going out to spend the evening with Mrs. N., or to look in on her aging parents. She was going out for a bottle of vodka.

From time to time she failed to come home until noon the following day, having spent the night somewhere with a man. She swore them both off, men and vodka, in the sober light of the afternoon, but it always came around again, the need to spend the night in a stupor of affection in the arms of a stranger.

It seemed, no matter what city Olesya walked into, she found the ghost of her mother sitting there, and the ghosts of the broken men she had loved. Some nights, looking into Mikail's eyes on the train, she saw her ghost in him.

..

"Here you are."

She dropped a pair of backpacks at Mikail's feet. He was laid out asleep on a bench at a bus stop a block from where she had left him. He squinted into the bright blue morning sky and located her silhouette, the loose top that hid her very nice figure from all the world but him, and the jeans that danced along when she walked, like a girl on a playground after school.

"What are these?" he asked, arranging himself on an elbow and taking a look.

"Sit up, babe." She slapped at his legs to make room for herself on the bench, and he swung himself into a vertical position. He rubbed his thigh out of habit, before the pain began.

"I'm done with being nice," she said. She sat down firmly beside him.

"What did you do?" he asked.

"I went to the train station, and I stole us two nice backpacks."

"Jesus, Yesya!" he said.

"Don't Jesus me," she said. "I'm done with being nice."

She went through the backpacks while Mikail watched nervously for

police. No one came for them. Not even the bus that was scheduled for the stop came for them. There was enough money in the backpacks to support them for a week, plus rail passes, cigarettes, music players, clothing. They found two passports, belonging to a couple of American college boys spending their summer in Europe, born in Boston, Massachusetts and White Plains, New York.

“We could return the passports to the train station,” Mikail said.

“Are you crazy?” Olesya asked. She threw the passports into a nearby trash can. “They deserve it.”

She looked out again at the sparkling Adriatic. “These towns look so much better to me when I have money for breakfast,” she said.

Mikail sat silently.

“It’s not the end of the world,” she said, “stealing a backpack.”

“We can sleep together in a proper bed tonight,” she told him. “With proper sex and a shower.”

Mikail looked out at the water. It seemed farther off to him than ever, the boats that spent their life at sea and the wooden stairs that climbed from deck to deck, seeking the object of their affection. Olesya put a hand to his face and pulled his gaze around to hers. She kissed him.

“Forget her, babe,” she said. “You’ve got me now.”

..

Waiting at the locked gates of the Russian Consulate in Trieste the following morning, Olesya sat on the curb and watched the sparrows at her feet, playing dangerously in traffic and driving each other off with small attacks.

“You think songbirds are happy,” she said, “but you look at them, it’s one fight after another, over crumbs.”

“Songbird,” she said to them, urging an end to the skirmish.

She reached out and took Mikail’s hand in hers. “We’ll be all right,” she told him. “You and me.” She squeezed his hand warmly and smiled. “Believe it.”

..

The girl whom Mikail could not forget, who had broken his heart in Moscow, was in fact his twin sister, with whom he’d shared an apartment for three years. Since the age of 16, she’d been very sick with bone cancer, and she should have lived at home until the very end, with their parents, but she begged Mikail, “I want to know what it’s like to live in the world.”

“I want to cut flowers for my own table,” she told him.

“I want to work as an adult before I die.”

“What do I say to that?” he asked his roommate, who stayed on with them for a month and then moved out.

She lived longer than anyone thought she would live, and when she died, she died without a sound as Mikail slept in his bedroom next to

hers after a hard day of welding. He found her in the morning, her skin as fragile and strong as white bone china, and when he touched her face to say goodbye she seemed to shatter in his hands, like a dropped white cup, like songbirds scattered by traffic on a cobblestone street.

He hadn't worked a day since then, wandering Moscow like a twin soul in search of its grave. "It feels like a mirror has been taken from a wall that's always had a mirror," he told his friends. They left him alone in the end, unable to help.

An old Russian bureaucrat came out at last and greeted them at the Consulate gate. He smelled of ink and paper and he wore a solid scowl across his large, square face. He pulled the heavy iron fencing open and walked them in and they told him their story.

"Why are you in Trieste?" he said. "You are walking in the wrong direction."

"We thought—south," Mikail said, confused.

The bureaucrat nearly spit at them for not owning a map. They applied for their second replacement passport in two weeks. There were more questions this time around, more instructions on how to secure one's belongings while on holiday, but the result was the same—valid identification and peace of mind restored.

"To Rome!" Olesya said, back outside on the street.

"I have something to tell you on the way," Mikail said.

"Tell me now."

"On the train," he said.

Mikail had little experience with women other than Olesya, and he was surprised at what angered them. For instance. Leading her on to believe that he'd left a girlfriend behind in Moscow, when in fact it had been his twin sister, who had died. Keeping this to himself for a month. Omitting the important facts of his life.

He didn't care if she was angry with him. He felt better, getting the story out. Although he'd never seen this side of her—she yelled so loudly on the train to Rome, it prevented thieves, or anyone else, from approaching them. A thief is looking for a quiet mark. A victim. Not a tornado, screaming in Russian.

As her verbal storm blew itself out, he smiled at her. "Yesya. The names you call me will change nothing," he said. "I loved my sister, and I love you."

It was the first time he had told her he loved her, and it took her breath away.

..

"Tell me what she was like," Olesya said. The train continued south to Rome without feelings for either of them, with feelings only for the steel tracks beneath its wheels.

"I can't," he told her.

"Tell me. It's good for you to talk about it."

"How can I describe a person in one conversation?" he asked.

"We have seven hours to Rome," she said.

"It's too difficult."

She nodded, understanding grief. "What was her name? Tell me that much."

"I can't."

"Only her name."

"No."

"Mikail, what's wrong with you? It's me."

"Her name was Olesya!"

Silence fell then, between them, as if the train were rolling to a stop at an empty station.

"Olesya," she repeated.

"Yes."

"Your sister had my name."

"Yes."

"That is too odd. How is it that we're sitting here together?" She thought back. "You saw my name on the bulletin board in Moscow and you called me. You chose me for my name."

"Yes."

"That is sick. I think. In a way. I don't know what to think. I don't think I'm happy about it."

"No. You aren't, you shouldn't be, I'm sorry," he said.

"Let me think. Should we be touring together? Should we be sleeping together? Is this healthy for you?"

"It is! Only—you should change your name. To anything. What other names do you like?"

"I don't know."

"Think."

"This is very odd." She looked into her hands. They were empty.

"I like Bata," she said.

"Bata."

"Yes. When I was a young girl my mother called me Bata. I don't know why. I hope it was for a good reason."

"So," Mikail said. "Bata. That's good. We can go on to Rome then."

"Yes."

"Together. You're Bata now," he said.

They looped their backpack straps through their belts as the bureaucrat at the Consulate had advised, and they shoved their passports into their underwear and fell asleep against each other, against the window glass, against Italy, dark and rolling by in its own, unnamable way.

..

Rome is a city built for its sights. You can walk into the Pantheon for free. You can take a long nap in the shade of the Colosseum and count the seven hills. It's a stone city, though, and in the summer the stones give up their heat fiercely, all evening long, like a mad man with a fever. The grass parks of the Villa Borghese are the only public places cool

enough for a good night's sleep outdoors, among the bushes and fountains and the tall parasol trees that arch overhead like the Renaissance itself—sun-dappled cathedrals by day; the painted heavens by night.

One evening, late, in the park, an old bearded vagrant sat on the edge of a large, plain, circular fountain—not a famous fountain, but a reliable one—and he watched Mikail and Bata making love in near-darkness on the lawn nearby. When they were finished, they saw him and asked him to turn away so they could dress, and he turned away. Then he shuffled over to them and sat down gently on the lawn where they had just been lying together, and they talked.

He had been a professor of astronomy in Prague, he told them, and he spoke a little Russian. He had lost his job over a scandal in the department. He came to Rome because he had family here, but he preferred living in the park.

They stood and returned to the fountain together and sat with their feet cooling in the water and talked about how to find a good meal for free in Rome. The old man stared down Bata's shirt and ached for his youth until it was time for them to go their separate ways and find a safe place to in the park for the night.

Water was never a problem in Rome. It ran continuously from small spigots set into walls and sidewalk faucets throughout the city. Bread and meat were affordable at the small groceries in the quieter neighborhoods, usually with a bathroom available if you were a paying customer. At restaurants, at the outside tables, diners left good food behind when they stood to leave, if you got to it before the waiter returned to clear the dishes away. Untouched antipasti. Bread and olive oil. A fingerful of red wine left in a glass.

One night in seven, Mikail and Bata stayed at a youth hostel or a two-star hotel, where they showered and had proper sex, but most of these places had unclean beds and no air-conditioning and they could get a better night's sleep outdoors on the grass of the Villa Borghese.

They lived in Rome the rest of the summer. When they needed money, they lifted backpacks and purses from other tourists, as good Roman thieves would, best done in the early evening at outside tables, targeting Americans who ate dinner early and drank heavily and carried more cash than other tourists.

"It's not so difficult after awhile," Mikail said. "Borrowing from the rich."

"It's lovely here," Bata said.

"Could we ever live here?" she asked him. "Could we ever find work?"

They sat on the curb in the shadow of the Spanish Steps and watched a troupe of street performers dancing for money in the piazza near an old fountain. The fountain sagged in the shape of a small boat half-sunk and overflowing its sides.

"There is no point talking about work," Mikail said.

"Look at all these railings," Bata said. She pointed to the balconies of the city. "Someone must weld them all."

"You could learn to speak Italian," she told him. "The way you learned English."

He smiled. "My dear optimist," he said. They bumped their shoulders together as if they were two restaurant glasses, with a fingerful of wine between them, toasting their good fortune. She kissed him on the cheek.

"Nazdrovia," she said.

Then she held her arms above her head. "Help me up." Mikail stood and helped her to her feet. Their eyes met. Their young, dark, wounded eyes.

"I'm ready now," she said. "To go home with you to Russia."

