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The Northridge Review

Fall 2004

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Awards

The Northridge Review Fiction Award, given annually, recognizes excellent fiction by a CSUN student published in the *Northridge Review*. The recipient of the 2003-2004 award is Jennifer Lu and the two honorable mentions go to Tom Noble and Tracy Bachman.

The Benjamin Saltman Award, honoring the memory of Professor Benjamin Saltman, recognizes excellence in poetry writing. The co-recipients of the award for 2003-2004 are Karen Barkan and Dan Murphy. Honorable Mentions are Jorge Ragni and Jeffrey Sosner.

The *Northridge Review* is also pleased to publish the 2003-2004 recipients of the **Academy of American Poets Award**. This year's outside judge was Angela Ball of the University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Writers. The recipient of the award for 2003-2004 is Kate Rowe for her poem "Winter Orchids." The runner-up is Scott Rowe for his poem "Instructions."

The Rachel Sherwood Award, given annually in memory of Rachel Sherwood, recognizes excellent poetry by a CSUN student published in the *Northridge Review*. The recipient of the award for 2003-2004 is Scott Rowe.

Table of Contents

Poetry

Scott Rowe	Lessons in Cartography	1
Jeffrey Alfier	Nocturne for La Migra	2
Jeff Sosner	E Pluribus Unum	16
Karen Barkan	Subtle Salvation	18
Jeff Sosner	The Yom Kippur War	19
Karen Barkan	Sibling Rivalry	23
Susan Brown	Summer Day, 1965	24
Jorge Ragni	Prevailing Winds of Six	41
La Rue Driscoll	Dirty knives	43
Karen Barkan	Storm	44
Amber Norwood	Stories found in stairwells and hallways	46
Scott Rowe	A short note to the owners of these trees	48
Dustin Lehren	Jay Leno and the guy who sells orange oxiclean killed all the poets	49
Karen Barkan	What She called up from the Bottom	51
Dan Murphy	fall	62
Kate Rowe	Winter Orchids	64
Kim Young	What We Count On	66
Rita Hermann	Rock	75
Dan Murphy	Sprung	76
Amber Norwood	Sunday Afternoons	77
Scott Rowe	Instructions	100
Amber Norwood	on the Architecture	101

- 103 Untitled Dan Murphy
116 Mourners' Tamales Jeff Sosner
117 Climbing the Border Country Jeffrey Alfier
126 Dire Wolf Jeffrey Alfier
127 Faith Healer Kim Young
129 Thermopylae, 480 B.C.E. Jeff Sosner

Fiction

- 3 Flour Children Eddie Joe Cherbony
21 Electric Mike Vincenti
27 Rigamarole Tracey Ruby
53 A dream of jean Alex Lee
79 Emergency Food and Bones Hannah Nahm
105 The Day that I Die Ken Cran
119 Disturbances Corinna Coorsen
133 Microsoft Word™ "mac" man, *the sons of adam and the barrier dividing.* Tracy Bachman

67 *Drama*

Because I'm Deaf Katherine Firkins

25 *Art*

- 26 Life in Los Angeles Liza Frankiw
52 Lariat Lodge Katherine Holmes
74 Easter Shoes Katherine Holmes
118 Peach Lynn Elishaw
132 Fence Reflection Larry Johnson

Scott Rowe

Lessons in Cartography

In the second grade Ms. Zimbrick
slices the center of our world,
makes the continents whole,
and arranges it upside down
while our bloodless knuckles grip the desks.

How does the world look now?

Asia and Africa loom,
South America a furious torch,
Australia a waxing moon
over the Pacific sky,
the Mediterranean a putrefying wound,
Great Britain no more than a birthmark.

North America crumbles and slumps,
driving a string of rodents off the coast of Alaska.

I look over at the blocks we connect
into ten-foot monoliths
and wait for the room to fall away.

Jeffrey Alfier

Nocturne for La Migra

Border towns are places forever shy
of somewhere else. In La Escondida,
she could touch the future out her window,
this town where myth says a spectral mother
weeps forever, searching for the children
that had drowned in some sleepwalking river.
But local legends can't feed her brothers,
so she gave her body as down payment
to a man with no name, to drive her north
where the truck broke down, her fare depleted.

Crossing the ebb of Rio San Jose,
she pondered life at that meridian,
the wind-seared alluvial plains where Time
leaches isotopes from volcanic sleep,
and Navajos heal with songs of water
past the foul afterbirth of mine tailings.
But there were still the migrant camps to find
under the embrace of a foreign sun,
a future hung from a thread of harvests,
the blind horizon daring ghosts to move.

Eddie Joe Cherbono

Flour Children

Each one wrapped in dough, the flour children walk into the oven. They march in step: one, then the next, then the next, entering. Their long, never-breaking line stretches far down a school hallway. They are good and well ordered, each of equal perfection, each following the child in front of them as readily as they would themselves.

Some throw conversations over their shoulders to behind-them friends, others read comic books or listen to walkmans. Girls pluck their eyebrows, and boys pick at scabs (though it's hard to tell which is which). Regardless, most share one great-big smile that smears across their faces like paste over crafts. A few seem sad. This is normal.

They look wondrously tiny compared to the oven. Their adult-sized eyes look at its swung-open door then jump inside, but just for a second. They then jump back out, then back in, then back and forth quickly. A boy playing with a candle moves his eyes in much the same way as he makes his finger jump through flame.

Wide and tall, at a slant from mere height, the oven ends the hallway. Inside will be hot; this is not a prediction. Brows made translucent beneath a layer of sweat think hard on this and wrinkle. Brain furrows lay out on the surfaces of foreheads. A boy watches waxdrops streak camouflaged down the stem of the candle. They run off a wick being unburied by flame. It cries in agony as it burns, "what have I done?" looking down at its new charred and inflated self.

The boy consoles, "think of it this way, you could have never been freed without first being burnt." This, of course, is a lie but at least the crying stops, and the children continue marching: their bodies white drips of floured dough camouflaging their way to the oven, their smiles making everything seem just

fine.

Many of them have fresh teeth, cut hair (clean behind the ears), and an overall child's neatness: the sort only seen on graduation days. Grandma-sized arms swing big and sweeping at their sides. In ancient China women and slaves weren't allowed to swing their arms as they walked. Instead, their arms were to remain in front of them, hugging a mean emptiness of air, propped in that position as if injured and cast. Their hands were to be cuffed together by their own obedient fingers, hidden beneath black and white sleeves. But when passing each other, women and slaves in ancient China knew they were connected in more ways than this.

Today, it is true for the flour children, as it is also for other children and adults all over the world, that the force of their arms' swing is proportionate to their self-confidence. This is not as simple as it seems. The German army marched using a two-for-one approach: one arm perfectly still, but the other swinging twice as hard. Very confident. Today, the Chinese walk with their arms behind their backs and bow instead of shaking hands when they greet each other. Today, the flour children's swings are big and sweeping, and nothing is as it seems.

A bright and airy atmosphere surrounds the children with the same outdoorsy freshness found in the ceiling fan section of a hardware store. The walls of the hallway are painted and look like the pages of an old book yet to be opened. Slightly misshaped lockers grip the walls on either side, their vents like finger-knuckle creases. A layer of flour covers the entire floor. The children kick it up as they go, sending puffs of flour into the air as if their tiny toes had filled it with helium.

At one end of the hall is the oven (of course), and the children continue to enter. The other end appears to extend off into eternity, stretching on and on forever, and the line of children stretches just as far. But then, at the very end of

sight, the hall and children altogether drop off as if off that one great cliff that still believes the Earth is flat. Seeing the end it is hard to tell how, or from where, the children keep coming, popping onto the back of the line just as quickly as they enter the oven at the front. A peculiar old man has a mind that works the same way: every time he learns something new, something old pushes out the other end and falls to the floor never to be found again. He is convinced that no one is a sponge, not even a child. "Things aren't absorbed," he often muses, "just stored away until nothing else will fit."

As the flour children walk down the school hallway, passing lockers, they imagine themselves storages of information locked behind combinations they will never disclose nor forget (though one day both may happen). For a moment, the lockers turn into mirrors. The line of children seems to swell: their vented foreheads moving in waves, their finger-knuckle creases reflecting and multiplying in the hall of mirrors. Suddenly, millions upon millions of children extend off in every direction. Other lines of other flour children walk down hallways where the lockers have too turned into mirrors. In unison the millions turn their heads away from what's ahead. Staring into the mirrors they see, not themselves, but the old men they will become, crouching close to the ground, picking up thoughts that have fallen out of their heads then shoving them back in, only to have more thoughts fall out the other end.

"I told you," the old men say in a voice made up of so many old voices it seems new. They shove thoughts back into their heads. More thoughts fall out.

"I told you."

Over and over thoughts are shoved in, and thoughts fall out.

"I told you. I told you. I told you."

Shoved in, fall out.

"I told you."

The old men are smiling but the children's mouths are squiggles.

"I told you."

The moment ends.

Somewhere, hair and toothpaste spots stain the silver faucet of a sink. A mother is wondering how her child will do in school today. She sees that her son shaved for his first time ever using her shaver and ultra sensitive cream. She knows he was alone as he did this and tears up, grabbing a towel, not to wipe her eyes, but to spend time with her child as she cleans his mess. If she stands in just the right spot she will be standing where he shaved moments before, and somehow they will be closer. She is young and pale. A loose, raspberry blouse shows off her breasts that can still catch a man if she needs one. She cleans the bathroom scrubbing with two hands. It's been so long since she's held her child and nourished him. Working hard her breasts ache and move and are beautiful, even in a woman's eyes. She hears the cries of a hungry child and is ready to help, but then she realizes that her baby is all grown up and at school and the cries are coming, not from a child, but from her own aching breast. She covers them with a thick sweater. They will never be heard from again. As she walks out of the bathroom she sets the towel down on the counter. After she is gone it turns into a white orchid, its petals open and loose: a flower waiting to be touched again.

Over the flour children's heads the ceiling is hidden in an illumination of lights so bright that they themselves too seem invisible. In fact, there may not even be a ceiling, or lights, just an opening above the children letting in the brightest sky in the world. Maybe it's Heaven? Maybe not? A few of the children stare up wondering while others toss a football back and forth. It gets lost momentarily in the brightness then comes back down unchanged. One of the wondering children notices the bright illumination smear down towards them, following the football like a blazing tail. Before she can tell anyone the tail retracts, leaving nothing in its wake but a speechless, believing child who

will never be able to relate with those who have not seen what she has.

A short melody of bells echoes through the hallway as intercom speakers positioned above the lockers indicate an announcement is about to be made. A murmur rustles through the line, and miraculously the children, all at once, come to a stop. A single silent second sits on the hallway as if it will never leave. It is a scary silence, like one caused, not by a lack of sound, but by a lack of the ability to hear. A distant object hits the floured floor with a muffled thud and the second ends.

"Dear students of S.P.P. Accelerated Academy of Learning and Instruction. This is your Minister of Admission speaking. As you may all already know, a member of the entering freshmen class refused to don the traditional dough garments of our academy earlier this morning. After hours of expostulation the young gentleman was ultimately persuaded to put on the dough and join the line. Unfortunately, his compliance was a device to trick the dean and myself. The boy remained in line for exactly five minutes before he decided to do the unthinkable. Flour children, never in the history of this great institution has a student left the line that leads to the oven, but this delinquent did just that. At 10:00 am he broke line and escaped into one of the lockers. It is believed that he is still somewhere in the hallway. Please be advised that he is very cunning, very dangerous, and must be found in order to ensure the safe running of the school. Anyone with information on the whereabouts of this infectious virus should let the dean or myself know as soon as we allow you. Thank you for your attention, you may resume your studies."

The children resume marching for a moment, but the announcement bells sound again and their feet, like little miracles, stop.

"Dear students of S.P.P. Accelerated Academy of Learning and Instruction. This is your Minister of Admission speaking. It should be noted that the criminal child is also a racist. Oh, and a terrorist."

The children resume.

Excitement ripples through the line, each child voicing something or another about the announcement. The lockers are regarded with much suspicion. They imagine that a grave injustice has been committed, that the academy has been dishonored, and the students are hell-bent on finding the escapee. Signs are made, songs sung, poems penned, riots contemplated. They hold board meetings where veterans speak, and a child cries for his mother who is overseas searching inside caves and under deserts (though everyone knows he won't be found there). During all this the flour children never miss a step, marching continuously into the oven.

It will be hot in there; this is not a prediction. But they are prepared. Their flour will crisp and the dough will expand and bake around them. Their sweat and sweetness will make a filling like none have ever tasted. They will be preserved, individually packaged, and sold by the dozen all over the world for different prices depending on the family name stitched in their underwear. Or they may simply be burned black and turned into charred, cashew-sized croissants. Many things are unknown to them.

"There! There's the criminal child!" A small girl thinks she sees something and starts to veer. She hears a locker, her eyes poking through the vents like pinkies, feeling around inside. The children behind her follow without noticing. The line breaks.

Sirens sound and speakers blare, "LINE BROKEN, LINE BROKEN!" Anyone paying attention would have noticed that the voice belonged to the Minister of Admission. Tall men dressed in white riot gear tramp down the hall toward the girl. The children following leave her and re-converge with the line.

"But I saw something," she pleads, frightened. Through the vents of the nearest locker she can see a boy and girl standing naked inside.

"Inside here! Look!" She points and starts to cry. The men line up in front of her. She is trapped. "I was just trying to help." The men move in, each step a drum, their boots like upside-down timpani. She sees the line of flour children

moving into the oven and wants to join them. Through the vents the naked boy and girl beckon her. Her eyes quiver. Drum! Drum! They beckon her. The men move in. She wants to cry. Drum! Drum! They beckon her. Her hands quiver. The men move in. Her finger-knuckles crease. Drum! Drum! They beckon her. Her adult-sized eyes—Drum! Drum!—move back and forth quickly. They beckon her. The men move. She wants to go.

“You will be safe in here,” a voice whispers but she knows this is a lie. A tail of light hangs down from the illumination above. A child notices and thinks she should take hold. The men are upon her. “You will be safe in here.” The other children turn their heads as she is consumed, white uniforms and gear enfolding her.

Somewhere in a clean bathroom an orchid’s petals collapse upon themselves. It cries out in agony, its voice reaching the school and echoing through the hallway.

People foreign to the school set up booths and sell flags that read, “We Can Always Forget???” All the children buy them and stick them in their dough. Some buy two, one for each shoulder. Soon the line is littered with small flags. Everywhere they look children see their own reflections in other children. Their resemblance to one another was uncanny before the incident, but now that they all have a similar cause and are wearing the same flag, they are indistinguishable. As the flour children walk into the oven it is hard to tell if they are really children at all. But it doesn’t matter because for the first time they feel united. Banners are raised demanding peace, and malls are opened. Finally, things start getting back to normal.

Somewhere, smoking not because he has to, a young father watches a crowd of intelligent people exit a theatre. Their voices, embarrassed and rebellious, stamp the ground as they sing and recite every word of the play they’ve just

learned. The young father remembers his son—lips crossed, arms tight like a smile holding laughter—tapping in front of his aunts and uncles the latest dance he had just learned. He laughs wildly out loud. *What a memory*, he thinks. The passing crowd makes eyes and sneers. All the young father ever wanted to do was tap: to dance and sing in front of intelligent people and have them force their voices to perform him. His laughing wanes as he remembers his son stomping the kitchen floor, wanting nothing to do with his dreams. Suddenly, the father is stricken silent, not because he notices the crowd eyeing him, or because his cigarette has sucked itself to his fingers, but because it hits him. He realizes he has never met his son. His memories of them together are nothing but fragments of remembered dreams.

A pale color sets in under his cheeks. Tomorrow he will begin searching for Samuel, and this time he means it. He lifts his unlit cigarette to his lips and inhales.

A clean-shaven boy named Sammy marches near the back of the line. He is a freshman who doesn't like the idea of wearing dough while walking down a long hallway into an oven. Inspired by the news of the criminal child he plans an escape of his own. Sure success gives him the giggles. Flour shakes to the floor as he laughs, trying to get the attention of the girl in front of him. He has to tell someone of his ingenuity. But headphones sing into her ears, and she can't hear him. She has missed everything—the announcements, the excitement, and the flags—while spending time with her new MP3 player. It is too bad she missed Sammy too, she hasn't spoken to many children since she started the academy. Digital cameras, PDA's with Internet access, computers, mice, these are her only friends, but she is not lonely. In them she has found something different, and she is in love.

The announcement bells chime. Sammy, on purpose, steps closer to the girl in front of him before he stops. He smells berry shampoo, dirty hands, and

heated plastic.

"Students of S.P.P. Accelerated Academy of Learning and Instruction. This is your Minister of Admission speaking. As you may already know, a young lady from the sophomore class incited a riot earlier today. At exactly 11:00 am she broke line and tried to escape into one of the lockers. Flour children, never before in the history of this great institution has the line to the oven been broken. The culprit has been dealt with, and those of you who decided to participate in the anarchy will be handled individually and given a chance to exonerate yourselves. As a reminder, no one is to break line for any reason whatsoever. If you were part of the riot you will be escorted to your trial. DO NOT LEAVE THE LINE ON YOUR OWN ACCORD. Wait for us to come and take possession of you. Please remember to have your underwear-stitching ready to be examined upon entering my office. Thank you for your attention."

Excitement drained, floured faces downfallen, the children march in step careful not to break line. Frowns are pasted across their faces as tears leave glaze trails down their cheeks. Even the flags appear to wither on their sticks.

Terry, Billy, Nick, Jorge. Sammy can see the children as they enter the oven at the far end of the line. He no longer giggles and his genius thoughts of escaping are lost inside his mind. *Maybe they've fallen out?* He wonders if he is too young to be over-stuffed. Maybe the announcements, with all their information, pushed his genius thoughts out the other end of his head? For a moment, through the corner of his eye, he imagines seeing them on the floor and begins to dive.

"Don't." The girl in front of Sammy stops him. "What are you trying to do? Escape? 'Cause if you are? Don't!"

"I might be. What's it to you?" He can't remember if he likes this girl. She sees what he was diving after. "Are they yours?"

"They might be." He remembers how she ignored him earlier, but this isn't

an attitude answer; it's an honest answer. Nonetheless, he decides to be nicer in his next response, and to sound less like a boy.

She takes a closer look. They remind her of an old man that used to live across the street. "They look like footprints to me." Alfredo was his name. He had neat, mirrored tile on all of his floors.

Trying, Sammy says, "have you ever wanted something so bad but just couldn't remember what it was?"

She turns forward.

Little balloons of flour stick to her feet as she walks. She still wears headphones and doesn't notice Sammy staring at her, watching her every move, paying close attention as she steps upon the flour-layered floor, lifting it up her calves, leaving imprints the perfect shape for girl's feet: each toe a tiny cereal bowl and the rest a shallow, emptied swimming pool. Staring at the footprints, fingering them with his eyes, Sammy sees what he knew he would. At the very bottoms of the bowls and at the heels of the pools tiny circle mirrors are exposed, but just for a second, then are quickly re-hidden beneath the flour. Ahead he sees a trail of split-second mirrors disappearing behind every child.

Sammy starts to giggle, tapping the girl in front on him on the shoulder. He's figured something out, and this time he is determined to get her attention. Giggling and tapping, a football smashes into his head, its bright comet-tail momentarily blinding him. Something falls to the floor. Rather annoyed the girl takes off her headphones and turns to look at him, waiting, not saying a word. Sammy has stopped giggling and rubs his pained head. He looks at her and knows he wanted to tell her something but can't remember. They stare at each other a moment. She actually looks cute in her dough uniform.

"Yes?" she questions.

"12-29-7." It is the first thing that comes to Sammy's mind.

"What's that?"

He hesitates. "My locker combination."

"Cool," she says nodding. "8-27-33."

"Cool."

They stare at each other with nothing to say. She almost turns forward, but then...

"So, what are your thoughts on the criminal child?"

He can't believe she's talking to him. *Try not to sound stupid. Just try not to sound stupid.* "You know, I had some really amazing thoughts about that, but I think they fell out of my head." Red.

"I bet I can help," she says, replacing her headphone's singing with Sammy's voice. In him she sees something different.

Somewhere, a man takes his ring off thinking how it might hurt the woman he loves. Grace is her name, not the woman he is in love with, but the one he's with now. They wait together, standing by the bed, but nothing happens. The room is dark, its walls, ceiling, furniture, and air drained black by their two shining faces that attract all the light. They breathe and dust caught in beams before their faces flips upside down.

"Same time tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Grace leaves.

He finds a counter to put his ring down and crawls into bed. She will be home soon. Thoughts of his mom and dad fighting (his dad fighting his mom mostly) taunt him. Sometimes he wishes he could rip his thoughts out of his head. The door opens. Another face drains the room and begins to shine. She gets into bed with him. They are both naked, but he is warm and will be on her soon.

"Did you take off the ring?"

"Yes."

"Then?"

And this coming from the woman he loves. He puts his hand on her, his finger searching, but just for a second.

Bulging, pulsing, the ring on the counter begins to glow: it becomes a circle sun, a perfection of light bending onto itself. It grows bigger and brighter, draining the room. Their faces darken. Nine months later it will be overgrown, bursting at the seams, and utterly blinding. He will be gone, but the ring will always remain. They will always be reminded. This is not a prediction.

