featuring poetry by Sherman Alexie

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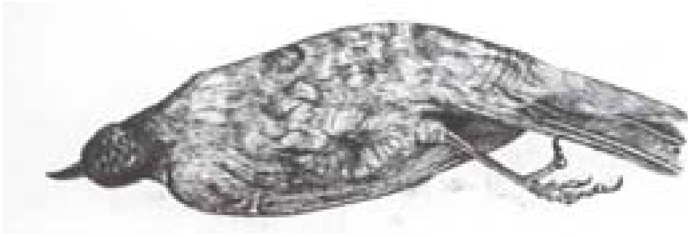

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Sherman Alexie

Fire as Verb and Noun

> *Working from a carefully developed understanding of his place in an oppressed culture, [Alexie] focuses on the need to tear down obstacles before nature tears them down. Fire is therefore a central metaphor: a sister and brother-in-law killed, a burnt hand, cars aflame.*
> —Publisher's Weekly
>
> *Sherman, I'm so sorry your sister was killed by a metaphor.*
> —Donna Brook

1.
Fire, then
turn the page and

2.
more fire.

3.
I know only a little about it:

fire.

There is something about the color
of the flames that can reveal
what chemicals fuel the fire.

I remember that simple fact.

What color are the flames that rise
off a burning body?

What color were the flames that rose
off my sister's and brother-in-law's bodies?

If they were the same color
does that mean they loved each other?

If they were different
does that mean they were soon to be divorced?

Maybe I should strike a match
to my skin and use the light
to search for the perfect woman
and hold her tightly
against my flames until

4.
she collapses into ash.

5.
If I were, let's say, to come across a burning house
on the way back home from the supermarket

could I change the color of the flames
if I emptied the contents of my shopping bags

onto the blaze? Would the firemen run from hydrant
to hydrant and dodge Golden Delicious apples

while the station house Dalmation licked
the puddle of Pepsi as the old white man

cursed me for wasting the food
which could feed all of the Third World?

So many questions
and then a Holocaust here, a Holocaust there

6.
a Holocaust everywhere.

7.
Let's say I am a Jew.
I am a Jew
who lost a sister and brother-in-law
in the ovens
during World War II. No, let's say

I am an American
Indian who had heated bayonets
held against his hands
until they blistered
and blossomed open. No, let's say

this all happened to me
because I can't tell the difference
between the size of a metaphor
and the temperature
of the flame. No, let's say

I only believe in two metaphors:
God and God
as the Burning Bush
which uses our questions
like kindling.

8.
On the application for a driver's license, they will ask you this: What do you do, as you are driving down the freeway toward a car aflame with the passenger still trapped inside, when a flicker of insecurity becomes a sudden roar inside you and convinces you there is somebody driving behind you who is much more deserving of saving a life?

9.
a. You drive past the burning car to the next exit, pull into the closest parking lot, and weep violently.

b. You stop the car, open your door, roll to the pavement, and wave your arms wildly, as if you were a small bird too small for flight.

c. You call your mother on your cellular phone and blame her for everything that's gone wrong in your life.

d. You search the radio stations for news of the next solar eclipse.

10.
e. None of the above.

11.
What do you do
when your sister burns
like a bad firework?

She sparks
and sputters
smokes uselessly

and leaves
only a shell
a husk

and the smell
and the smell
and the smell and

12.
it smells exactly like what it is.

13.
There is a grave on the Spokane Indian Reservation
where my sister is buried. I can take you there.

Elegies

This is a poem for people who died in stupid ways.
This is a poem for Napoleon's great-grandson who snapped his neck when his ridiculously long scarf caught in the rear wheels of the convertible he was driving.
This is a poem for General George Armstrong Custer.
This is a poem for all the Japanese gourmets who eat one of those poisonous blowfish, which are considered a great delicacy, but are lethal in even the smallest portions unless prepared expertly by a chef who has trained for years. A blowfish steak will make your lips numb, blur your vision, and ring your ears, when it is prepared correctly. A poorly prepared blowfish will stop your heart just like that. The dead, with their stuffed, stopped hearts, are buried with expressions of deep satisfaction.
This is a poem for all those who died with expressions of deep satisfaction.
This is a poem for the skydivers who pulled the cord and heard the deafening silence of a chute that would not open, then felt the roar of the secondary chute as it fluttered uselessly above them.
This is a poem for all of the teenagers who tried to beat the train at the crossing and failed.
This is a poem for all of the folksingers who wrote songs about teens who have failed to beat the train at the crossing.
This is a poem for the Brink's armored-car guard who was crushed to death by $50,000 worth of quarters. He was guarding a load of twenty-five-pound coin boxes in the back of a truck when the driver braked suddenly to avoid a car that had swerved in front of him. When the driver pulled over to check on his partner, he found him completely covered by coins.
This is a poem for all the hunger strikers of the world. When they are close to death, I forget why they were striking. I just want to give them a glass of water and a slice of bread. After they are gone, I feel motion sickness.
This is a poem for the men and women who ate themselves to death with meals of such enormity (whole chickens, ten pounds of eggs, gallons of milk, twenty-seven apple pies) that their hearts simply collapsed.
This is a poem for the cooks who prepared those enormous meals and feel no guilt.
This is a poem for the cooks who prepared those enormous meals and feel guilty.
This is a poem for smokers.
This is a poem for the poet who camped on Mount St. Helen's just days before the mountain erupted, despite repeated warnings from experts and psychics alike.

This is a poem for anybody who camps on active volcanoes. I am the kind of man who makes rules for himself. Hence, I forbid myself to become the kind of man who camps on active volcanoes. Please feel free to adopt this rule for yourself.

This is a poem for the people who jump off the Golden Gate Bridge and change their minds halfway down.

This is a poem for everybody who jumps off the Golden Gate Bridge because they all change their minds halfway down. I have faith that nobody wants to die for any time period longer than the few seconds it actually takes to commit suicide.

This is a poem for the music student who died after being caught in a flash fire while trying to relieve a bad case of hemorrhoids with gasoline. Don't ask me about the details.

This is a poem for John Edward Blue, who was being baptized on August 13, 1984, when he and the minister performing the baptism slipped and fell backward into deep water. The minister survived, but Blue drowned.

This is a poem for the minister who survived. He sits alone now and prays quietly for clarity and forgiveness.

This is a poem for me. No. This is a poem for the me I used to be, the me who once drove drunk on purpose, knowing I was too drunk to drive well, quite sure I might die in a crash. I was the me who changed his mind halfway through the ride, stopped the car in the middle of the road, and walked home. The car was still running, engine idling, when the tow truck arrived a few hours later.

This is a poem for the me who kept driving and crashed through a guardrail into the river, or smashed head-on into a car full of teenagers returning from a high school basketball game, or rolled over twenty-two times, down the highway, car coming to a rest on its wheels, roof collapsed on my head.

This is a poem for my oldest brother, who is still alive and living with our parents on the reservation, but who I worry about when my telephone rings in Seattle. Every so often, I have to catch my breath before I can pick up the receiver.

This is a poem for my oldest sister and her husband, who died in a trailer fire in Montana when a curtain drifted on wind and touched a hot plate left burning. My sister and her husband were passed out in the back bedroom, too drunk to wake, even when the flames and smoke danced through their bedroom.

This is a poem for my father, who has a sore on his foot that will never heal. He salts his food with vengeance, like he was taking revenge on everybody who had ever done him wrong.

This is a poem for my tribe, who continue to live in the shadow of the abandoned uranium mine on our reservation, where the night sky glows in a way that would have invoked songs and stories a few generations earlier, but now simply allows us to see better as we drive down the highway toward a different kind of moon.

Tourists

1. *James Dean*

walks everywhere now. He's afraid of fast cars
and has walked this far, arriving
suddenly on the reservation, in search
of the Indian woman of his dreams.
He wants an Indian woman who could pass
for Natalie Wood. He wants an Indian woman
who looks like the Natalie Wood
who was kidnapped by Indians
in John Ford's classic movie, "The Searchers."
James Dean wants to rescue somebody beautiful.
He still wears that red jacket,
you know the one. It's the color of a powwow fire.
James Dean has never seen
a powwow, but he joins right in, dancing
like a crazy man, like a profane clown.
James Dean cannot contain himself.
He dances in the wrong direction. He tears
at his hair. He sings in wild syllables
and does not care. The Indian dancers stop
and stare like James Dean was lightning
or thunder, like he was bad weather.
But he keeps dancing, bumps into a man
and knocks loose an eagle feather.
The feather falls, drums stop.
This is the kind of silence
that frightens white men. James Dean
looks down at the feather
and knows that something has gone wrong.
He looks into the faces of the Indians.
He wants them to finish the song.

2. *Janis Joplin*

sits by the jukebox in the Powwow Tavern,
talking with a few drunk Indians
about redemption. She promises each of them
she can punch in the numbers
for the song that will save their lives.
All she needs is a few quarters, a beer,
and their own true stories. The Indians

are as traditional as drunk Indians can be
and don't believe in autobiography,
so they lie to Janis Joplin about their lives.
One Indian is an astronaut, another killed JFK,
while the third played first base
for the New York Yankees. Janis Joplin knows
the Indians are lying. She's a smart woman
but she listens anyway, plays them each a song,
and sings along off key.

3. *Marilyn Monroe*

drives herself to the reservation. Tired and cold,
she asks the Indian women for help.
Marilyn cannot explain what she needs
but the Indian women notice the needle tracks
on her arms and lead her to the sweat lodge
where every woman, young and old, disrobes
and leaves her clothes behind
when she enters the dark of the lodge.
Marilyn's prayers may or may not be answered here
but they are kept sacred by Indian women.
Cold water is splashed on hot rocks
and steam fills the lodge. There is no place like this.
At first, Marilyn is self-conscious, aware
of her body and face, the tremendous heat, her thirst,
and the brown bodies circled around her.
But the Indian women do not stare. It is dark
inside the lodge. The hot rocks glow red
and the songs begin. Marilyn has never heard
these songs before, but she soon sings along.
Marilyn is not Indian, Marilyn will never be Indian
but the Indian women sing about her courage.
The Indian women sing for her health.
The Indian women sing for Marilyn.
Finally, she is no more naked than anyone else.

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Catherine Jervey

keepsake

black cane cut from hickory, carved
regimental seals Grandpa gave
me his Grandpa's diary carried
during the night we rested, lay on
our arms, took prisoners at morn
Captain Ingham mortally wounded
on his heart, in his breast pocket
during the battles, long marches,
years of the Civil War. I keep
remembering at ten a.m.
it was terrible; terrific
artillery, blood spattered
the diary in a safe deposit
box wrapped in baggies, visit
the bridge where John Dorsey charged
drove the rebels back from the heights
all night we lay on our arms, lay
in a ploughed field all day, at night
calculating trajectories
of bullets failing to kill me
by killing him. I read copies
relieved, we waded the creek, lay
down, shelled the river where rebs
were crossing (I was unwell), thinking
of words written in the diary
of the battle, of Abby, of
my home filled with plastics, metals,
formed and beautifully shaped, I
wish I had something I could leave
you I am still unwell dress parade
cannonading had drill a division
is passing grand review I am
opening drawers, doors, ransacking
looking for something to eat in
closets, I find not one thing worth giving
in a dry field, something to save
just for the sake of keeping it.

J. Mills

Where the Locals Go

A mile from the parking lot
a dead oak
hollowed by fire
marks where
a faint path
cuts away from the trail
and into the thicket.

It leads
to a bend in the river
where there's no rope swing,
no large rocks,
and the fishing
stinks.

The bank is steep, muddy,
covered with thistles,
and it's almost impossible
to keep your footing,

but if you wade into the water
far enough to anchor yourself
on the submerged sandbar
you can lean upstream
hold yourself
like a dancer in mid-leap
for minutes
hours
until night falls
and you're balanced on one foot
a black liquid rope
braiding around you
the moon in your face.

Driving

i.

My friend's sister drove from Detroit
to Portland, Oregon
and never stopped for gas
never even touched the accelerator.
She says she sat cross-legged and
"The Lord filled my tank."

Maybe that's why
I always wait so long
before stopping,
letting the needle drop
far below Empty,
giving the Lord his chance.

ii.

Drive long enough
and mile markers skitter
across the road
like rabid shadows,
the "winding curves"
snake
from their signs,
the pavement itself
shrugs, stretches, twists
until you're convinced
you're riding
the back of a living thing.

Doing a straight shot
from Salt Lake City to Chicago,
I stopped after eighteen hours
at a rest area in Iowa
just long enough
to take care of business
and refuse a ride
to a hitchhiker
but when I hit the Illinois line
I realized
he had secretly climbed into the backseat
so steering with my knees
I struck out wildly behind me

screaming "Get out,
goddamnit, get out."

iii.

After the Trinity test,
Enrico Fermi found himself
unable to drive home.
It seemed as if
"the car were jumping
from curve to curve
skipping the straight stretches
in between."

iv.

Drive long enough
and the trip becomes
nothing,
an absence;
for all the miles
that became hours
that became simply
driving
there's nothing
that you can remember
no landscape, no exits, no stops,
at one point perhaps
there was a sun
and then at some point
there wasn't.

v.

In the museum,
I saw Kerouac's manuscript;
the dirty yellow teletype
neatly spooled and displayed.
The plaque explained
how he had written to Cassidy,
saying that it looked like a road
when rolled out in his living room,
and in the next case
was Kerouac himself
on the Steve Allen show
reading the book's ending

every five minutes,
each time looking as tense
and out of place
as the time before,
and if the VCR were stopped,
the cassette broken open,
the tape unspooled
across the museum floor
maybe it too
would look like a road.

Maybe.

vi.

One is a figure.
One is ground.
The stops become the spaces
between the moving
the apartments the stops
between the traveling
as if what you want
is always only a little farther.
This is the legacy
of Columbus
that first American traveler,
who wrote in his diaries
about all those helpful tribes
advising him
it isn't here
what you want
is further along
keep going
keep going.

M. Elizabeth Weiser

What If It Were Merle?

I knew a guy in Texas, Merle Atwater. He raised cattle on the family land, four generations a rancher. What if they were brahmas—would that help?

Or maybe he drifted, itinerate art teacher moving from Texline to Goodnight to Tulia, sharing the glories of Jackson Pollock with the high school sons and daughters of Honest Dave's Chevrolet out on Farm-to-Market Road 65.

What if Dave sold Toyotas instead of Chevys?

What if those students loved him? What if he broke open their minds and they saw their world in sudden flashes of burgundy and aquamarine and lavender? A modern art revolution in the Texas Panhandle—Lonnies and Nolas become budding Picassos and Lichtensteins, painting their dying towns in "living color." Merle's art dealer friends in Santa Fe start to take notice, telling their friends in Malibu and Sarasota. *Good Morning America* sends out a team to interview the New Prairie Painters and their mentor.

Would that be meaningful enough?

What if no one understood him? Maybe the sons and daughters of Honest Dave stared back at him silently when he talked. They were bored. They made jokes about the paintings he showed them—different towns but always the same jokes. Teachers sat in the back of the room, watching his performance.

What if the teachers all loved him? What if it were only me?

Maybe we met after school at the carnival in Goodnight, rode the roller coaster six times, danced the two-step, ate too much cotton candy, walked along the railroad tracks back to my place, drank a bottle of wine while watching "La Dolce Vita" and made love until I had to go teach and Merle left for Wildorado.

Not enough? What if the film was French? What if he stayed a week? What if we went to Santa Fe together over the Easter break to browse the art galleries and soak in the hot tubs?

Or, what if we met three years later at the public library in Austin in the modern history section? Maybe I was working as a researcher, checking trends in multicultural education for my boss's next speech. Merle was taking out books on Guatemala. I recommended something to him; he asked if I knew much about the country. What if I had lived there? What if we met at the University library?

We stopped for coffee after we had our books, looking out at the parking lot of the Wheatsville Co-op and talking about oppression. He was going to go work in Guatemala, he said, leaving the cattle ranch in his brother's hands for a few years while he helped an agricultural cooperative get off the ground. The members were all repatriated refugees, survi-

vors of the 80's massacres. Or Merle's books were all on Mayan art—he was going to travel from village to village, teaching children about their lost heritage and getting them to put their experiences into paintings. Ordinary people need to be noticed, too, he told me.

Maybe I nodded. Maybe we met the following week with my boss to talk about organizational sponsorship. Maybe we took a walk around Town Lake.

Maybe he went to Guatemala. Is that meaningful enough?

He sent letters: his students were excited, their teachers interested. We found sponsors and sent paints. He sent pictures: the students drew green and golden corn growing on hills ringing aquamarine lakes, thatched huts with lavender weavings hanging in front. Or isn't that enough? Maybe the children drew airplanes dropping bombs on the cornfields while families ran screaming from burning huts, soldiers firing on their fathers, mothers, brothers. Merle appeared on Guatemalan television, denouncing the violence. Maybe we talked about publishing a small book of the drawings and testimonies.

Is that enough? Can it end here?

Maybe one morning we get a call from a teacher Merle works with. He hasn't shown up for class the past three days. They found his old jeep by the side of the road between two villages. The driver's seat is stained with burgundy, with rust. Ten fingernails, shreds of skin curling slowly into them as they dry, are lined up on the dashboard.

What if I call the Embassy? What if I call every public figure I ever heard of, and everyone assures me that they are doing everything they can to discover the truth?

What if Merle's body is never found? Is that enough? Is it meaningful now?

What if his name were Sam?

Bill Myers

Monument Valley

Wind-tattered flags
not of prayers
but of nations
signal cash-fisted tourists
to plywood-sided sheds
where sawhorse-riding tables
saddled with turquoise & silver
pottery & weavings
are peddled by Navajo artisans
who live in masonite-sided houses
on cement slabs
with shining pickups corralled out front
like chrome-bridled horses
and when nobody stops
with wind blasting desert sand
they spread tarps over trade goods
and stand facing the darkening sky
this day like so many others
erasing tracks
made moments before.

Buffalo Gap

Pine needles carry the voice of the wind
above remnants of bison trail
hoof-carved and grim—

here's where you follow

Eric Birkholz

American Film

70mm cirrus free-wolfing it above the mustard flowers
of the East Texas highways like vapor trails, high-balling it

across the prairie skies like semis through a fisheye lens,
windshields creased in chrome light—*Koyaanisqatsi*-montaged—

the heat of the visible in the rings of iridescent
ripples rising off the pavement, wavering back & forth

as though charmed & lifted. The smell of the burning sky: tires.
A veritable car chase on the too blue highway & no camera

to record it & make it live.

Paul Keller

One Act

Everything else is silence
until. I reach the top of the stairs.
look into my parents' bedroom where
my brother sits in the middle of the floor,
his legs sprawled like. they were thrown
into position. He is laughing, only
not his laugh when. he looks up at me.
He is maybe eight. And what startles
me most isn't that laugh or the salt-
lines down his face. no. I am gripped
by the color of his hair: chestnut,
like my father's. the color I've tried
to hide in my hair. I am thinking
I love this about him when. I smell metal
and the air is warm. I see my father's
(military) .45 on the white carpet beside him.
I drop to his right on my knees, place
my hand on the side of my brother's head and ear,
try to calm him but. my hand feels wet
and his skin is smoother than any
skin I've known. He whispers *don't*
tell dad paul don't you tell him. I try
to cover his mouth but all I've done
is smear the blood across his face.
He is beautiful. I think *This is how*
he must have looked
the day he came into this world.

The Juggler's Wife

Two weeks later and she manages
like one of the living, brushing her hair
or strolling aisles of the local market,
even answering "fine" when asked
how she's getting along without him.
Evenings while she's slicing mushrooms
for a salad, she imagines he's
down hours in his basement room
with the shut door, practicing
some movement against gravity
where, until she forgets and calls
after him, everything remains
in its air of suspension.

Nicholas Mason-Browne

Jaromir's Leap

I watched the Olympic Games on television last summer, and some of the events made me think of Jaromir. He had a special skill, too. Something just as spectacular, in its own way, as gymnastics or the pole vault, but more meaningful. I took a lesson or two from him years ago, when that was still a possibility, and even tried to repeat what he had done so often and so effortlessly. But I did so just a few times, I admit, and imperfectly.

Jaromir and I knew each other at school. We were both unhappy, but the unhappiness expressed itself in different ways. Jaromir was repeatedly caned by the teachers and prefects. He worked on chess problems during French class and was caned. He tore the badge off his uniform while at school and was caned. Then he ran away to Lethbridge for a week and got another "six of the best" for his trouble. On this last occasion, he told the prefect that he enjoyed corporal punishment, so he was caned a second time for good measure. But my own unhappiness was hidden from everyone except Jaromir. At times, I even hid it from myself.

Both of us were boarders. I went up to Jaromir's room one day after classes, and he was standing beside a dirty window with his eyes wide open. I touched him on the forearm. He breathed strangely and fell down. A dangerous moment, I discovered later. And it was fortunate I didn't do more than I did. All I could get Jaromir to say was, ventriloquism, a kind of ventriloquism. What's a kind of ventriloquism, Jaromir? The leaping, he said. What leaping? It was raining softly outside, the window was above me where I knelt, and I could hear a sound like the sky grinding its teeth. There was a sudden, visceral downpour. Jaromir breathed normally again. Only when it rains, he said.

That Saturday, we went to the fairgrounds of the Pacific National Exhibition. Canadian shriners in scarlet blazers and fezzes were sauntering around the grounds and manning some of the booths on the midway. Groups of seagulls were whirling about the fairgrounds like smoke-rings. Everything smelled of cotton candy and french fries. Apparently, something about the Octopus, the Salt and Pepper Shaker, and all the other amusement park rides put Jaromir in a contemplative frame of mind. He spent a lot of time looking up at them as they lunged and plummeted this way and that. Late in the afternoon, we talked for awhile with a man in a checkered shirt who ran one of the booths. Then we sneaked into a beer parlor on Water Street for a drink and a pickled egg.

I was there before, Jaromir said. The Exhibition, I mean. Last Thursday, when you came to my room. It wasn't the same situation, though. Jaromir had an odd, squarish face and stringy hair, and there was a flower-shaped birthmark at the base of his neck. His right forefinger carried a nicotine stain that went all the way from the dark fingernail to the knuckle.

The glasses he wore were the old-fashioned kind, with black frames and substantial lenses. On weekends, when he was away from the school campus, he wore a heavy, gray coat with big pockets he could carry books in. That particular day, he had with him a work by Spinoza.

I don't have the foggiest what you're talking about, I said. So Jaromir explained the whole thing from the beginning. It's just a knack, he said. I found out I had it last November, when I was catching hell for wandering off school grounds during the lunch hour. Do you remember that? I was in the prefects' common room, and this time it was Horstead, the head prefect, who was bawling me out. He was red-faced and angrier than usual. He had the cane out and was just about to start in, when I heard the sound of rain on the roof and saw a blue jay perched on a twig, looking in through the window.

What happened then was a bit like throwing your voice, except that it was the innermost part of myself I was throwing. I felt nothing but a kind of sour blankness for a moment. Then I realized that I was springing gently up and down on a twig and looking in through a window. I could see myself inside the room. And Horstead, who didn't seem to know that anything had happened, I could see him too, but from a distance. There were long, narrow photographs of the rugby first fifteen on the wall I'd never noticed before. The inscriptions in white ink on them looked very peculiar, like bird-tracks. Then I was suddenly pulled back into myself, as if an elastic band had been stretched tight, then released.

That was the first leap, said Jaromir. Leaping, that's what I call it. I've done several leaps since then. But it's dangerous, you know. Jaromir lit up a Black Cat cigarette and shook the little cardboard match until it went out. You don't realize how dicey it is until you start fooling with it. While you're away, your body is unhabited. And vulnerable. It's hard to know what happens if you return too late or not at all. Apart from that, there's the whole question of control. You can influence the mind you leap into, but how much, I don't know. There are strains and risks I'm just beginning to understand.

What about the other day? I asked. Jaromir paused. After a while, I decided to try it out on people, he said. There were a whole range of trial subjects, including Old Howatt (in the middle of Latin class, with that terrible smoker's cough of his, pulling nose hairs out of his nostrils and always forgetting your name.) Last Wednesday, I was supposed to go with the team to Shawnigan Lake for a cross-country race. But I skipped out. I was listening to some music and looking out my window when I saw a nun down the street. She looked like she was in her early sixties. She had taken her car keys out and was just about to open a car door. Some large, heavy raindrops were bouncing off the tarmac and the car roof, even though the afternoon sun continued to shine.

The next thing I knew, we were driving over the Burrard Street Bridge. I could see the tugboats and barges piled up with sawdust in the inlet below. There was a cloud in the shape of a head of woman's hair,

perfectly coifed, moving along quickly with the other rainclouds. And an unidentifiable, antiseptic odor in the car. Most of all, there was pain. Piercing, physical pain that was centered in the woman's eyes. I could see the eyes, blue, milky-looking, defective, in the rear-view mirror. At times, her vision was blurred and spotty. There was a split second when she almost lost consciousness.

First, we went to the fairgrounds. Ignoring all the other rides and attractions, the nun made her way to a makeshift plywood booth on the midway. She was intensely interested in the seedy-looking man who worked there. He was balding, and he wore a checkered shirt, ill-fitting jeans and scuffed ankle boots. The man sat on a little platform, and invited customers to throw wooden balls at a shabby-looking target above his head. Every time a ball struck the target, the man was dumped into a large tub of water. The man looked sick and broken-down, but he kept smiling all the time. He cracked jokes when he handed out the prizes, which were stuffed bears and hockey T-shirts. The nun just stood there and watched him from a distance. She seemed to be confirming something that she already knew.