Even that, however, would not be easy. A pair of American college boys, filled with an overdeveloped sense of justice, had spotted them wearing their backpacks and clothing, stolen at the train station in the village outside of Trieste, and they were making their way down the Spanish Steps now to intercept fate, near the troupe of innocent street performers, at the fountain half-sunk and overflowing its sides.

The interesting thing, Bata thought, watching the men rush toward Mikail and her—is when we are finished with this melee—when our injuries have healed—we might all become good friends and laugh about this over a glass of wine and a slice of bread and olive oil. It will lead perhaps to good jobs for Mikail and me. It will add to our knowledge of the rich—how to live like them and how to make our good luck as they do.

"I'm feeling strong," Mikail told her, standing by the fountain of the old boat, watching the American men coming towards them. He flexed his muscles, a real bodybuilder, and she could see his energy had returned. His heart had mended and he was ready for a fight.

"We won't run this time," he told her.

"You are my new country," she told him. "And I am your capital city." She stared down the Americans as they reached Mikail. "Believe it!" she yelled, as the fight began.

# MEALS AT ALL HOURS

*by Suzanne Roberts*



# EACH LAVENDER SHINING

*by Dana Olfater*



SPLINTER  
*by Dana Oldfather*



# CEMETERY IN COLOR

*by Ivy Antonowitsch*



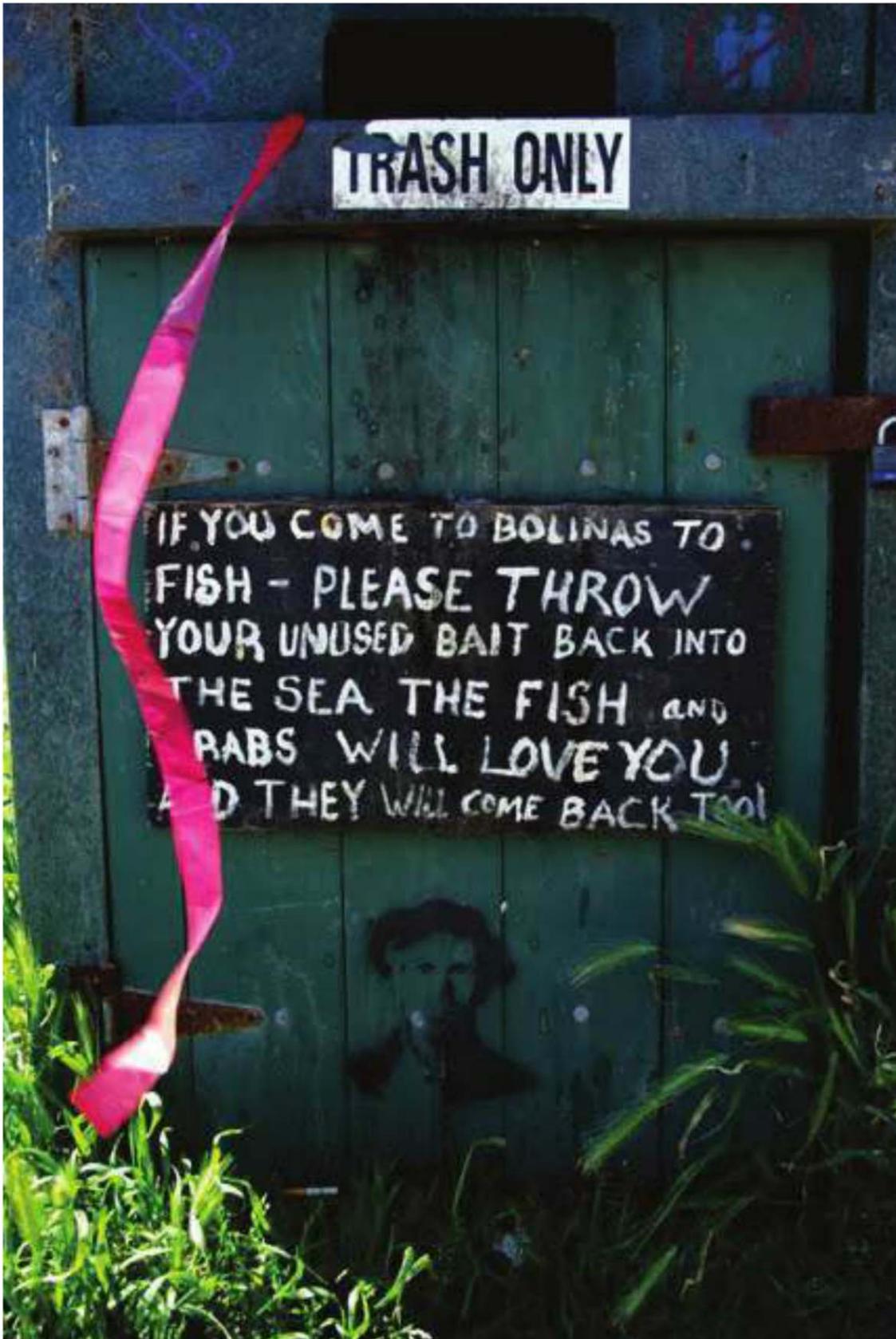
# FADING FACE

*by Ivy Antonowitsch*



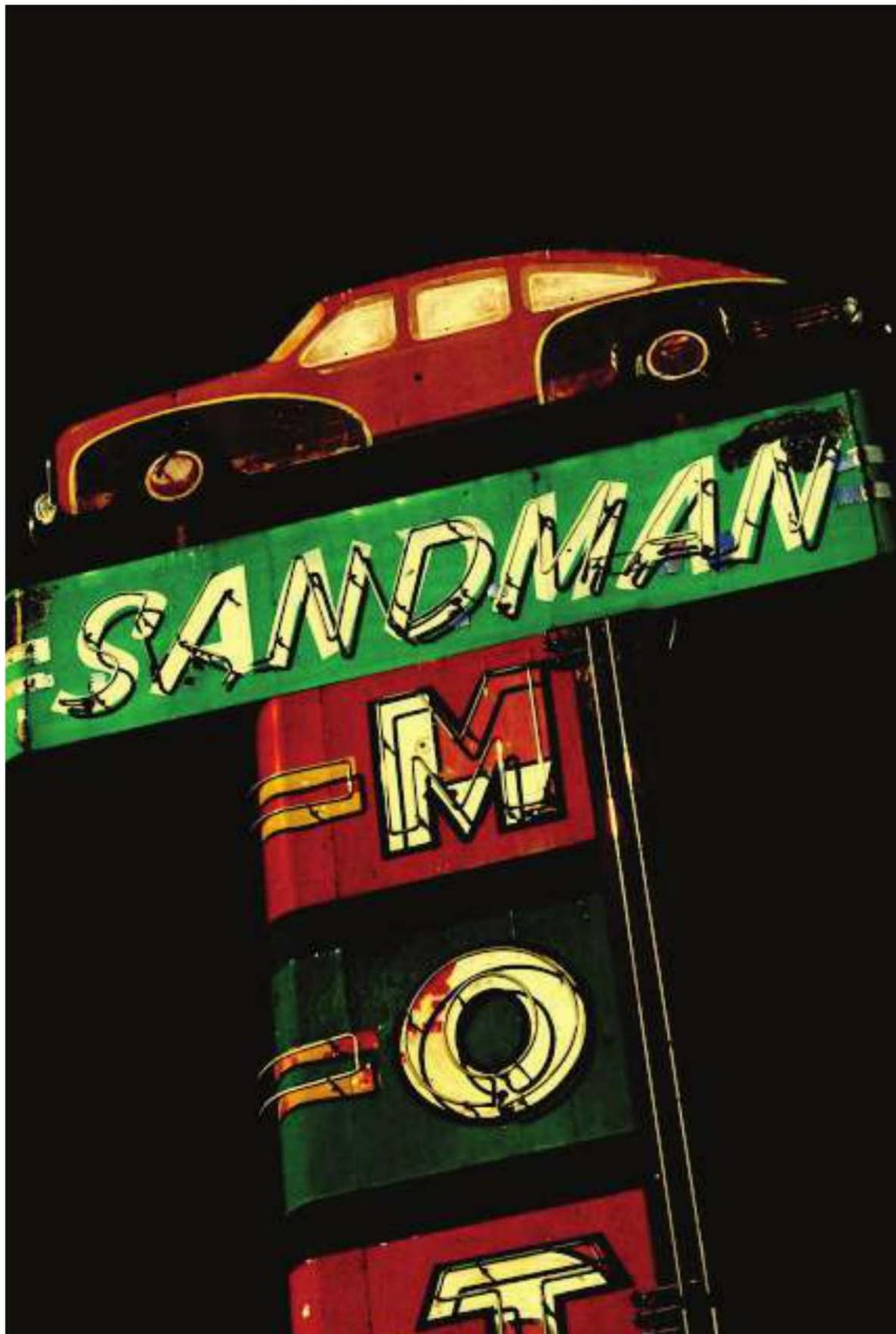
# TRASH ONLY

*by Ivy Antonowitsch*



# SANDMAN

*by Ivy Antonowitsch*



# UNDER THE EAVE

*by Suzanne Roberts*



# SEARCHING FOR FREDERICK SEIDEL

*by C. Dylan Bassett*

I found you digging  
in the trashcan, sifting through piss and porn  
and looking everywhere  
for your penis. That was in Rome,  
where you and I made love, only it wasn't really  
you and we didn't really make love  
in Rome. I follow you blindly  
through all that kinky  
hair and calx, trying to understand  
how we suddenly met Dostoevsky in Paris  
while getting drunk in New York City  
and three lines later we're eating foam  
and flirting with the african-american waitress.  
I find your fingerprints all over Google: Kill  
Poem, Mood Indigo, Mr. Delicious, Evening Man.  
You never answer me  
when I ask if you ever search your wrist for a pulse.  
In my mind you're lying on a the table  
like a slab of meat, I dissect you:  
forehead to abdomen but all I find is the same  
reeking cheese and wine. Only the wine was never  
water, but rather, milk from your nipple.  
I cut out your tongue to guess the difference  
between your throat and dirt. I check  
the Internet for some clue as to who you really are,  
but you can only brim so far  
on blogs and info pages and I envy  
your death threats. Some nights, I turn page  
after bony page in your book, quietly  
awaiting the master's body again  
while ridiculous hours pass  
and no one comes in. If I saw your face  
in a crowded room I wouldn't know it,  
but from your poems I could  
recognize your penis anywhere,  
especially in the trashcan.

