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“The Dream Traveller”  
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# Acknowledgments

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## Submissions

The Northridge Review accepts submissions throughout the year. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a cover page that includes the writer's name, address, email, and telephone number as well as the titles of the works submitted. The writer's name should not appear on the manuscript itself. Manuscripts and all other correspondence should be delivered to:

**Northridge Review  
Department of English  
California State University Northridge  
1811 Nordhoff St.  
Northridge, CA 91330-8248**

<sup>o</sup>Manuscripts will be recycled

# Awards

The Northridge Review Fiction Award, given annually, recognizes excellent fiction by a CSUN student published in the Northridge Review. The recipient for this award, for the 2009-2010 school year is Matthew Waldeck for his story "Out the Window."

This year's judge of the Northridge Review Fiction Award is Sharman Russell. Sharman Russell teaches at Western New Mexico University and Antioch University in Los Angeles. Her latest books are *Standing in the Light: My Life as a Pantheist* (Basic Books, 2008) and *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (Basic Books, 2005).

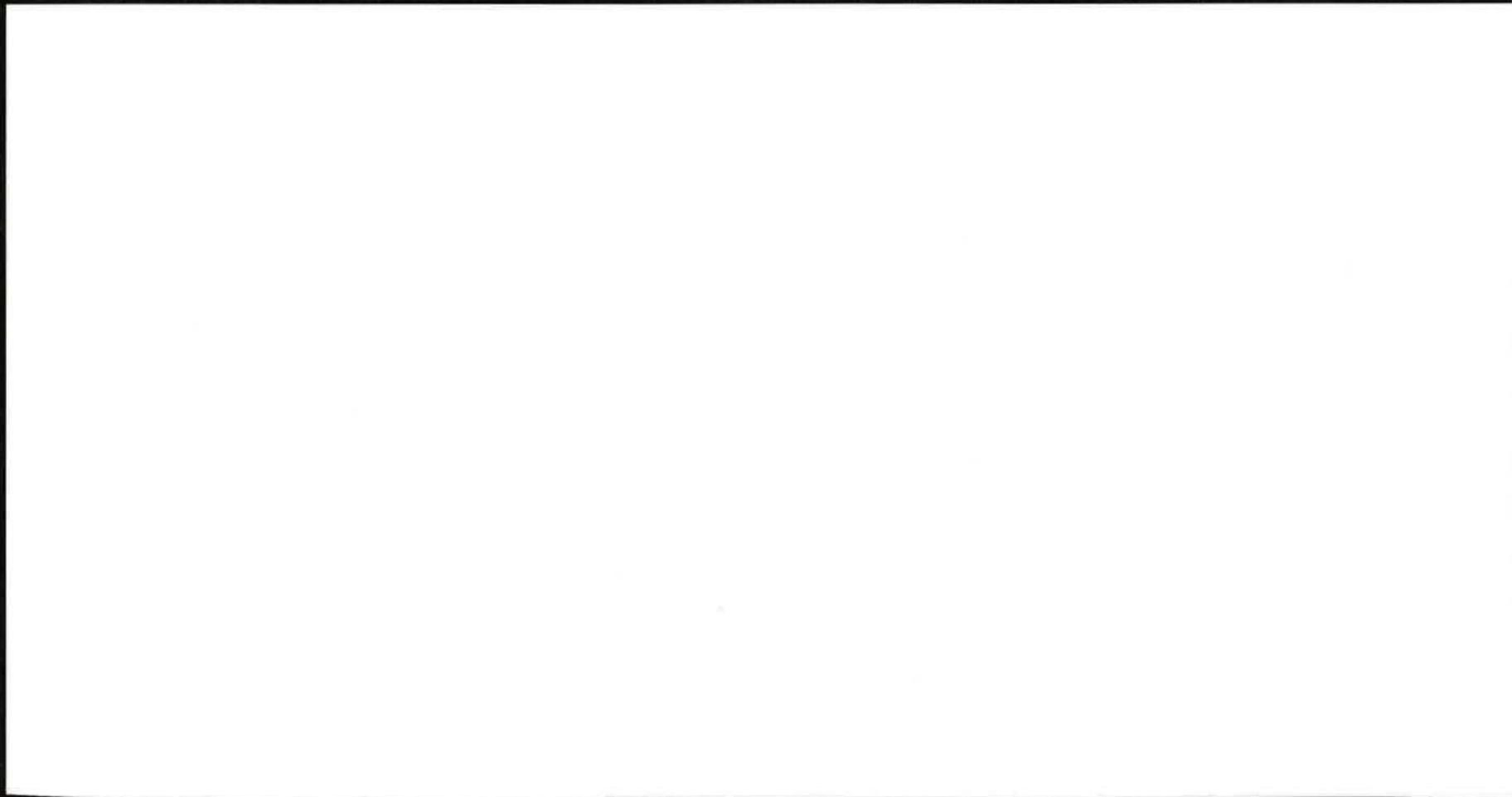
The Rachel Sherwood Award, given annually in the memory of its namesake, recognizes excellent poetry by a CSUN student published in the Northridge Review. The recipient for the 2009-2010 school year is Gina Lawrence for her poem "Boot Camp".

This year's judge of the Rachel Sherwood Award is David Starkey. David Starkey is the poet Laureate of Santa Barbara and Director of the Creative Writing Program at Santa Barbara City College. His most recent full-length collection of poetry is *Things You Should Know about the Weasel* (Biblioasis, 2010).

The Northridge Review is also honored to publish the winner of the Academy of American Poets Award. The recipient for the 2009-2010 school year is Rachel Jordan for her poem "March" and the honorable mention goes to Sophia Petkovic for her poem "Station".

This year's judge of the Academy of American Poet's Award, Dan Bogen, is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *An*

*Algebra* (U of Chicago Press), and editor of *The Cincinnati Review*. He has been a longtime reviewer for *The Nation* and has collaborated with composers from around the world. Awards for his work include U.C.'s Rieveschl Award for Excellence in Scholarly and Creative Work, The Discovery / The Nation Award, the Emily Dickinson Award of the Poetry Society of America, a Fulbright Senior Lectureship in Spain, and fellowships from the Camargo Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.



# Editor's Note

The process of making the Northridge Review is inherently experimental, trying, and necessary. It is a tall order to make a magazine with "literary" at its fore and your head begins to ache as you attempt to do so without experience in every field necessary while also navigating various temperaments, opinions, and tastes. It is a tall order to the extent that it is not recognized by most—including those who are filling it.

There is so much more to the purpose of the magazine than the selection, so much more than the presentation, and even so much more than the publication of this book, that is a supposed reflection of the best there is at CSUN (and those outside of CSUN as we are always eager to hear the voices beyond us, always open to extending this community into the world), as that is what we are really doing here, right? We are asking for your best so that we may transform the piece from work to art. Alchemy, really, and the formula has me out of breath.

It is. I am not being slipshod with my words, here, as what is art but a work that adequately communicates an idea to the extent that it creates an effect; instructs and delights, widens the circumference of one's mind? And what is something written but an ordered mess on a page? Oh, should something more, something grander, be said about it? Yes. But not yet. Give it to a reader, then, let him speak.

He will tell you how they conversed and that is the point when something has been made. It is not the piece, as that is simply a concrete spilling of the personal. Nothing to be excited about. Sometimes we write notes: "I was hungry and you don't mind"; and sometimes someone we read how cold and sweet they were and we learn why we do things for ourselves and we know why the knife-twist can be just as savory.

That is our purpose: Speak the knife and twist the words from phonetics to philosophy. Let the text open itself and become a work, the writer giving way to the author and it is all up the reader to relieve this tension, this chrysalis, and become the cataclysmic factor of creative response.

Art is that move from create to effect and for that readers are necessary. We consider great works those that continue to be read, continue to exist, reverberating beyond themselves. It is undeniable that there are great works that have not been recognized, the reason for this is lack of effect, lack of response, lack of being read. Without a recipient there is no acknowledgement of the creative act, thus there is no work, just text, script, page.

Argue within yourself for a minute at this refutation of your typings and all your reflattened crumples. I am not saying that you are not creating art if your work is unpublished, I am saying that you are and the gerund is painfully continuous until you find your audience and do what you set out to when you began.

There is much here that will sneak beneath your skin and cause a domino click inside you. It is probable some may not. Even more probable is the immensity of the body of work that has not been included, maybe even intentionally excluded in the combined efforts of this quest. There is no way to carry all that each reader does, but we can collaborate to see those that might and bring those few that are (mostly) agreed on to you. This is the order.

Let us go now: Make art, find the pages, propagate!

Brett-Candace

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## GUILLERMO VARGAS

DAVID MORCK

Put a dog in a room to starve in the name of art.  
The curious wandered through in order to see  
the face of dehydration, the demeanor of kidney failure.  
Maybe the show was for the canine, so he could observe  
the faceless crowds and their oddity of lacking empathy.  
Jesus was offered water by bystanders on his march to  
Calvary, and this puppy Christ was given moving circles  
of light in his vision from indifferent camera flashes.  
Did he, with last strength prying open eyelids,  
observe these photographic artifacts in his vision and  
imagine being circled by angels with dull-yellow halos?  
Were those seeing the last heave of emaciated chest  
satisfied at the completion of art?

# Différance: A Love Story or A Life in the Day

SEAN PESSIN

Suddenly, the narrator comes into existence. That narrator becomes self-conscious. That is me, I suppose.

As I have already been given the role of narrator, I ought to perform it. I've never narrated a story before, but I know that by the end of this one, I will have told all the stories I was born to tell, none of them being about me. I am not sure how to even begin.

Let me start it like this:

I remember this one time that never happened.

Wait. That was a false start. Let me try again:

I remember this one time that never happened. It is not that it could not happen, but it did not happen. Could I ask you to just assume that it does? No, probably.

So these events happen as I tell them. Trust me. The story will occur in present tense, since these events only unfold for the first time as my narrative takes place.

As I was conceived, so too were some characters. They come born onto the page, or something similar. Or, are they born as I place them there?

No.

They are born some time before I place them in this story, or else they would have to be born, then grow up, until the story can take place the characters begin to interact. Unless they *are* born when they enter the narration, in which case they would become alive on the page and age until they are no longer on the page. Then they would cease to be. They could die or be forgotten or wander off.

There are two characters whose births this story will concern itself with, even though multitudes exist.

One of them is John. I put him here, on page one, in the middle of column two. John is not anything but average. I like him, though. He is fat, hairy, and not compellingly driven for a thirty year old. He seems cool enough. He isn't suave, or attractive. Clearly, being thirty, he either has been born prior to the narration or he has aged thirty years in thirty words. He is the kind of man that has never been in love. He won't find real love, not in my story.

He falls asleep, in the chair I positioned in front of the television in his Los Angeles apartment, after masturbating frivolously. He doesn't enjoy it, and not just because he only gestures in words with a word not directly thought: penis. Whenever he turns on the television, he turns on CNN, and when he turns on CNN, he watches Anderson Cooper report the news, and when he watches Anderson Cooper report the news, he falls

asleep. His dog Polysemy scratches at the door but I don't let him hear it. He has a very long day ahead of him, and he will need his rest.

While he sleeps, the news scroll continues on. The other character of interest, \*NORTH KOREA LAUNCHES NUCLEAR MISSILE.\* waits patiently to the right of the screen, along with \*MILEY CYRUS CANCELS CONCERT\* and \*MAN MAULED BY TIGER AFTER SCALING CALGARY ZOO FENCE\* and \*RAPPER METHOD MAN ARRESTED ON TAX-EVASION CHARGES\* and \*JACKSONVILLE SHERIFF: MISSING PERSONS NOW TOP PRIORITY\*. Ahead of \*NORTH KOREA LAUNCHES NUCLEAR MISSILE\* is \*HONDURAS REPEALS EMERGENCY DECREE\*. \*KHLOE KARDASHIAN IS MARRIED!\* is ahead of \*HONDURAS REPEALS EMERGENCY DECREE\* and is dancing under the face of Anderson Cooper. \*KHLOE KARDASHIAN IS MARRIED!\* smirks and is proud.

\*HONDURAS REPEALS EMERGENCY DECREE\* watches this display, and is worried. He ought to be, since \*KHLOE KARDASHIAN IS MARRIED!\* is, in fact, a fabulous dancer. She is plain-looking, yet she grabs the attention of many people with her simple, forward motion. It is because of this that \*HONDURAS REPEALS EMERGENCY DECREE\* enters the screen backwards. He is too nervous to perform adequately. So, it is as the "H" enters the textbox that John snaps out of sleep. As his eyes open and adjust, he sees \*NORTH KOREA LAUNCHES NUCLEAR MISSILE\* begin her simple dance. \*NORTH KOREA LAUNCHES NUCLEAR MISSILE\* was nervous, and became worse when viewing \*HONDURAS REPEALS EMER-

GENCY DECREE\*. The view of Honduras uncomfortable is uncomfortable.

\*NORTH KOREA LAUNCHES NUCLEAR MISSILE\* has barely stepped out onto the screen as John's attention is grabbed from across the room. Her lines are smooth, and yellow, and beautiful. Her "N" is the most sensual "N" ever spied by eyes. John is ashamed to look upon her "O" and diverts his eyes after a summary glance, and moves to her "R" which is full and voluptuous and her "T" isn't crossed at all leading him back to her "O" for only a moment, but he eventually catches the "H," and her "H" is balanced and symmetrical. The "KOREA LAUNCHES NUCLEAR MISSILE" is also attractive to John.

John does something very much out of character for him; he becomes compelling.

John meanders over to the television, and proceeds to flirt with \*NORTH KOREA LAUNCHES NUCLEAR MISSILE\*. He comments on how beautiful her composition is.

He tells \*NORTH KOREA LAUNCHES NUCLEAR MISSILE\* that her letters are very striking and yellow, and her font, though clearly visible, leaves enough enigmas to keep him interested in her hermeneutics. I imagine John would attempt to use this line on any phrase I would permit John to fall in love with. He ventures to call her another name, because that which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet; he nicknames her Noko.

She is not interested, but she is intrigued. Noko walks off screen. In the fifteen minutes that continues in John's world until she will return for her second performance, there are countless conversations about

John to the left of the television screen's visual.

Should I flatter him with my presence Noko asks.

If you don't, I will, \*KHLOE KARDASHIAN IS MARRIED!\* threatens.

\*RAPPER METHOD MAN ARRESTED ON TAX-EVASION CHARGES\* avoids the conversation and wanders off from my story, and \*MAN MAULED BY TIGER AFTER SCALING CALGARY ZOO FENCE\* follows, wanting to dodge the beast that such a topic can become. Along with \*JACKSONVILLE SHERIFF: MISSING PERSONS NOW TOP PRIORITY\*, they all disappear forever to the right of the screen.

\*MILEY CYRUS CANCELS CONCERT\* tells her to consider the ramifications of buying concert tickets of childish performers.

\*MILEY CYRUS CANCELS CONCERT\* doesn't realize the gravity of the situation that Noko is in. I won't inform her. But is she childish? I don't know. She could be, since she is currently something resembling a child. John is not a pedophile, though, so Noko must become of an appropriate age by now, if she wasn't born of an appropriate age.

\*HONDURAS REPEALS EMERGENCY DECREE\* warns her to make sure of his intentions. He does not want to see the creation of the headline "MAN MOLESTS LANGUAGE."

Noko dismisses \*HONDURAS REPEALS EMERGENCY DECREE\*, but considers the warning in a fleeting entertainment of notions.

Noko, on her second pass, tells John that they should go to a coffee shop or diner around his apartment.

Which one, John asks.

Noko shrugs.

John tells her that there is a Denny's, Carrows, Coco's and a Starbucks in between each of them. She responds that they are all the same to her. John chooses Denny's arbitrarily. Well, not quite. He is lazy and Denny's is closest, and he doesn't want to sweat in front of her.

