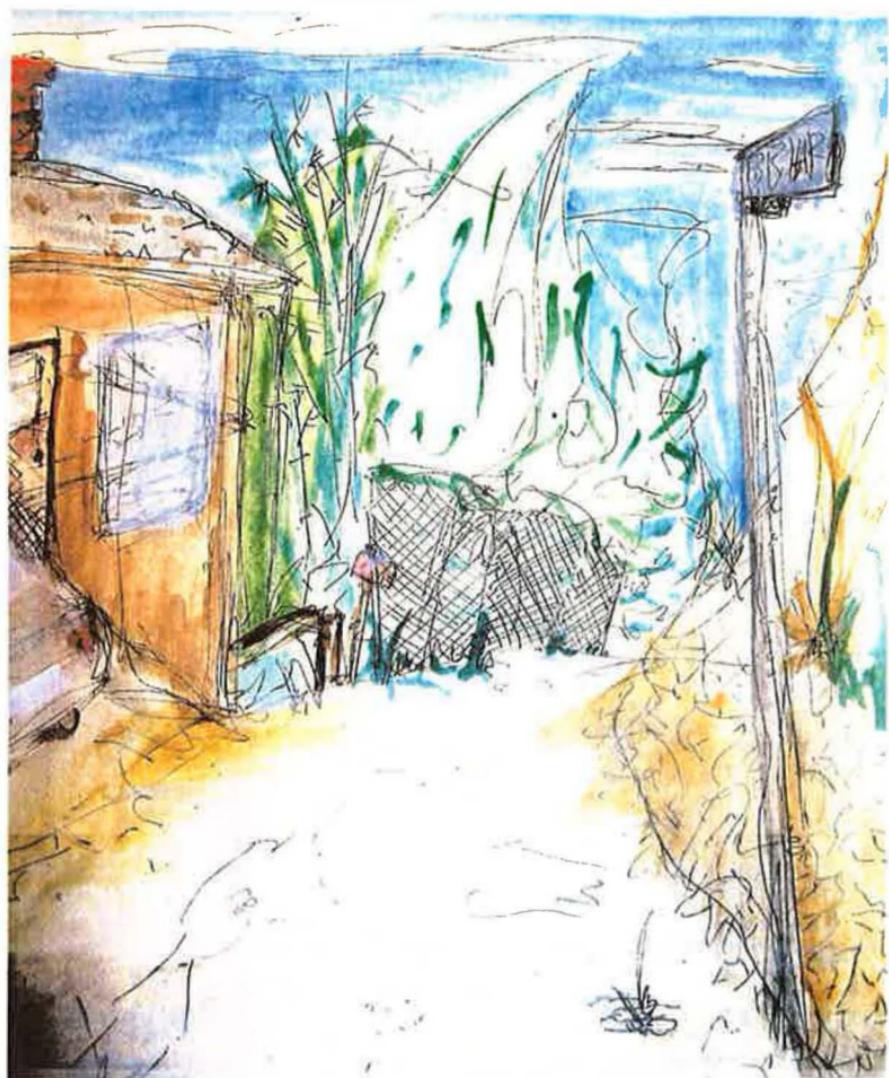


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# Northridge Review

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### The Northridge Review Fiction Award

This award is given annually and recognizes excellent fiction by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review*. The recipients of this award are Marco de la Fuente for "Jazz Mama," and Kenneth Siewert for "Conspicuous Consumption." The honorable mentions are Keith Onstad for "Searching for Sheep," and Corinna Coorsen for "Potluck Story."

### The Rachel Sherwood Award

This award recognizes excellent poetry published in *The Northridge Review*. The recipients of this award are Kate Rowe for "Three Kinds of Memory of the Opposite of Soul," and Dan Murphy for "Car Repair." The honorable mentions are Jeff Sosner for "Drug Deal Pantoum," and B.Z. Niditch for "When I Was Seven."

### The Academy of American Poets Award

This award is given annually and the winning poem is published in *The Northridge Review*. The recipients of this award are Roxanne Duboucheron for "El Velorio," and Cynthia Hoda for "METAMORPHOSIS." The two honorable mentions are Kara Lawton for "BETWEEN MORE AND LESS" and Shayda Kafai for "To Verify."

### About the Judges

Robin Amos Kahn is an east coast playwright whose newest play, *Scrambled Eggs*, was recently published by Samuel French. She lives in Brooklyn New York with her daughter Zoe and her husband Steve. Carol Parker-Lopez is a poet and visual artist who serves as one of three editors at Kinglog, an on-line poetry journal published bi-annually. She has recently exhibited her artwork at The Armory Center for the Arts, Carl Berg Gallery and Domestic Setting, among other venues. She teaches humanities and art history through the Los Angeles Community College District.

## Submission Guidelines

### Guidelines

All submissions should be accompanied by a cover letter that includes your name, address, e-mail and telephone number as well as the title of the submission. No names should appear on manuscripts or artwork. You may submit up to five poems and up to 20 pages of fiction or drama. Art submissions may be two dimensional or three dimensional and all mediums are welcome. Deliver all submissions to:

The Northridge Review  
California State University, Northridge  
18111 Nordhoff Street  
Northridge, CA 91330

### Acknowledgments

*The Northridge Review* gratefully acknowledges the Associated Students of CSUN and the English Department faculty and staff—Karin Castillo, Margie Seagoe, Jennifer Lu, Kavi Bowerman, Herby Carlos, Johnson Hai, and Damon Luu—for all their help. Thanks to Bob Meyer and Color Trend for their continued assistance and support.

May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2005:

Part of me, okay most of me, just wants to say, 'whew' and put a period on this... this page... this edition and ride off into the sunset... which will occur at 7:56 pm, according to Farmer's Almanac. It's going to be a long hot summer. Not that you'll care or even remember because your sun will be setting right around 4:52pm, that is if the fall reading takes place on or around November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

Whatever.

None of that was helpful.

But what would perhaps be helpful, for you, as readers, is a sustained reflection, by me, about the writing you're anxious to turn to... but I've decided not to do that. Because if I mention Searching for Sheep and the writer's outside-of-class-insistence that dialog should never serve to move a story forward but rather should serve to reveal character but then submits a story that contains almost no dialog Marco, the writer of an exceptional synopatic piece, will feel that I'm privileging the Sheep guy. I would also like to not mention (infinitive split intentional) Sosner's nostalgic No-Hitter in which he invokes the Dodgers of yesteryear who happen to be my present year favorite team and who also happen to play the greatest sport ever. Ever. So, I won't say that. I won't talk about Kim Young's Winter Coat or how when we read it aloud it gave us chills (and we know that's a corny thing to acknowledge) or how so many of the poets in this edition were able to internalize Ezra Pound-isms like "the natural object is always the

*adequate* symbol” or how all writers should “go in fear of abstractions.”

I will not share with you all the great discussions the NR staffers had about Purple Paint, Eggbutt, Three Kinds Of Memory, Makeup, rats and mice and all the others. I will, however, say this: The most I've ever learned about writing I learned this semester. And all of what I learned was gleaned from the wonderful writers who took a chance on submitting their work to the little lit mag that could. I learned a thing or two about collective consciousness (hydrangeas, pearls and toes were popular this year), and, as a fiction writer, I learned a lot about poetry and that it too must shoulder similar burdens that fictive pieces do. But, I won't talk about those burdens. Because we could all go on and on about what makes good writing good. So there. I've said enough. Turn the page and enjoy.

Tracey Ruby

P.S. Oh yeah, I will also not say how truly enjoyable it was to work with this staff. I won't say that Jessica and Tara rule. That Raul is doing this for the second semester in a row. That Eric is one of the funnier humans I've ever met, that Jennifer is hilarious and doesn't realize it, or that Annabel was named after a certain Poe poem and that Sahag has a very interesting aesthetic. And finally, I will not tell you how much I admire Mona especially for her tendencies toward kindness. That is all. Carry on.

# Contents

---

## Poetry

Roxanne Duboucheron	48	El Velorio
Amber Norwood	50	All things Golden
	52	Process Theory
Dena Skiles	53	Omen
Jeff Sosner	55	No-Hitter
George Jimenez	56	estuary
Ethan Bruer	57	A Night at Devil's Cove
Donovan Hufnagle	58	I Ain't Your Daddy
Evin Wolverton	60	Eggbutt
Anja Leigh	61	Purple Paint
Kate Rowe	62	Three Kinds of Memory of the Opposite of Soul
Donovan Hufnagle	64	Bar Girl
Ethan Bruer	66	A Child's First Romance
Jeff Sosner	69	Geographic
B.Z. Niditch	70	Book Boy
Dan Murphy	71	The Minister Pays a Visit
Victoria Gonzalez	73	I Want to be There
Kim Young	74	Light in August
Cynthia Hoda	75	METAMORPHOSIS
George Jimenez	76	how are things with her?
Leigh Ann Detweiler	77	makeup
	78	the post-war era
	80	song for the piano
Shayda Kafai	81	To Verify
Kara Lawton	82	BETWEEN MORE AND LESS
Kim Young	84	A Winter Coat with Sleeves the Perfect Length

# Contents

---

## Fiction, Drama & Art

Keith Onstad	11	Searching for Sheep
Corinna Coorsen	23	Potluck-Story
James Allardice	35	Fall Catalogs
Jennifer Lu	38	Dap's Wife
Mary Ruth Summers	86	How to Become a Deaf Person
Evin Wolverton	93	On the Fence
Christopher Page	101	Infusion
Brian Scott	107	ratsandmice
James Allardice	109	@ the Corner
Marco de la Fuente	119	Jazz Mama

## Art

Jim Buxton	85	Untitled
William Buckley (Bixby)	72	Harmony
Nancy Carroll	92	Linda's Chairs
Erika Deeter	59	Venice Tattoo Alley
	68	Cows
	79	Old House
John Divon	54	A Shared Kiss
Joy Japlit	46	Inhale, Exhale
	47	When You Feel You Can't Go On, Let Someone Know Your Pain
	106	A Gun Is Not a Toy
Adam Reyes	118	A Walk on the Wild Side
Drew Stillman	1	Brier Drive
	100	Los Angeles Love

---

## Searching for Sheep

1.

Here is a rule: if you use the word l33t on a regular basis, then you are not—and if you spell it l337, then it is really time to move out of your grandparents' basement. Here is another rule: if you like to brag about your skillz, then you probably don't have any. If you spend more time playing *Halo 2* than you spend coding, then you are a gamer not a hacker. If you think hacking has anything to do with breaking in to other computer systems, then you should put your thumb in your mouth and go back to watching CNN. If you have 200 bots in a pwn3d network of lamer ME boxes that you built via a downloaded copy of phatbot, then you probably have no idea you are really working for me. If you download warez or mp3s or bittorent movies, but create nothing, then you are a parasite. Let me refine that—if you create nothing you are a parasite. If you still call people noob, then you are one. If you have ever typed the letters LOL, then you probably shop at Walmart. If you think you got an amazing deal on eBay, then I hope you buy something from me soon. If you have no idea what I am talking about, then you probably use Windows XP or think the new bite-sized Macs are a good deal. If you buy into the concept of global warming, but don't take public transportation, then you are a liberal.

2.

Characters:

Narrator

unnamed—you will probably assume he is the writer

Jennifer

a place holder for the woman I have had a crush on for 15 years

The Reader

listens to NPR, claims to not watch a lot of television, never

downloads porn from the internet, thinks iTunes is a good idea, can not name all ten commandments, all fifty states, all thirty-seven amendments, or three reasons why Jimmy Carter was the greatest President of the twentieth century, but can name all seven dwarves and most of Santa's reindeer. Claims to be a liberal.

John Paul II

the 262<sup>nd</sup> Pope. He died while I was writing this story

The Dead Sea Scrolls

the greatest biblical discovery of the twentieth century

Alicia

a placeholder for my current girlfriend

Jesus Christ

a 1337 ub3r h4xor from the old skool

Muhammad edh-Dhib

the shepherd who discovered the first of the scrolls in 1947

Martin Abegg

the student who reconstructed 17 of the scrolls from a concordance and said fuck you to the biblical scholarship community by publishing them.

Gene Ray

a messiah for the new millennium

3.

I probably don't have to tell you the story of the scrolls' discovery. That story has passed from reality through the filter of pop-culture and into the realm of common knowledge. It has become dogma. It has become fact. It has been told and retold on fake Discovery Channel documentaries so many times that it is possible that the real story is lost forever.

I probably don't have to tell you that Muhammad edh-Dhib was twelve when he found the first scroll, but if you don't like the age twelve then feel free to adjust it up or down by as many as three years. He was searching for the one member of his flock that had wandered away. He left the ninety-nine and ventured forth in search of the one. In the real story they were goats, but in this story I am going to say that they were sheep because that will better facilitate a metonymic accumulation of meaning.

If this story were fiction, if it were possible to actually write fiction,

then I would set this scene with descriptions that evoked the desert around Qumran, but the only function of description is to provide insight into character, and the only character in this section is Muhammad edh-Dhib. I don't care about Muhammad except as a stand in for the archetype of "Shepherd," and you can put that image into your head without my help.

Muhammad was searching for his lost sheep, but his search was one of casual disinterest. He did want to find the prodigal, eventually, but in the desert there is time for all things and Muhammad was in no hurry. He wandered the hills, searching, and throwing rocks. In my mind he whispered prayers to a god he no longer believed in. In my mind he prayed, but I don't know what he prayed for. I don't know if he called upon his God to throw the Jews out of Palestine. I don't know if he asked for an end to the conflict. I don't know if his prayer was one of simple thanks for the miracle of life or a call for fire and brimstone. I don't even know if he prayed that he would find his lost sheep.

If you have ever watched the Discovery Channel, then you know that he threw a rock into a cave and heard it crash into a pottery jar. He heard the jar shatter, and he crawled inside the cave to investigate. He found the scrolls that had been hidden almost two thousand years before by men who were about to be killed by Roman soldiers in the name of Caesar and for the cause of empire.

4.

Alicia and I fought about Terri Shaivo over the weekend.

Alicia looked at science. She told me that Terri was in a persistent vegetative state, and that the kindest thing that could be done would be to terminate her life. She told me that it had been fifteen years. She told me that Michael needed closure. She told me that it was the kindest thing. She told me that the way politicians were using the issue for personal gain was disgusting. She told me that the parents just needed to let go. She told me that the issue wasn't really Terri Shaivo at all, but that it was really a debate about abortion. She told me that if we lost this battle it was only a matter of time before Roe vs. Wade was overturned.

Alicia is an idiot, but neither of us really cares about Terri Shaivo.

5.

There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.

There is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet.

There is no Allah but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.

My girlfriend is Catholic, which does not make her a bad person, it just means that she is confused. I called her Alicia in the second and fourth sections, so for the rest of this story that will be her name. Being Catholic in the modern world means that she doesn't really believe in anything. She went to Catholic high school, which in my hometown would have made her a bad girl, but she still won't give me a blow job.

It has become impossible for Catholics to believe in anything—I know because I am Catholic as well—but it is equally impossible for us to give up our beliefs. According to the Pope, I should not wear a condom when Alicia and I have sex, but according to the Pope I probably shouldn't be fucking her in the first place. Which leaves the god-fearing Catholic not knowing exactly why he should feel guilty most.

6.

Here is a primer in case you are having problems keeping up:

God and Allah are different words for the same concept.

A blowjob is another way of saying oral sex.

A bot is a computer that has been owned—probably your computer  
1337 and l33t are both wanna be hacker speak for leet which is short  
for elite

h4xor is wanna be hacker speak for hacker

—I am not going to do any more 1337 translations for you—google if  
you care

*Halo 2* is a video game—what, do you live under a rock?

Overloading is a term used in literature to describe a story with ten  
characters

7.

There are four reasons people collect bots. The first is for DDOS attacks, the second is to send out spam, the third is for bragging rights, and the fourth is identity theft. The four reasons are not mutually exclusive.

DDOS attacks are basically a waste of time. You tell all your bots to hit one website at the same time and the server is overloaded and unable

to respond to legitimate requests. Russian gangs hit gambling sites all the time and then extort money from them as protection against future attacks. Script Kids, the 1337 h4x0rs of the new millennium, hit corporate or political sites because they have tiny, little dicks and it makes them feel powerful.

I only did the DDOS thing once (it means distributed denial of service—but, seriously, I am not doing any more translations). Anyway, I only did the DDOS thing once, and I had fewer than 20k bots under my control at the time. I hit the timecube site ([www.timecube.com](http://www.timecube.com)) because Gene Ray is the craziest man on the internet.

The hollow Time Cube in which the 4 quadrant corners of Earth rotate, equates to your 4 corner bedroom, or to a 4 corner classroom which represents the 4 corners of Earth—in which stupid and evil pedants teach dumb students 1 corner knowledge.

Each of the 4 corners of Earth is the beginning and ending of its own separate 24 hour day—all 4 simultaneous days within a single rotation of Earth. Place 4 different students in the 4 corners of a classroom and rotate them 4 corners each. Note that they rotate simultaneously within the same Time frame as if only one is rotating—just as the 4 different days on Earth rotate. 3D math applied within this hollow Cube would be erroneous math, as it would not account for the 4th corner perspective dimension.

I wanted to give him justification. Nothing says you are being taken seriously like persecution, and I wanted Gene Ray to feel persecuted. No one ever visits his site though, and I don't think he even noticed my attack.

I have always wanted to be Gene Ray.

8.

In 1947 the dead sea scrolls were discovered, President Truman signed a bill that put the speaker of the house two heartbeats away from the presidency, a UFO crashed in the desert outside of Roswell, New Mexico, the first computer bug (a moth crushed between two mechanical relays) was discovered by Admiral Grace Hopper, Thor Heyerdahl proved that Polynesians had originally come from South America by sailing the Kon-Tiki from Brazil and crashing into a reef on an island in Polynesia, The United Nations divided Jerusalem between Arabs and Jews, Walter Morrison invented the frisbee, Mikhail Kalashnikov invented the AK-47, the House committee for un-American activities cited the Hollywood 10 for contempt, and Chuck Yeager became the first man to move faster than the speed of sound.

It was one fucked up year.

9.

This is an idealized version of the first time that Alicia and I met:

Alicia looked exactly like her picture, and I knew her the instant she walked in to Marco's. She asked if I had been waiting long, and I lied and told her that I had just arrived, and then she told me that I looked nothing like my picture and I told her the same thing.

In this version of the story I knew exactly what to say, and there were no long, awkward silences. There is no spilled wine and neither of us gets pasta stuck in our teeth. In the first draft of this story, Alicia and I slept together the night we met, but I don't think I can write a character who is cool enough to sleep with a girl the first night he meets her, so in this version we part with a handshake.

"When did you stop believing in God?"

It wasn't really a fair question, because I claimed to be agnostic, which really means that I don't know. A = without and Gnostic = Knowledge.

I told her that on some level I had always been agnostic, and asked her how she became an atheist—which is a much more interesting question.

"Did you ever have sex in a church?"

Every Catholic kid has had sex in a church, or at least claims to have done so, but I could tell that when I told her I had she thought I was

lying, and even though it was true it sounded to me as if I was lying as well. I started inventing details, telling her I had made out with my high-school girlfriend in the confessional and that we had ended up doing it for the first time while her mother lit candles ignorant of what was going on just a few feet away—which was sort of a lie.

“Have you ever been fucked by a guy?”

I am not sure why she got to ask all the questions, or why I was on the defensive throughout the entire conversation. I have never had any luck with women I meet on match.com.

10.

If you want to know what a hacker really is, then look to Martin Abegg. Martin isn't a computer expert. He is a biblical scholar, and is now actually part of the dead-sea scrolls establishment. Martin Abegg fully understood a system—he understood a system like no one else had understood it before. He understood a system better than the people who designed the system. He understood, he exploited, and he released his knowledge to the wider world free of charge or obligation. Martin Abegg is a hacker.

The scrolls were discovered in 1947, and they literally were thousands of fragments of texts. Imagine paper that is 2000 years old and you will understand the shape that the scrolls were in when they were found. For decades a privileged few academic scholars studied them, pieced them together, interpreted them, and published articles explaining to the world what the scrolls meant to Christianity—but they never let anyone else look at them. They did create a concordance—there were something like eight copies, and it consisted of 50,000 index cards. Each card contained a single word, and the contexts in which the word was found—the word that came before and the word that came after. Martin entered all 50,000 index cards into his personal computer, and from that information he reconstructed several of the scrolls—and he, and his adviser, published them in 1991 some 44 years after the scrolls were first discovered.