His finger jumps into her, then out, then in, then out, then back and forth quickly.

"It's the ring finger right?"

"Yes." The ring may have hurt her.

She moans.

The moment ends.

While the others look for the criminal child, they search the vents of the lockers for Sammy's ideas.

"Where did you say you last saw them?" she asks.

For him so much has changed since then. He tries to remember. He thinks back to the time when the Earth was flat and children were happy. That was five minutes ago. He looks ahead. Adam, Tonya, and Kyle enter the oven.

"They fell out of my head, and I left them behind."

"Look, we've searched everywhere. We'll never find them this way. You keep saying they've fallen out of your head, but that's impossible. Our minds go on and on forever. Stuff doesn't fall out, it just gets lost."

She has a point. "I think you're very interesting." He waits.

"Um, I would say the same, but you haven't shown me anything good yet."

He thinks of taking off his dough, but isn't confident that's what she means.

"There is one thing I can show you." Measuring the look in her eyes, still considering his dough, he points out the mirrors at the bottoms of the bowls and pools. "The way I figure, the whole floor is a huge mirror. But for some reason, they've covered it with flour."

"What for?"

"I don't know, but it could be something good."

She reaches down and scoops two handfuls of flour off the floor; two oval mirrors glimmer in their wake. In them she sees the ceiling and its grand, tubular light bulbs. For the first time she knows the truth about her school's "sky."

"Interesting." She walks away, head tilted up, palms still holding the flour. The mirrors she formed remain exposed. Curious, Sammy bends down and allows his hands to be buried in whiteness. For no reason, at that very moment, he imagines what it might feel like to be the wick of a burning candle. This frightens him, of course, but he pushes the idea out of his head and lifts the two scoops of flour away from the mirrored floor. In his two glimmering ovals he too sees the truth.

"This is good," he says as he marches on towards the oven, taking the scoops of flour with him.

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Jeff Sosner

E Pluribus Unum

after Kenneth Fearing

When you spy that little white ball
cracking off of Barry Bonds' bat,
and position yourself, headstrong individual, army of one,
in a hazy crowd of blurry cheers at Pac Bell Park,
focus.

Focus on rotation, trajectory, and timeless glory
wrapped tight around salvation's cork nucleus;

as it tumbles through billion-dollar night,
as it eclipses the red, white, and blue moon,
just north of a Carl's Jr. star,
recognize your God-given right
to the Hummers
it can buy.

What will you feel when leather destiny nestles in your mitt?
What will you do when the crowd beats you down
and steals your prize?
To whom will you cry out?
Your lawyer, your congressman, their
Jesus—in that order?

*Look here—the black smudge from Bonds’
six-hundredth home run.*

Look at the stitching, torn in beer-drenched melee.

Do I hear \$500,000? One million?

Two, three, four? Enough to feed a small country?

Outbid by nature’s fittest,
ousted from the hallowed auction hall,
relegated to the bus stop bench, you sit
next to a haggard man, whose hand has been mangled
by the teeth of a Rawling’s wool-thread spinner.

Pieces of his flesh lay tangled in that pristine leather orb,
or that one, or that one, or maybe further beneath that pile.

One red stitch sips one drop of his blood.

He will ask you for a light,
and you will not recognize him as your brother.

Karen Barkan

Subtle Salvation

The day the world ended I walked north
on highway 101, along the divider,
not that I was
frightened, because
there was no fear anymore.

I wasn't looking for heaven or hell,
or all the misplaced people.
I was just walking to Santa Barbara
because I could,
and there was nothing else to do.

I didn't even care that I was
(hurry last chance) the only one left.
It was nice to be occupied
by wind
and thoughts
and the theretofore
unheard sound of
sneakers on freeway.

I gave up where the 101 gives
in to the ocean.
My bloody feet needed rest,
and the rest
was catching up with me.

Jeff Sosner

The Yom Kippur War

My father had an extra ticket.
"Come to the service?" he asked on cue.
I don't feel safe in a synagogue.
I can't find my old tallis.
I am not a Jew.

I'm your last chance.
Steven married a dirty shiksa,
so you play the Holocaust card with me.

But I know God.
He loves a Catholic girl
who tends to her Trigonometry;
a Buddhist man whom the sky pushes into
the ground like a thumbtack;
the Presbyterian minister who contemplates
suicide at the McDonalds' drivethru;
the Muslim in the catacombs of Yankee Stadium.

Should I be a good Jew? Like the ones in your family
who say:

"Did you lose weight...or just hair?"
"How long do you think she'll wait for you?"
"What're you going to do with an English degree?"

Jeff Sosner

Do you remember me?
I'm the Scotch-Irish drunk who finally made good.
I found God in those who check their side-view mirrors;
in the heart of my Salvadoran baby;
in Robert Horry's jumpshot;
everywhere but in the eternal light
bulb above the temple foyer.

Mike Vincenti

Electric

i had reason to visit Viet Nam. on the balcony of Bong Sen Hotel on Dong Khoi, peering over the neon karaoke sign 50 yards away, i breathe in the heavy, fishy fragrance of Ho Chi Minh City, and a t.v. screen blinks.

seated in a high-backed, wooden throne is a bearded, weary Uncle Ho. behind him hangs a giant map, and there's a stick on the table that he'll use to point with. in this mountain stronghold, outside the homeland, he discusses strategy and plays with the electric. the electric makes people move and he's planning to build a nation.

it's difficult enough to get rid of a sofa in los angeles, or count how many licks it takes to get to the center of a candy apple; who are these people who change borders, who get children to run through murky miles of swamp and defecation?

electric is evolution and the living moment when you know the world is not like it was before; when you think that there's actually reason, rhyme and time left to alter the paint-strokes of the grand design—stars squinting, starting and stopping, peering and hoping your fingers don't twitch while you twist the sky.

i was once claustrophobic and deathly afraid of crawling with bats and scorpions and snakes through tunnels in the second-growth jungle of the district of Cu Chi. this amusement park of war—celebrating the ingenious, ferocious spirit of the rebel Vietnamese—reeks of the electric. this place titillates your hackles, and it's clear that independence is subjective.

one should hope never to have to burrow into the earth.

let's say you drove along the rode from Cu Chi trying to make it before nightfall to the Tay Nihn Province. along the way you'd pass some shrines. children might run out onto the road to meet you, if you're willing enough to

Mike Vincenti

stop at the side of paddies—perhaps even battle the jeeps, mopeds and bicycles across the street—to film the grazing oxen in the burning fields. oh. there's a single, looming, inspiring mountain in the background.

if you set your camera on slow-motion, perhaps you'll catch one young girl on her way back from school on a hot saturday afternoon. she's probably clothed all in fine, flowing white silk—her straw, conical hat dangling from her neck, down her back. the door of your BMW minivan is open, and the driver manages not to kill you, swerving through pot-holes and swarms of village traders.

it's hard to think that your world will ever be the same when they're gone. it's hard not to feel electric there. and if it only takes a moment to change the course of one life, what does it take to shake up the colors of the few, or create a fire-storm with the many?

cancel the escorts one day and walk unknowingly through city streets with a map you know nothing about. travel lightly on all accounts and worry what it is you'll do and where it is you'll stay when night falls and more than half of the buildings are dark from overloaded circuits and under-loaded pockets. remember, all you own is a moped that needs to seat four.

when i was a kid, I dreamt of large things; fiberglass impressed me and the dog tired me out. my parents used to take me to church where i was more comfortable in the vestibule than at mass, and for some reason my dad didn't like that. i separated early, just when my parents were trying to fit in, i guess. we started off on the wrong foot and i just fooled them until i moved out and it was time to grow up.

i felt electric then.

NR

Karen Barkan

Sibling Rivalry

When the crust of old summer
falls away from our sleepy eyes,
we roll over
to embrace the prodigal—
the infant winter chill
growing,

returning
to lavish dew-crowned
car mornings,
heaven-colored fog soup.

Then with gentle hands
we guide towards
the steady adolescence
of cool, driving, rain.

Into the new yearly dotage,
we swear never to speak
of the slow-creeping
seeping
stranger son,
summer sun.

Susan Brown

Summer Day, 1965

Before my mother owned a car
she'd pull my sisters and me in our Flyer
wagon, rusted-rain-red, to the store.

Creaking down chilled aisles
on a sticky warm day we'd pause for
popsicles, licking their wet coolness

as she lugged the wagon to the meat-man,
sugary juice slipping down three
dimpled chins, pale from the sun

bonnets she'd make us wear. Then
she'd light a Kool Menthol with a match,
puffing out halos of smoke, talking

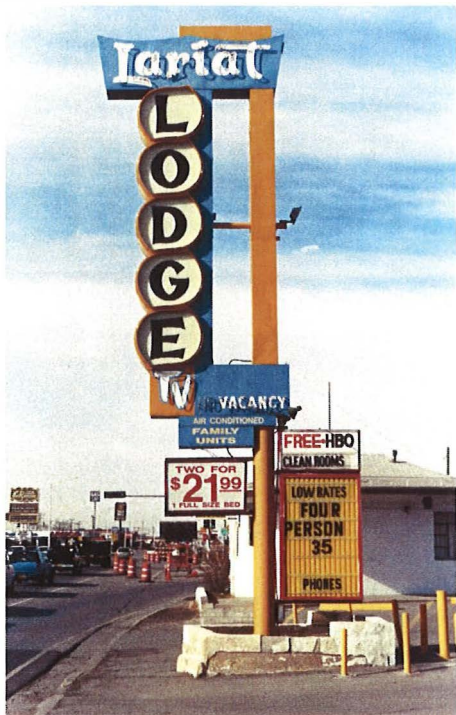
with a sly smile to the meat-man
while he hacked the ends off her pork
butt. She'd twist her hips, lazily, as she

wiped our juicy chins with the hem
of her sundress, flowered like the garden
she longed to have, and as the soft

orange and red flowers brushed my skin
I'd lean over, peer up the shady abyss
as if I were gazing into a crystal ball—

where, deep in the glow of her pearly
underpants, I'd see my future: a woman
who shows meat-men her legs.





Tracey Ruby

Rigamarole

*"Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes.
Art is knowing which ones to keep"*
— Scott Adams

*For my children,
This is all their fault*

Part 1: A Disclaimer

When you trip and fall and land splat. Arms splayed legs splayed. On your face. And someone says what happened? Actually, they don't say it but shriek it, because for some reason falls are scary to people, and they shriek instead of say, but it sounds angry to you not like someone scared but like someone compounding your injury. What on earth, they say, what on earth did you trip over and you say, that that... And, from your position, you point to a bump, a mistake, an architectural oversight, a wrinkle in flooring, and you say, that, that pillar. And your someone says, pillar? Hardly, more like a bump. And you don't say anything because you're the one that's fallen. Flat. Made the mistake. And, in so doing, have unwittingly discovered the nature of mistakes which are very large upon immediate reflection, yet not so large when they're not yours, mere bumps not pillars. This is an important discovery. One that will join other discoveries in your arsenal of things that will one day make you wise.

Part 2:
Ebullience

To say that the day that they were born was the happiest day of her life would be an understatement. In fact, she said, she was so happy she could have died. Died of ebullience. We teased her about this. This S.A.T. word. And thought about ebullience as a really funny cause of death. We would be intrigued, we told her, by ebullience as the cause of death in a woman as young as she, especially when so many causes are preventable or prolonged or at least diagnosed and then somewhat expected. If we ever got such news one of us might make the mistake of transforming the word ebullience into heart attack or into shock or seizure or stroke. For surely, even the coroner might shake his head as he cut into her long body. The first cut, the 'Y' incision would be made. The arms of the Y extending from the front of each shoulder to the bottom end of her breastbone. The tail of the Y extending from the sternum to the pubic bone, hers weakened by childbirth. The incision would be very deep, extending to the rib cage, and plunging through the abdominal wall below that. He'd use the Rokitansky method to remove her organs. The most common way. He'd cut off their connections to her body and remove them as one. Whole. Healthy. No early cirrhosis, plaqued arteries, or signs of foul play. The stomach would be cut open on its greater curvature and its contents examined: Graham crackers, apple juice, and one slender slice of hospital pound cake. Finally, all her major blood vessels would be cut open and examined, lengthwise. And then the organs would be placed back into her body and her head and body would then get sewn up. But even before he replaced that flap. That flap of face and skull and hair she would still have that Mona Lisa smile affixed to her face. An uncanny, rigamortis smirk that would stink of ebullience. Even in death.

Part 3:
To Do:

Do Your Dishes
Put On Your Seatbelt
Take Out Trash

This was not written. This was the mental list. Is the mental list that mothers, of children of a certain age, carry around in their heads. And so, it's quite possible, even probable, that 'put on your seatbelt' may get confused with 'take out trash', or 'put away laundry,' or 'be home before dark.' Because things often fall out of order in the brains of mothers. It's the same phenomenon that occurs when mothers holler for their youngest, let's say Timmy, when who they really want is their oldest, let's say Johnny. And a mother once told her son to put on his seatbelt when what she really meant was take out the trash. This mother and her son were in the kitchen and she was washing his dishes. His dishes and his friends' dishes. Because that's what he did. Had his friends over after school and he liked to please. To please and to entertain. And after he'd finished serving up the pizza rolls and the almost-baked fish sticks and she had just about finished washing his dishes and his friends dishes and thinking she should really chew him out for not using even one of the 500 paper plates she had just bought at Costco she sighed instead and looked over at the kitchen can brimming with *his* trash, with the empty Gatorade bottles, and pizza roll boxes and dirty paper towels and popsicle sticks and newspapers, and God-knows-what-else, and she sighed and said, put on your seatbelt. And he, the funny entertainer, having already sensed her next demand, having already picked up on her predictable, non-verbal cues, had already pulled the lid off the trashcan, had already cinched the cinch sack and was ready to pull it up out of its container,

paused, delighted with his mother's mistake, said, it's going to be a bumpy ride.

She didn't get him immediately. She didn't get the reference. He laughed at her. That she got. Because children always laugh at their mothers because mothers are out of it. Behind the times. And she said to him, what? What are you talking about? She stood puzzled, up to elbows in dirty, soapy dishwasher. For just a moment the kitchen was silent except for the crackle of her soap bubbles bursting. And then she realized what she'd said. She smiled at her son. And sighed again. Saying, in that short sigh, I'm tired. I'm lonely. I'm overwhelmed. She looked older to him just then. But he dismissed this. Because it didn't matter much to him and he'd forgotten it almost as quickly as it had occurred to him. And she watched him leave with the trash sack slung over his back, and he didn't go out the back slider like he should have, but instead marched through the house and a dark liquid seeped from the corners of the trash bag creating a long, unbroken, gooey wake behind him. Through the whole length of her house. Across her old wood floors. Her boy had done that. The mother went back to her dishes and began to cry. Quietly at first. Until she heard the garage door open then close and she knew that the boy would not be home before dark and so she cried louder.

*Part 4:
Crazy*

My boys are crazy. My boys are arrive two months early weigh four pounds each crazy. They're punch a kid in the stomach at the age of five because the kid won't give them back their ball crazy. My boys are hit fourteen homeruns when they're twelve crazy. They're lose their father the summer of sixth grade and then begin junior high depressed and alone and not smoke pot with the other kids who are into extreme sports like they are crazy. My boys are laugh

out loud in all the wrong places crazy. They're tell their grandmother to shut-up she's driving them crazy crazy. They're rake the neighbor's yard for free and trim the hedges crazy. My boys are skate against the red light wait for the lanes to clear stand in the center island in the middle of oncoming traffic with their fifteen-year-old best friend who goes ahead of them and gets struck and killed by a car that has the right of way crazy. They're join a Christian youth organization when they're sixteen and their parents are atheists crazy. My boys are pray for your soul crazy. They're bible study at their house once a week crazy. My boys are defensive players of the week in football for hitting a kid after the flag crazy. They're go snowboarding and land on their heads crazy. My boys are broken neck crazy. They're lucky to walk crazy. My boys are broken nose crazy. They're wreck their first trucks on a green light by an old lady who can't see if she has the right of way because the sun is in her eyes crazy. My boys are know all the E.R. docs crazy. My boys are know all the traffic judges and shake their hands and the judges know their first names and are happy to see them and ask about their short games in golf crazy. They're forget about Jesus drink beer smoke pot chew tobacco crazy. My boys are dislocated shoulders jumping off of furniture crazy. They're put their heads through walls trying not to step on their dog's tail crazy. My boys are cheat on a test get caught fight it with the dean and win crazy. They're get hit in the mouth with a baseball lose their front teeth demand to stay in the game as they spit blood all over everybody crazy. My boys are in love with the same girls since they were ten crazy. My boys are stay out all night play hard the next day in the most important game of the year and make the clutch play crazy. They're in love with their mother crazy. My boys are hate their parents crazy. My boys are tongue rings and tattoo crazy. They're beat up their little brother to toughen him up crazy. They're teach their dog to speak, walk on his hind legs, turn off the lights crazy. My boys are steal fishing poles from an overpriced sporting goods store crazy. They're steal twenty dollars out of your wallet to give to their friend with Nazi

tattoos who got kicked out of his house for having Nazi tattoos by his Jewish parents who don't respect individuality crazy. My boys are search all over the neighborhood for a lost cat crazy. They're punch a guy in the mouth before the guy can punch them in the mouth over something stupid crazy. My boys are spend every dime they ever get on their friends crazy. My boys are shirt off their backs crazy. They're the more the merrier crazy. They're party at my house crazy. They're win scholarships to stellar out of state schools based solely on their athletic ability that they turn down crazy. They're live at home forever crazy. My boys are make their mother crazy crazy.

*Part 5:
The Load*

This is where I will begin because I might as well. The phone rings. It is not morning. It is for my son. The boy on the other end of the ringing phone is Mike. Mike's tone is flat and deep. Is he there he asks. Just like that. Flat. Doesn't acknowledge me. Some bad news does not acknowledge mothers. Bad news is flat and deep. Mike, who I do not know, has bad news. Flat, deep, bad news. I am sure of this. And it is aimed at my son. I wake him. He rolls toward me too deep in sleep for the afternoon. The possibilities of the previous evening run through my mind. What time *did* he get home? When did I stop listening for his key in the lock? His footsteps on the old wood floors. The creak of the refrigerator. He's wearing a hooded sweatshirt and sweatpants. It's not that cold. It was last night. Does this bad news from this Mike have something to do with the hood of that sweatshirt wrapped too tightly around my son's chin? The perfect chin. Just a little cleft. A shadow of a cleft. A hint of his father. Dead. Is this bad news like that bad news? Who is it he asks. Mike I say. Flat and Deep. Mike. My son does not ask who Mike is. He takes the phone from my hand and he says hello. His eyes open just a little wider.

Not too much. Just a little. He digs at their corners. And looks at his fingers. He flicks away the sleep. I watch his chest. He inhales deeply and exhales in short steady pulses like singers are trained to do. From the diaphragm. My son is not a singer. I think about his sternum. How it used to jut out when he was little. A skinny little kid with a bird chest and a weird sternum that poked out especially when he exhaled. It doesn't do that now. He's meatier. Healthier. Older. Too old to be living at home. He says no way to Mike. No way. I watch for something from him, my son. The tell tale sign. Someone is dead I'm sure. Someone mangled in a car accident. Someone my son should not have let drive. Someone who surely met their end just after dropping my son off. Shut up, he says. Shut up. Are you serious. He rolls off the bed and puts his feet to the floor. He bends down and cracks the knuckles of his toes. Firmly. Like he does sometimes. For no reason. Now there's a reason. Because something has happened. Alright he says. And he hangs up on Mike. No goodbye. No what hospital is he at. Do you think he'll be alright. Did they get the other guys. How did you find out. Nothing. Just an alright and then nothing. What happened I ask. My voice is thick and I think it shakes. I got a 99% on my business exam. How do you know I ask. Because Mike just told me. He stretches and then brushes past me toward his bathroom. He doesn't close the bathroom door. He pees for a long time. I gather up some of the clothes on his floor. I wonder what's wrong with me. Why my antennae have grown so skewed. Pointed in all the wrong directions. Why I was so sure. So sure that Mike had bad news. That I would be holding that bad news just now and not dirty laundry. There is a stray quarter in the dryer. It is shiny having been washed God knows how many times and at last dried. What an imagination. What an imagination she has. They have always said that.