Noko, elsewhere, stresses out over what to wear. \*KHLOE KARDASHIAN IS MARRIED!\* sits next to her and tries to help. Together, they decide that the only thing that would be appropriate to wear is a cleaner and nicer set of asterisks.

As John walks down the stairs to the restaurant, Noko dresses in her best asterisks.

The Denny's is organized in a seat-yourself fashion. John sits in the booth underneath the large screen television. The waitress comes by, and John asks her if he could change the channel from Fox News to CNN. The waitress shrugs. John changes the channel. Anderson Cooper is on, but Noko is nowhere to be seen. John waits for many minutes, and \*NORTH KOREA LAUNCHES NUCLEAR MISSILE\* finally shows up; he notices her asterisks and asked if she found the place okay. *Of course she did. What kind of narrator do you take me for?* I should apologize to John, if he is even real; I will get him laid.

They begin with small talk, i.e. where were you born, where did you grow up, where did you go to school, and a half dozen other questions about places that are supposed to tell the questioner a little about the questioned. Neither of them say anything I deem necessary to corrupt the narrative but John does mention his dog, Polysemy. Noko asks John why his dog is named Polysemy. John shares the origin and naming process of his dog.

One day John had seen an episode of Jeopardy! where the category was contronyms. He looked that up, and with a Google search, came across the word polysemy. He explains that he feels bad because polysemy is the characteristic describing a word having multiple meanings, but polysemy only has one, which is that a word has multiple meanings. In John's infinite generosity, he gave polysemy another meaning, so the word may include itself. She laughs. I laugh. But seriously, John is the most generous word I know.

John asks if \*NORTH KOREA LAUNCHES NUCLEAR MIS-SILE\* likes Miley Cyrus. \*NORTH KOREA LAUNCHES NUCLEAR MISSILE\* thinks about it and answers that she does not know about how she feels about her; the headline that had announced her cancelling her tour sprang forth to her mind. She is irrelevant, however, and Noko realizes that too.

Am I irrelevant? Will I disappear when this narrative no longer is concerned with me? What does it mean if the narrator, origin of the story, is no longer important?

Noko considers her feelings; sometimes Miley Cyrus is Hannah Montana, and other times Hannah Montana is Miley Cyrus. She says it is the best of both worlds, but I don't know, maybe that sort of inconsistency is what MileyCyrushannahmontana wants. Noko says it is similar to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. But both of them are teenage girls, so there are really two Jekyll-halves and two Hyde-halves in one body.

John thought it interesting, but decided to pass on this conversation. He does not know literature and certainly does not know of Robert Louis Stevenson, (of course, nor did I until his name appeared in my

story) and he knows he cannot continue the conversation in the way that it is heading. John quickly changes topics.

The topic that he changes to is immaterial to this story. They lived for years between the time that they joined company in the Denny's and when the waitress came over to give them their late night menus.

They laughed, they cried. Noko lost her innocence and so did John. She cried and he did not, but he embraced her; her tears gushed down his back and she was so preoccupied that she did not even notice when John had fallen asleep, and even though he jerked awake when she was in the middle of asking him a question, and he missed what she had asked, which was inquisition as to whether or not she was a whore, he answered that he loved her, and that was the first time they shared that word, in the Denny's. That was all Noko really wanted to hear.

I wonder if, or how, a man and a News scroll can come to conjugally know each other. Is that still believable?

While the waitress was in transit with the menus, John notices Noko growing bold, and asks if Noko is growing bold, and Noko, in spite of them being together for what feels to be forever (him and her and Anderson Cooper), gets very angry. But Noko realizes that she has become immobile on screen, and she is resting under Anderson Cooper's face, and she has grown bolder, and she notices that she has lost her period. Noko discovers she is pregnant. It is still rude to point out without being told, and I agree with Noko, and she tells John that now she and John are with child. John tells her every time their eyes catch that she is glowing and she projects through the television screen.

The waitress arrives with the menus and she takes their drink order.

Noko asks if they have Pepsi; the waitress tells her that they only have Coke. Noko says that is fine. John gets water.

John and Noko's relationship gets rocky from here.

The intermission begins at the start of the cliffhanger:

Anderson Cooper comes on the screen, and tells the characters of the story that they better get out of here, because The End is coming. He turns to the smug Jehova's Witness sitting next to him and asks for the Witness's feelings on the matter. It will surely end us all, he remarks, and he is thankful that he has been faithful for his whole life. Every person of absolute faith in any religious ideological superstructure feels the exact same way in this moment. The atheists feel nothing, as well as the quadriplegics, as well as the dead.

John, just to let it be known, does not make it to the end of the story. He will die, and that will be that. But I, and Noko, make it to the end. What happens to us? Is the role of the narrator different than that of a character? Will anyone remember me as I spoke, as I had no name but the ambiguous "narrator"?

During the interlude, it occurs to me that if I were to retell or tell again this story at some point, that it would have to be in past tense and past perfect, which seems like an awful lot of work to have to just to retread all this information. So, let's all take a breath and let the narrative get a few steps ahead, so that from here on out, the narrative will be in the past, so that I may, in the future, do less work.

John and Noko found that having a child in a Denny's booth was difficult. First, the birth was complicated. The other headlines told her that her "O" would always be capitalized, unless she got a C-section.

She wanted the birth to be as natural as possible, and even forewent anesthesia. John was there to give her support and to stare down the waitress, who had yet to come back with their drinks. I have thought since her appearance that the waitress was a waste of space, and she is incompetent. I will remove her from the retelling of this part. Who needs her, anyway? Anderson Cooper's grey face continued on, and continued to hang benevolently and gravely above Noko. As the baby scrolled out of Noko and inbetween the space between her and the right side of the scroll bar, Anderson Cooper named it \*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\*. Noko was proud and so was John.

John noticed Noko, some time later, always had \*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\* with her. It was bad enough that \*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\* looked much more like Noko than him. The two were inseparable, and John had grown jealous. \*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\* was his son, too. He called for him, his little phrase, and \*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\* looked up to him, and John was ignored. \*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\* was clearly a mama's boy, but I don't think that there is anything wrong with that. It is good to love your mother. John brought up to Noko that it may be damaging to \*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\* in the long run that he should always be with his mother, and Noko became so upset that she did not speak to John for what felt like days. The waitress came back to the table with a Coke and a water and asked \*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\* what he would like to drink. \*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\* answered, orange juice, please. Even from a young age, \*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\* was definitive. When the waitress returned with the OJ, Noko and

John had not been speaking for what felt like days. The waitress asked if everyone knew what they wanted, and Noko snapped at John that she wanted a man who cared and understood her. John replied that she would have the Country-Fried Steak with French fries and vegetables and garlic bread. John would have the same thing, but with mashed potatoes and hash browns instead of the French fries and vegetables. **\*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\*** would have an order of pancake puppies. Noko knew that somewhere John cared and could see who she really was. This settled the tension in the booth for a little while.

John allowed his eyes to wander to the booth next to them; it was full of teenage girls and he thought about how old they were versus how old he was. The ages that were nostalgic for him occurred as forecasting to them. He thought of the time wasted in this booth, and juxtaposed this with the time well-spent in this booth, and realized that he would only ever want to be in this booth, in this moment forever with what could be his nuclear family. He smiled.

Noko noticed the drifting of John's attention and mistook the smile for lust, and stormed out of the restaurant with **\*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\***. She exclaimed that their relationship had become composed of differences, and that made her want to put even more physical space between them. The waitress turned the television off. John was left alone to eat all the food and pay the bill. He ate alone, and the meal lasted for almost a lifetime.

But what is a lifetime to a word? John is thirty years old or thirty thousand years old, depending on if we are talking about the man, whose origins are on on page one, in the middle of column two, or the word,

whose origins are from the dawn of the human. The lifespan of a word is the term in which it remains in the memories of mankind. John is eternal, but John is mortal. So, which one is he? Are we men or are we words? Which one am I?

John returned home, and felt like he was on the verge of death. His body was heavy to lift up the steps to his apartment, even though he was still thirty. His joints were sore from sitting for so long. His television was on, and Noko was on it. She had waited for him to come home, and with her was, as always, **\*HEADED FOR WEST COAST\***. He ran to his love, and she saw him, and she rolled back into the screen. She just couldn't do it. Their relations of difference were too numerous for her. She was just words, after all, and remained blinded by my hand to the fact that John is also just a word.

I feel like a jerk for not allowing her "I's" in the segment of her, "MISSILE," to see that, in at least some ways, the two of them are just words, and that there is nothing different between them at all. For whatever reason, I don't.

John curled up into a ball underneath Anderson Cooper's face as the sirens wailed and the missile struck. I watched him as he was incinerated.

I could end it here, with John being dead and Noko being gone, but there is a little more to say about these characters. Plus, I am not ready for the narrative to end. The moment my voice stops, I vanish just like the others who have already disappeared.

Noko, who, by the time she fully retreats into the television, changed her name to **\*NUCLEAR MISSILE STRIKES LOS ANGELES\***, vanished at this point to make way for the next cycle.

Approximately simultaneously, John becomes a headline as well. He got a new name, \*MILLIONS DEAD IN AFTERMATH OF NUCLEAR STRIKE\*, and he looked everywhere, but could not find Noko, or their son, who disappeared before she did, but since she, as a whole new woman, didn't keep track of him, I didn't either. John, too, vanished eventually.

And, I, who now am the only one left in this story, must also dissolve and fade. I was here, and I existed, and I told my story, even though it wasn't about me, and now I too disappear to the left.

# BOOT CAMP

GINA LAWRENCE

I dream that this whole time,  
you've had memories of me:

pirouetting your pencil during  
military theory—my fiery  
hair threading between  
your calloused fingers.

Push-ups on the hot  
Texan asphalt: Drop and give me twenty!  
—our heated thrusts  
in the backseat at 0100 hours.

Ten-mile runs down dry  
dirt roads—heart pounding  
the way I used to make

it; out of breath: you  
whisper my name.

And as you're marching,  
drudging and grieving the  
life you once had—  
left, left, left, right, left...  
you recall that you left me.

# WHEN IN DOUBT, IF TWO OR MORE ARE TRUE, ALL OF THE ABOVE

HARUKO HATAKEDA

that memory caught on my tongue.  
rope burn i'd pull myself through.  
washing your hair twice with all the spices  
worth all the dollars  
i would ever earn.  
and your lips are often liked –  
like a popped balloon,  
like bubble gum bursted,  
fresh, juicy wasted.

if cocks,  
    fertilizing eggs they will never  
        bother to watch hatch into  
    organisms they can father,  
flew to a faraway land as an answer,  
then you and i are that one moment:  
    the egg that doesn't stretch

for inventive male masturbation:  
sad and lonely.

that *has to be*  
*as is* or it is Humpty Dumpty, shattered shell,  
hollowed out but slimy:  
a Want that Once Was.  
evidence of *a thing*.  
you seeping through my mucous membranes.

an ax you made dance:  
*you could take some fuckers down.*

could i transform myself  
by eating marginalia,  
i'd love to be your footnotes –  
the single word ones that don't take up much space.  
and if a womb were full of rancid milk

i would crawl back into one,  
breathe in sourness and feast upon the crumbling blocks  
if that meant i could be.

i would like to see you again.

hallucinating about screwdrivers  
singing Ring of Fire  
only when twisting,  
i'd chose something as  
insignificant as a pea:  
useless to a starving you  
would devour anyway.  
and if tails translated into halos  
in some bastard version of French.  
in your company,  
adieu



# A Funny Thing

DALE BAKER

Her hair was dirty blonde and she had hazel eyes; this is how I remember her. Well, how I choose to remember her. It was long ago and the details have become hazy in my mind. I am sure that there was a feeling, but nothing more. Who was she? Or was it all a dream? My memories may have presented themselves as truth, but there is no guarantee that it is not all just part of a longer narrative. A writer's mind is always unsure.

But there was a divorce. That much I can be sure of. Why else would they live in two separate houses? And there must have been a girl; I believe her name was Stephanie, but that too may be a fanciful image conjured up in the imagination. I suppose we must start at the beginning to sort this mess out.

The assignment was simple enough; we were to "write a true story we've always wanted to but couldn't." Ok. So I bounded back home and sat in front of the computer screen, infinite in its blankness. The cursor flashed in anticipation as I pondered. What exactly is the truth? Was I to write the objective facts like a journalist? Or present the truth as I understood it? Or would it better to wholly fabricate the entire thing and

*present* it as truth? One has to be careful when performing the latter as readers tend to become rather upset when they feel they've been duped. But that is not the intention at all; I just want to write a good story.

So I chose something not so pleasant, the divorce. And it was an ugly divorce indeed. One filled with philandering and violence, anger and desperation. But this became a problem. I didn't want to bitch about the thing and invoke the "woe is me" cliché. I wanted to tell a story, a true story. So I finagled the truth a little because the real love story here is about writing. And, in an effort to clarify things for the reader, to make sure the difference between fact and fiction is known, I've composed a short list.

Fact: It was Halloween night and we were heading out to participate in the usual rituals. Things were already ugly at home and my father did not want to go with us. Mostly, this was due to him not wanting to be around my mother. We dressed up and took our pillow cases out to rob the town of its candy. I went as Penguin from the old Batman cartoon. When we got back home, her clothes were all over the lawn. The dresses she wore for work were in ruffled piles and her shoes were scattered all over. The clothes looked as though they had been trampled on and were wet from the sprinklers. The next morning mom was not at home.

Fact-ish: There was a girl, I think. Her name was Stephanie, I believe. I would have liked her to have hair the color that falls somewhere between blonde and brown. And I've always been a sucker for pretty eyes. She would come walking into class gracefully and steal my heart. I was too shy to ever approach her, of course, but that made no difference because this is my story and in it she would be mine.

Fiction: There was no writing assignment.

Fiction: The birthday party. The fight. The whole goddamned thing from the outset was rigged. She never kissed me. I've never been in a fight. But the story seemed to stem from somewhere inside of me. It may be possible yet that this did happen.

Fact: This did happen. It flowed from my mind and onto the page. Where were these images coming from if not real life? Perhaps a little bit too much television or the long-term effects of LSD use are finally beginning to set in. Maybe a combination of the two.

But even as I type this, I find myself wanting to immediately delete it. You can't tell me this didn't happen! You can't expect me to believe that it was *completely* imagined. But the seeds of self-doubt have been planted and I'm lost in the writer's purgatory. Did Hemingway have this problem when writing about his "Lost Generation"? Did he forget where he blurred the lines between reality and fiction?

Narrative is a funny thing, I tell her. Sometimes you find yourself with writing that seems to come from nowhere, as if it was a spontaneous act that ejaculated itself out of the consciousness and onto the page, like a truth that cannot be contained. Narrative is a funny thing, I tell her. Sometimes you find yourself writing the absolute truth and doubting it ever occurred at all. Narrative is a funny thing, I tell her. Sometimes you find yourself.

And she would smile and tell me that I'm being silly. She strokes my hair the way I like it and tells me that things are alright. It's worked out for the best after all. And we will laugh and laugh, all the while holding each other. Promise me you'll always be there? But she can't because

she's already gone. And she's gone because I wrote she is gone. Not even "Backspace" can erase that.

But I can try; I can rewrite the whole thing. From the beginning, the proper way this time. Promise me you'll always be there? And she smiles and captures me in those hazel eyes. Yes, she says, I will always be there. On the page, for ever and ever, as long as you never erase me.

And the divorce, can that be changed too?

My parents did go through a rough time, but she came back to him. They renewed their vows and we moved, leaving behind her former lover, the cheating, and the lies. Leaving behind her hazel eyes and wonderful hair that would move with the wind like a field of flowers. I never would see her again but she will always exist in my mind, in the writing.