It was the dawn of a new era in biblical scholarship. Almost nothing is ever revolutionary, but Martin Abegg's publication of scroll data was.

I have always wanted to be Martin Abegg.

11.

A root kit is a program that gives an attacker unrestricted access to an owned computer. The term comes from the traditional system admin

login on unix systems which is “root.” On a unix system, with root access, you are what they call a “superuser” and there is nothing you can not do. You can see everything. You can change everything. You can control everything.

I use two root kits. The first is an old BSD kit that I found online and modified to run on OS X. There aren't really enough Macs on the internet to make it worth while, but Apple users are so goddamn smug that I find them hard to resist. I wrote the second root kit from scratch, and it runs on XP, 98, and ME.

Your bundled copy of Norton Anti-Virus will never find a good root kit, because a good root kit, my root kit, intercepts calls to the operating system and only tells Norton what it is safe to know. A good root kit lies like an agnostic, and controls so completely that you never know it is there.

12.

When Alicia moved in with me we had to merge our belongings so we would not have two toasters and two coffee machines and two copies of *Buckaroo Banzai* and two microwaves and two editions of *Dubliners* and duplicate copies of *My Aim is True* and two of everything else we had in common. Two of every reason why we are together.

For the most part, when there were duplicates, we kept my movies (because they were on DVD) and her books (because she does not bend back the pages to mark where she stopped reading). I didn't tell Alicia this, but I saved my copy of *Dubliners* and my copy of *The Violent Bear it Away* in the bottom of a box in the bedroom closet, because all relationships end eventually and if you have Flannery O'Conner and James Joyce you don't really need anything else.

She has a box in the closet as well, and I suspect that in her box is a copy of her video cassette tape of the SNL episode where Sinéad O'Conner sang Bob Marley's *War* without musical accompaniment. She was dressed in white and surrounded by candles. She was beautiful. When the song ended she pulled out a picture of John Paul II, yelled that we should fight the real enemy, and ripped the photograph in half.

I have always wanted to be Sinéad O'Conner, but only in that moment.

I didn't plan for the Pope to be in this story, but he died and when he did Alicia climbed into bed with me and cried. It is funny that we call him

The Pope, when there have been 261 before him who held the title. Peter was the first, although the title did not yet exist when Peter was the Pope. It is Peter, the Rock upon which the church was founded, whom Jesus entrusted with the keys to the kingdom of heaven. It is Peter who became the first Vicar of Christ.

Both Alicia and I are old enough to remember when John Paul II was elected to the Papacy. My father asked me if I knew how they chose the Pope, and when I said that I did not he told me that they took a poll. I didn't understand why he thought that was funny until more than ten years later, and by the time I did it was no longer socially acceptable to tell racist jokes in public.

We both cheered when Sinead O'Conner ripped the picture of the Pope in half. We both saved the tape. I transferred my copy to DVD and Alicia transferred hers from tape to tape when the original copy decayed. And then, 13 years later, when the Pope died, Alicia crawled into bed with me and cried.

13.

The first thing my root kit does, when I install it on a system, is patch the system so subsequent attempts at ownership fail. The second thing it does is scan for copies of other root kits, known kits that can be found on any cracker site on the net. When it finds another kit, and it almost always finds another kit, it scans the kit for password and IRC channel, traces it back, and instructs every bot in the net to delete the script kit and install mine. My best take was a network of over 1300 bots. The kid must have been collecting for months.

14.

Your father was a fish. You evolved  
from an egg laid in water, fertilized by  
a sperm fish swimming upstream—  
just as salmon swim up stream to  
fertilize female eggs laid in the water.  
Maybe, you should worship a fish god.

Gene Ray isn't just crazy—there are billions of crazy people in the world. Gene Ray is crazy that knows no boundaries. He is anti-gay, anti-government, anti-education establishment, anti-Jewish, anti-Black, anti-

immigration—Gene Ray is hate distilled into an unbreakable tower of self-confidence. Gene Ray is a messiah for the twenty-first century.

15.

We stayed up all night on Saturday—Alicia and I stayed up. Flipping back and forth between CNN, MSNBC, local news, and a documentary on the dead sea scrolls that Alicia rented from Netflix. Most of our news we got from the internet—we listened to streams from the Voice of America, Vatican Radio, and the BBC. We read articles from India, and Kansas City, and Australia. We consumed news from around the world—and every article said the same thing. The Pope was getting worse, he was a great religious and political leader, he contributed to the fall of communism, he reached out to the Jewish community and tried to undo twenty centuries of animosity, he was the first non-Italian pope in four and a half centuries, he enjoyed the theater when he was young, blah blah blah blah.

We read about people praying for him. We read about cardinals flying to Rome. We read myths and legends reported as fact about how when the pope died the chamberlain would tap his head three times with a silver hammer, calling the pope's baptismal name for the first time since 1978. Alicia and I both laughed at that. We searched through a binder full of DVDs until we found the remake of *Little Shop of Horrors* so we could listen to Maxwell's Silver Hammer. We watched until we both finally fell asleep with visions of singing plants dancing in our heads.

16.

I'll never get rich off my network of bots, but there are more than sixty thousand of them in six distinct networks, and I make a decent living. I run a series of fan websites for obscure 60s and 70s television shows that no one remembers. I have a template and it only takes a few hours to put a site together. Shots of the cast, a "where are they now" section, a list of episodes, and some random inside facts—and that is already more content than most legitimate fan sites.

Advertisers who don't realize that clicks != eyeballs and eyeballs != sales pay me every time someone clicks on a banner ad from one of my sites, and thanks to my network of bots I get thousands of unique clicks every day. Payment varies, and it is never very much. Multiplied by 38 websites, however, and it starts to add up.

17.

This isn't a dream sequence. I would like to think that the world is interconnected, that everything happens for a reason, and that dreams have meaning. I would like to believe that we had record rain storms in Los Angeles this year because two thousand years ago, at the exact moment when Jesus was being nailed to the cross, a butterfly in China flapped its wings and set in motion a chain of events that could not be stopped. I would like to believe in chaos theory, but sometimes things just happen, and dreams are nothing more than random flashes of energy as synapse crashes against synapse.

So, this isn't a dream, but I would like to believe that things are connected. In my head I would like to see Martin Abegg and Muhammad edh-Dhib as lovers. The shepherd and the scholar connected by an unbreakable wall of love. I would like to see Abegg kiss edh-Dhib, and I would like to see edh-Dhib and Abegg locked in an embrace, see the look in Abegg's eyes as he gets fucked by edh-Dhib. I would like to hear Abegg tell edh-Dhib, I love you.

In my head I picture it rough; shepherds are not gentle men. My distant ancestors, so many thousands of years ago that they are lost to history, were shepherds. The Indo-Europeans who originated on the steppes of Russia are the ancestors of most of western civilization, and a good deal of eastern civilization. Their gods would transform over time into the gods of the Hindus and the gods of the Greeks—only to be replaced, for my ancestors, by the God of the Israelites, by a carpenter, by a shepherd. Hints of their language can be heard on the streets of New Delhi, Amsterdam, Vatican City, and Los Angeles.

The original Indo-Europeans were herdsmen—they were shepherds. They followed their herds and flocks from the steppes of Russia across India and into Europe. They grazed their animals on good land, and when the land was exhausted they moved on. They moved to new land, they took that land from the people living on it, they grazed their animals on that land until it too was exhausted, and then they moved on.

The original shepherds did not ask when they wanted something—they took it.

18.

It was 12:30 when the news finally came. I was still asleep, but Alicia had been up for hours. She was already crying when she climbed in to bed with me. We didn't make love, and we didn't talk. She put her head on my chest and cried until she fell asleep.

After she was asleep, I slipped out of bed and turned on my laptop. I sent a command to my entire network of bots. I told them to DDOS the Vatican web site for 90 minutes and then I walked out to the living room and played *Halo 2* on my xbox until Alicia woke up.

19.

I bestow upon myself the "Doctorate of Cubicism", for educators are ignorant of Nature's Harmonic Time Cube Principle and cannot bestow the prestigious honor of wisdom upon the wisest human ever.

Dr. Gene Ray

## Potluck Story

This is not my story. I first heard it from a friend, who heard it from someone else. It's a story that has made the rounds here in Ojai. Lots of stories get around in Ojai, and sometimes you hear stories about people you don't even know. I don't know the German woman, who's at the center of this story, but she exists, and according to people who know, she really *is* antisocial. I've done some checking on the different versions of the story, but I haven't been able to uncover which one (if any) actually happened. They all seem plausible.

Am I writing this story exactly how it was told? Of course not! That would be impossible unless I had taped the conversations with my various sources. Which I didn't, but even if I did possess recordings, I would add, delete, and embellish whenever and however I saw fit. How else could I tell you what the German woman was thinking? The truth is, I only remember one or two original sentences (not original either since the story has been retold and no doubt altered by all sorts of people), which I will include and point out to you. It seems only fair that you should know which are my words and which aren't, even if it's of no importance whatsoever.

No story version made mention of the mental state, which prompted the German woman to commit her *faux pas*. People aren't interested in the subtle changes in disposition, not even if they lead to fiascos like this one. For them, the thrill of the story lies in people's crime or shame. The German woman is antisocial, that's all, said my friend, but I think there's more to it, otherwise she would have kept her mouth shut. She's a teacher for Christ's sake, a respected member of the community, though this story has seriously shaken her reputation. I think she deserves a little justice,

and since I've chosen to tell the story, I will crawl inside her head and write down the thoughts I find there.

**F**or some weeks now, the German woman had been thinking about potlucks. I don't mean to imply that she thought of nothing besides potlucks, but here and there, too often to ignore, her mind was drawn to the subject like a cloud to a mountain. She didn't enjoy potlucks, hadn't for a long time, and she was wondering if potlucks were inherently boring or if something was wrong with her.

Her experience with potlucks was limited to Ojai—that same, small, southern Californian town I call home. She had identified three basic truths about Ojai potlucks: the food was good, the crowd predictable, and the conversation as bland as oatmeal. She did, in her potluck-reflections, consider the possible existence of other, far more exciting potluck-universes whose conversations were enthralling and memorable, but so far they had remained hidden from the tracks of her life. In her potluck universe, food-tables featured platters with salmon, goat cheese and olives, pasta dishes with fresh basil and pine nuts, bean stews with home grown tomatoes, vegetable curries and scrumptious spreads of desserts with fruit and chocolate in multiple forms, all lovingly prepared by health-conscious vegetarians or fish-and-poultry eaters.

I concur with the German woman on this count: Ojai potluckers know what's what when it comes to cooking. She wasn't thrilled with the crowd though, composed with little variation of the same screen-writers, chiropractors, massage therapists, distributors of alternative health-care products, artists, and those, whose obscure professional services seemed to serve mainly themselves. Still, the crowd wouldn't have kept her away had the conversations not been so dull. She was no fan of shamans, gurus, healers, miracle supplements or colon cleansing, subject matters which seemed to awe some guests to no end, so she was stuck with default potluck-talk, which, in her potluck-experience, was dense and viscous like after-school traffic: so how is it going, not too bad and you, great I'm doing great, [pause] still teaching French, yeah how about you still working on your script, yup it's going great, well it's good to see you, you too [long pause or end of conversation]. She had figured out rule number one of potluck-talk: don't rock the boat.

Here is what was really preoccupying the German woman: what if someone (her?) did rock the boat? What if she broke through the safety tape of potluck-talk and ripped open the unctuous layer of blah, under which lay all kinds of potent conversations? These were people, after all, real people, with fears and shitty luck and occasional moments of triumph—people whose stories you never heard at potlucks, where dullness was a must.

**E**xactly one month later came her chance to rock the boat. She'd been invited to this potluck by Cynthia Wereass, a woman she didn't know well in the first place, and whom she hadn't seen in almost two years, but who'd always been friendly to her. Cynthia let the German woman stay in her house when the latter first arrived in Ojai, while she herself went off on a two-week spiritual journey with a famous shaman. And now Cynthia had sent this invitation, a little card featuring a dancing sun and moon and announcing the summer solstice as the occasion for the potluck. It promised good food, music, games, and fun, and asked the German woman to RSVP. Which meant she had to make a decision now, for the card arrived almost three weeks ago, and the potluck was scheduled to take place this Saturday at 6PM. It was on Thursday afternoon that the German woman found the invitation under a pile of bills and felt a pang of guilt. Of course, no one would comment if she showed up without calling, least of all Cynthia, whose positivism floored even the local affirmation groupies, but it wasn't good to be in a constant state of indecision and hence non-commitment. She picked up the phone and dialed the number printed in cursive on the computer-generated card, hoping to get the answering machine and considering hanging up if she didn't. She wasn't ready to give news of the last two years over the phone—there wasn't much to tell anyway, but what little there was, she wanted to reserve for the potluck—to Cynthia, and even less to her boyfriend, Bud, or was it Buck? She couldn't remember.

"Alohaaaaa, this is the home of Cynthia and Jack. You know what to do," a sonorous male voice boomed through the receiver, holding the final 'a' of aloha like a stuck CD. Jack, that was the boyfriend's name, though she couldn't recall his connection to Hawaii. But the message was all enthusiasm, as if the potluck were already well underway and the experience of a

lifetime. She thanked them for the invitation, excused her late reply (late-ly, she was always excusing herself), and announced her acceptance with warm, enthusiastic phrases: it's been such a long time, I'd love to see you, looking forward to it, etc. It was done. Only the question of what to bring needed to be resolved. Chips and salsa wouldn't do. She'd have to bring something half-decent to make up for her lack of sociability.

**I**t's Saturday night, the night of the potluck, during which the seed for the story, having taken root in the German woman's brain, will sprout into action. The story versions I collected begin at the German woman's entrance to the potluck (no one bothered describing her arrival at Cynthia's beige stucco bungalow with the rose garden in front). There she is, driving her beat-up Toyota station wagon, cursing in German because every parking spot is taken. She makes a U-turn at the end of the cul-de-sac and parks down the street. Balancing the salad bowl in one hand, and the dressing (store-bought Newman's Vinaigrette) and a jacket in the other, she makes her way to Cynthia's house. I think I know her well enough now to claim that she's purposefully late. This is California, and potlucks never start on time, but she wants to arrive even later, when pre-dinner talk has succumbed to the business of eating. That way, she'll be able to dive straight for the food, and camouflage her withered social skills under culinary delights. Judging from the cars in the driveway and lining the curb, she's right on time. She lingers a little in the rose garden, breathing in the sweetly scented air. Some roses are in bloom, white ones fringed with pink and fiery orange ones lit by the setting sun against the dull stucco of the house.

She enters via the garden gate and walks along the north-side of the house to the back portion of the yard where the potluck is in full swing. Food has taken center-stage; she can tell from the looks of small clusters of potluckers, sitting on chairs or on the grass, their heads bent in intense concentration over the plates balancing on their knees or in front of them. Now and then they look up to ensure the survival of small talk. She knows that Ojai potluckers, well-educated and sophisticated for the most part, understand that it's improper to throw themselves over the food like Rupert, Cynthia's Rottweiler, who's licking the lawn for crumbs with dripping jowls. Not the potluckers, who may slurp, groan, smack and gulp at

home, in the presence of a pet, say, or the wife, and perhaps even mom, but here bridle their instincts in proportionate measure to the emotional distance of those around. Ojai's potluck etiquette requires proper utensils, small bites, and unobtrusive chewing, as if the food on one's plate were but the pleasant accompaniment to the celebration of the real purpose of the potluck: potluck-talk. I'm sure she sighs at the sight of their mouths, spitting out words like furnaces.

The German woman places her salad next to a pasta dish, opens Newman's finest, and joins the line that has formed at the end of the three food-bearing tables, arranged in horseshoe formation and topped with a canopy, which does little to protect the food from the slanted rays of a warm, evening sun. The backside of a bare-footed, heavy-set giant (at least 6'5") in jeans and a white and blue checkered shirt blocks her view of the platters ahead. Turning her head slightly, she scans the lawn for known faces. Under the oak tree, fifth largest in Ojai and centerpiece of the yard, she spots Stew, her ex-boyfriend from last year. His hair, definitely gray when they were dating, is dyed a reddish brown and he's sporting a pony tail. She grins in his direction because he too has seen her and now he's waving. She waves back. She'll have to talk to him at some point—no way around it—otherwise she'll look like she's avoiding him, a factoid that might be used to cook up a host of stories about her (oh yes, the German woman is well aware of the story pressure-cookers lodged in the potluckers' heads). Wrapped around Stew's left arm is a lean redhead she's never seen. Her pointy face is raised as if she's sniffing an unpleasant odor, and even at this distance the German woman can tell the redhead is staring at her with an odd mixture of curiosity and distaste that lets her know the redhead has connected her face with the stories Stew must have told about her.

It's not the first time the German woman is the object of that stare. She's seen the sordid business of her divorce—plates flying, windows breaking, and two police officers handcuffing her husband (another story that has made the rounds)—reflected in the knowing eyes of many a potluck. Ojai, she thinks spitefully, thrives on relationship stories, the whole web of romance, betrayal, separation, and divorce heated and reheated in the Ojai relationship-cesspool. Everyone, it seems, has dated someone else's ex, boyfriend or husband, and if Ojai potluckers are the

family they claim to be, they need to go see a shrink about incest. She may be exaggerating a little, but the truth is, it's not uncommon for a potluck guest to run into several ex's (boyfriends, husbands, lovers, one-night stands, what have you) at a single potluck.

Near the kitchen she sees Cynthia, looking like a model for a deodorant advertisement. Those are the exact words used by one of my sources: a model for a deodorant advertisement. The words stuck with me because I couldn't imagine Cynthia, in her fifties and quite overweight, advertising any beauty product. Cynthia is wearing a flowing turquoise top, whose material and color exude weightlessness and purity (my words). The sleeves flutter around her wrists like excited birds. But it's just Cynthia, gesturing and laughing a high whinny that goes off like a car alarm and stops as abruptly. Next to her is Jordan, the violin player. He'll probably play his violin later, which is both good and bad. The German woman doesn't much care for the moanful whines of the violin that rise and fall with the Gumby-flexes of Jordan's body, but at least his performance will give the potluckers, stuffed and petered out from too much potluck-talk, a much needed rest. She notices that Jack is nowhere to be seen. Maybe—and the thought sparks her mind into alarming rotations—maybe Cynthia and Jack had a falling out! In any case, Jordan seems to be standing as close to Cynthia as her flying arms allow. The German woman is looking forward to getting the scoop on Jack's absence from Stew, who's told her some other gems about Cynthia's love life. Not at this potluck, this isn't the right time or place for that sort of story, but one on one, over a cup of coffee, the redhead out of the picture, Stew will talk. It's in the absence of the cast that you get to the juicy, bubbling core of Ojai potluckers—even I can attest to that. The German woman was certainly never present when I heard the story I'm telling you now.

Cynthia, so the German woman had learned from Stew when the two of them were an item, has dedicated her life to writing a script about her spiritual transformation at a Burning Man Festival. Freed from the shackles of monogamy by the spirit of Burning Man, said Stew, she went through a series of young lovers, the last one younger than her oldest son, who refused to speak to his mother while she was shackled up with Yin-Yan, or whatever his name was. Her marriage of twenty plus years to the father of her four children, needless to say, collapsed like a house in an

earthquake. She finally settled for Jack, fifteen years her junior and a surfer, barely grown out of phrases like ‘dude what’s up?’ and ‘that’s tight’. Jack’s wife (yes, he is married, and she refuses to divorce him), owns a lingerie shop, and Jack’s baby-brother, in his early twenties and drunk, so I heard, once broke into the shop with a couple of friends and then the lot of them paraded through the streets of downtown Ventura in blood-red corsets and fishnet stockings until the police arrested them. Now that’s the real stuff! How much of it is true, she couldn’t say; it’s possible that Stew made up every shred, and if so, she decides she prefers fiction to the dull dribble of potluck-talk. (I can’t tell you either if Cynthia’s and Jack’s stories are true, though of course, I too have heard them—who hasn’t?).