*Part 6:
He's Pretty Fast for a Fat Guy*

When they were three she took them to Home Depot or some other do-it-yourself emporium. This was a mistake because keeping track of one is hard and two is impossible. While she kept a death grip on the one who was the most wily the most ADD the most loud the other scurried a little further down the aisle. She begged a man with a work apron on, who looked like he might know what he was doing, if he thought it would be possible for her to install her own new hardwood floors because her old hardwood floors creaked whether someone walked on them or not. He, the thick-bodied, aproned man with square hands, looked at this woman, who was wearing sweats and a two-day old pony tail, clutching desperately to a wild-eyed tot while somehow simultaneously staring through him at another not so wild-eyed tot who had wrangled a pistol style hose nozzle out of its container. She asked the man about the benefits of a floating glued down floor as opposed to the nail down type while she pulled the hair of the tot she was clutching and evil-eyed the one down the aisle. The aproned man was going to tell this woman, this woman, who he imagined had barely made it into her car with thing one and thing two, that perhaps hiring a professional would be best, considering. When he felt in the small of his back an insistent poke, poke, poking. He turned and looked down and saw that thing 2 had him in his sights. Thing 2 was staring down the barrel of the pistol style hose nozzle and he said as loud as any three year old could. Freeze Asshole. And when the aproned man did not freeze, but instead looked at the embarrassed mother of these two. The tot, the one with the gun, kicked the man as hard as he could in the back of his heel, and the other one, the ADD kid bit the man on the knee. The aproned man groaned and tried to wrestle himself free and the mother did nothing except look like she was going

to cry. The aproned man freed himself from the little tyrants and ran as fast as his shape would allow down the full length of the aisle. The first kid, the one the mother had kept clutched so tightly in the beginning of the story said, he runs pretty fast for a fat guy.

*Part 7:
Change*

When you were five and already fatherless you got into my car as I picked you up late from school. You had in your hand a small brown envelope about the size of my palm and you said mother we need to collect money for the poor kids and put it into this envelope. I said to you, in a not very motherly tone of voice, you *are* the poor kids. And I made you buckle up and I roared off down the street. I didn't notice you that day. I didn't see that you were happy to see me. Smiling. Looking forward to me. That you were wearing yellow corduroys and a striped yellow shirt. That your hair had gotten too long. Scraggly around your ears. That at some point you had stopped being blonde and were now almost brunette. That at some point your shoes had become too small. Your toes hurt and you walked funny. Heel toe, heel toe. You concentrated on that, I think. I didn't notice that. That was a Friday. On Monday I was late dropping you off to school and I didn't notice you that morning either. Because if I had noticed you at all that morning I would have realized what you'd been clutching in your hand all that way to school. How had you managed it? An invisible little man dashing around that apartment collecting wayward change. A quarter from under the crumby couch cushions, a dime from under the sink, pennies from that ceramic boot that sits alone atop my dresser. Two quarters from that birthday card grandma sent you. The ones she taped carefully to the eyes of that blue monster that roared happy birthday five year old. An old piggy bank we picked up in Tijuana filled with lint covered nickels and dimes

Tracey Ruby

retrieved from laundry mat dryers. I stopped at the curb. The clearly designated curb for dropping kids off. And I looked over at you and you were clutching that little brown envelope that had grown disproportionately large. Bursting. Pregnant with change. Filled. Unsealable. You held it tight, both hands, to your chest like a trophy. But you looked ashamed. Your eyes wouldn't meet mine. I know now that you weren't ashamed of yourself but of me. That you clutched your contribution to the poor, proud. But ashamed. Is that for the poor kids, I asked you. Yes, you said. I offered to write a bad check in exchange for your change. You declined. I kissed the top of your head so you would know that you weren't always invisible and I told you I loved you. I love you too, mom, you said. And you somehow got out of the car without spilling even one dime.

I woke up one morning and you were seven and I had another one just like you but not as good-natured. You were independent and reliable, mostly. We still had no more money than we had before and I was still no happier. I used to send you to the store. The corner-store the one on Kester and Hazeltine. Do you remember that little bodega? They knew you there. I sent you in one time with six dollars. Enough for bread, milk, and some mac and cheese and maybe, I told you, if you had some change left over, some chocolate milk for your walk home. You came home with a Super-Pro Wammo Frisbee and a quart of milk. And the milk, you left that sitting on the curb as you winged the Frisbee all the way home. Playing catch with yourself. Do you remember what I did when you walked in the door. Without the milk. But with that Frisbee? I called you Jack and the mother fuckin' beanstalk. I told you you'd sold our cow and come home with magic beans. You knew the story but didn't understand the reference. I flung your Frisbee hard off the patio balcony and I told you to go and bury it and see what grew. You cried and said I'd just flung the best Super-Pro Frisbee ever made. You retrieved the Frisbee from the pool that hadn't been used or

cleaned in years and you peeled off the dead leaves that clung to the creamy white disc and you returned it to Marshall, who never should have sold it to you in the first place. Marshall took pity on your tears and your lot in life being tied to a bitch of a mother like me and he gave you your money back and he took the Frisbee, which he'd never be able to resell because of all the scratches on it, and had you autograph it because he told you that some day, surely, you'd be somebody special. Somebody to be reckoned with. And he nailed it to the wall behind the register. I had to walk into that god-damned store every other day and see that Frisbee, pierced through the middle with a two penny nail, with your signature on it that said—I was born to a bad mother. And every time Marshall saw me glance at that trophy, he'd say, one day your son will be a world class Frisbee thrower.

*Part 8:
Untitled*

We warned her about what wouldn't be found in any baby books and later, when she really needed it, was prepared to really pay attention, what wouldn't be found in any pop psychology books that claim to deconstruct adolescents while simultaneously advising those committed to managing them. We told her she would not find any information at all on: fighting unfair speeding tickets, fender benders—that aren't the kid's fault because the person in front of them was driving too slow, minors in possession of alcohol charges from grumpy cops who are targeting teens on spring break who are just doing what everybody else is doing and besides they didn't give the cop permission to search their trunk, academic probations—brought on by mean teachers who won't ever understand the concept of the individual, talented ball players who continue not to make all-star teams because room is always made for the coach's son who sucks, pets that die prematurely because of selfish mothers who won't spend

Tracey Ruby

five grand on chemo treatments for ten year old labs that the kids call brother, broken bicycles put together at midnight without a Phillips screwdriver but with a butter knife, missed open houses—there are too many to keep track of anyway and why would any parent ever suspect that their kid would get a surprise special recognition award covered by the local paper, missed talent shows in which a kid somehow wrangles special permission out of the principal to put on a skateboarding showcase complete with ramps and loud music and then knocks himself unconscious during the show and gets whisked away via ambulance to the nearest hospital and the nurse calls and says everything is okay even though the kid doesn't know what day it is or where he is or who he is, missed parent teacher conferences due to the slip stating the date and time of said conference being wadded up at the bottom of a backpack stuffed inside an empty Oreo wrapper, school yard fist fights in which masculinity is clearly challenged, inappropriate touching, shop lifting, rollerblading—without proper safety equipment, spilled grape juice on white carpet, tetanus shots for road rash, broken teeth, broken arms, broken spirits, bad dreams, bed wetting—well into the 13th year, cheating, sudden onset claustrophobia, hip hop, tattoos, piercings, bad breakups with first loves, porn, school psychologists, summer school, female stalkers, or the consequences of bad haircuts.

*Part 9:
Maybe Just New*

This is my new body. Not too big. Not too small. But by no means just right. These are my legs. These are my arms. Someone being funny or very serious or perhaps merely mistaken has attached, seamlessly, a tertiary arm. Firmly. Positively. Resolutely to my waist. Between chest and hip. Right side. I haven't use of it, yet. The fingers don't drum. There are no instincts formed, no reflexes, no gestures, no skill.

It's smaller, I think than the others, healthier even—the nailbeds pink and clean and moonless. The nails neatly trimmed or newly grown. This hand has no linear scars on it like the other two—having suffered through too many hot cookie-sheet mishaps. The arm is hairless—maybe shorn prior to attachment—maybe not. Maybe just new. I roll over on to my left side and my new arm follows my body's movement and flops over, cradling me. I think maybe this new arm is not such a bad idea.

The doctor takes a radial pulse and gives me the thumbs up. Two thumbs up. He says that I can leave so I do. I want to ask him about the mistake. Because, surely, one has been made. But I already know about the nature of mistakes. So I don't ask the doctor about this one in particular. Because I think, somehow, that it is mine and that it has something to teach me. And besides. Mistakes, mine yours or ours have nothing what-so-ever to do with this story. I want to give him three thumbs up in return, but I cannot, yet. So I settle for two.

The house is hot and dark. I think that I haven't been gone so very long. There are no children here. The children are long gone. The dog is still sleeping and doesn't welcome me. His dish is full. He doesn't eat when I'm away. The answering machine is blinking. I am told that I have one new message. It is the Sparkletts man demanding payment. 153 dollars will square us. I delete it. The dog awakens and sniffs my new arm. I think the arm recoils slightly. It tingles. It says that it does not like dogs. I open a window to dispel the heat. The new arm does not help and the old arms struggle like arms do when painters don't take care around windows. I begin to rifle through my closet for something, anything that will accommodate the new me. I settle on a t-shirt and low-rise jeans so that the arm is not hemmed in. I make short work of scissoring a hole big enough in the t-shirt to accommodate my new appendage and am thankful that the new me does not include a new shoulder. I don't even consider going out because people will not understand what's become of me. They didn't

Tracey Ruby

understand what had become of me when I had just two arms. Now they will only stare.

I open the slider and wrestle with the screen. The screen is dented and mashed in places and doesn't open as it should. That is his fault. He had a party eons ago and one of his under-aged drunken friends tried to walk through it. This friend spilt beer all over the hard wood floors and mashed in my screen. 97 dollars to replace it and I figured why bother because there would be more drunken parties to come. There were no more drunken parties but the screen is still mashed in. Now it's a relic. An oversized token too big for a scrapbook.

There is plenty of dog crap to pick up. The new arm is coming to life. It likes the sun. It snaps its fingers. It knows how to be, suddenly. The pooper scooper is on the side of the house where I left it. How long ago? I can't be sure. But from the amount of piles in the yard I'd say a good while. A good long while. My right arms take care of snapping open the scooper. Its toothy metal mouth yawns and envelopes great mounds of doggy gifts. The left arm is free. Free to run through my hair. Free to stroke my face. Free to place its hand on my waist in mock indignation. Free to remember. Free to remember a different time in this same place when scooping up dog shit was someone else's job.

NR

Jorge Ragni

Prevailing Winds of Six

Something important,
like the twisty smoke spring
that holds the house down

and keeps the sky up,
shooting out the chimney
like a curly fry.

Something mysterious,
hovering and seen
from behind bent blinds,

wind-taloned claws, eyes
leaking light, peering
through the seams.
look, there

They grin.

Gap-toothed,
all bear the factory stamp.

It sicks, winning imperfection.

Jorge Ragni

From between gums,
gentle gusts,
the warm, fresh breath
of childhood;

it soothes the occasional ache
with the icing of make-believe.

Don't blow the candle out—
there is something
moving,

deep and terrible
in there.

La Rve Driscoll

Dirty knives

live on their own.
Don't like to mingle much.

Segregated from utensils like
spatulas, wooden spoons, and serving tongs.

Cutlery sharks wait for a hand in murky
water tasting of blood.

They slide in, slip, and slice fingers.
Accused of "bobbiting off" genitalia.

Knives think they're loved.
If they were sharp, then they'd know

they have to stand up straight
in constricting wooden homes.

When they lie down
someone always gets cut.

Karen Barkan

Storm

Grey snow sinks
by night to blanket
the clothes hanging to dry,
the pool,
the barbeque.

It swirls and lunges
in headlight beam
and makes pink glow
of the warm northern sky.

It coats my hair
and alights on tongue,
then swims down, in,
claws at throat,
clings to lungs,

as I drive windows down,
eyes up
to the hills,
through tailgating refugee swarms
of the displaced
and the curious

Karen Barkan

watching light
like Christmas.

I envision dirty angels
made of cooled embers,
burned homes,
bits of charred bone.

Amber Norwood

Stories found in stairwells and hallways

Tripped over agitated dinner, upside down
orange chicken lo mein—nai ho ma? Not well now. Her nervous
stomach overruling lunch, it's now scantily covered by
one stench-emitting paper towel; rolled an apple,
kicked a folding chair,
hid a yellow baby bootie.

Above two paint-chipped standard egg
white doors, beneath one dust mold spitting vent
indelible ink screams: SPORK IS GOD, a prophecy
following us to a park across
a busy thoroughfare into our formative years. Observed
Bosch triptych—"The Temptation of Saint Anthony"; lost
a martyr, a hammer and nails.

Traced indefinable splotch, gruel-like splays angry,
indiscriminate near breakfast bar counter top; spied memoranda
between strangers: "I
peed in this room." "Perhaps
you should have used the toilet." A comic strip
laments corporate takeovers; a dog at an ironing board.
Held little girls crouching on sticky floors
crying "mama?"

My grandmother marries neighbor's brother in
sepia fragmented antiquity; his cat asleep in frog-shaped
wicker hamper. Bought a man selling cards,
arsenic, chocolate bars and bootleg tees.
Solitary door bars opening, but tried with a screwdriver,
a ball of yarn, candycane.

A meeting of cockroaches adjourns in darker corners;
ranked advertisements for mouthwash, buried a lighter,
a pipe in a Gucci bag. High tread
boot prints made in blue paint on gray cement.

(They fit me exactly.)

Burnt sienna/periwinkle soldiers engage crayola war
not extending two feet from the floor, will be painted over; a small army
helmet for a smaller sergeant porting
a fifth of Jack Daniels, lyrics to Lennon,
Mardi Gras beads.

One print of Che Guevara—he looks just like a friend of mine.
A mural: my friend shares nitrous with Tank Girl,
me, Neal Peart. My tee-shirt reads
Spork is God (indeed).

Scott Rowe

A short note to the owners of these trees

Did you see the Boxwoods along the banks of the stream,
armfuls of jade butterflies?

Did you think of them when you placed these trees along your street?

The ones carefully chosen
for color and shape.
Evenly spaced like thin soldiers
guarding manicured lawns and boxed hedges.

What will you do when the roots
burrow under your home to strangle the pipes?
When the trunks become thick,
so large the sidewalk lifts and splits.

Dustin Lehren

Jay Leno and the guy who sells orange
oxiclean killed all the poets

TV stations break into cartoon shows to carry violent L.A. freeway drama:

Several Los Angeles area television stations, including two that were showing children's programming at the time, broke into their regular schedules to broadcast the story live.

Helicopters swirled above the scene, capturing every detail as it happened.

—CNN (5/1/98)

The pepperoni on the tombstone spells out,
"here lies Poetry, she would have
had something poetic to say."

They hired an online pedophile
with camel cash and free
checking accounts.

He killed a poet,
every time a TV's flicker
licked the closed eyelids
of a small black child

and two every time a high-speed chase
interrupted an after-school cartoon,
until finally only one poet remained
speeding down the freeway
during *Animatics*.

Dustin Lehren

The Taco Bell Tolls for that
last poet, who stopped
in the carpool lane with his dog
and shared, via five floating news helicopters,
the last poem ever written on a black banner in white letters.

With a shotgun, this poet decided to take his life
much like that hunting-flannel wearing
writer from the past, may you also
rest in peace father of the Foo Fighters.

The shot seen around the living rooms:
"BANG!" Vibrant red spilled onto the asphalt screen
like a tipped milk jug.

Karen Barkan

What She called up from the Bottom

I remember

how ferocious your dazzle was
before broken by a bone-kiss
and healed open with kill-clean salt.

Every never haunts
and magic soon ghosts us.

Bring ice now
for the needles and champagne
and we'll devour with a green-blind growl
your squirming angel-prisoner.



Alex Lee

A dream of jean

A was a pair of black jeans with zippers. A was owned by a sixteen year old girl named jean. jean bought A at hot topic. A was tried on, for the first time (jean decided to pick a pair of jeans from the bottom of the pile. not as gross, she described to her friends) and jean posed in front of a mirror with her two best friends, mary and freda.

"you look good," freda said.

jean looked at her butt and pushed on it, to see how A fit. this really was a good fit. A was folded carefully and placed in a bag. the exchange was made for 48 dollars. jean and her friends had some lunch.

late that night, A said to another pair of jeans hanging in the closet, "this is exciting. i've never been in a closet before."

another pair of jeans called B said, "it's not so bad. she'll wear you once or twice and you'll get washed.

C, a halter top said, "getting washed is the pits. the water is so hot!" >< then C added, "it's not so bad with the bleach though."

A kept silent, wondering about these new things. A also noticed there were a pair of moth balls on the bottom. "i see moth balls," A said. "its good to know that she cares about us."

Alex Lee

"we're very important," B said.

"thanks for the protection guys!" A called to the moth balls.

the moth balls remained silent.

"they don't talk at all," B said. "i think they're a bit sulky that they have to sacrifice themselves for us."

A was a bit miffed. no one had asked A if A wanted to be saved. but A made a silent thanks to the moth balls all the same.

the next day at school, jean wore A and C. A was excited and became quickly sore from all the movement. there were so many classes too. jean kept scratching at her knee.

"these jeans itch," jean told mary during biology class. the teacher was talking about starch.

"you need to break them in," mary said. "did you wash them yet?"

A became nervous.

"no," jean said. "i like how new clothes smell."

during lunch jean was standing in line when she bumped into some guy. the guy smiled at jean. A couldn't see if jean was smiling back. but then jean began to shuffle around a bit and the two kids talked nervously. after jean came home she changed. A was laid on the bed on top of B.

"how was it?" B asked.

"that was a long day," A said. "i'm pooped."

"you had a short day," B said. A remained silent, wondering what was going to happen. The next day jean didn't wear A or C. they remained on the bed. instead she wore a mini skirt who had refused to talk with A.

after jean and the skirt were gone, B said "D is pretty stuck up. D thinks that jean looks better with D on than with jeans."

"i thought we looked pretty good," A said. "me and C are a good combination."

"right on," C said. they would have hi5ed but neither clothes had hands or sleeves nor muscles to move. so instead they just laid there and quivered.

the next day before school, jean tried on B and then took B off. she wore a pair of slacks. A tried to talk with B but B gave only short answers. later that afternoon jean showed up with a big smile. she posed with B and then with A. she didn't change however. she put on B and then put A in a basket with C. she then left the basket in the garage. C whispered to A, "i think B is getting a little tight. she might give B away soon."

"give B away!"

"yeah, i think B is sad."

A was puzzled.

"i think that's what happened with my predecessor ... we only knew each other for a short time, but jean grew half a cup size and the last halter wasn't covering enough." C looked sad. "its okay though. i think they went to good will. i haven't seen any rags around this house."

"i hope not," said A. "i wouldn't want oil and car grease on me."

the wash wasn't so bad, but A was screaming a lot from the hot water. afterwards in the dryer A shouted out, "i feel much better now."

"that's good to hear," replied some bra.

that night jean tried on A. she also tried on another shirt. mary came over and the two of them commented on the clothes.

"i really like how your new jeans fit," mary said.

"yeah," said jean. "do you think mark will like how i look?"

"black is a bit stern for a first date," mary said.

A suddenly remembered: mark was who jean was talking with at lunch! A didn't think jean had any classes with mark, he didn't look familiar at all.

"you should temper black with some pink, or some light blue," mary said. "try this one." mary handed C to jean.

jean made a face. "but i wore this outfit a few days ago at school. i couldn't

wear it again on a first date. he would think i didn't care."

mary laughed. "he's a guy, he wouldn't notice."

"you think so?" jean looked unconvinced. "what if i wore a skirt?" she picked up D. "well?"

"try it on," mary said.

jean took off A and put on D. the two girls decided D looked good on her. D made a face at A when the girls were poking around in jean's dresser. A was annoyed. they picked out a friendly but thick shirt and a mellow thin knit vest. then they left.

a few days later, jean wore A to school again. this time, jean and mark were much closer. in between classes they held hands. jean walked halfway across the school to talk with mark for one minute. A noticed that mark wore khakis and a black shirt with some logo on it. mark pulled jean to the back of the school where no one was around and they kissed. while this was happening, mark's khakis pressed against A.

"hi," said mark's khakis.

"hello," said A. A had never been pressed like this before. mark's khakis were pretty warm. "you smell funny," A said.

"i think it's cigarette smoke," the khakis said.

"what's that?" asked A.

Ale, Lee

"you wouldn't want to know," the khakis replied. "i always reek of this smell. it's in my pockets, everywhere."

"hey you two!" a yard duty lady was yelling at jean and mark.

"well, goodbye," the khakis said.

"bye," said A.

mark and jean were holding hands again. later that day, after school, when A was put on the bed again, A looked around for B. "where's B?" A asked.

"B is gone," said a dress shirt.

"where did B go?" asked A.

"jean is too big for B," said the dress shirt. "B isn't going to be worn anymore."

A started to cry but stopped. this wouldn't do if jean came in and found her new jeans wet for no reason.

"there there," said the dress shirt. "it happens to us all. clothes are cheap. we don't get worn that often before we are passed on."

"if only we were adult sizes," said a left sock.

"well, socks don't change sizes that much," said the dress shirt. "me, i've only been worn once. maybe one more time when she graduates. or not. and that's

it for me."

a few weeks passed. A got to see much in the world. there was the mall, mary's house, the back yard, the inside of jean's dad's car (which smelled like gym socks), mark's house, some burger place, the school gym, etc. A got to be very comfortable with how jean moved. once when jean exchanged clothes with mary, A had to become sore all over again. but this was a different kind of sore, quite bearable. one evening, A had another date. she was nervous and A hoped to see mark's khakis again. so you can imagine A's surprise when A spotted some khakis ... but not on mark. this guy was called kevin. jean was seeing someone else! A saw how jean was a little nervous.

they sat in a booth and talked about things, occasionally accenting their gestures with some light petting.