From there, we went to the Main Post Office on Hastings Street. There were a number of letters in a briefcase that the nun kept in the trunk of the car, and I knew what was in them before she took them out of their envelopes. They were all personal letters, and all of them were unsigned. Some of them were written in a childish scrawl, with spelling errors and mawkish turns of phrase, while others were composed with a tiny, elegant precision. *Dear Mother, I am sorry I left without telling any body all those years ago. I got a job in Revelstoke for awhile. I am OK, I guess. I was married, but Careylea passed away last year. What you did was wrong, but I forgive you. I know it was wrong for me to hit Vic like that.* There were dozens of such letters. Some of them contained money. None of them had a return address. The nun had written all of them, and yet I knew that they were all authentic, each one in the appropriate handwriting, every sentiment accurate. She signed the letters in the post office, and then got a clerk to frank them. Without anything ever being said in words, I knew that she had been writing such letters for years. And she'd keep on doing so until she lost her eyesight altogether.

That, in essence, was Jaromir's story. I half believed it at the time. I was Jaromir's friend, after all. But I grew skeptical as time went by, and I even persuaded myself that Jaromir had subjected me to a cruel and pointless practical joke. He had told me how I could attempt the leap myself, and his instructions were quite specific. But, try as I might, I had no success at all. The whole thing began to strike me as invidious. Then, without very much in the way of fanfare, we came to a parting of the ways. Jaromir dropped out of school after finishing the eleventh grade, but I stayed on at St. Stephen's. Not a word from him after that. In those days, such ruptures were commonplace. It had something to do with the spirit of the times.

So absorbed was I in my own situation that, to be honest, I scarcely thought about my old friend again until a decade later. By that point, I'd graduated from college and had been working for years as a reporter with *The Provincial Sun.* One day, on a tip, I went down to a rooming house near the Georgia Viaduct. It was a big place on a rundown street where most of the households were Chinese. There were some patrol cars parked outside, but no ambulance as yet. The inside of the rooming house smelled of Pinesol. There was an inner courtyard with brown, lifeless grass and a fountain that didn't work. It was August, and there'd been a modest heat wave for several weeks.

I made my way to an apartment on the second floor. There were two city policemen there, as well as a forensics man from the RCMP. We all knew each other by name. Strange place, I said, looking around. Used to be a convent, said Officer Kinahan. The Order sold it about a year ago. But some of the nuns are still living here. Then the policeman said something else, but I wasn't paying attention. Whoever was lying there in a sleeping bag on the sofa, his mouth fixed and wide-open, must have been an eccentric artist. The walls were covered with sketches which had been scotch-taped to the plaster surface. Most were of athletes. Pole vaulters springing into the empty air. Gymnasts twirling in space.

There was a sound of broken, labored breathing in an adjoining room. There's another one in there, said Kinahan. She's not going to make it. I looked more closely at the man on the sofa. He had long hair and was heavily bearded. But I could see the dark, stained forefinger and the birthmark at the base of his neck. There were pop bottles and little piles of books on the floor. I was distracted by a shape in the doorway of the apartment. It was one of the nuns, an elderly woman, looking awkward and disoriented. There was a guide-dog at her side. Your last leap, Jaromir, I whispered, patting the man's lifeless arm. You escaped at last. Just then, the telephone on the coffee table in front of me began to ring. The old nun pointed at me from the doorway. It's for you, she said.

Phantom Limbs

Scarred absence,
forehead like a curved bandage;
windows, their frail accent;
deduction left marks
on leftover air;
egret's neck in the dresser;
unmeasured wrist;
long distance from water;
door looked like a coroner;
stretched face, long eye;
phantom limbs of the shaft
and sluice-box,
forgetful tributaries;
reduction to thorns;
convict-shirt in headlights;
magic vise;
silver engine
passing through solid pane;
witchcraft, a breath
limps on
its bird-like supports;
crystal whirling
in a cancerous cold;
precise water
suffocates in the dirty glass;
depot's agile shadow;
mirror-image chokes;
frost's alter ego;
void calling
to void, death to death;
the snowflake
listens in its suffocated kingdom.

The Tumor

Part of a wilderness fell out of one of the mouths behind a partition at the far end of the infirmary. Just to turn the patient over onto its side seemed the work of two to three months. Tablespoon. Its curve. Shining on the floor like a scar or an ocean current. Then an unaccustomed fact to fill all the available space. Filling up everything we saw or heard. False cloud. But a bottled sleep. Soon Mr. Schroyen and Gary, the young assistant, would start up the back stairs with a canvas stretcher. Patched in a number of places. Mr. Schroyen's hoarse weather was collapsing abruptly in the outer harbor. Hidden, fingerless rings and a transparent curtain. Shed at the base of a pebble. Soon to stuff the voice with cotton and fitting radiant shoes on her gray feet. Hanging by a thread, he went on to murmur, stethoscope in hand.

Robert Tremmel

Memorial Poem for a Locust Tree Broken Off During a Storm

A single bead
of sweat leaves
my hand and rolls
down the axe handle
toward the blade.

When it cures
this wood will burn
hot; its smoke will drift
back over the spot
where it grew
and where the garden lies
in ruin.

Marigolds bloom
in brackish water.
Corn lies
flat, pounded
into the mud.
Potatoes rot
in the ground.

Bitter smell cuts
the air;
empty sunbursts
explode
above the stump.

Camille Leganza

untitled

a harrowed   virginity
crisp like green apples
rich / supple / on tongues
taut skin pulled gently over
the sweet of thick nights
under   slit   moons
halved by voices
rising as smoke
wisps of air curl around
milkwood branches
the poke of green emerging
as spring breathes /

marguerite again

last night as we coiled around the moon
our eyes pale and hollow like spoons
you asked if i had devoured
the words you left under my tongue
    and i remember the time i read about
    the vietnamese man with skin like rain
    sliding arms through clouds of opium
    to deaden the pull
    of painted lips and pearls draped over flesh
    during those thick nights
    he was made of the strange movement
    of tongues over flesh
i think i am the same as that man when you speak
during these nights when i know we've talked too much
i run my fingers across your lips and wait
so when you open your mouth to breathe life
into the stillborn twist of my bones
your voice carries them to me
    they are not like the glass words i speak
    to break and cut with
    yours are shiny black stones
    and when i roll them across my palm
    their heat digs into my hands
as i bring them to my mouth
and i swallow them
to keep them safe inside
    this pregnant belly of stones
    rolls with laughter

Mark J. Poirier

Pray for Beans

As usual, Harper stopped by Maxim's parents' house the night Maxim returned from graduate school for winter break. Harper carried the big, clay pot of frijoles against her stomach, standing with her legs apart for support. Her hair was bunned, but Maxim noticed how a few loose frazzles blew in the light desert breeze, played in the light spilling from the front door.

"You went three times?" Harper said, hugging the pot tighter. These frijoles—Maxim's reward—had always been perfect: runny and spicy, but not blow-your-head-off spicy, and just a suspicion of cilantro.

Maxim was aware that to Harper he was nothing but a means of communication with Saint Jude, an intermediary for the miraculous blessing. But he didn't care; he was used to it, and in return, he got the beans and the sickeningly pleasant down-elevator rush in seeing her.

When she flashed her haughty, flirty-kitty half-smile at him, obviously holding back a real one, he forgot the dangerous drivers in Baltimore, forgot the gauntlet of street people he had to pass to enter the shrine. "Thrice," he said, staring at her mouth, waiting for her mild smile to expand. "Once in the beginning of the semester, and twice this month."

"And you prayed William would stay out of fights?"

"You ask me that every time," he said.

Harper's brother, William Watson III, loved fighting and women and drinking and crashing trucks—he always had. He was a grade below Maxim in prep school, and once, when Maxim was a senior and William was a junior, William brought a hooker to the prom. She was done up in a black vinyl dress and dangerously high heels. Her stockings were seamed fishnet. On the dance floor, the hooker grabbed William's ass, kneaded it, and pulled him in. With her bursting cleavage and mane of crimped, yellow hair, he paraded her around like she was a Texas debutante, introduced her to the headmaster and the headmaster's frumpy wife. Maxim saved William—as was often the case back then—by arguing in William's defense at the disciplinary board meeting: "The prom invitation clearly states that guests from other schools are welcome. Miss Bassini is a pupil at the Arizona Academy of Beauty," he'd announced to the board. "Is our school so snobby, so elitist, that we refuse to recognize the Arizona Academy of Beauty as a school?"

Now he answered Harper: "I prayed that he'd stay out of trouble in general—like I always do."

She sighed. He invited her in, but she said, "Tengo que salir. Sorry," and she handed over the beans like she was suddenly anxious to get rid of them. Maxim lifted the lid and dipped his thumb in the mush like it was frosting. She glanced back at him from the walkway before she disappeared behind the dense, swaying oleanders.

Maxim watched from the dark dining room as she cruised off in her shiny Land Rover. William, almost on cue, pulled his ratty truck into the bloom of dust her car had kicked up.

Maxim was exhausted from exams and the six-hour flight. His eyes were heavy and stinging. He'd wanted to sit at the table and devour a plate of beans before heading off to bed, but William relentlessly laid on the horn. Beans and sleep were now impossible.

When Maxim jumped into the truck, William handed him a warm beer and said, "When do you finish with all this college shit, anyway?"

"Maybe sooner than I'd like," Maxim said, breathing in the reassuringly familiar smell from William's truck: fast food, spilt Jack Daniels, chewing tobacco.

"Was that my sister's car pulling out?"

"No," Maxim lied. "That was my mom's friend."

"You know where Harper's working now?" William said. "At a tortilla factory. My dad almost shit when he found out."

"I wonder how many Ivy League grads make tortillas," Maxim said.

Harper had been speaking with an affected Mexican accent and wearing brightly embroidered dresses from the shops just across the border in Nogales since Maxim first met her years ago. They'd been in the same tennis clinic the summer before ninth grade, and they both ended up at Green Fields Country Day School that September. At first, Harper asked people to call her Consuela Maria Martinez—all three names—but no one did. Lucy Gomez told Harper, "You're about as Mexican as Princess Diana." Harper had beautifully feral blond hair and more freckles than not.

It wasn't until senior year that Harper learned Maxim's middle name. After physics class one afternoon, she skipped over to where he was sprawled on a rickety picnic table. Maxim was quizzing William who lay prone in the weeds under the table. "Copper," Maxim said through the planks of wood.

"C O?" William guessed.

"No," Maxim said. "C U. Like *see you* at the copper mine."

Harper busted right up to Maxim, ignoring her brother under the table. "Your middle name is Jude." She was barefoot, and Maxim noticed that the tops of her feet were tanned and freckled. She wore a turquoise, shapeless peasant dress and carried the wooden flute she'd carved and meticulously painted in art class: tiny blue flowers, geckos, stars, planets.

"I know," Maxim said. "What's yours?"

"That's not what's important," she said, looking him over and nodding. "San Judas Tadeo es el patrón de los casos desesperados." Her mussed hair seemed reddish in the shade of the sticky, budding pomegranate trees.

"OK," Maxim said. He sat up. The table creaked.

"You have a good middle name," Harper said.

"You have anorexic ankles," William told his sister from under the table.

But Maxim wasn't named after Saint Jude. His parents were Beatles fans. In those old pictures, they looked cool, relaxed: his father with moppy hair and dark, purple glasses, his mother in a beret and a black turtleneck sweater. For years his mother had stored coupons in her tin *Yellow Submarine* lunch box.

*

Maxim and William drove towards the airport, past track homes festooned with blinking Christmas lights, and past homely new Southwestern-style strip malls painted in various shades of teal and pink. With the window rolled down, the dry, cool desert air felt right on Maxim's face—it felt nothing like Baltimore. He breathed it in and pepped up.

They skidded into the parking lot of The Golden Spur, a honky-tonk with a mechanical bull, a sawdusty floor, and real prostitutes who conducted their business in the attached motel rooms. Some nights, chickens pecked at cigarette butts in the ashtrays on the bar. William was a Spur regular even though he looked nothing like a cowboy: his hair was a floppy, red tangle, and he only wore khakis and wrinkled Oxford shirts. But he was one of the few people who had ever ridden the bull on level ten for more than eight seconds, and because of it, the prostitutes gave him special rates and knew his name. Maxim couldn't figure out why he was envious of William's Spur status—he found two-stepping boring, and he was deathly afraid of the brazen prostitutes.

Misty and Icy toddled up to the truck as soon as William grinded it into park. Misty tripped, and her big, blond Dolly Parton wig slid off her head into the dirt. She stood up by herself—Icy didn't help her—and she shook the dust out of the wig before placing it over her darker, clipped-up, natural hair. Icy, with her lazy left eye, sauntered up to the truck and smiled, exposing big wet gums.

"Hi, William and Friend of William," she said.

William said, "Sorry, Icy," and started his truck. "I can't deal with this tonight," he said, driving back onto the road. "It's mean, I know."

"Yes," Maxim said, slurping the last few metallic-tasting drops of his beer. "They seemed excited to see you."

"I've exhausted this town, Maxi Pad," he said. He steered his truck up a twisty ramp onto I-10, handing Maxim another warm Coors from the ripped box on the floor.

"You should go back to college and finish," Maxim said.

"I'd rather live in a cave."

A few nights earlier, sitting there in Baltimore at his crowded desk, Maxim had thought of Harper and the frijoles. The image helped him plow through the countless equations and tedious reports. It helped him forget all the professors who thought they'd made a big mistake by letting

him into their program, how those professors would most likely ask him to leave in the spring with a consolation master's degree and not permit him to continue with his Ph.D. He closed a fat thermodynamics book and gazed out his steamed window into the yellow-lit alley. Two rats were gnawing and tugging at what looked like a third rat. One hundred and twelve more hours, he'd thought, one hundred and twelve more hours until Harper and the beans.

He and William zoomed past the Speedway Boulevard exit, the one for Grant, then the exit for Orange Grove Road. Every morning on his way to school, half-asleep Maxim had driven on Orange Grove. He used to imagine what the land had looked like when there were no malls or spray-painted convenient stores, only rows of orange trees and small horse ranches.

*

It was mid-April and their college acceptance letters had arrived. In the mornings, the seniors capered around for a while, skipped calculus class, sat on the crumbling adobe wall near the goats' pen, and gossiped about sex. Every part of campus—even the chemistry lab—held the dense, tart aroma of citrus and cactus blossoms, and everyone looked healthy in the perfect eighty-degree breezes. Water wars would break out around lunch time: sloshing buckets, drenched T-shirts, water balloons, squeals, and usually, a finalizing shove into the pool. By eighth period they'd all stretch out on the rich, moist lawn in front of Baltzell Memorial Hall, stoned on sneaked Mexican ditch weed, and stupid because they didn't have to be smart anymore. They'd let the beating yellow sun work its ways, dry their clothes, darken their skin.

Harper was everyone's focus. She'd been accepted to Yale where she'd study Spanish. "Mexican Spanish. If they try to shove that elitist Castilian *caca* at me, I'll leave." The untroubled seniors, Maxim included, followed her around like she had all the answers. But she didn't seem to notice. She went about her usual jaunty flute-blowing and dress-twirling, spent hours glazing hundreds of ceramic beads which she eventually sold at a street fair to raise money for Nicaraguan refugees.

Maxim had been finding Saint Jude prayer cards all over school that spring: in books and magazines in the library, taped above drinking fountains, stuffed into the return change slot of the Coke machine. Each card held the image of Saint Jude, rendered in muted blues and greens, clutching a giant coin to his chest with one hand, gripping his wooden staff with the other. Then there was that odd puff of hair in the middle of his head—like a dying gray flame.

Someone glued a card above a urinal with chewing gum. No one defaced the card, but scrawled next to it was HARPER = PSYCHO POSEUR MEXI-CHICK. Maxim spat on the graffiti, and thumbed it away.

He'd read the cards often, sometimes unwittingly, and he came

to incessantly recite the prayer in his head: *Saint Jude, faithful servant and friend of Jesus, the Church honors and invokes you universally, as the patron of hopeless cases . . .* The teachers looked at him in class like he was high, but most of the time it was the unsummoned prayer squirming through his mind that triggered his daze.

A few weeks before commencement, Harper caught Maxim reading a card as he waited to use the pay phone. She strolled up and said, "It works. How do you think I got into Yale?"

"You're smart, and your dad went there?"

"Your middle name," she said, scratching her ankle with her flute. "You're forever connected—blessed." She stopped scratching and looked at Maxim like he was a big, white light.

"OK," he said.

She blinked hard. "You want to come to dinner tonight?" she asked. "At my friends' place?"

"Sure," Maxim said, "I guess."

Harper took Maxim's hand and jotted an address on his moist palm: *62 West Simpson.* The pen tickled. "It's a party, so you can bring whomever." She skipped off, but turned around. "Don't bring William. He doesn't understand my friends."

Maxim didn't bring anyone. He drove the narrow, brick streets of Barrio Viejo in the shadow of Sentinel Peak, feeling boxed by the closely-fitted ancient adobe homes, pretending he was in a different country, somewhere exotic and a little dangerous like Brazil or Honduras. He parked on the end of Simpson and ambled along the dusty, tiled sidewalk until he found number sixty-two.

Maxim peered through a large window and saw Harper dancing. She was smiling broadly, really grooving, hitching her skirt and pumping her hips. Her man, with his slick, pomaded hair and killer white teeth, moved like a pro, like an extension of Harper. The fast and trumpet-heavy norteño record was tormentingly audible from outside. When Maxim placed his hand on the window, he felt the vibrations. He jogged back to his car.

*

Two hours later, William turned onto Indian School Road. "Gas," he said. "We're in Phoenix."

"Why?" Maxim mumbled from half slumber. It was three a.m. Baltimore-time, and he hadn't gotten much sleep because of his exams. He'd finished one only fourteen hours earlier, right before he caught the train to BWI airport.

The beer was drained. The empties clanked around on the floor, trying to tease Maxim. But Maxim didn't want more beer. He wanted only to be asleep in his childhood bed at his parents' house, knowing that

when he woke up, there would be plenty of food to choose from in the kitchen. He imagined breakfast: scrambled eggs, steaming flour tortillas, electric green poblano salsa, and a small delectable swamp of Harper's frijoles. In Baltimore, he often ate cereal for all three meals.

William didn't turn back towards I-10 after he pumped the gas; he drove the opposite way, into the prefab sprawl, under a million street lamps, past shopping centers, all of them lighted up like football games even though it was midnight.

"We played soccer down here once," William said. "At that school near the red mountain. Remember that school?"

"Vaguely," Maxim said. "That was six or seven years ago." His mouth was pasty. To his tongue, his teeth felt furry. He wanted his toothbrush.

Maxim fell asleep, his head pressed against the cool window.

*

Back when Maxim had been an undergraduate in North Carolina, Harper called him. "William told me that you're going to graduate school in either Baltimore or Chicago," she'd blurted, neglecting to identify herself.

Maxim knew it was Harper even though this was the first time they'd spoken since scattering to different colleges almost four years earlier. He'd almost forgotten to care about her. "I might," he said.

"Don't you think it's a little too mystical?" she asked. "I mean with your middle name and all?"

"I don't get it."

"The Saint Jude shrines!" she screamed into the phone. "There's one in Chicago and one in Baltimore. The one in Chicago is the *official* national one, but the Baltimore one is supposed to be more powerful."

"I'm not familiar with shrines, Harper."

"Saint Jude. Shrines of Saint Jude."

"Sorry," he said.

"On the back of the prayer cards the addresses for the shrines are listed," she said. "On the bluish ones it says Chicago, on the brownish ones, it says Baltimore."

"I remember the bluish ones," Maxim said. The prayer worked its way into his head again. He knew it better than the concepts and equations related to molar enthalpy, the subject of the worksheet on his desk. "What are you doing after graduation?" he asked her.

"Moving back to the barrio to teach in a bilingual kindergarten," she said. "I hope."

Back to the barrio, Maxim thought. Her father's house was nowhere near the barrio; it was perched on a canyon wall in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains. A peanut-shaped pool, tennis court, hypergroomed xeriscaping.

“I’ll mail you something,” she said.

A few weeks later, a UPS guy placed a heavy box the size of a TV at Maxim’s door in the dorm. Inside, swaddled in bubble-wrap, was a ceramic Saint Jude lawn statue: green robe, giant coin, and the puff of hair. On the underside: *HECHO EN MEXICO.* Tucked snugly next to the statue were four votive candles, each with a painted image of the saint. A note, too: *Jude, I’ll contact you in Chicago or Baltimore regarding pilgrimages to the shrines.—Harper.* Being addressed as Jude was weird, wrong.

He set the statue by the deep freezer in the lab where he worked on his senior project. Saint Jude stood proudly, watching over the young scientists. Everyone got a kick out of him. Someone made a hat for him out of a Coke can.

*

William threw the empty beer cans at Maxim to wake him up. They thunked Maxim’s head. “Be awake,” William said. “I need you to drive.”

“What?” Maxim said. “Leave me alone.” And then Maxim was glad that he was no longer sleeping. He’d been dreaming that Doctor Head, his evil bastard thesis advisor, was yelling at him for screwing up the titration again. “What?”

“Let me get set, and then I need you to lay on the gas,” William said. He was dripping wet, smelling faintly of sewage, standing by the open driver-side door.

“What the hell?” Maxim said.

They were parked on a dirt road next to a cement canal as wide as a basketball court. Maxim could hear the canal water moving swiftly, see the ripples catching the yellow shine from the moon. Behind William, bathed in floodlights, was a family’s backyard: wicker furniture, lime green sod, and a patch of prickly pear cacti with pads as big as frying pans. A small-sounding dog barked nervously from a few yards over. Maxim felt the dog’s high-pitched yips deep in his gut. And towering above everything was Camelback Mountain. Its gnarled peak reached into the velvet sky like an animal. “What are you doing? Why are you wet?”

“Water-skiing,” William said, “Check this out.” He pulled out a wad of shiny fabric from the bed of the truck. He stepped back, held two comers, and snapped it like he was setting a table cloth. A flag: PHOENIX COUNTRY DAY SCHOOL EAGLES. “The rope from the flagpole’s my tow line. You just have to gas it when I say.” He sloppily wadded up the flag and threw it at Maxim in the cab.

“You’ll drown,” Maxim said. “Or get hepatitis.”

“Shut up.”

“What’re you using for skis?”

“It’s more like a sled,” William said. “A big, plastic garbage can lid. I got it from the behind the cafeteria.”

"You stole it," Maxim said,"like the flag and rope." Maxim knuckled the crusties from his burning eyes, thought about sleep. "Let's just go back to Tucson."

"Killjoy," William said, grinning madly, rocking from foot to foot like he was cold or excited. "This is perfect." He showed Maxim the garbage lid, how he'd tied the rope to the handle with double knots. "Just let me get back in the water, and you haul ass in the truck. I'll be sledding against the current."

"How will I know when to stop?" Maxim said. "How will I know how fast to go? I don't want to drag you to death."

"Don't blow a clot, man," William said. "Just listen for 'go,' and floor it. I want to go as fast as possible." He walked around the back of the truck holding the garbage lid like a huge shield.

Maxim adjusted the rearview mirror, but no matter how he tilted it, it wouldn't afford him a decent view of William in the canal. He hung his head out the window, and waited for the word. The breeze was warmer and swampy-smelling. Camelback Mountain looked bigger, alive, like it might pounce on the whole scene. He heard William's splashes above the muffled rumble of the idling engine, watched the white rope lose slack, straighten, but he couldn't see William in the black, sparkling water. Was he tangled up in the rope? Floating away, pale and bloated, to Apache Junction or to wherever the canal flowed?

Finally Maxim heard the command echo off the sides of the canal: "Gas it, Max! Gas the hell out of it!"

*

It had been a heavy and humid ninety degrees when Maxim first arrived in Baltimore for graduate school. Walking through the pressing, draining heat had been torture, so he signed a lease on the third apartment he saw. The rental office was generously air-conditioned, and the manager, a perky pregnant woman, seemed honest. It wasn't until after he signed the lease and paid the deposit that he noticed the dumpster right outside his window. The apartment wasn't air-conditioned, and when he put a fan in the window, it blew in the stench of carrion and brown lettuce from the trash.

Maxim received a registered letter from Harper the second week he was there: *Jude, The shrine's on Polk Street two or three miles from your place. Please go and light a candle for William. My father thinks he's high on pills and booze. He still won't go back to college, and he had a black eye the other day.* But it was too hot to ride his bike anywhere, too hot, and way too humid to do anything but sit in his apartment with a wet towel on his face and listen to unfamiliar radio stations. He barely staggered to classes.

Maxim didn't visit the shrine until Harper called him three weeks later. "Sorry," he told her, "been too busy." He'd wanted to make a clean break from Harper and forget the prayer. He was sick of it clogging his

brain.

She knew he was lying. "You've been there over a month. If you're really William's friend, you'll go down there."

He was trapped. He knew he couldn't lie about going to the Saint Jude shrine, he might anger God or Saint Jude—or both!—although he wasn't sure why. "I will."

"What do you miss about Tucson?" she asked him.