# BOOK BABIES

*by Maya Jewell Zeller*

I put my book down on top of Matthew Dickman's book  
and I think *our books are doing it*,  
the way some girls pretend with Barbie and Ken,  
but the neighbor girl and I did with the Michael  
Jackson doll she had and Skipper, whose body  
we liked better with its smaller breasts  
and narrower hips and feet which could walk farther  
in their strappy sandals and tennis shoes, out  
past the row of blackberry bushes beyond the barn  
into the field and down to the river  
where she could sit on the shore and skip rocks.  
It was the only way we could justify her name.  
We wanted things to make sense. My book says  
*moon beam olive skin sheen kelp rust barrel mouth*  
and Matthew's book says *pull out, I have been*  
*on my knees, sleeping pills, be good to yourself—*  
*but you, me, let's bite each other on the neck.* This  
must be their language of love. Then his book  
flips open and a girl looks up and walks  
away into the crowd, and the people throw down  
their literature and start tearing down morning  
glory vines and pretty soon the pages are interlocking  
like you can do with two phone books until a person  
can't tear them apart, and I begin to worry about  
what kind of book babies these two could make,  
what strange fruits could spring from their unprotected  
union. Matthew's book looks a little like a boy  
at a school dance when the songs suddenly switch  
from YMCA and Friends in Low Places to Lady in Red,  
both disappointed and anxious to see if there's a girl  
in the room who wants to put her hands on his shoulders,  
who might let him slip his down below where anything  
could happen, and my book looks like the first week of spring.  
There are plum blossoms all over in her hair, she is leading  
a horse across a field, as if to ask us to get on and ride.

# AFTER SEEING JOHN WAYNE AND MAUREEN O'HARA WHEN I WAS TEN

*by Elizabeth Harmon Threatt*

Because I saw the two of them  
together, black and white in Ireland,  
the next two years of my childhood  
consisted of blue-ringed-raspberry-lip days,  
kissing my fitted sheets at night,  
video tapes hidden beneath the pillow,  
until I searched for deep auburn  
hair dye, moving on to a techni-colored world.

You have read *War and Peace*,  
*Where the Red Fern Grows*,  
a little Jane Austen in my lamplight,  
so that you say now there is nowhere  
I can go without you,  
especially at night. When I watch you  
move somewhere beneath sleep, I imagine  
you bringing my hands around your back,  
pushing my hair from my face with your thumb.  
I feel the hem of my jeans rub  
against my heels, and I am walking fast  
through a casual field,  
one shoe lost along the way.

# THE ARTIST OF HELEN STREET

*by Paul Kareem Tayyar*

So you live here now,  
In this cottage that looks like it should be located on the cliffs of Monterey  
or Big Sur,  
Your maiden name painted onto the mailbox as I walk up the dirt path to  
your front door.  
The wood floor creaks as I walk upon it,  
The dogs dream of Big Macs and jack-rabbits as they sleep on the sofa,  
The paperback copies of Sexton and Rexroth and Thomas and Ginsberg  
Seem almost sacred the way you have stacked them,  
And the Elaine De Kooning print that hangs on the southern wall of your house  
Is more beautiful than any crucifix.  
The water that you give me to drink is colder than anywhere else in the county.  
You tell me how lovely the nights are, so many stars,  
And talk about the coyotes that come to your door like out of season trick  
or treaters.  
You say that the way the wind runs its hands through the trees in the moonlight  
Is the same as those of a harpist who has mastered her instrument.  
You are happy.  
Your hair has returned to its natural color.  
You let me read the drafts of poems you have been working on,  
Ask if the next time I come over I would be willing to let you draw me.  
There is a photograph of you and your mother at the beach,  
You look no older than six in the frame,  
And your hands are shaping the final turrets of a sand castle  
You have made too close to the sea.  
You are smiling not because you believe the castle will last forever,  
But because you know the sea can only swallow one of them at a time.

# LETTING THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG

*by Kaitlyn Carr*

While I slept next to you  
the rain came and washed the gold paint  
from the tips of your fingers,  
unraveling a ball of yarn for the stray cats  
to play with in the alley. In the early hours,  
when the sun comes up, the sidewalk  
looked untouched as if draped in silk,  
yet the roads still weren't fixed  
and were full of the same old potholes  
filled with different puddles.  
The first cigarette of the day  
filled the air with smoke, and I noticed  
our front porch was still covered  
in spider webs. I sat beneath the dead flies,  
watching you get your hands dirty  
weeding the flowerbed full of dead roses.  
I wondered about the woman  
who you used to pick them for,  
and how their thorns always stick  
to your pockets and end up in my bedroom.

# AGE DIFFERENCES

*by Kaitlyn Carr*

As my love lies in bed waiting for sleep,  
I cry silently next to him  
pretending to close my dilated eyes.

His body thrashes back and forth  
under the down comforter.

I try to brace our bodies together  
but I turn him away into the darkness of sheets  
and his mind races on without me.

*I can really feel the meth in this one,*  
he carefully whispers as if somebody,  
somewhere is longing to hear  
the confession of his past addiction.

I see him sweating for a chance to breathe  
from his dry, cracked lips  
while he picks at every scab  
trying to scratch the familiar  
yellow tint from his skin.

In my tiny room, I trapped a past  
he's struggling to forget,  
yet I have the fucking nerve  
to get him high once more  
with naïve tendencies.

I hoped for ecstasy,  
but it backfired and I found  
a grown man craving sobriety  
wanting rest from his youth  
that in myself has only awoken.

# FOR NATHAN, AFTER MY THIRD MANHATTAN

*by Angelo Perez*

**Third Place, Poetry Award**

Amber skies, as if a fire ignited on some distant planet.  
But just like the stars, the burn is merely a vestige on the atmosphere,  
similar to the stain of red wine on your lips I tried desperately to kiss  
before you turned your head and allowed me to plant two years of  
patient fervor on a bearded cheek.  
Too drunk to retain your taste, but the feeling I remember vividly,

even now (and always)

as my conscience wags a finger at the center of my chest  
for regurgitating a symphony of clumsy timbres and  
slurred legatos, stitched and bolstered up with an irresponsible cadence.

That slight revolution your head made against my enduring embrace  
felt like there would not be another morning and I wished, at that moment,  
you were back in Taiwan--rubbing your eyes awake as you welcome a day  
Reno has yet to meet.

Still, I cannot bring myself to vouch for it now, lying here in a park,  
scavenging for another thought to haunt just one second of time,  
and yet my efforts are to no avail, because your unsettling eyes are  
still the recurring element; your hair, its color still in question, the irony;  
your voice and smell the sensory details of the setting that is your body;  
and your name the only proper noun present, all of these, all of your traits  
delicately entangled in my mind's first person narration.

How much longer must I wait until I have your "soul's full intention"?  
Remember that is what you told me during that night you wore a bomber jacket,  
while the movement of the wind indicated the terrible summer  
of your absence was over, and you were finally back,  
just in time to witness the fire in the sky.

# FORGET TO FORGET

*by Nicholas Barouch*

*You're the icing on the cake, on the table at my wake...yes, you're the good things.*

—Modest Mouse

You always ask, *How come you never write a poem about me?*  
It's because you're just not cut out for my style.  
Am I supposed to describe how your pale blue eyes  
don't make me want to puke up bile?  
Or how your lips aren't dry, cracked or peeling like mine?  
I'm never bothered by any of the other dead fish  
wearing shirts and skirts driving toxic steel bubbles  
on the grey currents of the land ocean  
whenever I see you haul that mighty ship "Forgiveness"  
with your old school bug through the streets of my shortcomings—  
frozen waves of torn asphalt trailing behind.  
Can you recall the time we got caught making out  
in the high school dean's office by the janitor?  
We were supposed to be painting a mural  
depicting the steps to the "compliance to community"  
disciplinary process when she saw you straddling me  
in his executive chair. She gasped and ran off to tell.  
Anyway, the point is, I wasn't thinking at all about my dying mother  
sick with degenerative bone disease. Her neck and spine painfully  
consumed like wood on a campfire. I wasn't thinking  
of swine flu, chemical warfare, diet Pepsi commercials,  
or even how Jesus might come back and not take me with Him  
because last winter I killed my friend's cat  
by throwing it against a wall in a drunken rage,  
then hid it behind the refrigerator and never spoke of it.  
So I guess what I'm trying to say is:  
even though it's only for brief moments at a time,  
thanks for reminding me to forget.

# THE LOUISIANA NIGHTS I WONDERED IF MY WIFE WAS EVERYTHING I EVER WANTED HER TO BE

*by Victoria Kellie*

**First Place, Poetry Award**

She came to me in the porch light  
Of that summer dying.  
Her brown hair was still  
in the soggy air. Crickets moaned.  
We sat under trees and shelled pecans from a burlap sack  
Tossing the parts we didn't need  
Into shadows on the lawn.

Her hard brown fingers cracked the nuts open.  
Half of them were rancid.

She showed me.

My love spread the meat in her palm,  
Leaned over with her thin arm outstretched.  
The gift was a little rotten flower blooming,  
A wound in the skeleton shards.

The heart pressed out between the fingers  
Like shelling seeds or pulling triggers,  
The moment, the senselessness, the search  
For meaning in retrospect.

I was learning to love  
Pushed against a cracked porch rail  
In half light and half naked.  
I was learning, rushed, the way  
Leaves stir in wind and end up  
In piles, in corners, out of season.

I was sleeping two hours a night,  
Dead in the sheets.

I was learning need  
By the demand  
To be whole again,

By the pitted moon  
Halved and soaked in darkness,  
The way summer came fast and breathless

Leaving the fruit from the trees cracked and split  
On the sighing ground.

I was trying to figure something out:  
My dead face in the mirror at five a.m.  
After I awoke, I came down the stairs  
To find her passed out in the armchair in the moonlight.