"hi," said A to kevin's khakis.

"yo," said kevin's khakis.

"how are you?" asked A.

"fine," said kevin's khakis. "a bit squished here though. this seat is a little wet."

"is it?" asked A.

"you're on top of me," said kevin's khakis. "could you lose the keys, maybe a little? they're poking and that hurts."

Alec Lee

"sorry," said A.

"thanks," said Kevin's khakis.

suddenly something wet and hot came down on A. Jean screamed and stood up.

"sorry sorry," Kevin said. A waitress came. Jean stammered and pulled on A.

"you got hot coffee all over me!"

"sorry about that," Kevin said, as though he wasn't going to say sorry anymore. He got a napkin and handed it to Jean. The napkin didn't do much to rid the coffee away.

"this stain is going to stay," said the waitress. "good thing your jeans are black."

after that, Jean wanted to go home. Kevin paid and he took Jean into his car to go to her house. "boy is Kevin tense," said Kevin's khakis. "i think this evening is ruined."

A didn't say anything.

A was washed that evening with some of Jean's sister's clothes. after drying, Jean looked at A in the harsh bathroom light. "it's not too bad," Jean murmured.

"what happened?" C asked A when A was put in the closet around 10pm.

A didn't say anything.

"you okay?" asked a pair of slacks. "you look a little tense. i thought you'd be

out a lot longer.

"i got coffee spilt on me," A said.

"oh my. you look fine to me," C said.

"most of it's gone," said A. "plus i am black."

"good thing too," said the slacks. "i'm always afraid of things like that. i once got ketchup on me. i thought that was the end of me. but she wore me around the house a few times. and then after a few more washes no one could see it anymore."

"jean is a bit self conscious about her clothes, but you're also new," said C. "you don't need to worry. when you get older, she might become sentimental over you. then she'll be wearing you no matter what, even as you fall apart."

A managed a weak smile.

the next day jean wore A to school with C. A made sure to move extra nicely with jean so that jean didn't have to scratch her knees. A was quite relieved. jean even hugged kevin. A hoped that jean would wear A over the next few years. A wouldn't always fit, but at least A would get to see some more of the world.

that, and jean really was a good fit. A and C just wouldn't look as good on anyone else.

NR

Dan Murphy

fall

there is a maniac loose
in our streets
like a dollar bill
rushed along by the back
hand of the wind

there is a maniac loose
defining the outline
of shadow hushed
along at the corner
of silence and

later we will remember
this time with sadness
with reverence and remember
excitement locks
and unlocks each door

and might mention its secret
into expectant ears
that motion dignifies
the darkness
reloading with nightmare
and with night

there is a street loosed
from its jamb, flapping
in winter night cursing
the wind that defines it
rushed along to pale remembrance

and didn't you have a cold
you were sick, remember?
huddled up against
the outside coming in
as your mother hushed you
out of danger
memorizing silence

there is a maniac loose
do you remember the song?
the prayer you rushed into memory,
stranger in your own house.

Kate Rowe

Winter Orchids

Right now they are young.
They rise from the water like girls who know
they are beautiful.

But I know how things go,
years pass
and questions begin to blaze like neon signs.
I wish I were not the type of woman
who thinks about it
like this.
Still, late at night
I examine my thighs under the light bulb
with excruciating attention.
It's not that I don't regret the thin years
when everything that passed between my lips
was evil.
But time rushes in
and demands to know where I am going.

I need to feel the gravel under my bare heels.
I just want to know something before I die.

Three days later
the aged flowers shake their bony fingers
at the sky
shouting about the end, like me.
But their petals are still the color of milk,
their buds like flawless cashews
and their cool stems as youthful
as wet clay.
Maybe passing is painless,
maybe they will always
be elegant.

Ladies,
death appears simple.

Kim Young

What We Count On

A little blood, a little overexposure,
a sunny backyard, some grief.

I'm looking for something—
tender, a pink heat pad, god, or dark juice. This thirst.

I polish my cracked boots,
pick red peppers and eggplant from the vine,

lost again

in a dark wind moving though the yard.

Blackberries drop off every summer and that terrible wind
spooks the horses.

I know that one day
I will be taken.

Devastated by
the fifty good acres between me
and all that I didn't do.

Oh god, I am sincere.
Like the sound of thousands of ship masts blowing. Like fabric. Like fire.

Katherine Firkins

Because I'm Deaf

"In *R.A.W. ('Cause I'm a Woman)* I wanted the man's lines to be slides because I didn't want lines like 'I've never been with an Oriental woman before' to be delivered with exaggeration or mockery. Slides are non-judgmental. I am not trying to condemn men who say lines like this. The words express themselves, no commentary is necessary. But I want people to know that Asian American women have to hear these comments all the time."

Diana Son

R.A.W. ('Cause I'm a Woman)

CHARACTERS:

DEAF PERSON 1

DEAF PERSON 2

DEAF PERSON 3

DEAF PERSON 4

DEAF PERSON 5

The actors as DEAF PERSON 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 perform in American Sign Language (ASL), a primary language for the Deaf in the United States.

SLIDES:

The slides represent hearing persons' voices. They should not be substituted with actual voices and should be read in silence. They should be in black text with a white back-

Katherine Firkins

ground. The text should be large enough for the audience to read.

SLIDE: Mysterious

Loud

Educated

Proud

Expressive

Deaf

ALL: Yes!

SLIDE: Dumb

Mute

Handicapped

Blind

Death

ALL: Bullshit!

DEAF PERSON 1: In a packed . . .

DEAF PERSON 2: Smoky room . . .

DEAF PERSON 3: At a bar . . .

DEAF PERSON 4: With dim light . . .

DEAF PERSON 5: On Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood . . .

DEAF PERSON 1: I walk up to the bar counter and wait patiently for the bartender to finish mixing a drink. *(pause)* He glares up and says . . .

SLIDE: Would you (murmur) like a (murmur)?

DEAF PERSON 1: I try to find a perfect spot to see his thin lips. I ask, "I would like a what?" *(pause)* He turns his head away from the light and says . . .

SLIDE: (murmur)

DEAF PERSON 1: I say, "I'm sorry, but it's hard to read your lips in the dark." *(pause)* I ask, "Will you please speak where there's light?" *(pause)* He turns to the light and slowly says . . .

SLIDE: wwwwouldd yooouuuu liiike aaa . . .

DEAF PERSON 1: I interrupt and say, "Talk to me like I'm a normal person."

(pause) Without a surprise, he slowly says . . .

SLIDE: oooh, iii aaamm m ssssooo ssssoorryy.

DEAF PERSON 1: I say, "Talk normal and give me a bottle of Budweiser."

(pause) Of course, he responds . . .

SLIDE: thaaat wiiill beeee . . .

DEAF PERSON 1: I interrupt and ask with disgust, "Are you a robot?" *(pause)*

Of course, he groans and says . . .

SLIDE: No, I'm sorry, but that will be eight dollars.

DEAF PERSON 1: What can I say?

DEAF PERSON 2: The bartender doesn't understand.

DEAF PERSON 3: Because, of course . . .

DEAF PERSON 1: He thinks I'm . . .

ALL: Deaf and dumb!

DEAF PERSON 1: I'm . . .

DEAF PERSON 4: Only . . .

DEAF PERSON 5: Deaf!

ALL: Yes, only deaf, not deaf and dumb!

DEAF PERSON 1: In a busy . . .

DEAF PERSON 2: Crowded terminal . . .

DEAF PERSON 3: With loud speakers . . .

DEAF PERSON 4: At the international airport . . .

DEAF PERSON 5: In Los Angeles . . .

DEAF PERSON 2: I walk up to the Air France station. The airline assistant at the desk looks up and asks . . .

SLIDE: May I help you?

DEAF PERSON 2: I say, "I'm deaf and I can't hear the speaker. I would like you to let me know when it's time for me to board on the plane to Paris." *(pause)*

Katherine Firkins

She gasps and responds . . .

SLIDE: I'd be happy to let you know. Do you need wheelchair assistance?

DEAF PERSON 2: I groan and say, "I'm sorry, but I walk like a normal person. I only need you to inform me when it's time for boarding." *(pause)* Of course, she says . . .

SLIDE: Oh, I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I'll be more than happy to let you know. Please have a seat.

DEAF PERSON 2: What can I say?

DEAF PERSON 3: The airline assistant doesn't understand.

DEAF PERSON 4: Because, of course . . .

DEAF PERSON 5: She thinks . . .

DEAF PERSON 2: I'm . . .

ALL: Deaf and handicapped!

DEAF PERSON 2: I'm . . .

DEAF PERSON 1: Only . . .

DEAF PERSON 2: Deaf!

ALL: Yes, only deaf, not deaf and handicapped!

DEAF PERSON 3: In a quiet . . .

DEAF PERSON 4: Waiting room . . .

DEAF PERSON 5: At the medical center . . .

DEAF PERSON 1: At the University of California, Los Angeles . . .

DEAF PERSON 2: An elderly woman . . .

DEAF PERSON 3: Sitting across from me lightly taps on my shoulder. I look up to face her. She hands me a note, and it says . . .

SLIDE: I tried talking to you, but I realized you didn't hear what I said. I'm sorry you're deaf. Is there anything I can do for you?

DEAF PERSON 3: I snap and say, "Treat me like a normal person." *(pause)* Of course, the woman drops her jaw and says . . .

SLIDE: How can you speak if you're deaf?

DEAF PERSON 3: What can I say?

DEAF PERSON 4: The woman doesn't understand.

DEAF PERSON 5: Because, of course . . .

DEAF PERSON 3: She thinks I'm . . .

ALL: Deaf and mute!

DEAF PERSON 3: I'm . . .

DEAF PERSON 1: Only . . .

DEAF PERSON 2: Deaf!

ALL: Yes, only deaf, not deaf and mute!

DEAF PERSON 3: Seated in rowdy plane . . .

DEAF PERSON 4: Waiting for take-off . . .

DEAF PERSON 5: In New York City . . .

DEAF PERSON 1: I hear the murmur . . .

DEAF PERSON 2: Of an announcement . . .

DEAF PERSON 3: From the speaker . . .

DEAF PERSON 4: With my hearing aids. I wave at a nearby flight attendant. He quickly walks over and asks . . .

SLIDE: May I help you?

DEAF PERSON 4: I say, "I would like you to tell me what the announcement was. I couldn't hear it clear enough with my hearing aids." *(pause)* He says

SLIDE: It's not a problem. Do you need the instruction of flight safety in Braille?

DEAF PERSON 4: I grunt and say, "I'm sorry, but I don't need Braille. I have eyes like a normal person. Please tell me what the announcement was." *(pauses)* Of course, he blushes and says . . .

SLIDE: I'm sorry. The pilot announced to have each passenger be seated and buckled up immediately for take-off.

DEAF PERSON 4: What can I say?

DEAF PERSON 5: The flight attendant doesn't understand.

Katherine Firkins

DEAF PERSON 1: Because, of course . . .

DEAF PERSON 4: He thinks I'm . . .

ALL: Deaf and blind!

DEAF PERSON 4: I'm . . .

DEAF PERSON 2: Only . . .

DEAF PERSON 3: Deaf!

ALL: Yes, only deaf, not deaf and blind!

DEAF PERSON 4: In a long . . .

DEAF PERSON 5: Slow line . . .

DEAF PERSON 1: At the Customer Center . . .

DEAF PERSON 2: At Nordstrom . . .

DEAF PERSON 3: In Woodland Hills . . .

DEAF PERSON 4: Waiting to order a clothing item . . .

DEAF PERSON 5: I feel a harsh tap on the back of my shoulder. I lightly rub it to ease the pain. I turn around to face a young teenager standing behind me. She says . . .

SLIDE: Are you death?

DEAF PERSON 5: I groan and purposely feel my pulse inside my neck. I say, "I'm alive like you are." Of course, she snaps and says . . .

SLIDE: I meant, you can't hear?

DEAF PERSON 5: I chuckle and say, "I'm deaf, not death." Of course, she blushes and says . . .

SLIDE: Forget about it.

DEAF PERSON 5: What can I say?

DEAF PERSON 1: The young teenager doesn't understand.

DEAF PERSON 2: Because, of course . . .

DEAF PERSON 5: She thinks I'm . . .

ALL: Death!

DEAF PERSON 5: I'm . . .

DEAF PERSON 3: Only . . .

DEAF PERSON 4: Deaf!

ALL: Yes, only deaf, not death!

DEAF PERSON 5: Deaf persons are . . .

DEAF PERSON 1: Mysterious

Loud

Educated

DEAF PERSON 2: Proud

Expressive

DEAF PERSON 3: Not . . .

DEAF PERSON 4: Dumb

Mute

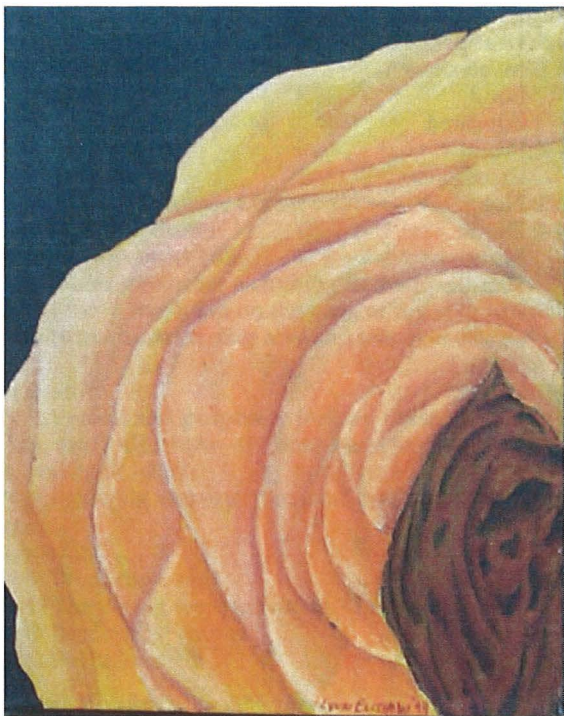
Handicapped

DEAF PERSON 5: Blind

Death

ALL: That's all.

NR



Rita Hermann

Rock

lotus position, legs crossed,
I sit on a mat, sunny grass and
empty my mind.
a spider crawls green
stalk up, stalk down.
focus, they instruct, be the rock.
lined up, karma spaced, rows
of buddha squatters, holding
rocks.
the mat cushions the small
weight of my rock.
breathe in, concentrate on emptying;
it is hard to be so practical.
in front of me, the spider
weaves silk, dressing blades.
breathe out, allow the universe
to ground me to the earth,
to the rock,
crushing me.
threads of silk span a shallow.
relax, remember, be one with the rock,
connect.

connect.
the rock hangs in the spider web
suspended.

Dan Murphy

Sprung

The coil would call wound tight and strung up
were not constriction its sugar nibbling
essence incurable too unsparing

to heart-point past star and break how sweet far
flung in Spring's drone stung souls hover the hive
hum in quivered modulations state we call

fallen and honey-stuck pure absence curls
a melody line a lark somewhere begins
to sing about it thrums She stirs in me:

metal ping shivered air released, a hitch
unhinged and bound back dark to the coil unsprung
but how strange the change from major whirring

to minor those God—pearls with sharp longing
waste in what was strong was plain the tongue to taste

Amber Norwood

Sunday Afternoons

i imagine something buried
rotting hairless and slowly
beneath red checkered blanket,
cold roasted chicken. i

lie on stomach, face flat
in raw grass blades,
inhale sod, sniff histories of crawling things,
kick toes through impending skies,
trace cracks in your shoe with hangnailed fingers.

This may be the last picnic,
we think; the ants think survival
while drowning in white wine,
suffering stuck in cheese spread, and

while we notice them,
the absence between
us, there is a familiar warm haze
in the clearing autumn
sky, a slow tuneless coo of the feathered and lost,
the scent of stagnant water.

Amber Norwood

You roll me
over, my head
a rusty nail between clenched teeth
in your crossed legs. You
feed me browning apple slices
and in the distance
from your knees to
the blanket to
the still turning earth below,

there is unmistakable echo
of things breathing underground.

Hannah Nahm

Emergency Food and Bones

1

Joe Parker had no visitors and then he had two. It was the girls, and they fluttered in, and with them came a train of things, things that were not seen but felt, like the powdery flakes of pollen that hung thickly on the edge of spring. That was the season that never failed to surprise him, especially May when he would walk out the door and see roses in full bloom in places that seemed to have nothing but a patch of dirt just the day before. Like these over-night roses, these children seemed to have sprung out of nowhere and yet at the same time they seemed to have been rooted here all along.

"This place looks the same, Joe," said the tall kid, Stella, as she took her museum tour around the living room. Soon she disappeared into the bedroom leaving Joe standing there with her new friend, a small child with hair like tulip bulbs and a frightened dazed look in her eyes. He wanted to make a motion for her to sit, that everything would be okay, but she avoided his gaze and craned her neck in the direction of where Stella disappeared.

"I remember this. Geez, you got everything the same. Joe, come over here," Stella's voice called out from the bedroom.

When he went inside, he saw her sitting on the edge of the bed flipping through his black daily planner. One leg was plopped up on the end table. Stella had always been like this ever since he'd known her—rubber-band flexible and constantly in motion. It was hard to keep up with her sometimes.

"You still have this, Joe? You need a new one. This one's what, four years old!"

"Well—"

"Can I borrow it?"

Panic, like a big bully, pushed him around inside. "Well, it was a gift. I don't think I—"

"Just kidding. Geez, you thought I really wanted this piece of junk?"

He suddenly remembered why he hadn't missed this girl Stella though he saw much of her weaving her way in and around his apartment for many years until her family moved away to Hollywood a couple of years ago. Everything was there for her to borrow and keep for good. She must be in the seventh or eighth grade by now, but as it seemed apparent, her manners lagged behind her age. Now the girl dropped her dead weight on the bed and sifted through the pages hard, as if the pages were glued together and she had to tear them apart to separate them. *Didn't she understand that those pages could tear?*

"Here, here, let me get you ladies something to eat." Joe had to get her out of the bedroom. She had already mussed up his bedding where she laid and was rubbing her seriously dirty feet on his pillows.

When they came out, the tulip girl had swept the picture frame of Okja and Sookhee Ann off the kitchen counter and was peering into it, her eyes inches away. She would be leaving finger marks all over it, and he had just polished the wooden frame too.

"No, please don't do that. That's an old frame; if the glass breaks, I won't be able to replace it. It's my only picture of my daughter." The girl said sorry and placed it back on the countertop. There was a puzzled look in her eyes, and he knew why. "That's my wife, or I should say, my ex-wife, and she's Korean. That's why Sookhee Ann, my daughter, looks Asian." He felt himself flush as he caught himself referring to Sookhee Ann in the present tense. It was strange, what he felt, this thrill and dread, as he searched for words to say to this little girl should she ask him where Sookhee Ann was today. Maybe he might lie and tell her Sookhee Ann was living in Detroit with her mother; maybe he could even add that Sookhee Ann was now a mother herself.

The afternoon sunlight crept in through the half-parted window and hit the girl's face aglow with all its dying force. Her hair showed all its reddish highlights and her face wore that vulnerable translucence of a newborn. She was so young, probably no more than twelve or thirteen. He was suddenly gripped with the premonition that she would never grow to see old age. Sookhee's hazel eyes were almost milky gray in the hospital light. Those eyes looked straight at him, eyes that, according to her mother, carried with them *han*, grief and unrest beyond measure. "She die open eye," Okja said almost too calmly, days before she would walk out on Joe. "Her young heart too much *han* that is why. I bury her here, right here," she smacked her chest hard. "I never forgive you."

Under the scrutiny of the afternoon rays, Joe noticed the grimy dust enveloping the hanging ferns. He found it terribly interesting to wonder where all this dust came from when one lived alone and when one cleaned well and often.

"I'm Korean, too." The girl beamed like a lottery winner. He wet a dishrag in the running faucet and started wiping the ferns stem by stem. With his glance averted, he said he knew, and she said how. He said he could just tell; that is what happens when your daughter is half Korean. He was immediately sorry for saying this. Now he would have no recourse but to tell this girl his daughter was dead, long dead, because of his negligence, should she ask. Lying took strength, and strength was what he missed.

"Sookhee's a Korean name," the girl explained. "I'm Minji. Mine's a Korean name too." He said he knew.

Joe had some breaded drumsticks in the freezer. He offered them to the girls with ice tea, but only Stella took up the offer. Joe sat across from the girls with a freshly brewed coffee in hand. He held it to his nose and drew in the steam. The tulip girl, Minji, sat by the dinette questionably sipping her ice tea with an almost pained look in her eyes. She was watching Stella gorge down

on her plate.

"That girl's a wanna-be vegetarian," Stella explained, her lips shiny with grease. She leaned forward and started wiping her mouth and hands on the paisley table cloth.

"Please, Stella, not on that; here's a napkin, here," Joe said.

Stella giggled and tugged at the edge of the dining table cloth, almost knocking down Joe's coffee mug in the process. She wiggled her ready tongue on the linen. "This is how you French kiss. You know how to French kiss, Joe?"