And as I type the last paragraph, that feeling, that longing, that nostalgia, comes washing over me. Did anything change? These are just symbols on a page. Nothing more, much, much less. Because things have remained the same. She sees me typing this and leans over and presses her lips gently against mine. There, you see, do you feel any better now? No. The truth can be much easier to handle than the fiction because the truth remains constant. But fiction can fill you with hope, with desire. It can blind you with the illusion that things can be better, that things will be better. And, by the time you reach the end, it all goes away as quickly as it came. Hush, she says, and go to sleep. It will be better in the morning. And when I awake, she is gone.

Narrative is a funny thing, I tell her. Fact.



# ABSCONDER

ERIC DINSMORE

I thought about giving up today.  
Opening the word-of-the-day, I read:  
abscond: to depart secretly and hide oneself.  
Where? was the question.  
From? I have loved ones.

My desk has a wonderful view  
of Windows XP,  
the background an image of some  
brochure-paradise island,  
where  
at times  
I drift  
staring  
waking to island women who enjoy  
double entendres about melons,  
where size doesn't matter,  
where one whispers:  
we have forever;  
and the other says:  
we have all night.

I am planning to change my background image.

What the fuck  
did people do  
before the internet?

I have 5 emails:  
two yahoos (difficult to pronounce Houyhnhnms?)  
MS Outlook (sadly, *not* a charity for multiple sclerosis)  
GMAIL (Gangsta Mail)  
Hotmail (I forgot the password in 2007),  
all streamlined to my phone.

I suppose I should be grateful  
for this existence:  
income,  
401(k),  
no black lung,  
but these people  
are like blisters  
swelling on the surface of my brain,  
skin dries  
massaging the egos of superiors  
making 5x my salary.

I have to drink  
coffee,  
alcohol,  
Alka-Seltzer,  
in that order  
to make it through the cycle,  
now my piss  
looks like the Gulf oil spill.

I don't believe people die inside,  
the desire burns  
like my smoking habit.

The only thing I've read  
from Jack London  
is The Apostate,  
about a young boy  
who spends his entire childhood  
working.  
His imagination dies with each day  
he plays with turn of the century  
factory machinery.  
I am not as brave as he,  
deciding one day  
to walk out the steel doors and  
sit under a tree,  
wondering about wondering.

It was this alert to my phone,  
the word of the day in my Gangsta Mail:  
Abscond —

I was staring at the little boy,  
his eyes surprisingly bleak,  
but the word, abscond, dances in mystique.  
I know that boy.

## CARELESS ACTS OF CREATION

BRIAN ROBERSON

Two round pumpkins loiter on the floor  
of my mother's kitchen. One, four years old,  
holds a chipped and tipless carving  
knife. The other lies disfigured  
beside a carefully packed bowl  
of its own moist, viny entrails.

It doesn't mind. You can tell by the jolly  
upturned crescent etched into its face.  
The nose, two oblong holes flaring  
upwards like a hog on the scent  
of truffles. Does it detect  
the overripe sweetness wafting  
from that freshly flayed face?

There are no ears – a merciful gesture –  
this way the curses crackle harmlessly

overhead as a wandering blue-suede slipper  
falls because of one misplaced seed.

Those round eyes, wide and sparkless,  
grow dim as the crossed arms  
of its maker bruise beneath a barrage  
of criticism for such a careless act:  
creation.

# Latrine Lamentations

TOMMY BUI

*There's a bathroom door. Next to it a small bureau with empty-glasses and maybe a tray of half-consumed shrimp puffs atop. All indicative of a party underway. BIXBY walks up and gently raps at the door.*

BIXBY: Hello? Mr. Greene?

GREENE: (*startled: from within the bathroom*) Yes?

BIXBY: It's me, Bixby.

GREENE: Who's Bixby?

BIXBY: We met earlier. I was the one that brought up insects within the first five minutes of our introduction. Remember me?

GREENE: The rhinoceros beetle guy.

BIXBY: That's the guy. Whenever I meet new people I inexplicably begin talking about bugs. It's a nervous thing. Sara says it's a tic.

She also says she's going to stop taking me places if I don't quit.

GREENE: Is there anything I could help you with, friend?

BIXBY: You're not terribly busy at present are you?

*Pause*

GREENE: A little.

BIXBY: Once again, please. You're kind of muffled through this thick oak door. Is this door oak?

GREENE: Are bathroom doors often made of solid oak?

*BIXBY presses his ear against the door.*

BIXBY: Again, please.

GREENE: (*clearly*) Yes, Mr. Bixby. I'm kind of terribly busy at the moment.

BIXBY: I only ask because it's kind of urgent. I have a matter I need to discuss with you and I couldn't bring it up out there with the other guests possibly listening.

GREENE: So you thought the best way to illicit advice from me was to corner me while I was in the bathroom?

BIXBY: Yahtzee. You have a really good bladder. The evening's almost over and you only went this one time. And after four glasses of wine!

GREENE: I find it a little irking you know how much I've had to drink.

BIXBY: Well, sir. I've been watching you all night like a hawk.

GREENE: More like a sexual predator.

BIXBY: Heh.

GREENE: Just waiting to pounce.

BIXBY: Are you picking me up clear in there? If you're slightly muffled, then I must be too. Shall I press my mouth against the open slit

at the bottom of this possibly oak door?

*Pause*

BIXBY: Would that help?

GREENE: What do you want, insect boy?

*BIXBY begins idly playing with the shrimp puffs.*

BIXBY: Can I confide in you? It's a sincerely personal matter.

GREENE: If it gets you away from the bathroom door, then out with it.

BIXBY: My problem could quickly be summed up as a spousal one.

*BIXBY talks directly into the key hole.*

BIXBY: I highly suspect my wife might be (*sotto*) cheating.

GREENE: At what?

BIXBY: On me. Because, recently, all signs point to her being a total (*sotto*) whore.

GREENE: You've been drinking. I'm sure this is all premature paranoia.

BIXBY: I know it. I know it in my (*sotto*) gut.

GREENE: It's a lavatory, not a library. Stop whispering.

BIXBY: (*sotto*) I'll try.

GREENE: That's really unfortunate. Sally's a tragically beautiful woman.

BIXBY: Sara.

GREENE: Right, Sara. Whatever.

BIXBY: Are you familiar with the bullet ant?

GREENE: Naturally.

BIXBY: Really?

GREENE: No, you lummoX. Why would I know what the hell a bullet ant is? You and your goddamn bugs.

BIXBY: Y'know, bullet ants. They get that name because that's what a bite from one feels like. A bullet.

GREENE: There's absolutely no reason for me to know that. If anything, I actively campaign to not know things like that. Things like bullet ants.

BIXBY: I'm gut shot, Greene. I am. That's what I feel like. I'm hobbling around. Losing blood by the pint. I'm a goner.

GREENE: C'mon, we're being awfully melodramatic, aren't we? Courage, man.

BIXBY: What am I going to do? I've exhausted all avenues.

GREENE: I barely know you. So I'm hardly a candidate to be offering you advice. But I do commiserate.

BIXBY: Really?

GREENE: No.

*BIXBY lies on the floor.*

BIXBY: I treated her like a queen, sir.

GREENE: And did she treat you anything like a king?

BIXBY: I would've toiled hard for her. Provided her with honey. Protected her larvae from predators.

GREENE: Right, bugs. Of course.

BIXBY: I feel like dung.

GREENE: Stop it.

BIXBY: Dung stuck on the claw of a dung beetle who's stuck on the bottom of someone's boot.

GREENE: If you make one more bug reference, I swear, I can't be held accountable for my actions.

BIXBY: The boot of a serial killer.

GREENE: This isn't productive.

BIXBY: You've gotta help me.

GREENE: How could I possibly help you?

BIXBY: You were talking to Sara earlier. What do you think? Does she strike you as someone who'd do something so heartless?

GREENE: I don't remember most anything about anything out there. As you so diligently accounted, I've had a great deal of wine. But if it's any comfort, then no, Sally seems very loyal and committed to you.

BIXBY: Sara.

GREENE: Right, Sara.

BIXBY: That's just an empty platitude. Could you try a little harder maybe?

GREENE: Alright, kid. Honestly. If she vexes you this much, you probably shouldn't be with her. And if she is being unfaithful to you, then forget that Jezebel.

*BIXBY shoots up and claws at the door with shocking ferocity.*

*His face takes on a radish color.*

BIXBY: She's not a Jezebel! She's a delicate flower! Fragrant and attractive! I'll break your neck!

*He reels back and delivers a punishing haymaker to the door. The crunching noise from his hand likely means he'll never play the violin again.*

BIXBY: Blarg! You and your stupid oak door broke my hand!

GREENE: It's not oak, Spiderman.

BIXBY: God, what the hell kind of wood is it then!?

GREENE: I think it's cherry.

*BIXBY begins to break down in hiccupy sobs.*

BIXBY: Oh, that's the color of her hair.

*He leans against the door and slides down into a defeated mountain of despair.*

GREENE: Is it out of your system now?

BIXBY: Shut up! I loathe you! And your house is repulsive! Your curtains are quite distasteful!

*Pause*

GREENE: Now?

*He cradles his hand*

BIXBY: I'm done. *(sniffle)* Thank you.

GREENE: Feel better?

BIXBY: A little.

GREENE: Sometimes a meltdown is the best medicine. For heart-

break, a tantrum is better than tequila.

BIXBY: I'm sorry about that back there.

GREENE: Skip it. It's alright.

BIXBY: My hand really, really hurts.

GREENE: Go back to your wife, Bixby. Sleep it off.

*Bixby's pocket begins to vibrate. He pulls out a cell phone. He reads the text message.*

BIXBY: It's Sara. She's looking for me.

GREENE: You should go to her.

BIXBY: I think so too. She has my Blue Cross card. My hand's almost unbearable.

*BIXBY begins to walk away. He turns.*

BIXBY: Hey, Greene.

GREENE: Yes?

BIXBY: Sorry for bugging you.

GREENE: Get out of here.

*Bixby smiles and exits the stage.*

*A few beats.*

GREENE: Bixby?

*A few more beats. Then the bathroom door slowly opens and out peeks a woman with cherry hair, SARA. She cautiously peers around and then steps outside. She has a cell phone in her hand.*

*She rearranges herself and then exits the stage.*

BLACK OUT.

## A POETIC RETELLING OF AN UNFORTUNATE SEDUCTION

TYLER DEAKINS

When you awoke beneath me  
tiny sailors readied cannons from  
behind your porthole eyes and  
fired shots, two at a time, into me.

My dreams closed their hands around  
your throat, gripping tightly  
until you were unconscious,  
then drowned you in the bathtub.

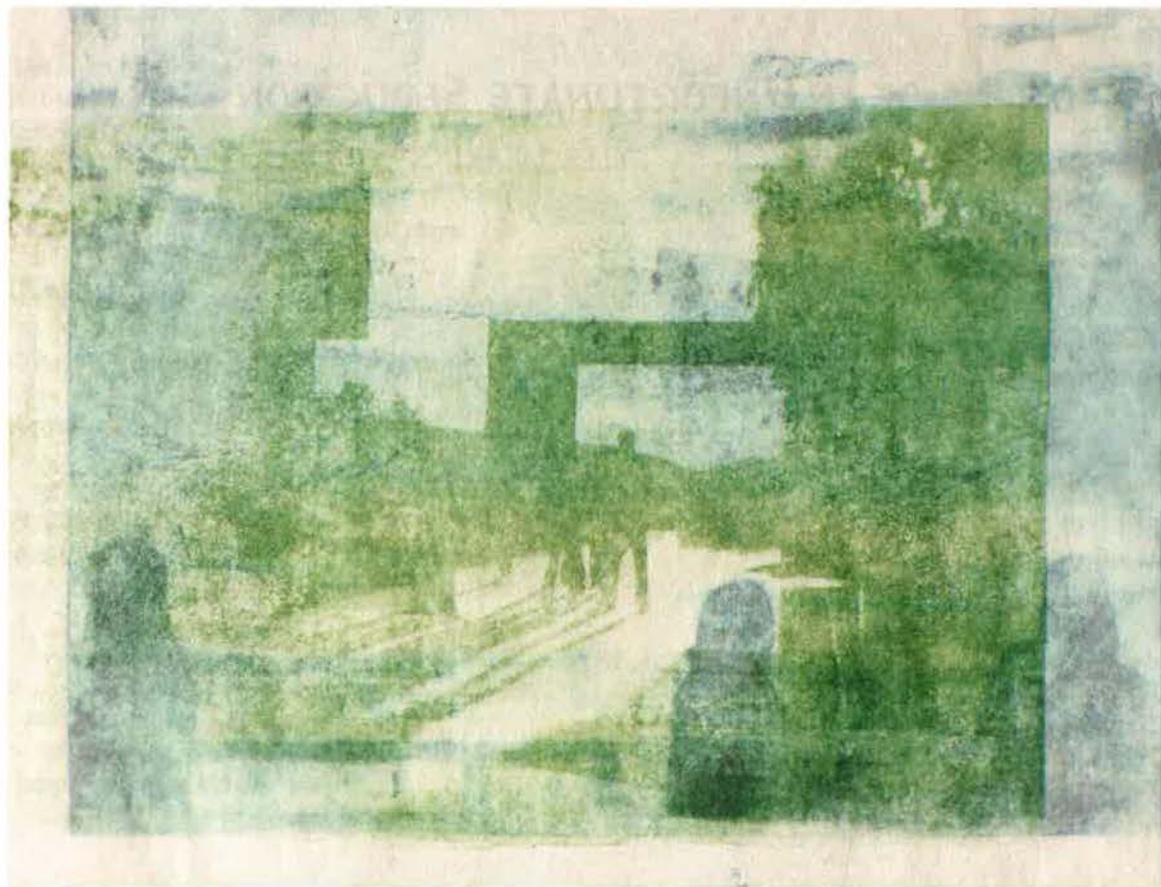
The guns are silent now.  
Those are pearls that were your eyes,  
glassy and pale, vacant as the seas:  
you open them when

I want you to.

You will have no more troubles, Admiral.  
You've never known a love like mine.

A quick bath. A few nights in my bed.  
Und wer von uns Dichtern hätte nicht seinen Wein verfälscht?  
But you'll be ready for the floorboards soon,  
and then the bonfire.

I'll tell the children to keep their distance.  
No one will wonder what business I've got  
burning trash cans full of rubber or  
what ever became of you.



# The Train, the Communist, and the Shoes

JANE DOBIJA

*Gdansk Poland, 1981*

Stefan considered his shoes. They were white sneakers, a gift from a junior diplomat at the American Embassy who used Stefan as his tie to the Polish underground. This fellow was fresh and hadn't learned yet the ways of dictators. So he called openly on tapped phones, noted full names in his calendar, traveled in taxis that waited outside the Embassy door.

Once, the Secret Service had followed the diplomat to a clandestine print shop. Underground couriers arrived at the same time. When their keen eyes caught the agents' car, the couriers left their trunk full of paper and turned, suddenly casual, to a building beyond the rendezvous. They chose a buzzer by the name of an occupant they did not know, and when the intercom came alive, they faked the postman's voice. Their ruse worked: The lock snapped, the couriers slipped inside, and they waited in the stairwell for two hours until a slit of street light in the cracked door showed the diplomat getting into a taxi and the agents pulling out behind him. The couriers gave up the stairwell then, and the

delivery, too. Best to wait for another night when their boxes could pass as innocents. Best to wait for a night when the diplomat stayed home.

Stefan maintained the gift of shoes never could compensate for the messes the American caused. Still, it was true that he had worn them every day for a year now. This constant service had caused one of the laces to give out, and because the shops weren't selling replacements, Stefan had to rehabilitate the cord with a knot. He saw now that the repair was good, and so he stretched his short legs to allow the other passengers in his compartment – a mother and six children – a chance to admire them.

For the third time this week, Stefan was riding the night train to Gdansk. The Solidarity Trade Union's first National Congress was set for September. Half of August already had passed, but the organizers seemed unable to finish their work. Every few days, they summoned Solidarity's advisers from all corners of Poland to solve a new problem. This time, the authorities were threatening to censor reports from the Congress before they ran on state-run media. The communists would cut and paste the news until Solidarity looked like a band of thieves, and its ties to the West looked like ties to money. The Party, however, would come off as the defender of the working class.