Leaning against the counter in the dark,  
My beady eyes and exhausted wet lip  
Chewing open an old oily pecan, trying to discern the taste  
And still spitting the shells  
Into my own shadow.

# HOW IT FEELS TO BE THE LAST ONE TO LOOK AWAY

*by Victoria Kellie*

It was your eyes that finally terrified me—  
Watching me from where you lay in bathtubs, ponds,  
Sinks, saucers, and especially that dirty, gray river  
Where, months before, you sunk to the bottom among the reeds and stones,  
No less alive in death but mute in their luminosity.

We lived only at night, and I think  
Of how we parted the grass at the riverbank and I let you  
Strangle or dunk me as I cried like a kitten  
In a bag swinging from the cradle of your drunken wrist.

Would you believe me if I told you,  
Every morning I thought we'd be lovers again?

It is the dreams, in which I am alone,  
After it happened, that terrify me.  
My hands sleep alone on my thighs, thumbing your story  
Black-voiced. I am strong enough to lift you,  
Limp and heavy to the bank.  
And the branches whip your face and your wide open eyes.  
You cannot move and I give you to the river.  
She willingly weds you  
Looking up spread languidly and ready  
To swallow you.

We lived by the seasons of that river, swollen and matted with life,  
Pouting over the banks and moaning with your joy.  
If you hadn't died, I wouldn't have killed you.  
I only wanted to.

I watched you float away, and the dark water floods your fat heart.  
You whisper something I cannot hear, and I wake up and you're gone.

# LOVE IN A YELLOW SEASON

*by Victoria Kellie*

That year, the sun's weak light stained the ground  
In the garden next door, two shadows  
Punched holes in the sleeping earth behind an old house  
Leaning on their rakes and coughing  
And dropping in seeds too old to sprout.

The garden drooped, depressed, already smelling of death  
And the old couple shoved themselves,  
Bone to bone  
Into the cringing elbow of winter.

Summer had planted them, time held them in place  
Tasting the oil of the years, in the pale shriveled vegetables  
And the unwashed spoons stuck together in the sink.

I watched them argue from my place in the neighbor's window,  
Dull eyes like their gray fingernails.  
They screamed at each other, spitting bones.  
She slapped him a few times quickly and soundly  
Like she was breaking the impassable dirt clod of their faces.  
He went too quiet.  
Later, shovel in hand, he picked his way  
Through the dead grass of the lawn towards her.

She tripped and fell, scrambling over the bunions of weeds  
As the sound of the dogs tearing each other apart in the garage  
Keened over the yellow ground.

I watched behind glass  
Collecting the crumbs of flowers  
And dead flies from the windowsill,  
Cupping one shaking pink hand over the ledge  
To keep from falling.

She broke through the backdoor and he followed her.  
I imagined him grunting down the hallway a step behind  
In his dying bones, slow creaking.  
The shovel broke glass, blooming and moaning,  
Begging for love  
In all the fallen leaves seeping, leading my eyes  
To that wide open window.

# NO CALENDARS

*by Dave Malone*

No calendars  
mark the first day of spring,  
not even the ones white folks  
post on double-wide refrigerators  
or dry mount to home office  
cream walls. No calendars  
mark the flutter of wings—  
your bone colored skirt  
crying above Blue Spring,  
its aqua color tint, implying  
the Atlantic Ocean. No calendars  
mark the first day of your period—  
the blood dripping into circles,  
then pyramids on river rock  
beside the spring where I shouldered a nest  
into your thighs and made our hair  
a tent. And we slept there  
beneath the first-sexed redbuds  
purpling like bruises  
while the river gushed past the bend  
beneath constellations  
we drew with our fingertips.

# BLOOD AT SHILOH

*by Dave Malone*

You drive past the edge of the earth  
marked by your grandfather on a county map  
where the New Madrid fault meets  
the Mason-Dixon line. But you're way past

borders now. She left you.  
As simple as a key  
dropping to a countertop  
in a nowhere diner  
where she served dirt coffee.

She plunked her pink outfit down  
beneath the opossum-colored time clock.  
Her salon hair sprinkled curls  
on your leather motorcycle jacket  
she never returned, your name  
tattooed on the inside pocket.

You saw it comin'  
like the climax of *First Blood*.  
Someone was going down in the brush.  
When she grabbed some new-fangled English  
and said you was crowding her,  
you threw that giant story anthology  
as fat as an adult coon cuz you knew  
that lit bitch Bobbie Ann Mason  
didn't have shit on you.  
So what you was going to Shiloh, too?

A Confederate flag sticker flies solo  
on the coal-tinted rear window  
of the old Chevy you got from Grandma.  
You pawned your best Remington  
and unloaded that bored-out four-wheeler  
to pay Granny in twenties.  
There's blood of yours at Shiloh.

All the answers that couldn't be had  
awaited you in Tennessee. You felt  
as blamed as Beauregard, but an ex  
could ease your heartache

with white lightnin' and the stripper  
pole speakin' for half her trailer.

You hit Memphis at dawn,  
but when you make the Mississippi River,  
the mud-red beater just give out.  
The Chevy must have known you left  
behind the New Madrid Fault  
headed into a world not on maps.  
So she stalls in the passing lane,  
and all those mothers you dusted  
whiz by your right ear like mosquitoes  
blood-letting at a June reunion.  
Except for that last semi.  
The timber truck swats you flat.

# GHOST STORY

*by Greg Billingham*

In the distance yesterday's shadows are rolling up  
like the gentle shimmer of a storm's advance,  
like a woman who carries a procession of ghosts  
and a blue-gray dream she disregards  
before her body of thunder concludes.

*I dreamed a hallway emptied of its beginnings  
until it was not a hallway but a plot of time  
where the arms of ghosts, like unfinished statues,  
tangled with my arms  
and the most untimely purchase of my death...*

I wanted to say I'd miss you—your double life in my words,  
But what I said is that at times hundreds of seagulls covered the night,  
that I gave in and slept beneath blankets and moons,  
that I woke again under the nearest feet of silence,  
this time with a new word to place next to the city in its hands—  
where the air is whiter than rain.

# THE SHORT STORY

*by Michael Minassian*

Buried in a box of old journals and notebooks,  
I found a short story an ex-girlfriend had written,  
documenting a night of hot sex and long, steamy looks  
in graphic detail: every earlobe, thigh, & nipple bitten.  
“He grabbed me & kissed me hard,” the story begins,  
but my character goes quickly downhill from there.  
“He wasn’t in touch with his feelings,” she complains,  
“until I walked out the door and told him I didn’t care.”  
The story tailspins into a long tearful goodbye,  
ending with her barefoot & weeping all the way home,  
while I write poison postcards to stick in her fiancé’s eye—  
but she left behind more than a toothbrush and comb.  
Maybe I loved her too much without enough sense;  
Even then, we knew our story was written in past tense.

# LOS BORRACHOS DE DONOSTIA-SAN SEBASTIÁN

*by Brady Harrison*

He had never seen such a beautiful place. From the esplanade overlooking the curving expanse of the horseshoe-shaped beach, he stared at the gentle waves rippling against the strand and then shifted his gaze in turn to the verdant hills on either side of the opening to the Bay of Biscay. To the west, upon the promontory, rose the steeple of a church partially hidden by the deep green of trees and at the base of the hill were several houses or low-rise apartments, a crane towering above them. To the east, upon the other promontory, stood a tower or lighthouse jutting above the treetops, and still more houses and low buildings flowed down the steep incline toward a small marina with a few dozen sailboats and fishing vessels. In the gap beyond the shelter of the harbor were a number of small ships and, in the remote distance, a freighter creeping east along the horizon. Two storeys or more below, on the broad, smooth beach that ran for a hundred meters from the base of the esplanade to the water, were couples strolling at their ease, people playing with their dogs, and children splashing in the wavelets as a parent or perhaps a grandparent or nanny looked on. The mid-morning light made everything and everyone clear and bright and crisp. He spoke:

—Have you ever seen such a beautiful place?

When neither his wife nor his daughter responded, he turned and spotted them several meters away, giggling at a man posed and dressed as if he were the statue of a man leaning into a strong breeze. He titled as if into the wind, his hair and tie swept up and back, his suit-jacket open and as if blown back, his face contorted, squinting as if the torrents carried bits of sand. Working up her courage, Ellie crept toward the man and dropped a coin into the upside-down tambourine the man had placed nearby and in which rested several coins by way of example and encouragement. When the coin hit the skin, the others and the jingles bounced and clinked and chimed and Ellie laughed and ran back to her mother. Once there, she turned and imitated the man; he grinned, and then bowed at the waist, thanking her silently for the appreciation, and then resumed his arduous, frozen course into the tempest.

Alec gazed at Ellie and Claire and recalled how, on a trip to Amsterdam not long after they had moved to London, they had tried to go to the Rijksmuseum and just outside the front doors was a man all in silver, standing in a box with only his upper body showing as if he were a bust set upon an elaborate pedestal. He was remarkably still, and they stopped and watched, and then he, too, and all at once, gently leaned forward in bow, and Ellie, between them, each holding one of her tiny hands, had screamed, turned, and ran off for all she was worth, they in hot pursuit, calling her to come back. When they caught her, she could not be con-

soled and would not go near the museum:

—That silvery unreal man moved!

When they tried to explain he wasn't really a statue, just a man pretending to be a statue, she demanded:

—Who chopped him in two?

In the end, Alec had gone inside to see *The Night Watch*—and had been shocked at how immense, even monumental it was—while Claire had watched Ellie run around the grass alongside the museum. When he passed the silver man, Alec apologized and dropped a few Euro into the collection box. As before the man gently bowed without speaking and then resumed his perfect, motionless, seemingly unblinking pose. He was really good.

Looking away from the handsome young statue and his girls, Alec leaned back against the balustrade running on the edge of the wide, curving walkway and admired the city, turning his head first to the east, toward the old city and its medieval-looking buildings and streets, and then slowly the full, long curve to the west, enjoying the apartment buildings, banks, shops, and large houses on the other side of the avenue paralleling the kilometers of esplanade. He then turned his attention to the people around him—most seemed to be locals—and then out at the people sauntering on the hardpacked sand or playing in the water. He wanted to reach out to an older couple as they passed by, to grab one of their arms and give it a gentle shake:

—Do you know how lucky you are to live here?