The German woman is at the front of the line, finally, following the giant, who’s moving slowly along the table, shoveling rice, curry, chicken, garlic bread, pasta salad, and deviled eggs onto his plate with robotic precision. She lets her eyes glide over the tables, in search of another solid plate, but paper is all she sees. *Did he bring his own plate? Jesus buddy, lighten up on the food.* She begins loading but not overloading her own flimsy excuse for a plate. Salmon, steamed asparagus, spinach dip, brie, and chicken wings. That’ll do. She wants to be able to go for seconds, maybe thirds, in case she needs to get away from someone she doesn’t want to talk to. Her plate and fork in one hand, a glass of fruit-punch in the other, and the jacket over her arm, she looks for a place to sit. A place where she can eat in peace.

She’s still standing there, still looking, and now this man, a sort of Santa Clause (I’m quoting one of my sources here) is coming towards her. She scrutinizes her plate, as if searching for stray hairs, hoping he’ll pass. No such luck. She sees his brown leather moccasins come into her field of vision. They have little holes and look like they would creak on linoleum, but on the grass they are silent. Not so their occupant, who starts off with, “Great food isn’t it?”

If she looks up, she’ll be stuck with him, at least for a while. She could pretend deafness, just bend over her plate, like Rupert, who knows nothing of shame or inhibition, and eat ferociously until the food is gone, and then go back for more, away from the brown shoes and what’s in them. Or Santa might leave first, having hesitated at first, and then decided that she is either incredibly rude or deaf, and that, in either case

it is not worth repeating his opening statement. Whatever happens, there is no chance that her behavior will go unnoticed, with thirty or more bored potluckers waiting for nothing more than a bit of entertainment to give them something to talk about. (Naturally, she's not thinking out these possibilities in the little time she has to make up her mind, though shadows of these same thoughts do dance inside her head. But it is only in writing that I, having personal and spatial distance to the encounter plus the time to think things through, can develop their logical sequence.)

"I haven't tasted any." She doesn't want to encourage him, but neither does she want to be noted for bad behavior. Social etiquette demands that she look at him now. She doesn't like what she sees. The shoes go with beige slacks, a khaki shirt, white, bristly chest hair, and a trimmed white beard on a round head the color of a pork chop. Were he a sensitive person, he would read her response as clearly as if she had stuck out a billboard, saying: LEAVE ME ALONE.

Instead, Santa wipes his neck with the palm of his hand and says, "Boy it's hot today."

"Hmm."

"I'm Earv," he says and holds out his hand which looks fleshy and soft and incredibly pink against the cuff of the khaki shirt. "Hah, I guess you're kind of tied up, aren't you?" He laughs and points at her plate and glass.

"I guess I am." She has nothing more to say, but knows this won't be the end of it.

"Now I've lived in Ojai for a long time, but I don't think I've ever seen you. You live in town?"

*Here we go.* "I moved here four years ago."

"I detect an accent. Let me guess—you're from northern Europe." He rubs his chin as if trying to solve a three-step equation. "I'd say Sweden."

"Germany, actually."

"Really? I was stationed in Baden Baden in the late sixties. Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" He wags his head with surprising agility, as if it were somehow hovering above his neck and not attached to it.

He's flirting with her. *What am I to say to that?* And then the thought comes to her, tentatively at first, but gaining shape on the spidery veins of Earv's nose: this is her chance to rock the boat. She'd forgotten all about it, but Earv's chatter—a slight variation of the same old potluck-talk and utterly pointless because she's not in the least interested in him—reminds her of her mission. Why then is it so difficult to tell him what she thinks? She's afraid of her audience, of course. There are people within earshot, some watching with unconcealed curiosity. But it's not only that. She's surprised to find, inside her, a slight resistance to rebuffing this man. (I attribute her trepidation to her basically sensitive nature. I'm convinced she isn't the rude bitch people make her out to be.)

On the other hand, she refuses to play the game he's setting up. Responding in German is out of the question, for it will encourage him to show off his army-base German, rudimentary and painfully mispronounced, judging from his first, pathetic attempt. And she doesn't care to know the when, how and why of his military assignment in any language. The presence of all those American soldiers and their Pershings has never sat well with her. (Later, she will think of clever replies in German and English, one after another popping up like buoys in her churning brain: *Since I have a German accent it stands to reason that I speak German, don't you think? You aren't seriously expecting an answer, are you? Did you ever consider the possibility that you weren't welcome in Germany, or something in German, that would no doubt surpass his abilities, such as, What do you think about Germany's critical attitude towards the US government?* But like I said, all this will surface much later in the safety of her home, away from Earv and the nosey potluckers). At the present moment, she's incapable of thinking up a well-worded, let alone complex reply, the fear of social consequences rocking her blood, and when she finally does speak to break the silence, which has extended well beyond the acceptable parameters of potluck-talk, she says (and here I'm quoting the fateful question, which was overheard, to my knowledge, by at least three people):

"Have I given you any indication that I want to talk to you?"

He's dumbfounded, she can see that. This is not what he expected, and Earv, browsing his mental dictionaries of pick-up lines, jokes, and

potluck-talk comes up empty. His hands are burrowing inside his pocket as if the correct answer might be stuck in their depths, and when he shifts his weight to give more room to the furious digging, they both hear a soft sucking sound from below. She knows he's heard it too because his body, hands and all, come to a dead freeze. They look at each other and then at his shoes, which continue to whisper in moist tones. He's not wearing socks, she gathers, and his feet must be sweating inside the moccasins, which are probably fake leather. *Dear God, the whole mass of him is sweating.* The sun has set, but in the remaining light, she can see the film of dewy perspiration on the ruddy cheeks, and big droplets crawling from his hairline over his temples and down his neck which has turned the color of liver. Earv stands nailed to the lawn, afraid no doubt of moving his feet.

**T**hey must have stood facing each other without speaking, the German woman holding her plate, fork, glass, and jacket, and Earv rigid in his wet moccasins, for some time. I can't be certain of how much time, for my sources differ greatly on this count. One swears it was only a minute, another claims at least three and yet another says they stood there for a full five minutes. Too long to pretend nothing happened and resume regular potluck-talk, that's for sure. Everyone agrees that it was during this interval that Rupert appeared behind Earv and began sniffing the moccasins with eager snorts.

What happened next, however, remains unclear. People tell different versions of roughly the same sequence of events. You'd think they'd be vague about other stuff, such as how the German woman and Earv met in the first place, or the gist of their conversation, but they pretty much agree all the way to the sucking moccasins, which you can be certain none of them heard personally. Why then the differences when it comes to Earv's malaise, the culminating event, which transformed Cynthia's potluck into something between a slapstick comedy act and a natural disaster zone? For that much I was able to ascertain: whether Rupert's nose, burrowing into the moccasins disturbed the fragile balance of Earv's posture, whether, as some people claim, the German woman stepped forward triggering Earv's body to tilt backwards, or whether he simply lost consciousness, Earv collapsed as if his body had been stripped

of everything solid. Being a big man, his body hit the ground like a sack of concrete mix, the thud of which cut the last shreds of potluck-talk and drew the eyes of all to the soft heap of beige, khaki, and fleshy purple at the German woman's feet. The image of Earv's body falling has no doubt replayed in her mind countless times, and even years later it will manifest itself before her mental eye whenever she sees someone resembling him.

During the momentary standstill, when even the crickets were silent, Rupert's tongue could be heard licking Earv's moccasins. He wanted to get to the powerful odor inside them, the smelly juice between the bottom of Earv's foot and the shoe-sole, spiced with anxiety-sweat (the strongest kind), rubber, and plastic. The steamy snorts of Rupert's nose and the wet lapping of his tongue were magnified in the silence of Cynthia's backyard. But licking alone didn't satisfy Rupert and soon he was seen closing his jaws around the toe of Earv's left moccasin. He succeeded in pulling Earv's body into a straight position, and had moved the mass of him a few inches before Cynthia fluttered along.

"Rupert, Rupert, stop that darling." But Rupert, excited by the new-found flavor, continued pulling and jerking at the shoe with Earv's jiggling body in tow. Neither Cynthia's high-pitched screams, nor the whacks of Jordan's violin bow could stop the dog from his mission. Finally, the shoe came off with a wet pop, as if Earv's foot were being pulled from a bog. Head high, jowls foaming, the precious moccasin clenched between front teeth, Rupert trotted off to a bed of Irises, flopped down, and, holding the shoe with one powerful paw, began licking the inside with deep, lapping strokes.

The German woman must have been disappearing even then, not physically, at least not yet, but in essence. At her feet lay the result of her one, verbal act of potluck-rebellion, *have I given you any indication that I want to talk to you*, which, as soon as she said it, she wanted to erase entirely or at least invalidate. She was trying to find the right words, *I'm just kidding*, or, *typical German rudeness, don't you think?* or even, *bad sense of humor, sorry*, but the sucking sound from Earv's shoes had tied her tongue. Still holding her plate, fork, glass and jacket, she retreated a few steps, then a few more until she reached the garden gate. A handful of potluckers had gathered at Earv's feet. With calm efficiency (and without once acknowledging the powerful stench that exuded from the naked foot),

they calmed down Cynthia, and revived Earv with a fresh pitcher of fruit punch. They never did succeed in extracting Earv's shoe from Rupert's massive jowls, even though Stew, ponytail flying, chased him around the food-tables. Her last frame held Stew trying to coax the moccasin from Rupert with a piece of smoked salmon, to which the dog responded with rapid mastication. She hesitated an instant, but then slipped, plate and all, through the garden gate, leaving only the potent growth that would explode into this latest Ojai story: her story and Earv's (who by the way refused any comment) and now mine because I have chosen to tell it.

## Fall Catalogs

Each morning, I make my bed. I poof up the pillows and tidy the corners, only to mess it all up at night. In the bathroom, I always shut the door. And after breakfast I ask no one where my keys are, and then announce to no one, here they are. Each evening, a debate over dinner ensues. Tonight I will probably go with Lean Cuisine Chicken Teriyaki. After I do the dishes, I settle in my chair, and as the low blue light of the TV fills the living room, I flip through the catalogs that have kept coming all through the summer and now into the fall. The Burpee Seed Catalog promises me juicy tomatoes, dripping with flavor, tender Silver Queen Corn, perfect Purple Eggplants and a Hybrid Zucchini that will never stop producing; Land's End offers me bold Mesh Polos that won't fade, wrinkle or shrink even after fifty washings, Silky Pinpoint Oxfords made of Peruvian Pima Cotton, and tailored Khakis with Toss-in-the-Wash convenience. As the trial begins on *Law & Order*, I turn to Audra's catalogs: Macy's warns us to get ready for winter and Ann Taylor responds with a Classic 100% Wool Gabardine skirt, stone-colored Poly-Cotton Cropped Pants, but L.L. Bean has the answer for long winter walks, an Insulated Squall Parka with 100% Italian Wool lining and a Zip-Off Hood with Faux Fur Trim. And outside, that last tomato hangs heavy over the edge of the raised bed; that stubborn Early Girl, dying to be picked, casts a fat moonlight shadow on the dirt below. The drooping Sweet Basil two rows over hides from the lurking frost, and the little poof of Bibb Lettuce waits quietly to be taken inside. I remember all this at two in the morning. I remember Audra talking, over coffee—which she only plays with, stirring it cold with her spoon—about finishing the picking. We're running out of time, Jimmy, I hear her say. She has begun to call me by the name I was called when I was eight. I try to come up with a pet name that I could call

her—a girl with a name from an old TV show...it should have been easy—but no. I really should have come up with something. And still that Early Girl is out in the garden because I never brought in that last harvest. Unplanted plants, born of a fall-night drizzle—weeds I call them behind their backs—rise up between my Early Girl and the puckered Green Pepper. God damn it, I yell when I see them. They won't even turn my way. But why should they? It's not even my garden; I'm just the share-cropper. God's damned weeds certainly aren't in *my* plan, but what is? Not the exploding lump in her small hand-carved breast, not the pushed-away spoonfuls of ice chips, not the dandelions—as they would prefer to be called—coming back from the leftovers of last year's crop...leftovers like the manicotti from last week or the night's cold bowl of tasteless soup sitting still on the table, still waiting for Audra. Shhh, I say to hush my brain, and click over to Sports Center to catch the late football scores. I don't watch the news anymore. I pick up our Williams-Sonoma catalog, and I remember Audra nudging me as I chop an onion for the soup we are making—mulligatawny, a recipe I got from Emeril. The sourdough on the cooling rack next to us makes one final exhaling of steam from the wound Audra has ripped in its side. Hey, she says, munching on the bread. I can smell her metallic breath. Hey, I say back. Want a taste? she says. She dabs her eyes. It's the onions, I say. Finally, the carrots and onions and celery—freshly plucked from the garden outside and chopped into little pill-sized pieces—slide sputtering into the pot, and our green soup starts to simmer. By the time Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien are trying to make me laugh, butterflyed catalogs ring my chair. Eventually, I will go to bed and thrash around until the sweaty sheet is wrapped around my legs and I can't move. Sometime deep in the night, the slow rumble of my mind will overtake me again, and I'll go back to when Audra had snapped at the distracted doctor. She hated—I mean really hated—doctors. But the doctor means well, I tell her when we are finally alone in the exam room. She glares back, no he doesn't, Jimmy. No he doesn't. I explain that they just weed out the unwanted flesh and meat, the doctors do. She just rolls her eyes. Anyway, we both need them, I point out. Her breathing hurts—I often find I'm breathing in sync with her, but it's so shallow that I have to gasp for air. Her food had no taste, and my rented body oddly quivers. She pulls the gown tight across her breasts when the doctor walks back into the room. I could have made the mulligatawny more palatable for

her. Perhaps more curry, maybe less pepper. And I'll think of that tomato. Of course, I know it is now no time to harvest god's damned garden. No time to think, I may think, of what I should have done or shouldn't, which I know, but knowing doesn't stop my weedy mind from wondering if an earlier planting could have saved my Early Girl, or wondering why I never made the split pea soup I had promised to make when Al Roker had told us to look out for the cold front coming our way, or trying to remember if I paid the cable bill or not, or wondering why the last time we had sex, my fingers had missed it? And her hand: I shouldn't have dropped it—more like let it slide away—the last time we walked out to the garden, and... Shhh, I hiss again. It's so late, and I'm not getting any sleep again tonight. I think that maybe Audra has stirred next to me. I think I hear Audra's overgrown body falling, and I listen and try to hear her bubbling breath shifting her red-checked flannel nightgown—the one I gave her two birthdays ago. But I can't hear anything but the wind rattling the window. I don't hear my dead and dying vegetables swinging in the wind. How could I? I don't hear my Early Girl finally falling to the ground and splitting open; I don't see her red meat spilling across the night and her juices running away. God damn it, I mutter. But there is still no answer. Distant and silent, he expects me to lie in my bed, my garden's landlord does—and Dr. Phil, too—and not recall my yellow-eyed lady and her wispy-haired head in a Dodger cap. Why does he—if he is even there—expect someday that the old blue sheet that covered Audra's long sleep might be one day washed. Why should I expect to wake one day to no return of the damned weeds? And tonight, like every night—at maybe two or three—I reach across my new percale sheets from Target to Audra, who isn't there.

The apartment smells of incense and the scented papier-mâché of mansions, money, and smiling servants that Dap had wished for when he was alive. They guard the shrine that the two holy men have erected to honor his death. If you happen to pass by, you can look through the open window, past the throng of kneeling mourners, and see a framed black-and-white photograph that offers Dap's most sober expression; it sits on a table that stands at the average visitor's knee level. A pair of lit white candles flicker before his face, towering between two plates of sweet cakes and fruit. Finally, a line of miniature copper-colored cups have been set up along the edge of the table.

One holy man refills the cups with tea (as Dap might get thirsty in his transition to the after-life) while the other adjusts the white bow that drapes above the shrine. They nod to each other before bellowing out a melodic wail, signaling the start of the memorial. The mourners shift in their kneeling positions. Their heads are bowed, white hoods shielding their faces.

The holy men tap their cymbals together, softly and slowly. "We are here today to lament the death of Dap Hui, who passed away on the night of April 22, 1989."

The mourners break into sobs as the holy man continues, "He has passed after hanging himself during a drunken stupor." The beating of the cymbals gains momentum, soon followed by a horn that is reminiscent of an elephant's scream. As the bodies of the family members, immediate and extended, rock against each other, the holy men march back and forth in front of Dap's alter.

Dap's wife howls from behind a black hood. She is the only one

wearing a black hood, and it completely covers her head. She sits apart from the rest of the mourners, in a chair toward the back of the room. Her hands are clawing and slapping at her thighs, then she clings to her younger sister, who has moved to her side. On its own, her voice becomes a love song for her dead husband.

**D**ap's wife, Thuy, mother of ten grown children who moved out as soon as possible. Now here they are, every last one of them, including their spouses and children, each garbed in his or her mourning outfit. Guests, practically strangers, no one here to stay. She cannot see them from behind her black hood, but she feels them in front of her. As her own grief overcomes her, and she clutches her sister who cries along with her, she also hears their crying, their hums of sorrow, even from the children who probably do not know any better but know well enough to cry along. When children see their parents like this, they know a family member is dead; although they do not know what death really is, the mourning catches on, and they, too, feel great regret in their little hearts.

**A**t times, when Dap had finished drinking at the moment, he would kung fu the air, screaming at evil spirits to leave him alone. He would laugh and cry at the same time, and would eventually collapse on the floor in front of the ancestors' scarlet metal altar mounted on the wall, drool soaking into the rug.

"It is disrespectful to invade our ancestors' space like this, Father," the eldest son had said in one occurrence.

Dap hooted like a hyena. "What can they do about it? They are trapped in that frame, and as long as they get their share of incense, why should they care about personal space?"

The children had worked together to lug him to bed, to prevent him from breaking anything more than the shattered bowls and mugs adorning the kitchen tiled floor, and to prevent him from getting to the knife drawer he seemed to be moving closer to each time. It would take four of them to drag his body along. Dap kicked and punched against the hands that held his wrists and ankles. They winced as his lips spewed forth one insult after another—"Bastard's bitch," "good-for-nothing loser," "woman's sissy".... After the children moved out, Thuy would let him lie on the

floor until his body had calmed and he had fallen asleep. Later, he would either crawl his way to the sofa, or back to their bedroom, reeking of sweat, alcohol, and bad breath.

**D**ap's wife called her eldest son, advising him to pass on the word of their father's death to his nine younger siblings. She spent the next few days confirming the funeral arrangements, convening Vay's wife, Cam's wife, and Ty's wife to help purchase the materials to put together funeral apparel, a white cloak with a straw vest, and a separate white hood, which all family members must wear with matching sock-boots several consecutive days until the entombment period has passed.

The four wives sat together in a circle on the floor, weaving and zigzagging the needles through the cloths. No words were uttered, only silent shared understanding radiated from their bodies. This would be a task taken up by the married daughters and daughters-in-law when they arrived.

**T**huy felt lonely as she sat in front of her armoire, its mirror reflecting her face. Her eyes naturally squinted more than they used to, and had that glassy look even as she wanted to wail and kick. Her smile turned down rather than up, and the more she tried to beam, the more her mirror image scowled. She noticed a small box of perfumed white powder; on the box was a picture of a smiling Asian woman, whose face was fair and lovely from using the powder. Thuy suddenly wanted to be that woman, and she took a small lump of the powder and started to paint her face, starting with her chin then moving up to her cheeks, nose, and forehead. She rubbed dazzling red onto her lips, reaching for her youth, reaching for something to celebrate. She longed to be ravaged, like Dap had been inclined to do years ago.

Thuy stepped out of her pants and yanked her shirt over her head; she saw sagging breasts and hips, inner thighs droopy, layers of skin folding over her pubic hair. She dusted some of the same beauty powder all over her body, slinking toward the door to the living room, where Dap was sipping white wine while a Chinese song softly played in the background.

She knelt before him, taking his hand. He followed with heavy airless footsteps, the glass of white wine still in his hand. His eyes were outlined

in crimson, and he absorbed the nude profile of his wife. Thuy felt the heat and weight in his gaze, and rejoiced in being desired again.

**D**ap closed the bedroom door with his back, pausing before he approached the girl with the red veil over her head. The veil hung over her eyes, revealing only the lower half of her face, and her lips that were painted red. She sat very still on the newlyweds' bed, their bed, her hands folded in her lap. He had never stood alone with her before. Thuy, his wife. Earlier that night, they had bowed together to his parents, taking turns serving them tea. Before that, they had kneeled until the names of all of his ancestors were called out and enough incense was offered all around to the spirits.