When he mumbled that he did not know, she doubled-sized her eyes and wanted to know if he was serious. When he said, "I do know, but I meant I don't want to talk about it right this minute," she said he was sick and perverted. Then she wanted to know if she could have a beer. Then she asked him if he had mixed his coffee with vodka. He could trace back to the exact day he'd stopped drinking—he counted the days—1,461 days in all, but Stella's obsessive questions shook him up and suddenly, he felt as if he had been caught with a bottle in hand.

Minji did not eat, but she talked her share. She said something about drumsticks and dead animals. She then turned her head and made some comments about the ancestral portraits he had up on the corner wall. She said something about the war medallions hanging next to the RCA. She said something about how his place was like a treasure chest. He did not hear all that she said because he was distracted. By then Stella was slithering around the apartment, bending here and stooping there, making him nervous and agitated.

He did not trust this girl Stella, how could he? He remembered the time when she had sneaked out some girlie magazines he had hidden under the bed and passed them around to all the neighborhood kids. Then they ended up in the hands of adult neighbors and were traced back to him. He could not leave his apartment for weeks on end because in the eyes of his neighbors he had recognized himself to be a child molester. He, a child molester, how ironic was

this, when he saw his own baby girl in the face of every child he came across.

Irony, that word. He had only had two shots of Jack Daniels to drink that morning; even to this day, he could not figure out when his unconsciousness began and when it ended. Everything about that day was like a dream. None of it made sense—the bottle cap stuck in Sookhee Ann's tiny throat, the whiteness of her orchid lips, the fact that she was suffocating while he slept. One thousand four hundred sixty one days and here he was, still feeling fettered to the drink.

It was possible that these girls were up to no good. After all, why were they here? What did they want from him? And when it was their time to leave, Stella stuck out her palm to him as if he were a palm reader and said, *Joe, we need bus money home.* He supposed he could've said, *No, go back the way you came. I didn't ask you to show up.* But he didn't bother, because he just wanted the girls to leave, to take back all the crowds of things they'd brought in, things felt but not seen, back with them. He handed over three dollars. Stella first looked at the dollar bills in her hand then up at Joe. She blinked her confusion. "But Minji hasn't eaten anything. Give her some money to buy food, Joe." Light bulbs flashed in Joe's mind—his suspicions were confirmed. He handed over three more dollars.

After the girls left, he suddenly remembered the Tulip girl's comment about his place being a treasure chest. He did an inspection of the apartment to make sure nothing was stolen. To his surprise, everything was there, even the black organizer.

Joe had no use for a to-do list, but he kept this daily planner on his bed-side table. It was a handsome thing with a genuine leather binding and a red sash to mark the pages. It was almost brand new too, the pages outlining all the days of the year 1981 still so pristine, unmarked, and untouched like a virgin child. He could not bear to mar the blank purity of the pages by marking it with his

clumsy hands. He had a skinny section in the planner where he drew vertical bars. Every day earned him one vertical bar. He slashed off every five bars. The bars told him the days of his sobriety. He only used pencils, and even this, in the faintest way his bungling hand knew how. Pencils were erasable.

The only other writing in this organizer, written in a bubbly, curvy hand, was not his doing at all. It was not he who listed those names and numbers in the address and phone number section of the planner. It had to be Sookhee Ann. It had to be the spirit of his child who left this planner out by the pool directly below his apartment window for him to pick up. It was her coded gift to him, her way of saying, "Papa, wait for me to come around." He almost believed this, almost.

And it was always like that—everything in his life was peppered with that word "almost." He almost had a good life with Okja, didn't he? He almost would've been a good father to Sookhee Ann, wouldn't he? Every day as he squeezed out a glob of Vo5 pomade to dabble generously in his hair and parted it neatly on the side, he felt that he was not doing this for Okja at all. And even as he dressed up every morning in his stiffly-starched button-down shirt and woolen trousers, he bet he was not doing this for Okja at all. She had over thirty years to make a visit if she wanted to, and she had not.

If Sookhee Ann had lived, she would have been thirty-three today, Jesus' age at crucifixion. It would have been nice to talk to Okja about this, about how Sookhee Ann would have turned out and what she would be doing today. But Okja moved on and left their daughter's memories behind. That was the way with Okja, crying up a storm and parading around the apartment hollow-eyed like a ghost herself; yet here she was, never once calling Joe to talk about the daughter they once had. No doubt, she had other children by now, maybe grandchildren, even; that was fine, but what hurt Joe was that she never forgave him; she never acknowledged that despite his flaw—albeit mortal—he loved his daughter as much as a father could love his own. The last he spoke with Okja,

she was living in Detroit. This was over twenty years ago. He was surprised when the long-distance operator actually came back with a phone number for Okja Parker. She had kept his name. This gave him courage.

"I've been thinking," he told her. "Thought you should know, I've been thinking. About those Tigers. They play some games, don't they? You still like baseball, don't you?" He could hear himself swallow. He pressed the receiver harder to him and said, "I've been clean, Okja, did you know that?"

"How you get my phone number? Where are you?"

Twenty years and he could still recognize that voice anywhere. Hearing was the last thing to go in death. He could not remember if he had said to Sookhee's ears that she was loved. "Do you miss her?" he said.

"Where are you?"

"I could meet you," he said, and he was convinced he could.

"I call police. I call police now." Then she hung up.

"Murderer." That's the last word she told him when he called back. It took her twenty years to say it, but she did. And that's what she thought of him after these many years. And he thought about that.

Sometimes his living room felt like a doctor's office and made him nervous and stiff. His back ached from leaning forward so much on the couch. He would have to remind himself to lean back all the way. Sometimes he buried his face between the seat cushions and waited. And there in the dark recess of his couch, he waited for the scent of home again. His hand groped the underside of the couch to see what he might find there. His fingers gathered sands of rubble and a couple of stranded coins. They felt cool and small against his touch. Some pennies, he figured, or maybe dimes. In any case, they fell beneath the crack some unknown time ago, and he had not missed them.

That night after the girls' first visit, he dreamt of things and people and faces, all of which he could not recall when he awoke. But this much he knew:

There were a lot of movements and commotion and flashes of light in his dream.

2

Minji went to Ralphs with the full intention of stealing a can of clam chowder. Maybe if she felt bold, she might walk out with a couple. She would have one and offer the other to Joe when she saw him next, maybe later the same day. He was an "angel old man" as Stel would call him, and she had wanted to give him something all along. Though she'd only met him a few times, she felt sorry for him in a way, because every time they would go over to his apartment, her best friend Stella cleaned out his refrigerator. "Trust me, he doesn't mind. He's one of my bestest friends," Stella told her. "I've known him since I was eight." Somehow, in life according to Stel, knowing someone since eight made you an expert on that person. Minji was clearly at a disadvantage since she had no adult friend she had known since she was eight. But the girl figured if Joe's place were to be their new hangout during their ditch days from school, the last they should do was to ransack his food.

Besides, Joe was not rich. She knew this though he gave them money, sometimes as much as five, ten dollars at a time. Stella was sure he was loaded since he was paid by the government every month for being a Korean-War vet, but Minji did not think so. She could tell because of the smell in his apartment. It was not the kind of smell that you could point to or wash off. It was more like the kind of lonely smell that hits you when you walk into an empty room that used to be crowded, or the kind of wet-carpet feeling you sensed in the air when the sky was overcast and the wind was blowing hard. Minji could not convince Stella that Joe was not rich simply based on this feeling she had, so she did the next best thing and fought with her. It was not an out-and-out fist fight yet, though it was getting there. So the girls decided on settling the matter

civily, by betting money—ten dollars—and putting everything on their parents' graves to top it off.

At Ralphs, Minji had four dollars and some change, but she did not want to waste the money on food. The plan was simple: walk in with a purposeful air, go straight to the canned food aisle, drop some cans into her ready backpack, and walk out. Nobody would notice her anyway. Minji knew this, because she used to steal in the past. It was mostly at smaller Korean grocers and mostly when she was there shopping with her parents. While her parents busied themselves among bushels of spinach, green onions and bean sprouts, she deliberately trailed behind and eventually lost them. She explored the store casually ripping open different bags and packages of goodies—sometimes a bag of 3-D Korean corn chips, squid jerky smoked in sweet sauce, or a package of refrigerated tempura—whatever simply looked good at the moment. She did not have to eat the whole thing; just a small sample was good enough. Her favorite were packages of Japanese hard candies called *Chelsea*. They tasted like bubble gum or condensed milk and reminded her of Hello Kitty erasers. But in all this, the delicious part was not the actual eating; it was the feeling of being a special child with the privilege of choosing whatever she wanted in the store. She was seven, eight, nine, but even at the time, she knew that what she was doing was wrong. But it was too easy and convenient. She would never have to beg her parents to buy her this or that unlike her friends. She would never have to bother her parents with her cravings.

Every aisle at Ralphs had a tinted glass overlooking it. It was about a bust-length in size. Minji wondered if someone was looking down at her behind that tinted glass. She held the can of *Chunky Soup* clam chowder and pretended like she was reading the label. She was sure the person behind the tinted window would call security as soon as he saw the can disappearing inside her backpack. Then they would arrest her and call home. Dad would pick up because Dad always picked up the phone on the weekends.

She paid for the can and walked out confused. Stealing was so easy when she was seven, eight, or nine, but now, the fear of getting caught was so real and so shameful that she might just as well walk to school naked as she often did in her dreams. If Joe had some bread, she would eat it with her clam chowder.

When she got home, her father was in the drive way hosing his Toyota Cressida. It was amazing how often he washed and waxed this car. It seemed every time she looked up, he was there by its side. The car was so shiny with wax it glinted in the sun like a fat burgundy diamond. When their eyes met, her father gave her a furious look. She recalled her temptations to shoplift at the market and was grateful at her better judgment not to.

"Where do you always go running around night and day?" He stifled the mouth of the hose so the water would come out in spurts. He was spraying the tires. "Doesn't your school believe in giving homework?" When Minji reminded him it was Sunday, he said it did not matter what day it was; no day was a good day to be a shiftless vagabond. "Besides, with all that time you've got, you could be watching your daddy's car from these crazy neighborhood thugs. Tell your brother to hurry up with the detergent."

Her little brother Sammy met her at the doorstep. "Did you see? Somebody scratched up Dad's car bad," he sang out breathlessly as he rushed past her with a plastic pail full of dancing suds. The boy was so excited he almost seemed glad. Minji wanted to say something witty and sarcastic, but by the time she thought of replying, "Yeah, and you could barely see it with a magnifying glass, I bet," the boy was already by their father's side.

Honestly, the girl could care less since her father made sure everyone in the family understood that it was just that—his car. She could not even use the power button in the backseat to roll down the window. The first and last time she did, her father pulled off the shoulder of the freeway and told her she'd better not do that, ever.

Her mother jumped in and said, "The child was only hot. Isn't this the family car, or is it just your majesty's?"

"Shut up," her dad said. "What do you know about cars? You let those damned kids tinker with everything in the house, which explains why everything breaks around the house. Which explains why we can't ever have anything decent like decent folks. If you and the kids had it your way, we wouldn't have a car to go on our drive. A car? What car? It would be a god-damned go-cart by now."

For all Minji knew, all of the car windows could be malfunctioning. Her father never drove with the windows down. "See how the air conditioner cools off the car in seconds? This is a work of art," her father whistled his approval. The car, not yet two years old, still smelled brand new.

Soon, Minji dug her diary book out from between the mattresses and settled into the rocking chair in the corner of her room. The door was closed, but it had no lock, and no one in the family believed in anything like knocking before entering. She knew her father had read her diary before, at least once, a couple of months ago. She knew because right after the entry where she wrote, "I wish my family could be like other families. I wish my dad wouldn't cuss so much. He embarrasses me," someone had scribbled in Korean, "dog shit." After that, she truly believed she would never want to write another entry for as long as she lived. There were things she wrote in that diary book—her fantasies about going to high school and becoming stunningly gorgeous and taunting Keith—the most popular boy at her junior high—with her good looks. There were other things written in that book, things that she did not care to share with her father. It was strange that her father did not question her about her many secret crushes and desires. But for this, she was glad.

On the blank page of her diary, Minji wrote, "I hate my dad." Outside the window she could see her parents. They were squatting before the car and studying the passenger side door at close range. Her mother turned to her

father and said something. The expression on her father's face reminded her of those Korean soap operas where the main character learns from the doctor that he has six months to live. Minji looked down at the page and reread the sentence she'd just written. She added an exclamation mark, then another. Then she crossed out the sentence altogether.

Her father drove the family up the Pacific Coast Highway. The radio was tuned to KJOY as it always was in her father's car, and it was playing the instrumental version of Christopher Crosses' "Sailing." The ride was smooth, so smooth, in fact, that when Minji closed her eyes, she felt like she was on a sailboat gliding on water. The ocean looked like a never-ending stretch of silky blue sheets with sequins in them. Sammy was nodding off next to her. Except for his matted hair and sweaty face landing on her shoulder now and then, the drive was nice. As much as she'd insisted on staying home earlier when her father said, "Children and Wife, should we go for a dry-ee-vu," Minji enjoyed these Sunday car rides.

Every week her father took them somewhere unexpected and unplanned. They drove as far north as Redding and as far south as Tijuana. The family would spend five hours driving to Vegas and stayed no more than an hour or two once there. If they were to stay any longer, they wouldn't be able to drive back in time for work and school the next day.

"I promise this will be the last time, but are you sure it's not that noticeable? It's so conspicuous to me." Her father turned to her mother as he headed up the hill on Topanga Canyon.

"*Yuh-boh*, you focus on it too much," her mother replied. "You know the scratch is there already, so you look for it. Anybody else looking at the car for the first time would think you'd brought it out today for a test drive and never returned it to the dealer."

This made her father smile.

All along the drive up Topanga, her parents talked about things like the current political situation in Korea that were totally complicated and uninteresting to Minji. They would laugh one moment then be angry the next. But they weren't angry at each other. Minji felt safe and protected inside the car with her parents talking their adult talks.

"Chun Doo Hwan will be held accountable for the Kwang-Joo Massacre. History will hold him accountable," her mother said. "Doesn't he know these are people he's killing?"

"What do you expect from a soldier-politician? Do you think he knows the first thing about diplomacy? You have to understand, he is living in a military world. He can't think like a civilian. *Coup d'e tat*, that's all he knows."

Minji recalled the ten-dollar bet she'd made with Stella. "Mom, Dad, you know how the government gives pension to army vets? How much do you think they pay them every month?"

Her dad snorted. "Enough to buy some lollipop and toilet paper to wipe your ass."

"I mean here, in America. If you're a Korean-War vet, a fighter pilot?"

The father gave her a wrinkled-laundry look through the back mirror.

"Who's a Korean-War vet? Anyone I know?"

This could be a booby trap, the girl sensed. "Stella. It's her friend."

What Minji's father said was "Window Woman." He said this is what Stella would become when she grew up if she kept seeing that dirty old man Joe.

"If Stella's father weren't the drunken whale that he is, I would pull over right this minute and tell him about this 'friend' of hers."

Minji's mother flung aside the seat belt and turned half-way facing her dad. Then out of nowhere, her hand reached back and pinched the girl.

"Owe!" Minji drew back. Her cry was more out of surprise than anything.

"You are not a child raised like weed," the mother warned. She glared at her husband as she spoke. "This man must be in his fifties. You have no business being friends with him."

Minji gazed at the log-cabin grocery store for help. "I don't even know why I'm getting in trouble. I haven't even met him."

"Don't play with Stella. She's a bad influence. Nobody's born a *chang-yuh*," her father repeated.

Minji stared at her father's eyes darting about in the back mirror. "Stella knows Joe because she's friends with his daughter. Joe lets all his daughter's friends call him a friend, too, because that's the American style."

"Dog shit," her dad said.

"Window Woman"—that's what her father said. That's what a *chang-yuh* was, a woman looking out the window. Minji looked out through the rolled-up window and thought about this word.

She often looked out through her bedroom window. The room had no air conditioner, and the fan—as loud as it rattled—did not do much to alleviate the sizzling heat of Los Angeles summer. She liked looking out through her bedroom window though it hardly helped to cool things off. She liked looking out this window because it invited the scent of lilacs that grew along the chain-link fence to the side of her house. The smell was intoxicating and heavenly; she knew she would always love the scent of lilacs forever, even when she grew up. And there would be many windows, she knew, that she would look out of even as an adult. She would grow to be a window-woman, to be sure, but of course that's not what her father meant. *Chang-yuh*, she knew, meant prostitute.

It was not until the fifth visit of the girls that the little girl with hair like tulips started to eat his food. Joe first heard the clattering sounds of silverware.

He must've dozed off on the couch, his face away from the kitchen.

"Italian food's kind of like Korean food, isn't it?" He could not believe his ears. Minji was unmistakably talking with her mouth full. *What was she eating? Did he have anything Italian in the house?*

"Not even. Italian food's all ketchupy and has olive oil everywhere. Besides, this isn't even Italian. It's American, like hamburger and fries."

"It is Italian."

"No it isn't. How much you want to make a bet?"

Joe sat up, brushing the wrinkles off his shirt. Stella came rushing at him with something in her hand. An opened can of ravioli, *Chef Boyardee*. The lid stood intact on the thing like a tombstone. "Joe, isn't ravioli American food?"

He noticed that Minji had her own can, too, not ravioli, but clam chowder. They were eating it straight out of the can. "You girls should really warm it up and not eat it cold like that. It's not good for you."

"But it's more fun this way. Like camping out," Minji said. The fork tinkled against the metallic hollow of the can. She held it up and slurped the white juice. "I wish I could have canned food for dinner every night. You could get everything in a can—you could get spaghetti and clam chowder and just about everything you can think of. Then you wouldn't ever have to eat out. My dad's so weird; he never lets me get what I want when we go out to eat. It's always T-bone steak, Salisbury steak, New York steak, steak after steak. He makes me eat meat when he's a vegetarian himself. He's like, 'Finish stea-i-ku now! Stea-i-ku expensive!' I'm like, 'I didn't even want it.' And guess what *he* always eats?"

Nobody answered. When Minji asked again for them to guess, Stella picked the dead skin between her toes and said, "What?"

Joe brewed some coffee and listened.

"This." Minji held up her can. "He always eats this. And the way he blows on it like this, hoo, hoo, makes me want to eat it so bad. You know, for

the longest time, I thought *Thousand Island* was the only salad dressing in the world. Because that's what he always gets for my salad."

Joe looked at Minji, but not really. He thought about *Thousand Island*, and he thought about its rich texture. He thought about Okja and their daughter in good times. They had good times, the three of them, a family. When Disneyland first opened its doors, he took his family there. They walked through the "Weenie" entrance and ate cotton candy and soda pop. The day was scorching hot, but Joe still carried Sookhee in his arms. Sookhee Ann was just beginning her baby talk. At Fantasyland, he bought her a pink toy duckling that quacked when you squeezed its tummy. Baby Sookhee would squeeze it and squeal in delight. *Baba*, she said. She was calling her papa. Okja laughed and held his arms tight.

That night they drank and made love. For a while, she stopped crying about missing her family home back in Korea.

Stella got up and nudged her head between the vertical blinds. "Hey, nobody's out in the pool. Let's jump in."

Minji turned to Joe. "Isn't my dad weird? I bet you give Sooki Ann everything she wants."

Joe stared at her. She looked to him an intruder, prying into his mind. "She's with her mother in Seoul," he said.

Joe recalled the landscape of Korea, poor but fiercely proud despite its pockets of war-torn desolation. They went up and down the *Leetaerwon* strip, Joe and Okja, drinking at gaudy bars and make-shift rickshaw joints. In those early days of courtship, Okja refused to let him pay for her. *I work at Dabang, only serve co-pee and tea. I no kiseing*, she made it clear to him.

"Seoul, that's where I was born," Minji said. "That's where my family lived. We had lots of dogs—my dad, he loves dogs. I had a pet chicken, once, too."

"Could be, your father wants you to have those things he could not have for himself when he was your age. I'm sure he wants you to eat nutritional food, not something out of a can with vitamins all depleted."

He was ready for the girls to leave now; they could come back on another night, but tonight, this very moment, he wanted to be alone. He wouldn't have to think about things then. But that's when Minji drove in with bullets of questions. She wanted to know how come he had a whole mess of canned food? He told her it was just in case of an emergency.

"How long can you keep it before it gets spoiled?"

"As long as it's unopened, it never would. At least not for a long time."

"I see. But it's kind of weird, isn't it, kind of sad too, that you're eating food that should've been spoiled a long time ago if it weren't canned? Do you like to eat canned food even when it's not an emergency?"

"Rarely. It's mainly there just in case something happens. If there's a major earthquake like the one we had back in, was it '72, it could be days before we could restock. It could be weeks before you could buy anything even if you had all the money to spend."

Minji supported her head with one elbow and made a prune face. "I wish you would tell that to my parents."

Sitting there in the kitchen with Minji who looked as if she was about to cry, Joe felt like a cheat and a liar. Those canned goods weren't there for emergencies; they made up his daily meal. But he could not tell this to the child for some reason.