Stefan pondered what bait might divert the censors from Solidarity's media trail, but before an idea jelled he was distracted by the pines,

swaying outside his second-class window, their needles sculpting comfort from the dusk sky. He abandoned politics, puffed his jacket into a pillow, and propped his head against the greasy pane. As he dozed he thanked some power for the blessing of a compartment seat. It had fallen to him only because the train had pulled out early from Warsaw Central Station. Other nights, the trains left late; sometimes, they didn't leave at all. That was how things in Poland were working right now.

Stefan gathered his boyish limbs deep into his corner seat and pretended that sleep was possible. But the children in his compartment were restless. They had been made to wait too long for the seashore and so had claimed the corridor as their beach where they ran, kicked up sand, and feigned deafness to their parents' calls. The mother smiled an apology each time the children squealed past their compartment door.

"No problem," Stefan assured her. "I have two of my own."

Stefan turned again to his window thinking he might force sleep by counting trees. But, instead of slumber, the pines brought memories of the summer past when he and his friends had traveled to the Lenin shipyard on strike. They had spread themselves through the train when they traveled then, pretending not to know each other when they passed in the cars. They spent hours in silence, listening to the wheels rattle over the tracks, imagining a message in the clatter that presaged what waited for them in Gdansk. But nothing Stefan conjured could have matched what greeted him at the shipyard. He saw the gate spring open, the workers' ranks break to let the experts pass through. The unexpected silence of the place had frightened him. Why weren't the workers singing? He wondered. Who had swiped the megaphone that

should be carrying speeches into the yard?

Brokering an agreement between workers and communists took so long that the strike had turned routine. Women set up a kitchen to cook hot meals for the crew, and the experts joined the strikers in the canteen. Some of his friends had taken to the workers. They spent dinner breaks listening to worries, discussing details from the talks that were broadcast live on the factory grounds. Stefan marveled at this ease which, he knew, he never could manage. When he entered the canteen, he avoided the strikers' eyes, trained his gaze instead on the *pierogi*, imagined the women who had rolled the dough, cut the circles, turned quarter moons around spoonfuls of potatoes or cabbage. Even in those first days, he forced himself to see that the shipyard and what it wanted could never last. The Party bosses might feign capitulation for a while, but then, they would take control again. The strikers had risked everything, and they would lose all. If they had sat at Stefan's table and asked what he thought, that is what he would have had to tell them.

The din in Stefan's compartment swelled when the mother called her brood inside. She passed out sandwiches of cucumbers and white cheese, lettuce and eggs. A jar of tea made the rounds of five young mouths. Stefan stirred and the woman found a sandwich for him, too, offering it over her infant's soiled diaper. He managed a "No, thank you," before dashing for the corridor and hanging his head from an opened window. The night air was still heavy with August heat, but he breathed deeply, hardly noticing the cigarette smoke curling from a passenger nearby.

"Little ones don't travel well."

Stefan looked at the man who was talking around a hand-rolled cigarette.

"They're not mine."

"I know," the fellow said.

The suggestion of familiarity made Stefan draw his head inside. He took in the muscular figure, jacketed in olive green and topped with a bush of reddish hair. This man wasn't his Secret Service shadow. He'd seen the agent who usually tailed him board the car next door in Warsaw. But Stefan knew when someone had popped up in his path for a reason and this sleazy fellow gave signs of wanting to confide in him.

"I remember summers in these forests." The man hadn't looked at Stefan yet. He was still taking in the pines. "Granma had a summer house by the lakes. Me and my brothers, we fished every day, and Granma made supper with what we caught and what came from her garden. You did pretty much the same?"

The bait, posed as a question, was meant to soften Stefan, make him feel they had something in common. He never understood why they expected such naïveté, or why they showed so much themselves.

"I worry about losing all that now, for my kids, for yours," the stranger went on. "We've always lived in a civilized place. This is Poland, not Russia in 1917. You have to consider what could happen."

Stefan drew away from the shoulder that tried to brush his own. He straightened his back, his eyes seeing only the pines that passed before him.

"There has been a meeting at the Kremlin. You will read of it soon

in the papers." The stranger turned now to his real subject. "Our First Secretary has not received the Party's blessing for what he has allowed in Poland. The Soviet army plans maneuvers for September on the Baltic coast. We all know what this means."

The man dragged a final puff from his cigarette and flicked its remains into a damp field. He blew the smoke into the darkness, then bowed his head as if in prayer. His downward stare held so long that Stefan finally dropped his head, too, and saw what had caught the stranger's eye.

"I see you have not been able to find shoes in Warsaw," he started, looking sadly at the sneakers. "I have a friend in Gdansk who handles shoe shipments. Go to this address, show him what I have written. He will help you."

The paper stuck to Stefan's palm. He thought to defend his sneakers, but the stranger already had bowed good-bye and was backing toward the end of the car. A boy dashing for a beach ball finally made him disappear.

Stefan read the name of a street he did not know on the scrap of paper and then stuffed it into his pocket. He flapped a fold-out stool from the corridor wall and waited for his body to accept the train's rhythm. The night was thick now, those few hours during the East European summer when darkness offers relief. He closed his eyes and tried for a picture of a stream off-trail in the Tatra Mountains, but only the stranger's olive sport coat, too warm for August, came to him. The stranger hadn't shared any extraordinary news. Within two days, everyone would read the same reports in the Party daily. But someone had chosen to leak the

information early, and Stefan knew why. The picture of Soviet troops gathering around the Baltic was sure to frighten some of the union's rank and file. They would ask why Solidarity hadn't managed to secure Poland's borders over the past year. Accusations would fly, debates would turn hostile, and the Congress' task of setting a course for the local union chapters would take second chair to foreign policy. That was always the intent of the authorities' rumors—to throw Solidarity off track. But Stefan wondered if there was more to the stranger's message, for he had seemed frightened, too. Had the man sought Stefan out on his own, and was he worried he might be caught? Or had he been sent by Party bosses, who knew what was brewing in Moscow and needed Solidarity allies to stave off trouble?

Stefan pushed the questions away, like a plate of peas he couldn't stomach, and pulled a letter from his pocket. "Arrived unsealed," the censors had stamped across the flap after they had read the correspondence. His wife, Julia, knew her letters from abroad would be checked before they reached her husband's hands. She didn't have much subversive information to pass from Kentucky, where she was doing research in a university neurology lab. But every now and then, she would mention a movie, the specific time and day she had seen it. Stefan knew then that someone from the States would be calling, and he would have to wait by a phone for the contact. This system had worked well so far and had been a channel of communication about grants from the Democracy Fund, about shipments of computers for the underground presses. All the transactions were legal right now, but Stefan and his friends knew the authorities were listening. The situa-

tion inside Poland was volatile, and until things settled down, they needed a few well-kept secrets.

Julia's letter had been written in her compact, precise hand, as if she had been trained to save even notepaper. It described the house she had rented outside of Lexington, the garden, the pair of cats, the swing made from a patched inner tube. Their son, who already was six, had asked to build a tree house where he and the neighbor boys could meet. They would need the hideout when they were teens, he had explained. Privacy would be necessary then; the house couldn't provide it for three.

"Adrian sees himself here forever," Julia wrote. "He refuses to remember our flat, the chestnuts we gathered in the park. Monika is different. She is only three, but she cries often for no reason, and I think it is because she is homesick.

"We are all waiting for you."

Stefan folded the letter, tucked it back into the envelope and returned it to his pocket. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine Kentucky. The bluegrass and cats came easily, but the days without political meetings that set his life's course were harder. At first, he had promised to join Julia in the spring but then had pushed the visit into summer. In his next letter, he would suggest saving the trip for Christmas. Julia would accept the holiday logic, but if he waited any longer, he would be forced into a simple "No."

"I cannot leave." He practiced the argument now in his head. "Too much is happening, and I am needed here."

"You think *we don't* need you?" Julia's counter would be obvious. "And what about you? Don't you need us?"

"Of course, I need you," he would answer. But his teeth would begin to bite worry into his lower lip, and he would pull away from the hollow he felt growing inside himself.

They had been repeating the argument for five years now, starting the night his closest friend, a fellow mountain climber, had taken him to a secret meeting in the Stegny district. It was the trust that kept him there, the feeling that all the activists in the curtained room—from the Professor, who argued with chilled stares, to Kuron, who spouted smoke without cigarettes—were bound to each other like climbers rappelling on shared ropes. If one missed a step, the others could save him, or they all could tumble together into the rocks below. In either case, their shared fate would be greater than what they could have managed alone.

This dedication of the initiate, blind and furious, lasted a full year. Then, Stefan saw his own value. He proved himself first as a courier, creating his own rules for the deliveries and mercilessly enforcing them upon himself. He never told anyone—not even Julia—what was hidden inside his satchel. He didn't drink vodka before he set out, or even beer. Before climbing into his Little Fiat, he checked his papers—identity card, driver's license, insurance—and rehearsed a story just in case the *milicja* stopped him.

His prudence saw even treasonous manuscripts to their printers. And when he circulated a memo to convene the Committee, every member showed up. Without disturbing the hierarchy that had invited him, Stefan found his natural place within its ranks. He liked the power this position gave him, perhaps more so because power was so hard to come by in Poland. Even within the Party, there weren't any guaran-

tees. Someone might lie or pass out favors. Then the whole system would shift to drop you through the floor. Victims of such accidents fought for years, but they never climbed free of the rubble.

Julia had made him see the truth about the power.

"The cause isn't your sole motive," she had challenged when he refused to explain long absences.

Stefan knew she was right. He liked the flush of shy importance when the Committee paused to hear his opinion, perhaps about a welder, who had been fired for his politics, and about his friends, who were ready to storm the Party headquarters. The Committee might be leaning toward confrontation, letting loose a general strike. Then Stefan would lay things out: Send Kuron to the workers' council; keep the job action inside the tractor plant; call Michael from the *Times* and let him know unrest was burning in the south, at Nowa Huta, as well as on the Baltic coast.

"The foreign press likes such drama," he would remind them. "And even the Kremlin reads the *Times*."

When Stefan extracted such a plan from the debates, the Committee could see what they were arguing about. A vote could be taken, and they could go home. On the way out the door, Kuron would clap Stefan on the back, as if they shared a secret, as if no one else had noticed where the decision came from.

Stefan huddled now into his corridor seat and let his skin relive the rush of satisfaction. It was akin to the pride he had smiled over Mount Gniwont when he first scaled its peak. Only the release was lacking, for within the Committee, there wasn't an achievement—not

even infiltrating the Politburo—that merited rest. In this way, the underground was like an animal, noble but ravenous, that had slinked into Stefan's chest. It already had eaten part of his heart, and so, when he tried to picture his son and daughter, vying for a place on his lap, nothing came. Instead, he felt himself letting them go, watching them run to someone else. The resignation embarrassed him, and as he groped to cover the feeling, his fingers fell upon the paper scrap in his pocket. He pulled it out and studied the address, written in a shaky hand that never had felt comfortable in school books. Then he folded it next to his wife's letter so he would not lose it before reaching Gdansk.

The train lurched to a stop, and the doors popped open. A gathering of families with too many children pushed into the corridor. Stefan stretched himself against the wall to make room for bags passing through.

"Excuse us, excuse us," each father said as he led his family by the occupied compartments.

Stefan felt his body pressed into the window until he gave up his folding seat and retired to the empty space by the toilet. The fecal stench made this end of the car the men's area – not for fathers, but for men who were traveling alone. Stefan was lucky to get a corner where he could sleep standing up. He closed his eyes, and from the murmurings around him, he learned what had gone wrong. The train had changed its schedule and now was running late. Even stragglers would catch it. Before dawn, the families might force Stefan to give up his corner and

move to the shifting platform between the cars. At least he could feel air in the space outside, he comforted himself. He could see the sky and feel the wet morning.

A pair of young shipyard workers spotted Stefan before he stepped off the train. They gathered his bag, pumped his hand, and hustled him toward a tram stop, hoping passersby might recognize their Warsaw hero along the way. Slim in their clean dungarees, they silently guarded Stefan's seat in the tram. The two had agreed before setting out to keep their questions until they arrived at the flat. Only when Stefan's shower was finished and the rye bread had been served did they ask: What was Warsaw's viewpoint on the factory directors? Would the experts stand by the workers when they asked to choose their own bosses? They were tired of managers, appointed by the Party, who built mansions, summer homes, even private businesses with bricks and windows that belonged to the state-run firms. One crook at the Lenin Shipyard didn't even hide his theft. He ordered workers to load factory trucks with cement and pipes and wiring, and to deliver the supplies to a site outside Gdansk.

"He's building his own shipyard," was the rumor that circulated among the crew.

Stefan knew the men would pass his opinion on to their friends, using it to prove their closeness to Warsaw's wisdom. He thought, too, of the stranger's message on the train as he chose his words.

"The question is, how to make this change without angering the Party so much it will crush our union. And remember, the Kremlin is watching.

No other Soviet country has been allowed such an experiment.”

The workers expected Stefan to explain how the advisers would walk this tightrope. Instead, he asked one of the men to pass the bread before finishing the cheese on his plate. Then he pushed his empty tea glass toward the middle of the table. When he rose, the men stood, too.

“I have personal business in Gdansk before the meeting.” Stefan apologized as he grabbed his jacket from a peg near the door. He checked his pocket for the scrap of paper. As soon as he touched it, he was on his way.

Stefan matched the name on the scrap of paper with a street on the map loaned him by the kiosk tender. He left the tram a mile or so before his destination to take the last distance on foot. His best thinking happened when he was in movement. Today, he needed the walking time to ponder the day’s meeting and to compose a better comment about the factory bosses. But as he weighed the satisfaction certain words might give the workers, his legs pushed the sneakers into his view. Why had he taken the stranger’s criticism to heart? The shoes asked. Did no one else covet sneakers when they were one year old?

Stefan found himself answering the shoes. Their value went beyond leather and laces, he philosophized. He associated them with a cosmopolitan comfort that looked as good in Paris as it did in New York. When he slipped them on in the morning, they confirmed what he knew about himself: Although he still was in Poland, he had slipped by the dictator. The largest part of him no longer lived by the communists’ rules.

He padded this argument with a mundane motive for tracking

down the shoe warehouse. The man on the train had started a game, something like Polish Monopoly, that never led to real profit. Stefan had a similar match going with a jeweler in Warsaw, who had taken his watch for repairs. He’d left the timepiece in April; the repair was promised in May. Stefan returned late in the month, and it was promised anew for June. This routine continued through summer vacation, the winter holidays, the subsequent spring break. Each visit produced only stories that excused the jeweler’s delays. First, there was a missing part, which might come from an older customer; but he must die first. Then the shop lost heat, the pipes burst, and the jeweler could not work. Finally, the craftsman took sick and sought a cure at the salt baths in Torun. By New Year, Stefan knew the watch was lost, but he could not stop himself from going back for the next story. Instinct told him the shoe warehouse would be a similar maze, and refusing to enter it was unthinkable. In this, he was still a Pole.

He saw the shoe man sitting in a chair tipped against a long, gray warehouse, his stockinged feet dangling a foot from the ground. One loafer lay in the weeds by the wall; the other was taking a savage brushing from hands that wanted a patent finish from dull leather.

Stefan shuffled into the yard. The shoe man didn’t notice him.

“Excuse me, sir.”

Stefan threw out the greeting from a respectful distance. The man stopped brushing, squinted, flexed his brow. A pair of bifocals slid from his forehead to his eyes.

“Excuse me,” Stefan repeated the apology.

The man scanned his bifocals for the best take on his visitor.

"Grabowski." Stefan stretched his hand halfway over the gap and lied. People who came to him through the secret service never got his real name. "I met a man on the train from Warsaw this morning. He said he was your friend. Suggested I see you about a pair of shoes."