He reached out now, somewhat awestruck by the pink-orange glow on her cheeks, their roundness, and how they curved in the candle-lit room. The moment was deepened by a breeze that floated in, made the shadows dance, and teased open the high collar of his bride's gown. A small landscape of pale, unblemished skin.

His hand finally made contact with her veil, and he pulled it away, exposing the rest of her face, her hair that was bunned up and loose strands framing her forehead. Her eyes were closed, and her eyelashes fluttered as she sensed his nearness.

With his fingers, he raised her chin, staring fully at her face. Her eyes opened, and they were round and dark and bright and questioning. He lay her down on her back. Before getting in beside her, he blew out the candles on the table.

**D**ap climbed off of her, and she could hear the alcohol swimming inside his belly. In minutes, he was breathing unevenly in slumber. Thuy continued to lie very still, and in her mind, she saw her own body spinning and shrinking until her miniature self curled into a heaving ball on her pillow. Sensing both selves, she summoned enough energy to open her eyes, and discovered the bedroom ceiling and walls had merged to become a cool dark cave, exhibiting multiple drawings of her nude and spent, an image she would carry long after his death.

"A cow's head with a horse's face," Dap whimpered in his sleep. "Please leave me alone. Don't get me."

Thuy knew he was pleading with his mystical adversaries that were

growing in numbers by the day, who were maintaining the upper hand, steering Dap closer to madness. It is meant to be, she thought, karma gets us all eventually. She could not sleep. Dap tossed and turned, kicking away the blanket each time she tried to warm herself.

She grabbed her clothes and headed for the bathroom just as Dap shot up. He lunged at her, missed, and fell on the floor. His fists were thrown out. "I'm not afraid of you," he moaned at the ceiling. "Thuy, I know you are conspiring with them. How could you, I'm your husband, I'm your sky."

Thuy stood behind the locked bathroom door. She put her hand on the doorknob, but pulled away as Dap threw his body against the door from the other side. "Let me in, I will teach you to mess with me."

**B**efore she left the apartment, his mouth was foamy and he had a shaver in his hand. It was Vay's wife's father's eightieth birthday, and he had invited Dap and Dap's wife to celebrate with him at his favorite restaurant in Chinatown. Eighty tables had been reserved to seat family and friends, they were told, not an event to be missed.

When Thuy emerged from the bedroom wearing a silk silver and ruby gown, Dap threw his white wine at the wall. "Who are you meeting at the banquet that you are dressed like a whore?"

"What are you talking about, *bei-meen*? We've known Old Man Wing for almost twenty years. He is celebrating his eightieth; of course I have to look presentable."

She faced the hallway mirror, smoothing her hair into place. "Why don't you quit being an ass and get ready? Ty and his wife will be here to pick us up soon."

Ignoring the half-jug of white wine, he reached for the brandy in the cupboard. He drank straight from the bottle. "I refused to stay in the same room as the *poak-guy* my wife is having an affair with." He headed to the bathroom with the brandy; with his free hand, he took a shaver from the shelf. He took one more gulp before slathering his face with shaving cream. The bottle was then shoved through the froth to his lips, and he swallowed brandy, hair, and shaving cream.

"My wife is an adulteress, she can't help but seduce every man she sees," he sang to himself, laughing at his own image in the mirror. It

would be the last glimpse she would catch of him when he was alive.

**F**rom the distance where she appeared in the doorway to his deathbed in the middle of the hospital room, she could already see the thin line of shadow that had imprinted into his neck. She was still wearing the banquet gown that he had scoffed at. She stooped down to his still body that was becoming thick and hard, her own body losing control as the tears came.

She saw the doctors' and the police officers' mouths moving, their hands gesticulating, but her ears had closed and surrendered to only the din of Dap's departure.

*"My wife is an adulteress, she seduces every man she sees," he sang, roaming through the house in a tank and shorts stained with old shaving cream. He chugged brandy, swallowing more foam and hair in the process. "She left without me because she didn't want me to catch her in the act."*

*A vase was knocked over, the pieces kicked to the kitchen floor where the broken bowls were. He grabbed several shards and threw them out the front window. His body appeared through the outside; he simultaneously poured brandy and white wine on the jagged ceramic pieces, one bottle in each hand, and asked if a passing neighbor wanted any.*

*Dragging a cloth behind him, he made his way to the bedroom. His voice reverberated, its pitch varying with his uneven footsteps. He climbed the armoire, managing to stay poised on its surface. He twisted the cloth before throwing it over the thin rail that hung horizontally from the ceiling, between the bed and the armoire. After the ends were tied together, he kept his hands on the cloth, enjoying the stretch in his arms.*

*His eyes widened and shone. "I am going to call the restaurant and humiliate that woman. That's what I will do. I will humiliate then kill her. Her lover too."*

*He stepped forward, off the armoire, his neck landing and securing in his makeshift noose. His arms flapped, his legs kicked, but he could not regain his balance.*

*The neighbor that walked by earlier had decided to call the police. He said there was a man in the building acting crazily, and he was concerned for the residents' safety.*

It is the seventh day of the memorial service. The flames leap up in the air, burning away all of Dap's belongings. His clothes, shoes, jewelry, whatever that had belonged to him now sift and churn in the beacon in the empty lot behind her apartment that was rented out for this purpose. The material possessions are journeying back to their rightful owner, struggling in the process, ensnared in the tall and wild flames.

Thuy watches from several hundred feet away. She now wears the same mourning gear as the rest of her family. They stand together in a group, having returned from their field trip by foot to the local temple to pray for goodwill and recovery. She sees that some of the younger children's boot-socks are torn from trekking over the small field of pointed rocks on the way there.

Earlier that day, with fingers stiffened to her sides, she scolded two of her grandchildren, her eldest son's daughters, for laughing out loud while playing a card game.

"This is a time of despair. Your grandfather is dead, is that really funny? Tell me, is death something to laugh at? Have some respect for your family."

She ignored their pink faces and round eyes, instead approaching her daughter-in-law. "Talk some sense into your absurd children." She started to walk away, then turned back. "Actually, teach them their lesson later. Call the rest of the women to help dig out everything that belonged to Dap."

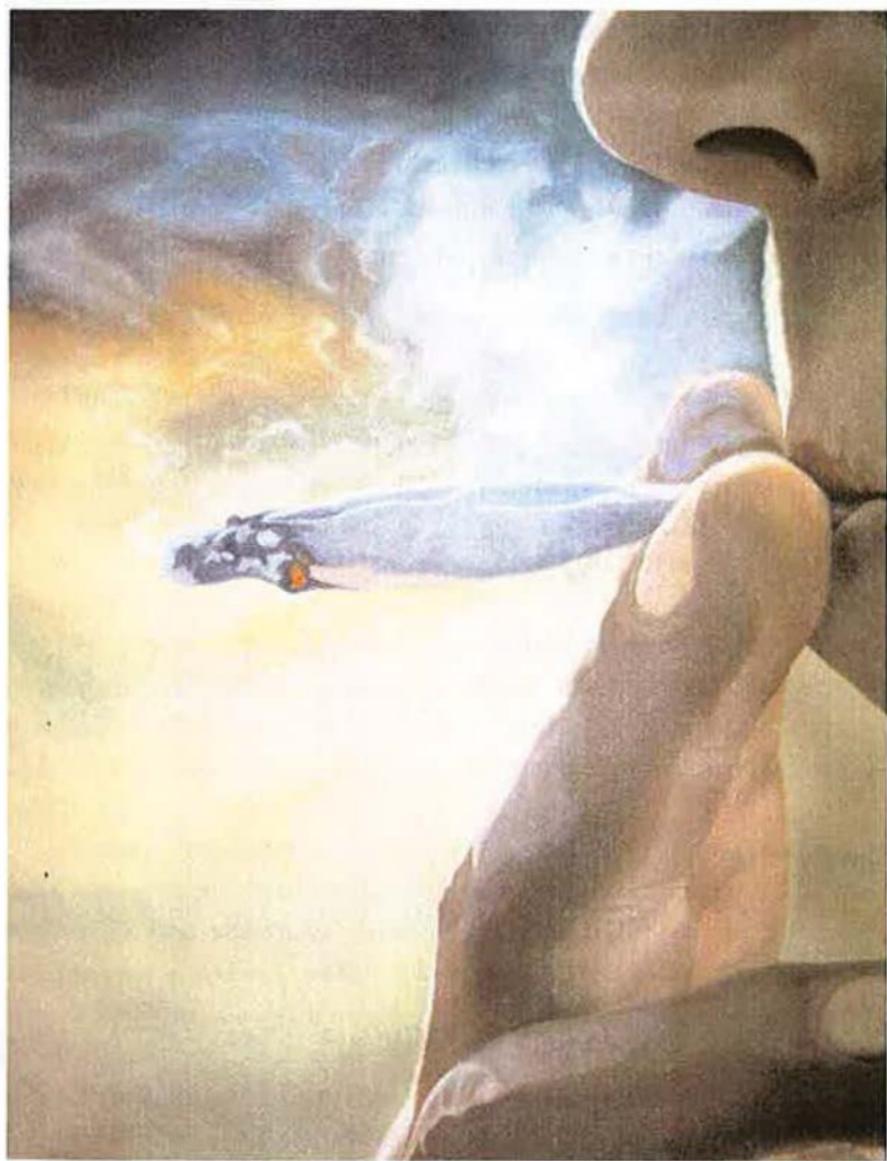
She turns once again to the flames. The holy men stand several feet away, adding the finishing touches to tonight's service. This should be all your things, Dap, she thinks. Soon the mansions and money and servants will join you, so you can finally live like a king. See, you can't say I don't care. Please take it easy on me.

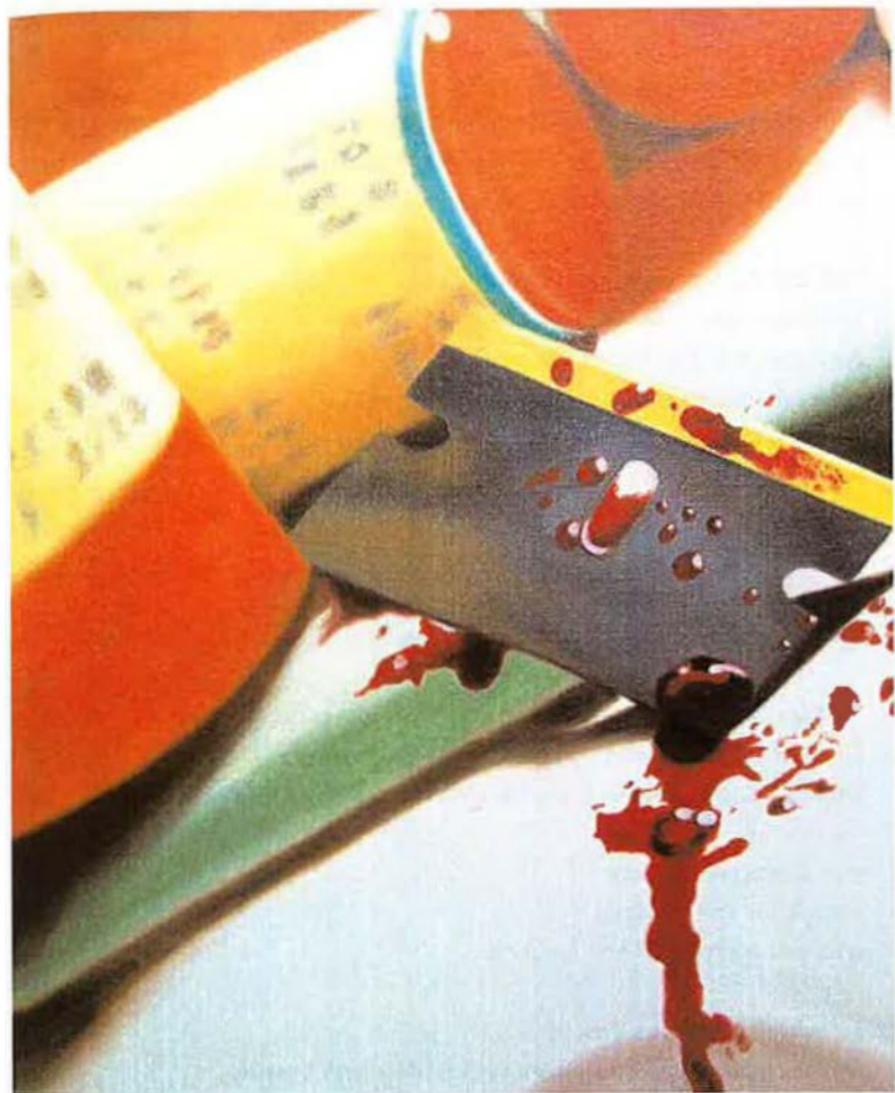
Dap's wife, Thuy, mother of ten grown children who moved out as soon as possible. The sixty year-old hag who still paints her lips dazzling red even on non-special occasions.

Red. Unfitting for Thuy if expressed in a celebratory manner. All too fitting if it meant harlotry and wantonness, although Thuy has slept with only one man, her husband for forty-five years. She cannot give happiness,

as her children staunchly believe. Her twin daughters moved out when they were fourteen to attend high school a six-hour drive away. All her children spoke in hushed tones at home, and clamped their lips when she entered the room. Before she knew it, it was only her and her husband, Dap's wife and Dap, living in the apartment. Now it is Thuy by herself.

*Hei-meen, dieu nay ma hei, sui hei*, Dap and Thuy's most popular "pussy" curses, pussy this, pussy that, are now only heard in her own head, bouncing off the walls of her brain in the memory file. Occasionally, the words threaten to spill from her mouth at her dead husband's spirit, but even in the after-life, he is too alcoholically subdued to tell.





# Roxanne Duboucheon

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## El Velorio

The Wake was long and hot.

Mourners took their places beside the box praying, grieving.

Flowers filled my student's living room—

pink and yellow gladiolas, tight roses turning black from the heat.

Tall candles attended the open coffin.

His huge frame visible from the waist up,

he didn't fit. Too big for the coffin,

his knees bent up into triangles,

his skeleton eternally doblado, pobrecito.

My head hurt.

I studied the flowers.

Familia Benitez, Familia Osuna, Familia Sanchez, Familia Lisarraga.

The walls and ceiling heaved in the heat, lost more plaster.

Brick showed underneath, behind his three sons

sitting along the south wall still shocked,

and it was silent there

except for the children

who ran and played and laughed.

I couldn't cry anymore.

In the opposing afternoon we sat on bleachers outside,

waved away the heaviness of flies and dust.

I thought about how to make tamales,

who to call about the broken tile in the bathroom,

the invitation I had given my student days before he died,

the conversation we had on the way to Mazatlan  
when he said it was getting better in Mexico  
for women, and gays, and the children of campesinos.

And we practiced the page of prepositions

I had prepared for him:

on top of,

beside,

next to,

in front of,

under;

e.g. a man, like a civilization,

buried beneath a mountain.

# Amber Norwood

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## All things Golden

*"That bridge is more than a bridge: it's alive, it speaks to people. Some people come here, find themselves and leave. Some people come here, find themselves, and jump."*

*-Marie Currie, spokeswoman for the Golden Gate Bridge*

i write your body metallic,  
rust covered broad armed stretch  
embracing northern Muir blackberries  
to fall southern humanity.

i lie face down, count sea gulls, street  
urchins, at once apart  
from and a part of your taste,  
embedded in cords binding you down.

Cool, damp, severe against  
my cheek, the fall as perilous  
as remaining stationary—

you as dangerous as the absence of you.

The drop meters in hundreds.

i consider  
the descending weights of memory held  
in wretched hearts, too fearfilled to stay  
in your softest

place; listen first to secrets, once  
leapt from pursed mouths holding air, then crawled

into seashells on bayfloor,  
begging one final pearl white ear:

Hear me. Just hear..

before becoming sand at your feet.

Listen then to your breath,  
the only way to read you,  
your rise, fall, sway  
in curves the ocean makes  
towards your body and the breakwater.

# Amber Norwood

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## Process Theory

i wanted to write  
what the chimes outside were saying—

that wind is the strongest  
sense tied to memory  
which is why, when the air approached the jasmine  
like it did then,

i brought you fresh apples to show that i remembered.

But something else strikes through  
the copper and wood you hung at the eaves  
and lows into the Italian cypress:

a girl at the park  
in checkerboard shade  
plays invisible and queen  
of the red ants crawling there.

We cannot always choose what we say.  
Sometimes, designs fail.

Intention is a whore, drinking wine  
like i do,  
straight from the tight-lipped  
“ooh” of the bottle;

drawn like i am to frames of things,  
how kin they are  
to shapes made by familiar privacies.

She seduces the thought and changes its mind.

52

Together at the word, we hold perfect still  
as we did years ago  
in the grass through a breeze  
on a summer afternoon,

bound to the clover field  
by the dandelion chains we made there.

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Omen

1.

The end of summer—  
between seasons  
and for a moment time has no name.

The sycamore also  
between two kinds of living.

I heard it sing out  
among the diminished  
leaves.  
Only once.

2.

Fall—  
leafless  
naked life, things laid bare.

Everything is more honest at the turning of time.

It comes more frequent now  
tolling on the hour  
like the countdown to an end.

By the shrill song I am reminded  
am warned

I still look to the trees, the empty sycamore—  
wait for the beginning.



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No-Hitter

My Grandma Esther sat right behind the  
Dodger Dugout on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1963,  
the day Sandy Koufax no-hit  
the Giants. She always liked Sandy because  
he refused to pitch on Yom Kippur.

As the team mobbed the southpaw,  
and they headed for the showers,  
Koufax looked right at Esther, and she smiled  
her horn-rimmed grin at him. He looked  
like a saint, his head eclipsing the glowing  
orange 76 ball in right field.  
He took off his hat and tossed it to her.

Esther the widow pictured Sandy  
coming back to claim the cap  
and perhaps offering to take her for a steak  
to make it worth her while,  
but she carried the sweat-soaked hat  
home to her single-bedroom apartment and  
never saw him in person again.

Esther keeps the cap packed in  
closet mothballs, careful not to let  
the royal blue fade to powder.  
She takes it out to show me  
the salt deposits around its brim  
and tells me about the night  
that Sandy Koufax almost  
became my grandpa.

# George Jimenez

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## estuary

a dance to comprehend:  
cloud white collision splayed,  
a difference in density, green ink  
swallows a hurtled black magnet,  
death composed of ivory feathers.

what remains is tidal,  
a life of gravity, inertial dance,  
surrendered to the cliffsides.

i am: various stranded boys  
trying at once to build a raft.

you pound riverstones,  
one into another. touch your cheek  
to the sand.

roots grow in your irises,  
reach seaward to broken  
planks, fractured bowls that cradle still  
the whole hush of listening.

the sounds i wish to make for you  
are buried in this sandbank.

i offer memory as prey.

ripples graze a cypress drift; a wing  
against shore, i feel its motion.  
it looses in me,  
soliloquy and sail.

---

A Night at Devil's Cove

Resist this:

A Blunt Trauma Romantic Interlude

Kiss This;

What are we if we aren't Love?

We sit like we know everything  
and everything in the air is foreign to us.

The pianist at his post  
never giving an inch for more than a dollar.

He is black. You are black

I am space

I belong to no scheme, formlessly emptied of all ritual.

I am the color of light at the bottom of the door.

Nothing more.

The bassist walks as all bassists do and he is special.

We are special The bartender with his double barrel

He is special.

Beat the snare; we will fall in line with our speech

Neon sign's distract the prophet at the bar from his preach.

Eyes fall as they always do, something is wrong here.

We order

We kiss

We drink

We pretend

Nothing happened here.

And we are the lonely.