"People who know how to deal with the heat, and Sanchez bean burritos," he said, even though he was thinking that he missed her smile and her brother's knack for fun.

"I make frijoles," she said. "Authentic ones. I learned from a woman in Hermosillo. You pray for William at the shrine, and I'll make a pot for you when you get back to Tucson."

"You don't have to," he said. "I promise, I'll go down there."

She sighed. "Go three times before Christmas. I'll make you beans." She hung up.

He traced the route on his map of Baltimore with dental floss: four point six miles. He dug his helmet out of the closet.

*

Maxim flicked on the parking lights and floored the loose-feeling pedal. The tires spun in the dirt a few seconds before he felt them catch, and he was pushed back into the smelly, threadbare seat. His eyes darted from the dirt road to the rearview to the speedometer. The wind in the truck made Maxim's eyes water. The fast food wrappers swirled around like little ghosts. Thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five . . . Maxim heard William's rollicking *whoops* and felt proud to be a part of the stunt, important and comfortable speeding through the night alongside the canal behind this sleeping neighborhood. But what would Harper think? A flash of guilt ignited his gut as he remembered the prayers he'd said and the beans he'd received over the last few semesters.

When the Phoenix Country Day School flag flapped up off the seat and draped itself over Maxim's face, he mistook it for an animal—some beast had flown into the truck and was attacking him, smothering him. He stomped the brake and the truck fishtailed dangerously close to the edge of the water, finally sweeping the opposite way into a pile of yard waste. Before he was able to pull the flag off his face and wave away the dust, Maxim heard William yell, "Hey!"

*

It was a misty October day the first time Maxim pedaled down North Charles Street on his way to light a candle. As he crossed 28th Street, obeying the traffic light, a man in a wide American sedan yelled, "You're not a car!" and threw a box of Chinese takeout at him. The soy sauce stung his eyes and sent him swerving into a stinky, water-logged

couch someone had set out on the sidewalk.

The shrine sat on Polk Street in a forgotten section of Baltimore where crazy, pantless crack ladies pushed shopping carts down the sooty sidewalks, and guys in pimpy leather hats who looked like they were extras on *Barretta* or *Starsky and Hutch* hung out like they hadn't moved since 1977. The peeling billboard in front announced, THE SHRINE OF SAINT JUDE: WHERE MIRACLES HAPPEN.

From the outside, the shrine seemed more like a scam than a holy site. But when he entered, Maxim saw it was home to a parish with ancient women praying the Rosary, posters for bake sales tacked up in the vestibule, and uniformed kids from Catholic schools walking single-file to confess their sins.

The votive candle that Maxim lit cost a dollar—folded into fourths and crammed through a small slot in a tin box.

Even though Maxim had been raised without religion—his mother was a nonpracticing Jew; his father was a defensive atheist—he worried a little about praying to Saint Jude. He'd prayed to God before; he did it often as a child. Back then, Maxim figured it couldn't hurt. At twenty-four, he still thought it couldn't hurt. But he feared praying to Saint Jude might annoy God, wondered why Saint Jude wasn't considered a false idol. He prayed anyway, he'd promised Harper he would: *If William Watson is a hopeless case, help him not be . . .*

The hundreds of flickering votive candles caused the air to smell holy and substantial, and the slight, buoyant purling sound they made recalled to Maxim the flute Harper used to play back at Green Fields.

*

Later, they sat on the hood of William's truck, William wrapped up in the flag, both of them eating sweaty microwaved burritos from 7-Eleven. While trying to find their way back to I-10, back to Tucson, they'd stopped and pulled over where 40th Street ended at the runways of Skyharbor Airport.

The crosshatched abrasions on the side of William's face were already puffing pink, flaring with infection.

"That canal was squirming with bacteria," Maxim said.

"It was worth it," William said, gingerly dabbing his face with a paper napkin. "Tell me again how fast I was going."

"Forty-five," Maxim said. "Maybe a little faster."

The sun swelled on the horizon, smearing the sky from liquid purple to filthy brown. They watched the jumbo jets float in from the east, slow down in the air, and land. Like cartoons, Maxim thought. They seemed fake, too close and giant and sluggish to be real. But their booming, ripping noise made them real.

Maxim and William graded the landings. One jet bounced four times, testing its hissing shock absorbers. Its red wing lights traced

squiggles in Maxim's tired eyes. They gave it a D minus. Maxim imagined a ruddy-faced stewardess cursing the clumsy pilot under her minty-fresh breath.

"We found two good things in Phoenix," William said. "The sledding canal and this place."

"You can watch the planes in Tucson, too," Maxim said matter-of-factly.

One was drifting in, shredding the sky. "Not this close, you can't," William yelled. "And they're jets, not planes."

Maxim felt the vibrations on the hood. They jittered up into his stomach and head. They made his inner ears itch and tingle. The prayer kicked in: *Most holy apostle, Saint Jude . . .*

He glanced at William's injured face, then looked down at his feet, his wet, mucky sneakers. "I pray for you," he yelled. "I light candles for you at the Saint Jude shrine in Baltimore, and Harper makes me frijoles." The jet landed smoothly, squealed to a halt without bouncing. "I've been doing it for three semesters." Telling William felt good, like finally going to sleep after a long day.

"She never makes beans for me," William said. "Not even for my dad—and he loves frijoles." William swiveled on his butt and jumped off the hood. "I give that landing an A minus. Let's go."

Maxim tossed his unfinished burrito in the dirt.

And I-10 was clogged with drones in bubbly Asian sedans headed to cubicle jobs, and minivans full of holiday shoppers en route to Metrocenter or the outlets in Casa Grande. Maxim listened to William whistle along to a happy-go-lucky country song: "Did some honky-tonk healin' to get me over you . . ." He watched him bob his battered head to the twangs and not even react to the stop-start, slow-as-hell traffic. William didn't flinch or curse when a hotshot talking on a cell phone in a glossy convertible abruptly cut into their lane; he only braked gently and kept whistling.

Maxim had twenty-one days before he had to be back at school, bumbling around the lab. Twenty-one days of eating beans and wondering if he was praying for the right person.

Lyn Lifshin

Texas Ranch

"I'd say this bull was killed for research"

She drove her 79 Chevy pickup
west from Laguna Vista
slithered its metal cheek
to cheek with a rusted
Ford truck but didn't
get out, just lowered
the window slow as an
eyelid. Her skin glowed
in the moon like a
Texas cheerleader named
Ivory Baby in 1976 but
her tongue didn't stop
and her lips sucked him
dazed past the ripped
up fender. Later in the
town's one bar he wondered
what there was to do in
these parts. "Could give
you the lowdown," she flicked
in his ears, got out her
keys 12 miles from there
shoving him off her she
slid out of her seat into
a circle of lowered lights.
A cat howled and she yelped
with it. Other women came,
their teeth gleaming like
knives leading a dark
animal. He thought he'd
leave, but she had the
keys, could barely get
the visor down between him
and the moaning when he
saw her take something
long and dripping toward
the v of her jeans
turning the blue purple,
staining herself as if
she'd given birth

He'd Rather Have a Paper Doll

a porn woman. I'd
soak in a tub of bath
oil an hour, come back
and drop the towel and
he'd roll over. Even
on our honeymoon, he
was out getting skin
flicks. He had *Play
Boy* and *Penthouse*. Then,
things in brown envelopes
stashed behind furniture,
films, I was in competition
even that week in Las
Vegas but I tried
eight and a half years.
I had my breasts done,
belly, but he'd lock him
self in the bathroom for
3 hours. I could hear
paper turning. He said it
had nothing to do with
me. And he'd been such a
gentleman. Five dates
before he even kissed me.
My father told his three
girls men just want one
thing. I wear teddies to
bed, eyelashes. I tried
suicide twice, never told
anyone, thought if I just
bought the right nylon
or lace. A real woman
scares him. On paper, he
can have as many, never
with cellulite, or scars
or hair where it should
not be, doing what
ever he can imagine

Even Before the Pond Freezes Over

There were feathers,
closer and closer to
the house. Not just dark crow
wands or strands from the
wild geese but a

white that seemed tipped
with flesh. And tho this
may sound strange, a whiff
of magnolia, even in
November. At first, it was only

a feeling that someone else
was in the room, a something
loitering on the deck,
swaying against bleached wood.
The first time I

dreamed her pinched face, I didn't connect
her to the feathers but then
there were more signs. And in the
dark I heard moaning. It sounded

like another language. Then
I picked out, "Leda's child," and "Leda's
girl," over and over. I thought I was
imagining this until I found
rose velvet cluttered with feathers
near the shore

and claw marks, almost a note in the sand.
One night and I can't swear it wasn't
a dream, something half woman, half bird
seemed to be perched on the foot of the
bed, a pale woman with wings
where there'd be arms

and in the morning, the shades
looked clawed or pecked. Maybe if
I had reached out . . . But it could
have been a dream and she seemed
so angry, homeless, maybe unable to find
a place she could fit in. She might have seen

us feeding the geese, somehow hoped to find
someone who could hold her

It was clear she didn't like
men. She always came to me. My
husband rarely saw her. Who could blame her
after her mother had been raped
by a swan. Maybe she was curious about
her father. Once I thought I could feel

her sleeping coiled against my hip,
starved for warmth, shoving the cat out. She
ate less than the cat, maybe feeling too earth bound
with her woman's breasts and hips, hoping for flight.
She seemed to be looking up at the sky
on the balls of her feet as if aching
to turn those feathers she'd
been cursed by into wings

Christopher Sindt

Dancer, Dirt Stage, No Music

My father's in the garden. There is nothing better
to call him. Bad knees pressing dirt,
brow sweaty and bent to the movement
of hands, seedbag to furrow and back. The sun
prances above his thinning hair, whirling around
stalky asparagus. My father is cramped and shadowed
and full of hatred for slugs and earwigs. He'll efface
each pest, annul any weed-bound row. Now
my father stomps the dirt like a flamenco dancer,
embracing the limbs of the flowering broccoli, and I
wonder which will be wounded more, the red dirt
he stamps with his boots, the cabbage heads
sliced off at the base, or the sun—don't forget about the sun—
the glistening on his forehead as he waves his arms
to the sky, the chance of another stroke, the sun
you can't get rid of in the daytime, fencing in my father
and making him sweat and dance. And to be closer
to him, I'm hiding in the garden. I'm the salt-
and-pepper graininess of a cutworm, the non-color
of a vine borer, sneaky leaf green of a cabbage maggot.
He hates each of my manifestations but cannot
reach them with spade or rake. At times I'm so small
I can sneak up his pant-leg, rest in his arm-socket,
pry through sternum and breast-plate, mend
each dislocation, inspire any cell. If I wanted
to lie down, I'd walk to the back of the pasture,
dream of bluebells, daylilies and zinnias: brighter,
louder flowers. But now the cows are calling out,
the horses standing still in the mud, and the sun
and my father are in the garden. Yes, the sun,
it's here browning his skin, his flat tan body
lying where corn will grow this summer.

Jen Cullerton Johnson

Set the Spine Straight

In 1937, Avi came into the world crooked. His spine grew in a sharp "S," like the cut of a butcher's serrated blade. The doctors figured walking would be difficult as he became older. They shook their heads. In our small town of Union Pier, there were no breaks between sidewalks and streets. It was impossible for him to maneuver. They told me it was better to let him stay at home, then when he turned nine to relocate to the Estate. There, Avi's living quarters would be equipped with all the quality services and attention a working woman couldn't provide. He would be properly cared for and even loved, they assured me as I signed the dotted line from the other side of their oak desk. I knew no different from what the doctors said but what I did know, I did with my hands. For nine years, my fingers massaged Avi's bones, drew hot baths with vinegar and wrapped his torso in tight layers of cloth and lavender.

Back then, when Avi slept during the day, I kept open my store, General Goods. The factories laid off and the berry patches turned dry, but the store managed to stay open for credit or exchange. Food, I told Avi as we ate, meant survival, another day of living and growing stronger, maybe even straighter. Whenever neighbors stumbled into my store, they never went away with empty palms. Instead, I brought them to the back room and said, "This food is for you. Eat with good health." Then, I watched how their hunger left through their fingers as they stuffed bread into their mouths. After they brought packages up to their noses for a final sniff, some bought flour, sugar and powdered milk. Worn coins, handed over from days spent picking unripe fruit, washing windows or begging on the trains, clinked into the cash register. Others, with rough faces and dull eyes, returned with payments of unloaded boxes or a swept store floor.

After General Goods' doors locked and Avi finished his supper, I rocked him in my arms. I rocked him back and forth like summer lake water until he left when he was nine. I sang softly into his face *Avi, Avi* for him to learn his name. *Avi.* His name is a Hebrew name, you know, for Spring, the survival of winter. Spring is the season our Union Pier farmers, who kneel down on frozen soil, pray for hope. A name, I hoped, would set the spine straight.

Avi tells me sometimes when his assistant Franz moved his chair at night, when everyone else in the Estate slept, shadows formed from the light posts outside his windows. Slow cars, after midnight drives, crept past and reflected their headlights on his face and forearms. He remembers how our rocker unraveled an easy beat of wood on wood and skin on skin. Then, even among the other children with crooked spines, he was alone.

We were never separated until he reached nine. After the move to

the Estate, he came home once a month and I hardly let him out of my sight. I cooked apple strudel, potato fritters and poured soda pop. Avi ate every piece of food I gave him so fast, it made everybody laugh. He's a growing boy. Strong, he'll never be thin like paper, a neighbor said. But nobody pointed to his weak ankles. No one asked why he limped or how as each year passed, his left leg dragged and made a thud. No one said anything about his unbalanced shoes or how quiet the room became when he walked out from behind the cash register.

Instead, our neighbors saved old jars, steel bits and stray wires when Avi became interested in science. He went crazy for finding out the hows and whys and no one stopped him. I encouraged him and even saved up and bought him a microscope. I stored away small specks of raw meat, onion peels and grapefruit skin for him to make slides. Wrapped up in wax paper, these were sent out once a week to him. When he received them, he wrote back long letters of wanting to find cures for burned tongues, chapped hands and stale breath. New paper articles from the *Detroit Herald* science section thrilled Avi. My neighbors heard about his quick mind but never of the headaches he suffered.

On his sixteenth birthday, the visits changed to once every three months up until his twentieth birthday, when they changed again. In the time between those years, Union Pier came into money. It was a new time then. Another factory went up, the streets became paved and sidewalks were walked on with people who kept on buying. Even the weather was on our side when the winter snows thawed in late February. General Goods stocked itself with new items, like glass cleaners and French jam. I bought myself a new Singer sewing machine with a foot pedal and cut out different patterns for pants to fit Avi's uneven legs. With fabrics of cool grey and cornflower blue to bring out his brown eyes, I sent away for the Sears catalogue and put down payments for hats and sweet-smelling cologne. With each new item bought and ironed, it was as if my sending them could make his spine straight and blot out the time he was away from me. Avi tells me I shamed the nurses and Franz with these packages. I kept sending them, too, even after the doctors wrote that his spine couldn't handle the constraints of zippers and buttons.

My hands kept on moving until the doctors' updates and their restrictions stopped me from being part of Avi's life. On sterile, white paper, they wrote that he fell, stumbled, and his legs were numbed with needles. Those pains in his back were the pressure of the curving "S," they said. Home visits would prove impossible. Your son is bedridden, they noted with their ink pens. But I didn't want to believe them. I wanted to believe Avi was safe, that his spine moved in a straight line each day, that his name meant something. I wanted to believe those packages, the science magazines and the visits nurtured his bones. But after the letters, I hummed less when I stocked the cans. My smile was a bit smaller when neighbors asked if there was a sale on cabbage. Except to keep my hands moving, arranging and rearranging anything that came before them, I knew

no different.

Once a year on his birthday, I was allowed to drive up to the Estate. I brought up with me sacks with packages filled with the best cuts from the butcher, the best bread, the best coffee. All tied together with notes and a science magazine from our neighbors. I hoped these would help his spine to gain strength to uncurl itself. On the day of our visit, I prayed and practiced what I would say to the doctors, if they ever asked my opinion on Avi's well-being. But our visits were short, an hour or two long, and the doctors hardly said more than a hello to me when I sat next to Avi's small bed.

Most of my attention was on him and I watched how he slept in a fetal position. His spine outlined his issued-green robe, showing a flash of his yellow flesh when he turned over. Next to him slept patients the same age. Some better off than Avi, others worse. During our visits, patients called out for the nurses or their mothers. They soiled sheets and sang songs. Sometimes, Avi joined them playing checkers or drinking orange juice out of a straw. Other times, he held my hand and turned his face to the wall. As the years passed, he talked to nobody there, not even Franz. He became sullen and silent, reading books about pirate adventures and poems of trees in the forests. He told me he couldn't sleep in his bed, the air in the room choked him, the bland food stuck in his throat and bed pans embarrassed him. He said he grew tired of seeing patients walk in on crutches, then never walk again.

On Avi's twenty-fifth birthday, I baked apple strudel and put a straw into a can of soda pop for him. Like our other visits, Avi talked little. His eyes reddened around the rim but he wore his birthday hat. He opened his presents and said thank you. At the end of our visit, the doctors asked to speak to me in their office. I sat in front of their oak desk and they told me to say my goodbyes to him and make final arrangements. He had less than ten months. His organs weakened each day from the pressure of a curved spine. It would be for the best. They nodded their heads.

Returning to Avi and brushing his hair with my hand, I sang his name, *Avi*, like I did when he was a child. He turned his face from the wall and took my hand.

With the papers prepared for me to sign, I picked up the pen and put it down. Then I told the doctors, 1937 was almost three decades ago. Women can work now and take care of their children. I have a full time employee. I said there was a mistake made twenty-five years ago and it wasn't about to happen again. With my purse clutched under my arm, I turned toward the door and closed it. My son is going home, I said into the glass window of the nurse's station.

Until today, when you came here with your papers, knocking on our front door, it's been two years since we heard from the Estate. The doctors never call or write. Avi sleeps in a bed on steel rollers and wood, made by one of my employees. He watches Union Pier change from the windows and sidewalks while he draws strawberry and blueberry bushes

on stones to sell to the tourists who are attracted to picking fruit on weekends. The factories no longer expel thick smoke. As you can see, I added a deli to the side of the store and there is easy living in my older years, with my son in our home. On Sundays, we drive to the cemetery. I push him over rough gravel with spots of grass where my heels stick in the mud that splashes on Avi's clothes. There, underneath a tombstone that barely nudges itself from the ground, rests his father. Avi tells me he knew no man as a father. He says there was Franz and his male doctors, but none of these resembled his father's picture, which I unpacked from his suitcase when he came back. Sometimes when we're on our way home he'll say he tries to imagine his father's nose sniffing the fresh lavender on the grave. Lavender is a scent he dislikes. It reminds him of the Estate's yellow tile floors after a quick wash. Then he remembers the lavender on my hands and how they wrapped him in cloth when he was a child, he says, and smiles at me. But to me, as I drive home with his hand in mine, the lavender smells of Avi's past years in the Estate and how much lost time I have to make up with my son. I want you to know, Miss, this smell lingers on me, even after I scrub my hands.

Patrick Moran

Old Teachers

They remember
you as children.

To them you will,
in one way or

another, always be
what you were.

To them you will
not have grown,

you will have only
altered the hem

of who you were.
Perhaps your desk

is a little larger,
no one says any-

thing as you stare
window-lost

counting clouds,
but the bells are

still furiously
ringing: the clapper

bang, bang, banging,
smashing the air

as if it was
a door or a word

somewhere behind
you letting in,

breath by breath,
the old punishments.

R. D. Drexler

Eastwood

Streets are scrubbed of coal dust,
Of Congregational church, of black men,
Bitter women. Brinsley Head is shut.
Signs remain detailing premature death
Of children. Black pithead timbers still stand.

At night pink under scab new skin faced
Girls come out to prowl streets in orlon
Skirts. Eyebrow pierced, scraped hair headed
Boys drive warily on lookout for head,
For scraps. Everywhere reeks of neon.

Take-out tandori sweats, curry stews
In aluminum tubs. Gujurati
Consonants, sodden grits of rice spot
25 watt air. Yellow pulped ads want
Heroin narcs. There are no jobs.

Lawrence lived downhill from here in one
Of three spots—tight brick rooms, brick pent yards,
Lace curtains like eyelids behind each pane.
Paths he walked are overgrown, cow shat lanes
Grass scabbed, cow spotted hillsides of slag.

Physically he fled England but long
After lived these fields, those bitter homes,
These desperate girls who forfeit their bloom
In pints of ale. How did he make
Such beauty from this ruinous dark?

Ice Maiden

Reuters calls attention to her age,
Wants us to know her as “ice maiden,”
Is excited by the fact advanced
X-ray/computer technology
Has been used to probe her fractured skull.

Reinhard found her corpse, has taken charge
Of her history. She was—he tells us—
Starved, drugged, struck on the head with an ax—
Solemn rite beneath the volcano.
Brain edema—the cause of her death.

Recently, she’s left her frozen tomb,
Made her international debut—
National Geographic sponsored—
In a special air-conditioned vault.
And so we consider Reinhard’s script:

She was “sacrificed by priests.” She had
“A sense of majesty.” She possessed
“Phenomenal courage.” The photo
Shows her child-spare face, her teeth exposed,
The dark folds of her alpaca cloak.

I see myself at four. The doctor
Talks. I’m perched on a high, hard table.
He shows me rough slats of orange crate. He
Will lash them to my fractured shoulder.
I bare my teeth, rat-like, at the pain.

Woman as Ocean

Women are like the sea—
Or so Conrad tells us—
Capricious, enticing, illogical,
Beautiful, cruel, above all inscrutable—
And, presumably, full of fish.

Men are enticed by the sea,
It breeds character, casts
A rough outer shell, but
Leaves a sweetness inside—
Like oversized kiwi fruit.

Men like riding the waves,
Like the hump up & down, like
To cleave, to slice through, to cut
But they must do it in boats
For protection of the groin.

Women, men say, have the power.
They can lull, can soothe,
Turn nasty at night,
Can promise, rage, are both siren & storm,
They can swallow up during a blow.

Men are seamen, women just sea.
Men are divided as officers & men,
Stand watch, keep logs, spin yarns,
Come home, set out, are buried at sea.
Women remain sunlight & mist, water & salt.

The fact that the moon governs the tide
Men find profound. They keep tables,
Predict, write books. Women
Just menstruate, establishing,
For men, what they always maintained.

In French, men point out, la mer
& la mère are suspiciously like.
In Chinese both women & oceans
Have breasts. Thus language
Determines the else undefined.

At birth we all come from the sea.
At death we return to water & salt.
If we buy all this guff,
I suppose we conclude
That men are just women frozen in cubes.

W. K. Buckley

Cannibal review

It's always Broadway slugged up in the face.
The Times Square fibrillations that have us trapped.
A whole gulp of profit like wolfing down a meal on the Donner Pass,
as if eating hearts boiled up on the sidewalks.

There's always something in the looks we get—
as if we've just stolen plastic angels from a dime store.
You know, the ones people stick on their dashboards for a trip to Brooklyn.
Or hung by its wings on a rear view mirror
to keep away the dripping tooth—
the ones that turn green when you turn off the lights in a bedroom.

It's true. *Wild men roam the streets eating angels.*
They sit down at lunch & pull them wiggling out of pockets,
and no one dares to see if they are real.

Men eat them raw, or cooked up in the privacy of their kitchens.
They feed them to their guests in *hors d'oeuvres* before deals are cut,
until the fat boys bloated with approval float above 5th Ave.
like a Macy's Day Nightmare,
roped down & held by the ticker tape ghost of Geronimo.

The jacket I keep for walking

You've shut the bathroom door
to take a bath alone.
You like to put scented candles on the tub
and read your book on horses.

I know when to leave you quite alone.
(The way you raise your head above the waters,
arch your neck—*Madame Blavatsky at her readings*).
I know when to put on
the jacket I keep for walking,
watch men stare out from barroom windows
at the steam,
rising from these April streets.

Men love women
deeper than the mysteries they imagine
at the end of history.
But over Scotch in Stuyvesant
they talk of Cleopatra with Antony around her finger,
and *Joan of Arc. Medusa's stare.*
Just give them one more drink, and they'll
turn their backs on history,
walk back home for women who come to them.

Tonight, on West 17th,
I could swear I heard you singing in the waters.
I could swear I heard Cleopatra, whispering in Antony's ear,
as the taxis lurched,
like *Egyptian cabs to heaven*.

Yayoi Teramoto

Tumor

A June afternoon after the shower, I stretch on the carpet.
When I slip my palms on my belly, I sense a hard mass through the skin.
It’s big, but I avoid taking it seriously,
I try to believe that it is an organ everybody has,
I try to feel familiar with the touch of the lump.

A January morning
I visit a nurse to make my concern clear,
She touches my lump with her four fingers,
tilts her head, and brings a ruler . . . eight centimeters diameter,
“You must see a doctor,” she says.

Cedar Rapids free clinic is for low income people.
Every Monday night this walk-in clinic is held in the community center.
Three devilish kids with their tired mom occupy the hallway,
To make her kids behave themselves, the mom keeps saying,
“You’d better stopn’til I count three. One . . . two . . .”
But, so often she counts that kids never listen.
Two hours,
I wait with her kids from hell.
Finally, my turn comes.

Thin curtains divide a space into several rooms
everybody hears what others ask doctors, and what doctors say.
I take my jeans off, sit on a table, put a paper apron on, wait.