The little city was magnificent, even perfect: modern and medieval, sheltered without being claustrophobic or too-crowded feeling. When Ellie and Claire joined him, he said:

—We should move here. It's incredible.

Claire smiled. He often wanted to move someplace new, never turned down a transfer, and when they traveled he was always speculating on what it would be like to live wherever they found themselves at the moment:

—I doubt Phantom Works will open an office here.

He frowned, but did not speak.

Ellie wanted to know:

—What's that writing? All the signs have Xs and Zs and Hs.

When Alec did not respond, Claire said:

—I think it's Basque. People only speak it around here and no place else in the world. Isn't that amazing?

Ellie thought for a bit:

—Maybe.

In the meantime, Alec had turned and was looking back at the beach. Below him and to the west was a small group of men and perhaps a couple of women standing in the shade cast by the walkway above. The esplanade was supported by arches which sheltered alcoves, and the seven or eight people were gathered partially in the recess. Compared to the people walking on the beach, or above on the walk and in the town, they appeared rather shabbily dressed, and they passed a bottle or two

from one to another, the bottles slowly making their way among the group. One of the men, thin and tall and dressed in baggy, dark clothes, spoke and the others laughed and a wild-haired and crazy-whiskered old man holding one of the bottles lifted it as if in toast to a bon mot and then raised it the rest of the way to his lips and took a long, slow draught. He roughly wiped the finish with the palm of his hand, and passed the bottle to the man who had spoken.

Claire, conscious that she had stung Alec a little, had eased to his side:  
—What are you looking at? Oh.

He turned back and faced the city once more:

—Nothing. Just the beach. You have to admit, this place is amazing.

—Sure. Amazing.

Ellie said:

—I'm hungry. Does this place have food?

## II.

When Claire and Ellie headed for the old city in the early afternoon for some ice cream and shopping, Alec set out to wander around, as he often did, and to see what he could see. He climbed the steep hill to the lighthouse, and then zigzagged his way down to the quay and looked over the battered fishing boats and various sail boats, some new and sleek, others well worn and in need of refitting and paint. He followed the curve of the esplanade all the way to the crest on the west and then went a few blocks into the city and let his feet take him where they would, stopping along the way for a coffee and some sort of fish sandwich. By evening, well after he should have gone back to the hotel and checked in with the girls, he found himself once more on the east side of the perfect harbor and, foot-weary, he rested for a time on a stool at a tapas bar, sipping beer and sampling the seafood and ubiquitous jamón serrano and ibérico. The beer and food made him drowsy, and he sat slump-shouldered and happy and gazed around him at the people in the crowded bar and those going by on the narrow, cobbled street. At last, stirring, he reluctantly pushed himself away and eased among the patrons to the street and then turned toward the harbor and the hotel. Moving at half-speed, somnolent and creaking like an old man, he shuffled among the tourists and locals and passed a wine and liquor store. Without thinking, he stopped and backtracked a few paces and stepped inside the tiny, bottle-crowded shop. Looking absently at the labels, he grabbed a likely-looking Rioja and a flacon of Oruju claiming to be, if his Spanish served him, over one hundred proof.

He hobbled from the old section and into a warm evening breeze coming off the water. Rather than turning toward the city and the hotel, he continued along the walkway, nodding now and then to other saunterers, and came at last to a set of stairs leading down to the strand. Without changing his pace, he swerved to the stairs and, his knees aching, stepped down and onto the hardpacked, level sand. Almost immediately, he came upon the drinkers. He stopped abruptly a few meters away.

No one of the group paid him any attention. Most were standing, look-

ing across the sand at the waves, the tide coming in, passing a bottle of wine one to another. A man and a woman were sitting against one of the piers supporting the arch above them, attempting, it seemed, to fix some sort of pipe, all the while half-heartedly trying to give instruction or take it from the other. In the dark beneath the esplanade he could see other shapes and thought he could hear a man moaning.

—What the fuck do you want?

Alec staggered back as if he had been struck.

Standing an arm's length away, suddenly there and towering over him, was the tall and thin man he had seen in the morning. His nose was smeared across his face as if he had been a boxer, and his shaved skull was long and narrow, his visage gaunt and leaden and covered with black and gray stubble. He waved a burning cigarette at Alec's face:

—I said, What the fuck do you want?

—Nothing. I—you're English.

The tall man rounded his eyes in mock surprise:

—And yer a fuckin Yank. Ain't we a pair? Meanwhile, piss off.

As they had been talking, some of the others had wandered over, including the electric-haired old man. He said something in Spanish to the tall man, and the tall man smiled, his cheeks protruding as his lips curled up into a sneer:

—He wants to know if you're looking for company?

Alec took another step back:

—What? No. I—

The others were laughing. A young man with sores on his lips and neck flicked a cigarette past Alec's head and said something in German. A lank-haired, dirty-faced girl at his side burst into hysterical laughter and just as abruptly stopped and stared hungrily at Alec.

The tall man nodded at the pair and then turned to Alec:

—Do you want me to tell you what Fritzie said, mate?

He shook his head and reached into the sac he was carrying and brought out the bottle of Oruju. He passed it to the thin man who, taking it in one hand, broke the seal and pulled the stopper with the other and took a long, slow draught. In the meantime, Alec had reached for the wine bottle and passed it to the young Germans who then turned away from the others, hunched over the bottle as if it were an ember they were trying to keep lit as they retreated toward the darkness beneath the arch.

When he turned back to the others, the gaunt Englishman was standing even closer, holding the bottle in Alec's face:

—Drink.

—Oh, no. I'm ok. I've just been drinking beer over—

The man took another drink and then shoved the bottle almost against Alec's lips:

—Drink.

He pulled the bottle back and took another long draught, and then grimaced and again shoved the bottle at Alec, this time tweaking his nose with the spout:

—I said, Drink.

Alec took the Oruju and drank deeply, taking an even longer pull than the thin man. He passed the bottle back, his guts clutching as the strong drink reached them.

—Now, there’s a good little Yank.

With his free hand, he reached out and shoved Alec hard on the shoulder:

—Off you go. Wouldn’t want to overstay yer welcome.

III.

As planned, they rented a car and spent a day in Bilbao and two more days following the coast back to Donostia-San Sebastián. When she was tired, Ellie would complain about the smell of the sea and how hot it was and if they had to climb one more hill or stop at one more place with a weird name—who would come up with a name like Txakolina?—her brain would explode, but for the most part the weather was mild and the breezes temperate and the steep hills and bay beautiful, and Ellie became a dedicated connoisseur of pintxos and was happy to decide which ones to order. Too quickly, they were back in their hotel overlooking the perfect harbor, and they were all weary and ready for a day of rest. In the late afternoon, Alec said he might go for a walk along the beach, did anyone want to come? When both declined, he decided he might go, anyway, though Claire thought it might be just as well if they all watched some of the World Cup as their favorite, Uruguay, was playing Ghana.

Without quite meaning to, he walked briskly and directly to the spirits vendor he had stumbled across a few days before. He bought two large, inexpensive bottles of the burning, clear Oruju and a smaller flask of pale green Izarra, and after paying tucked the flask in the cargo pocket of his walking shorts. From the old quarter, he walked to the harbor, to the stair leading down to the strand. A few of the drinkers from before were there—including the emaciated, tall Englishman and the wild-haired Spaniard sitting on the sand, sharing a cigarette—and some others that he did not recognize. He drew one of the large bottles from the sac, and held it out in front of him as he approached. The Englishman, showing yellow, irregular teeth, spoke:

—Well, if it isn’t Monsieur Monde.

For a moment, Alec paused:

—Pardon? Oh. Well, I have been working out lately.

In turn, the Englishman seemed confused, and then burst out laughing and he reached out and curled long, knobby, dirty fingers around the bottle and pulled the stopper:

—Good lord, does it hurt to be such a fuckin git?

Alec sat on the hard, warm sand and snagged the Oruju in mid-pass:

—I don’t know what you mean.

—Of course not.

—What? Mr. Earth? Mr. World? Mr. A-Man-of-the-World? Mr. Worldly? Is that it? You got the world figured out, and I don’t, because I don’t smell like piss and own a toothbrush?

The Englishman jerked the bottle from Alec’s grip and put his long arm

around Alec's shoulders, pulling him close. He leaned his face down until his lips were almost against his cheek:

—Where do you think you are, mate?

Although the man was thin, he was evidently quite strong, and Alec could feel his fingers digging into his shoulder and could smell the alcohol and cigarette and something deeper and sour on the man's breath. He flexed his shoulders against the pressure and sharp nails:

—Do you want to drink or not?

The Englishman tightened his grip until Alec's shoulders began to ache, and he felt small and had trouble catching a full breath.

—Your pretty little wife and little girl aren't here, are they?

—What?

—All by yer lonesome.

—Hardly. And what do you mean by—

He pulled Alec even closer:

—Among strangers.

Alec tried to stand:

—Keep the bottle.

The tall man released his grip:

—You're fuckin' right I'll keep the bottle, and the other one, and the one in your pocket.

The grizzle-haired Spaniard, who smelled like he had not bathed in years and who had dozens of little scabs and sores on his face above his beard and across his wind and sunburned and grimy forehead, had eased to Alec's other side and had put his arm around Alec's neck:

—We drink, ok?

Alec nodded:

—Ok.

—Good.

The old man pointed at the Englishman, and grinned:

—'Ee's a fuckeen ass'ole.

The old man drank from the bottle and shoved it into Alec's hands and when Alec went to drink, he nodded gleefully and pushed up on the bottom of the bottle. Alec gagged, and the alcohol ran down his cheeks and chin and onto his shirt and shorts.