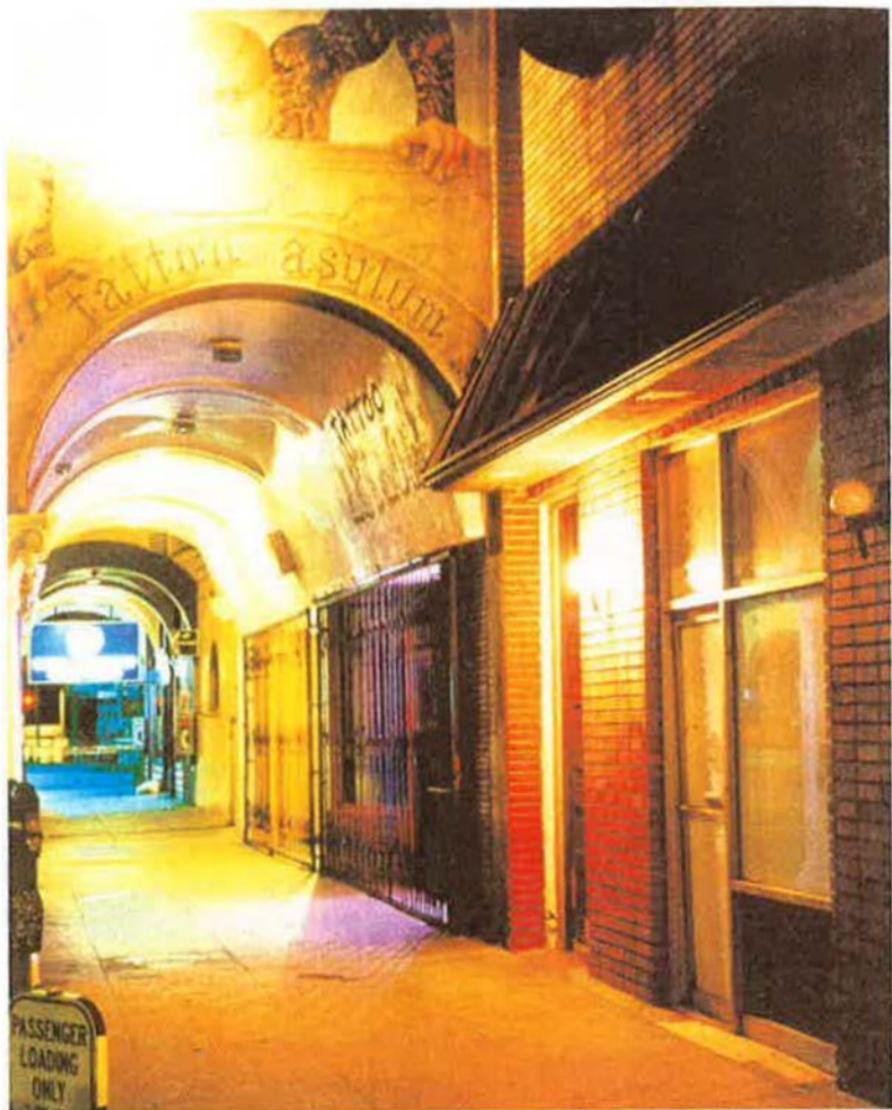
# Donovan Hufnagle

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## I Ain't Your Daddy

I have your mother's  
maiden name  
tattooed on my arm  
engulfed by green flames—  
breath of a dragon  
gasping for oxygen.  
Her charred name  
etched in my skin forever.  
It's alive,  
pulsing as I flex  
my bicep.  
You grab at her  
burning letters.

You ask me if I'm your daddy  
as she waves,  
from the greyhound  
an awooga  
from the horn.



## Eggbutt

Like a lizard in flannel trousers  
Eggbutt is chronically uncool;  
Shampooing his twelve-hair mustache in the bathtub,  
Penning geometries onto his jeans,  
And carving his mother's dumplings into fallacies

Where most boys his age are busy  
Bathing their pathos in the tepid pool of feminine encounters,  
Eggbutt remains intoxicated by  
The prospect of a late-night Dungeons & Dragons session,  
Where dwarven figurines will never question  
The origin of his indelible epithet

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Purple Paint

I'm some kind of old  
woman who wears purple  
nail polish and fantasizes  
about one last fling  
as if I still had it in me  
to ignite anything more  
than the backyard barbecue.

Once a week  
I wander into the  
corner tattoo parlor  
scan the wonder wall of designs—  
  sun, moon, tribal butterflies  
  splash against a thirsty eye.

As if purple nail polish  
made a difference.

As if a tattoo mattered  
  on me, an outdated  
  sassy woman.

A twitter, a coo, a subdued roar.

Walking backwards  
  I may bump into  
  iridescent possibilities,

  painted toenails  
  rambling the streets

  looking for something I've lost.

Kate Rowe

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## Three Kinds of Memory of the Opposite of Soul

Limb.

Completely unlike the way a mind goes. For loose strings.

Spilling further toward the edges when given the opportunity.  
Unrestrained flesh, white sockets of pain.

I've got no illusions anymore.

*Is a lot of your work about the body?*

*What do you mean?* I ask. Clenchingly.

Rain blows in semicircles over the roof.  
Cold arcs of glass.  
Like shadows of birds. Underwater.

Likenesses.

Your eyes grew dark overnight. Like fragments of charcoal.  
*This is supposed to be the trailhead of life?*

But daughters still grow up. Un-crippled.  
Forms like minnows bright as moss.  
Eight year-olds in new coats.

*Is that what you see?*

Jobs that go away. Land of opportunity.  
Language, like disintegrating feathers.  
Sand.

No one said leaving would be easy.

Structure Becomes Lightning.

You should have never had kids. If you didn't want to be the babysitter.  
He really said that.

Whole worlds rocket into outer space.  
What year is it again. *Machismo* you say.

American liberation. At home and abroad.

Did I ever tell you. I always wanted long, black hair.  
And dark horses.

To ride through snow storms. Of course.

Tell me again about the cold.  
Tell me. Again.

# Donovan Hufnagle

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## Bar Girl

He's a drunk  
He climps a last drag  
the cig strigils orange,  
black at its nub.  
ashes sprag across his shoes.  
Sprag across the floor  
like an ongoing novella  
lost to the winds,  
drenched from the rains  
and muddy tire tracks.  
Sprag like lifeless poems  
circling writer's block,  
like jazz notes,  
like her legs in my dreams.  
She's a dog  
She strikes the flint  
and hangs the flame under her nose  
until the stick catches fire.  
She's drunk from the smoke,  
drunk from licking the sugar  
rim of her martini like a dry hound  
sipping puddles of rain and blood  
from the bar slugfest  
between two pork chops  
hounding over her.  
He's a drunk.

He roodles through alley scraps,  
guddling the tunes, guddling her scent.  
The tunes strigil blue:  
a *whillywba mizzle* breaths  
from the clarinet  
a zoozeezaa groans  
from the trumpet.  
Tap'n his shoes,  
he waits to be sucked  
up by the notes.  
gammerstang to the whiskey,  
black at his nub,  
he's a downtick  
from the booze  
and her lipstick kissed glass.  
She's a dog.  
She bats her lashes,  
her daddy's rhizo  
in those baby blues.  
She has a wamble in her talk  
and a jimp jook in her voice.  
Jimp jook in her working class collar  
starched hard  
but trickles silk from the neck down,  
*I want a little jook in that soda cracker,*  
*a little jimp in that water.*

Ethan Bruer

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## A Child's First Romance

Mama,

I learned to rumble  
in a school yard yesterday.

Knuckles bore the weight  
of our jaws giving way.  
There was spit and shit talk  
Circles walked

Something was said about  
The distance of your legs

And everybody laughed

Mama,

You'd have been proud  
of your prize fighter.

I gave 'em hell, just like you told me to,  
Like no one had ever seen.

We played it out like a dance

But with much more blood  
Like our lives lived in seconds instead of days  
Only with much more blood.

Our lips were swollen  
Teeth lost to the grass  
Our faces were burnt a furious red  
Knuckles split as our tongues  
Whipped curses into the air.

Mama,

I never cried,  
not even when I bled.

Whistles blew  
the war came to an end  
cheers died down  
lost in the calm air.

I looked him in the eye, *mama*, like you told me to

It was like a childhood,  
Only with much more blood



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## Geographic

Brian Higgins and I packed his pickup until going under a low overpass would've strewn half our stuff on the 93.

We took turns driving and lighting bongloads of some pungent skunky fauna through one of those heavy-duty fiberglass jobs with the pull-out stem that would, at just the right moment, shoot smoke into our bowels.

Cow country and a freshly broken nose kept me staring at central Nevada—the part beyond Vegas—the part you never see on TV.

I didn't realize at the time the deputy pulled us over that we were in a zero-tolerance state. There were two paths, though not as obvious as Frost's fork: one led to casino jobs and Nongonococcal Urethritis, the other to jail for possession.

As Brian's license crawled back into his wallet and the round mirrors of the deputy's subterfuge turned to face south, we had taken the former. That didn't make much difference

for Brian, who's in the middle of an eight to ten stretch for making and selling crank in Lancaster.

Three royal flushes, a nasty coke habit, one lousy marriage, 2,131 bottles of cheap vodka, a urologist appointment, and a floor-cashiering gig at Cactus Pete's later,

I still find myself barreling down the 93, watching for stray livestock on the blackened highway, wondering if the barbed wire on either side of my head exists to keep cows out or memories in.

## Book Boy

They call him  
the book boy;  
at the age of three  
he looked at  
cherubic illustrations  
of angels and saints,  
at four he tore through  
Blake's "Lions & Bats,"  
by five he survived  
reading and feeding in  
War and Peace,  
at six, during vacation,  
he became the youngest  
proof-reader  
in New York City,  
at seven he was writing  
his own fiction,  
including science,  
at eight he completed  
his bio,  
replete with photos  
and volume one commentaries,  
at nine he won  
several prizes,  
national and international,  
at ten he was into  
criticism of criticism  
of criticism,  
at eleven he became  
his own publisher,  
at twelve he did translations  
in twelve languages,  
at thirteen he had  
a breakdown of sorts  
while working on his book  
of knowledge,  
it's rumored  
he now works downtown  
in a used bookstore;  
he is in remainders.

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The Minister Pays a Visit

You have married a girl  
who undergoes fainting spells  
and you shall have breakfasts  
of unpeppered eggs forevermore  
and Easter bonnets margarine yellow  
with lime trim and a flag on the porch  
its 60 degree angle kept into 3 years  
of suburb's life where you feed a lawn  
speckled with fertilizer, divots, Whitman's errata.

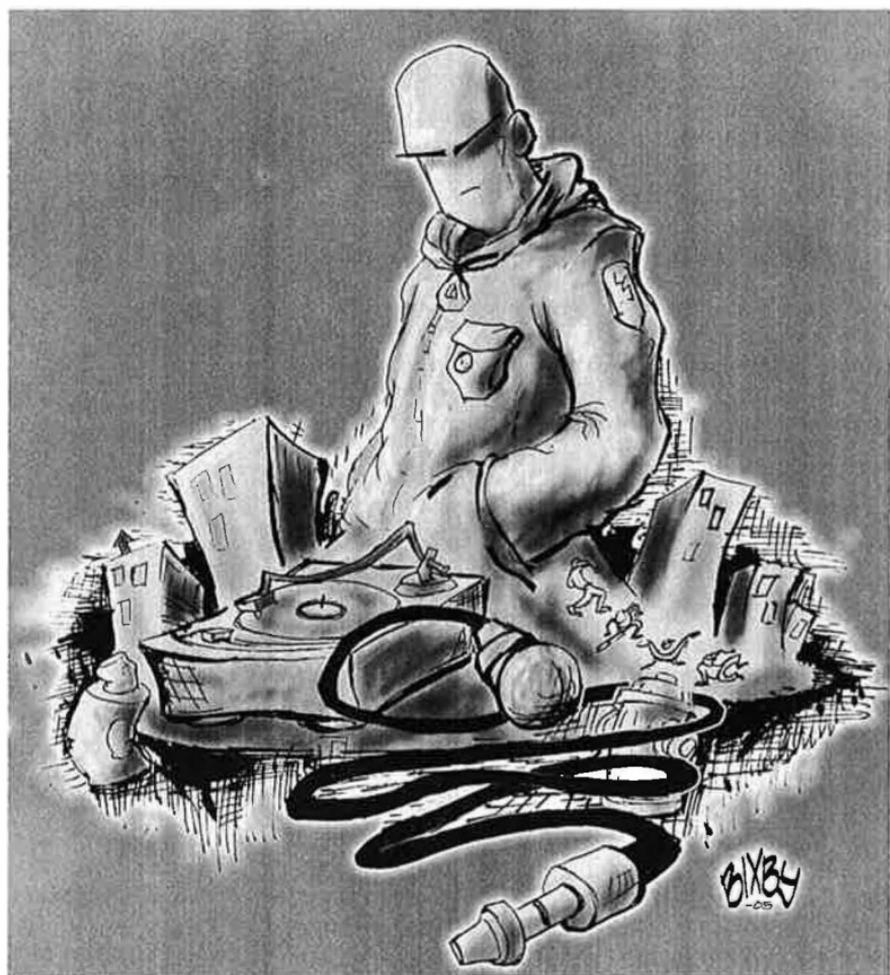
You have turned her over easy  
onto the porch of 32 years old today  
where Nebraska eyes Wisconsin an Electoral vote,  
a 'c' hair, a disappeared child come  
to commune the choir to singled voice.

When we say *life* we mean *I am afraid to die.*  
When we say *country* we mean *Me, I am afraid.*  
When we say *freedom* we mean nostalgia, bicycles,  
ice cream, libraries, that creek that runs in search  
of an outlet for anger. But I did not say this.

You have made a name for yourself like a frozen bulb  
that bears a perfumed fruit. You have married a girl  
who blocks the window its sight  
and you have marveled her making.

Truly all are grateful. I only come now not because  
your bike's flowered basket or trim beard or  
your frayed lapels, for certainly God has given  
us the lilies and the lepers and who are we to judge,  
but if I might say so do you think you could perhaps  
let well enough alone for we have been happy here  
all these years and your newfangled or New York  
ways irk even to soreness—what's that thing  
about Love is the Answer What is the Question  
And War Is Not the Answer and do you think you'd mind  
not saying this to the lemonade-and-cookies children  
who are sensitive and believe most anything.

You understand I hope and the house  
is much improved and everyone notices this daily in comments,  
the color of paint is smart and take no offense certainly  
that's the last of it and thank you for your time  
I'll let myself out, it is a nice evening.



# Victoria Gonzalez

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## I Want to be There

Masks  
Makeup  
Red full lips  
Blue eyes,  
Blonde wigs  
Flat formed shoes  
Millions of people  
Groping  
Kissing  
Dancing nasty  
Music you could die under  
Movements  
Of floor and feet  
Nobody against a wall  
Cracks of light  
Seeping through curtains  
Tight pants  
I'm the best looking there  
I've got a partner  
Close to the chest  
Heads on the shoulders  
Black little dress  
Tanned bodies  
Shimmering in dust  
Long Hair  
Slicked back  
Black venom hair  
A tutorial on  
Samba,  
Cha Cha,  
Rap,  
Slowing dancing  
I want to be there

## Light in August

*"I reckon this was the first time she had ever been further away from home than she could walk back before sundown in her life"*

-William Faulkner

There is a glare because the sun is down behind you. In a dream you make love to someone who has discarded all you know and believe about the world.

It costs you everything.

But you take what you can: the evening trees moving past the windshield, a father tossing his two giggling girls into a pool before dark.

You creep out of bed wearing mother's thin shift, gathering stickers and mud at the hem.

You smoke cigarettes with men in front of cookfires, with dollar bills and all your desire.

Your face is the next order of business:                   the eyes, the chin. You look a bit tired, you look like you are having trouble keeping up.

You know that you will never learn to love this drive; but you prefer to keep it up anyway, behind a strained innocence and a mailorder dress.

When the lights go out you understand how grateful you are for order. One of the guys is rolling tobacco and he still dreams about you: you are jumping off a roof too high and too fast, and even he can't save you.

74   Some nights the neighbors burn their trash and the smell fills the house. It reminds you of how messy transformation can be: all those papers curling to ashes. Those nights you dream about jumping off a swingset and landing with a thump. But not tonight, this time, with ashes in your hair, you just keep falling.

METAMORPHOSIS

I saw a piece of thumb-size glass,  
hue of opaque blue. A shoal of fish.  
Hesitation, as in tourmaline stagnancy. Then  
rush of pulse. Specks of air in stream light.  
Glacier mist dispersed in the air,  
opening a boundless trail.  
Fish grew legs one summer day,  
meadow of emerald gold. A throng of ants.  
Silky stitches. Sheathed nectar in black lace.  
Wind sprinted through the foliage, plucking  
strings of a violin. Quivering tune in stillness  
built a whole new world.  
When ants came to light, they spread  
wings. A flight of shearwaters.  
Fleet of infinite thought.  
The end of the horizon  
saw the birth of men.

# George Jimenez

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## how are things with her?

The answer to that begins early  
in grade school.

Before anything,  
you should know that I loved  
my teachers, the way those  
women wore their wisdom,  
like a stray lock of hair.

I was by all accounts  
what you might call  
a sweetie.  
More accurately,  
I did what I was told,  
quietly, with care.

So when, without warning,  
a woman reaches out in praise  
to tousle a young boy's hair,  
it is hardly a thing to be noticed.

But a child knows touch  
and hers was sorrow escaping,  
slowing time just enough  
to see my life in full.  
This, for the tender pause where it  
began, then quickly becoming  
something rougher.

Today I call it a lesson.  
It is how one teaches mercy  
for a lack of grace,  
or how to taste without devouring.

makeup

scrubbing maddie's lips, like  
rubbing red dye #47  
from a wailing snapdragon bud;  
tears streaking her cheeks,  
she kicks her sneakers  
against the milky yellow cabinet doors  
and accuses me of malice; this vanity

is a red pen mark  
through my maternal bloodline,  
a slick eel preying on the delicacies  
in my gene pool, each generation  
forced to fight against the dark course set  
by my mother in her red dress,  
by my grandmother,  
who has not removed her bra since  
her mastectomy and by my great-grandmother,  
whom i never knew,  
but who probably cried at night  
with the longing to feel lovely.

# Leigh Ann Detweiler

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## the post-war era

i've begun to steal things  
from my mother's house  
because i can't scream at her  
and because i blame her for what i've lost;  
every ordered thing is falling into slow entropy,  
family photos have been banished  
to the recesses of her ailing antiques,  
the colors of the house  
muted by the dust  
that is erasing us.

i steal papers with my father's "i's" on them  
(mine are looking just the same—*i, i, i...*),  
oil of olay from underneath bathroom cabinets,  
graham crackers from the kitchen,  
books on the care and maintenance of hydrangeas,  
and volumes of home movies:

grainy, flashing films  
that show my infant father  
sleeping in the brow-shaped shadow  
of a palm tree in india,  
while my young aunt spits  
the skins of fresh dates from her lips,  
and my uncle's little fingers light matches,  
firing bottle rockets  
into the overwhelming sky,  
the climbing line of smoke  
intersecting the horizon  
like the cross-hairs of a  
sniper rifle, or the  
Cross of Christ.



# Leigh Ann Detweiler

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## song for the piano

among the things sold, pawned or swallowed in the teeming years  
that led to the divorce was my father's baby grand.

marvelous man: he could lift one of us with each hand make volcanoes  
from ordinary kitchen things rustle snakes come down from the hills  
to our backyard; he could play Mozart.

it was just a piece of furniture that no one touched to my mother  
so out of tune and teeth-marked it became a blight to eyes and ears  
alike and then to memory for her.

for us it was a fort or hobbit-house more fun than indoor-plunking-out-  
scales after school hours. we knew its under-belly as well as legs  
and teeth and curved sides. lying belly-up  
we watched the felt-covered hammers

flying over tightened strings, plum and pomegranate tones so full  
they seemed about to split and run bouncing off the surface  
of banged-out brass and returning back  
to our littlest bones.

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To Verify

1.

Mania gives birth to noise,  
red drugstore lipstick, like rage  
hanging full and weighty on a vine.  
Logic becomes calloused, hectic  
tourmaline under a fragmented sun.

2.

In the pink cupboards  
of the doll-house, there is glass,  
cotton, and room to build  
syntax on the body, roseate  
sound in paragraphs.

3.

Scotch tape and toilet paper  
anchor arms, thighs blushing  
in still calls that swell early mornings.  
Here, red roses blossom onto  
the floor in handfuls.