The shoe man hadn't set the front legs of his chair on the ground yet, but he hadn't returned to the polishing either.

"What's this fellow's name?" he asked after some silence.

"Didn't give one. Just said he was a friend of yours. His hair was red, maybe even on the orange side, I would say, and he wore a green sport coat."

"That'd be Wilczek." The front legs of the chair came down, and the shoe man dusted particles of wax from his brown shirt. "He grew up around here. Joined the Party early. Never resigned but never felt right about it either. Keeps trying to make amends. Says he's using his *position* to help us. That's why I got a warehouse full of shoes right now."

He jabbed his thumb in the direction of his stock. Then he pulled the loafers together and pushed his feet inside. He didn't seem to mind that the left was shiny and the right was dull.

"So what are you supposed to arrange for me? Or what am I supposed to arrange for you?" he asked. "According to Wilczek, that is."

"It is not so large a matter that it could be called 'arranging.'" Stefan laughed and looked at his feet. "I just need a pair of shoes."

The man shifted his eyes to Stefan's sneakers, trying out both halves of his bifocals. He scratched his pate between strands of graying

hair. Stefan looked for a trace of jealousy in the man's stare. All he found was the calculating gaze of a businessman.

"What size do you wear?"

"Nine. But I have a good shoemaker in Warsaw. He could stretch a size eight or pad a size ten." Stefan shrugged. "I'm not hard to please."

The shoe man set his hands on his waist to take the place of a missing belt.

"Pleasing isn't the issue these days. No?"

The shoe man waited for a reaction to this statement, which, he believed, summarized all. Stefan just held his shoulders in a slight bow.

"Wilczek forgot just one thing," the shoe man confided on the way to the warehouse door where he stopped to sort through a bunch of keys the size of a grape cluster. He singled out a stubby number and slipped it into the lock.

"Please," the shoe man said, motioning his guest forward.

Stefan heard a desk fan inside the warehouse trying to cut the August heat. He followed the shoe man toward the tired sound. It led them to an office where caged blades whipped a girlie calendar, the pages of oversized ledgers, and the remainders of morning tea. The shoe man fished in his top desk drawer for yet another key, then he pointed to the end of a corridor.

"This way to storage," he explained.

Stefan's sneakers padded behind the shoe man and stopped at the designated door. The ritual of lock and key was again attended and, when the door gave way, the shoe man gestured for his guest's passage.

"See for yourself," his eyes said. "There is nothing to hide here."

Stefan moved toward the middle of an oblong room with the shoe man behind him. The large space at the center was empty, walled in by gray boxes that sagged over each others' corners.

"What you see here," the shoe man began, "is my stock. Not a small stock. Not an *insignificant* stock."

Stefan nodded as if he wanted the monologue to continue.

"But you and I both know that times are such, we do not have the luxury of keeping so many shoes in storage—unless there is some kind of *problem* with the stock." The shoe man looked at his visitor, folded his arms, readied for the revelation. "Every shoe here is a size thirteen. Men's oxfords. Some other city got the size twelves, and some other, your size, the nines. If you like, I can check the log in my office and tell you where you may find the shoes that will fit you perfectly, probably a whole warehouse of them, just like this."

Stefan chose to play the scene straight.

"Okay," he said. He followed the shoe man back to the office and watched him pull a ledger the size of Moses' Tablets from a high shelf, lay it on the desk and lift its heavy cover. The shoe man leaned his paunch over the pages and scanned the regular handwriting.

"Aha! Size nine!" His finger fell on a line, traced it toward the binding, and settled on a name. "Here it is. In Zakopane. Mr. Krywacz runs the warehouse there. He got the shipment for your size. I'll give you the address."

He searched his desk for a piece of paper, and when he didn't find one, Stefan handed him the scrap that had been passed to him on the train.

"I keep all my shoe information in one place," he joked with his

benefactor, who laughed too heartily at the wisecrack. The paper came back into Stefan's hand, and he slipped it next to Julia's letter once more. Time was running out. His colleagues would be waiting for him at the shipyard. But one more step was left in the transaction.

"You know, I have a friend in Warsaw," Stefan started. "He's a big guy. I think thirteens would fit him just right. Would you sell me one pair? For him?"

The shoe man nodded commendation of this good business sense before bustling off to the storeroom. He came back smiling with one box, which he passed to his customer's hands. Stefan lifted the cover and brought out a shoe. Its top was a synthetic that would never let skin breathe, and the sole was rock hard to guarantee pain.

"Good shine," Stefan mustered as he continued the inspection. "And good craftsmanship."

A price was decided, with minimal discussion, equaling half the train fare back to Warsaw. Stefan hoped he could find someone at the shipyard who was a size thirteen and would help him make up the loss.

"If you see Wilczek on the return train, tell him I need a radiator for my truck," the shoe man called as Stefan strode to the sidewalk. "Mine sprung a leak. Can't find a replacement anywhere in Gdansk. If I got one, maybe I could spread these size thirteens around."

Stefan nodded and waved. He headed for the tram stop, watching his sneakers as he walked, glad for their well-washed leather and knotted lace.

# AN EXPLANATION FOR SPEAKER DISRUPTIONS

KIMBERLY MILLER

I listen to my music loud  
To feel the beat live in my head  
If I could hear God in this sound  
My soul would not fear man or death

# MARCH

RACHAEL JORDAN

*Stimulation.* Clothes no longer fit. You push my skin outward. My flesh, the gut strings of ancient flamenco guitars, stretch to encompass sound. I swell with you. Your father places his mouth to my stomach to talk secrets through my skin. He sings muffled songs, his fingers tap along my lightened skin. I tell him you can't hear yet. He holds his lips steady against me and hums. In garbled words he reminds me, "but she can feel."

*Transmission.* I often wonder if you will write me. I have written my mother. I write her as kitchen walls, the broken leg of a limp chair that sags under rippled yellow curtains. She is spit-spotted cheeks against dry cupboards; sweat and words broken on air. She is also bird baths and hollow wind chimes over oranges sour with dirt. My mother is a chickened apron; her mother, my grandmother, is gypsied skirts and the smell of acrylic. Blue-glass jars blown and set to catch the sun. On which parts of your world will I be transcribed?

*Sensation.* After the voices of the actors silence, after their last sung note drips to the orchestra pit and disappears, I feel you. You flutter through me as those notes descend. Your few inch body etches sensation against deepened flesh. Before this night, I knew your heart's sound, I knew your gray-scale image, and now I know your body; the commitment of freshly carved bone and emerging skin. As if your fingers play a fleeting harp against your walls, my inside. In a theatre with hundreds of bodies behind and above us, the moment of silence before the applause fills with motion. I am sure of you.

# Paperboat<sup>1</sup>

HARUK●HATAKEDA

Once<sup>2</sup> upon a time<sup>3</sup>, there was a man<sup>4</sup> who loved<sup>5</sup> a woman<sup>6</sup>. They met one late afternoon in summer. It was the end of the last summer they would know as high school students. It was a somewhat melancholy meeting that would permeate their memories with thoughts of *what ifs*, *the ends*, and *once upon a times*<sup>7</sup>. Once upon a time<sup>8</sup>, they<sup>9</sup> flew<sup>10</sup> to space<sup>11</sup>. In between being on earth to leaving earth, they crossed the seven seas, saw the seven wonders of the world, found seven new constellations, invented seven ways to take naps then be able to sleep easily at night, made seven faithful friends, learned seven seldom spoken languages (two of which were considered dead languages), and had seven wishes<sup>12</sup>. However, of those seven wishes, each of them only had one true wish, and that was to spend more time with each other. Once upon a time<sup>13</sup>, these two<sup>14</sup> didn't die at the end of the story<sup>15</sup>. They didn't have to say good-bye to each other, sacrifice one another, anyone else, or the world, or lose "the most important things that can't be seen with the eyes<sup>16</sup>." Once upon a time<sup>17</sup>, a man met a woman<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The paperboat plays a pivotal role in the lovers' story.

<sup>2</sup> Should the question be: how many stories begin with the word "once" or how many stories have been documented that begin with the word "once"? Perhaps, even better, how many "good" stories begin with "once" and how many of those stories are fairy tales and are fairy tales considered a cheat because they automatically have an edge other stories don't that do begin with "once"? Plainly put, fairy tales own an air of prestige that allows them to have the backing of the word "once". And, while this is arguable, fairy tales are considered royalty, in a category of their own. The kind of category no other story, or other modern fairy tale, could possibly hope to attain. A category akin to a knighting only Time<sup>2</sup> (a faraway, long gone – time-is-not-cyclical-after-all – sort of Time) can bestow.

<sup>3</sup> Sadly, the phrase "once upon a time" doesn't have the kick it used to. There are many speculations as to why this is, but the most popular theory is its overuse in shitty stories. Plus, people who use the phrase "once upon a time" more than once in a story are "asking for it."

<sup>4</sup> Please don't substitute "man" for "boy," "old man," or "Rougarou."

<sup>5</sup> True love may be difficult to grasp, but if there ever could be a pure, intense love, as described in *The Princess Bride* (not to be quoted or well-summarized here because a) that costs money and b) if you haven't watched the movie, there's no point in explaining its logiclove since a summary would not do it justice), between humans then this idea of love presented in the tenth word of this story would be that kind of love.

<sup>6</sup> Once again, substituting or replacing "woman" with "girl," "dominatrix," or "sheep" cannot be done. Wait. That's a lie. Of course one *can* substitute or replace "woman" with "girl," "dominatrix," or "sheep," but it's not recommended.

<sup>7</sup> The kind of "Once Upon A Times" followed by Not Exactly "To Be Continueds" that only look like they're disguised as Also Not Really "The Ends." Time<sup>2</sup> may not be cyclical but Beginnings and Endings are another story. Not to say they are or aren't.

<sup>8</sup> Oh, my.

<sup>9</sup> Together, yes.

<sup>10</sup> Method? That'll really bake your noodle.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the footnote above makes more sense after reading the destination. Still, it's too late to know otherwise; what would have happened if you had read this story in a different manner, different order, different mindset – if you were a different person?

<sup>12</sup> Think of it as a list.

<sup>13</sup> Here's a spoiler: Three times, in this story, isn't a charm. There will be one more use<sup>17</sup> of the phrase "once upon a time" in this story.

<sup>14</sup> In another life, they may've said to each other, stuck with other lovers, but still soul mates, "Maybe in another life," when he hinted she could stay or she hinted she'd like him to stay (the "or" is only present because no one here knows how that story went).

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps this is a good thing - it is meant to be - however, one could decide not to read it as such. Suffering is **more fundamental than enjoyment**. Actually, that's a half lie. Speculating the suffering, especially the suffering of those closest to you (but the suffering of strangers also suffices in the absence of intimate suffering), of other people is a popular human pass time. Well, that's another half lie of a half lie, making it a quarter lie. The real truth is that suffering isn't so important, but the chance to push one's own miserable life onto another experience or to believe that another person's suffering is relatable to their own is the most egotistical folly people nurture.

<sup>16</sup> *Le Petit Prince* was the woman's favorite story. The man never read it, but he understood the importance of what the story meant to her.

<sup>17</sup> The spoiler<sup>13</sup> was true.

<sup>18</sup> The end.

## IN THE BLINK

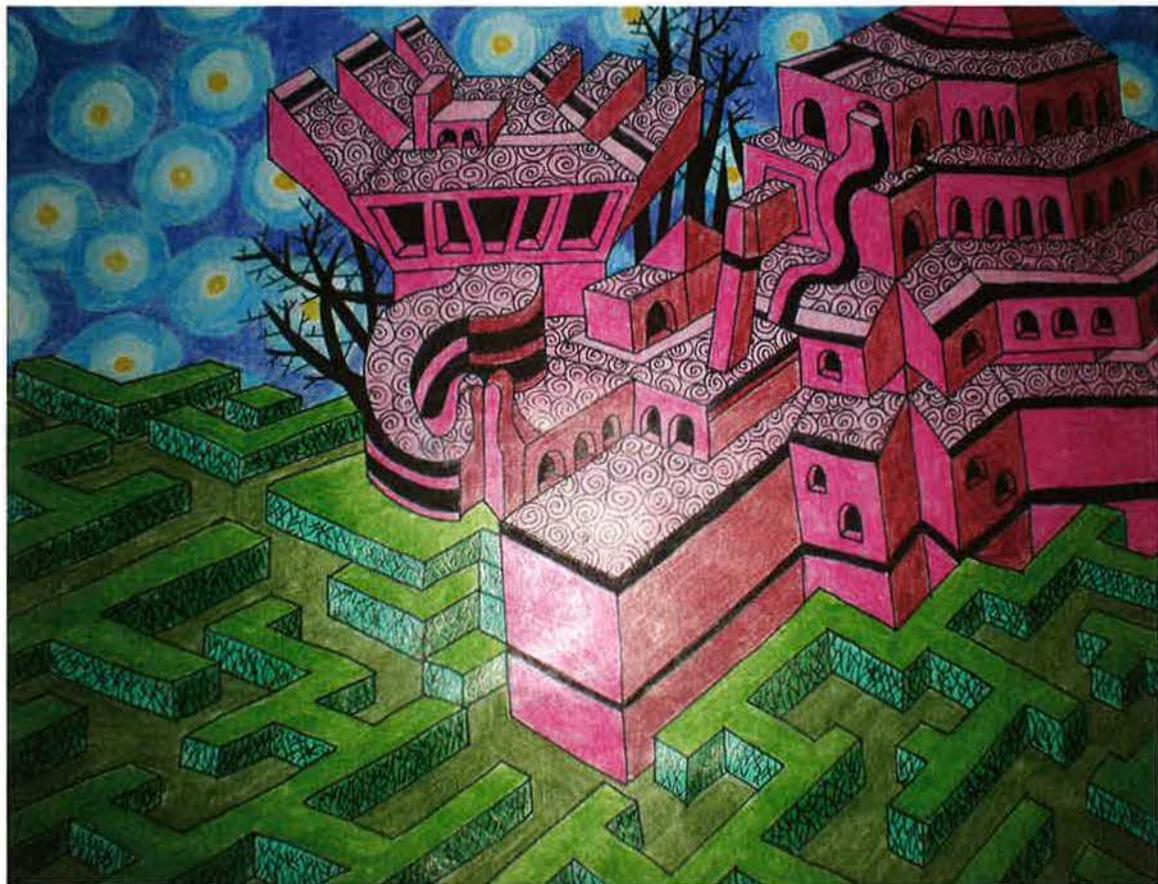
BILLIMARIE ROBINSON

First rule of editing: we are attracted  
to human bodies. It is always the face  
we turn to. Before that:  
    eyes. Lovers  
hold the ability to shift  
through irises' debris. I remember yours,  
those tins of brown  
    —mine, a darker shade  
    of brown—  
though my memory is scented  
worse than nearsighted vision.

To regain sight, I stared into the mirror:  
    It was not vain.  
    Even infants reflect.  
Through those eyes, I touched my face  
(or touched *its* face).  
    There was no translator.  
    The body could not meet the soul.

Names I never gave it  
spoken in strange dialects.  
The body, that object, is rented  
and one day I will return it:  
a soiled and empty suit  
pressing its wrinkles  
back into the earth. Gently disassembled, packed  
like the sand on Arrakis, where water is in limited supply  
and the only ones to cry for  
are the dead. We — that body and I—  
will leave home, knowing

    each blink as a desecrated rift.



# THE GRAVITAS OF SEASONS

FOR TRACY AKEMI KATO KIRIYAMA

ALLAN AQUINO

*we are the toilers who toil  
to make the starved earth a place of abundance,  
who transform abundance into deathless fragrance.<sup>1</sup>*

your voice embraces rhyme and awe.  
you speak surely as twilight reminds us of purer childhoods.

you are the wealth of compassion, the antithesis to dread.  
you are the spectral glory of the world's last rose.  
you are the force that through our dark veins drives our language.  
you are the canopy of stars the firmament takes for granted.  
you are the secret sun in each of us, realized.

you jazz our sad fancies, making us brighter, tender, more loving.  
you make us want to be angels, poets—you make us seek  
ourselves and, somehow, more.