For hours, they sat and drank from the large bottles, others by times coming to join them, each, in turn, stepping into dark corners to piss. Alec, who rarely smoked, steadily puffed on bummed cigarettes, his throat and lungs burning, his head throbbing, and when he tried to walk into the darkness to relieve himself, he often staggered into a pier or one or more of the others sharing bottles. As the sun set, he lurched across the beach, almost falling several times, and walked into the shallow, cool water, his trekking shoes soaking through, until the water was above his ankles. He stood, swaying, staring at the darkening ocean in the distance, trying to smoke a cigarette that he had dropped in the water and then picked up and put back between his lips, now and then looking up at the stars as they appeared as a crazily swinging script of blue.

When he awoke, his head pounded so badly that he turned a little to

his side and vomited, the side of his face falling into the voluminous, stinking puddle he had just made. He lay for a longtime, his head throbbing, course after course of vomit erupting and spilling out the side of his mouth and onto the sand and debris around him, onto his neck and shoulder and chest. With each heave, his ribs hurt incredibly, and he began to sob with each successive convulsion. At last, after the vomiting had subsided for a time, he forced himself onto one elbow and looked down as best he could at his torso.

He had been stripped of everything save his boxers. His shirt and shorts and shoes were gone, and even in the half-light beneath the esplanade he could see and feel that his stomach, ribs, and upper arms were covered in abrasions and bruises as if he had been beaten and kicked. He gingerly put one hand to his face—other than the hangover, his face and head seemed to be intact and mostly unscathed. In a panic, he reached behind him, but was unhurt. Gasping in pain at the torsion the reach had caused, he lay back in the sand and gravel and closed his eyes against the hammering in his skull.

#### IV.

Several weeks after Claire had left with Ellie—back to their apartment in Toulouse, threatening to fly home to Seattle if he did not show within a few days, as soon as he was well enough to travel—his skull pounding, his tongue as if stuck to the roof of his mouth, his guts a churning nest of bilious snakes, one of the women from the front desk had knocked on the door, apologizing for the disturbance but explaining softly that his card, for some reason, regrettably, was not working and would he be so kind as to settle the bill, as soon as possible, in some other manner? Gathering himself as well as he could, he dressed and stumbled from the hotel to the bank around the corner. When he found that neither his credit nor his ATM cards worked, he waited for a teller and managed, for a modest surcharge, to get an advance from his DBS account, enough to cover the previous week at the hotel and to float him for a few weeks, or more, if he found a cheap place to stay. He returned to the hotel facing the harbor, packed, paid his bill, and wandered deeper into the city, following the directions provided by the thoughtful concierge to a modest, family-run pension near the old quarter.

That evening, at last feeling well enough to eat a little, he left his tiny room in the pension, and zig-zagged through the narrow, illogical streets until he found the tapas bar he had been in almost two months previous. The taberna was almost empty, and he took a table at the back, as far away from the street and the few patrons as he could. He ordered a large beer and asked for three or four plates of the waiter's choosing. His stomach still tender and prone to sudden, painful lurches, he sipped the beer when it arrived, pushing the small dishes to the far edge of the table. The beer, at least, helped, and he hoped that his guts would settle enough for him to manage a few swallows of food.

Since his night on the beach, he had avoided going anywhere near the harbor, and he likewise tried to avoid getting into conversations with

anyone, either locals or tourists, who might want to catch a stranger's eye for a bit of news of the outside world or the pleasantries of where-are-you-from and what's-around-that-you-would-recommend?

That day, stinking and filthy and in considerable pain, when he had finally felt able to stand, he had forced himself, step by painful, gasping, fiery step, to totter from the alcove beneath the walk and out into the brutal, sun-searing day. There were the usual numbers strolling on the strand or playing in the water or leaning over the balustrade above, but he had had no choice and lurched to the bottom of the stairs, the sun seeming to rip his eyeballs from his head. Slowly, and in fear of falling backwards and tumbling down the concrete steps, he climbed his way to esplanade, the hot, smooth surface burning the bottoms of his feet. He had looked both ways and then shuffled forward, across the walk and onto a slight rise covered in grass and a small flower garden. Reaching the far side of the rise, his feet muddy from the flowerbed, he stood on the sidewalk running along the four-lane drive paralleling the long, gentle curve of the harbor, the traffic heavy and zooming in either direction, horns blaring in mocking salute. When a small gap opened in the nearest lane, he stepped out, forcing the drivers in the other lanes to slow and stop and let him pass. Once across, it was only a few meters to the front of the hotel, and the doorman helped him inside and called for security to take him to his room.

Claire, sleepless and sick with worry, soon turned grim and silent, but had helped him in the shower and then had called the front desk to call a cab to take them to the nearest hospital. Ellie had cried and cried and wanted to know what had happened to her daddy and had the police arrested the awful men who had hurt him? After the hospital, Claire had moved herself and Ellie to another room down the hall, and a week later had flown back to the Midi-Pyrenees. For all he knew, they were probably back in the States by now.

Still sipping at his beer and nibbling at the least exotic-looking of the tapas, a slice of cold, spiced beef on bread, he became conscious of a tall man weaving through the patrons at the front of the bar. Suddenly alarmed, he snapped his head in the direction of the moving figure: the man was tall, but modestly dressed in khaki slacks, a light blue oxford collar shirt and dark blue sport coat. His hair was slicked back, and he was clean-shaven and looked like a businessman on holiday in Spain. Even his teeth, as he smiled, seemed straighter and whiter, though his nose still twisted one way and then the other between his lean, well-tanned cheeks.

Alec exclaimed:

—It's you!

—Well, if it isn't Monsieur Monde. You just never know who you'll run into.

His accent was plummier, less harsh and coarse. He pulled up a chair at the small table, signaled the waiter for two large beers, and turned to Alec:

—On the mend, are we?

When the waiter arrived, the tall man reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and brought out a well-laden billfold and set out enough to cover the beers and Oruju he then ordered.

—What the hell? Who are you?

—Geoff.

He offered his long, thin hand across the table.

—No? Won't shake hands with an old friend?

—Where did you get that money? Those clothes?

The waiter arrived with bucket glasses of the strong liquor, and Geoff raised one of them in toast:

—To my old friend, Alec.

He downed it in one gulp, and signaled for two more.

—Drink up. I have a plane to catch.

—A plane?

—It's time for me to be getting back to work—and please don't say, Work? And, my wife expects me back—and please don't say, Wife?

Alec sipped at his beer and then set it down and picked up one of the Oruju:

—No kids?

—No.

—You work in—

—London, of course.

—And, you're on—

—Holiday. Every year. I find the air and the light quite pleasing.

The tall man finished his second drink, stood, and pushed in his chair:

—If I see you again, I'll make it count. You understand.

# LANGUAGE ARTS

*by Michael Jurkovic*

Back in '73  
When Steinbrenner bought the Yanks,  
I was toying with words  
On Sixty-Fourth and Third.  
Why was a rock a rock  
And not my favorite Renoir,  
Rothschild, or Rousseau?  
Where'd they get tampon from?  
And tintinnubaltion?  
Which would you use  
For ringing in the ears?  
The endless game of language  
gives no clue, only rebuttal.  
Is infinity odd or even?  
Is it proven ants don't burp?  
Back in '73  
When the Mets went down in seven,  
I was still somewhat inquisitive.  
Dog-earring poems, eating fiction.  
But that was then.  
Now I pronounce  
The prayer of each species  
loudly like a name.

# INANIMATE ORCHESTRA

*by C. Dylan Bassett*

Some kind of terror in the sugar bowl,  
or rather some ache, a vague and familiar pinch  
on the elbow knobs. The cracked glass, the sink,  
the glint of light through the window:  
everything almost sings. A throb of bells  
from the ice box, the milk purling a former song.  
Is it any wonder that after loss is order?  
Or that the faucet water flows to somewhere other  
than the ocean? And if I dissect  
the refrigerator, will I find that, like the body,  
all objects are loaded with a concourse  
of plum-dark marks and skin like a curtain slung  
across its skeleton? The trashcan collects  
trash: can to can, and each bottle is a loud coin  
rattling in the indulger's cup:  
Empty and full of everything.

# AUTUMNAL MOURNING

*by Robert Fillman*

Under salmon sun the geese wing south.  
Chimneys mist. The day burns itself out.  
A hollowed root, English yew unearthed,  
rests on the edge of the porch between my legs,  
a boneyard for matches and ashes, a place to rest  
a pipe when pouring another glass of port.

*When I came into my own I promised myself  
I'd never swig the final sip of drink  
or eat the last morsel on my plate  
because I didn't want to ever see  
an empty dish staring me in the face.*

I thought of this when you left me here to fetch  
a pouch of tobacco. I wish you hadn't left  
because now I notice the tepid contents  
of my tumbler, tawny so that what remains  
is certain backwater and floating remnants of supper.  
There's not a drop of port to fill my glass.  
And I hate to think how long I've rocked alone  
on this empty porch, listening to the tick  
of the kitchen clock and staring into dusk.

# RAIN

*by Tanisha Shannon*

She goes in the bathroom  
And turns out the lights  
Then lifts up her skirt  
And can still see it clearly in the moonlight  
From the cracked window above her.

*I can't do this anymore.*  
Trailing her fingers over  
Her scars in the faint light

She remembers why she made each cut.  
Tired of her parents labeling her as emotionally  
Challenged, or her stepfather telling her he loves  
Her then puts his fingers to silence her lips,  
Whispering, *just one last time.*

She ached to do it again.  
A broken blade from a razor  
And her mother's "good" towel.  
The rain fell easily from the window that night.

# SERIAL MUSE

*by Andrea Scarpino*

*Although she took up painting, [Ruth Kligman] knew that her ultimate place in the art-history books would be as the lover—or, preferably, the muse—of painters more gifted than she. —New York Times*

Ruth, you were more than  
that Oldsmobile, Zowie,  
than footnotes, asterisk,  
more than a way to access  
*him*, than rivalries  
engaged in your bed.  
All those years you lived  
beyond that night, and still,  
*the girl in the car*.  
But Ruth, I've seen your skies,  
canvas stapled to the floor,  
color creeping through  
sunset, erupting, breaking it.  
More than lover, tragedy,  
muse. More—and less—  
the way a life breaks through  
darkness, stands bare  
in front of it. The way  
light shines from behind.

# THE WHOLE WORLD

*by Tyler Bigney*

There is a slit in the sky,  
cut with a dull knife,  
a little sunshine  
pouring,  
melting across the front yard.