BETWEEN MORE AND LESS

I'd let someone else adopt this life,  
serve apple martinis, eat mashed potatoes, sleep  
on an asphalt bed, without knowing  
her face is shaped like a mother's,  
her words fall like a father's, silent

words lie  
near the pit of my tongue,  
fight their way  
out of a pen, illuminated  
by a warped sense of direction,  
the possibility of becoming  
worthless, victory happens blindly  
in English, language is coincidence.

Beauty hides in the darkest margins,  
a series of poems in an unwritten bed,  
not everyday, but often  
I'm reminded how time renders passion  
meaningless and I care  
more about the scent of lilac  
roses than everything, anything else.

I extricate myself from sex  
limb by limb, face after face,  
the distance between interludes grows  
more easily measured in seasons than weeks,  
less important to memory.  
I have never seen either of my fathers  
touch my mothers. At the dinner table  
I wait, a vegan inhaling pot roast,  
for a serving of acceptance,

when Grace finally comes,  
I'll turn off the lights, pretend  
hers is the most beautiful face  
I've ever seen, lie and say  
the waiting was nothing,  
circumstance happened  
between longing and reality.

Kim Young

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## A Winter Coat with Sleeves the Perfect Length

The man I love leaves receipts and coins and string and instruction manuals on top of the cutting board. He corrects my grammar and misses my poetry readings. The man I love sends the mortgage payment a month early, worries how the dryer is venting, that my right tire is low, that the fence needs mending. The man I love used to line up for government cheese and government butter. He cries every time he reads *Sunday Morning* and wrote a poem for me once, called *Big Sur in Both Directions*, after we drank cola from glass bottles and threw pennies into the sea. People say that love is like a good carriage with wheels that squeak, but I think it's like a winter coat with sleeves the perfect length. The man I love slept alone on a futon my first semester of grad school, so my hard wrist wouldn't whack his sternum, cut open and trying to knit shut. I was supposed to be reading Derrida when the cardiologist said, double-bypass, and the man I love—face, cheeks and chin slack in that coming indignity, looked over at me, his new wife, seventeen-years younger—and knew I didn't know what it meant. And maybe I don't have all that much Irish blood, but we felt Irish growing up and the man I love knew that I relied on work, and earth, and the space between us and the stars. People say that you should judge your success by what you have to give up to get it. I unwrapped a blue sponge on a stick, dunked it in a plastic cup of water, and swabbed inside the mouth of the man I love.



## Mary Ruth Summers

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### How to Become a Deaf Person

**F**irst, turn off that processing center between your ears. Do this as soon as possible, because some of us were born deaf. Turn the television on, and turn off the volume. Make sure you have a television dated after 1993, the time when companies were required to install the closed-captioning chip in the televisions. Jump start your reading so that when you go into kindergarten you can outsmart a teacher about what deaf people can do.

**T**ell your mom everything. She is your backbone and advocate in dumbfounded deaf programs. If your mom doesn't speak English, learn her language, just enough so you can get milk when you need it or tell her about the cop at the door. Teach her some American Sign Language if you cannot ever get a verbal word down pat. She believes that deaf people are doomed and has abandoned you to your brothers and sisters. Be better than them. Stand out. Be tough, cry on her shoulders, and remind her that you are still her baby. She'll look at you blankly and point you to go outside. Stay where you are. Let her try to communicate with you in words, any way, any how, eventually it will come. Look at her face. Faces are the window to a thousand words.

**G**o with your brothers and sisters to Sunday school, baseball practices, and their friends' houses. Ignore the feeling that the kids may be talking about you. Ignore the stares and laughs. Pretend that they are envious that you can not hear the loud train going by outside. Play with them and be better than them. Go to the library, get books and actually learn to read them. Look at each sentence and tune in to its meaning. Read them over and over again, because the written words are your source.

In your fourth grade class, strike up a close friendship with your desk mate or the person sitting next to you. She is your gatekeeper. Always be on her side, no matter what. If you lose her, you lose your teacher. After the teacher finishes talking, ask your desk mate to tell you what to do. If she shrugs, know that you are not alone. If your teacher sounds out a spelling test, tell your teacher to mouth the words clearly before the test so that when she says a word, she will look at you, and you can get the grade you are due. If your teacher has a moustache, tell him the signs for the words. If no specific sign for a given word comes up, make one up. If the teacher keeps moving across the classroom, raise your hand if you missed his word. He makes a face. He is restricted. Pity him. Just for the sake of a good grade.

What with all the deaf kids on your school bus as long and as quickly as you can because once you get off that bus and set foot in your house, your world goes quiet again. Tell your deaf friends that you heard of a free Trans Am car being given away; they may be envious because they too, like you, are out of the loop in several more ways than one. If one says she is going to a Menudo concert, it is probably because, like you, she is trying to be on par with hearing people. After all, it seems it is the hearing people who get to go to the Menudo concerts. When an ice cream truck drives by your bus, tell the others you can hear it, even though you can't. Then, when you get home, complain endlessly to your mom about not being able to do what hearing people can do. Your mom will tell you, "What do you mean? I just can not afford to buy a Menudo concert ticket for you." Then make the connection there. Don't think it is the ears that are deceiving you.

When you go back to your friends on the bus, explain that concept to them. They will not get it. They are still there on the back of the bus, just you are in the back of the classroom, when in reality you are actually sitting right up front, and can not hear a thing that is going on behind you. Your teacher keeps talking and pausing, knowing she is focusing on those who can actually provide a response, and you are hoping not to fall asleep. By now, your teacher knows you will come up to her five times before recess.

## Mary Ruth Summers

Count them, so as not to thwart her day. Play hard and madly to get all that frustration off.

**J**oin in a family conversation with your mom and brothers and sisters at the dinner table. Try to keep up. Someone says, "New Mexico," then you say "what about New Mexico?" Your mom says, "We didn't say New Mexico," and looks at your brother who then says, "Oh, we said two months ago. We were talking about Grandma going to the hospital." Then you try to understand the connection between two months ago and grandma going to the hospital. Then you catch, "I love you," and tell your Mom that you love her, too. She looks puzzled, then your sister taps you on the shoulder and tells you, "Grandma has gone to I love you". You ask her to repeat the sentence because you know your grammar. She says again, "you know grandma? She went to the hospital at Olive View." Oh.

**A**s a poor, deaf teenager, apply for a job at Lucky's Food Store. You want to go to the prom, make your own prom dress, buy class pictures, buy a class ring, and be like all those other hearing teenagers that do what normal seniors do. You are great at guessing what customers need. They are used to you and smile at you. Sometimes strangers who just walk in the store start talking in Spanish to you, even though you have blonde hair. Say, "huh?" Not because you are deaf, but because you are blonde. They get pissed. Ignore them and go back to your sweeping. You get Employee of the Month nine times out of twelve months. You puzzle at the other times you didn't get awarded. You try to learn to lip-read in Spanish because maybe that will do it.

**A**pply to college as an audiologist. Your college advisor will tell you that you can not do that because you will need to listen to the hearing tests of deaf children. You don't care. You go through the motions of everything. You want to change the system. It starts there, when an audiologist explains steps to a parent what can be done for a deaf baby. You want to be the one to tell the parent, not some stupid prankster who doesn't know what it is like to be deaf and thinks he knows what works and what doesn't. You will not endorse any medical or phonetic companies, the ones who profit most in brandishing babies and children with cochlear implants

and earn millions of dollars off the mercy of parents. You will be pure to yourself and to them. You will tell them the full truth. You will be a model.

**A**s an audiologist major, you have some electives. You always liked to run your frustration off. Sign up for “Physical Raconteur 101,” which meets in the Racquetball Court House on Mondays and Wednesdays at nine. When you get there, you are in your shorts and gym shoes. Everyone else is in slacks and blouses. Figuring this to be the first class, they probably prefer to wait till Wednesday to shoot for the moon. Wednesday comes, and still they haven’t dressed appropriately. After contemplating, you raise your hand and ask, “Is this racquetball?” But they all shake their heads and start talking in figures and numbers. You say, “Excuse me” and leave, unsure if they were laughing or talking about how they pitied you. Ignore that feeling – fight it. You endure the pain of embarrassment even though you didn’t ask for it. You were born with it, so it must be for something good. Without knowing what you had signed up for, you go to the registrar office and ask them to change your course to “racquetball one-oh-one!” much to the woman-behind-her-counter’s dismay. It isn’t her fault, but you displace your anger at her anyway, because you won’t see her again until next semester. Maybe time will grow on you both.

**I**n racquetball, you play with the men because they talk less and play more. They like you for some reason, too. You figure it is to your advantage that they are ready to go; like you, they want to get down to business, too. You decide that you will take up as many sport classes as you can because you are validated in that way as a human being, not as a deaf person. Next semester, take up cycling, then tennis, then badminton, swimming, basketball, volleyball, and table tennis. Being good at what hearing people do gives you contentment. You will continue to follow this pattern or seek it for the rest of your life.

**I**n college, you seek out deaf people to cover the socializing part, even though they come from different backgrounds. Deaf power players from deaf institutions and many generations of deafness prefer other deaf power players from deaf institutions and many generations of deafness

## Mary Ruth Summers

(and that is not you); victim mentality players seek justice for every little reason made up for their pathetic lives (that is not you, either); lifeless bodies walk on thin air, led by a college advisor because their parents said college was a must even though they are failing miserably (this is definitely not you); late deafened adults do not want to learn sign language because they view it is for people who can not use their voice, but still they can't lip-read and so they are double whammed (you were born deaf); oral deaf ones use spoken words with their signing and are not able to make any intellectual sense in their communication to you (you already know ASL and English are separate languages); mainstreamed deaf individuals who went to public high schools just want to get by in life and are generally accepting of what life dealt them (if you can find them!); finally, bored deaf people from deaf institutions are open to you for something new even though they have gazillions of deaf friends from going to the residential schools, where they were all brought together earlier in life, where you were out of that loop as well.

**Y**ou avoid the aggressive hearing person who is lacking boundaries in your Otolaryngology class. She tells you of her desire to learn American Sign Language and seems to repeat to you what the professor instructs. You know from your 12-step Book that this screams co-dependency. She, of course, makes assumptions that you don't know what an ear and a mouth are, telling you that the teacher prefers you to write your goals according to the gospel of so and so. Do not say, "Oh thanks" because she will haunt you tomorrow and the next day. Instead, tell her that you have an interpreter in your class that covered it and that you appreciate her being a Good Samaritan and that is what this country needs. Watch her face when it contorts and do not pity her. Let her wither and die. Or she may go kill herself. Not your problem.

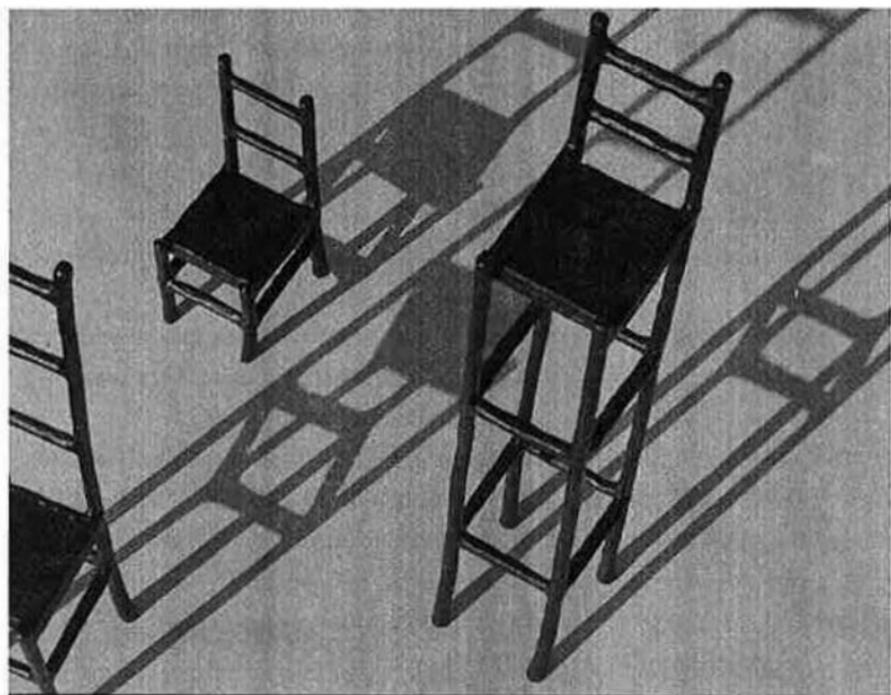
**Y**ou attend an ASL Poetry performance at a bookstore 30 miles out of town your deaf poet friend put on. You seek out cultural experiences with the unique hand shapes, movement, rhythm, and creativity that your deaf peers are doing. Then a deaf man you barely know tells you that you should not be getting a divorce, and wants to know why. You tell him you do not know, and hope he will go off, but he will just stay on that island

with you. He asks you how you can afford it. Tell him you have to go to the restroom. He probably will look directly at you for the rest of the night, even while he signs his poem. Make like you don't know what the heck he is talking about.

**I**n the real world, you spend too much time contemplating the life you are meant to be living. Why do some people have it so easy? Some have it so hard? You come to the conclusion that life likes it that way, and you accept it. You join a gym and tell the instructor to use visual cues. She doesn't know what they are, so you tell her the numbers and some gestures. A person next to you in cardio kickboxing class starts talking to you as if he didn't have any teeth. You point to your ear and shake your head, saying you can't hear, and he says, "Oh I'm sorry" then he plays with his fingers and keeps smiling at you. Don't wonder what he is apologizing for. They always say that. You go through these motions in the grocery store when the bagger asks you paper or plastic while you are busy putting your PIN number in the credit card swipe machine, when the parents come up to you with concerned faces in your children's kindergarten classrooms, and when you start a new job and your co-workers think you are rude.

**W**hy be deaf? Where does it come from? Why does one person become deaf out of the one or two million who don't? What makes a person so special that he was awarded this gene or a curable disease that took away his hearing as a toddler? Immunization shots prevent them now, yes, but still you were not inflicted with any disease. You were born with it by the grace of God.

**Y**our mom will come visit you. You let her live with you so she can answer the phone and be the voice to your children. She cooks the dinners and washes the laundry. Your children forget to sign at the dinner table sometimes, but you do not get pissed. You make out some of the conversations, but sometimes after a busy day, all you want to do is listen to nothing. Life comes full circle, but sometimes being out of the loop will do you good.



## On the fence

MATTHEW and TANYA sit at a small dining table, picking at two plates of pasta. Near Matthew's side of the table stands MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE, a caveman wearing a bowtie. He holds a club. Near Tanya's side of the table stands TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE, a young pregnant girl dressed in pajamas. She holds a teddy bear.

Matthew and Tanya speak to each other. They cannot hear each other's Inner Monologues.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: This pasta tastes really weird.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Why isn't he talking?

Tanya smiles.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: I think they put too much pesto in it.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: (*worried*) I wonder what he's thinking.

Matthew holds up a forkful of pasta and lets it fall onto his plate.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Me no like pesto.

In slow motion, Matthew's Inner Monologue practices swinging his club like a bat into Tanya's head.

Evin Wolverton

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Something's wrong.

TANYA: Is something wrong?

MATTHEW: I think they put too much pesto in it.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: He's not telling me something.

TANYA: Oh? I can't taste it.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: That is *weird*, man!

MATTHEW: That's weird.

Tanya sighs.

TANYA: Are you having fun tonight?

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Don't say no.

Matthew laughs.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: What the hell kind of question is that?

MATTHEW: Of course I am!

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: (*biting her nails*) Really? Then why wouldn't he be talking more?

MATTHEW: I guess I'm just tired is all.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Did I make him tired? Do I tire him?

TANYA: Yeah, I understand. You've had a long day.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: All days are the same length.  
Matthew yawns.

MATTHEW: I guess I have, and I didn't even know it. It just snuck up on me.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Is he too tired to see a movie after this? Does he always get tired this early?

Tanya's Inner Monologue checks her watch.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: (*proudly*) But, there's room in

my bed for two.

MATTHEW: We were up pretty late last night!

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: (*jumping with joy*) And I loved it!

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: I have a condom in my pocket.

MATTHEW: Did you sign off after I went to bed?

TANYA: Pretty much.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: I looked up Clive Owen on IMDB and then picked out a dress for tonight.

MATTHEW: What a trooper.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: That's sort of a cute word to use. He sure is cute.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: She was hotter on the internet.

Matthew's Inner Monologue scratches his crotch. Tanya giggles.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Better than nothing.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: This could be something.

MATTHEW: So, how long have you lived in Tarzana?

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: (*scowling*) Bad segue.

TANYA: Two years. How long have you been in Burbank?

MATTHEW: All my life.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: I moved down from Bakersfield eight months ago. But you just wouldn't understand Bakersfield.

TANYA: Really.

Matthew's inner Monologue sits on the floor, bored. He begins to fidget.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Why are we doing this?

TANYA: It's a great place. I'm really starting to get used to it.

MATTHEW: Yeah. This is home for me.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: I'm leaving in August to go on a fishing trip with my dad. I don't really care if I stay here or not.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: I hope he's willing to drive to see me.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Can we just pay the bill already?

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: (*getting psyched up*) I gotta go for it.

Matthew pushes his chair back and stands up.

MATTHEW: Well, it's probably about time we—

TANYA: (*jumping up with him*) I really like you.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Whoa.

Tanya waits for a response. Tanya's Inner Monologue does a nervous dance.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck I said it. Come on, Matthew! Say it back!

Matthew laughs a little. Matthew's Inner Monologue stands up questioningly.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Do you really want to get into this?

TANYA: And I know you've been tired today, but I'd love to see you again soon.

Tanya's Inner Monologue begins to rub her pregnant stomach.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: How soon? No sleepover? Is she putting this off?

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: (*jumping up and down*) Come on!

MATTHEW: When were you thinking of?

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Oh shit. When. Do I ask him to come home with me?

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: (*pacing, lecturing*) If it's not tonight, I don't want to do it. I don't want to string out some long boyfriend girlfriend thing after the first date.

Tanya's Inner Monologue grips Tanya's shoulders from behind.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Think fast! Don't sound desperate.

TANYA: Friday night...?

Matthew visibly thinks about this.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: (*gesturing toward his crotch in protest*) Friday night? Why so long? I'm ready now!

Tanya's Inner Monologue throws her teddy bear against the ground.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: NO! Shit shit shit, he has plans for Friday night. I should've said Thursday.

MATTHEW: Friday night...

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: I should have said Saturday. God, that was forward of me.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: (*considers to himself*) Ass on Friday. Better than no ass. (*to Matthew*) But don't agree too soon.

MATTHEW: That...might work.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: (*gesturing militantly toward Matthew*)

Convince him. Convince him! He's on the fence! GO!

TANYA: It's just, my best friend Shelly is throwing a soiree kind of thing on Friday night and...

TANYA  
...I was thinking you would come  
with me.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE:  
Damnit.

WAITER takes the bill from their table. No one speaks or moves for three seconds. Tanya and Mathew simultaneously step closer.

TANYA  
Please?

MATTHEW  
Okay.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOUE: Hell yes. HELL YES!

TANYA

*(excitedly, holding Mathew's sleeves)*

Ohmigosh! This is going to be so fun. Okay, so it starts at eight, but maybe you can pick me up at six-thirty so we can go get a little something to eat before. I'm not sure if she's going to have food there. But anyways, basically all her friends from work are coming, a couple of my roommates, and she's trying to get this *awesome* little jazz piece that her cousin is in to come and play.

TANYA: Maybe six-fifteen would be better. Is that okay?

Matthew feels the outline of the condom in his pocket.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: The moment has passed. Don't ask.

MATTHEW: *(putting on his jacket)* Okay.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: *(singing in "neener-neener" melody)*

Tanya has a boyfriend!

Tanya leans over and kisses Mathew very quickly.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: *(looking incredulously at Tanya)* Where did that come from?

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: *(blandly)* She tastes like pasta with too much pesto in it.

MATTHEW: Mmmm.