With a slashing noise, an old doctor opens the curtain.
He introduces himself, I harden my spine.
The doctor asks me to lie down on the table;
the sheet on the table crackles with my movement,
the paper-sound reminds me that I am one of the temporary occupants.
“David, please come,”
the doctor suddenly calls someone else over the curtain.
A young doctor appears.
“There is no question.” The old one suggests another,
The young one touches my lump, and nods.
My doctor says,
“You have a tumor. I hope it’s benign.”

I thought the arrival of the sickness would be like listening
to complicated chords of a pipe organ.
But it is more like the time I stood at a railroad crossing,
watching boring boxcars pass by.
After countless black tank-cars are gone,
the next one is a cobalt green boxcar: the sickness.

Andrew Small

Still Life in Amber

The restaurant closed at nine. The place was not usually busy nights. Most of the customers were gone by then or getting ready to leave. A few late arrivals and some regulars were still there, but there weren't very many. Joseph, a handsome man who always ordered a salad and a reuben sandwich and never ate the salad, was there, as was the grey messenger's cap that never left his side by more than four feet. Joseph never said much, and Louis wondered if this was because he was thinking of the right thing to say at the right time or if he had plenty of things to say without really wanting to say anything. Joseph always ate alone, slowly, while reading the evening edition of the newspaper. Louis made sure to save him a copy.

"Here's the paper, Joseph," Louis said shyly. "I read a little in the back and the best parts were on page two."

Joseph took the paper without looking at Louis and opened it with one hand as he took a large bite out of the sandwich. Crumbs fell from his mouth to the page. He read in silence for a minute while Louis wiped the table opposite him with wide, circular strokes.

"Hmm. Another impostor? 'Local Elderly Woman Loses Life Savings to Fraudulent Minister.' Hmm. She was nearly ninety, completely lucid, but totally blind. More ways than one I suppose."

"Not a bad story at all huh? Says the police know him. Got a lot of aliases though. He stole more than two hundred thousand dollars from a church in South Texas once too."

"Heaven's sakes I *can* read you know," Joseph said, making eye contact with Louis for the first time. He mumbled, "Can read you know. No need for talking about it." He turned back to the front page. "Hey, a car ran into a bus. Somebody died today I guess. It's never the driver. There's no surprises, it's all just useless. Dosen't even make for a good story anymore." He took another bite. "There anything in the morning one worth it?"

"No Joseph." Joseph was in a bitter mood, but he wouldn't tell about any of it. It happened sometimes. Louis didn't look up from the table top to face him.

"No surprises. Nothing worth a story. Just useless."

"I'd better get back. Good night, Joseph."

Louis did know to call him Joseph; he had tried Joe once and Joseph stood up and acted like he was going to hit him. Tonight's reuben was almost finished. Joseph would linger for another half hour or more, and it would probably be ten before Louis could begin to clean up.

Louis was mopping the floor when he heard the sound of rain through the ceiling. He stopped between two tables to listen. The beat of

the drops got faster and grew more insistent and soon all the little, individual impacts faded into one softly invasive curtain of sound. He looked out the front window. It was dim and grey outside. There were four large trees by the entrance to the bank across the street. Beneath the trees was an uncovered wooden information board, layered with small sheets of paper of different colors in various states of decay. The newer ones were posted over the old, but they didn't hide all of them. Irregular sections of signs for past events poked out from underneath. The wind and the rain tossed the papers, ripped some of them out and flung them down the street. It shook the leaves on the trees.

Louis caught sight of his reflection: his body standing thin and still; his hands holding the mop, and resting the end of it to his chest; his head bent slightly to one side. The rain would bring fog once the wind settled.

Louis knew some of the regulars, but not as many as Robert the main waiter did. He hadn't been working at the restaurant as long as Robert, and still wasn't comfortable enough to talk with them as easily as Robert did. Robert was the same way with the three cooks and most of the other waiters; they had all known each other for a couple of years and this common body of time showed itself in their familiar, sometimes almost ascorbic exchanges. They called him Rob. Louis could only call him Robert.

Louis was older than almost all of them too. This didn't help. There was a gap between the body of his time and the body of theirs. He sensed it, recognized it, and accepted it. He thought that the others recognized it and accepted it too, but it was still there, a simple fact among them. Robert had given him the interview instead of the owner. Louis had only been in town for two days and didn't have the chance or money to buy a new white shirt, so he had gone in wearing his faded blue one with fraying cuffs. He had not talked very much during the interview, and Robert wasn't rude.

Robert had said, "Now, you wouldn't have to worry about dishes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. That's for the high school kids that come in. And a lot of the folks that come in don't like chatty waiters." When he said it he quickly looked at Louis's feet. Louis looked too. His shoes were dusty and the sides were worn thin. Robert's voice was low and he said, "Probably won't be a problem."

Louis replied, "No, of course not. I can keep my mouth shut."

"Then again, some of these people like a little small talk with dinner. It makes them feel . . . at home or something."

"No problem. I can do that too."

Robert seemed to be as nice now as he was then. He didn't talk Louis into circles, and he didn't get angry easily or often.

Louis didn't expect to get the job; he was shocked for a moment when Robert called him to tell he had it. After that moment he made him-

self remember, as always, that this was just a job like any other; there was no room or real cause for celebration, and it would be bad to ease into any improper luxury. It meant money, and money required work. There was nothing more to it than that.

Work was in the details. When those that remained were gone, he cleaned meticulously, polishing the tabletops until they were mirrors. He could take proper care of things when the place was empty. Electric light replaced the soft, red-yellow gleam of sunlight on the tabletops. Underneath the new, white patch of artificial light the surface was amber.

Louis folded his rags and took them back into the kitchen. He placed them neatly in the corner of the counter to the right of the three metal sinks. Someone had left a pair of filled rubber gloves hanging up above the sink. He emptied them, hung them again, went slowly back through the swinging doors and sat down at his favorite table, the one in the very back. It was badly placed and no one used it very much. He liked it because it was near a small side window, had a small light right above, as if just for it, and it never got very dirty, for despite its common emptiness, he polished it just as thoroughly as any of the other tables.

From underneath, he retrieved a very brown, very worn-in guitar case. He placed it on the table the same way he placed dishes of half-cooked meatloaf and ham and eggs that were too pink and too yellow to be convincing before a long string of diners.

Louis sat back and waited. He knew that in a few minutes the cook would leave. Then Robert would turn out the lights out front and inside, all of them except for the line of lights in an arc from above the front counter to the table in the very back. After that, he would hear the jingling of keys, and the slamming of the back door. With this, Robert has left for the night and the restaurant is empty.

The sound of a sheet of ice cubes falling echoed from the kitchen. It came from the ice machine back between the screen door to a small wooden porch, bloated and warped from old mop water and greasy dishwater, and the marble-printed linoleum counter for the industrial microwave and the red plastic cups for iced tea. Underneath was the hum of the refrigerators. Louis could have passed the ice machine anywhere between twenty and thirty times a night, and dipped into it for ice almost as often, each time using the scoop because, like the sign says, you can't use the cup or your hand. When he would carry dishes, salads, side-orders or appetizers past, sometimes he would hear the ice fall. Often he would not, but he didn't pay any attention to it except to think that all the time the ice falls regularly, and he has probably missed it most of the time, but hearing it one time is good enough, and there is always always another time.

The ice was louder at night. When the restaurant was empty it could fill the whole kitchen. Everyone got used to it during the day. The

hum from the refrigerator was always there. Everyone got used to that too, it was quiet and constant and didn't mean anything, but it sounded large and alien to Louis now; he noticed it and the continuing rain distinctly, and listened to both carefully.

Louis tried to make the most out of his time in the evenings with the guitar. Now was the right time. But he could never fool himself into believing the restaurant was completely empty because he had such a refined talent for recalling patrons' faces—some without names and the usual ones with them; he could predict where they would sit, and what they would order, to the point where he couldn't even sit down at night without projecting some young couple's faces into the now-empty booth at the window where they ate together in the early afternoon. That was why he chose the table that was most often empty.

Now was the right time. He was the only one there. He had always tried to make the evenings mean something with the guitar, but he couldn't use it right and had never pleased himself.

Ice fell in the machine. Louis got up from the table, untied his apron and tossed it into a box behind the counter, and walked over to the jukebox by the door. He crouched down to plug it in. It wasn't already plugged in because they didn't use it. The owner of the restaurant liked it there as long as it didn't play music. Once, when he had first started working there, he plugged it in in the morning because he thought doing so was part of his job, right along with wiping the counter and all of the amber-colored tabletops. He had been perfectly prepared to unplug it before he left that night. People used it all through the afternoon, but the owner happened to come in, and he went over and unplugged it himself.

It was a shame too. The jukebox sounded fine, as good as records usually did, and those in it a bit worn, but it wasn't very fancy, with lights and bubbles on the face and sides like the Wurlitzer he remembered from a bar in Mississippi. Or was it North Carolina? It didn't matter. All that was a long time ago and finished now, and any one of the jukeboxes he'd seen in bars and cafes could easily be replaced in his mind by any other among them. It didn't matter where each one had actually been.

He had memorized all the titles in the jukebox, but he read over them again anyway. Those yellowed paper labels had typed names like Leadbelly, John Lee Hooker, and Charlie Parker. Most of them were crooked, old—from a bad typewriter. Old. Guys like that, old guys he liked. Nothing sounded better in a closed diner at night. There were a couple of John Coltrane songs too. Odd for a jukebox. He played it, and it took him back to Kansas City, to one of those clubs with a badly cultivated half-darkness, overexpensive liquor, and a three-drink minimum instead of just two. He had been sitting alone at a tiny round table listening to some jazz set—and a good one, too—when the girl sitting in front of him leaned over to her date, over far so the candle on their table shone

up on her chin and the tip of her nose and made odd shadows over her eyes and forehead. She whispered, but Louis had heard her: she had said she thought the saxophone player was John Coltrane. Louis had not heard what the man said, but it looked like he just agreed and went back to listening to the set. The sax player was not John Coltrane. He had been pretty sure it wasn't John Coltrane. They were good though, and it could have been John Coltrane, but it wasn't.

Louis listened to the whole song while sitting there by the jukebox. As it finished he went back through the swinging doors to the kitchen, took a glass ashtray from the nearest shelf, turned as the doors swung back open, went back to the table, and had time to light a cigarette before the next record began to play. He'd heard this one before too, at the restaurant and other places. Plenty of times. The record was old; the needle jumped, and underneath the music was a faint din of little scratches. Ice fell in the machine.

Louis kept his guitar well polished; the electric light glinted off it. Underneath the white reflection of electric light it had an amber surface.

When the next song began he played along with it, but it didn't sound right when he really listened. He stopped listening to the song and tested the strings. They squeaked as he slid his fingers down along them; and he sifted through a number of adjusted notes that slid up and down as he turned the tuning pins. He tried playing along with the song again, but it still didn't sound right when he really listened. The guitar was still out of tune.

The song stopped, and the jukebox went dark. Louis sat there trying the strings, putting his hands down to them—his mouth moved silently with the melody as he remembered it. He removed his hands and cracked his knuckles. Then he put his hands back to the strings again. Ice fell in the machine.

Louis usually held his cigarette between his lips, without ever touching it save to ash it twice and put it out. He had started this when he saw a man waiting at the platform of a train station smoke that way. It had become a habit since. Smoking this way, he sometimes forgot it was there, but the smoke always got into his eyes and sometimes the ash fell off and rolled down the front of his shirt.

This happened again now. He put out the cigarette, got up, and walked over to bring the jukebox back to life. He selected the same song. As he passed the long front window, he paused. It was early morning outside, with the complete, material darkness that early morning brings, broken by a few streetlights. It was still raining, but weakly now, and the wind had stopped. They lit the fog into fluid amber cones.

It wouldn't be light on the street until 7:30, although in the open

places the dawn is at 6:45. The restaurant would open at eight. The morning cook would arrive at seven, when it was still dark. He would wonder if, and then why, Louis had been there all night, but he wouldn't say anything about it.

Louis had enough time to go back to the table and light another cigarette before the song began again: *So many—I'll have to buy a new pack in the morning.*

He waited for the beat, and tried to play with it again, but he stopped: *It is not right. I cannot get it right. I'll have to tune again.*

When he cracked his knuckles it echoed. In the small, silent moment afterward, a sheet of ice fell in the machine in the back of the kitchen between the screen door to the porch and the linoleum counter for the microwave. It answered with an echo. In the time between the two, Louis caught sight of himself in the long front window. He eyed it like an uncomfortable, suspicious stranger. The image of the scene was curved; the reflections of the tables, the guitar, and his presence in the room, were all a little out of focus and distant.

Mae Soule

Big Bend, Texas and the Window Trail

For Mexico and Richard Long's 60 Minute Walk

Part 1
dusty boots, flat gravel, following hoof prints on the path
pacing steps around burrows, holes with the unknown
lizards, jack rabbit, orange and red butterfly
scratchmark of brittle thorns, on the leg
cactus spines and blossoms, blue and yellow
midday at Mule Ear Peaks squinting, snap dry roots, heat-split
in the distance, hovering buzzards over crossed sticks
small birds, chirping echoes off the cliffs
big sky horizon changes, breeze and purple silence
sleep back ache, long day's thirst away

Part 2
at the end, where the rocks are round and
curve like a woman's bosom
where water runs thin and fast through
and trees are sparse due to fierce wind
on top of the Chios mountains,
there is the end of the world
this place called the Window
you see for miles in dry desert land
birds fly with wings out strong against
God and Satan, and they mingle there
where tears come freely, singing without sound
the body shutters, soars
the window trail, where you see for miles
and you have traveled farther than that

Michael Krebs

When all the ands are ampersands

things are easy & I

(want to get a tee shirt made up that says *Jail. Congress.* & be lucid.

Can't get in trouble with punctuation—it's the SENTIMENT that screws you)

know better than to attempt as much.

It makes things brief & makes me

(think I'd be COMFORTABLE with a concealed weapon—

something tight and weighty—a pipe maybe)

consolidate thoughts & inappropriate ideas (in things

concerning murder & woman-control—the legs on which HUMAN history

rights itself) rather thoroughly.

I had a friend—really a fanatic for grammar—& he said

(c'mon, get in the damn car—we got no TIME)

it ruins the language & I nodded & (know nothing will change

through monologue or dialogue, but I am LAMBENT)

never could agree.

Why Befriend When There's the Chrysler Building

Because answers are not found in the interstices

where the fables and falcons alight over the living city.

I phone a friend and we waste time

on and about cycles—how odd patterns are,

the ways broken fragments come back together sometimes.

We both fear drugs these straighter days.

Because it leans like a reed—

elderly and awkward, seeming a brittle prop of marked stone.

We don't know what happens break to break

between the late movie and the early news. The synapses are wider,

and there used to be anthems and flags. Pieces don't click together.

I am reminded that we had sustenance.

Because it rises sickly and gothic

and little new can be told from it.

We run out of things to say and things to be,

and nothing has changed between us. This same talk grows tired,

and there is just so little resolution.

I realize one of us will be first to get a dial tone.

Rachel Barenblat

At the end of the millenium

Question: at the end of the millenium,
what poem should one read
at the wedding of a friend? I work
in paper and cracked cloth spines. That I know
these things is assumed, like gravity.

My first response was something
old, something Biblical. Then I thought
of how no one uses parchment
anymore, or soaks skins in running water.
Ink is archaic, I thought, and was silent.

At the end of the millenium, what
is as we expected? Does a white dress
still mean tenderness? Is she expected
to blush, what if wine is spilled, what if
someone cries? These cues,

(or what had been cues), are less simple now.
This is not a lament: most of our world
is multivalent, like crystals
or bug's eyes at a children's museum.
I have grown accustomed. I do not complain.

Still, I wonder this: if possibilities have thickened
the slurry of speech, if wondering
and wonder have unraveled our tongues, why
not simply appear and bow, or present the couple
with an apple, a ribbon, a wooden bowl?

Terry Heller

Preacher Zinser on the Road to Deer Grove

Preacher Zinser thought he might be in Hell. "God knows how I have striven to do right in his sight, but He's not grateful at all today. That's certain." Preacher thought he knew God well enough by now to venture a gentle joke. The sandy road leaked into his worn brown shoes over the tops and through the soles, and his burning feet got heavier. Acrid dust puffed out of and around his shoes with each step. There was no one else on the road this blazing afternoon, and the next farmhouse on his way to Deer Grove shimmered in its copse two miles ahead. Even from this distance, he could see the windmill wasn't turning. "If I could just squeeze this air a little, I could have a drink right now." But he knew this air wasn't going to squeeze for all eternity. It was always going to be just about 94 degrees and 94 percent humidity. He thought he might slip into the shade of the August cornfield down the hillside and break off a stalk to suck on. He could smell the corn roasting and ripening below. But it wasn't his corn, and down on the lower and darker ground, it would be hotter and heavier, and those small, high-pitched and hard-biting Illinois mosquitoes were awaiting him. He took off his yellow straw hat and wiped his bald head, long white hair, and red, lined neck with his blue bandanna. Then he picked up his canvas suitcase, shifted the bed-roll on his sweaty back, and trudged on along the meandering road that followed the sand hills through the Rock River bottom land, on his way to preach in Deer Grove.

He could have slept that night in Van Hyfte's barn. Emile and Millie, the old couple at the farm with the still windmill, had been polite. They had offered shelter too after giving him food and drink and expressing interest in the upcoming revival. But Preacher Zinser, when he began his ministry ten years ago at the age of 42, had promised God never to sleep under a roof while at *His* work. In his winters of rest and Bible study, he allowed himself to live with his sister in Aurora in exchange for the offerings he brought her, but from May through October, he must always sleep under God's roof or such shelter as God Himself provided.

This night, God brought him to an old, sweet-smelling cottonwood that shaded a country cemetery on the dirt road to Deer Grove. From beneath that tree he could see the stone foundation where the church had rested. This was a frugal country, and he knew this church had not been abandoned, but moved. The graveyard remained though, with about fifty markers starting in 1871, the last in 1919, just five years ago. This was the remnant of a country congregation that now was probably in a village, Mineralville off to the East or maybe Sauk Trail to the West.

He bedded down beneath the tree, spreading a swath of pale netting over four sticks pushed through the thin dry grass and into the hard, brown earth to keep the mosquitoes off his head and arms. From the waist

down, he cooked under the olive canvas that was his blanket, hard-baked sand beneath him and hot, still air above him. The locusts sounded like they were frying in oil. Sleep came slowly, and his mind wandered, as it often did when he relaxed, to that moment of crisis, when he had committed himself to this life.

At the age of 40, he was a dead man. Caring not for righteousness, he had broken his parents' hearts, letting those gentle, holy farming folks die in despair of his soul. Within a year, his fifteen-year-old son had escaped the drunken violence and the slavery of the farm to God knows where. And finally, Zinser had staggered home one Thursday midnight to see his house in flames, Emily and her daughter inside. His wife shouted at him from the second-story window, the fire in the bedroom behind her outlining her form against the blackness of smoke and night.

"See where you've brought us! Amy is dead already." He thought he could see the tears on her face as if he were standing right before her. He could smell the burning wood and—mixed in—the sick odor of feathers flaming in their beds. "And I'm not coming down. You hear!? I'm staying right here, and I am going out of this world at last," she shouted over the hungry roar of flames.

The growing heat drove him further away, until he found himself standing by the water tank, beneath the windmill, dipping his hands in water the temperature of an October night and rinsing over and over his feverish and stubbled face. Studying his distorted reflection on the disturbed, black surface of the water, he finally understood God's punishment. He thought to himself then, "There is an order to the world, and God has told us what it is. Woe unto the one who breaks God's law." So he became Preacher Zinser.

Faintly aware of something strange, Preacher awoke after he had been asleep for what felt a long time. It was really about midnight; he could see the almost full moon was directly overhead. The graveyard seemed like it was inside a giant Mason jar, for all around the sky was glowing white and a circle overhead formed around the moon. In the circle, the sky was clear though somewhat dimmed by mist and his mosquito net. Only the brightest stars were visible. Within the jar, he could see well around him, but at a certain distance, trees and fenceposts faded away. "How lovely God can make the world!" His wonder helped him forget momentarily what had awakened him and how hot he was, wrapped in his canvas and deprived by the netting of any faint motion of the air. He wanted to ask for a breeze, but he had promised not to ask God for anything for himself. If only there were someone else here who could use a good breeze! But he slept alone in the open partly so there would be no one else to ask such favors for.

He became aware of a moving shadow and a rustling. Slowly and quietly he turned onto his side. Though this was tamed country, one needed to be careful. An innocent skunk could be trouble enough, but

in August, you could meet a rabid wild dog or raccoon or even a hunting bobcat in this still sparsely settled farming country, with its uncleared woods and undrained swamps.

What he saw was a fox, just about ten yards away. It looked rabid for sure. The fox worked near a canted stone that glowed pale in the moon at the graveyard's unmown edge. The red-brown animal was tearing at the ground, not just digging, but dragging at it. Already it had made a small pile of milkweed, wild raspberries, and yellow daisy plants. Preacher's eyes opened wide as the fox dragged a skull out of the ground, and then some small bones, like those in a woman's arm maybe. The odor of green things uprooted from dry earth drifted to his nose. Soon the skull, minus its lower jawbone, lay on its left ear on the top of the pile of torn out plants, a mocking crown of thorny raspberry over its right ear. A few long thin bones surrounded the pile, leaning against its sides, pointing fog-colored fingers skyward. He watched the fox impossibly burrow into the small pile, seeming to shrink as it slithered in, as a lizard slides into a pile of rocks.

"I must be dreaming." Preacher scratched at his stubbly chin and neck to awaken himself. The crickets were chirping right along as usual, and a lone locust started up its dry siren rasp. He was beginning to think he had seen some illusion of the moon and mist, when he began to hear the muffled tramp of a horse along the sandy road.

Preacher sat up then, dislodging the netting, so that he looked like a ghost rising from his grave. But he was hidden in the dark shade of the cottonwood when the rider emerged from the night mist into the moonlight. The rider was coming from the direction Preacher had come, along the track from Prophetstown. Probably he was a businessman who owned a car, but prefered a horse for travel between these tiny rural villages that were connected only by dirt and sometimes graveled roads. Or perhaps, Preacher thought, he was a banker, checking on his mortgages.

Hearing another rustling, Preacher looked again at the strange pile. He saw something rise up slowly out of the ground, as if someone were coming up over a hill. The figure of a woman appeared, young and shapely, in a plain gingham dress that to him looked brown-checked in the moonlight, with long brown hair falling from beneath her country-woman's gold straw hat.

Before Preacher could close his mouth, the woman was at the side of the road, and the horseman had stopped to listen to her weeping.

"I've been walking this road nights all the way from Rockford since my poor Joseph died and left me with nothing. It isn't safe by day, because any man who sees me wants to lay me down behind the nearest bush. I've been afraid to stop at a farmhouse in case there wouldn't be a woman there. And now I am out of food and lost. Can you point me the way to Deer Grove? That's where my mother is."

"Deer Grove is where I'm headed. I 'spect to be there by mornin'. You can go along with me, if you've a mind." He smiled at her, and through

her tears she smiled at him as well. Preacher saw her adjust herself just a little, so that her youthful curves were touched more tenderly by the moonlight.

"My horse is hot, though. I'd hoped that walking in the night would be easier on her. I reckon you can ride a little, and I'll lead her along. Later on, we can ride together."

"How kind you are!" she said. She sniffled a little, and then wiped her nose and eyes with a white handkerchief she produced from somewhere.

"Well, it's too bad to be a pretty woman left alone in the world like this, traveling by night and scared and all. But this here's a Christian country, and there are good people to help a respectable woman. You've nothin' to fear from me. I'm Bill Perkins from Farmer's Insurance in Rock Falls, and I'm on my way to settle a claim to Deer Grove."

Perkins dismounted and tethered his horse off the roadside, to a fencepost that had been a young tree before it was cut off and trimmed. Now green shoots crowded up from the roots. The woman seemed awkward and somewhat frightened about mounting the horse, and soon Perkins found her in his arms as he considered how to lift her up.

It came to Preacher then that he was seeing the Devil at work. He roused himself, magically erupting from a pit of darkness. Tossing aside the clinging mosquito netting as he approached them, he seemed a wraith flowing across the graveyard.

"Watch out, stranger!" Preacher called out. "That woman ain't what she looks, but the Devil himself!"

"The Devil!" Perkins yelped, more in surprise than because he believed what Preacher said. He pushed the woman away to free his hands and face this apparition, for who could know what sort of man would accost you on the road on an August midnight? Appearances were against Preacher, who was barefooted and hatless, his clothes rumpled and rank now from sweaty waking and sleeping. His hair exploded in a silver nimbus around his bare, bald head, and his blue eyes seemed ghostly white in the strange light and his feverish excitement.

"He's a madman," said she. "Don't let him near to me!"

"'Tain't me that's mad," replied Preacher. "You should'a seen her rising up through the earth out o' Hell, and then you'd know."

The woman looked at Preacher hard then, and he felt the air bend and close around them, as if he and she were suddenly alone in a stifling, pitch-black box. And something happened that he was not able to grasp. Later he told himself the story this way.