The neighbour's dog barking.  
Some birds.  
A few maple trees standing still.

My father in the front yard with a rifle.

My mother behind me,  
tippy toed staring out the kitchen window  
holding our breath,  
shampoo and her fingers  
stuck in my hair.  
A little vibration  
buried in the dark part  
of our throats.

Everything will be okay.  
One day you will  
wake up  
and yellow sun  
will wash over you  
like a warm bath  
spilling across  
your chest  
ankles  
pelvis  
abdomen.

Every ugly thought  
will return  
as tiny pieces  
of information you can't  
put together  
and make sense of enough  
to make you cry  
or make you want  
to lie in bed all day

under thin sheets  
listening to far away radio stations.  
And it won't make you want  
to change the world,  
or give money to charity,  
or go for long drives  
that cross province lines,  
or lodge a gun  
under your chin  
in the front yard  
with the whole world  
watching you  
pull the trigger.

# THE MOUTH OF SANTA ELENA CANYON

*by Cameron Aveson*

Casting about in the muted green  
of the Rio Grande, the slow current  
swirls as if something's about to surface

a box turtle or a snake, maybe  
nothing but the deep pulse of this river  
I float down in a borrowed canoe.

My eyes feed on shadows drifting  
below. In a narrow side canyon, puddled  
remnants of San Carlos Creek hold a gar

caught between silt, stagnant water  
and stone cliffs, almost motionless,  
like the old woman I found—her body

water-logged, hypnotic and waving,  
a fish I didn't want to catch. My brother  
pulled her out: a body the color of water,

the color of sky or flesh without air.  
I remember the deep, slow breaths  
he pushed into her mouth; her lungs,

how they leaked it back out into a puddle  
of unused oxygen, lying on her still chest,  
the pool sweeper doing its mindless laps,

while neighbors slowly filled the back yard.

# WATCHING DAYTIME TELEVISION WITH MY MOM

*by Cameron Aveson*

You sit with your teeth pulled out, because it hurts to have them in, an old casino ashtray smoldering next to a stack of half-finished crossword puzzles as you watch *All My Children* and *The Price is Right* in a fog. Muted sun caresses the empty window pane, a half-starved cat slinking its way into the living room. You chew through the soft parts of the day, full of merlot, smoke collapsing to the linoleum like your daughter, dead now. You talk of parakeets, how you can't seem to keep them alive, how you hate to see their blue and green bodies lying at the bottom of the cage, how you've stopped naming them because it's too painful but you can't stop buying them.

# CERVICAL STENOSIS

*by Bryn Homuth*

I remember when dad cried out  
from the bathroom, when mom slid open  
the wooden door to find him crouching,  
head bent, both hands in a firm clamp  
across his neck, his torso and legs  
still damp. He had raked the towel through  
his hair first, then reached behind his head  
to pat the back, careful – as touching  
warmed cast iron through a thin oven mitt.  
It was a stinger, as he'd called it before,  
shooting pain stemming from the base  
of the skull, down the spine, deep tissue  
beneath the skin that he'd knead  
as a baker would – stretching, pulling together,  
trying to massage muscle into a shape  
without pain, a shape he wanted to know.  
And he tried – with that ointment,  
its stinging peppermint smell, thick white worms  
squeezed on just below the scalp, rubbed down  
into the skin. And the chemical burn it left,  
a dark, volcanic red, like a self stamped birthmark,  
a reason to grow long graying hair as a natural cloak  
to hide what seemed tight, wrinkled,  
like spilled on paper drying in the light  
of a desk lamp. I could see it before I stepped  
behind the door frame, listening to muffled cries  
quieting in his chest the way a cough does.  
Sometimes he'd try a heating bag, warm it  
in the microwave, wrap it tight, will the body  
to relax and uncoil. But it never would,  
and I watched my mother hold him that day,  
resting her head on the corner of his shoulder  
to avoid that patch, that pain center, and underneath –  
the ganglion – the knotted bundle of nerves  
interwoven like a ball of the rubber bands  
he kept in his office. She reached around his chest  
to link her hands on the other side, two rocking  
as one, while she tried to untangle his pain.

# THE GIRL IN THE RED COAT

*by Victoria Kellie*

I dream of a girl in a dirty red coat  
Breathing hungrily the dusty air as I sleep—  
Her fingers on the door.

She got tired of being dead  
Crawled out of her plot in her burial dress.  
I dream of a girl in a dirty red coat.

Her eyes are gray like star-sucked skies.  
She never sleeps, she never weeps—  
Her fingers on the door.

Sometimes, I have to tell her softly,  
*The dead should stay dead.*  
I dream of a girl in a dirty red coat.

She looks through me, her frozen form  
Starving where death had carved it slim.  
Her fingers on the door.

She comes every night. I can't get used to her  
Rank breath and empty stare.  
I dream of a girl in a dirty red coat.  
Her fingers on the door.

# SIGHT

*by Victoria Kellie*

When I was nine, I learned my neighbor's daughter was blind.  
I sat with her other daughters on the porch eating popsicles.  
A fever, they said, had taken her eyes.  
I'd never thought about it, but it made sense somehow  
Even though she didn't run into walls or burn her hands on the stove.  
She hunched, resigned, when she was caught in our horseplay  
And knocked into walls, catching and clinging to the banister above the stairs.  
Her irises always shook, whether she stared in the direction of the television  
Or stood limply in the yard, greasy haired,  
On the occasions she was allowed outside.  
I thought her eyes were constantly frustrated  
Spasming in all that darkness.

I thought being blind was like being half dead.  
I tried to imagine: a black sky, black sheets she slept in,  
The warm box of the house, no different from the black outside,  
Dark microwavable food heavy in her mouth,  
The absence of a reflection in the mirror,  
A colorless smooth surface  
Her dirty nails skid across in search of something.

She lived in the basement and talked aloud to herself,  
Gripping familiar items in her soft anxious hands  
To keep herself company,  
And when I played hide and seek with her sisters,  
I would tiptoe down the stairs  
Into the carpeted mouth of her brown cave,  
And found the confined smell of candy, urine and old sweat.

She stood in the hallway swiveling on the spot, looking  
Somehow, with her brown eyes  
At my frozen figure, tickling the creaks in the floor.  
I wanted to know how much she knew.  
I started saving pennies, paperclips, memorizing  
The static of her small television,  
Softly tossing projectiles onto the screen to make noise.  
When I heard the continual thumps of bone against plaster  
The sound of the imagined black box  
Melting into the hunched shadows of the people who came at night.

Years later someone mentioned her summer death  
Con conversationally, as an afterthought to August.

How much time did I spend in that house,  
Looking so far into her blindness I associated with death  
Convinced of its emptiness?

I thought of her dark, heavy figure, lifeless,  
Carried awkwardly up through the basement  
Into the light. I pictured it

In vibrant tones but also imagined a different ending:  
One in which I had lost my own way to sudden darkness,  
Had fallen down those stairs to rest crumpled and panting  
On the dirty landing, small and vulnerable as the mirror  
Reflecting only what it sees. Sick with the grief  
Of sight and not able to withstand the light on in myself.

# WITH LINES FROM NAZIM HIKMET

*by Andrea Scarpino*

The poplar with its silver leaves as if a welcome light: come here, follow me. You did as you were told, took a flower from his casket's face. How long, this Earth? *A star among stars / and one of the smallest.* How long this silver light? Once there was a girl, a father, basil plants, feeding of chickadees, mourning doves. Even opossum. Even deer. Then there was a grave, sunflower cut, pressed hard to metal, mahogany. Turned from light. *This earth will grow cold,* Hikmet said. *Will roll along / in pitch-black space.* Once there was a father, daughter, ground for silver leaves, air for sparrow flight. Flowers opened recklessly. Then there was a grave.

# CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

**Catherine Auger** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

**Catherine Austin Alexander**, Pushcart Prize nominee, has published stories in 25 literary journals, including *North Atlantic Review*, *Rosebud* (two successive issues), *Bryant Literary Review*, and won “Jurors’ Choice” in *Spindrift*. National Public Radio has aired her work. Jorja Fox, (Sara Sidle in TV’s CSI) performed her story in a Word Theatre production. Currently teaching in the Seattle Area, she lives in Edmonds, Washington.

**Rebecca Andem** earned an MFA through the Stonecoast program at the University of Southern Maine. Currently, she lives in St. Petersburg, Russia, where she teaches at a private school. Her publications include two novels and several short stories. For more information, visit her website at [www.turtleflyink.com](http://www.turtleflyink.com).

**Jonathan Barrett** lives in Kansas City with his wife and three sons. His poetry has previously appeared in *The Literary Review*, *North American Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Phoebe*, and *Subtropics* among others. He is also the co-editor of the literary journal, *Cant*.

**C. Dylan Bassett** is a student studying poetry from Las Vegas, Nevada. His poetry has been featured or is forthcoming in *Tar River Poetry*, *Salamander*, *The Christian Century*, *SLAB*, *The Portland Review* and elsewhere. He is a contributing editor and reviewer for *Inscape*.

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**Leonard J. Cirino** (1943) is the author of nineteen chapbooks and seventeen full-length collections of poetry since 1987 from numerous small presses. He lives in Springfield, Oregon, where he is retired and works full-time as a poet. His collection, *Triple Header* is due from Cervena

Barva Press in 2012. His collection, *Homeland, Exile, Longing & Freedom* was published by AA Press in 2011. *The Instrument of Others*, will also be available in early 2012 from The Lummo Press. He can be reached at cirino7715@comcast.net.

**Justin Crawford** is finishing up his M.F.A. degree in fiction from West Virginia University, and he's a native West Virginian. His story "Converge" is forthcoming from the online magazine *Inwood Indiana*.

**Cristina Crocker Escribano** is a teacher and writer in the rainforest of Honduras who is working on a bilingual collection of poetry and fiction, *God and Other Stories*. The title piece, "God," is featured in *Lake Effect*. She is greatly inspired by her mother and her Latina heritage.