After the girls left, Joe opened his pantry and saw canned food neatly stacked up against each other, the contents tightly sealed and protected from the bare hands—safe from prying hands and the caprice of seasons and the temperature of his universe. He started counting the number of cans. Seventy two in all, they were all there. The girls had not stolen any.

That was when the strange feeling struck him. He was standing there without the chatter of the girls, but it felt like the girls had never left. He turned to the invisible Minji sitting behind the dinette watching him in disgust as he counted his cans. He blushed. That invisible child could have been Sookhee Ann too; she would have grown up only to look away in shame at the sight of her ungainly father turning over cans by the dank closet pantry. *What did he do that for? Why did he have to count the cans? Were his days nothing but just counting cans?*

Standing there with the invisible child ready to walk out in disgust, this became clear to him: His days were like the cans—neatly lined up according to their labels, predictable and mummified. And his days would continue to be like that, like those tightly sealed food stored away in the shadows of his pantry for his so-called days of emergency, food that, without the help of the metal container, should have been spoiled long ago. The thought suddenly made him sick. He needed to go shopping. He could not let the girls eat out of cans.

Joe started writing in his black leather organizer. He wrote a list of grocery items to buy at the market, not too many things at once, just enough to make a meal for the day. He could pick out fresher fruits and vegetables this way, plus, it made it easier on his walking feet. Every day had its own entree. Today was tuna casserole. Today was Saturday. This meant the girls would most likely join him. He flipped open the inside cover of the organizer to make sure his coupon envelope was securely intact. It was. He was ready to go.

When the girls came, the three of them headed out in the direction of *Food 4 Less* on Olympic Avenue. He opened his planner and said, "Says here, tuna casserole. How does that sound, ladies?"

"Why tuna? Tuna's boring I'm going to grab the first thing I see when I walk in. Don't know about you guys, but the first thing I grab is what I'm going to have for lunch."

"Okay, but just one item this time, Stel." Joe sighed.

They passed the old palm tree near the corner of his street, Elden Place. It had graffiti marks and a peace sign. Minji tugged at the whiskers of the palm tree near its roots. "Why do they call tuna 'chicken of the sea'?"

"Because it tastes like chicken, stupid."

Minji ignored Stella and turned to Joe. "Do you think chickens have feelings?"

Stella snorted and rolled her eyes. Joe said he did not know.

"Have I told you my chicken-bone story, Joe?"

"Chicken-bone story?"

"Yeah, why I can't eat meat with bones in them?"

"No, tell me."

"It's kind of boring, but..." They waited for the rusty station wagon to jounce by before crossing Arapahoe Street.

"I'm listening."

"You see, when I was living in Korea, I always wanted a pet chick. They're so cute. They're so yellow, I mean the yellowest yellow, like tiny Tweedy Birds that glowed. Have you ever seen chicks before?" He nodded, yes. "Well, I would buy a chick from this man who sold them on this bridge right by my elementary. The problem was, none of these chicks that I bought ever lived too long. They just died like weeks after I would bring them home. But see, this one chick I picked up one day, he had a little red birthmark on his beak, and the man was like, 'Don't choose that one; he won't make it.' But see, I did, because I had this feeling he might live if I did.

"And this one managed to survive and grew up to be a chicken. I mean, he wasn't ever like a fat, Foster Farm chicken or anything, but he became a chicken. And I swear, that chicken—his name was Ari—was like a dog. He followed me everywhere and only ate off of my hands. Ari was bitten by one of our dogs and hopped on one leg, but he managed to survive through so much.

Then one day, I came home and Ari was gone. I never saw him again. I cried and cried, and wanted to call the police to help me find Ari, but Mom and Dad said he was only a chicken.

"Then before we immigrated to America, our family and my aunts and uncles went to this restaurant to celebrate our last day. One of my aunts ordered this rotisserie chicken and wanted me to help her eat it. I looked at the chopped neck and the goose bumps on this chicken, and it didn't look like food, but like a dead animal. And then my dad got really upset when I didn't eat it. But I never touched that dead chicken, Joe. This is kind of weird, but somehow I thought maybe that could've been Ari. I didn't want to end up eating him. See, I think up until that night, I waited for Ari to come home. I thought maybe as long as I didn't eat chicken meat, he might still be alive and come home someday. But when I saw that headless chicken turn into a pile of bones, I knew Ari was dead. That's why I don't want to see bones. When I see bones, I think of death. You know what I mean?"

"I do," he said. He was surprised by the eagerness in his own voice. If he waited for a time, maybe he might understand. "I do," he repeated, because he felt he had to hear himself say it this time. "I mean, I think I do. This Ari was like your child, your baby. I know this feeling, trust me, I do." Joe wrapped his arm around the girl and gave her a gentle tug. "We'll make sure we don't buy anything with bones."

"Okay. But you know what's weird, Joe? I could eat chicken nuggets—like Chicken McNuggets? They're good. I like chicken; it's just I get grossed out and sad when I see bones."

Joe remembered something. It was a comment he'd made long ago, when Baby Sookhee's brown eyes turned hazel on him one day. He looked into those eyes and told her mother, *What do you know, she's kept the recessive gene alive in the family.*

"My daughter had hazel eyes like mine," he said.

Minji and Stella highly doubted his eyes were hazel, so he took off his glasses and tried not to blink so they could have a better look.

After the inspection, Minji concluded, "Hazel's a pretty name. You should've named her Hazel."

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. She has hazel eyes and her name's Hazel, too? She would be a dork." Stel turned to Joe and tapped him. "If I were you, I would've named her Amber. Amber's ten times better than Hazel."

It was a nice day. It was warm, but not uncomfortably so. There was a street vendor selling music tapes, ceramics and other knick-knacks across the street. Mariachi music played in the distance. There were people walking about, babies in strollers and mothers and fathers in their summer attire. They paid no mind to Joe and the girls. It was good to be lost in the crowd.

Joe caught up to the girls. "Have you had tuna casseroles before? I make the best tuna casseroles, you know that? We'll pick up some chicken nuggets too. We'll have chicken nuggets and tuna casserole for lunch. How's that?"

"Sounds good. But do we have coupons for all that?"

"I bet he does," Stella chipped in. She was punching the pedestrian button. The *Do-Not-Walk* signal flashed on the perpendicular side of the intersection. "He's got coupons for all occasions. He's the coupon king!"

The three of them stood on the corner of Hoover Street and waited for the green light.

Scott Rowe

Instructions

Crawl through the neighborhood
on hands and knees to follow a single ant,
press against the house to see
paint over rotten wood siding,
converse with a mockingbird.
Look for the stones in the asphalt,
mouse holes under the stoop,
and study the underside of leaves.

Why do you look at clouds?
What good is the sunset?
The pale moon at dusk
holds no mystery like shoes
hung over power lines
and discarded ears of corn.

After dark opens its doors
wait for a moth to come
to hurl himself against the bulb
again and again and again.

Later when you listen
for the woman who feeds the cats
it is the way she talks to them like children,
it is the slowly opening can,
it is how they beg for more,
even after she is gone.

Amber Norwood

on the architecture

There is another word
for faith tests she fends in
accustomed disbelief. Still unfamiliar houses
account for parts of wounds; wooden fence
splinters peel brittle into one alien pile, leaves a ring
in sod, a solid earthen hand.

Detonation, instantaneous, by a deft hand
twisting, she counts the power of the spoken word,
the move of change, the ring
of the phone that brought her here in
expectation, dreams of the world beyond her fence.
She was trading homes for houses,

his houses,
made un-hers with one ginger hand
on a worn brown suitcase. Took what he delivered, became the fence
unwitting. Chinese snuff boxes, Turkish ostrich leather purses, gifts, a word,
a promise. It doesn't take much these days. In
time, in packages, his lie becomes the ring

tangible, the solid gold guarantee of future. The ring
becomes albatross. He explores newer territories; she tends false houses.
She follows her feet in
tightrope tile lines through the bathroom, left hand

Amber Norwood

fondles housewife blouse, whispers one word
into the mirror, on neither side of the fence.

It was the walk-in-closet. It was hope in the painted eaves. It was the picket fence
it all should have been. It is now the empty hall, a bathtub ring,
a picture hook on a barren wall. It is the word
she promises herself each morning in cutout houses:
"go." It doesn't have to be his finger on the button. It isn't his hand.
Doors open out as well as in.

There is a difference between misery and apathy, strength in
the knowledge of equal trouble beyond the established drying fence,
between upheaval and a striking hand
capable of bringing the past to its knees. Twists the ring
round her knuckle, a blade between ribs, and waits in white houses
for his wavering companionship, his strangely comforting word.

And it is in the scope of a word
to fence all model houses,
solitude the marks in a clenched hand, company as gutted as a ring.

Dan Murphy

then a car snivels up gravel
 racing the sunset cuts across
 the angle of evening

rocks softened in the stream

imprinting

deep-sea of sleep

Ken Cran

The Day that I Die

Six years from now, October 9th will seem like any other day. But it will be significant to me for one reason and one reason only: it will be the day that I die.

Six years from now, on October 9th, I will go to bed with a stiff shoulder from playing squash for the first time in my life. My squash opponent will be a thirty-two year old man I will meet three months before my death, and he will be the boyfriend of a nineteen-year-old waitress I will sleep with. He won't care though because they'll have an "agreement." His name will be Kumar and he'll be from Kenya. His girlfriend, the waitress from Vick's Breakfast Nook and the girl I'll have a fling with, will be Shawnra. Shawnra will be very white, with red hair and freckles and no chest to speak of. She'll have puffy lips and gray eyes, and she'll wear her hair up with one of those pincher-claw things that resemble a Venus flytrap. This will all be important, of course, because she'll be the last girl I'll ever have sex with. Right now I'm forty-one years old, but in six years when I die, I'll be forty-seven and about a month and a half away from my forty-eighth birthday. At first, I will be excited by the prospect of sleeping with a nineteen-year-old girl. But the actual act will be anything but inspiring, for Shawnra will be awkward at best. Plus, she will have never been with an uncircumcised man before, so she'll be somewhat put-off. We'll do it anyway, in three positions, but she won't climax and I'll feel guilty. I'll try to make amends by using my mouth on her, but that will only make her giggle, and in the end, I'll remember what it was like to be a sexual being at nineteen.

Oddly, right now, Shawnra is only twelve going on thirteen, and living with her widowed stepfather in Saskatchewan. They'll move to Montana, stay there for a month, move back to Saskatchewan for a year, then head to Quebec

Ken. Cran.

by way of Manitoba. Like so many other people, they'll lose everything in the Second Great Depression, and Shawnra's father will commit suicide by jumping off a cliff in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Shawnra will spend time in foster homes in Halifax, and once a week she'll visit the graveyard where they buried the dead Third Class passengers of the Titanic. She'll make penciled impressions of their headstones and keep them in a notebook that she'll lose in a bus station in Toledo, Ohio. She will brood over the loss for the next two years.

The squash game will last two hours, and Kumar will win three of the five games. I'll think that he threw two of them to make me feel better, and I'll be resentful because I'll be forty-seven and in no mood to be the recipient of a younger man's charity. He'll buy me a Sport Rush energy drink that tastes like Pine Sol and urine, and I'll thank him and shake his hand before he heads over to his Subaru and I retire to my Chevy. It'll be raining that day, but the rain will be light, more of a mist, and I'll stand next to my car door in the parking lot and smell the air for a while. An off-duty policewoman will stop and ask me if I'm all right, and I'll say, "I'm great, don't you love the rain, it smells like the sea." She'll smile and nod and then walk over to the squash courts and I'll watch her pumpkin ass battle her jeans one cheek at a time.

The night before my death, I'll get a call from my mother who lives in Pierre, South Dakota, which is the capital of that great state. I won't answer the phone, though, and she'll leave a message on my answering machine saying that her cat Eisenhower Philippe was carried off by a coyote. She'll want to know if having a eulogy for a cat would be silly. Of course, I'll think it would be silly, but not as silly as naming a cat Eisenhower Philippe. I'll erase the message and vow to call her in the morning, after my Cream Of Wheat and tomato juice. After CNN's Morning Report with Gil Sheppard. After my morning shower.

There will be three more calls on that night, one of which will be from a telemarketer espousing great real estate offers in the new U.S. Territories of

Western Persia and New Babylon. I'll tell her to shove as much real estate up her ass as she deems necessary, then slam the phone down. I'll be angry because the new "freedom of communication" laws will have made being removed from any phone list impossible, and thus, it'll be open season on Joe Citizen.

I won't be around when they repeal those laws, either, which will be twenty-seven months after the day I die. Were I to be alive then, I'm sure that it wouldn't surprise me *why* they'd repeal them: disgruntled citizen Bernie Gibbons O'Shannon will throw a Molotov Cocktail into the offices of Terra-Phona Inc., killing twelve immediately, but then setting off a fire that will consume twelve city blocks, killing six hundred people, mostly elderly invalids. The investigation into O'Shannon's life will reveal that he had received up to 30,000 telemarketing phone calls a week. He'll have no wife and no kids. He'll live on a houseboat anchored to the southernmost shore of Lake Huron. He'll be fifty-one. He'll have a mustache.

The second phone call that night will be from my ex-wife Brendy, who'll want to know if I can help her move a chair or some piece of furniture, but I'll feign an injury from my squash game so I won't have to help. She'll get pissy and hang up on me, but that'll be okay, because I'll know the real reason for her calling. Six years from now, I'll have no interest in having sex with her, because five years from now, Brendy will, in an attempt to save our marriage, get breast implants that are laughably too large, which will turn me off faster than Bill Gates's ability to make a million bucks.

Though our marriage is fine right now, in three years things will start going badly. Mainly because of me. Brendy will suddenly be a forty-two year old woman, and it'll horrify me to accept the fact that I'm married to someone over the age of forty. She'll still look reasonably attractive, but attractive for a forty-two year old will be different from twenty-two or even thirty-two year old attractive. I won't be able to handle it, I'll want youth again, and she'll in not so

Ken Czar.

subtle ways tell me that I'm going through a midlife crisis, which I'll deny. Of course, she'll be right, but she'll have no idea at that time *why* I will be going through a crisis. She'll find out six months later, when I tell her that I fell in love with another, much younger woman. She'll cry and call me a prick-bastard-pigshit-sonofabitch, but I'll accept it and then quietly drive to Saxophone Dave's house and have sex with his youngest sister. He'll be playing his sax in the garage, obliviously drowning out the twenty-three year old's screams of passion.

Libby Anne McMartin is Saxophone Dave's youngest sister. Right now, she's twenty and has screwed more than forty guys and girls, mostly while drunk or stoned or just plain bored. Three years from now, I'll go over to Saxophone Dave's to borrow his jigsaw, but he won't be there because he'll be too busy cheating on his girlfriend with a guy named Arthur Paddington. Saxophone Dave will come out of the closet a year after I die, but he'll die exactly one year and three weeks after that from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The suicide note will be an epic five hundred thirty-seven pages and will recount every miserable thing he went through in his life. Later, his mom will send the "note" into Bantam-Doubleday and it'll be published in a soft cover binder resembling a high school kid's notebook. It'll sell two million copies and be made into a TV Movie Of The Week. All told, Saxophone Dave McMartin's family will rake in a little over six hundred thousand dollars after taxes. They'll spend half the money on a new house. The other half on a vacation to Australia. It'll rain most of the time they're there. They'll complain heartily.

Though Saxophone Dave won't be home, Libby will be, and she'll be hosing down the backyard garden wearing a thong bikini and a white Seaton Hall baseball cap. Libby's really thin right now, but in three years, she'll have put on a few pounds that will reinvent her body. She'll be curvaceous in a way no skinny kid can be, and it'll be then that I'll notice her as a woman, and fall instantly in love.

I'll tell her I'm there to borrow her brother's jigsaw, because I'm making a

shelf for Brendy's porcelain giraffe collection. She'll say Saxophone Dave isn't home, but that I'm welcome to wait around for him. Libby will return to spraying the garden while I lean against the house and watch her. She won't be shy about her body either, and she'll repeatedly flash her ass at me to the point where my stomach flops around like a dying bluegill. She'll offer me a beer in a can, I'll drink two, she'll show me the ripening tomatoes in the garden, but I'll only be interested in melons. After two hours of painful, mindless banter, I'll finally have had enough and bid her goodbye. I'll go to leave without the jigsaw, but Libby will ask me if I saw everything I wanted to see, and in a moment straight out of a porn video, I'll tell her I want to see her naked. She'll strip right there in the backyard, because, just like in a porn video, no one will be home. I'll grab her and pin her against the house, taste her mouth, smell her hair. But unlike in a porn video, Saxophone Dave will pull up into the driveway, drinking Yoo-Hoo and blaring Vince Guaraldi. Libby and I will sneak into the house and go into her room, where we will spend the rest of the afternoon exploring and exhausting each other. Saxophone Dave's melancholy sax solos will accompany our tryst. We'll do it on her bed and on the floor. We'll break her alarm clock. I'll sprain my ankle. It'll be the best sex of my life.

Libby and I will carry on for another thirteen months, though Brendy will have no clue. We'll celebrate her twenty-fourth birthday by having my first threesome, but it'll be with an older woman whose name I will never remember. It won't be fun, because the woman will be too aggressive, and though Libby will love that about her, I'll find the whole thing a turn off. A few weeks after that, we'll get into an argument over something stupid- the color of a ripe tomato- and that'll be the end of it. I'll still be in love with her, however, and I'll fantasize about her every time I make love to Brendy.

Four weeks before my death, I'll see Libby again, though she won't see me. She'll be walking into Ziggy's Deli, and she'll be a little heavier, but still attractive. Her hair will be bright pink with streaks of blue in it. She'll be

Ker. Cran.

wearing a "Liam Lynch For President" t-shirt and cut-off sweat pants, and I'll think about gardens and melons all over again.

The third phone call of the night, and the final one of my life, will be right as I'm climbing into bed. It'll be just past eleven o'clock, and I'll debate whether or not to pick it up. For whatever reason, I will, and it'll be Shawnra. She'll apologize for calling me so late, but she'll tell me that she's got two tickets to "Urban Uprising," a comedy show featuring all of the best black lesbian comediennees from Ottawa. I'll tell her it sounds great, but then ask her why she didn't invite Kumar first. She'll tell me that Kumar doesn't like lesbians, doesn't like comedy, and hates Canada. So I'll agree to go with her, but then she'll tell me the date and I'll have to decline, because I'm going to be in Pierre visiting my mother at that time. She'll pout in a way that'll make me want to have sex with her, but the feeling will pass and I'll tell her I'll take her to lunch over at Millicent And Eddy's on Thursday. She'll be giddy and then kiss me through the phone before hanging up. I'll lie in bed wondering what the hell I'm doing having lunch with a nineteen year old girl who giggles when I try to please her orally.

Before the call from Brendy, but after the one from my mom, I'll make myself dinner, which will be somewhat unusual because by that time Brendy and I will have been divorced a year, and the only thing I'll do more than masturbate is patronize restaurants. But I'll decide to whip myself up a little pasta and garlic artichoke pesto, focacia bread and cherry pie. Granted, it'll be a frozen dinner, but I'll reason that I will, at some point, have to learn how to cook. I'll read the nutritional information on the back of the box, see that it contains only 74 grams of fat. FD&C Yellow #5 will be the last ingredient. It'll be packaged in Iowa.

I'll skip reading the directions, leaving the plastic covering on the tray, which of course will melt and start a fire. I'll pull the ruined tray of food from the oven, throw it into the sink and scream "shitters!" at the top of my lungs.

I'll never know if Mrs. Hotchkiss next door had heard me. Regardless, I'll open up a box of Donut Gems and eat those for dinner, washing them down with lime flavored club soda.

Watching television that night will be like any other night. I'll flip to the adult channels first, but get bored right away because the actors will, of course, only be in it for the money. I'll think about starting my own television station called L/STV, short for Love/Sex Television, which will show only people that are in love having sex. That way, everyone watching will know that the moaning and screaming will be real, and that all climaxing will happen the normal way, instead of for the camera. I'll think about Shawnra, about Libby, about Brendy and her ridiculous boob-job. I'll consider masturbating, even untie my pajama bottoms for easier access, then reconsider. The squash will have left me too tired, and besides, sex with a hand at forty-six won't be like sex with a hand at twenty-six. There will be no thrill, no matter what the visual aids. The only thing that'll get me going will be the soft naked body of a woman I'm in love with.

Or at least, a woman over the age of thirty.

I'll flip through the channels, watch the news and a repeat of the President's speech dedicating North and South Baja as the fifty-sixth and fifty-seventh state, respectively, which will complete the absorption of Mexico into the U.S. After this speech, CNN anchor Barry Adamski will come on and report that the fighting in New Babylon is going well and that the rebel uprising will soon be crushed. I'll chuckle and think about telemarketers and "great real estate opportunities" in these new American territories. I'll wonder if mine sweepers are a part of the deal. I'll wonder how many "rebel uprisings" it takes to declare war. I'll wonder if the rebels have families.