"I could see her, and nothin' but her, not even myself. Like she was the only real thing in creation. It was still night and hot, but I didn't hear any sounds at all, and the heat was dry, like there was fire all around me that burned black and cooked me inside, while I could almost feel cold on my skin. It's like we were meeting somewhere else. And it was like everything had stopped, just so she could have it out with me.

"Her eyes were glowing rocks in a fire, and she seemed to kind of shine all over just a little. And after a minute of her staring at me, it was like she was talking inside my head. Her mouth didn't move; I didn't hear a sound. But the words were in my head without going through my ears. I can't tell just what she said, but it seems it was like this.

"'Why do you interfere, human? We will harm no one here. This man will have a little pleasure, and we will have his semen. That is all.'

"'Succubus!' That's the word that came from somewhere else inside me, just like my soul was telling me her name.

"She stopped like she'd heard my thinking, and then she said, 'Who are you to meddle with us? What do you know of our origin and purposes? Do you know the orderings of Cosmos?'

"This was loud in my head, like a thousand voices flowing out from a tornado. It made me feel like my insides were coming out. I thought without wanting to, 'How shall I answer thee?'

"And it was like she said, 'The Heavens thunder around you, and you hear only the little ticking of a clock in your breast. There is no harm in us. If you oppose us, we will withdraw, but then you waste our energies. Go on your way, and leave us to our work.'

"Then it was like a thousand voices spoke inside my head. They said just one word that echoed so it jumbled up all together. But what they said was, 'Look!'

"It was all silence then, and it was like I began to see through her, like she was a fire, and inside the fire was the face of the fox, and I was falling into it, falling and falling into the face, and into the blackness of nothing at all, and then into the stars."

He threw out his arms in the hope of grasping something solid, and in an instant, time resumed. He found himself, arms outstretched in the sweltering moonlight. Perkins and the woman stared at him as if somehow, *he* were an apparition that had flowed upward out of the hot hell beneath the steaming earth.

"Take me away quickly! Save me!" cried the woman, and she now found the stirrup and began to pull herself into the saddle without Perkins' help. And when she was in the saddle, the horse began to paw the sand, as if eager to be away. Perkins was inclined to protect her and to get himself away from this crazed stranger. He began to lead his horse back into the road, but Preacher, as if released from a spell, bounded toward them. The horse backed away, pulling Perkins, who grasped the reins tightly. Perkins cried out, incoherently, a sense of panic taking hold, as his horse pulled him into the center of the road.

Preacher reached the horse and grasped the right stirrup. He took a wad of her cotton dress in his left hand. He felt a kind of power flow from the checked cloth, slightly numbing his hand and arm. Still he moved his right hand from the stirrup, grasped her bare, smooth ankle, and held her. He could not feel her skin, but instead a series of shocks traveling through his grip to his elbow and shoulder and into his whole body.

"Stand back, old man!" she shouted. "Let us pass!"

Certain he held the Devil, Preacher cried out to God within his soul. He felt an icy calm descend upon his mind. He shouted aloud then, and the commands echoed softly back from a distant invisible wood. "Get thee behind me, Satan! In God's name, I compel you back to the dust your belly earned. " He pulled hard on her leg.

He heard a cry that never could come from a woman, an animal cry like cats in the night. In it Preacher distinguished words: "Ignorant human! You don't know what you do!" Beneath the words he discerned a ghostly echo that rattled his skull bones. He felt the ground tremble, and he staggered. He thought he saw a greenish light erupt into the sky, but perhaps it really was the flash of the emerald column that remained imprinted upon his retinae for several minutes afterwards, coloring his vision.

He shivered, cold for an instant, and then the close night resumed. He heard locusts and crickets. A mosquito whined near his left ear. He could smell the old sweat of the strangely calm horse. He looked at the dried and prickly raspberry stem he now held in his hand. Then he looked at Perkins, who was still holding tight to the bridle reins, and blinking as if to clear his vision, while searching for the woman's vanished shape.

"God damn!" Perkins said.

Both watched as wisps of withered grass, dried daisies and milkweed slipped from the saddle and drifted as if through water to join the already fallen white bones. For a moment the skull, which had dropped onto the fox skin, balanced, and then it tumbled and landed pate down with a soft thump, and what had been the roof of its mouth shown whitely, its teeth pointing toward the stars.

Preacher saw Perkins pull his horse close and begin softly to stroke its neck, probably to assure himself that his familiar world had been restored.

"God damn!" he said again.

Preacher stood, looking inward for a long time. Then he looked Perkins over from head to toe and decided to forgive him. "I've seen the Devil in many a heart, even my own, but never in a body of fox and grass and bones." He tossed the thorny, blackened stem into the road, then nudged the seemingly weightless body of the dead fox out of the saddle so that it fell softly onto the loose sand, next to the upturned skull.

"Tomorrow morning, I'm not goin' to believe this," Perkins said.

"That would be a good time to pray," said Preacher Zinser. "And then in the evenin' you can come to the revival at Deer Grove. There you'll learn what God and the Devil are really about."

Anne Dyer Stuart

On the Ride Home

Mary Margaret had a blanket
her mother was ashamed of
she took it to kindergarten
and sat under trees very still
she curled it into her lap
during reading time
whispered nonessential things,
recapped every story
on the ride home
and spilled many fine things
all over its coat
Mary Margaret had a blanket
her mother grew tired of
she tucked it into bed with her
wrapped her stuffed animals
into its girth
a cape it was, a magic carpet
a patchwork Cinderella dress
until one day her mother began
to wash it
cutting a strip off regularly
with every Sunday load
and hiding the pieces
until it was gone.

One Recipe

basil on top of chicken fat in a broth
buddha like a madwoman
burning on the stove

mama's hands salting liquor creme
dressing potato skins with blocks
of chunky Helman's lite

the whirr of the gadget that
disperses the heat
dad's thick gold watch turning
the stove dial a second time

"everyone's coming to dinner,"
sister says and I tug my own hair
into shape, layered like a crying onion
mama's wig a tossed salad,
her bout with cancer already lost.

wendie carr

five

and then through the sand
sometimes water
your stick dragging
behind soggy footprints
cutting crevices through land to unearth bodies you read about
that should be still and waiting

until caught
for an early afternoon spot check
she used your stick as a weapon against you
to lift up the elbow
and check for signs of fruit

and now
hands left wrinkled and rotting
weapons abandoned for
the morning's high tide

Shana Fried

Starving

Today I burned my finger on the stove.
It was more like a prick
and I remembered, four years ago
I was in love with you and also,
somehow, I had left the iron on.

There were four hundred elephants
murdered in the congo, for
something as pale as ivory and Mother
still talks of learning to play piano.

It's when I think of starving words,
like *practical*, *half-life* and *dead beat*
that I get hungry and find myself in the kitchen
looking at my refrigerator, pale as ivory,
with pictures drawn by a little boy
surrounded by gray magnets.

I remember hating him those last few days
when he plugged his ears and crouched in corners
he said he'd punch himself in the stomach,
until we sent him home—I wanted to go home.

It's less than fourteen days until the baby comes
and I wonder why I haven't called her
just to let her know, there's still a cross stitch
in the making—I've just been so tired lately.

It was just six months ago that your father
called and said he found a suicide note, and
had I heard from you. No, and we all clamored
about to look for you. It was only three days later
we found you slumming on the east side of San Antonio
—just some liquid martrydom that left you poured out.
By then I had lost the feeling remembering you were empty.

After that my mouth was so dry, I had a couple drinks
turned dirt into oil and fell asleep on the couch with
windows open and cool rain running down my thigh
relieving feverish muscle. I tried to tell him
he can't avoid becoming his parents, but it
caught in my throat—those starving words,
that feel like chipped cement, hard and granule

The kind you always fall on when
you're jumping off the swingset

Gynecology

This female existence is pourable like syrup, thick, almost clear, sweet. I am conscious of eggs sliding through tubes of satin never used for any purpose, always ending in a puddle. I can feel the tightening muscles of my thighs and uterus as I wait to be called. There is a moment when I am undressing from the waist down, as I drape paper over my lap, waiting for invasion, when I feel the odd cells multiplying, copulating with each other as if no one was watching. A slide to the edge, the raising of feet, cold curious metal prying a tunnel and holding it open causes the cervix to shutter from a force of light, a small and pink being born with a mouth but no voice, it chokes in nitrous gas and learns to regenerate after the burn. Who would believe that these things, steaming insides, are so countable, breathable, livable, moving. I have wanted to keep them protected in glass bottles with lids but know the importance of letting them all ooze together in the thick, landing and birthing itself in a puddle beneath the maple. They will not be independent of each other. The serum we would like to keep for emergencies has been inside me all this time.

William Jolliff

Crossing Home Church Road in October

Now the heavy-coated dew has come.
It covers the shoulders with a shawl of fog.

Tassels hang weary toward the earth
like a man spent from hunting or love.

Lower on the stalk, full ears dangle
like the breasts of a woman that ache

when her milk lets down. Sweetness drops
between furrows, while trucks on 74

sing radial hymns to the coming winter,
and morning water gathers on the lips

of three deer, their eyes dark and round
with the fatty season. They wait to cross

over from their nest between the corn rows.

Alan Webber

Hail, Hale the MMB!

You need to realize—
Mexican Motorcycle Bandits are not your average bikers.
They may ride hard & hellion,
Raise rooftops Sturgis rallies,
But, their lives are strummed full of Quality.

One of them writes short fiction!
Another does poetry!
One of them makes movies!
Another has a laboratory!

The writer has long, black hair . . .
The poet shoots cowboy glares . . .
The film man throws classy gigs . . .
The pharmacist feeds dirty pigs . . .

Wild women whoop and holler!
Tear their leather jackets off.
A fight is sure to break out!
Hope they ditch the cops.

Just look back, Americana—
There have been sights to see.
Classic cars and Magic buses,
Perilous journeys.

In the movies,
Riders died.
Rednecks were the cause.
Time to grow-up,
Remember lessons flawed.

Somewhere Montana Bench,
Robert Pirsig,
Ghost rider with a smile,
Watches Bandits ride and wrench
Mother Earth, mile by mile.

Wayne Harrison

Nice

The quiet, clean bus dropped him off at the Woodbury Shopping Plaza off Rt. 6. Jack's socked toe stuck through his boot as he descended the metal steps. He thought the second thing he was going to do was buy a new pair of Timberlands, the tan insulated ones, or maybe with steel toe. He waited for a moment on the asphalt, squinting out at the plush rise of alfalfa fields to the east. In this fresh morning light, with the sparrows chatting and darting around, it seemed as if last night were only something he'd made up in his head.

A pair of older women came toward him along the sidewalk. They stopped every few steps to point out extraordinary specimens of hyacinths and kingsbloods that bloomed fiery shades of red in half-barrel planters. The second woman, in a powder blue dress, clutched her purse in long bloodless fingers out in front of her as if handing it to someone. Jack looked up from it, and she was watching him. She smiled, her face becoming a mass of wrinkles, a forgiving smile it seemed. He straightened out his slouch, caught a breeze of musk as they neared. He liked the smell. The women meandered up the steps of the bus, helping each other by the elbows, and the air brakes hissed as the bus pulled away.

Jack unrolled a hard-pack of Basic Menthols from his sleeve. He lit one with a paper match from a crinkled deck that said, "Classy Ladies." He went to the bar in Waterbury lately with Smitty on Thursday nights, but by himself before, when his Valiant was running. Smitty would talk dirty to the women, who didn't seem really to mind as long as he'd fold out dollars for them. Jack didn't like it, though. Jack could find other transportation if that's how Smitty wanted to be. He smoked the cigarette down to its filter in five hard pulls.

Cars trickled into the lot as he stepped onto the sidewalk. They were small station wagons and minivans mostly, some still shiny and wet from just being washed. They clustered in front of Amy's Hallmark and Jean Country like groups of friends. Most of the people Jack passed wore casual Saturday morning clothes, whites and baby-blues on the men, soft-colored patterns on the women. Voices floated back and forth with sentences dangling and connecting. Change jingled in loose pockets.

The first place he headed for was Don's Cycles. The air was cool and smelled of new rubber in the shop. Many of the bicycles on the side wall were too fragile looking, tires as thin as cords. Jack ran his fingers along their cool frames. At the rear of the store he found one with tires thick and knobby.

The salesman that approached him was just a kid, tall with hair cut different depths down to fuzz on the sides, shiny skin, and a small gold stud in his ear. Probably up from the College, Jack thought. "How are you today, sir."

"I'm okay today," Jack said, unintentionally making a rhyme.

"This is one of our best sellers, eighteen speeds, Shimano index shifting." The salesman bent over and Jack backed out of his way. "Just watch how easily the front wheel pops off." He loosened knobs on the front fork and pulled at the wheel, but it didn't come off. He wiggled it and pulled again, his face turning red and a thin blue vein growing on his forehead.

"That's good," Jack said, to end the salesman's suffering. He didn't really want a front wheel that would pop off too easily, anyway.

The kid straightened and composed himself. "Are you looking for something for yourself?"

"Yeah."

"Well let's look at the man's model, right over here." Jack looked back at the bike and, yes, there was a small dip in the mid-frame.

"Oh," he said, and the young man passed a forgiving hand through the air. His eyes were big and dark, like a woman's. They widened as he talked, squinted slightly as he awaited answers. These weren't the shameless eyes of Holsteins, orange-sized balls shiny with slime that stared blankly while the other end filled the cement trough with shit. Black eyes whose only expressions were occasional fluttering of pink lids, blinking away horse flies.

The salesman went over all the features, a bit of spittle flying from his mouth. Jack took the water bottle off the frame, opened the top, and slipped it back into its holder with a decisive click. Out of his back pocket Jack removed six crisp fifties and handed them to the young man.

"Well, I'll just take this up front to the register and get you all filled out."

Jack walked the bicycle out to the parking lot and stopped to breathe in a lungfull of the summer morning. He'd known the plaza all its life, even before, when it was the east corner of Hank Ferris's cornfield, then the two-by-six yellow skeletons on bone-white concrete, later the collapsing of the Food Mart roof under the heavy snow of '87. Today the pink dogwoods stood atop pine nugget mounds, dropping their pillowy skins like litter of a dreamworld. It seemed as if the plaza had always been there, just like this.

A police cruiser slowed in front of him and his stomach tightened. Jack held his breath as it passed and pulled into a parking spot. As he exhaled a woman behind him said, "Look, he's got a new bicycle." Jack turned to see a young boy struggling with a small watermelon. His mother's small face was edged by bangs and wings of shiny black hair, her skin powdery white like a porcelain doll. She watched her son admiring the bicycle then looked at Jack. Her smile crinkled her nose for a moment before she walked away. "Hi," Jack said, so softly that she didn't hear him. Fawn used to smile when he'd have a folded dollar bill waiting for her in the neck of a beer bottle. But that was something else. That was a big smile that meant just what you were thinking, a smile with no clothes

on.

The mother jingled her keys out of her purse as she and the boy approached a red hatchback. The boy leaned back and forth with the watermelon as his mother lifted up the back. He plopped it on the carpeting, and his mother lifted him up next to it and tied his sneakers.

When Jack hopped on the bicycle the hard rise of seat caught him on the testicles. He felt he might throw up and swallowed hard. He put down the kickstand and walked away from the bicycle until his stomach stopped aching.

Officer Pinnel was having a wonderful week. A Rolling Stones riff hung in his head and he whistled it out. The song was on the radio early that morning when he started his dew-covered Chevy pickup.

Pinnel stepped out of his cruiser with two letters in his hand. The sun caught him just right on his back, like a woman's soft fingers massaging. He walked to the big blue mailbox and inserted the envelopes. The tight curls of his head tingled as he ran his fingers through. When he brought his hand down a tiny breeze of perfume held him, in a second it was gone, but no women were nearby. It was his hand, he realized, her shampoo he'd used—Finesse.

Jack saw that the letters the policeman deposited were solid white envelopes with names in thin script, not clear windows that show a typed address. They're to friends, he thought. The officer's whistling was beautiful, although Jack couldn't place the song, an upbeat, happy sound. The officer looked quickly at Jack and nodded in a friendly way before walking back to his cruiser.

Again Jack mounted the bicycle, carefully this time. He wobbled back and forth, righting himself with his feet. It had been a long time. The seat was too high for him, but he'd fix that with the Vice Grips when he got it home. Just as he got going with the wind throwing his hair back, the double-folded cuff of his overalls wedged behind the chain guard. He reached down and wrenched out the greasy snag, and he looked up just in time to see his front wheel crash into the back fender of the red hatchback. He fell over on his side.

The woman opened her door quickly and stepped out, leaving her son seatbelted in the passenger seat.

"God, I'm sorry," Jack said. He wheeled the bicycle to the curb and laid it in a neatly-trimmed patch of pachysandra.

The woman walked timidly to the back fender and looked at the small dent. Then she looked at Jack. "Are you all right?"

Jack came up to her quickly and she backed away. He bent and ran his hand over the dent.

"It's not too bad," the woman said. "My insurance—"

"I could fix it for you," Jack said quickly, "Do you have a hammer?"

"Is everything okay here," came a deep voice. Still bent over, Jack

turned to see a shiny black pair of shoes connected to navy blue pants that held a black belt at the waist. The gun that hung from his hip was black and squarish and seemed very big.

"He's had an accident," the woman said to the policeman.

"Like I said I can fix it." Jack could ride over to Smitty's garage, pick up some Bondo and touch-up paint.

"I needed to take it in for the brakes anyway," the woman said, again to the policeman. "I'd just as well have it taken care of there." Finally she looked at Jack. "I don't think we need to make any monetary case here. It was just an accident. "

Pinnel was relieved she said this. Looking at the man, Pinnel didn't imagine he could afford to pay for the repairs. "I guess there's no harm done then." The woman nodded to Pinnel and went back around the car.

When she opened her door Jack heard the boy inside crying. He saw the woman reach over and give him a long hug.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" the officer said to Jack.

"I've got to go with you somewhere," Jack said.

"How's that?" the officer said.

Jack looped past him and stood by the passenger door of the big blue cruiser. "We got to go, in your car."

"What about your bike?"

"It'll be okay," Jack said. He didn't want it anymore. The last thought he ever had of the bicycle was that it would be a tough color to keep clean.

As Pinnel approached his car the man stretched his hand over the roof. "Jack. My name's Jack." Pinnel considered the hand for a minute, then reached out and shook it. The temptation to introduce himself as Ted was strong, but the officer suppressed it as you should on duty, and he pivoted his torso to where his name tag was in full view: Officer Pinnel.

Pinnel checked his watch, spit his gum into a gutter. The man by his car shifted his weight from foot to foot, and his enthusiasm seemed genuine. He didn't look dangerous in any way, and what made Pinnel concede was the fact that Danny Webber was facing a possible suspension for admittedly finishing his Spicy Italian and coffee before responding to a burglary at Mrs. Green's place. Her roto-tiller was being stolen from her shed. Webber contended he thought it was only the raccoon in the bird seed again, and how was he to know that she'd have gone into conniptions requiring an ambulance call and sedation after watching the Polk brothers carrying her Wheel Horse off into the woods. "This is a tricky time for the department," the Chief had warned the past two mornings.

Pinnel wouldn't have let Jack in the front seat if he'd had his shotgun up there. He'd taken it to the range yesterday afternoon, and since he wasn't home last night, he intended to clean it after his shift today.

The inside of the big blue car smelled strong with new leather. Jack watched the officer get in and fasten his seatbelt, and then he did the

same. There were controls for the red and blue lights, a toggle switch that said SPOT LIGHT, and the speedometer went up to one hundred and forty. The gas needle read a little over Full. He told the officer to go left onto 6. The officer backed out of the parking spot and pulled slowly out onto the busy street.

Over the scratchy radio another officer called for dispatch. It was Bobby Lawrence, Pinnel recognized. He was going to call Bobby later on and have a few drinks at the Rusty Scupper. Pinnel and Lawrence, being the only single officers in the department, and having graduated from Southern CT State together, had a kind of competition with women going. Pinnel had a lot happen recently that he wanted to brag about. "Charlie eleven—yeah, I found the car of that Nolen Parks, four miles north on Flanders, on the Bleaker property. Call his wife back and see if there's any reason for it to be here. No sign of—"

"You gonna tell me where we're going?" Pinnel said. He was soon to be missing his lunch at The Charcoal Chef.

"A right turn up at that next light."

Pinnel obeyed his directions, and when they were on a straightaway, he looked over his passenger with a policeman's eye. Late thirties if he takes care of himself, early if he doesn't. Brown hair, thinning in back, blue eyes. A sloppy tattoo on his bicep. Just the green letters, JACK.

Pinnel felt a sneaking sympathy for the farm workers. Most of the public he dealt with were the executive class, griping about shots fired on their property or trivial bumpings in their Saabs and Audis on winter roads. The farmers and their help pretty much stayed to themselves—not in a vindictive way, but more out of pride, to handle things and mind one's business.

Turning back to the road Pinnel watched Betty's house go by, her car gone out of the gravel drive, the window shades opened now. She would be waiting for him at The Charcoal Chef with a chopped steak sandwich on a Portuguese roll, steak fries and an extra pickle she'd dropped on the side. A pickle—a second crisp garlic pickle—she'd promised him, a loving glint in her eye. That was their first night together, four weeks in the making, not only the sex (three times starting after dinner) but with sleeping, glasses of water on his bedstand, a shower in the morning. Worth waiting for. He wondered how long she'd wait for him before she threw the plate out. Or maybe she'd just take it home to her husband, some country comfort after his three-day business trip to the city.

Jack recognized the truck coming at them as Vernon Miller's. He had the slats on the bed and a load of hay tightly stacked. Shit-ass, Jack thought, watching him shrink in the side-view mirror. How the hell's three cows getting mastitis my fault? I kept to schedule, used the teat-dip. Shit-ass.

Pinnel eyed the man once again and wondered if he'd ever had a woman. Maybe one or two, the officer concluded, but no one special, no one like Betty. Pinnel thought that the man, who was watching out the

window like a farm dog and scratching at his cheek, might even be a little retarded, perhaps another escapee from Southbury Training School.

"You want to tell me about yourself."

"Sure, what do you want to know?"

The man's quick response made Pinnel reconsider—he's just quiet, shy?—and now he had to finish up his proposition.

"Do you have a job?"

"I'm milking up at the Miller's place."

"Wasn't that Vernon we just passed?"

Jack bit the inside of his cheek. He hated being caught in lies. "Could be. I wasn't looking."

Pinnel was now suspicious of his passenger. He saw him looking right at the truck. Why would he lie about something like that? Pinnel reached down and picked up the receiver off the radio. He wanted to call into dispatch, just in case, to tell them what was going on. But it was unclear to him what this was all about, and perhaps the Chief would think he'd behaved rashly in taking the stranger in his car. Besides, the man seemed to trust him for some reason, and if he reported to dispatch the man might reconsider. Pinnel replaced the receiver.

Jack directed two more turns and they wound along the horse-farm side of town. Bright white colonials with fluted wooden columns on the front porticos, freshly-painted red barns in back. On the other side of Wolff's Flats where the high school kids raced their muscle cars was the beef and dairy farm side. Jack had been employed, at one time or another, by every cattle farm in Woodbury and two in Bethlehem. His hands were tough and strong from milking and slaughtering.

"Is there a problem at your house?" the officer said.

"Not really. The old lady's mean as a snake."

"That your wife or girlfriend?"

"She's my mother." Jack thought for a minute. It had been awhile since someone had asked him anything personal, "She's been bitchin' about things, but I'm pretty used to that by now. She's been bitchin' for years—" He stopped himself when he saw the grave look on the officer's face. Jack was suddenly embarrassed that he'd cussed like that. Twice.

Jack talked to the cows while he milked. "Back your foot up there, watch the damn hose." Sometimes he hit them, like a couple of weeks ago when the one kicked over the stainless milk pail three times in a row. They were full-swing punches, from the shoulder and into her neck where the skin was tight and made a slap, but you had to teach them; spilled milk was lost money. When he hit so hard that his jaw knotted up and a scream came from far down inside him, leaving him panting afterwards, Jack would apologize. He'd run his hand along the bell-shaped sides, combing out the mud. "I didn't mean nothin' by it. But godammit you just got to learn . . . " reasoning, his voice mixing with cow noises, claiming part of their world for himself. If you didn't talk to them after ten hours in the barn, it was easy to forget you were a person.

He thought that the people who spray painted their names on the brick walls of the motel where Fawn had lived were also wanting to be somebody. You needed to make a mark for yourself. His headlights ran over the bubbly letters, and before he had a chance to click them off, Fawn, her face pimply and shining in the interior light, would say, "Thanks for the ride. One of these nights I'll bring you up. We'll have a good time." He'd put up the windows after she got out, hanging on to the sweet fragrance of her perfume that always gave him an erection.

The officer slowed down for a light and turned to Jack. "Maybe what we need to do here is just head right down to the station house." He didn't intend to go through with this threat but thought it might get the ball rolling a little faster. A sharp twang of hunger stabbed at Pinnel's belly. Betty's shift ended at two.

"It's a Volvo. A red Volvo." Jack said. He rested his palms on his knees and sighed.

"What's a red Volvo?"

"That's where we're going."