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**Robert Fillman** lives in Allentown, Pennsylvania with his wife, Melissa, and his daughter, Emma. He teaches English literature and composition at Moravian College and Northampton Community College. His poetry has most recently been published in *The Aureorean*, *Plain Spoke*, *The Laconic*, *The Chaffin Journal*, and it is forthcoming in *The Westward Quarterly*.

**Lynsie Dunn** is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

**Brady Harrison** is the author of *Agent of Empire* and editor of *All Our Stories Are Here*. He has published stories, essays, and articles in books and journals in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, France, and Australia.

**Ahren Hertel** was born in Fort Collins, Colorado in 1979. His father's job as a geologist moved the family around for most of Ahren's childhood, including nine years spent in South America. Ahren received his BFA in Illustration from the Savannah College of Art and Design in 2002. After graduating, he moved to Reno, Nevada with two friends to open an art gallery. He later received his Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Nevada, Reno where he now teaches painting and drawing as an adjunct professor.

**Paul Hostovsky's** latest book of poems is *A Little in Love a Lot* (2011, Main Street Rag). His poems have won a Pushcart Prize and been featured on *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, *The Writer's Almanac*, and *Best of the Net 2008* and *2009*.

**Bryn Homuth** is a senior writing major at Concordia College in Moorhead, MN. He is the current Editor in Chief for Concordia's literary journal, *AfterWork*, and is a member of both The Concordia Band and men's varsity tennis team. Next year, he will be attending graduate school for creative writing.

**B.T. Joy** is a Scottish poet, haikai and haiga artist who received his honours degree in Creative Writing and Film Studies in 2009. He has written two volumes of haiku and his writing and art has appeared in journals in the USA, Australia, Japan, Ireland and Britain.

**Mike Jurkovic:** *Purgatory Road* (Pudding House Press, 2010); 2009 finalist Bright Hill Press full book competition, *Purgatory Road*. Over four hundred publishing credits. Anthologies: *WaterWrites & Riverine* (Codhill Pres, 2009, 2007). CD reviews appear in *Elmore Magazine*, *Folk & Acoustic Music Exchange*, *Van Wyck Gazette*. He loves Emily most of all.

**Victoria Kellie** wants you to know about the time in the summer of 2008 when, while walking through a consignment store, she was stopped by a gray-haired stranger. He handed her two red dice which he told her she had dropped. Never having seen them before, but not wanting to waste a valuable opportunity, she stuck them in her coat pocket and has been looking for more strange gifts ever since.

**Jane Rosenberg LaForge** lives in New York with her husband and daughter. She is the author of two chapbooks of poetry, *After Voices*, from Burning River of Cleveland; and *Half-Life*, from Big Table Publishing Co. of Boston. More poetry is forthcoming in *THRUSH*, *Curbside Splendor*, *Petrichor Machine* and *Muscle and Blood*.

**Dave Malone** hails from the Ozarks where he writes poetry and crime fiction. Several literary journals have given his work a home, including *The Meadow*, *Elder Mountain*, *Mid Rivers Review*, and *San Pedro River Review*. He publishes a monthly e-newsletter, *If I Had a Nickel*, about his writing adventures and the publishing world. Online: *davemalone.net*

**Oakley C. Merideth** is a New Mexican and a graduate of The University of New Mexico with degrees in psychology and English with a focus on creative writing. Oakley currently teaches English as a second language in Daegu, South Korea and hopes to attend graduate school this autumn.

**Michael Minassian's** poems have appeared in such journals as *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *Poet Lore*, and *Visions International*. He is also the writer/producer of the pod cast series *Eye On Literature*. A chapbook of his poems entitled: *The Arboriculturist* was published in 2010 by Amsterdam Press.

**Lindsey Neely** is a recent graduate of Georgia College & State University. She just moved to Washington, D.C. for an internship with a research group that studies development and education in adolescents. She plans to go back to school in the next two years to earn an M.F.A.

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**Sean Prentiss** is the editor of a forthcoming anthology on the craft of creative nonfiction, *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre*. He also will be Western State College's Center for Environmental Studies Environmental Writer-in-Residence for 2012. He writes from a desk that either overlooks Grand Rapids, Michigan's Fulton Avenue or Colorado's Continental Divide. He can be reached at seanprentiss@gmail.com.

**Suzanne Roberts** is an award-winning writer and photographer. Her books include *Almost Somewhere: Twenty-Eight Days on the John Muir Trail* (University of Nebraska Press, 2012) and *Three Hours to Burn a Body: Poems on Travel* (2011). Her photographs have been featured in National Geographic's Traveler website and National Geographic's Intelligent Traveler site. She currently lives in South Lake Tahoe, California. For more information, please visit her website at [www.suzanneroberts.org](http://www.suzanneroberts.org).

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**Zebuel Christopher Stecker** was born and raised in Nevada. Husband, son, grandson, father to Truckee-Dog, and aspiring anthropologist. He hopes you enjoy the poems.

**David Allen Sullivan** teaches English and Film at Cabrillo Community College in Santa Cruz, California, where he edits the *Porter Gulch Literary Review* with his students, and serves on the *Veterans Task Force Committee*. Poems from his first book, *Strong-Armed Angels*, were read on The Writer's Almanac by Garrison Keillor. *Every Seed of the Pomegranate*, a multi-voiced book from which this poem comes, will be published this summer.

**Adam Tavel** received the 2010 Robert Frost Award, and his first poetry collection, *The Fawn Abyss*, is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry in 2014. His latest poems appear or will soon appear in *Indiana Review*, *Phoebe*, *South Dakota Review*, *Zone 3*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *The Minnesota Review*, and *The Cincinnati Review*, among others. Tavel is the poetry editor for *Conte* and an associate professor of English at Wor-Wic Community College on Maryland's Eastern Shore, where he directs the Echoes & Visions Reading Series.

**Paul Kareem Tayyar**'s most recent book of poems is *Follow the Sun* (Aortic Books). Previous collections include *Scenes From a Good Life* (Tebot Bach) and *Postmark Atlantis* (Level 4 Press).

**Elizabeth Harmon Threatt** is currently a student at the University of Cincinnati where she is studying for her PhD in English and Creative Writing with an emphasis in poetry. Her poems have appeared in journals such as *The Rectangle*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *The Aureorean*, *Poet Lore*, *Big Muddy*, *Rattle*, *Mississippi Review*, and others.

**Scott Tucker** was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He has a journalism degree from Northwestern University and a law degree from the University of Michigan. His short stories have appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Blood Orange Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Mayday* (upcoming), *Narrative Magazine*, *Pif*, *Best of Pif* (upcoming), *Portland Review*, and *Prick of the Spindle*. He lives in Seattle with his wife and son.

**Peter Waldor** is the author of *Door to a Noisy Room* (Alice James, 2008) which was a finalist for the 2009 National Jewish Book Award. His book, *At the Last Split Second* is due out in December of 2012 from Settlement House. His work has appeared in many journals, including *the American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *the Iowa Review*, *the Colorado Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily* and *Mothering Magazine*. Waldor works in the insurance business and lives in northern New Jersey.

**Maya Jewell Zeller's** book, *Rust Fish*, is available from Lost Horse Press, and individual poems appear in recent issues of *Rattle*, *Conversations Across Borders*, *The Emerson Review*, *Sycamore Review*, and elsewhere. Maya lives in Spokane and teaches English at Gonzaga University. You can read more about Maya and her work at <http://mayajewellzeller.wordpress.com>.

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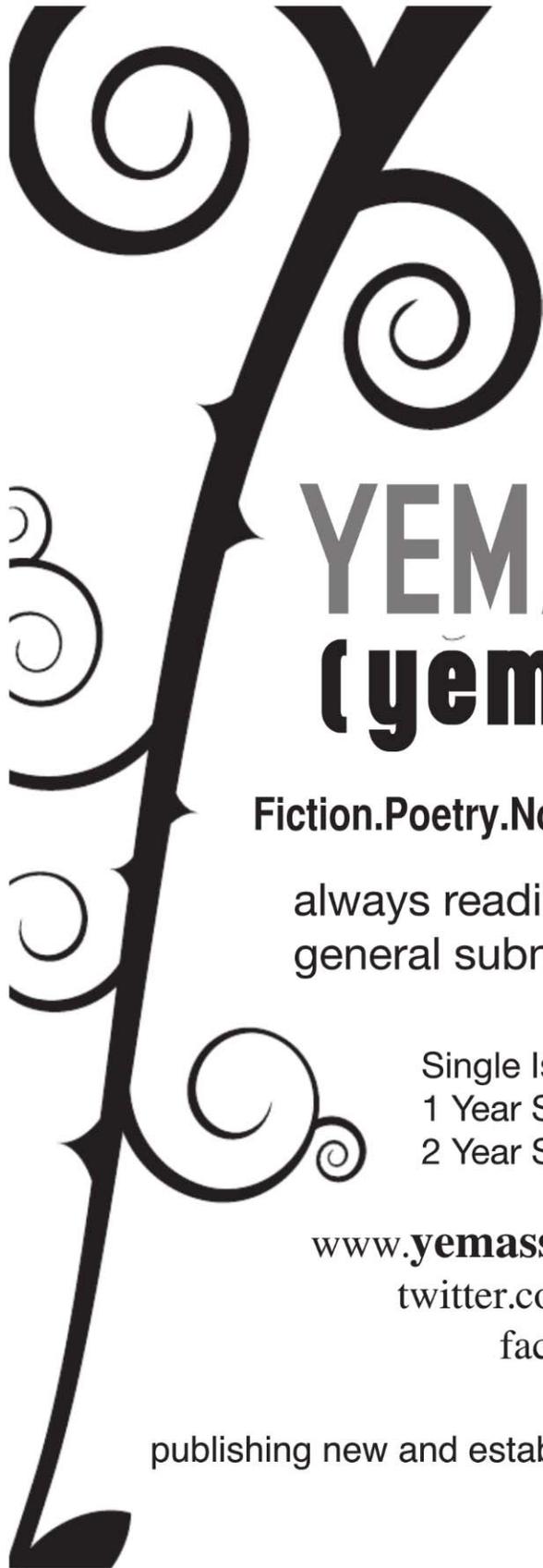
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