I'll change over to XBTS Channel Three Thousand Twenty-Four and watch five minutes of "Extreme Happy Days," but I'll tune out because the digital Ritchie Cunningham and the digital Fonzie will look too fake. I'll try the Marlin

Ken Cran

Fishing Channel, but will get bored because it'll be the same episode I see every time I turn to that channel. I'll give up on the television, grab an issue of Time magazine and read about the Person Of The Year, who will be sixty-five year old Omar Visquel, former Gold Glove shortstop of the Cleveland Indians and the man who will save British Prime Minister Winnie Sinclair II from a sniper while jogging through London's Hyde Park. Visquel will take three bullets and be permanently paralyzed, but he'll retain the gratitude of the Prime Minister and all of Great Britain, and thus receive a salary of twenty thousand pounds a year for life. This will be on top of his baseball earnings, which the Daily Mirror will report to be roughly thirty million dollars, held mostly in West Persian bank accounts. Visquel will lose eighty-nine pounds. He'll live with migraines doctors will say were caused by the bullets. Jaguar will send him one new car a year for life.

I'll finish the article, then log onto the Internet to check my electronic mail. I'll have four thousand messages, but only one will be from an actual person I know. It'll be mail from my friend Annette Orpowski, whom I'll have known for thirty years by that time. Annette and I went to high school together in Pierre, and I helped her get through her "plump years" by being her only friend. Annette underwent surgery twenty years ago, had her stomach stapled, and now she's very comfortable at a hundred and forty pounds. We never had sex, and I never got the impression she wanted to. I think she might be a lesbian. Or perhaps shy.

Regardless, in six years, Annette's e-mail will be the last thing I ever read. She'll ask if she can visit me for Christmas, as her family will not be celebrating on account of the fire that will have destroyed their house the previous year. Annette will write that she'll have doubts her family will ever celebrate Christmas again, and that they've had Jazz the Australian Sheppard put to sleep. The year before I die, the Orpowski family will rescue the Aussie from the pound, clean it up nicely, and present it to little Damien as a gift. Damien

will be the only grandchild in the Orpowski family; he will be the son of Melvin Orpowski and Dianna Schipf, and at the time of the fire, he will be three years old. Right now, he doesn't exist, and Melvin and Dianna haven't even met yet.

But the dog will be blamed for causing the fire by knocking over a lit candle someone will leave on a coffee table, and Grandma Orpowski and little Damien will burn to almost nothing. The fire marshal will do a thorough investigation as to why the house goes up so fast and so hot, and they'll conclude that the basement contained five-gallon buckets of formic acid and kerosene. They'll also find the bones of seventeen young girls buried in the basement's dirt floor. Harvard Orpowski, Annette's father, will be arrested as a serial killer, then released because forensics will have dated the bones at over fifty years, and Harvard at that time will only be fifty-nine. Next, the police will blame Pool Clellen Johnson, a seventy-seven year old retired fireman who lived in the house before the Orpowski's bought it. There won't be an investigation, because Pool will jump in front of a snowplow the following Valentine's Day. Everyone will assume he was guilty, though. There will be no funeral for Pool. There will be no wake. He'll be cremated. His ashes will sit in a mortuary vault for sixty-seven years. Someone will flush him down the toilet when the mortuary finally shuts its doors.

The fire marshal will still be suspicious though as to why formic acid and kerosene were stored in the basement, but he'll decide not to investigate further because of the trauma the family will have suffered. Harvard Orpowski will offer no explanation either, and a new South Dakota mystery will be created.

I'll write back to Annette to tell her that I'd love to spend Christmas with her, because by then, I'll be alone. Shawnra, I'll think, will be spending the holidays with Kumar, and I'll wonder why in God's name I'd want to spend Christmas with a nineteen year old girl who giggles when given oral sex. I'll write back to Annette that we should go sledding and drink cinnamon cider like we did when we were kids, and I'll feel for the first time in a long time excited

Ken Cran

about something. I'll click "send" then turn off the computer, get a drink of water, massage my sore arm, then get into bed. I'll have the short phone conversation with Shawnra. I'll lie in bed and think about buying a new car. I'll wonder how much a Saab 9-9 convertible would cost if I put five thousand dollars down. I'll think about the emptiness of my bed. I'll feel sorry for myself. I'll fall asleep within five minutes.

I'll be dreaming when the light rain that smells like the sea begins falling harder. I'll be barely cognizant of lightning and thunder, but I'm a heavy sleeper and so will not pay it much attention. The wind will be blowing like the dickens, but I'll sleep through it. The power will go out at exactly three-seventeen a.m., and the clock on the nightstand will likewise flash three-seventeen. Thirty-nine minutes later, my neighbor "Mocky" Peterson's cotton tree, the one at the north-west corner of his front lawn, the one that he'll always say before a rain, "Sure as hell hope it don't fall onto my house," will get caught up in a vicious wind. There will be a sound not unlike an explosion, but it won't be lightning. It'll be the trunk of an eighty-six year old cotton tree giving in to the wind. And Mocky's hopes will come to fruition: the tree will not fall onto his house, it'll fall onto mine. Specifically, it'll fall across the roof over my bedroom. The roof will cave in, because it wasn't designed or built to hold up over a ton of cottonwood. Of course, the ceiling of my bedroom is only sheetrock and will offer no protection, either. In the end, the tree will divide my house in half via my bedroom, smashing through the floor and into the basement. A lot of shattered two-by-fours and plaster dust will get mixed up in the wind and rain, but that'll be the last thing I'm concerned about. The largest branch of the main trunk will have landed across my pelvis and groin, effectively obliterating bone and flesh. The shock will be so great that I won't feel much pain at all, and as I lay there on a collapsed bed next to a gaping hole into the basement, I'll be thinking about Brendy, a coyote snack named Eisenhower Philippe formally of Pierre, South Dakota, cinnamon cider, Saxophone Dave, real estate opportunities, and my going-on-forty-eight-year-old life.

I'll watch the rain stream down from the new hole in my roof and wonder why I never put in a skylight. I'll hear sirens go from far-away-hushed to up-close-deafening, then see flashing red lights out of the corner of my eye. I'll see Mocky Peterson lean over me and say "Hang on there, Fritzzy," even though my name isn't "Fritzzy", but since that's what Mocky Peterson calls everyone, I won't object. Mocky's wife Helena will come into my bedroom, and though I won't see her, I'll hear her shrill screech of horror. That kind of scream, I'll reason, can only mean one thing: my injuries don't look pretty. Mocky will grab his wife and say something like "Shut the hell up, you want the last thing he ever hears to be your shriekin'? Go call our lawyer." Mocky won't have anything to worry about, though, because no one's going to sue him over a fallen tree. Lawyers will term the whole incident "force majeure." Brandy will consider suing Mocky and Helena Peterson, but she'll lose interest a few days after my death when she begins to date one of the paramedics that take my body away. He will, apparently, love large fake boobs.

I won't be alive for the journey to the hospital. I'll be declared dead on the stretcher ride from my bedroom to the ambulance. The last images in my mind will be Shawnra giggling as I perform oral sex on her, Kumar beating the stuffing out of me at squash, and my Mom delivering a eulogy at a pet cemetery. After the blackness hits, I'll drift into nothingness. There will be no consciousness anymore, just the feeling that an exhausted life form has made the journey, and that that in itself will have been an accomplishment.

Six years from now, on October 9th, one more person on planet earth will have passed. The only thing significant about it is that it will be me.

NR

Jeff Sosner

Mourners' Tamales

Her tío gasped and fastened hand on chest
last night in front of the TV,
his wife witness to the blossoming
of a tired heart.

In the end, when last rites
washed over tío's eyes,
tía released the crows from her throat, scream-song
choking white-light hospital corridors.

Men find refuge in silence.
Women sob as they make tamales.
They pat corn meal with their slender palms,
each tamale a heart wrapped in green banana leaves.

Salvadoreños eat tamales and bread and
sip coffee at the wake.
We are hungry, says Carolina.
Mourning makes us hungry.

Jeffrey Alfier

Climbing the Border Country

Leaving ranges they've overgrazed again,
we mount trails to the Las Guijas Mountains
where sunlight says we're clean as wolves up here,
even though aches means clocks become tripwires,
pain so deep you forget if it's muscle
or soul, the old scars playing new tunes
to a stiffness that swears we won't climb far.

One could stay on these heights forever,
watch wind slow-dance on perennial grass
as pocket mice store mesquite seeds in ground
like stocks earth sold them on delivery,
or watch mule deer meander off switchbacks
calmly eating cliff rose and yucca blooms;
eagles above, considering the fawns.



Corinna Coorsen

Disturbances

This morning Mabel doesn't get out of bed. She is lying under the comforter, facing sideways and sucking on the corner of her pillowcase. The comforter is pulled over her head, but through the little opening in front of her eyes Mabel can see the faded pink roses on the wallpaper. They look like the face of the old woman she met yesterday. Their pink is the color of the woman's face and the gray outlines of their petals are her wrinkles. Mabel looks at the mob of old women on the wallpaper, and the women look back at her.

It was yesterday that Mabel first saw the old woman. Holding up her skirt, the woman was squatting on the edge of the curb, peeing on the sidewalk. Her bare bottom hung over the street. Mabel couldn't help staring at the white, puckered flesh so bright against the pavement. People hurried past, averting their eyes and making as wide a semi-circle around the old woman as the sidewalk permitted. Mabel however, stood inside the semi-circle and watched.

Next to her head, Mabel sees the last digit on the radio clock flip to zero. 7:30. She should be on her way to school. In twenty years of teaching, she has never been absent without arranging for a substitute and leaving lesson plans. *I should have called.* She can still call, even if it's too late to get a substitute, but the phone is in the hallway and she can't will herself out of bed. Susan, the school secretary will call here as soon as one of Mabel's little first graders shows up in the office and says, "Miss Thibault isn't here." The pang of guilt in her chest isn't strong enough to make Mabel get up. *Let them worry.*

Yesterday, Mabel watched the old woman, whose bottom hung over the curb of Saint Germain Boulevard like a sheep's head over a fence, pee on the sidewalk. Probably the woman thought the gully would catch her pee, but instead the stream splashed against the curb and onto her naked feet. Mabel felt

ashamed for the old woman, peeing in front of all these people on the sidewalk of a major boulevard in the middle of Paris. The woman, who had watched the flow of her pee, lifted her bald, pink head and looked up with eyes that floated in watery sockets like dead trout. Mabel thought the woman might be blind, for the eyes kept moving from side to side without focusing on anything. But then they stopped ever so briefly to look at her, Mabel. The tiny pupils narrowed, and a hint of recognition flickered in them. *Does she know me?*

The corner of the pillowcase is soggy. Mabel turns the pillow and puts a new, dry corner into her mouth. When she closes her eyes, she sees dead fish, millions of them, floating belly-up in the Seine, the whole river a swirling brew of eyeballs. There is no shame or sadness in those eyes, only a vague craftiness in the wayward motion of the eyeballs as Mabel shakes her head from side to side. Mabel opens her eyes and watches the rose-faces on the wallpaper dance until the dizziness goes away.

Yesterday, Mabel stood on the sidewalk of Boulevard Saint Germain, a few feet away from the metro station. Facing traffic, Mabel couldn't see the church behind her, but of course she knew it was there, knew the simple roundness of its Roman arches and its square, stocky steeple. *The old woman must have seen it. She saw me, the people behind me, then the tall iron fence and the church. Pigeons marching on the roof. But maybe she didn't see any of that because she looked at me.* In the eyes Mabel saw a flicker of recognition, and then the old woman laughed. It was more like a cough really - one quick, coarse ejection of air - but it hit Mabel in the pit of her stomach like a fist.

Mabel sucks feverishly. The fabric around her mouth is wet and her lips are beginning to hurt. She knows she needs to get out of bed. She needs to call the school and she needs to pee. But she can't move just yet. Something terrible has crept inside her, a discomfort, no it's more like a great fear, that has Mabel glued to the sheets, sucking on her pillowcase. She closes and opens her eyes, but it doesn't matter whether they are open or closed. She can see the old

woman's face in the roses of the wallpaper and she can see the old woman's eyes in the fish, floating on the back of her eyelids.

Yesterday, the old woman looked at Mabel and laughed - a brief burst of air and phlegm that surged from her depths, as if she were purging something despicable. The sound was an explosive "eh" with a hint of friction in the throat: "ech." Her pale irises focused on Mabel, and she nodded two quick nods. *Just like the pigeons with their gray, shifting eyes and bobbing heads.* And now the pink wallpaper roses open their tiny mouths, and laugh at Mabel too. All of them.

Rrr Rrr Rrr. It's the telephone in the hallway. Mabel uncovers her left ear and lets go of the pillowcase. Though she can't make out the words, she knows the answering machine has picked up after the fourth ring, and that it is her voice, Mabel's voice, instructing the caller to leave a message. *Hello, you have reached the home of Charles and Mabel. Blah Blah Blah Blah. Thank you for calling.* Strange, it doesn't sound like her. When she hears Susan's voice, Mabel lets her head fall back into the pillow. It's all wet. She starts sucking on the comforter instead.

The old woman didn't wear underpants. Her skirt lifted over crimson calves, she peed right there on the sidewalk in front of the church and the pigeons and the people hurrying past. *Why didn't she go behind a car, or in an alley?* Her shins were scabbed and dirty. She probably hadn't washed in weeks, maybe months and here she was, squatting on the sidewalk, peeing on her feet. Both she and Mabel watched the stream of urine until the old woman looked up, found Mabel's eyes and laughed. The throaty puff of air from the chest of the despicable old woman made Mabel feel abject.

Mabel shudders under the comforter and sucks furiously, when she realizes that the woman's laugh had been condescending. This woman, who wiped her feet with the hem of her skirt when she was all done, laughed at Mabel, as if she were better than her. Disgusting in the eyes of the people, who made a wide

semi-circle around her, the old woman laughed at Mabel, and now Mabel feels abject. She wants to look at herself in a mirror to see if she still looks the same, or if she really *has* become abject since yesterday. There's a mirror in the master bathroom only a few steps from the bed. *Go, you need to pee anyway.* The pressure in Mabel's bladder is getting uncomfortable.

Yesterday afternoon, Mabel watched until the woman stood up, lowered her skirt, and waddled toward the metro station. Mabel wanted to rush after her. She wanted to ask why the old woman had laughed at her. But she was too afraid the woman might laugh at her again. She waited until the old woman's pink skull disappeared in the mouth of the metro.

Now she wishes she had had the guts to ask the old woman for an explanation. She is stuck in bed, afraid that she might be as despicable as the old woman's laugh had implied. She sucks on her comforter and argues her case to the rose-women on the wallpaper in front of her. *I'm an honest person. I make good choices.* The roses snicker in unison, and even Mabel isn't convinced. *Other people admire me. Yes, yes. Paulette – she's a colleague of mine – tells me I'm a good teacher. She says ...* Mabel can't remember any details of Paulette's praise.

Damn. What if Susan calls Charles? Mabel doesn't want Charles to worry, and she sure doesn't want him coming home, checking on her. He will want an explanation and Mabel doesn't have one that will satisfy him. First he'll be worried, but once he figures out that she's not sick, he'll be angry. He'll badger her with questions for which she will have no answer. *I could say I have a headache, but he'll want to know why I didn't call.* Mabel can't explain why she's in bed, sucking on her comforter because she doesn't really understand it herself. She only knows that she's afraid she might be as horrible as the old woman made her out to be. Her lack of explanation will make Charles angrier still. *Why did you make me leave the office for no reason? And why are you sucking on the goddamn comforter?* Mabel knows he'll be more upset about the soggy comforter than about her being in bed. He doesn't like messes, and the comforter will

disgust him. He'll insist on putting it in the washer right away. She wants him to stay gone, so she can work things out with the old woman.

Mabel turns to the roses on the wallpaper and sucks on the comforter. The little mouths in the core of their petals are laughing at her. *Do you know me?* The roses shake their heads. *I know the likes of you. What do you mean - the likes of me? You're pampered.* And the roses open their petal-mouths in unison and say it once more: *pam-pered.* Mabel doesn't feel pampered in the least. *I've worked hard for what I have.* The roses open their mouths wider and laugh harder. Mabel closes her eyes and the laughter stops, leaving an uncanny silence in its wake. Behind closed eyelids, the old woman's fish-eyes bore into Mabel. *Why did you watch me pee?* they ask. *I was ashamed.* Mabel isn't sure whether she felt ashamed of the old woman or for her. The fish-eyes narrow. *Let me tell you something. Don't feel ashamed for me. Go take a look at yourself.* Mabel opens her eyes and spits out the comforter.

I need a mirror. Mabel lifts her weight onto her elbow and considers the possibility of getting out of bed. She sits up and sees her purse leaning against the wall by the foot-end of the bed. Inside her purse, she knows, is a little hand-mirror. If she holds on to the bed frame with her right hand she can reach the purse with her left hand. Mabel slides down, grips the wooden sideboard, and leans her body over the edge. *There, I've got it.* She takes out the mirror, tosses the purse on the floor, and slides back under the comforter.

The pressure inside her bladder has become painful, but Mabel flips the switch on the bedside lamp, and bites into a wet section of the comforter. She cups the mirror in the palm of her hand and begins to study her face.

First she examines the mud-colored eyes that stare back at her. She can't find herself in those eyes, but this is nothing new. Their flatness is familiar, something she's attributed to the tiredness she feels day in and day out. Over the years, the shadows underneath them have deepened. The anti-wrinkle cream hasn't stopped the fine webs around her eyes from growing roots. The pores of the skin

seem larger than ever. *They must look like craters under a magnifying glass.* The nose looks the same, except that its contours are a little sharper. Mabel turns to catch a glimpse of the profile. *Yes, a little sharper, but still elegant.* She spits out the comforter and lowers the little mirror, so she can see the rest of her face.

The chin is the color of lamb chops. It's as round as the tip of a penis and about the same size and shape. *A penis-chin.* Mabel can see tiny purple veins gravitating towards the tip. Underneath, a pouch of fat flesh forms a double chin that stretches all the way across her throat. From this angle, it looks like it's grinning. The two chins look like a clown's nose and mouth—grotesque underneath her real mouth and nose. Mabel lifts and lowers the mirror between the two sets of noses and mouths. She touches her chin, cool and sticky and a little numb from the friction against the wet comforter. *How disgusting. I need to cover this up.* Her powder box is in the bathroom. She'll have to get up. Mabel doesn't feel quite ready to leave her bed, but the sight of her chin is too repulsive. *Besides, I really do have to pee.*

Cautiously, she lifts her weight onto her elbow. She slides her legs out from under the comforter, surprised by the coolness of the air. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she looks at the roses. They don't look like faces at all from this angle, and no matter how much Mabel searches for the old woman's face, she only sees pink roses and scuffed patches on the wallpaper.

Mabel tiptoes into the bathroom. The tiles feel cold under her feet. *I'll look for the powder later. First things first.* She turns, pulls up her nightgown, lowers her underpants, sits on the seat of the toilet, and begins to pee. The stream gushes forth uninhibited. *Oh my God. Oh sweet Jesus, this feels good.* Her eyes closed, she relishes the sense of growing relief. She opens her eyes and turns her head ever so slightly to reach for the toilet paper. That's when she sees her reflection in the shower door. Her nightgown is bunched around her waist, and her underpants are stretched over her thighs. *I wonder what my butt looks like inside the toilet bowl.*

Mabel sits up straight and turns her head as far as she can to catch a glimpse of her butt, but all she can see is a half-moon of pink flesh beneath the bunched-up nightgown. When she turns back, she sees a face—her face—in the shower door, looking at her with an expression of sincere concern. Her urine won't stop—it's a deluge—and she is helpless before its power. And now, Mabel feels a great laughter rising from her depths. Her stomach quivers, laughter bubbles, rises, explodes, and now it's riding her, riding her, riding her.

NR

Jeffrey Alfier

Dire Wolf

*Real memory is beyond him, but lying somewhere
in the unmeasured distance is instinct.*

Richard Hugo

Joined to glacial patrols of scavengers,
knives of strange hunters and hooves of mammoths
slowly thinned his companions in forage
whose skulls would one day line museum walls,
rows ever marching off the map of Time.

Men would come to think this was paradise,
but his broken teeth that ache in the wind
can barely recall the hunt for marrow
that he tore from bones of bison and sloth,
whose redolence the wind long relinquished.

In his dulled mind, whelps echo from tar pits
fatigue says he will no longer reach.
Instinct means carrion must appease him.
But a singular trace of icy breath
says today his howl is a dead language.

Kim Young

Faith Healer

I have received your letter and found that I could help you. I have found that you have hoodoo in your home. You have sickness and love problems.

As soon as you read this

call me immediately. Your problems will be solved for a small sum of money (but no personal checks).

I am Mother Alma and I work for Mother Luther we guarantee help within three days for illnesses and lonelinesses.

As you may know, many measure their stature in the sight of god by the state of their health.

We anoint the sick: we take some of the blood from the guilt offering and put it on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be cleansed. The remaining oil shall be put on the thumb of the right hand, and on the big toe of the right foot. The rest of the oil shall put on the head of the one to be cleansed.

We shall make atonement on your behalf.

Recovery from anemia, arthritis, blood poisoning, corns, deafness, defective speech, grief, loss, loneliness, meningitis, multiple sclerosis, skin rashes, total body paralysis, total loss of faith, visual difficulties, visual limitation, are all guaranteed.