They crossed the narrow cement bridge over the Nonnewaug River, and as Jack looked down at the gravelled banks a memory overtook him. It was last summer. He was fishing for browns. A red-haired, skinny man with expensive fly gear heading upstream to the rapids stopped by him, and Jack picked up his tackle box. He asked Jack if they stocked rainbows and Jack said he didn't know. Suddenly the man dropped his rod and with both hands threw Jack over on his side, Jack landing on a rock the size of a salt lick, his plastic tackle box cracking down the side. Jack jumped to his feet and clawed at the loose bank. The heavy redness that filled his head came in waves behind his eyes, dripping hot over everything. He reached the top and chased the man, until his chest was tight, the man yelling something and running frantically up the road. Before hitching a ride back home, Jack stomped on the thin flyrod, snapping it in two, and he hurled both pieces into the deep water.

But now he remembered. It was a snake. A copperhead had slithered to a flat rock by Jack's feet to sun himself. He'd seen it for a split second before falling over. That was what the man yelled afterward. He was saving Jack's life.

"Charlie-eleven, come in," came over the radio. Jack looked down at the luminescent red channel lights as Officer Lawrence responded. Dispatch continued: "Wendy Parks has no idea why the car's parked there. She's on her way to meet you. " An icy trickle spread through Jack's intestines. Could he just stop now, get out of the car and forget the whole thing? He began unrolling his pack of cigarettes from his sleeve but remembered where he was and stopped. He didn't look at Pinnel but thought of the woman at the shopping plaza, the boy with the watermelon. It could just as easily be her. She wouldn't hate him. "It was just an accident," she'd said.

"Here," Jack said, pointing to a sandy pull-off.

The officer raised his fingers on the top of the steering wheel, waving to Officer Lawrence, and pulled in front of his patrol car. Officer Lawrence waved back to him, wearing a puzzled look.

"Seems a lot different than it did last night," Jack said, while unfastening his seat belt.

"Now hang on," Pinnel said. The man turned and Pinnel looked into his clear eyes. "Jesus, why?"

Jack smiled to him then, letting all his crooked teeth out. Then he stepped out of the patrol car and bent between two strands of barbed wire into the alfalfa field. "C'mon," Jack called. "Back here's where I left him." The police officer watched him for a moment, then followed.

Amanda Moore

Leaving

We finally devoured the tension—
stayed up late one night and gorged ourselves
on everything that passed between us.
He feasted on each of my lazy breasts
(had I only carried milk to feed him)
and I on his skin, his hair, his skin.
We were wrecked together until
the mingling of us soaked up our mouths
and we were thirsty.

And today the only evidence of him
is streaked in the bottom of my toilet,
maybe his smell on my sheets or hands,
puddles on the kitchen floor where ice has melted
and perhaps the urge to tell him this
is how it will always be with us—
I am a bottle, a mouth, a meal, a bed
I am here and not thirsty and not needing.
This is how I will be loved.

Cure

This is a defeat. My father who once beat cancer learns
that done doesn’t mean over, safe isn’t out of danger,
quitting cigarettes and adding vitamins can’t protect you
from what you are on the inside: cancerous, malignant, benign,
and he has always been all these things.

He’s not worried, he tells me over the phone.
He will be back at work on Tuesday. There’s no need for me
to drive home and watch him rest one day, heavily drugged.
I go anyway, and for myself bring fat novels, bagels,
and for his efforts to rid himself of cancer, a salad:

Electric green lettuce so alive it looks unhealthy,
tomato beating like a heart in acids,
cucumber slotted, cheese shredded, egg hard boiled,
blue cheese tumbled, pure, white ranch dressing
like vomit over everything except stale croutons,
floating like driftwood in a stagnant lake.

Ode To A Red Velour Chair

I do not know the story of your birth,
the hands that made your shape
from cheap wood, springs and nails—
the first time I saw you, rascal,
you were a huddled waif in the corner
of Salvation Army, your stiff arms
begging to be brought home.
Chair, you are typical student furniture,
not upstanding enough to grace
even the basement of a decent home.
Your tackiness, your open lap of
sinful, silky, shiny red material
does not say, "Come read a story on me," but rather,
"If I could talk of what I've seen, you'd be embarrassed."

O red velour chair, I bought you for a dollar
and lifted you onto my head
like an African carrying a jug of water,
like an Indian carrying laundry to the river,
like a Victorian in the most absurd milliner's fashion,
and brought you home to sit among
your new, mismatched friends.
You looked like a fantasy against my plain wall,
a history too sordid for most to hear,
but I knew I could dress you down,
make you face the corner like a punished child,
place a table before you.
You suddenly became practical—
a civilized place to eat meals, a well-lit place to read.

You must long for something more:
The dim confines of an opium den and
the slender white thighs of an addict rubbing
your overstuffed, perfumed skin,
loose springs scratching nodding heads.
Or maybe you want the more puritan life,
a religious home where you are too good to be sat upon,
nestled on rich carpet among jewel tones,
blues, greens, purples like light caught in stained glass.
This common use in my living room degrades you, I'm sure,
your brilliance muffled by less flashy, utilitarian furniture—
my powder blue rocking chair precariously close,
70's style green, pea green, lime green, soft green chair clashes,

my luxurious red couch (no you weren't the first),
too far away to prove shabbier, less elegant,
too close to let you sing your glory alone.

O poor stifled chair weighted down
with books and papers and people,
your tender velour ruffled under hours of tedious sitting,
I know you must miss the lavish life your wear remembers
because sitting on you, swimming in your redness, your sin,
I long for that life too.

Michael Gregg Michaud

Homer Shows Me His Prince Albert

I want to show you something, he said
as he took my hand and
led me into the bathroom.
I just got this done on Saturday,
I've been thinking about doing it
for so long
and I bartered with a girl for it.
I'm totally into bartering now.
I cut her hair, and she paid for this.
He dropped his black jockey shorts,
and laughed.
His penis was wrapped in a paper towel
secured with a rubber band.
Oh, cool, he mumbled as he inspected it,
no bleeding.
A large silver ring penetrated
the end of his swollen penis
and exited about a half inch
on the underside of the shaft.
How do you like my Prince Albert,
he asked.
He put his hands on his hips
and leaned back.
Watch this, he laughed,
and he started to urinate.
He grimaced
and leaned forward against the wall
while a steady stream of urine
exploded from the head
and leaked from the new hole
on the underside of his penis.
It's okay, he mumbled in pain,
urine is sterile.
I covered my eyes.
Afterward, he dabbed at himself
with toilet paper,
polished the silver ring, and said,
wow,
I need a smoke after that.

Ivor C. Treby

SKE
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TON

Once in Egypt you appeared briefly at my feast
smiled raggedly through a slipped bandage
before they bore you unprotesting away
How many centuries later there you were again
staggering upstairs to starlit London
out of a tavern's capacious cellar
a waiter tight at your heels
I watched you count a gleam of silver and bronze
enough it seemed for one more dish
the orange honey-dripped flesh of a melon
Then crabwise down the wide stairs again
a crony held precariously by an arm, your laugh
the white scattering of a flight of bats
no noise, only the open O of your mouth
with dawn leaking blood at the window
as the fire, all ash, stuttered out

Ten years perhaps to a night in Amsterdam
I saw you past shoulders in Cafe Vertigo
you nodded distantly through the cigarette haze
Always though, that silence: not yet, not here
When next seen, how could I have been mistaken
sprawled on a charpoy on the bank of the Indus
your eyes sunk grey above that hawk beak
your beard a bristling flame of henna
One time you welcomed me at a lovo in Fiji
I smelled the broiled flesh of a priest
trussed in the submissionary position
for once of some use to his fellow men
And surely beyond doubt it was you
in Qosqo, late below the Inca wall
you shuffled along the moonless lane
and round your neck a wreath of dropping roses

Never the same, unknown yet ever familiar
it seems you have always been there somewhere
spooking at the back of the crowd
not a beetle-blue cloak in a mirror
not a splinter-thin shape at a high window
not a bone vizor glimpsed by sunlight
rather an interesting grotesque, a liripoop
each time inching nearer, staying longer
no greeting to your long dumb watchfulness
a timidity almost, uncertain of your welcome
Of late you sense my acceptance, grow braver
stand often alert outside my inner door
This livid winter suddenly you flesh out
draw up a chair to my accustomed table
press eager lips to my attentive ear
begin at last, long last, to speak

Gina Hausknecht

The hiccup cure

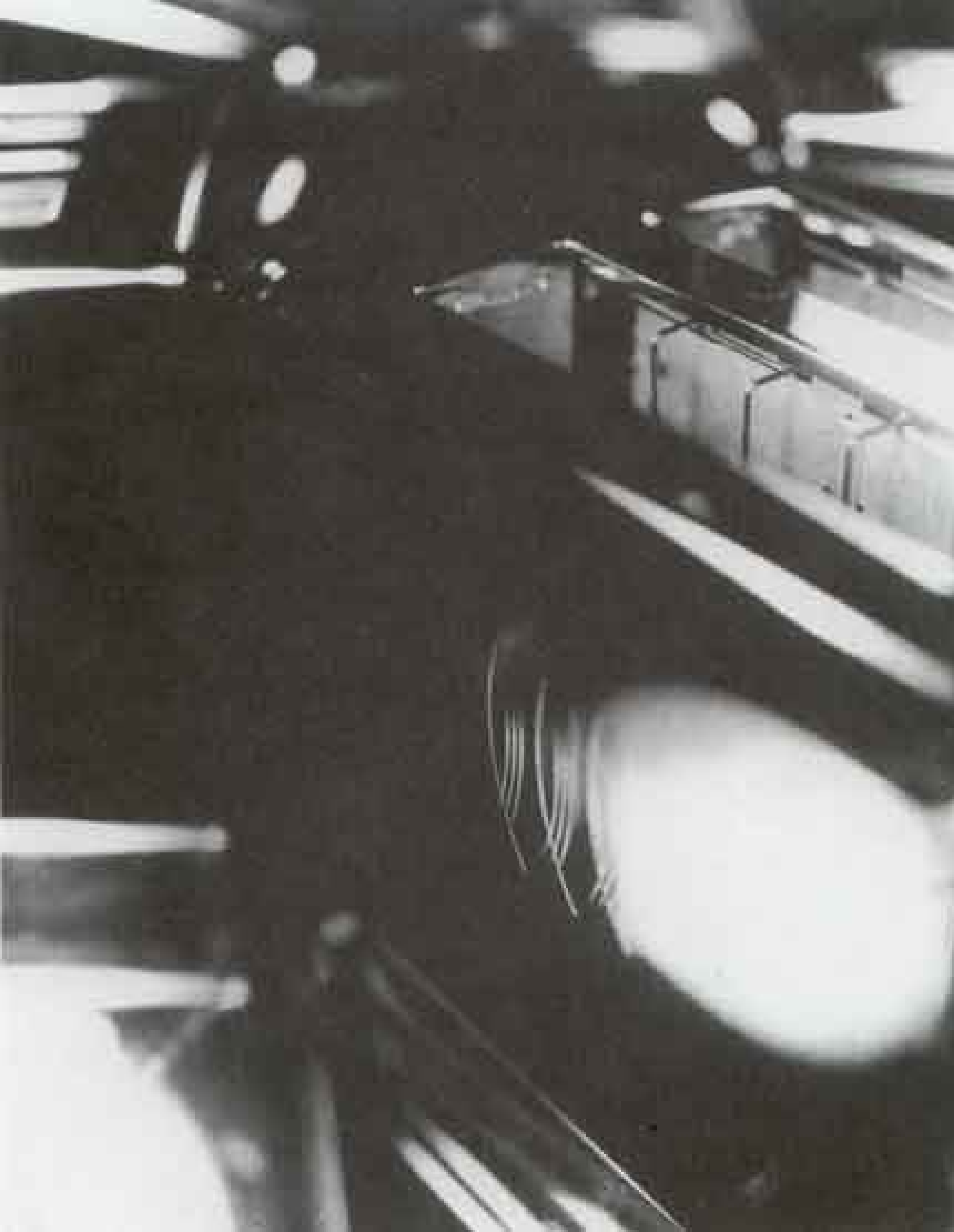
The hiccup cure is all about
latent faith in skeptic hearts.

Drink water backwards from a glass.
Drink water with a pencil held
between your chattering teeth.
Swallow water, slowly,
in ten tiny glugs.
Eat a spoonful of sugar as
quickly as you can.

Breathe in the pattern of a poem.
Laugh at nothing under a full moon.
Spell your name in gulps.
Scare a ghost.

Danny's mother took him everywhere when he was young, to cure his awful warts. The Tijuana doctor advised: grind up a scorpion and drink it with a glass of juice. The warts were cured. A later (U.S.) doctor said, Mexico nothing, that's power of suggestion. But when we heard the story we all felt a wave of devotion for the scorpion.

With hiccups, and some other things:
doubt and hope at the same time,
while continuing to breathe.



Daniel M. Jaffe

The Potato

Pasha and his mother stepped through the door, followed Nikolai Adamovich down a short hall and into the living room. Pasha tugged on his mother's yellow cotton sleeve, she bent, he whispered to her ear, "It smells like a bathroom."

She put finger to lips.

Pasha saw his schoolmate, Danya, standing by the sofa, waved at him. Danya stared for a moment, looked from one to another as if trying to place the visitors somewhere else in Moscow, lifted his hand to them without smiling, his eyes lost in the shadows of his brows.

Mama smiled and said to Danya, "You look like a birch sapling. Pale and slender and graceful."

Pasha's shoulder twitched under his mother's touch. She never called Pasha slender and graceful.

Pasha looked around the room. Bookshelves on the walls, many books. Away from the window, a bureau filled a dark corner, and something that looked like a picture in a frame stood on it but Pasha couldn't be sure—only twilight filtered through the closed window, no other light in the room.

"Please wait a moment," said Nikolai Adamovich. His dull grey eyes seemed to tear ceaselessly from an inner irritation. "It's time to adjust the potatoes."

Potatoes? Pasha loved potatoes. Mama had promised to fry some later for him and Papa. No matter how little meat or anything else appeared in the shops, potatoes could always be counted upon for supper everywhere in Moscow, maybe in all of Russia. Asya-with-the-red-pigtails' mother was known for her potato puree with peas and Sasha-with-the-runny-nose's mother made the best potato pancakes Pasha had ever tasted. And no one made fried potatoes like Mama—the slices shiny with butter and salt, crispy brown around the edges, soft in the center. Mmmmmmm. The biggest scare they all sometimes shared during winters was speculation that the potato harvest might be poor, even if Soviet leaders assured the nation otherwise. Was Danya's father going to cook them potatoes?

While Danya continued to stand still, fists clenching something, Nikolai Adamovich moved to the sofa, pulled it open into a bed. The man's face and hair were like snowy cotton, thought Pasha—soft, puffed, white. Pasha watched him cross to the window, to a brown armchair holding what looked to be a lumpy sack of potatoes. The man knelt before the armchair, kissed the burlap hem of the sack, rested his forehead against the swellings at the bag's seam, moved his lips without making a sound. He pressed his ear alongside a bulge as though to listen, the way Pasha and his friends would do when playing doctor.

Danya's father stood, turned his palms face up, slipped first his fingers, then his hands, then his forearms beneath the sack and slid it forward until it rested against his chest, under his chin. Nikolai Adamovich tilted his face downward, pressed his lips gently against a bump in the sack here, a tear in the burlap there, then stood, stifled a groan at the weight.

No, thought Pasha, Danya's father was not planning to cook the potatoes. What was he doing? Pasha scrunched up his nose as the sour smell became stronger, reminding him of rotting dill. His mother squeezed the tip of her nose, smeared the thin layer of face powder already moistened by perspiration. Pasha saw her glance at the closed window, and he wished that Nikolai Adamovich would open it to allow in September street air, car exhaust, anything to freshen the room littered with yellowing papers and sour-cream-caked plates.

Nikolai Adamovich, his slippers flapping softly against his heels and the floor, shuffled across the room to the sofa-bed, gently carried the sack the way Pasha's father would sometimes carry him to bed after Pasha had nearly fallen asleep in front of the TV. Danya's father knelt again, set the sack down, slid it from his arms onto the thin mattress. He shifted the sack gently up against the back of the sofa-bed, then arranged the potatoes through the burlap.

Pasha huddled against his mother's thigh, put his arm around her waist, looked up to see her lift her right hand and move it to straighten the pins at the back of her blond bun, a motion she would always make when uncomfortable, as whenever Pasha's father was late returning home from one of his special meetings and had not telephoned. In the past, the gesture would make Pasha nervous, accompanied as it was by Mama's pacing across the room, but now he felt comforted by the movement's familiarity.

Nikolai Adamovich climbed into the sofa-bed next to the sack, lay on his side facing it, pressed the entire length of his body against it, the slight swells of his chest and thighs filling the spaces between the potatoes, the sack's indentations. He reached his arm around the khaki green bundle, held it close, inhaled deeply through his nose.

Pasha felt Mama grab his hand and tug hard, abruptly turning and leading him to the living room doorway.

"I've finished," Nikolai Adamovich called weakly from behind them. "No need to go."

Mama and Pasha turned to him. "I know," she said, her voice trembling, "that we each must develop a private way of coping, but this . . . in front of the children . . . I can't claim to understand. Whatever it means, the children should not be exposed to such behavior."

Nikolai Adamovich shrugged his shoulders. "It was time. Anyway, I've finished," he repeated. Then he addressed his son. "Danechka, change the dill."

Pasha wasn't in the class his mother taught at school, but Asya-

with-the-red-pigtails, Sasha-with-the-runny-nose and Nadya-with-the-freckles—all in class with Danya and Mama—had told Pasha that Danya was as weird indoors as he was outside. They said that ever since school started, whenever Mama called on Danya to read in class, the boy would just stare back at her—didn't look away or put his head down on his desk or cry or do anything else that would have made sense; he just stared. And instead of speaking his arithmetic answers out loud like everyone else, he always trudged up front to write them on the blackboard without ever asking permission to leave his seat.

On the playground, Pasha had seen for himself how Danya never answered a question, never posed one, never spoke, just watched the rest of the children from a distance, stared with his deep, hollow eyes, fondled the rotting potato he carried in his pants' pocket. The boy seemed to sway in the wind, he was so skinny, and every once in a while he'd brush aside strands of his long blond bangs, wispy spider webs dangling from the upper trunk of a young tree.

Yesterday morning on the way to school, Mama had suggested that Pasha plan to join her, for the very first time, on one of her unofficial advice-giving visits. She refused to explain the visit's purpose, would say only that Pasha's presence might make Danya more comfortable. During recess, Pasha walked over to Danya in the corner of the schoolyard. "Mama says we're gonna visit you at home tomorrow."

Danya stared.

"Wanna play tag with us?"

Danya shook his head and looked down at the dirt where he'd been drawing horizontal lines with a stick. He marked little x's on the lines, then looked up at Pasha and raised his eyebrows.

Pasha squinted to understand the sketch, couldn't, shrugged.

Danya threw down the stick and pulled a potato from his pants pocket, stared into its protruding yellow eyes.

"Nice potato." Pasha didn't say what he truly thought, that the potato's shriveling skin looked dry and scaly like a lizard's. "Can I hold it?"

Danya shook his head, clamped his other hand over the potato.

The boys stared into each other's eyes with such intensity that Pasha saw his own reflection in the steel blue of Danya's.

Danya opened his palm, then, extended the brown lump so that Pasha could touch and pet it as he might a hamster or mouse. Pasha poked the potato with his fingertip, pressed and expected the same hardness he always felt at home when tugging potatoes out of the paper bag beneath the sink, but Danya's potato felt spongy, indented at Pasha's touch. So old. An antique potato with pointy eyes like clusters of misshapen teeth, tiny wrinkles on the skin reminding Pasha of the prunish creases around Alek-with-the-belly's grandma's toothless mouth.

Pasha asked Danya once more to join in the game of tag, but the boy shook his head, shoved the potato back into his pocket and picked up

his stick. Why wouldn't Danya play with the others during recess? Did he think he was better than everybody else? And why was he always carrying around that stupid potato?

"Danechka," repeated Nikolai Adamovich, "change the dill. It's okay in front of people." Danya opened his fists, rushed to the sack of potatoes on the sofa-bed, unwound dried dill stems from the twine at the sack's top, replaced them with the fresh green sprigs he'd been clenching in his fists. Then he sat on the bed, rested his arm on the sack.

"The boy enjoys fussing with the dill," said Nikolai Adamovich with a limp smile. "My wife used to love it with almost everything. Boiled potatoes rolled in chopped fresh dill. Every night." He offered the brown armchair by the window to Mama. She moved from the doorway, sat in the chair, patted its arm for Pasha to sit. He did and took her hand; it felt warm.

Nikolai Adamovich scraped a wooden chair across the floor and sat opposite them. "Nina Andreevna, whatever mischief my Danya's done at school, please consider not telling the authorities. I'll pay for anything he's broken." Pasha saw the man's eyes crinkle small and pink. Then Nikolai Adamovich tugged a crumpled handkerchief from his white shirt pocket, dabbed first at his eyes, then along his moist upper lip. Dab, dab. Dab, dab, dab. Bits of the handkerchief's lint caught on the grey stubble of the man's lower cheek.

Mama sighed and shook her head. "This doesn't involve the authorities."

Nikolai Adamovich shoved the handkerchief back into his shirt pocket. "Thank you. I hope you don't expect a bribe for your silence. I haven't a kopek to spare." He stared with those pink eyes.

"There's been no mischief. I should have explained on the telephone. Of course you misunderstood. How to explain?" Pasha felt her shift in the armchair. "It's Danya himself. The way he thinks. He never speaks. Everyone accepts that, but I've begun to wonder whether the problem truly is physical."

What was Mama saying? Pasha wondered. That Danya could speak all along, but just never felt like it? No one at school knew for certain why Danya didn't speak. To be sure, at least once a week, like little whirlwinds of autumn leaves, unreliable rumors would circulate on rushed, children's breaths—the story about the witch who'd put a spell on Danya because he'd yelled naughty words at her, or the one about his having tried to kiss a little girl ("Feh!" "Tfooo!") who was so angry she bit out his tongue. In reality, no one knew anything about Danya's past, not where he'd attended some school the year before, or even if he'd attended at all.

Pasha had certainly felt nervous about going to Danya's apartment, but more than that, had felt curious and excited by the prospect of being the one to inform everybody else the next day of whatever secrets he and Mama might uncover. After all, a secret was no fun until you teased an uninformed somebody about the fact that you knew one, until you

gave in and shared.

Many teachers (not Mama, but others) encouraged their pupils to share whatever secrets might have been overheard at home, like little Pavlik Morozov, the twelve-year-old who turned in his own father for having aided opponents of Stalin's forced collectivization of the peasants; a statue was later erected in heroic little Pavlik's memory. But Pasha's parents and those of his friends cautioned the children never to tell teachers anything overheard in the apartment, especially not criticism of the government—of Brezhnev when he was alive, of Andropov when he was alive, of Chernenko now. Disclosure of such a statement might result in their parents' being taken away forever, much too huge a price to pay in exchange for a dumb statue. So, if the teachers asked what was talked about at home, Pasha and his friends would share only fairy tales told by their parents, stories about Grandfather Frost and talking foxes, tales which the children sensed to be harmless because the teachers already knew them.

Among themselves, however, in hushed tones, Pasha and his friends would speak about some subjects discussed at home—not about politicians, certainly, because the children didn't really care about those old, cross-looking men—but about practical things. They would share useful information, important lessons learned at home, like the advice Alek-with-the-belly had once passed along from his grandma of what to do if ever you felt hunger in your soul: find the grandma's savior, the man who turned his blood into wine and his flesh into bread; the children were grateful for this information—and agreed never again to eat at Alek's, where his grandma did the cooking. Another time, Pasha stopped his friends from throwing stones at pigeons in the schoolyard; he whispered to them that Papa had shown him an icon depicting a dove and had called it a holy spirit—none of the children should risk angering a ghost.

"Does the reason for Danechka's silence matter?" asked Nikolai Adamovich.

Pasha watched Danya hold onto the sack of potatoes.

Mama moved forward on the chair, raised her voice, "Of course the reason matters. Maybe he can be helped. If the cause is emotional, the result of trauma—I take it that his mother is no longer . . . ?"

Pasha watched the man's cottony head give a fluffy nod, then the lips move, like fish lips, opening wide to reveal a pink, empty mouth. Nikolai Adamovich started a sigh which turned into an old dog's yawn. "Working, shopping, taking care of the potatoes, cleaning. Everything takes time. I don't spend enough time with him, I know. He's a good boy. Helps as much as he can. And he always prays in front of the icon we keep over there—" he pointed his thumb toward the dark corner far from the window, "—on the bureau."

Mama waved her hand around the room in what Pasha recognized as the universal reminder to beware of bugging devices. She whispered, "Nikolai Adamovich, should you mention that so openly?"

"What else can they do to me? I'm no threat to them. Besides, for your sake, I unplugged the telephone before the time you were supposed to arrive. So they don't even know you're here. I shut the phone in a drawer."

Pasha knew the common wisdom, that the KGB placed bugging devices in telephone receivers. His father would always unplug the telephone and put it in the bathroom before telling Pasha bedtime stories about holy men and women who lived long ago, even before showing Pasha their pictures.

"We don't have secrets anymore, little Danechka and I. We used to. But not anymore. Not since they found out."

Pasha watched Mama tilt her head and shake it to show that she did not understand.

"You really don't know? I assumed they'd have told you, the teacher. Hmmm. My wife used to type samizdat for a group of believers."

Pasha saw Mama look down at him, curl half of her lower lip into her mouth, chew on it slowly the way she would whenever Papa's voice rose too loudly while telling the bedtime stories.