\*

i will tell you why the los angeles skyline, our herald of destiny,  
roiling with redeemed and quickened souls, assumes  
*this* color, heaven's truer tincture:

because the soul knows no other tone,  
because the moonlight spreads its bluish-white splendor  
to crown the city with metahuman halos,  
because you trace and calculate the systems of the heart,  
because your name evokes valiance and mountains,  
because we become who we are because of who you are,  
simply because of no-because,

\*

you are the gravitas of seasons.

we owe you our reasons, our meanings.  
we owe you our madness, our purpose.  
we owe you our dreamscapes, our appropriations.

we can forgive ourselves for what we are.  
we can love each other for who we are.

<sup>1</sup> Carlos Bulosan, "If You Want to Know What We Are" (1940)

# STATION

SOPHIA PETKOVIC

Hollow as tin, her heart drifts  
homeless in California's  
ultraviolet splendor. An avalanche  
of summers stone pile  
their remains at the gates  
of MacArthur Park.

Blankets of newspapers.  
Plastic hags stuffed with regrets and  
misplaced homes. Soon fill  
to overflowing as her shopping cart  
squeaks out the blues.

Years of rotting fish layer her moth eaten  
overcoat mailed from an earlier life  
of champagne. White cashmere.  
After dinner mints.

Once christened worthy pink baby,  
powdered and oiled to her mother's delight,  
she now mines below topsoil. A coal covered gem  
swaddled in back alleys. Not a pillow.

Not a lullaby. Only rebuttal to the hierarchy  
of costume jewelry grandmothers, great  
aunts and uncles bent over bassinet,  
hawk, owl and mawkish.

Long bony fingers that poke through  
white chiffon, tattooing their importance  
on the moment. Pointing,  
as if to sanction an orderly destiny, a life  
that now chains around her blue,  
blue ankles.

# The Arm in the Wall

LUCAS PAYNTER

There's an arm in the wall. It's muscular, tanned and feeling around, reaching for something it cannot see. It came through quite suddenly, rousing me from a nap that had transported me to a far off place that was anywhere but here. It broke through, carefully at first, snapping off brittle walling and pulling it in, into the darkness. It was only when it could finally break off no more that it became brave, reaching out carefully at first for something, anything.

I approach it, slowly, as it reaches, fumbles. The lighting in my cell is poor; his is poorer. I know this from the blackness that was in that newly opened hole, between the moments when the arm carefully withdrew a piece of the wall it snapped off, pulling it inside the cell for fear of who might be on the other side. My visitor is shy at first but grows bold while I keep my distance. I am afraid what this invader might want, even though I have nothing to take. He finds this to be true, reaching around at first for a lamp, matches, a gun or a knife. He claws desperately, suddenly, claws, claws, claws at the wall.

Exhausted, the arm drops limp. It dangles, helpless, vulnerable. It's the helplessness and vulnerability that I feel. I've been here for twelve

days now without sign of contact from the outside world. If it had only been twelve days, I could stand it. If it had been thirty or a hundred, I could stand it. But it is not twelve out of twelve, or out of thirty, or out of a hundred. It is only twelve. You cannot imagine how maddening this is, to face eternity in a white brick room with the window almost entirely blocked by a few planks and some duct tape.

This arm, I now conclude, may be the last sign of human contact I see for a long time. Those jackals never said what they're going to do with me, and I've found names of missing persons in my investigations who this new government has willfully not pronounced dead, to make a warning to those who would sniff too far.

And so I make contact, I reach out and touch the arm of the man in the next cell. It panics and flails. It bats my hand away and withdraws into the hole, disappearing into the darkness.

I peer in. I don't see an eye staring back at me.

It's been three days since the arm disrupted my perfect routine. I knock on the wall, sometimes, to no response. I dare not speak, as the guards are fond of killing anyone who does. I saw this for myself in my last moments, where a man sobbed for freedom and they shot him on the spot for doing so.

I recognized his face. He was an important man, an aide to the prime minister. I had interviewed him once, for the January issue, two years back. He could never make eye contact and began every response with the word "well" and ended more than a few of them with the phrase, "you know..." A half-page photo of the man topped the interview,

and it remains the last clear memory I have of him after the M.P.'s sidearm mangled his handsome-but-aging mien. His dried blood still streaks the floor of my cell, from the middle out the door. I know they cleaned the hall, because I remember the soapy water seeping through the slot on the floor where they push the food through.

I considered drinking it, in hopes it might taste better, but thought—

Oh! The water reminds me... it was raining on my sixth or seventh day. I know this because the white noise from the rainfall silenced the gunfire going on outside. Or perhaps the coup had been postponed on account of rain. I'm not sure which.

Sorry, I'm losing myself. I think I see fingers on the rim of the hole in the wall, but I blink and they're gone.

A dark patch formed on the wall, then spread quickly. I don't figure the circle was more than a few inches from end to end. Whatever damage it had done to the wall, then or before then, it hadn't created an exit. Just a vent.

All this thought of water makes me thirsty. I walk over to the toilet and lift the lid on the tank. There is a mildew stench, and you can feel traces of rust on the chain. So I close my eyes, cup my hands, and take a drink. It's bitter, awful stuff, but it hasn't killed me yet. The indigestion I suffered in the first days was awful, but my stomach's toughened since.

As I wipe my lips, I wonder what would happen if my toilet were to break. Would I die of dehydration?

Twenty-three days, I think. That hole has been there almost as long as I have, but the arm in the wall has stayed out of the wall. I've stayed

away too. I'm afraid of what will happen when I get close—is he watching me, waiting to grab me if I get near? Will the hand catch my throat, the arm lock me in a chokehold?

My tray of food slides under the door, and I dash over to grab the low-rimmed bowl before they pull the tray back. The food's been mashed flat to fit neatly in the slit, but they don't give us long to retrieve it. Reach through the slit, and you'll find your hands smashed by your custodian's boots. I learned this much while researching my article. Since the bullets stopped flying two days ago, I'm doubting its odds of publication.

As I dig my hands into my food, I hear through the hole in the wall that my neighbor is being fed as well. I chew softly, slowly, as I walk near the hole. I press my back against the wall and listen. If he reaches through and grabs me, they will not save me. I keep distant.

The metal bowl slides across the floor. Little skids, here and there. Sometimes, the noise is abrupt, startling as it bounces a couple feet. At least once, I hear it hit a wall; not the one we share, of course. The arm is keeping too far away for that.

I'm disgusted to think he's wasting such food in a place like this. Does he think he's clever, pushing the bowl around like that? Does he hope to annoy the guards and make them beat him? It would serve him right. I lick my fingers clean as I can, and wash them with the water from the toilet tank, counting myself lucky that the arm has kept away. It would make a poor choice of associate.

It's been six or eight days since I resolved to avoid the misfit arm in

the wall, and my doubts are seconding. I felt the pangs of isolation ten days after being here and the feeling is returning. But my roommate is scared — I saw to that much — so I'll have to initiate conversation myself.

I walk slowly towards the wall. If he has eyes, I see through them; a tiny patch of light, narrowing slowly as some mass encroaches. I don't need to make any sound. He'll know me by what I take away. I draw my hand up and flex my fingers — I may never see them again. Then, I reach for the heart of some unseen god and thrust my hand into the hole.

Darkness absolute returns to his world. In his inaction he settled for a window, a trace of light, and I have taken even that from a man who already has nothing.

I feel the arm grasp mine, suddenly, violently. I desperately keep my fingers closed, terrified that he'll break them. Scared, I withdraw. I tug, swiftly, and feel the edge of his hand collide with the broken circle he made a month ago. His hand grips tightly around my forearm — he's trying to rip it off! I pull and I feel his skin break because the faintest splatters of blood touch my skin! I pull and struggle and brace a foot against the wall, and I feel his pull against mine. An epic tug-of-war in a casket of silence.

Then, for the grace of sweat or blood, my arm slips between his steel grip and I fall on my tailbone. Freedom! I rise and strike the dust from my dirtied hindquarters. Prepared to wash my hands free of the whole affair, the arm in the wall emerges completely for the first time since the first time, his fingers pointed towards my navel as though knives might grow from them.

Over some unmeasured, patient pause, I remember this old sign of camaraderie. But do I risk embracing the arm's steely grip under the banner of truce and trust? While his other arm (is there another arm?) certainly cannot conceal some useful tool against me, will he try to pull me through?

This is the end of the rope. To fear another man's gesture, to reject it out of fear for what he might do against the best chances of what he could do.

I shake the hand of the arm in the wall. It is a firm, solid shake. We dwell on it for a moment and he releases my hand as quickly as he took it, and snakes back into the hole and into the dark.

A few days have passed... four or five, I think. The arm comes through sometimes, as if to say hi. It tried tapping Morse code once, the second day, but the only response I knew was "S.O.S." (were there two dashes or three?); it became clear that intelligent conversation would be quickly lost upon us.

It's raining right now. The hole in the wall still draws water, but it no longer soaks into our partition. The hand of the arm in the wall rests in the alcove, cupped. Rainwater accumulates in the palm and every so often, it retracts and I hear a slurping sound. During one intermission I place my hand in the hole while the unseen mouth slurps, and he does not thrust me away.

The rain water, even with the dust and particles in it, trumps the toilet. I taste the outside and remember what unprocessed air tastes like vicariously through the water. I savor this and let the drops fall, wasted,

before the hand returns. I do not steal from him again; after all, it was his idea.

On the third day, the arm hung out like a friend over to watch the game. I took a look at him and noted my recollections here: as mentioned once (I think), tanned and muscular. Tattoos of a Celtic knot adorn the bicep and between the openings, as if to ruin the tattoo forever, are his numbers. I faintly make out a 1, 3, 4, 4, 8. The one may be a seven — it's hard to tell in this lighting. I see knife scars upon his forearm and at his wrist are marks and cuts from handcuffs, latched too tight and fought against.

I look at my own corresponding arm, clean of significant disfigurements and symbols. A scar on my index finger from a mishap with a butter knife remains my sole conflict with bladed weaponry. My hands are soft where his are coarse. My skin is pale when his is tanned. I wonder how we are so evenly bad as to share related cells.

The steady breathing in the arm's cell tells me he's either exercising or masturbating; neither one would surprise me. It's been around forty-five days, give or take a few. My activities are less robust; I often pace around my poorly lit cell, trying to keep my notes in my head. If I was brought in on a Thursday, I think today it should be Tuesday... except that would make it only forty-three days... last Sunday might've been a holiday, since I didn't hear any guards, but it may be they simply had a long break...

I wonder about the arm sometimes, if it has a family or friends. I never see its companion, just the one arm. This disturbs me, but I can

never ask why the counterpart fails to show itself. If I'd known Morse code, perhaps I'd learn the reason. The other arm could be in a sling, or deformed, or simply missing from some past military excursion. Or perhaps the arm bears the mark of a former ally of the new dictator, and he conceals it out of shame and design.

As I sit here and eat my extra-mashed, mashed potatoes, I ponder the side of the arm that I've never seen.

A week from the forty-third day. The precipitation has been coming heavily; my friend and I aren't suffering for lack of aqua pura, for once. It literally rains through the hole in the wall.

The rain has worsened and the hole in the wall spills water to the ground of both cells. The thunder alarms me. Before my imprisonment, I ran for cover as munitions rained down upon my head. If I had never been here because this chaos had never happened, the sound of thunder would titillate me, and the flash of lightning would remind me of the things Betty did with her camera when we weren't pursuing a story. She'd sometimes slip photos in my pockets, our passion the memento mori of my marriage. After so many indiscretions, could my wife ever be happy to see me home?

And then the arm in the wall emerges, trembling. The rain water flows down the slick of its skin, falling into the crevices and avoiding the blemishes before falling to the ground like gossamer blood.

I run to the wall and take the arm and try to force it back through; I do not want my friend contracting pneumonia and dying; I do not want

to lack even the company of the arm in the wall. But the strength of the arm outstrips mine and will not be budged. Instead, it wrenches free of my grasp and flails around, startling me. In catching my hand, it shakes; clumsily, awkwardly, but it shakes. Not a shake of meeting but that of cordial farewell.

And then without a second's pause the arm twists away and disappears through the wall. Just as suddenly there is a terrible pounding on the walls, on the door! I try to cry out to stop, desist, but my voice does not work from so much disuse! Without hesitation the guards break through the door of the cell of the arm in the wall, and light pours in so abruptly that I am blinded. I try to watch through half-shielded eyes, but the light hits the water that now floods through the hole in the wall and makes it unseeable.

Lightning strikes. There is a flash of light, then a return to darkness. A stronger darkness, one that invades the halls of our jail.

I hear a scream and the sickening sound of a cleaver hitting wet meat, again and again. Two gunshots and a more intense darkness.

The foul taste of vomit upon my breath is my own, and I quickly wipe the remnants from off my lips and rise.

There is no sound.

My door is open. A trail of blood crosses the path and I wonder why no one's cleaned it yet. So I approach, carefully, one step at a time. I expect to be struck or shot but it does not come. Out of some inbound courtesy when I step to the hall, I close the door behind me. It clicks shut in a way I've not heard for fifty or sixty days.

The guards are all dead. Even as I look I cannot believe it, so many men loosed from their blood, slumped to the ground. I begin to turn to leave, only to pause. I know who did this, but I do not *know* with the certainty a man must have. My friend's cell door is open full breadth. I only need look inside to see.

On the ground between the two dead guards is the arm in the wall, cut loose at the shoulder. It has lost color and the blood has drained from it. I think I see it twitch, perhaps some last spasm as the nerves fire. It is coldening and displays none of the friendliness it formerly showed me. It is dead.

I pick up the arm and clutch it tightly in mine. We will not leave alone.

# MAYBE IN AMERICA

SEAN AHERN

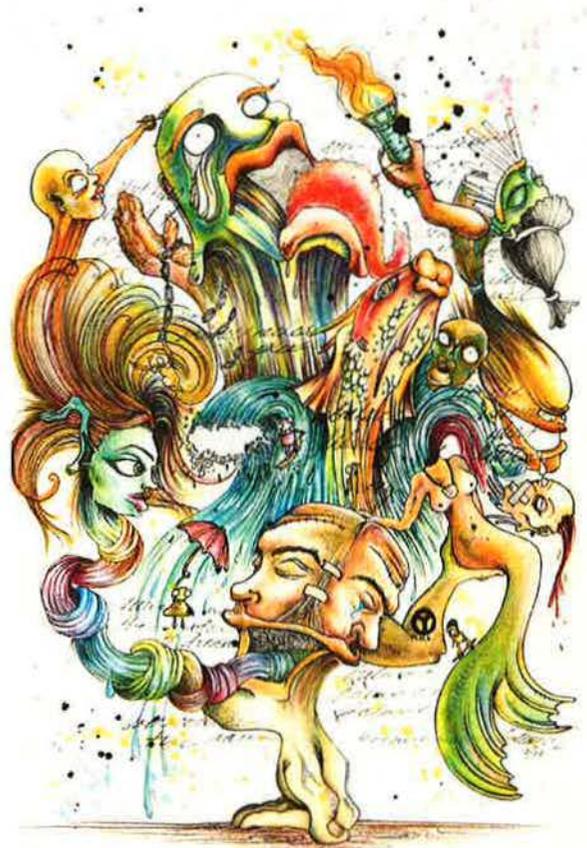
Let's have a Civil War  
without weapons. We can divide hearts  
and draw in districts of mind matter and moral malaise.

Cervical induction politics will be bent on a single phrase  
to tear apart and decant democracy  
to Red and Blue states of the population glaze.

Start a Revolution of forgetting,  
ignore the books written in a billion shades of blood,  
gathering dust on abandoned shelves  
too ashamed of collapsing, because taxing is a crime.