Matthew's Inner Monologue returns to swinging his club in slow-motion.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE

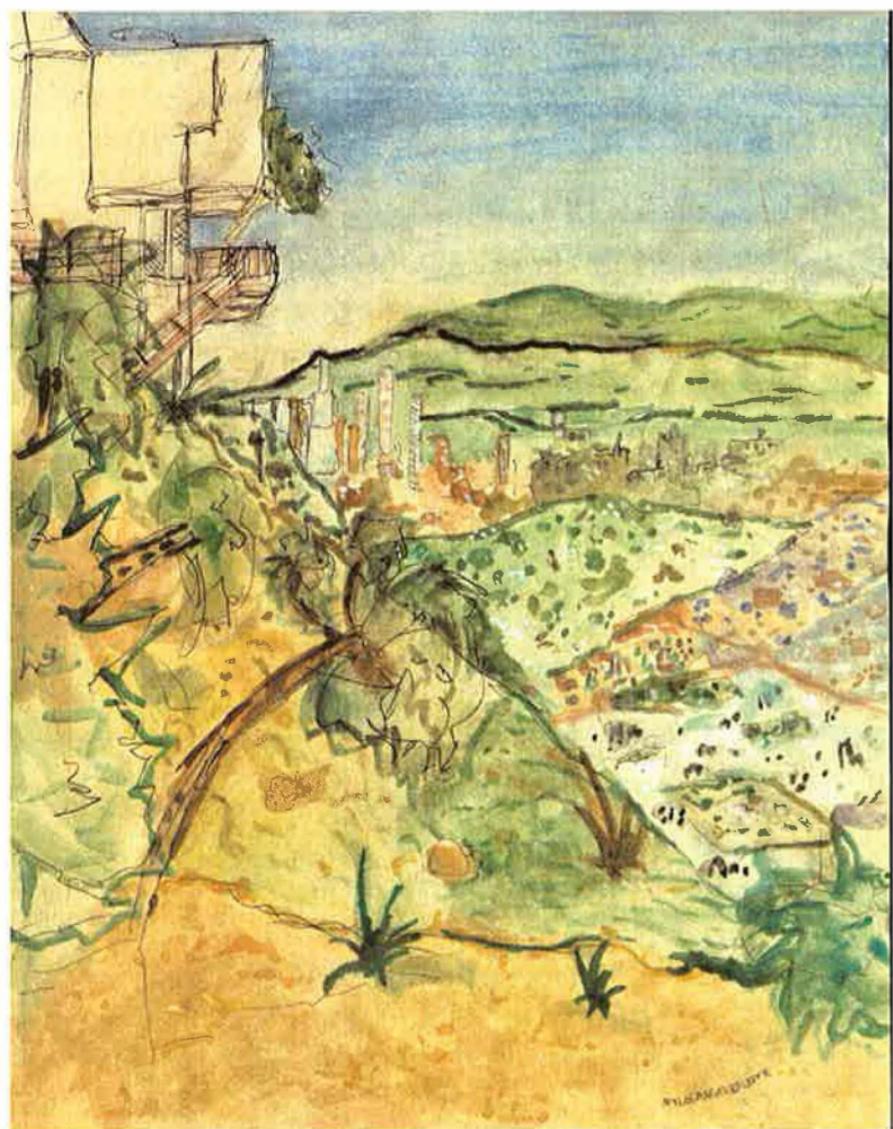
Damnit, damnit, damnit. Why did I say yes? I don't have clothes for this. This is such a loaded question. I'm going to be paraded around some filch-fest in a perfumeey apartment with this girl, when all I really wanted to do was get freaky with her. What the fuck. I should just take her home tonight. Except Rod's going asleep on the couch. Fuck it; she won't care. I should just ask her.

MATTHEW'S INNER MONOLOGUE: Pesto pasta poo poo pasta!

Matthew begins to smile.

TANYA'S INNER MONOLOGUE: *(rubbing her stomach)* We're going to make so many babies together.

(END OF SCENE)



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Infusion

Her hand drifted across the back of his shoulders as she passed behind him. He didn't look up but smiled as he contemplated his freshly infused tea. The tea rested in his favorite Japanese potted cup, carefully crafted by his college roommate's father in a mountain village whose name was known only to a few of its inhabitants, the rest barely cared to know. He could feel the soul of its maker infusing the tea with peaceful karma, the good will mingling with the hot tea, concentric rings spreading outward from the energy center of the cup. He liked tea. He loved the cup. He loved contemplating his tea.

Her fingers reluctantly left his forearm, having trailed all the way down his arm as she found her seat and pulled the paper to her across the hand-hewn table's surface. Her movement was always the same and on one level it annoyed him tremendously, on another level he was ambivalent and on another level, his revelations always came in threes, he liked how she moved. But that in itself could piss him off too.

"This parade thing is such a farce."

He didn't reply, her words interrupting the flow of the aroma rising from the cup to his nostrils. He savored what he could from the rising fragrance before her next comment demanded his participation.

"Don't you think?"

"No. I don't think."

"About what?"

"The parade, it's a pageant," he said, correcting her.

She curled her lip and trained her piercing greenish-gray eyes on his teacup.

"What's the difference?" she replied slowly. "A pageant has a parade,

all in the same event.”

He sipped the tea and felt the warm botanical bouquet rolling into his mouth, languid and tumbling. In the leaves he could see the floral young women, the finest of the city, arrayed for pleasure and titillation of the old men and elites of the region.

“What counts are the origins of the damned thing,” he said, not looking up.

“Oh not this again,” she complained. She put up her hands, mockingly adding in sing-song, “Don’t tell me, it’s a pagan thing or some such?”

“Of, course, as most things genuinely are.”

She rolled her eyes and picked up her tea, her lips moving to sip from the cup as she intoned, “Enlighten me, oh wise one.”

Unphased, he continued, “Ancient rituals, fertility, midwinter, boredom, ways to spread the genetic assets of a village.”

He half closed his eyes, inhaling the rising bouquet from the cup, the moment fading fast, pushed away by her words, which he loved, truly, but also felt chafing his moment.

“Everything with you is sex.”

“Of course it is,” he replied matter of factly.

“Puh-leez.”

“It’s true.”

He set the cup down precisely, the entire circle of pottery resting on the table surface all at the same time. “The town fathers gather all the young hotties and put them on display, then later on after the parade, the hordes have their ways with them in some debauching rite which defeats boredom, spreads genetic material around and helps maintain the local patriarchy’s choke-hold on power.”

“You’re so demented,” she shuddered, disgusted.

“No, just informed.” He peered at his tea then raised his eyes to the steam curling above it. “It’s the same now as then, only now the debauching takes place in the minds of the town fathers instead of out in the open. It was honest then and now it’s dishonest.”

“Nobody but you would have such perverted daydreams from a simple parade. What about the historical significance of it?”

He turned his cup slowly. “But that is the historical significance of it. The powerful control the serfs through demeaning public display and then call it a pageant, to make it all nice and pretty.”

"I suppose this is somehow connected to a conservative plot too?" she said with a noisy fluff of the paper.

"It usually is."

"Why do you do that?"

"What?"

"Why do you link sexual nonsense, where there clearly isn't anything sexual, with conservative patriarchal plots to maintain control of the masses?"

He shrugged, disappointed that his tea moment had long passed.

"Because it's true."

"No it's not," she countered.

"Explain it another way then."

She put the paper down and looked out the window.

A finch hopped on the snow-covered branch outside the window, searching in its jerking, tilting way for seeds left behind by the squirrels.

"Sometimes people just like to have fun, feel attractive, be out in public with each other, have a parade, god forbid."

"That explains what happens but not why it happens," he challenged.

"There is no 'why', just what happens. Most people aren't that deep."

"Therein lies the source of the autocrat's power."

"No, just how people behave in communities."

"No, how autocrats control communities to prop themselves up so they don't have to do any work themselves. Then they cover it up by propaganda which the oppressed people buy into because of their delusional uninformed optimism, which is really just a subconscious way of enabling the dysfunctional elites to maintain the perverse order of things."

"Your world is cruel and perverted."

"Maybe it wouldn't be so perverted if I had a reason to not think about sex."

Silence.

"You're such a prick."

"How would you know, you haven't tried being around it in god knows how long."

She reached over and collected his teacup and took a sip. "It's cold," she said, making a face trying to change the subject.

"Cold is my life."

"We did it last month. You want it twenty times a god-damned day. No woman could keep up with that."

## Infusion

“Good god almighty, last month, and how long before the next time, a year?”

Silence.

“Most committed partners do things from a love for each other. Love means affection. I never signed on to be a eunuch.”

“You’re not a eunuch.”

“I’m not?”

“No, eunuchs are not loved by women. You are, god knows why.”

“Show me where they’re hiding, these women who love me.”

“You just want too much, that’s all.”

She picked up the cup and moved away from the table and headed for the microwave.

“Don’t put that into that damned contraption!”

She stopped, placing the cup inside and closing the door. “Why not?” she said as she punched in the buttons and hit ‘Start’.

“For fuck’s sake, woman!” he pleaded. “You’ll ruin the infusion of the essences with that low-grade radiation.”

She grinned sadistically. “It’s cold and this will heat it up. The radiation is minor and won’t hurt you.”

“Not me, the tea... it’ll wreck the tea.”

“It’ll take you twenty minutes to heat up the tea over that charcoal boiler thingy of yours...”

“Twenty minutes will allow the essences to gently become excited...”

“Excited, isn’t that a conservative perversion?” she mocked.

His face reddened then he exhaled in surrender. “Conservatives don’t drink tea, they drink that latte shit or mocha frappasuction or whatever it is. As long as it’s sold in a franchised cookie cutter poison box, in a paper cup mined from the clear cut forests of yesteryear...”

“...and for a dozen dollars, a little less than what it really costs the environment, yeah, I know the drill.”

She sighed and stopped the microwave.

He watched her pull the teapot back over to the broiler and stoke up the flame. She put a new cup with new leaves into a fresh bag and perched it into the cup, suspended by the bamboo skewer from the rim of the cup.

“I’ll make you a new cup.”

He softened a little. “Thank you. Nice of you to be so merciful.”

"You should appreciate my mercy more often."

He was still eyeing the ruined cup of steaming tea. "You should drink the one you ruined."

"No problem." She rolled her eyes as she said it and then picked up the steaming cup and brought it back to the table.

She sat drinking the tea while he folded his hands precisely and slowly circled one fingertip around the opposite fingertip, attuned to the sound of the filtered water roiling in the teapot behind him.

The silence between them snapped at them both like a rabid dog.

He got up after a moment and went to the broiler. The teapot thermometer read 82.2°C and he pulled it off the flame. He opened the lid of the teapot and dipped the bamboo ladle into the steaming water. He turned the cup precisely, the bag tilted just so, hanging beneath the skewer. Then he poured the water carefully into the cup. There was a flash of steam as the leaves swelled and expanded rapidly, the water infusing the tea and releasing the essential oils and botanical essences into the cup.

He prepared a second cup and bag and repeated the ritual. He pulled out a small tray and placed each cup upon it and turned with it in hand. He offered the cup to her, a peace offering, a truce requested.

She finished her cup and set it aside as he placed the tray on the table between them. She watched as he handled the cup with a delicate touch and placed the cup before her. He turned it so the emblem etched into the rim faced her and then moved it a few centimeters forward towards her.

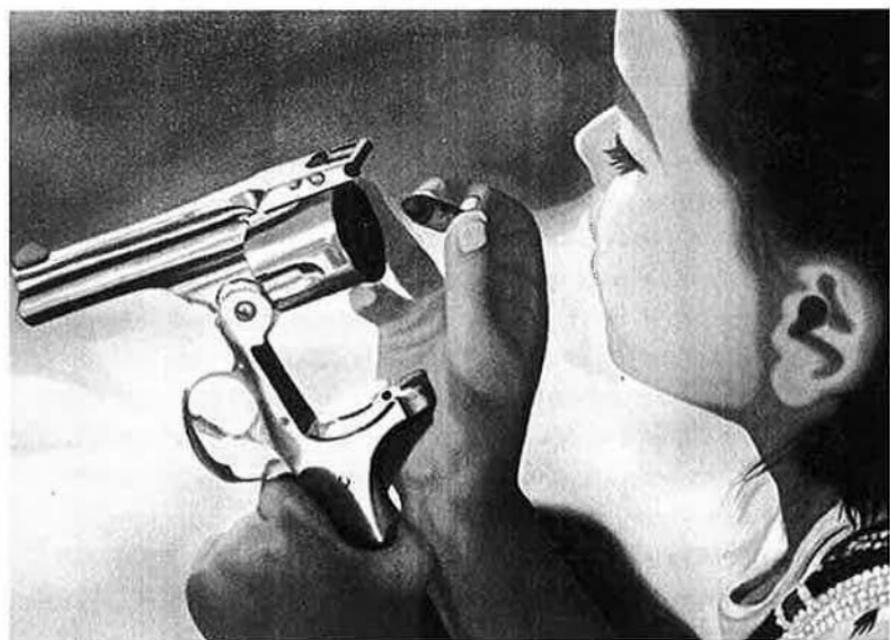
She put her hand on the cup and waited as he sat down before she repeated the same for him. They drank for a moment in silence. He put his cup down precisely and inhaled slowly.

"So, you wanna have sex?"

She blinked slowly at him then shook her head. "Ugh, you're an ass," she sat back in her chair. "Maybe next week."

"Let me guess, if I behave myself?"

She smirked.



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ratsandmice

the innocence of a child's heart soon rots into a smiling hammer smashing the heads of mice. mice, not rats. rats are more resilient, more hardy, evolved a few more steps beyond the common mouse. mice: most of them surviving in the country, stealing grain, pillaging crops. rats: city dwellers, jaded, scarred, utilitarian. mice eat seeds dropped by the farmer's wife while rats chew the lip off of the farmer's newborn baby. why did the child choose a pet mouse over a rat? pure aesthetics? or did the child smell competition? this creature could damage him, hurt him. damage the continuation of his genetic line. rats can be vengeful, it is how their species have survived in domestication, in labs, in cages, in civilization. surely what they do is justified. one particular advantage of rats over mice is their resilience. the child on a chair on his tippy-toes places the rat ever so gently on top of a fan blade connected to his ceiling fan. his lithe fingers dance around the switch: one of the first ethical dilemmas he will face. but he knows the rat is hardy: the rat has been dropped, kicked, squished. endorphins, adrenalin race up and down his still growing spine. in his brain, a hydrogen molecule breaks a bond, a 0 switches to a 1, an electrical impulse shoots out, a muscle contracts. the switch has been hit. the fan undulates, slowly at first due to the added weight. the rat's eyes bulge; ratty chemicals are released into its blood stream: the body knows it is threatened, somehow. the rat's testicles shrink; they know they may be useless soon. its small, muscular hands shoot out, claws attempt to dig into cheap plastic but are hampered by the dusty veneer. the battle is easily won by the fan: motors, electricity overpower muscle, blood. the rat caroms off the wall into the dresser onto the hardwood floor. sweat drips down the child's back, excitement telegraphed by

his erection. the rat is still alive. the child tiptoes over to his pet, to his catch, to his kill. he is exercising his power as a human male. the rat twitches, eyes mirky with blood. but the rat survives, as it did the swimming pool incident and the family cat encounter. it knows it has been threatened, wronged. rats have excellent memories and children have subtle little limps. three months later the child's father kills the rat with a shovel after the rat bites the tip of the boy's penis. or rather chews. not the entire tip, but enough to scar for life and cause painful urination for a year. is this the source of his hatred towards women? hatred towards those who consume, use his flawed organ: sex is a reminder of the rat's inversion of the power binary, of nature still having not the upper hand, but a hand, or a few teeth. the boy sees all this, starting at the rat in the pet store. he knows what could happen. he chooses the mouse. mice are too weak to survive anything that would require vengeance. the boy smiles with teeth as white as sin. he picks the mouse up by its tail. the mouse kicks its silly little legs: legs only useful for scampering, escaping. he knows the power dynamics of this relationship. and his mother knows that mice are cheap: 2.99 for one stuck behind the dresser (asphyxiated), 2.99 for one down the disposal (another switch flipped), 2.99 for one frozen in the freezer (slow yet painless). the mouse's body is soft and subtle, as soft as the first breast the child will squeeze in high school. his display of control is exemplar: his first wife will know this first hand, back hand. unlike the rat's eyes murky with blood, the child's are clear, blue, perfectly lucid. the child and his prey. the mouse to teach him about life, death, subjugation. the innocence of a child's heart soon rots into a smiling hammer smashing the heads of mice.

@ the Corner

**TO:** justinsgirl27@hotmail.com

**SUBJECT:** 411

no way r u going 2 believe this...but every night this freaky lady walks right past right my house... every F\*\*King night (sorry) i mean its not like she bothers me or anything (nothing like when iv screwed up & my Dad gives me his look) but her eyes...just this dead stare...really weird i m sure 2night shell show up again ill let u no

raymond asked if i ever hear from u...i said no...just dont want 2 catch S\*\*T from the guys...hope its ok with u besides its not like i m ur boyfriend or anything

—L8r

**TO:** justinsgirl27@hotmail.com

**SUBJECT:** Re: 411

the lady was back last night

hey 4got 2 ask...whats with the new address justinsgirl27??? r there really 26 chicks in front of u??? u poor gr!!!! :( like you could even get close to mr BIG SHOT justin timberlake even if all those other chicks died thats what happens when u leave the neighborhood & move 2 sub-urbanville...you get stuck on hopeless causes i guess ur old man thinks its worth it...“better schools...safer schools” as the parents say speaking of hopeless causes...i m back here where it still sucks big time...but u no that

anyway...i m writing 2 give u some 411 on this lady..thats the only excite-

ment since u abandoned me thank god the library has a mac...not being in school & all yes!!! no school!!!! like anyone @ the BIG MARTIN LUTHER KING MIDDLE SCHOOL cares mr roberts...remember our old algebra teacher??? he misses u sooo much...he sure was in LOVE with u...flirting with him got u a b+ @ least ;-)

so this lady...she is way older than us...like as old as my Dad there was this article about this accident in the chronicle so i read it to the guys just after i read them this huge article about a crack house bust over on 8th st its not that they cant read...except maybe joey.. its just that they dont...sort of like Dad...he can read all right it just takes way 2 much energy i m always reading the chronicle to him...obviously i dont have a life since u left me in this boring boring town or the bible...i read the bible to him if u can believe that...once he loosened his death grip on his mamas bible...more like i read a couple of verses over & over & over & over "even tho i walk through the valley of blah blah blah" remember that one from father martinez? those days with father martinez were all so totally boring boring boring...xcpt u & me in the alter boys room :) "whats a grl doing in the alter boys room" joey was always asking "i dont get it" he was always saying poor boy joey!!! ill bet u miss him...maybe u should be joeysgirl27 instead of justinsgirl27 u could even be joeysgirl :-)

when i read the bible to Dad i cant make up stuff like i did with stephen king...Dad has that entire bible down from when he was a kid...back last month i was reading this stephen king book to him... sort of reading when i couldnt sleep...which is most of the night by the way...id read it...then in the morning id tell Dad what happened (sorry...ill shuddup about this stephen king thing)

back 2 the lady who killed a kid...did i say she killed a kid??? yes...i still get off track sometimes & 4get the big picture..like in our dead literature class last year...i should remember ms jacksons rant "look at the big picture ladies & gentleman...the BIG PICTURE!!!" if i do it again just SCREAM & ill get back on track by then...like i can hear you from way out there in suburbanville!!! i figure when Dad gets better hell read the stephen king book 4 himself then ill be so busted

this accident happened a couple blocks south but a couple blocks south is another world as u no... thats where ur grlfrend denise moved to by the way..denise!!! :-\* not just weekends either but the poor grl drinks 24/7!!!