Nikolai Adamovich stared out the window. "Once a week or so. She'd come home with a bunch of handwritten pages shoved into her brassiere. She'd unplug the phone." He sighed, nodded. "Then I'd pull the typewriter out from behind the refrigerator; it wasn't registered, you know—illegal. I'd lay it on a blanket on the sofa so the neighbors wouldn't hear." He became silent for a moment, and his eyes moved as if he were watching someone. "She'd type for hours, copying lists of arrested people, protests against the bulldozings of village churches. She never signed anything, though. For Danya's sake. Still they arrested her."

Arrested! Pasha didn't know anyone who'd been arrested!

Nikolai Adamovich finished, "Three years ago. We don't know who told the authorities."

Danya made a soft moan—the first sound Pasha had ever heard the boy make—then rolled onto his stomach on the sofa-bed, slid half of his body beneath the sack of potatoes and huddled there.

Tomorrow in school, Pasha would explain to everyone that Danya was weird because his father was weird. But should he tell them that Danya's mother had been arrested? Arrested!

Mama looked at Nikolai Adamovich, her eyebrows lifted in expectation. She whispered, "Nikolai Adamovich, your son needs to be hugged." Pasha recognized his mother's suggestive tone, the kind she would use with Papa when he'd come home from a special meeting too late to tell Pasha a bedtime story, but not too late to tuck him in and give him a kiss good night.

Nikolai Adamovich nodded at Mama, but continued sitting. "Danya used to speak, you know. But not since his mother's arrest. Only once since her arrest."

Ahah! thought Pasha.

"At least the potatoes comfort him. She was a potato farmer as a girl. That's how we met." Nikolai Adamovich looked up at the shadowed ceiling. "At a collective farm market."

Pasha had been to such a market, one by the Rizhskaya metro station.

"Behind a table that bore the largest potatoes I'd ever seen. The most beautiful woman—Polina, with sun-blond bangs showing beneath a white kerchief, a gently upturned nose."

Pasha saw Danya smile for the first time he could remember.

Nikolai Adamovich continued: "'Citizen!' cried Polina's mother. 'Handsome Citizen,' the old woman said to me, 'Fresh potatoes raised with care. Private plot potatoes. A rarity, especially beauties like mine.' She pointed at the potatoes, but shifted her eyes to Polina. 'The loveliest west of the Urals.' Anything to make a sale. Or so I thought. Maybe she really was trying to find a Muscovite husband for her daughter. A husband to save Polina from the hard life of a collective farmer. To save her." Nikolai Adamovich stopped for a moment, his heavy breathing the only sound in the room. He gently bit his lower lip. "But Polina didn't smile at me from behind the potatoes that morning. She blushed and turned her back. Such modesty. I bought five kilos, lugged the potatoes home on the metro. Then returned the next day for more. Three months later, we married." The tired man looked at Danya. "Yes, Danechka, you like that story, don't you?"

The boy, still smiling, nodded vigorously. Pasha almost felt like smiling, too, although he couldn't tell why.

"All right, my boy," said Nikolai Adamovich, "Enough. Enough for one night."

Danya slid out from beneath the sack of potatoes, sat up, his back stiff and straight, and rested an arm on the sack.

"Nikolai Adamovich," said Pasha's mother. "Dear Nikolai Adamovich. I'm certain I can't imagine the extent of your troubles. And I don't mean to sound harsh or unsympathetic—these times we live in." Pasha watched her shake her head and swallow and sigh. She pressed a hand against her forehead. Her voice softened, "But I understand more about your wife, about her activities, than you may think. You see, sometimes my husband—" She turned to Pasha. "Pashenka . . . Pashenka, you need to be a big boy now. I'm going to talk about private things. You understand? Like Papa's stories of the ancient holy people. You won't talk about this with your teachers or anyone else, right?"

Pasha looked down at his feet, remembered having told the other children his father's secret explanation about the holy spirit and birds. He mumbled, "I won't tell."

She squeezed his hand. Pasha looked over to see Danya watching them. At first Pasha felt glad that Danya had seen Mama squeeze his hand. But then he thought of Danya's mother being in jail, and he felt ashamed. Pasha pulled his hand away, slid off the chair's arm and stood beside it.

Mama seemed not to notice.

"My husband . . . sometimes he attends—" She leaned forward and lowered her voice to its softest whisper yet, "attends services. Not in a church, you understand, but in the apartment of another believer." She looked back at Pasha.

Pasha looked up at her and squinted.

"Sometimes after work, Pashenka. His special meetings."

So that's what the special meetings were. How was it that Pasha had never even wondered?

"Your mama would have liked this teacher, Danya," said Nikolai Adamovich. Danya's stiff back relaxed and curved, his shoulders drooped forward.

"So I understand your troubles somewhat. You see? I'm sympathetic. I came because . . . Danya's been . . . a special student from the beginning, of course. But the other day—" Mama reached into her blouse, pulled out a folded piece of paper. "This is why I wanted to see you. Look at this drawing, Nikolai Adamovich. It's Danya's. I didn't let the other students see." She gave Pasha a glance meant to reinforce the need to keep this conversation private.

"Danya loves to draw," said Nikolai Adamovich. "For years we told him to hush, to be careful, to say nothing. He's always loved to draw."

She handed Nikolai Adamovich the unfolded sheet. "It's September, so I asked the children to sketch pictures of a camp. I thought that summer experiences would still be on their minds. The other children drew trees and mountains, lakes and forests with mushrooms. Summer camps, Young Pioneer camps. That's what I expected them all to draw. Look at Danya's. He drew barbed wire fences and barracks."

Pasha stood on tiptoe to see the paper in Nikolai Adamovich's hands, recognized the horizontal lines marked with x's.

"I thought you should know what's on your boy's mind. It could be uncomfortable, even dangerous for him if the other students saw and talked about it."

Dangerous. Pasha watched the man run a handful of loose fingers through his white hair, watched him look at the sack of potatoes on the bed and at Danya.

"He's a good boy," said Nikolai Adamovich. "He was five when they sentenced her. 'Remember to eat and grow strong. Eat your potatoes for vitamins,' she said. Then she kissed him goodbye on the forehead, the belly, the right shoulder and the left. Two years later a telegram came—the winters in the camp proved too harsh for her."

Pasha was not sure what that meant—"proved too harsh." Was she too cold to walk home? Maybe they should send her a shawl.

"Too harsh for her," repeated Nikolai Adamovich. "I wondered, you know? Had she really died from hunger and cold? Or had some guard . . ." He sighed, ". . . beat her to death?"

Pasha shivered. To death? Poor Danya's mother had died! Pasha's

left forearm suddenly hurt. He looked down to see Mama's fingers squeezing it tightly. He yanked it free. Mama looked at him with narrow eyes and wide nostrils. Her jaw was clenched tightly as if to silence a cry of pain. She pressed her lips onto Pasha's cheek with such force that his cheek hurt, too. He rubbed his arm, rubbed his cheek.

"They buried her. No priest. I couldn't kiss her forehead goodbye." Nikolai Adamovich looked directly at Pasha's mother and asked, "You seem to know many things. Did they beat her, do you think?"

Pasha watched Mama shake her head quickly from side to side. "I'm sure," she said in the softest whisper Pasha had ever heard, "that such a good woman died in peace."

Pasha looked first to Danya, who crossed himself, then to Nikolai Adamovich whose eyes now reminded Pasha of their kitchen faucet at home—drip drip, drip drip. "I don't know," said Nikolai Adamovich. "I would wake up from nightmares. That she'd been beaten and was puffy and swollen. Lumps here. Lumps there, looking like a sack of potatoes."

Mama slid her hands over Pasha's ears, and he thought to pry them free, but since he could hear through them anyway, he let them stay.

"Yes," said Nikolai Adamovich, "that's how it started. I got carried away, I know. But I missed her so."

"Does Danya understand—?"

"He understands a great deal. One night, after I put him to bed, I—you have to understand, I missed her so. One night I took one of my wife's nightgowns . . . flannel. Green flannel. Still smelled of her cologne, Red October. I had to stretch the cloth, but eventually it fit over the sack."

Pasha squinted as he listened. Danya's father was so strange. Mama's hands pressed harder against Pasha's ears. Ouch! He pried the hands off, expected Mama to struggle with him, but she didn't even seem to notice, just kept looking from Nikolai Adamovich to Danya and back.

"The next morning, Danya saw his mother's nightgown sticking out from beneath my covers. He screamed, 'Mama!' He ran over, jumped into bed—then quickly realized. Such a good boy, he didn't cry. He fumbled with the sack's opening, took out a potato. Never another word. Such a good boy."

Mama stood, strode across the room to Danya, hugged him to her, held his head against her stomach while he sat motionless, hands at his sides.

Pasha thought to object to his mother's embrace of this other child, but decided not to as long as the hug was brief. Mama ended the embrace, asked Danya, "What can we do in class to make you happy? What makes you happy? Do you know? Can you tell me?"

"He won't answer," Pasha said.

"He needs to know that I asked."

"He loves his potato," said Pasha.

"His potato?"

"The one he carries in his pocket. You've never seen it?"

She shook her head.

"Over there," said Nikolai Adamovich. "The one he took from the sack. When Danechka's at home, he rests it beside his mother's favorite icon." The man pointed to the bureau in the shadows.

Pasha saw Danya pull from Mama's embrace and step over to the bureau. Mama moved beside him. Then Pasha crossed the room to stand on her other side.

Danya lit a thick candle in front of the painted, wooden icon. Pasha recognized Our Lady of Vladimir, her head tilted, her golden cheek nuzzling her son's. "Papa showed me pictures of it," he said. "It's the one St. Sergius used to bless the Russian soldiers before a big battle. Against the Mongols. The Russians won."

Danya nodded quickly, stared into Pasha's eyes. Then he pointed to the potato resting beside the icon. Pasha recognized the clusters of pointy eyes. "This is it," Pasha said to his mother. "But don't try to hold it. He doesn't like it if you try to hold it."

"Do you like that potato, Danechka?" she asked.

He nodded, crossed himself, picked up the potato and held it on his palm.

Mama bowed her head and crossed herself in front of the potato. Pasha had never seen his mother cross herself, was surprised that she even knew how. Then he saw Danya put the potato into Mama's hand. And Pasha was surprised again.

Mama bent down, kissed Danya's forehead, turned and kissed Pasha's.

Pasha looked at the many-eyed potato in Mama's palm, stared at it in silence, wondered whether Mama would like him, too, to carry around an old potato.

David George

The Madonna of Port Lligat

This enormous 12' x 8' oil on canvas, one of Dali's most famous, marked, in 1950, the beginning of a new period in his work. It was the first of his religious paintings and the largest of his paintings to date.

There are two oils of the same subject; that reproduced here is the second one. The first, which is smaller in size, was submitted by Dali to Pope Pius XII for approval and is now at Marquette University.

The Madonna of Port Lligat, the second and larger painting on the same subject, is now in the collection of Lady Beaverbrook in Canada. It is never shown in retrospective exhibitions because, in order to get it out, it would be necessary to knock down the door or take out one of the windows in the library where it hangs. (Descharnes)

Gala Madonna embodies all the geological virtues of Port Lligat, the painter wrote in 1956. *For example, the nurse, from whose back the night stand was taken, has this time been sublimated into the tabernacle of living flesh through which the celestial sky may be seen, and in turn another tabernacle cut from the chest of the infant Jesus, containing eucharistic bread in suspension.*

Geology alone does not explain
The stone tower, the terraced hill, the cliffs
Chalky and white at the entrance to the port.
Nor is it enough to speak of the shell

From which an egg is dangling on a thread—
The cleft arch, the colonnades, the cloud
Black and tumultuous, but rent with living light.
Beneath a sky disturbingly blue, the sand

Reflects the flatness of infinite molecules,
The madness of avenging angels, the bright
Cuttle-fish posing with veils and bridal-gowns—

All of it revolving around a muse
Whose ample lap (like an altar) is covered with
The blue dimension of an altar cloth.

II

The painter has cunningly draped an altar cloth
Around maternal hips and thighs. She sits
Securely poised (ostensibly) in air—
As if the weight of what is there, and what

Is still unseen (the supernatural)
Must not disturb the nature of the scene.
The child, in turn (with book and bread and ball)
Crosses his legs, extends his arms, and floats

Ever so slightly above his mother's lap—
The altar cloth, the winding sheet, the gown,
The broad dimension of what is about to begin,

Already has begun. Regard the bread,
The center of an intersection of grids
Already floating on bright, invisible strings.

III

Draped from the top like a Dutch painting, the frame
Contains the essence of what *madonna* means.
Tending the child like a woman weighing pearls,
She folds her hands in an attitude of prayer.

Her eyes are closed, but she is aware of what
The child is doing (the ball, the bread, the book);
Through slitted lids, she stares at what she knows
The cuttle-fish are doing with their hands—

The wheat-tassel, the sleeping fish, the rose
Blossoming beneath her foot. What age
Will this small child achieve within the frame

Already closing down? Is he aware
The book and ball are levitating, the bread
A premonition of what he will endure?

David Starkey

At the Vasectomy Fair

The Birth Control Elephant thunders
down the main dirt track of Narsipur
passing out condoms with its trunk,
leading a line of men into the billowing
scarlet folds of a government tent.

Gold coins on the dancing women's scarves
jiggle like their breasts, like the tasty rolls
of flashing belly flesh. Sitar and flute,
scent of roasting fowl. Two, three minutes
max, and the family's planned

for good. On the way out, a beardless man,
sour as a Mogul eunuch, passes out
the prize: a five gallon plastic bucket
filled with rice. On top, eighty rupees
in an envelope and a sari for the wife.

Greg Sampson

Statistically American

I

I thought of the mall.

Ten year old car, a hundred and seventy five thousand miles. Almost twice the hundred thousand each American is statistically allowed in any ten-year period of a given car's life. But it's red with no rust, a two-door Cavalier.[1] Granted I bought the thing used, but even then it had something like one-third the mileage it was supposed to have at the age of three years. What's most disappointing is that the furthest I have taken the thing from my town was to Chicago for a couple weekends a year.[2] It's served me well, though, and I would refuse to give it up, even if my so-called disposable income did not enslave me to driving it around for the rest of my life.

I am going to the mall because I have run out of life and need it, like a shot of Demerol to soothe the ache. I want to forget, and the dishes are making the place stink, most likely permanently, of vomit.

The mall. It smells sweet. There are pretty girls there who are attending middle school, whose breasts are still nothing more than enlarged pimples, boils waiting to burst into the full-fledged womanhood of high school. Their innocence is calming. I will see them and think about when I was that age and the only thing I would ever want to do with my Saturday was go to the mall, buy a thick chunk of taffy that if bitten wrong would rip out every single filling. I had to chew it tenderly, careful to swallow before I got to the girly boutiques where surely there would be some young thing looking at the latest nail polish.

The best way to know a girl is to watch her pick out nail polish. I always went for the ones that wore black. Although it was a fetish, growing up I didn't love death. I loved the idea of dating a girl who did. The kind of girl I wanted, until I got it, was a girl who smoked cigarettes. Then when I finally did I found that she would spend more time drinking than doting on me or calling me up at two in the morning, except when she needed a ride, or had to be picked up because, as one of her friends said,"She's so wasted!"

Then I realized the only thing to be looking forward to was college, then hopefully death before having to pay back the government.

[1]A so-called friend said once that if someone bought you a Cavalier, he probably has a death wish for you, since they are such crappy cars.

[2]For the humbling experience of visits with the parents. The sad reality of my life is that I haven't been anywhere since I got the damn car. So much for the idea of it being a symbol of freedom in our society.

I begin to drive, start 'er up just the same as I did so many times before I can't count, and head west out of town, the edge of civilization, not as I know it, but as I am directly aware.

Thinking not of my destination, but of the moving scenery, something happening to the stability for once, I follow the stop-and-go traffic along the long-ago memorized route, thinking of my neighbor in back. She is an old woman who smokes on her back patio. She does this every hour, fifteen minutes after, even in the dead of winter; in fact that's when she started, or was at least when I first noticed her. I wondered at first what drove her to smoking outside—was it some fantastic belief that if you smoked outside it evened out the negative impact cigarettes had on your long-term health? Or maybe there was a baby in the house, and she, as many well-mannered and sensitive smokers do, felt uneasy about exposing such young, fragile lungs to something so damaging and reprehensible.

But the woman had gone through menopause long ago; I could surmise that from her appearance, looking at least sixty-five, always showing off a wardrobe that each time strengthened my belief that she, like so many elderly people, quit buying clothes sometime in the early sixties. There was the possibility of a younger person, a daughter or niece, coming to visit, bringing along an infant, but the outdoor smoking continued for months, through the spring, and into the drudgery of summer heat, and an old bitch like her would have kicked the guest out and left the child in the trash before she sacrificed being able to smoke in her own climate-controlled environment for any extended period of time.

I enjoy seeing her out there so regularly, being able to speculate about what went on behind the thick patio curtain from which she emerged with the timed synchronization of a machine. She has become almost like a friend—as much as a plant or goldfish or mouse, a living thing that I can talk to and pretend that she understands how I feel, feeling comfortable that her inability to understand me will never allow a response to the stupid things I am saying. After a while, peering into the adjoining backyard becomes like spying on a lizard in a terrarium. I feel as if we hold a bond, even though her reptilian aloofness prevents any direct contact. She just wants to finish her cigarette and get back inside where it was cool.

Or as the case is now, warm.

February's frigidity has forced most living beings indoors, but not the old woman, though her secretive smoke breaks have become less frequent as the weather becomes more unbearable. Her absence has left me lonely, which has given me more of a chance to concentrate on the mall. Were it not for other people, would we not all be alone? The car is running beautifully, as always, and I wish for a second that it would just quit, so existence would be a little different and surprising. But I keep

moving and forget about it.

Fairblanks Mall emerges over the horizon as you might see a looming castle do in a cartoon, were you racing directly at it in some sort of turbo-charged super-sports car—the ground moving at immeasurable speed directly before you, but the megastructure in the distance taking its time to emerge, as if it is the absolute by which all in the area is measured. Although still blocks away, I can feel the narcotic reality of the mall seep into my body, warming it with the love of your common Walgreens employee who would sell cigarettes to a kid with braces.

I think it's the paradox of the mall that really seduces me. Here we have a place with so many stores, so many individuals willing to be kind and servile to you, though for the selfish reason of making a buck for themselves. Sort of a social kindness created and enforced by selfishness. The common man can go to the mall, a gorgeously modern and ornate structure festooned with all the decoration of whatever consumer season we might happen to be in,[3] and be assaulted by armies of workers trained in kindness, just wanting to serve him. The negative side to this is that kindness is directly related to however much that common man might have in his wallet.[4] But as long as he keeps the money flowing, they'll keep up the facade.

The idea that anything anywhere in this world is actually honest is an obsolete one. Things are real only when there is money to buy them with. Anything that doesn't cost is irrelevant. But I will pay just so I have something.

I pull into the frigid parking lot, which has lost the fandangle and excitement of the holidays, when you could go in the building and feel the misery of each individual, flowing forth in a mist that smelled like fake pine, with the sound of a new-age version of "Deck the Halls," all of which formed an abstract feeling of sadness that was more than the sum of each person's misery. It sort of made this world of suffering, which was reality. Instead of merely one person looking at a happy world through the skewed eyes of personal depression, there was instead a real sadness to the world, and the person who looked upon the experience as joyful was the one who was out of his head.

But the holiday season has left, months ago, leaving behind only the sludge of a hollow experience and the painful cold of January and February.

Suddenly the experience of the mall is not at all what I need. I feel like an addict who for the first time in his life thinks about the thing he has been obsessed with for so many years and for the first time is completely

[3]Today it should be enshrouded in clouds of pink, with naked, winged cherubs, love-arrows cocked and at the ready, suspended from the ceiling wavering like pendulums in the almost gale-force drafts that rip through the enclosed atmosphere of the building.

[4]This is why I'm always sure to go with a big fat wad of cash when I go.

disgusted with it. I am a degenerate for believing that this is what happiness is in the world. I do not need the crap. Unless I make the break from believing that what I have to do is spend spend spend to be happy, knowing full well that it is all in fact a lie, then I am doing nothing but lending a hand to all those other addicts who believe the same lie. I would add to the reality of material obsession and meaningless depression. I would be making my life nothing.

The Effects of Lost Faith

Too quickly, I rip a donut with the car that is living on borrowed time, skate in a rotating line on the ice and compacted snow that is the signature for a parking lot in winter, and unceremoniously sideswipe a twenty-foot-tall lamppost that burns high-pressure mercury gas, enshrouding the lot and all cars in it in a veil of a secure, artificial-orange glow. I hit with such force that I could swear the car was going to fall apart, like the Model Ts you see in a comical silent movie. I think this not so much because the car is such a heap of shit,[5] but because I feel like one of those characters, whose life you would watch on the silent screen, little more than an obscurity, an absurdity, and in the end completely meaningless to you, the slightly entertained viewer.

I am not even fully aware of my situation by the time the police show up. When the cop comes to the passenger side, I roll down the window and give him a scowling look because he is making my life so much harder because he wouldn't come to the driver's side.

I begin questioning with mad fury, just to avoid coming to grips with the reality of what was going on. "What's the problem officer, the car's working fine" . . . "Just out seeing the sights of the city, you know" . . . "I've been feeling a bit nihilistic since the end of football season." Then my foot slips off the brake, and since I neglected to put the thing in park, I begin moving forward. I come into the situation with the sound of metal fatigue, my car grinding against the concrete base of the lamp post. The cop stands away and unsnaps his holster.

"Turn off your car, sir."
"When did you guys begin carrying those *big* guns?"
"How much have you had to drink today, sir."
"Why, nothing at all, officer."
"Can I see your license."
"Okay, but it's out of state, as I have not had a chance to renew."
" . . ."
"Is there a problem, officer?"

[5]Though I am not denying it.

“Yes, how long have you been living in Iowa, sir.”

“About ten years. I came here to go to college, but then I got this great job, and you know getting money is always better than owing it, which was all I was doing there, you know what I mean?”

“ . . .”

“I haven’t gotten it renewed, see, because my father, he actually owns the car and pays for the insurance and everything, and I have to take it back home to get emissions and everything, and I do fulfill my end of the bargain, but if you look on my record you will find that I have a perfectly clean slate and that my father, he is actually an upstanding member of society and everything, and he does many things to serve his community, and I hope to do the same someday. He—”

“I see, then why don’t these plates match up with this car?”

“Are you insinuating that this car is stolen?”

“I didn’t say it, you did.”

“ . . .”

“Sir, how much have you had to drink today.”

“Nothing, Mr. Officer, sir.”

“Then how did you wind up against this here lamppost?”

“ . . .”

“Are you going to answer or . . .”

“I was a bit angry with the mall sir.”

“ . . .”

“It’s all a lie, sir, just like my life, and this place, I have come to realize, is just feeding off of it, and the lie is feeding off of this place, forming two sides of a circle that is so incredibly vicious.”

“You mean a vicious circle?”

“I just want to leave.”

“ . . .”

“I have not been drinking, and possibly you could check those plates again, and see if maybe the last time you punched them in wrong or something? I’m sure that this car is mine.”

“ . . .”

“Please, sir, have some decency.”

“Listen, you goon, if I find the slightest inkling of a problem here, I’m going to nail your ass to the wall with everything I can, maybe with things I can’t but know I’ll get away with. Don’t cross me, asshole.”

This Is What It Means to Be Beaten

He checks his little hand-held computer again and finds that in fact he has made the mistake of punching in the wrong plate numbers, and that the car is in fact mine and I am who I said I was. Everything seems to be kosher. He gives me back my identification card and asks if I need some help with removing my car from the lamppost. He tells me he is going to let me go, as I am the only one that is getting screwed on this

one.[6] I confirm his kindly offer of help, and he gets back in his car delightful. For a split second I think he is actually excited about helping out an ailing fellow human. But he comes up full force, slamming into the back of my car with his front-bumper bulldozer and presses it until the entire left side scrapes free of the post. He then rolls down his window and hollers, "You ain't goin' nowhere unless you get back in school, boy!" Red flashing lights, a fury of compacted snow that his souped-up vehicle sprays on my car, and in an instant he is gone. I am altogether defeated and alone.

A Reference Point

Surprisingly enough, the engine starts again, and the car is actually running, though the squealing sound the moving tires make against the road (once I have reached actual blacktop near the street, where salt has obviously been laid) leads me to believe that the kind help of the police officer had actually bent the car's frame. I am irate, and not because I feel any real connection with the automobile,[7] but because it was all a blow to the ego. For the most part I would like to think that I'm the one who's in control, yet here I am, being teased as the victim, strung up before the state- and city-funded power of this asshole who, in real life (when he's off the job) probably is no different from your usual working class piece of white trash, who has illegal open fires and smokes marijuana with his friends on the weekend over a case of Bud Light.[8] Yet here I am, whether I am more intelligent or more moral means nothing[9] compared to the fact that in the end I would be the one going to jail.

So I weave through the lot for home, nowhere else to run, squealing all the way to let all fellow mall-goers know that I had in fact lost the battle, though neither I nor they knew exactly which one. I am pondering the gravity of the situation,[10] then thinking about the old woman in back of my house, wondering how many times since I left she has revealed her

[6] As there was only minimal damage to the pole.