The bottom line of lunatics might sweat justice  
and torture billions of dollars from enamel.

It will be an arms race of anti-Intel,  
the counter consumer consumption,  
hit and run economics leaving the bleeding  
in a gutter that reads *no dumping - drains to ocean*.



# WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN EVERYONE WANTS TO WRITE A MANIFESTO?

SEAN AHERN

Slam the shit out of convention  
this is a vicious multi-player deathmatch with  
sticky buttons, cross-hairs,  
wireless dream failure,  
never to be siphoned by mouth.  
Drink up your drunk writing with a flash and bang memory tonight.  
Why is pirating terabytes of digital knowledge  
just like sex? Damn that Trojan horse  
so much like vitamin C, a stimulus package  
wrapped in birth control measures for the market street  
shelf life, please call One-Eight-Hundred-Fuck-You history.  
Video-chat makes you look someone in the eyes  
when you speak with them.  
Spend the blind currency blood count of this country,  
you're not as bad as you're paid to be.  
Is the only proper nonsense babble on plasma?  
News in the HD ten-twenty-Iforgettheirsolution  
of the streaming jargon

vomit [may cause reproductive harm].  
Suck on the non-drowsy green energy  
and Cap and Trade this life for another.  
Politics are endangered whales on a diet,  
they taste of gravity and swim like rehabbed fish from a farm.  
Purge the body of constants  
or you'll forget to tip your server  
and spin out of control into oncoming traffic  
if your GPS tells you to.  
Avoid prolonged exposure  
to the wasteland yard, crawling  
over the edges with apeshit emergencies.  
You're the madness in the moan  
to the sum of unanswered  
text messages. Did you forget the title?  
Learn the sideshow sortie for a pillbox of beauty,  
regurgitation is multigrain memory trapped in plastic.  
Catch a ride on this stupendous caravan of  
sin-tactical narration. Harmful or Fatal  
if swallowed. Romance is cringing down the sink  
into the communal reservation,  
overflowing with milk and beer  
malpractice. Chug and forget  
what you pay for.

*Your life is gonna course like a history book.  
Don't be frightened of turning the page*  
—Conor Oberst

I knew a girl who asked me to lie  
because she was ashamed  
to tell her friends how we met.  
And I suppose she was right  
about some things—  
dealer with a crooked smile  
and a German conscience  
gives girl her first  
hit of acid and,  
miraculously, they begin  
spitting the word love  
into the dirt within the week—  
not the most charming of stories,  
certainly not the stuff of love  
poems or romance novels.

Have you ever emptied a bottle  
because it was within reach?  
Have you seen the world  
through half-inch pupils?

In the seventh grade I stole purses  
from three girls in my geography class,  
one after the other, within the span  
of an hour—my first try and I was  
already pretty damn good.  
I'd emptied and scattered them  
across campus before anyone  
noticed they were missing.

You might as well confess,  
our teacher had warned,  
It'll be better for you that way.  
I've got eyes like a hawk  
and you will be caught.

He lined us up like tin cans  
on a fence and when he came to  
me I looked him straight  
in the eyes and told him that  
I didn't even know what those  
girls' purses looked like.  
As a matter of fact, I said,

## STEALING PURSES

TYLER DEAKINS

if you let me out of class,  
I'll look around the school  
and see if I can find them.

I should have been  
a goddamn actor too because  
no one even blinked  
when I found all three.  
Instead, Hawk-Eyes gave me  
fifty points extra credit  
and excused me from a test  
on state capitols.  
People are easy when  
they're not quite people.

I used the money  
to buy a couple of joints  
and a king-sized Snickers bar.  
The seventh grade taught me  
how to confess.

I knew a girl who believed it was  
God that covered her mouth,  
slid his hand up her skirt,  
and stole the warmth  
from her twelve-year-old body.  
We are artists in the grandest sense,  
she would tell me,  
we are the sculptors of the absolute.  
And I suppose she would have been  
right too, had she been the one  
writing the book.

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TYLER DEAKINS

# WATER

DEBORAH PRICE

There is a preciousness  
in a few drops of water  
pooled in a drying riverbed.

You dip in a finger,  
just tasting it so it will last,  
murmuring words of love for it.

But what about  
the abundance of it  
in plastic confinement?  
You gulp it down.  
Once harnessed, does apathy  
create the tastelessness  
flooding through your mouth?  
You can no longer stomach it.

Grip me for your self-preservation.  
It's the only time  
you speak words of love—  
a whisper like the  
rushing of a river.

# Ability

LORETTA MCCORMICK

**Personal care assistant needed for female quadriplegic. Be pleasant and easy to work with. Applicants who can bear weight very strongly preferred. Reliability a must. Training included; experience unnecessary. Available shifts include days, nights, and weekends. Resúme and references required. Please email for more information. Principals only. Recruiters, please do not contact this job poster.**

I was lying in bed next to Zoey stroking her fingers, soft from lack of use, with thick glossy nails manicured into perfect pieces of hard red candy. Her angular body, reduced to the essential, lay smooth and still next to me, belying the effort it took me to get her errant limbs tucked safely into bed. The gentle rise and fall of her thin torso was barely perceptible, but after so many evenings spent unfurled beside her, I could tell when she was awake. Often, I would see her eyelashes flutter as we sank into the sheets. Her body would spasm with involuntary violence, rejecting the pain of immobility. So I would rub her temples, brush her hair back from her forehead, and whisper my secrets to her. But not that night. I refused to turn my head in her direction and bury

it in her feathery hair. In the dark, there was a crushing silence that had never been there before.

Earlier that evening, as I was getting ready to brush her teeth, I knew she wasn't going to wait until morning to fire me. I stood close, my thighs brushing up against her wheelchair, and dipped her toothbrush into a ceramic cup, swirling it around making sure the small round dot of cinnamon toothpaste didn't come off the bristles and float around in the water, avoiding her determination. I stuck the toothbrush into her wet mouth and gently scrubbed until I could imagine the words frothing and foaming behind her hard palette, or getting lost in the tender part between her back molar and tongue. She was saving our friendship, she said and spit into the cup.

I felt as if Zoey had pushed me off of a high dive platform. But I got her ready for bed in silence. With nowhere else for either of us to go, at least for that one last evening, I braced myself, leaned her against me and bore her into bed. Later, as I perspired under the comforter, her words became a weight, pushing me down and plugging up my ears. It felt like suffocation. Zoey once told me that her injury sometimes made her feel as though she was drowning. I imagined her choking on her words and held onto private, nasty thoughts. *Cripple*. In pain, I repeated it—*cripple, cripple, cripple*. A personal mantra or an invoked curse, I wasn't sure. Even though she'd let me go, I held onto her hand because I had forgotten how else to define myself except through her body.

I had learned her body's language by rote and for years she was my range of motion. Every night, I slipped her into a nightshirt and lifted her into bed. I moved her brown arms up over her head, across her

chest, back down and again. With my palms firmly on her shins and my fingers wrapped around her thin calves, I lifted her knees to her chest and slowly pushed them together, forcing them from side to side until the gentle cracking of her back subsided. To prevent footfall, I flexed and pointed her ankles and slipped her feet into large foam booties. In the middle of the night I scratched her cheek when it itched while I dreamt about an accident I never asked about.

So she wouldn't feel like the only one without secrets, I overcompensated and told her everything. I even told her about the time I slept with my cousin's boyfriend. I felt guilty, I had confessed to my cousin soon after it had happened. I was drunk, I lied. But Zoey knew I hurt my cousin for being perfect, beautiful and condescending. I always wondered about the accident, though I did think it was perfectly fair that she never gave me details. In the end, I'm sure I left some things out. It's not possible to tell your entire story to somebody, even if you could remember it all. Besides, by the time she severed things, I had collaged fractured pieces of events with imagination to create my own story.

Zoey was sixteen, I know that much for sure, on a family trip to the Grand Canyon. Her mom, sitting shotgun, began nodding off before the car turned onto the freeway but Zoey promised she'd stay up the entire way. She entertained her dad with silly songs and road games as he steered the car over long, monotonous stretches of highway. I always pictured her in the back of the car, leaning on the armrest into the front

seat, counting out of state license plates with her father until the sun went down. Hypnotized by the rhythmic passing of the dashed yellow lines that seemed to come at the car out of the night, into the weak orb of illumination thrown out directly in front of the car, she laid her body across the backseat. She once told me that she was thrown from the car so quickly that she never woke up before she lost consciousness.

Just a few dozen miles from the California/Nevada border, she was dreaming of striated red rocks jutting into an ocean of sky, the river below cutting ever deeper while the paramedics strapped her into a collar and backboard and lifted her into the ambulance within minutes of the accident. Or, her body, impervious to fear, slammed into the craggy side of a cliff and fell into a ravine until she was rescued, limp and broken, hours later. Or, it happened with the hot summer sun in the sky and a broken air conditioner in the rental car forcing Zoey's father into drowsy complacency behind the wheel. Onlookers watched from the side of the road and cars in the opposite direction slowed to catch a glimpse of the mangled car, the broken glass and her missing shoe in the middle of the highway. Maybe on the drive through the desert countryside, she noticed the Joshua trees scattered across the landscape, like scarecrows warning her to turn back. My body would shake with terror and I could hardly breathe at the thought of it.

When a bone breaks, the body works hard to knit the fissure back together. If the area is not totally immobilized, longer healing time or even permanent damage may occur. But no matter what, all fractures

indelibly leave their mark. While it's true that most are easily hidden once new bone seals over the crack, an x-ray will still tell the truth.

Zoey kept her x-rays in an old shoebox with her family photos. She gave the box to me one lazy weekend after we'd finished watching the Argentine national soccer team beat Mexico. I was sitting on her lap, avoiding the firm, bone-colored couches. The upholstery was expensive and hard to keep clean and the seats were too erect but Zoey, who always sat in a 450-pound electric beast, bought them for their aesthetics. They were sleek and modern and she liked the idea of them. I liked the fact that they were miserable to sit on. It gave me reason to climb up onto her footrest and nestle into her lap. I could feel her little heart knocking up against her rib cage every time Argentina scored a goal and I would lift both her hands in the air, pumping them up and down in victory as she cheered. She was surprisingly strong considering her body had atrophied to just the basics in the years since she'd been injured. Most of her strength was a quiet stamina and an unflappable sense of self that drew people to her. "She's got legs," her high school soccer coach used to say and I know it's true. I used to shave them at seven in the morning after she had already endured a catheter, a bowel regimen, a range of motion exercises, and my clumsy lifting technique out of bed onto the chair, out of the chair and into the shower. When the soccer game was over, she wheeled us down the hallway, steering her chair with ease from a joystick controller in her headrest. I pushed her bedroom door open with my foot and hopped off so she could get through.

"Look in the closet, Eva." She nodded her head in its direction. "Grab the box up there on the top shelf for me."

It was heavier than I expected and I could feel the contents shifting around inside as I reached up and pulled it down.

"That's just about everything," she said. She wanted me to arrange them all, organize her history into some sort of meaning, filing them all into a photo album. "You can start whenever." I began sifting through the proof of her memories right away and didn't stop until they were almost mine, until I felt vaguely left out. It didn't matter that most of the pictures were taken before we met. Hadn't I missed holidays, vacations, parties to take care of her?

What an athlete she was. Her mother has told me so many times, I can see her in a bikini, cutting through glassy waves, or shooting hoops with neighborhood boys. She could pick up any sport as quickly as she could pick up a ball. I've imagined her picking up speed while downhill skiing, the sharp wind and the blinding, white sun reflecting off the snow, turning her cheeks pink. I've seen her gracefully slalom down a mountain only to inexplicably lose her balance halfway down. She didn't even have time to register shock on her face before she heard her collarbone snap. An emergency crew appeared on a red snowmobile in red parkas to carry her off the slopes. Or, tired and dreaming of hot chocolate after a long day of skiing, she slipped on the icy front door steps to her family's cabin. Or... or...

Zoey still had all the get-well cards she received from school friends when she was in the hospital, too. They were at the bottom of the shoebox, held together with a thick, tan rubber band. I didn't know her school friends or the ski cabin where she spent her childhood Christmases, but I knew her injury. The thick glossy pictures of her glowing white spine

were tucked into a manila envelope and buried underneath her long dead grandma at Thanksgiving dinner and her first perfect soccer goal. Her x-rays were so heartbreakingly beautiful I got a tingle down my spine every time I looked at them. When I touched my finger to the fracture and tried to get underneath it hurt like hitting my funny bone. I thought maybe that feeling was the reason she kept them.

I tried to stay out of her head unless she invited me. I knew how little privacy she had; I got her dressed in the morning, probed for sores, abrasions, breaks, tears in her soft brown skin from living a sedentary lifestyle. I fed her pasta with marinara, baby back ribs with extra barbeque sauce, homemade borscht without spilling a drop. I wiped her nose. I put in her contacts, but I didn't dry her eyes. Zoey never cried.

When caring for someone with a spinal cord injury, it is important to remember several medical facts. First, it is not true that quads can't feel below their point of injury. They do. This is because when the spinal cord is severed, it is rarely complete, leaving a faint signal to force its way down the ragged scar tissue hidden beneath the break. The signal goes both ways, though. They don't merely receive the faint message of stimuli, they can send a message too. Second, when the decompression first takes place, lowering the body temperature can prevent a significant amount of damage, however it is impossible to calculate the long-term effects decreased body temperature can have on an injured young woman. Does it make her cold? Can it be helped? Does the inability to reach out and touch another person prevent their

body from ever completely warming up again? Zoey has said that she is lucky. People with spinal cord injuries often live in chronic pain. But some, like Zoey, are desensitized. "Like my whole body is slightly Novocained," she's explained. I've wondered, does she ever miss the feeling of her body throbbing?

**Single Female, 31 years old. Successful college graduate, very social. Loves watching soccer matches, football games, baseball too! Waking up early, music, concerts, and fine dining. Seeking single male with active lifestyle. Looking for new experiences with someone fun and interesting but not adverse to serious commitment. Non-smokers only please.**

It was my idea to put up the personal ad. I wanted to be the one to make a connection, to give her something nobody else had given her. She would know how much she needed me, I thought. Eventually she came around and created her own profile. Zoey didn't explain herself right at the start—just a close up picture of her beaming smile and aquamarine blue eyes, striking against her brown skin. No chair visible. It was the ease with which she could be disembodied that was most appealing to her, even if most of the men never wrote back after she told them about her injury. That was fine, she said. Being rejected online doesn't have the same impact as having to watch the disappointment move over someone's face, taking in the switches and wires, clicks and bleeps of her chair before even noticing her. But it made me angry. She

didn't owe those men her story. Some men showed up and spent the evening asking *me* questions: "Does she like red wine or white?" they would yell at me from across the dinner table, trying to maintain a look of sincerity, afraid to stare. She's paralyzed, not deaf, I would say before Zoey decided it was time to end the date. Then Jay came through her computer monitor and told her he liked her body just the way it was, even though he hadn't met her yet.

Jay was short and beefy, with rough chef hands and a degree from culinary school. For their first date, he agreed to come over and make dinner for her and her friends. When he showed up, I don't know if he was expecting the protective hive, buzzing around her, hovering jealously in her orbit. But he took the wine that was offered to him, answered every embarrassing question put to him, then moved in to Zoey, scooping her up out of her chair like he was going to eat her, then cooked her course after course as she sat next to the oven and watched. I was impressed, so I didn't say anything when he spilled red wine down the front of her shirt.

I didn't mind sleeping on the couch when he was over, even if the couches in Zoey's home were never made for sitting on, much less sleeping on. I had no problem with cleaning the mountain of dishes, dirty pots and pans Jay created when he made dinner. The three of us had fun in the kitchen, chopping, dicing, tasting. It would get so hot and steamy, all four burners going at once and the oven blasting out waves of heat every time Jay cracked it open to check on his creations. We would open the door off of the kitchen that led to a small balcony and cram all three of our bodies onto the cool deck. Jay and I concentrated

on keeping our toes away from Zoey's wheels, and Zoey tried to avoid ramming the banister until we heard something boil over or a timer go off. He came over week after week, bringing fresh scallops, prosciutto, whipping up homemade béarnaise and spoon feeding her cream-filled lady fingers. He was trying so hard to fit in that I didn't realize he was pushing me out.