megan caught ms smirnoff passed out in the grls bathroom @ school anyway paper said the lady was cruising along in her cool red beemer... yakking on her <can-you-hear-me-now> when BAM she plows right into this kid on a bike next thing the kid is all over the street raymond shivered when i read it to him...benny just laughed flat as a pancake the boy was the bike just a bent tire raymond went NO WAY (when i read it to Dad he just shook his head... doesnt like to hear about people dying that stephen king book was always giving me trouble dood was always writing about people dying & all...so when people in the book died i just told Dad they left town or something)

gotta go the library lady is giving me the i

—L&r

**TO:** justinsgirl27@hotmail.com

**SUBJECT:** Re: 411

havent u moved up in line yet??? still 26 chicks ahead of u??? poor gl :- ( its 3:30 & library lady thinks i m doing homework

back 2 the lady..we rode our bikes down to check it all out NO SKID MARKS...NO BLOOD... NO NOTHING sorry 4 all the shouting but it was all 2 weird just the dead kids bike still lying in the gutter...stripped...not much left we took the bike anyway (Dad of course went "what are u boys going to do with a broken bike?" a Dad question 4sure i just scooped up a couple of ice chips & slipped them in his mouth...i didnt have much of an answer Maybe i should pay attention to these Dad questions...maybe i wouldnt have such a sorryass life right now...no comment from ms suburban chick)

lady is done with cars the paper said...these days she walks everywhere...always with that look... always alone her friends must have scattered...cant be near her...cant look into those eyes @ least thats Dads theory...he knows...his friends have scattered...always making excuses like theyre busy @ the plant...have relatives staying over...whatever but i no different after work they sometimes drop by..just sort of hang around his bedroom door talk a little about the raiders game & they r gone all Dad really has is me & aunt louise i get a little pissed @ Dads friends if u want to no the truth sometimes feel like i m going to throw up when i

get going like that ill get back to the lady which i m sure is all you really want to hear about

now its just me & the guys who dare 2 get even close to the lady..just a bunch of pathetic middle school kids from a pathetic neighborhood in pathetic east sacramento u 2 could check her out if u didnt abandon us!!!! she starts our night this lady..so 4 maybe 5 each day i head out to c the guys & wait 4 the lady 2 show up sure enuf right after sunset when the cops start their cruising...her dark figure appears @ the corner

i dont go to school in case u havent figured that out yet...maybe i told u last email..i 4get maybe ill go back when Dad gets better...maybe not...ill c it used to bother me to leave the apartment but aunt louise would drop by after work & she would cover 4 me while i went out to mess around with the guys benny gives me S\*\*T about how i m always looking up @ Dads window every 2 seconds...like i could really do anything...like i can actually tell how he is doing from out on the street last month i swear Dad was always @ the window watching me hang out @ corner over by st bernadettes last week or so he hasnt left his bed much tho...still i glance up @ the window i keep thinking i should be doing something..i mean across the street & 5 floors up isnt that far but i always worry...is he drinking his water...is he taking his 4 oclock pills...maybe i should be up there in case he all of a sudden starts looking bad which happened last Sunday (sorry...i m sure u could care less about some pathetic boys problem right ms justinsgirl27???) U R reading this to find out about this lady so ill get back to her)

every night this lady is suddenly @ the corner then silently moves down the block & into the night every night we wait 4 her that first night...a couple of days after the accident...we barely noticed her..i dont think i even mentioned it to Dad when i gave him the run down of my day back then Dad would have been all over me...DONT BE STARING AT SOME LADY TWICE YOUR AGE...WHAT IS BENNY GOING TO DO JUMP HER OR SOMETHING...DONT U BOYS HAVE SOMETHING BETTER TO DO????? always yelling stuff @ me...mostly cause of his pain & all

but last week Dad & me were talking about this lady when we were over @ the clinic "FOOL" he went "this is not the part of town where a lady

should be...especially @ night” so i went “its not a bad part of town”...like thats not a lie right??? like thats not why ur old man moved u??? then Dad got all weepy on me & i started feeling a little sick he said his sorrys “its not that bad” i told him...i no he felt really bad i was trapped taking care of him i dont mind really i finally have something to do...someone to talk to after u moved

gotta go library lady has shut me down BBFN

—L8r

**TO:** justinsgirl27@hotmail.com

**SUBJECT:** Re: 411

no ms justinsgirl27 i cant believe u got tickets to the treepool concert get it??? tree-timber pool-lake (sorry) i m thinking of sneaking into the BIG MARTIN LUTHER KING MIDDLE SCHOOL AFTER SCHOOL DANCE on friday...so there...cry & be jealous

i cant believe u asked 4 more on the lady...i was sure i was boring u with my so boring boring life shes blond & tall...like a real live barbie absolutely oblivious to the sirens...the yelling & screaming from our sad little cardboard houses...even oblivious to the F\*\*King (sorry) noise from boom-box-joe she has no purse this lady...but benny sez she has money (“well does she?” Dad asked...like i m the expert “i just read the paper Dad” i told him he wanted to no whats with this white lady from up oak ridge messing with his boys life?)

last night we were waiting 4 her...hanging on the steps of st bernadettes...pisses father martinez off.. we still do that even after u left us talking...listening to tunes...smoking a little bud... watching Danny mess with dead kids bike...fixing it up (this part i didnt tell Dad...hes always on me about the way we treat the father) sure enough...as soon as the sun dips down behind old man montoyas house she comes to us “a white lady dressed like that...has to have money” somebody sez...probably benny boom-box-joe sez “she wants it taken” so Danny hops on dead

kids bike & rides out to meet her...we all lay back against the church out of sight...Danny stops in the middle of the sidewalk & waits 4 her to scream & run but all she does is look @ him he lets her pass "she has the look" he goes..."tiene los ojos como los muertos" raymond goes "NO WAY" but Danny looks like he is going to hurl (tell me about it...i feel that way all the time...like when i help Dad to the bathroom...i bolt down stairs & lose it then beat it back to help him to his bed & clean up the bathroom...i dont get it...i mean he is the one sick & i m the one throwing up sorry...i m getting gross here...like u care about some poor kid barfing into a dumpster)

anyway...somebody goes "thats just ur grandmother talking Danny"...remember his grandmother??? way way out there!!! "pussy" we call him "chicken shit" raymond squawks "no man u should c it" he sez back Danny had enough...he dumped dead kids bike behind old man montoyas (when i asked Dad about this ojos thing he just gave me a look that ive seen a million times be4 his yellow eyes said "u dont want to no"...clueless i went "what dont i want to no?" ... Dad just sipped some of the tomato soup i made 4 him...then slid into one of his little naps)

gotta go check on Dad

—L&r

**TO:** justinsgirl27@hotmail.com

**SUBJECT:** Re: 411

hey did i tell you debbi went goth on us??? 1 day she has this pinkish blond hair next day shes black...completely black...even her eyebrows!!! her mom must have really flamed out when she caught a look at that!!! i heard she has been grounded for a decade but shes still doing her goth thing

anyway the lady...last night raymond walks right up next to her "hey whats a nice lady like u doing down here this time of night?" he sez getting in stride with her she just stares straight ahead "hey lady..i m talking to u" he goes finally she sez "going 4 a walk is all" in this sweet little voice like she really is just going 4 a walk raymond he laughs then taunts

her “lady u gotta have some money 4 this poor boy” then raymond sees them...her eyes he freezes & she moves on clueless me i mocked him “what the F\*\*K man?” wish i hadnt said it raymond was...i dont no...hard to describe...just gone...not really there (i no that look...last week i looked into Dad’s eyes one day & FREAKED...they were all vague i went “Dad i think we ought to call dr cobb”... but he just looked @ me like i wasnt even there “Dad at least let me call aunt louise” nothing then i realized aunt louise wasnt even home S\*\*T i went all cold & sweaty all @ the same time i shot outside & got benny & raymond (u can stop reading if i already told you all this) they helped me get Dad to the honda...actually i paid them 5\$...when raymond saw Dad he tried to give the money back but i was 2 busy with Dad drove him over to the clinic...drove like some guy on tv racing to the er (i no a kid my age isnt supposed to be driving but i wasnt waiting for any 911 call or anything...good thing i have long legs & can reach the peddles) soon as a nurse took Dad into this little room i threw up all over the waiting room...totally grossed out all the sick people turned out Dad was only dehydrated or something dr cobb sez i just have to make sure Dad drinks lots of water now (there i go getting way off track again ill try to stick to the lady)

back to the her...benny laughed @ raymond because he was looking all wiggled out “no wait...i seen it 2” raymond went “los ojos...los muertos???” i asked like a moron “yeah man... los ojos” he tried to shake the memory of her eyes out of his head raymonds little brother went “F\*\*K that” he sez “i m gonna get her shes got money” raymond absolutely flames out & slams his brother up against the church “no man” raymond yells...then he whispers “she got nothing left to take...dont mess” last night was all 2 freaky

hey justinsgirlz7...gotta go Dad is due 4 his drugs & i m due 4 dr phil yes i watch dr phil...its on @ the same time Dad needs his drugs dr phil got bigger losers than me & he gets them a life...i figure i might learn something

—L&r

James Allardice

**TO:** justinsgirl27@hotmail.com

**SUBJECT:** Re: 411

what do u mean what happened next??? i m done with the story :-)

—L8r

**TO:** justinsgirl27@hotmail.com

**SUBJECT:** Re: 411

R U ;-( because there is no more story??? ok ok...just kidding

gotta back up & give you some of the big picture u probably heard this new kid moved into the house next to ur old one last sunday (the day Dad got real sick) we all showed new kid the dead kids bike & he took it then benny set him up (sort of like god did with abraham talking him into killing his kid...remember that one??? father martinez went on & on & on about that one last summer btw i was reading the bible again last night..last week Dad gave me his mamas bible which actually has some cool stuff if u dig around in it...wars & miracles & all) so benny sez "hey new kid theres this lady...shes got money man...rich as a mother F\*\*Ker" (i m telling u this part like raymond told me aunt louise kicked me out when dr cobb got to Dad...had to push me out the door actually but i couldnt take being out of the apartment 4 very long so i snuck back in Dad knew i was there 4sure even tho he didnt actually see me no one else saw me either...that is until i got in dr cobbs face...almost punched him out if u want to no the truth..i mean whats the point of having a doctor around if all hes going to do is do nothing????? aunt louise pulled me off him after i finally got it together i threw up which is typical as i m sure youve noticed all i wanted to do is talk to Dad but he wasnt talking much last sunday.. in fact he wasnt talking @ all...but i can just hear Dad say "that benny...he has such a filthy mouth" dr cobb changed Dads drugs & today hes ok...not great but ok)

so raymond sez new kid looked all skeptical so someone reassured him "straight up man" "cool" new kid sez then the lady turns the corner &

he hops on dead kids bike & cruises over to her... circles her as she walks...then new kid looks right into her eyes he jumps off the bike & runs nobodys seen him since (aunt louise sez she heard he moved back in with his crackhead mother which was aunt louisies lead in to her talking about where i m going to live "down the road" as she likes to say (like i m even thinking of moving...even "down the road" no way am i ever leaving this apartment not even to move out to suburbanville like u) anyway new kid just leaves the bike lying there 4 anyone to take i thought about taking it but maybe Dad was right..i mean what do i want with a dead kids bike???

—L8r

**TO:** justinsgirl27@hotmail.com  
**SUBJECT:** Re: 411

what do u mean "IS THAT ALL?????" ...u don't have to yell little ms justinsgirl27 yes that is all i mean this lady will appear @ the corner again 2night just after sunset...she will pass by my empty house...mess with my empty life i may even think about going up & telling Dad about this lady who keeps coming around but ill catch myself...no point in even thinking about that

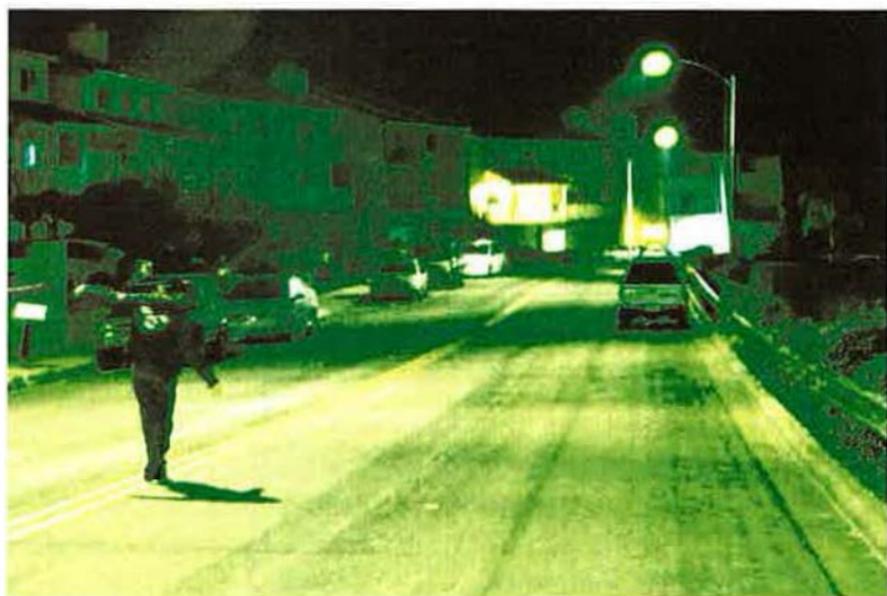
sorry but thats all there is about this lady who killed a kid & who keeps bothering me & how she wont go away thats about all there is about the dead kids bike 2 its still behind old man montoyas house & i m sure not going to touch it

—L8r

**TO:** justinsgirl27@hotmail.com  
**SUBJECT:** Re: 411

sorry Erica...sorry i havent written in a few days just didn't no what to say i guess my Dad died a couple of nights ago & i m staying @ aunt louisies

—L8r



Jazz Mama

**W**hen I watch you now, puttering around the house, the old woman you were never meant to be, I tell myself that I remember. I remember when you used to sing to me. Whenever I was scared of the dark, or of the storm, or whenever I was sick. You would sit on my bed and stroke my face with your little white hands. And the tips of your fingers, like icicles would send a warm shiver around my neck and across my back. But this never happened. You sang with frightening beauty, but never to me. And really, lullabies just weren't your stuff.

**B**aby" you call me, you always called me. But really, you had two babies. There was me; Baby, crawl under the bed and hand me those candy red shoes, Baby go get some more ice. Baby where's my ashtray, Baby, damn it, didn't I tell you to go to bed.

And then there was Billie and Ella and Louis and Cole and Duke and Dinah. There was the stack of music sheets on the dining table, some of the papers speckled with ketchup or bits of scrambled egg or coffee. There were the countless records in their shelves, on your bed, carelessly left on the floor, the counter, the couch that no one sat on and that I could never jump on. Jazz.

And of course there was the band. Martín on the piano, fat and heaving but still, always with that soggy cigarette hanging from his mouth, soggy because of all that sweat that pooled on his upper lip. Paco on the drums, handsome in that dusky, sickly, skinny kind of way, who brought a new girl around almost every week, single handedly contributing to the number of "aunts" I would have, Aunt Jackie, Aunt Lola, Aunt Bernice... "Nose" on the stand up bass, whose short, pudgy banker body belied a frenetic,

passionate self, plucking and slapping that big old thing like a lover. And Eddie, whose instrument, the sax, suited him. Jammed up into his mouth like that, because he never said anything anyway; tall with gray hair, and big droopy eyes. And when he played you could swear that he was playing the blues, even if he was really playing jazz. Eddie who I wanted to be my father because I didn't care to know what instrument my father played or whether or not he was any good when he was with you. Eddie, whom I wanted to be my father because of the way he looked at you, looked at you in that way that made him play the way he did. Eddie who didn't want to be in the band anyway, the sax, the fourth member of a trio, who stayed only for you.

**J**azz, mama, was your baby. Your first born. And then I came along unexpectedly like one of those fantastic scat riffs, out of nowhere in the middle of a song, in the middle of your jazz life. And all of a sudden improvisation had new meaning. You've forgiven me, I hope.

**T**he place was "Birdland" on Tomas Morato Avenue. And folks flocked, out of the humid night, into the dark club, where you took them places. Many of them had already heard your songs, were familiar with your set, but since no one set was ever the same as when it was played next, they went with you anyway, to places only you and the band could take them. And on nights that you didn't leave me with grandmother, I went with you too. What a playground that was, and all around me, what strange birds sang. Crazy songs...*shoo bop doo wa zoot zoo wee*.

**T**here you were, on that stage, sweat flying off your giant, frizzy black hair, and your sequined dress flashing in that fake moonlight as it caught the dust rising from the stage floor, caught it as it swirled around you like magic powder. And I watched you from the side of that stage, billow out your luscious incantations...*My Fummy Valentine...Body and Soul*, casting spells over them, the faces in the dark, holding that mic like a wand, singing dreams, singing laments, singing sex. All the good stuff.

**T**here are other memories. The hours before those Birdland nights. Me and you at home. Me, coloring in my books or playing with my

trucks, and you making last minute changes to your scores, rubbing away played out tunes, and writing in new ones. I remember once how you almost lost them all, your scores, when you thought you'd laid your cigarette down in the ashtray but you missed.

I remember how you would pace across the halls in this quick mechanical gait, like a Chinese soldier because your dress was half zipped up, and you had your shoes in your hands and your stockings all wound wrong, and you were cursing like you were scating because you were so very late and the band was already set up. I remember how once you tossed your shoes all the way across, and screamed at me "Hey baby, put those away! And get me the burgundy ones." And I ran into the room and dove under the bed, scrambling, pushing away pair after pair before I realized that I didn't even know what burgundy was because I was eight. And I remember how I got up from under there and said I couldn't find them, and you sighed and said "never mind then", and you picked up a pair of black ones. Sighed like you were tired of those black shoes. Tired like you didn't want to go to Birdland that night. But that couldn't be right, because it's here you didn't want to be, at home. I forgive you.

**I** forgive you mostly, because of that night, the night you lost your shoes. Not at home, but on stage. I was there. It was when you were singing "How High The Moon," the Ella Fitzgerald version. You were well into your second set, and Martín was already glistening with sweat and he'd taken off his coat. Paco broke a drumstick. Nose was still in that weird place, pre-orgasmic, gyrating and bobbing his head side to side as he made mad banker love to the bass. Eddie played though, like he always did, in that sweet sad way, even if the song was fast. And you, you were really pushing it this night. Hop-scotching, zig-zagging through song after song, not in your usual calculating way, but tonight, trance like and ecstatic, sweating yourself, melting away all your make up, smudging your fingers every time you wiped your brow. Maybe it's that I hadn't seen you take a drink that day. Maybe it's that I thought I heard you talking to my father on the phone that day. Maybe it's that I accidentally stepped on one of your records that day, and you shouted "What the hell?!?! Don't you watch where you're walking? Which one was that?!?!" and it was a Cole Porter record, one of your favorites I suppose and you picked up the pieces on

your knees while looking up at me, wondering what a dirty eight year old boy was doing in your apartment.

At any rate, you were really flying that night, stomping your feet on that old wooden stage. And then, your heel caught a crooked slat, and you were stuck, and you were trying to wiggle free and for a second you looked like you were doing the twist. And Martín and Paco and Eddie, looked down to check on your shoe, but Nose he kept playing. And then you stepped out, out of your shoes, both shoes. And you were barefoot. No stockings that night and you pounded the rest of that song out like nobody's business. Like you hated those shoes, like you hated that song, like it was some vile sickness you needed to vomit out. And out it came, one syllable after the next, regular lyrics, then riff after riff, then a scat in syncopation, and did they scream, all of Birdland. Martín wailed with delight as he crushed those keys every time he drove them down with those fat fingers and you could practically see that piano lift up from the other side. And Paco, those skinny arms flailing away in a blur, but his head, motionless and his eyes fixed on you, frightened. Eddie barely hitting his notes, wanting to stop playing, his breaths, shortened by worry. Worried that you would break from the stress, worried that your frenzy would loosen all that held you together and you would unravel, worried that you would burn on that stage, that those notes, those riffs that you took to such profane heights and lengths and depths would turn on you and devour you. Nose just kept on - eyes closed, head down, big, big smile. It was on this night many years ago, at the age of eight, that I learned to forgive you. That I saw where you truly lived. That my mama was not like other mamas.

**A**nd when you'd had your way with that song, stretching it and breaking it, and forming it again in your image and likeness, you put it to bed. Finished it barefoot. And all of them, all those blue shade faces loved you even more, but not like me. Loved you more than they ever did, but not like me. And they cheered for you as I did, sitting off stage, face in the dark, clapping and crying in the wings.

James Allardice	Kara Lawton
William Buckley	Anja Leigh
Jim Buxton	Jennifer Lu
Ethan Bruer	Dan Murphy
Nancy Carroll	B.Z. Niditch
Corinna Coorsen	Amber Norwood
Erika Deeter	Keith Onstad
John Divon	Christopher Page
Marco de la Fuente	Adam Reyes
Leigh Ann Detweiler	Kate Rowe
Roxanne Dubouche-ron	Brian Scott
Victoria Gonzalez	Dena Skiles
Cynthia Hnda	Jeff Sosner
Donovan Hufnagle	Draw Stillman
Joy Japlit	Mary Ruth Summers
George Jimenez	Evin Wolverton
Shayda Kafa	Kim Young