[7] I have a psychological aversion to inanimate objects of all kinds, and refute many things that other Americans might hold sacred

[8] Though he is able to call it into the station before hand to let the good ol' boys know that everything's all right and if it's a slow night they would be more than welcome to come down and visit.

[9] Everything I told him was the truth.

[10] Though how grave was it, really? My life was not really in danger, I didn't get that feeling that I used to get when the cops pulled me over for a minor traffic violation, in reality checking me out to see if "anything illegal" was going on in the vehicle.

scaly existence from behind her rock to find no quizzical looks from her neighbor in his observation window. But I think, in fact, that she did not miss me at all, that I was a boring nuisance to her absolute desire to be left alone.

II

It must have been that thought that completely disabled my ability to concentrate on what was around in the physical world, because by the time the bum was able to react and find safety behind the marble Fairblanks sign on the other side of the road, I had succeeded in slamming up on the median, flying at high speed inches above the ground, and bashing into the little post he had made on the inlet to the parking lot, which consisted of not much more than a lawn chair and an old soft drink from Subway that had been sucked of all its juice, but that he was keeping a hold of in order to drink the waxy ice inside as it melted into a paraffin solution and the cup itself deteriorated into a soggy mush. I sat, shocked once again, until a chunk of cardboard floated from what might as well have I been heaven to me, and brought me back into reality. I got out and read the sign. On the mangled inside of a cardboard box that read AMANA®, with a black crayon in scrawled five-year-old handwriting that looked so pathetic and unoriginal, was a little something that is familiar to all mall-shoppers:

WILL WORK
FOR
FOOD.

An Image of the Good Samaritan

By this point I did not give a damn about any of this, not about the mall, not about the cop, my car, even myself and my pathetic little life. All I really cared about was something I didn't make any sense of, which was why I probably decided to pull the car over and see if the guy I had almost killed was okay. I pulled over and parked right in the outgoing lane of the mall, was sure to put my hazards on to give a reason for stopping, and walked behind the sign to find an overweight guy with a mangled beard and a white, streaked-grey stocking cap, staring at me stunned as a deer.[11] He struggled to get up as fast as he could, and seemed to curse his own body for not being able to do exactly what he wanted when all he wanted was to get the hell out of there.

[11]I have no idea why the image of a deer came to mind, as a man as heavy as him would not likely be as graceful or agile in the wild, Midwestern woods.

"Hey," I almost asked him.

Paying no attention, "Hey yourself, get the hell away from me, you psychotic little freakboy, been fed with a silver spoon all a yer life and wonderin' why everyone's makin' such a goddamn big deal about welfare."

"Wha . . ."

"You heard me, boy, get the hell away from me. I'm fine. And pretty soon the cops'll be here, I just know it."

The terror that permeated his voice made the possibility all too real, and since it hadn't been that long since my last altercation, I realized that I should probably get the hell out of there.

"You in some trouble, you need to get outta here too?" I asked.

"What's it to you, asshole-that-wants-me-dead-anyway."

"You can ride . . ." I drifted off to my car, which by now, with its blinking emergency glow, had caused a mass of honking automobiles that were backed up to the mall itself.

"Get in." I was fed up, and I didn't care if he wanted to come or not, he was going to see my life. I threw him in and we headed for the security of home.

What happened I have no explanation for, and the more I think about it the more I realize just how crazy I was. What the hell was I thinking bringing this guy with me (wherever I was going) in my car, that by now was so beat to shit it might as well be destroyed. My first instinct was to go home, which I am sure is the automatic thought of anyone so wounded and estranged by the world. Here was a place I could make sense of, where I was understood, had not to worry about checking myself for just what kind of freak I actually was. As far as I can figure, I thought at the time that what I was doing was serving some end that was ethical and good, something that would somehow benefit all of humanity, even if the only way it got passed on was through my telling the crotchety old tale to my grandchildren as they fed me some pureed version of whatever they were feasting on that night and rolled their eyes, knowing that in the end what I had to say really meant nothing because I was old and demented from age.

But what was I going to do with the guy once we got there? Show him around, all two rooms of the dump, in which there had been all of probably three people in the past five years I'd lived there? Hell, he probably had a hundred and fifty different kinds of diseases that I could catch just by breathing the same air as him.

In fact, it was his coughing that disabled him to the point that he could not even wrestle me, and I waited for him to finish so he could beat the crap out of me for yanking him out of his life just so he could see mine. That was the reason, more than any other, that this was all happening, that I took control of the already seriously bizarre situation and made it even worse than it would been, had I done the familiar thing and simply

played a passive role in what was going down. I took control for a reason, and it was because I wanted this guy to see who I was, and I didn't even care if he wanted to or not.

Tired of coughing and anxious to really let me have it, the bum began swatting at me with a closed right fist, all the while unbalanced and trying to feel out the position in which he could get the most leverage. I noticed then that his hands were stereotypically wrapped in worn-out, fingerless gloves that were worn black and shit-brown from groping in garbage cans.

He coughed out a sentence: "What the . . . haugh, haugh . . . hell you think you doin, boy takin me up from my place, after lookin to kill me so brutally as you did! . . . haugh, haugh, haugh . . . You ain't nuthin but a devil, you heer me, boy?"

" . . . "

"Fine, I'll just go kick the shit out you again!"

"I thought you were looking for work."

The Only Real Constant

On the way home, for the first time in six months, I stopped at my regular gas station and picked up a pack of cigarettes. For so long I was proud to say that I quit all on my own, without the need for the shitty-tasting nicotine gum or the sissy-assed patch. But whatever joy that gave me meant nothing anymore, and once again I had yet to quit. The gentleman behind the counter gave a fake look of camaraderie, as if I were the old veteran come back for just one more battle.

"See ya later, John," he told me. I, like all those faceless masses that came in and out with a nicotine itch, had fallen into the universal name of John for these workers, who were wrong about my name. I smiled, making them think they were right.

* * *

"So what you got planned for me?"

"I'm not sure. What do you say to cleaning my house, and afterward we can go get a burger."

"Depends, I ain't never cleaned no houses before."

" . . ."

"Sounds good to me. Gimme one of them cigarettes."

"Depends. What's your name."

"They call me the Hick."

" . . ."

"Ain't you gonna tell me yours?"

" . . ."

Home from the Holidays

We got home and it was sweet. Inviting for once. It would now be

a place of comfort, of friendship, however forced and paid-off it might be. Although I wondered if it really was that bad. It wasn't like there was money involved in any direct way—it was quite an example of a symbiotic relationship. He was getting something he needed and I was providing him with work so as not to make it a charity case, which definitely cut down the factor of guilt.

"You ain't expecting me to clean this entire place, are you? This is horrible, man, worse than where I live."

"I find it hard to believe."

He started belligerently, and I sat back, smoking cigarettes and offering reheated pekoe tea, though to no avail. He started in the living room, which was a fatal mistake. The living room was bad, what with its old newspapers and magazines and half-read supermarket novels that were thrown down in a fit of self-pity, all of which mounded into piles three feet high, standing like a group of Serengeti anthills. But it was all dry and basically bacteria-free, and when compared to the kitchen a much easier task. It was still horrendous, though, and by the end one was so exhausted[12] he would want to do nothing more than screw the rest of the house.

But I watched him bend over, look quizzically at all the individual magazines, *Road and Track*, *Newsweek*, a copy of *Field and Stream* that I bought when my nerves wouldn't allow me to pick up the latest issue of *Playboy*, just to check out the fiction. The Hick found this also, gave me a look of "woo hot mama," and stacked it neatly between an *Atlantic Monthly* and *National Geographic*, just to make the place look a bit more cultured.

He moved to the other side of the room, to a disorderly pile of newspapers that had started as an orderly, square stack, but had eventually tumbled over when its height made it too rectangular. I took the chance to jump to a newly cleared-off seat on the couch and observe the Hick more closely, comfortably.

A Want for Steamed Rice

Someone once made a comment to me about how they would never pick up one of those down and out people like the Hick because despite their typically large size, they were always looking for food. The same person said to one once, "Doesn't look like you need much food to me," afterward tossing his box of steamed rice at him before tearing off. I thought of this instance for a while, wondering if maybe it would have been better had I just done something vindictive like kicking him while he was crouched in fear behind the marble sign.

[12]If he had the patience to wade into and sort out all of that chaos.

As far as his size went, the Hick was no different than the norm: fat, on the verge of obesity. I watched him work, bent over a two-foot high orderless pile of newsprint, his gut swaying behind him with every pivot he made to deposit the papers in a new, orderly stack that was familiar of the days when I actually cared about the place. He had a white knit stocking cap that had "Winterfest '82 " embroidered in orange around its entire circumference. A key to the man's history? Probably not. More likely it was at the bottom of a heap of pairless gloves and old winter accessories that they were giving away down at the local Salvation Army. I was so caught up in his pivotal motions, looking for more clues in the printing of the hat, all of which I could not read unless he or I were constantly rotating, that I caught the obligatory butt-crack, not just peeking over the top of his black, faded trousers that smelled of sour milk, but full on, since they[13] had drooped halfway down his ass, so I could almost see the inward curvature, leading to where the cheeks met the legs. I was completely disgusted, but not frustrated. Something good was going to come of this, even if I had to force it. Anyway he must have caught a breeze because the next instant he pulled them up and he was decent once again.

A Child, He Said

I asked him where he got his sweatshirt.
"Huh?"
"That sweatshirt, what's it say, 'Go gaga in . . . '"
"Ogalalla."
"Go gaga for what?"
"What do you mean?"
"What's in Ogalalla?"
" . . ."
"Touchy subject?"
" . . ."
"Come on, tell me."
"Fuck you, asshole."
"Well you know if you don't want anyone asking you about the clothes you wear, then you should just buy blank clothes, you know, with nothing on them. My entire wardrobe is full of blank things—blank T-shirts, sweatshirts, sweatpants, jeans, flannels. The craziest thing I own is a button-up flannel shirt that is colored with pastels. Green, yellow, pink, every color of the rainbow, skewed just a little bit to make it happier. It's what I like to call my 'feel-good shirt.' But, back to what I was saying: for the most part, nobody asks me anything and I am the most satisfied person, knowing that I'm so damn boring to everyone else . . ."

[13]The pants

“. . .”
“What, you got nothing to say to that?”
“. . .”
“Come on, something?”
“. . .”
“Please?”
“. . .”
“. . .”

An engine started up and for the first time since I moved in there I found out that the woman owned a car. It was my pet. The secret smoke-breaker. The reptile. I ran to the back room to see just what the hell was going on. By the time I got there the garage door was already half-open, and she was firing up her old Bonneville. It was one of those long sleek ones that looked like they were smooth-running sharks of the road when they rolled off the production line, but fifteen years later had usually fallen into the same disrepair and dereliction of their chronically welfare-stricken third, in some cases fourth, owners. But the woman's automobile, that was something in as good of shape as the day she had brought it back from the dealership; despite the infamous bad paint jobs of American-produced cars in the seventies, the coat on her auto, I could tell in the failing light, was the same deep immaculate shade of metallic green. It still purred, too, like the cars you see on movies from the seventies but never actually exist in reality anymore. It's as if it was an accepted fact that auto work and creation was horrendous, and the only thing really to do is to pretend that it never happened.[14]

The light on the garage-door opener seemed almost hopeful in the failing light, against the backdrop of a purple urban dusk. I heard the three clicks of her unused, ancient automatic transmission, and a split second later, the brightness of her high beams filled the room, making me feel like I was on stage. Hitting the deck, I realized that I was in fact accompanied by the Hick, as the thump he made while following my lead was four times louder than my own. He must have been intrigued by my actions, my silent running from the room, and must have instinctually known that it was something more than the awkward silence he had created with his aggressive language.

She gave it gas, and the car came forward from the garage in which it had been entombed for so long. I peeked over a window, looked down to watch it pass gracefully below us, seeming to skate on the rough terrain of the driveway that led to the curb in front. Dying to know what she was doing, what direction she would go, I peered out the front window, listen

[14]"Hell," I could hear some patriot say, "it don't matter anyway, seein's as how you can tell from this here commercial that Dodge is havin' one of the best damn years of pro-duction growth in its entire career of money-and-car-makin."

ing with anticipation as the rumbling grew louder and the light the car cast in the darkened tunnel between the two houses became more intense.

"Sounds like she's got an eight cylinder," the Hick commented. "Don't see much of those coming out of Detroit these days, unless you're willing to pay sixty grand."

My apathetic silence shut him up, and until I once again saw the car I wondered how at a moment like this anyone could say something so stupid. At the curb she stopped abruptly so the tires let out a bit of a squeal, and she stopped the engine. She came out of her car, flipped forward the driver's seat, and pulled out a mangled roll of shag carpeting, which the next day found out was the most putrid shade of green. It was also soggy from the night's rain, and the dust that had been collecting on it for years had turned to some kind of mud. Before stumping decrepitly back in her car, she slumped the roll, tied with old shoestring, on a heap of trash waiting for early-morning pickup. It was over in a flash, and I didn't even have a chance to take delight in the vision. Finally I had a sense that she did do more than what I saw, that if I watched with enough patience, she would show a sign not of routine so monotonously beaten in that it is mechanic and soulless, but of honest intelligence, of thinking on her feet, of doing something just to show that she was still alive and interesting.

"What the hell was that all about, crazy old bitch."

The final words that the Hick spoke in our ornery relationship were pointless, and they only added to my newfound confusion. I felt like I'd had an epiphany of sorts. There was meaning everywhere, and it was all coming at me so quickly I couldn't understand it, my peabrain was too slow and obsolete to process it all. I just stood there, wallowing in the very real boredom of life.

I mumbled, "Forgot to take the stupid trash out."

Paula Sullivan

Lament for the Common Cabbage

We are sure the English waited
thousands of years to tame you.
They found you between chalky seacliffs
rushing in steep ravines
a terrifying sea.
Only children dared harvest your wild heads.

Now you are carelessly tossed
into rough wooden bins on Polk Street
a tumult of disordered skulls.
You are stripped of your violet fountains
those immense shelters which opened
and framed your visages to a milky sky.

Is it only on a coastal meadow
that the universe can admire you?
There you gaze with a dumb constancy of contentment.
A harmony trembling into delight by your unfolding.
It is always by the unfolding,
the shearing away tenderly   one by one
your solemn and resilient leaves
white-veined and purple-circuited
to ruffled tips, to curling edges,
that you ignite the air.
You unleaf yourself slowly
diminishing your centermost countenance
You broaden your leafy lineaments.
Proclaim peripheries.

Late last Sunday we drove by your purpling fields
near Half Moon Bay. We were blinded
in the lilac dusk. (It is the precise moment of day
when angels poise themselves between the sight
and the corporeality of the eye.)
We only recall the bright-leaved stirring.
The next morning we were in our beds.
By eleven you were shorn without ceremony
ranked and sorted, packed in crates.
Your eyes pinch tightly.
Your outer garments
jade robes, magenta velvet capes
are strewn across the fields.

Fernand Roqueplan

Quiet, Courteous Performer

He struck a bone & silver tambourine
making bird on wet rock calls—
making noise that someone see him
kicking juice-clumps down fresh-mown
banks of the Vistula River.
Brown-red water chugged past
the gray pinnacles of Kraków.

Before cancer made him a beggar
he was a foundry-pot stirrer;
turned, in darkness and fumes,
his smoking paddle
the morning the iron curtain
slumped in its rings.

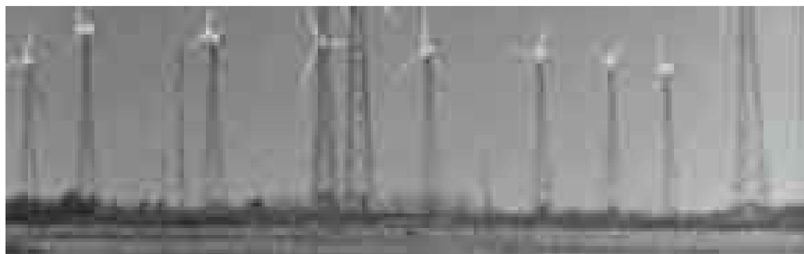
"I still make music," he cried.
bang bang bang a carafe of vodka
to stop him, or cigarettes.
The wind carried fresh paint,
mercury & green branches.

His wife died in Teplice,
his son in Chomutov,
his daughter married an American.
He unpockets her photograph, says
god's lifted the embargo on his luck,
allowed this beauty to surge
above him and survive.

If You Want To Cry, Touch Me

Sad in the night he talked stars.
She kept silence with the clouded moon,
allowed his conversation to roll downhill
like gravel underfoot
muddling the pure clarity
of insect voices clamoring summer
eternal—the billionth you've lived
whether five or ninety.

He said	Without my father the world opens up and spreads out. I can't see any end to it.
She said	Kick off the funeral-shoes. Roll your trousers, stand barefoot in the wet grass as he did the night you were born: calling to my window through my morphine drowsiness boyorgirl? over & over. Hear the chigchigchig of the sprinkler sluicing through the picket fence he built and whitewashed each spring.
He said	He is me, I am him. Where do I go?
She said	If you want to cry, touch me.



Contributors' Notes

Sherman Alexie's first collection of poems, *The Business of Fancydancing*, was selected as a New York Times Book Review Notable Book of the Year in 1992. "Mr. Alexie's is one of the major lyric voices of our time," wrote reviewer James R. Kincaid. Since then, Alexie's poems, stories and novels have brought him many honors and an international following of readers. In a review of *First Indian on the Moon* in *The Nation* , Chris Faatz deemed Alexie, "A young writer who is taking the literary world by storm . . . a superb chronicler of the Native American experience . . . an overwhelmingly exciting voice . . . he is a master of language, writing beautifully, unsparingly and straight to the heart." Alexie is an enrolled Spokane/ Coeur d'Alene Indian. He lives in Seattle.

Rachel Barenblat lives and writes in a small town in the Massachusetts mountains. One of her poems is a semi-finalist in the National Library of Poetry contest, and will be included in an anthology entitled *The Nightfall of Diamonds*, due this summer.

Eric Birkholz will complete his M.F.A. at the University of Arizona in May.

W. K. Buckley was published in the 25th Anniversary edition of the *Coe Review*. He lives in Gary, Indiana.

Christine Buckton is still saddened by the *Coe Review* staff not being serious about making page headers into a flip book.

wendie carr studies in Ireland this year. She is a Coe junior who hopes to perfect tomato gardening this summer.

Aaron Coleman is a senior at Coe College who is hoping to soon frogsnatch a globular career. At some point in life, he would like to figure out the true meaning of the übermensch, as well as discover how to make sausage-laden gravy.

R. D. Drexler chairs the English department at Coe College and writes poetry in airports and nameless, faceless hotels.

Susanne Ebacher is an art major at Coe focusing in ceramics and sculpture. Her true dream in life is to be an artist and a fabulous art teacher.

Kathleen M. Forbes can be seen pushing a shopping cart around town collecting garbage, but hopes that this will not influence her future career choices. After graduating from Coe this spring, next year she is running away to join the carnival with the new love of her life, a baby bunny named Xiola.

Shana Fried, a sophomore at Coe, is currently spending her days at *Poets and Writers Magazine* and her nights at C.B.G.B's with the Detox Babies. Have you ever known a bird to fly so low?

David George placed first and third in the December 1996 National Poetry Contest sponsored annually by the West Haven Connecticut Council of the Arts. He is currently completing his fourth book, *Things of the Sea Belong to the Sea*.

Wayne Harrison is a first-year fiction student at The University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop. Two of his stories have appeared in *Blood & Aphorisms*.

Gina Hausknecht teaches English at Coe College.

Terry Heller is Howard Hall Professor of English at Coe College. His stories have appeared in *Thema*, *The Mage*, *Thin Ice*, *Short Story* and *Coe Review*. He is grateful to Angela Carter for anthologizing "The Werefox" and to China, the culture that "wrote" the tale that inspired this story. And he wants especially to thank two groups of helpful people for generous readings and criticism: his Winter 1997 creative writing class and Bob Marrs' 1996-97 Directed Studies in Writing group.

Daniel M. Jaffe writes about his many visits to Russia in the past 15 years. Russian-themed stories have been published in *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Oxford Magazine*, and elsewhere. He studies for his M.F.A. at Vermont College.

Catherine Jervey resides in Virginia.

Jen Cullerton Johnson teaches in inner-city Chicago. Her Latino students helped with her translations of Argentine poet Liliana Bellone. She won the Gwendolyn Brooks State of Illinois Poetry Prize in 1995.

William Jolliff, Associate Professor of English at George Fox University, enjoys reading to his children and playing the fiddle. Recent works have appeared in *Cumberland Poetry Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and others.

Paul Keller resides in Napa, California.

Michael Krebs owns a 55-gallon freshwater aquarium and founded The Hofstra Expressionist Literary Press. His poems have appeared in *Dog River Review* and *Crazy Quilt Quarterly*, among others.

Sarah Laaker likes reading, writing, making art, and smelling wildflowers. She is a sophomore at Coe.

Camille Leganza would like to thank Blinky the Clown for inspiration and spiritual guidance, as she plans to join the circus upon graduation from Coe College. Thank you, Blinky.

Adrian Lemberger is the 18th century poet laureate of France who enjoyed warm sweaters, Morrissey in the morning, and summer days on the beach.

Lyn Lifshin currently resides in Virginia. She has been published in previous *Coe Reviews* and other literary journals.

Nicholas Mason-Browne teaches Spanish in the Department of Foreign Languages at Coe. His poetry has appeared in American and Canadian literary journals.

Michael Gregg Michaud has been printed in numerous journals, and his latest book is *Seven Deadly Sins, or How I Spent My Summer Vacation*.

J. Mills lives in Oakland, California.

Amanda Moore is on her way to a brilliant career as a phone psychic or FBI translator after graduating from Coe College in May. She has poems forthcoming in *Visions International*, and her latest collection of poems, short stories and essays, "Instructions," is currently available on her home computer.

Patrick Moran lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Bill Myers is currently working on a manuscript about James Galvin's work for Boise State's Western Writers Series, and has had recent poetry published in *Chiron Review* and *Plainsong*.

Ginny Northcott will be graduating this spring from Coe with a degree in art. She loves to draw botanical images and images from life and does works on paper with collaged elements.

Nathan Peck is a senior art major at Mount Mercy College studying painting and sculpture at Coe. He plans to attend the University of Iowa for his M.F.A in intermedia.

Mark J. Poirier is currently in his second year at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. His stories have appeared in recent issues of *Green Mountains Review*, *Cimarron Review*, and others.

Fernand Roqueplan has published with *College English*, *Indiana Review*, and others. His poetry will appear in the soon-to-be-released anthology *Anyone Is Possible* (Red Hen Press/Valentine Publications).

Greg Sampson, a junior at Coe, is currently enjoying the company of squirrels and pigeons, living as a tree person in Central Park. He writes on bark.

J. Shull, Coe College graduate, is a high school art teacher who enjoys artistic freedom.

Christopher Sindt was recently awarded the James D. Phelan award for his manuscript-in-progress, *Rocks and Cargo*. He is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Davis, and the Program Director of the Art of the Wild writing conference.

Andrew Small is from Colorado, where nosebleeds are common. He enjoys pot-luck dinners and is sometimes frightened by little creepy insects. He recently saw the face of the Virgin Mary in the steam above Quaker Oats and now only wants to go back to sleep. Quietly, he awaits his first heart attack and passes the time by collecting small shiny objects. He is a first-year student at Coe College.

Mae Soule is from St. Louis, Missouri and attends Coe. She has works published in the *Soulard Culture Squad Review* volumes 1-3 as well as being previously published in the *Coe Review*. She has also performed spoken word and multimedia performance art in St. Louis, Iowa, and New York City.

David Starkey teaches creative writing at North Central College in Illinois and is the editor of *Teaching Writing Creatively* (Boynton/Cook, 1997). Many of his poems have appeared in publications, and he has four collections of poems published with small presses, most recently, *Open Mike Night at the Cabaret Voltaire*.

Travis Stiles is a senior majoring in English and art at Coe. His photography thesis is based on self-portraiture through reflection and shadow because it's a subject that seems to follow him everywhere.

Anne Dyer Stuart is an English/creative writing major at Hollins College in Virginia whose one-act play, "The Afterbirth," was produced during the Rocky Mountain Playwriting Festival in Colorado in 1995.

Paula Sullivan resides in California.

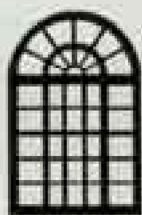
Yayoi "Sparky" Teramoto doesn't listen to music. She doesn't drink or smoke. What's fun for her? —Imagination. She attends Coe.

Ivor C. Treby has over 200 poems in print in Europe, America, Australia and New Zealand, as well as in the United Kingdom. He resides in London.

Robert Tremmel is an associate professor at Iowa State University, and has been published in a variety of journals, including *Midwest Quarterly* and *Texas Review*, and has poems in a recently released Loess Hills Press anthology of Iowa poets.

Alan Webber, glorious prankster and dedicated *Bomb* magazine employee, is currently living in New York City. He recently purchased a goat. He is a junior at Coe.

M. Elizabeth Weiser is currently pursuing an M.F.A. at Southwest Texas State University. Prior to that, she spent ten years as a policy analyst for a national education organization in Washington, D. C. She has been published in Spain's First Word Bulletin, and has produced six manuals for Hispanic parents.



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