Think back to the last time you had a bad flu.
Your arms and legs tied to concrete blocks. Someone unplugged the power supply.
It's like Gulf War syndrome.

The throbbing, shooting, stabbing, oh
the intense burning; spending the night with one foot in sleep and the other one
out of it. If you wake up feeling as though you've just been run over
by a Mack truck, it is reasonable for you to assume that you have a disorder.
Maybe brain fog. Pain has no boundaries.

Jeff Sosner

Thermopylae, 480 B.C.E.

When Xerxes' Persian ten thousand invade Thessaly,
the four thousand Greeks retreat and draw them into the
narrow mountain pass at Thermopylae—the
gateway to hot springs and, beyond, central Greece.

Xerxes' messenger shouts to
King Leonidas of Sparta,
Deliver up your arms.
Leonidas shouts back,
Come and take them.

In a two-meter wide gap
(steep mountain teeth to the south,
cliff and ocean throat to the north),
ten thousand may file through only a few at a time,
like wine in a giant bottle, each milliliter forced to wait its turn
at the choking glass neck.

This is a time
when a man absorbs your
eyes while he kills you,
hands warming handle
as blade traverses torso.

Jeff Sosner

With odds evened,
the Spartan Phalanx shreds Persian lines.
Bronze spears shear aggressors, who cascade into the
sea below; each hour the tide of corpses rises,
as if being tugged at by the moon.

The moon is brighter than bone china.
It rises on humble nights,
still as a goddess and not a cratered orb.

But Ephialtes, the treacherous Greek,
shows Xerxes a secret, alternate mountain
pass; Persians outflank Spartans by night and
surround them by day.

This is a precursor to self-proclaimed patriots, tiny
flags pinned on lapels, selling out countrymen
for a slice of Halliburton pie.

Three hundred Spartans behind King Leonidas,
wear death sentences as medals,
sacrificial fires searing their inner eyes.
They fight until spears are nubs,
then use fists, fingernails, fangs.

This is before hand grenades
and the preemptive strike,
before the art of war
transforms into a
cool Nintendo game.

Xerxes orders the Spartans skewered
by his archers, and the sky
ebbs in favor of arrows.

No MOAB or MX; no undisclosed locations.
No triumphant landings on aircraft carriers
or obtuse jumpsuited grins.

This is when kings fight and die
alongside their subjects.

Think back to the last time you had a bad flu.
Your arms and legs tied to concrete blocks. Someone unplugged the power supply.
It's like Gulf War syndrome.
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Tracy Bachman

Microsoft Word™ "mac" man, the
sons of adam and the barrier dividing.

There is a small robot on the right hand corner of my computer screen in a small box. He says he can help me. With what? I ponder, wonder—consider. I set my ice cream cone, a Nestlé's drumstick, on the desk—on the CD burner and type into the robot's search box, "How do I write a story?" He spits out several choices.¹ Not out of his mouth (he does not have a mouth but a blank computer screen) literally but figuratively they pop out of his (what I assume is a) computer brain into a dialogue box. The dialogue box hovers above his cartoonish self. How did he appear to me in this moment, when I needed some direction, some electronic muse, is there any other kind (now), some sort of guide, a sign—mac man tapes his foot and whistles (to himself) waiting for me to make up my mind.

Mac man had only happened to come out (of the place he is stored) because I had been writing a letter earlier. He *is* a little computer with legs and feet. He looks around. I sit at the desk in the office where there is barely any room to write or think. Books are strewn about like bodies—piled up and ready for burial (I can only seem to hold a terrible studied metaphor for the moment). (The walls of the office are not painted green but a light purple or maybe—call it lavender.) Helping write letters is one of the

¹None of the choices make any sense to me except "insert text in a shape."

mac man's primary functions. *It seems*, for this is when he usually appears to me.

~~I have decided the computer is a masculine object. Not like a ship or a hurricane. Masculine. Not Mother Nature not at all responsible for the Fall of mankind — not *drowning forever* in Biblical oppression. Though I would also add that in fact Satan did fall first sort the *real* first Son of God. And here I sit with the mac man and together, we go to the city of invention. He will help with the privilege.~~

Mac man still taps his toe waiting for me to choose an option.² I click on “see more.” He twists himself around like a Rubik’s cube.³ I look out the window trying to ignore how disfigured mac man has made himself. The cat is sitting on the windowsill ignoring both of us. “Insert text in a shape.” I think this choice seems like a dangerous adventure or disguised procrastination, a manifestation of some new obsession that I have suddenly formed for this small virtual robot who has graciously offered his help because I have helped line the pockets of his employer who is wrapped in some giant nasty little lawsuit having to do with some kind of game— Monopoly.⁴ I always have trouble with form and structure so this choice appears to be direction. But I am afraid to click on it. Will the text suddenly change shape? Click on it. “Insert text into AutoShape.” What could this lead to? Will my text be transformed into a butterfly or an hourglass? I

²While I wait, he pulls out a piece of paper and a pen and begins writing. I think he is mocking me.

³Rubik’s Cube (I should have capitalized “C” in the main text) was invented in 1974, in Hungary by Erno Rubik. It was created out of his love for geometry and forms and hidden combinations. It is a self-contained whole but at the same time it is not. His country was physically behind the Iron Curtain at the time. The cube made it to the U.S. in 1980, the year Ronald Reagan became President, which created even bigger problems for us to solve.

⁴Monopoly was created in 1934, during The Depression (I left out Great) after the stock market crashed by an unemployed man from Germantown, Penn. named Charles B. Darrow. (More than five billion little green houses have been manufactured since 1935.) The game is legally protected under trademark laws.

can only imagine forms I would not want it to be.⁵ I can also choose to add captions or labels. Next it says, "Select AutoShape. Under drawing toolbar click Add Text." (hindsight—I wish I had just inserted captions but I settled for creating a text in two divided columns) ("a cold combrous column") Mac man sits down on his computer butt while I ponder and wait. Ponder and do nothing. No decisions made. He wiggles his outstretched feet at me. The bottoms of his feet have black spots on them, one on each foot. I don't know why. It must be about the brand of shoes he is wearing... he does not know the answer to that question. I ask him if he has any ideas. He does. I cannot really do much with the ideas he has given me—I move on.

I toy with ideas for a story. (Though I feel incredibly disconnected to that word, "story.") I could re-write Melville's *Bartleby* from Bartleby's point of view.⁶ Only he could be a woman or a gay man. Caught up in his boss's homoerotic sexual fantasies, a victim of his sadomasochistic desires. Bartleby is a masochist. His boss, Mr.—is mostly a sadist but a masochist too (I am sure not too far from Melville himself). Closing up Bartleby into that small office space.⁷ Torturing and making observations about all the men under him. Torturing them until they are sufficiently full of sexual tension—mixed with fear for they do not want to lose their jobs. Erections everywhere—over all the frustrations of

⁵A few days later it comes to me that the text should be in a shape that reflects the structure going on in the story—the story takes place on Wall Street.

⁶I think Bartleby eats quiche. "Properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian" (Melville 12). This story takes place around 1853.

⁷"I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not my voice...owing to subsequent erections. Commanded at present no view at all".

the work place. Maybe Bartleby could suck his boss's cock.⁸

Little mac man makes a noise: as he stands up, he has sprouted little arms and hands which he puts on his computer hips. He taps his foot as if he is impatient with me.

Bartleby goes down on Mr.—on the floor in his own cubicle while Mr.—sits in Bartleby's swivel chair. Mr.—says he wants to handcuff Bartleby's hands behind his back, bend him over his desk, and fuck him in the ass. He wants to watch Bartleby's ass shake and quiver—sweat from the pain. Soon Bartleby won't need his chair; Mr.—puts him in a smaller office—one where he does not need to sit down.⁹ Sounds like Mr.—could really fall for this one.

Mac man moves up and down on the heels of his feet and nods his computer self up and down, as if to say "uh-huh." Before I go any further I want to do spell check. Mac man gives me some written lecture about capitalization. I didn't capitalize my title. He says, "Instead of: It usually snows in November. Consider: It usually snows in November." But both are wrong. He doesn't understand that this title, can't discern one line from another. Doesn't understand the special circumstances of the title. I click on "ignore." And he makes some loud horrific noise and flashes capital letters on his small screen self. He has frightened me. Should I make him go away? I stop the spell check and leave him in the right side margin

⁸"After a few words touching his qualifications, I engaged him".

⁹"But there was something about him that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me".

of the screen waiting.

The fat guy in *Bartleby* (a co-worker) eats ginger nuts all day. What the hell is a ginger nut?¹⁰ Is it a nut? The co-worker could eat-suck-hum Mr.—’s nuts while Bartleby watches. He sneaks gingernuts to Bartleby while Mr.—is not looking. He has a crush on Bartleby too. (The new guy always gets all the attention.) The co-worker’s nickname is Turkey.¹¹ Nicknames. The men in this story have nicknames. (A glorious tradition credited to Charles Dickens who stole the idea from Jane Austen who stole it from some other man—one of the other three major fiction writers before her—though it truly was something she established—but it is referred to as Dickensian.) Turkey could only work well certain times of the day because he took dictation from his digestive track instead of being a law copyist—which because of his stomach was really a side job for him. Most of his days were spent in negotiations with breakfast, lunch and dinner, not with pen and law contracts.

[This office place is like the movie *Top Gun*, like all those faggots in *Top Gun* showing off to each other. (Remember that scene in that movie that Quentin Tarantino wrote about how *Top Gun* was homoerotic? *True Romance*.) They had nicknames too. Iceman and Goose and Cougar. Tom Cruise’s character, Maverick,¹² fucking that man/woman who is played by actress Kelly McGillis. Her character’s name is

¹⁰ It is not a nut. It is a tiny cookie/cake. A tasty morsel. “What was ginger? A hot and spicy thing. Was Bartleby Hot and Spicy?”

¹¹ “Turkey was a short, pousy Englishman.”

¹² I would say that Bartleby is a maverick too—unappreciated—unable to do his law copyist job for eternity. That kind of writing is mimesis.

Charlie—how fitting. Shrouded in androgyny. She is a dyke. I heard she had a love triangle with Whitney Houston and Jodie Foster during the making of *The Accused*. Heard it was a real bitch fight fest. Just like Bartleby being the new guy at this office with the three other guys who are jealous of his relationship with Mr.— but Bartleby is stressed out. He sort of stops eating.^{13]}

Can the mac man see me? Why does he react? He is programmed to react. I can make him bigger or smaller but I have to turn the sound down—don't want him to startle me again.

Nippers¹⁴ was the boss's favorite until Bartleby appeared—he was mysterious and handsome. He did not pull on Mr.—'s heartstrings the way Bartleby did—no, he was dark and secretive—did all the dirty work—dealt with the unsavory clients—Mr.—stayed clear of those goings on—he did not want there to be any implications implied. He had fast hands and a nice new suit. He liked to treat Gingernut like a little dog. If you know what I mean. Well, we all did.

Gingernut was twelve years old—a member of the man-boy love society—whatever it is called. He fetched those tiny gingernut cakes for all the fellas in the office. Got under our desks...and shined our shoes or did anything we told him to—he could swallow any task. A real up-and-comer. His daddy owed me a favor—so he sent him my way—he has been quite a pleasure for all of us here at the office.

Terminally squashing individualism.

¹³"I would prefer not to."

¹⁴"Among the manifestations of his diseased ambition was a fondness he had for receiving visits from certain ambiguous-looking fellows in seedy coats, whom he called his clients." This sounds to me like he is a male prostitute working a side job at the office. Mr.— does not stop him—must be collecting a kickback.

The offices were inside a building. Where they/we/I worked at, looked like a huge hard cock. Size, shape, dimensions. Up, up, up. Empire State Building. Only smaller. Even smaller were the cubicle spaces where I stored my men. When Bartleby came—I made a special place for him in my office—wanted us to get real close real fast. I set him faced against the window which was not much of a window at all—it faced a wall¹⁵—to buffer that depressing scene I got a green screen to surround Bartleby—then I would not always have to see him but I could still feel him there on the other side.

I caught him sleeping in the office—one night—he was naked—vulnerable—just the way I like my men. He was writing by candlelight. This for some reason made me assess who exactly had keys to this building—my offices. My key. Turkey’s key. I guess now Bartleby’s key. Oh, and not to forget—the only woman ever mentioned in this story—“one key was kept by a woman residing in the attic, which person weekly scrubbed and daily swept and dusted my apartments.” She did all her work at night—of course, so we never had to see her. The building had an attic with a woman inside, a law building. (Funny thing about this building. It had an attic. Why was there an attic in an office building? That doesn’t seem right. Yet there it is.) What was she doing there living in the margins of this capitalistic structure?¹⁶ (I know in fiction you are not supposed

¹⁵“Skylight shaft-penetrating the building from top to bottom.” So in other words very little light made it through the window because of the high walls. Damn thing about high buildings, they block the light.

to answer questions.) The answer: cleaning up after the men. She straightened up after work in darkness—bumping around trying to find the light—switches. Down corridors—through the maze of office partitions. A woman in the attic. Who was this woman in the attic? Is she symbolic of all women? What is her name? Her name is Jane,¹⁷ Virginia—no her name is Bertha—or Bertha/Jane.¹⁸ So there is this woman in the attic now (a representation of Melville's inner self—his creative imagination—part of his mind, the part that cleans up his text—his bad mother—his tiresome wife). She cleans. She has the key, so she is somewhat trusted. She is not writing by candlelight. She does not own a pen but a broom.¹⁹

She is in the attic²⁰ with saffron wallpaper. In a room of her own, but it is not a room it is an attic. Two of the walls are red. Bertha/Jane cleans off the shells—cookie crumbs of the gingernuts off of the desks. *Bartleby's*, *Nippers's*, *Turkey's* and mine. She washes the floors that black leather shoes shuffled across. At night the only ones left inside the building, a woman in the attic and *Bartleby* writing by candlelight. She is in the top—living upstairs.

(Boy loses boy.) *Bartleby* ends up in prison²¹ where big Black guys, who have the longest thickest cocks *Bartleby* has ever seen, can fuck him in the ass all the time. Mr.— comes to visit him—to see if he has had enough. He wants *Bartleby* to come with

¹⁶Wallstreet.

¹⁷*Jane Eyre* (1847) precedes *Bartleby*.

¹⁸ *She meditates on the injustices of her life*, "some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression—as running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die" (Bronte and Gilbert and Gubar).

¹⁹ "I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down" (Bronte).

²⁰ "Even more importantly, Thornfield's attic soon becomes a complex focal point where Jane's own rationality and her irrationality intersect" (Gilbert and Gubar 348).

²¹ "His face towards the high wall."

him. He is a desperate sugardaddy. He wants more of Bartleby's sweet little ass—wants him to rub it in his face. Wants Bartleby to do the same—wants him to be a brownnoser. Mr.— is jealous of the hot muscular Black men in Bartleby's prison. Mr.—can't compete with these guys. No-Mr.—would never see guys like these. He'd go to some white-collar prison, get fucked by an Italian Mafia man in a suit and tie. Just like his suit and tie. His tie—a representation of his penis—a symbol of his penis—an elongated penis. His white shirt starched. Italian guy's cocks—short hard extra thick like some spicy sausage.²²

Mac man falls over as if playing dead. His feet move a little, so I know he is not really dead. I don't know if he is shocked or dying.

Bartleby is dying too.²³ He can't stand it anymore. Everywhere he goes, he has to get fucked in the ass by some man who is trying to squash him under his thumb, whether on Wall Street or behind prison bars. His ass is raw. He does not want to wear a suit and a penis tie. He doesn't want to tighten his own dick around his neck—twist it up. He does not want to pour himself into an orange jump suit with his ankles in cuffs. And he is no good at basketball²⁴ (See Below and beside).

(Basketball is a sport attended by a bunch of white guys that wear suits and ties. Black guys with them are *stars* in the sidelines. Everyone's dick is

²²I am talking the real shit—like the *Godfather* and the *Sopranos*—those wise guys. Aren't sopranos guys with high-pitched voices?

²³"I would prefer not to dine today...I am unused to diners."

²⁴ a small history of the game

Tracy Bachman

hard. Black guys running around performing—big dicks swinging between their legs—that's why they wear such long shorts. Jack Nicholson watches Shaq run back and forth—his sweat flying into Jack's face. Jack is in the sidelines with his cock in his hand, it is rock hard—though that might be the Viagra talking. Jack is in the zone—the end zone—the sidelines—just out of bounds. That misogynistic little shit nigger is there too—Spike Lee, but he is playing—I mean rooting—for the other team the Nicks. This is the heat of competition. The men yell at each other in male vibrato. Coaches sneer and order the players around—crack the whip. These niggers [I mean white ones too] are high priced whores.)

Mac man still hasn't gotten up. He is down for the count.

Bartleby is a whore too. He is the white warden's whore who makes sure Bartleby is always on edge²⁵—on his toes—raped in the shower—threatened with a knife, but Bartleby's dick is still hard with the game.

As he is collapsed in a heap at the edge of the basketball court just outside of the sidelines his face against the chain linked fence a gunman on a perch watches him his rifle pointing at the sky. Bartleby stares just beyond the fence to the blades of grass—even though it is crabgrass—the grass is green. Mr.—stands over him. Green—his office was green. Mr.—reaches out to him. Bartleby gives him the cold shoulder one last time. What is it about men and

25 "But a soft imprisoned turf grew underfoot."

their fascination for grass? A blanket of green light.^{26,27} I look outside the window and see it is time to mow the lawn.

Somewhere in the darkness of all offices,²⁸ all over the world in the middle of the night a woman²⁹ holds a broom, a mop and a rag. She is ready to clean up the mess.³⁰

I shut mac man down by pressing the small square button at the top left hand corner of his box. In his screen appears a small white hand that waves "goodbye," and a little tune of music bursts out and he disappears.

²⁶ "Though I shall gaze forever/On that green light that lingers in the west: I may not hope from outward forms to win/The passions of life, whose fountains are within!" (S.T. Coleridge).

²⁷ "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It alluded us then, but that's no matter—" (F.S. Fitzgerald).

²⁸ "A strange regretful consciousness of some barrier dividing... Then my sole relief was to walk along the corridor of the third story, backwards and forwards, safe in the silence and solitude of the spot, and to allow my mind's eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it."

²⁹ "This young girl who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell—"

³⁰ "You are formed for labour not for love."

Notes (and Confessions) from Our Contributors

Tracy Bachman

is CSUN's outstanding grad student for 2003-2004. Tracy has twice (and proudly) edited the NR—and is very happy to be included in the NR this semester. Tracy can be paid to write anything.

Karen Barkan

enjoys word play, ponies, and the occasional balancing of objects on her head. As her poetry will attest, she has an extensive collection of obsessions and sporadically despises gravity.

Eddie Joe Carbone

is a person who thinks more of his curly hair than his abilities as a writer. It's twisted, intricate, dark, can take many shapes, and gets him lots of attention. In a desperate attempt to duplicate these characteristics in his writing he dipped his head in ink and rolled his curls across the page. What resulted is what you find here in this edition of the Northridge Review. Hopefully it is halfway legible.

Ken Cran

"I love...summer movies. I despise...summer heat. I love...red hair w/ green eyes. I despise...huge tattoos. I love...cats. I despise...Yankee bats. I love...autumn in Ohio. I love...love"

Katherine Firkins

is an English major with a minor in art and a world traveler. She enjoys interacting with diverse cultures, and she also enjoys fine art, literature, food and fashion.

Rita Hermann

"My only secret is knowing it is important to take moments to think and to thank those who made me."

Dustin Lehren - - - - -

claims that in his head he once starred in his own sit-com, but if you ask the "voices," they say he only had a recurring guest role.

alex lee

about alex anything doesnt have lee much to say

Dan Murphy

as a postmodern, postpunk, folksinging Trotskyite counterrevolutionary, has always kept the trembling notion of world domination through poetry as the goal of his many basement experiments, of which this is one. He hopes that you enjoy your stay.

Hannah Nahm

confesses that the weirdest thing she ever stole as a kid was a jar of homemade pickles from a neighbor's back porch. Fearful of having to account for the alien pickle jar to her parents, she gorged down the entire jar in one sitting. The rest of the day she spent repenting her sins in the toilet. She swore she wouldn't touch another pickle as long as she lived, but to this day she can't keep her hands off of pickles.

amber norwood

likes backtalk, wordplay, music and crayfish. she likes candy and poetry. she indulges in the occasional shennanigan. she awaits her forthcoming B.A. and the rest of her life.

Scott Rowe

is a writer (sic) and the sole member of the CSUN chapter of Skull and Bones. He is also developing a dietary regimen for writers primarily consisting of buttered popcorn flavored Jelly Bellies and peach iced tea Snapple, and is a firm believer in corporate sponsorship.

Jeff Sosner

is a complex personality, as are most of the small breed of modern-day renaissance millionaires.

Mike Vincenti

"All things dance, even in death. This is not faithful, it is a matter of science. We can see only static and shiver at the end, or realize the infinite changes that make us and smile knowing everything moves on."

Submissions should be accompanied by a cover letter that includes name, address, e-mail and telephone number as well as the title.

No names on manuscripts. Manuscripts recycled. Deliver to:
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