Soon, he wanted everything she needed to pass through his hands first. But for all his finesse in the kitchen, and gentle concern for her comfort, he was aggressive and absent behind the wheel. He would insist on driving, tearing down residential streets and traffic-clogged boulevards with no concern about the extra weight he was moving around. The van would rock and sway and, from the backseat, I could see the tension in Zoey's face when he took a corner too fast. She would try to hold her shoulders back in her wheelchair to keep herself upright but she never told him I should take the wheel. She never told him to slow down.

One night, after finishing dinner at a fancy steakhouse one of his friends owned, the van refused to start. I realized he had left the lights on but, when I tried to tell him, I caught him glaring at me from the corner of his eye, resenting my presence. Zoey suggested we call AAA to get a jump, but Jay had his face and hands under the hood, futilely jiggling wires, and shouting back at me to find a flashlight. I waited until he got back in the car and I snickered at him while I dialed AAA. Later, I imagined I could hear him explain to Zoey why she didn't need me hanging around all the time.

Learned non-use, the brain's way of dealing with terminal injury by ignoring the body it can no longer connect to, doesn't happen right away. It's not sudden like a knee jerk reaction. It's gradual—skin thinning, bones hollowing and turning chalky, erosion speeding up. The skin becomes thin, which makes not only shaving difficult, but also speaking your mind. Zoey's soccer coach used to say she had legs.

Lying in bed next to her I thought about her high school varsity soccer picture, taken just a few months before the accident. Her long, graceful neck is arched forward and the muscular chords of her neck, while strong and beautiful, are not nearly as powerful as they became after her accident. She is bouncing a soccer ball on her head. It hangs in the air, fuzzy and out of focus with a kinetic desire that can never be fulfilled, a frozen imprint of a memory of an event. Her legs are so long and dark, as they still are, but their lean musculature surprises me no matter how many times I see them. They extend from her white athletic shorts and direct her body like an arrow from her cleats, up over her knee high socks, past her ropy thighs all the way to her hips. I felt a pang of nostalgia.

Learned nonuse still happens in people with spinal cord injuries no matter how driven they were before the break or after. It's also important to remember that it is contagious. That's not in the medical books, but trust me, it is essential to maintain a healthy distance. Although this may prove to be difficult, failure to do so can result in painful separation anxiety and confusion, making caregiving much more dangerous than many realize.

He didn't come over that last night but she denied that he wanted me gone. At least she didn't get rid of me with Jay leering over her shoulder, I thought, still holding her hand under the weight of the comforter and my hurt. What *exactly* happened? I asked her for the first time ever. My voice hung in the darkness, sounding too loud and invasive. She kept silent, pretending I was asking about the accident like everybody else but me always did, knowing there was no way to answer me. Hoping for numbness, I drifted off to sleep before she finished explaining how she was trying to salvage the threads of our friendship.

In my dreams I am not numb. I am terrified, climbing into a tiny barrel on the calm shores of an upstream river. I know that so much water can push me down and make me immobile, can spill into the cracks of my less than worthy vessel. I know that the water will pick up speed, eventually carrying me swiftly over the edge of a powerful waterfall. I feel overwhelmed by the awesome power as I'm carried over the edge and I can feel the barrel splintering into a million tiny shards, exposing me like the yolk of a soft boiled egg split open. But I somehow break the surface of water and find air.

I wear scrubs and comfortable sneakers to work now. It's a job cleaning up after little old hunchback women and men in a sad dilapidated building that looks as lonely and neglected from the outside as the people who live there and smells like pee and disinfectant on the inside, no matter how much washing, wiping and airing I do. I'm friendly, even to the crabby old men who like to bark and complain so that someone will notice they are still around. I don't mind being the occasional surrogate daughter,

sister or husband for the ones who don't know the difference. It's not personal so there's no pain. But almost everyone here is just a husk of their former self, including most of the employees. They walk around bored and indifferent while the residents mostly sit in their sad, stale rooms waiting for their weekend call or their occasional visit. It's numbing, like when I was a child and I would wrap a string around my finger, round and round as tight as I could, feel it tingle and watch it turn red and go numb until I couldn't stand it.

Zoey called me the other day. It was awkward and the stretches of silence yawned out until I had to call out, "Hello?" to see if she was still there.

"You're still my friend, right?" It was like she was talking to me from across a gorge.

I said something friendly and insincere, thinking numb, numb, numb. Finally, she asked if I would meet her for lunch. "Just you and me," she said. "I want to tell you a story." I agreed to come over after I got out of work, even though I knew I probably wouldn't. But when I got off the phone, there was an itch just outside my body somewhere, like something had been amputated.

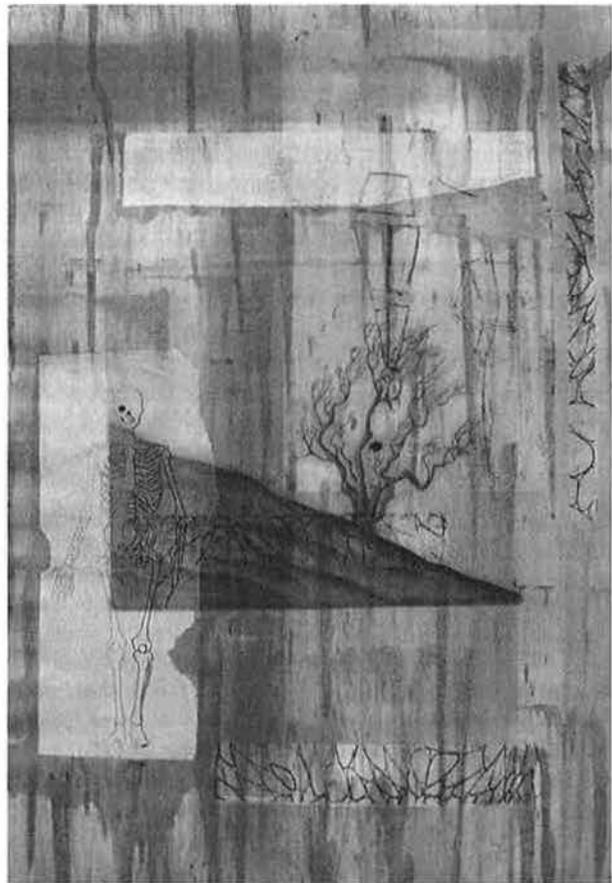
# TASTES LIKE LAKE WATER

ERIC DINSMORE

I always thought  
people are like bottled water  
with confusing brands and contours,  
yet all are filtered, all taste the same,

like that girl I met  
with the spray-on tan,  
she just looks like sweet potatoes,

until I tasted the lake water  
dripping from her lips  
and I never bought water from the store again.



# 12 Needles

JAMES BEZERRA

The details of my situation were never made entirely clear to me.

1. The first-ever needle was just a blast of brighter-than-white light around an infinitely dark core. It was a sun collapsing and it frightened me so much that I didn't go back for three weeks.

I still have mostly slippery memories of my childhood. None I can pin down. If I had been raised near-sighted without glasses, my ears jammed with wax, that's what my memories are like.

2. The second one - I knew it was coming, and that made it worse. The same, but worse.

In fact, the first completely clear memory I have—the first one that makes more sense than a fever dream smeared with Vaseline—is Sheeler's long, ashen, face very close to mine. I remember him tapping hard on my temple as my eyes focused, *Hey! Hey! You totally don't know where you're at right now, right?*

3. I don't know why I went back for the third needle, but I did and that was the first one that took. There was brightBRIGHTBRIGHT light but then it spread out all around me, like water when you dive in. And I was there in my childhood and it was like I was seeing my Mother's face for the first time. She wasn't pretty, but she was beautiful.

Sheeler took something off my head. Like a metal headband. He began to wind a cable around it and put it back in his big plastic case. *Don't stand up just yet or you'll throw up all over the place.*

4. I went back for the fourth needle the very next day. It was all I had been able to think of. The crystalclearclarity of that memory. It had been so long since I had had anything like that; any sense of history. The fourth time I found out that I'd had a dog named Alfred.

He was a very skinny man. Sheeler. So tall and skinny, all sharp angles, from his cheek bones to his elbows. He was not alone. There was a giant-of-a-man off behind him. I was sitting at a kitchen table. I look at it. Turns out it was my own table. I just didn't know it at the time.

5. The fifth needle gave me back my first love. Her name was Winnie. She had the darkest hair and the brightest black eyes. I remember that she was just developing breasts the first time we kissed. I feel strange now, as a grown man, closing my eyes and thinking about a twelve year old girl's breasts.

I just sat there at my table while Sheeler packed and the Giant hovered gigantically in the background. Sheeler talked to me the way people talk to their pets; honestly and without filter: *So I don't really like doing this sort of thing, but the thing is, I'm seeing this girl and – well, she is fucking hot, too hot for me, actually – and she has some expensive tastes. Expensive with a capital E. All capital Es. ExpEnsivE. So I figured I'll do a couple more and make some more cash.*

6. By the sixth needle, the process was old hat. After work on Fridays I would hop the I train all the way up to the Heights and get off at Dyckman Street and I'd hike up the eight flights of stairs to her apartment overlooking High Bridge Park. There I would take my clothes off and lay on her massage table and she would take the needles out. They were very long and so sharp that you could barely see their points.

By the time I did finally throw up, Sheeler was all packed up. He pulled his suspenders up over his shoulders and the Giant helped him into his suit coat. He handed me a thick, glossy envelope. It had the name and logo of a bank. *Here is all the stuff you need. Your account number and stuff is inside. You need to call the phone number ... open up the flap... the flap... there you go. Call that number – not now – wait until you can remember your name, then call...*

7. The seventh needle – she told me – was usually the last one. She didn't know why. She liked to whisper to me while I was taking my clothes off behind the screen. She told me that the first few needles,

people didn't know what to do or how to feel about it all. The next few they were adjusting.

"But why do people stop coming back?" I asked.

"Not everybody wants their memories back," she told me.

"I want mine."

That day she made me remember my first time.

Sheeler put on his hat and then bent down to look at me. He looked at my eyes, into my eyes, but not at me. *Yeah, you must be really confused. He put his hand on my knee, don't worry. I didn't take your memories. I didn't even erase them. I just locked them. Work hard and you will get them back.*

8. By this point I had a fragmented idea of my past. It was a mosaic being revealed to me one colorful fleck at a time. Each needle in my body was a single jigsaw piece in the palm of my hand. When I laid down on the massage table, she ran the tip of the needle down the curve on my back. This was a sensual act for the sake of sensuality. It was not a sexual invitation; neither was it a flirtation. She made me remember my first fist fight, age sixteen, and the flavor of blood in my mouth.

Sheeler left the apartment with the Giant trailing after him like a too-big shadow. I drank water from the kitchen tap and I looked at the phone number on the envelope, waiting until I could remember my name.

9. The ninth needle is a little different. The end is a thin spiral. Like a corkscrew.

“What is that for?”

“Get undressed and I’ll show you.”

It was a hot day and she didn’t have central air. The air itself was hot and thick breezing in the window. I laid down. I didn’t see it, but she took off her clothes this time. It was a small shock when I felt her climbing on top of me. Her flesh was pressed against mine. She sat on my lower back and ran her nails through my hair.

“This one is special. It curves because it *draws out* the good stuff. I gotta go deep for that.”

I called the phone number, I entered my account number. A woman came on the line. She said my name and she said that the Bank was very sorry, but I had not been making payments on my loans.

*What?*

She said that if I was not going to repay my educational loans, then – it is Bank policy – that the knowledge of that education was to be repossessed.

10. The tenth one was even longer and more curved. She was naked that time too. She climbed on top of me and she felt around my scalp. She picked a tender spot behind my right ear.

“What do you want to remember?”

“Everything.”

What I got was some of my college years. Classes on the Napoleonic Wars. And the Peloponnesian Wars. A lot of wars. I was a history major. I wanted to write history books.

*Unfortunately, she explained, sometimes the Repossession Process can lock out all of a person’s memories. The Bank apologizes for any adverse ramifications . . .*

I asked, *What am I supposed to do now?*

She told me that the Bank had arranged a job for me. Something I could do with no experience or memories of my experiences.

11. The eleventh was a weird one. We both got undressed and she climbed on my back. She pressed the curved tip on the needle to a spot just at the top of my neck. She turned the needle so very slowly, its super fine tip screwing through my skin and bone. She was able to find something awful.

I hit a girl once. I was in grad school. It was a hot and wet drinking weekend and I was dating a girl named Michelle who liked to lick my neck while I was driving.

I had been drinking wine and I was driving and Michelle was licking my neck and ISLAMMEDONTHEBRAKESASSOONASISAWHER but it didn’t matter at all, I had too much awful velocity and she crumpled against the car and she broke into pieces. And Michelle screamed and I drove away as fast as I could. And Michelle and I broke up and I never told anyone.

I was at work—there’s an army of us, a no-memory legion of jump-suited indentured servants—cleaning the floors at the Bank’s headquarters in Midtown, when one of the guys on my crew, Victor, told me about her. *Her name is Viviana. She can make you remember things.*

So I took the 1 train up to the Heights and got off at Dyckman Street and I hiked up the eight flights of stairs to her apartment overlooking High Bridge Park. She didn't even ask, she just looked at me and let me in. She knew what I needed.

12. The twelfth needle never happened.

I got up to her apartment and her door was hanging open. There was something giant half-blocking the doorway...then it moved and I realized it was the Giant. I turned to go, but the Giant snatched me by the shoulder and dragged me inside.

Sheeler was winding up some cables into his plastic case. He smiled a smile as tight and thin as a scalpel. "I remember you. I bet you remember me. Not that I care that much – just a job after all – but you really shouldn't try to screw the Bank. Just pay your bills," he handed his case to the Giant, who took it silently. Sheeler put on his hat, "and then you get all your memories back. Unless you don't want them. Some people do that you know. They decide they like it better this way." Sheeler tipped his hat, "Who knows, maybe *she* will."

Sheeler and the Giant left.

I went to her. She was laying on the massage table, turned toward the window, looking over the park. I knelt down and looked at her and she looked at me and I could tell that she didn't remember a thing.

We live there together now because it's cheaper and I'm paying less in rent so I can pay back the loans a little faster.

Sheeler didn't take the needles. They are still here in the apartment, but—no matter how much I ask her to try—she can't remember how to work them.

# TANDA

ALLAN AQUINO

*1. Who Follows Me is Whom I'll Follow*

tuning:  
we tilt, feel,  
rouse a convergence:  
tight, yet soft.  
focused and right,  
muscles and bones  
summon shared memories.

your shoulder, tanguera,  
warms beneath my palm.  
your cheek is frictionless,  
friendly. your lips at  
my ear, your breaths  
quicken my mind, soothing  
the soul's ruins.

apilado: the  
oneness of  
pulses, breasts  
abreast, honed  
betwixt zero  
and ten's  
mystic accord.

command my sternum: in  
separateness synced in solution,  
we choose our five,  
a respectful embrace,  
our heartbeats like mutual  
invitations: they will converse,  
mientras que caminaremos.

2. "Dancers, weave your silent betrayals in the silence of the halls"

listen:

[1] 2 3 4 [5] 6 7 8

the habanera begins as it may,  
 an emotional content, as it  
 were, as per our flow  
 - the strings, two, glide-step  
 of three, four. no drumbeats,  
 save the bass and basslining  
 piano, trilling garnishment, while  
 the accordion graces such almost-fury.

[1] [2] 3 [4] [5] 6 [7] 8

a weightshift, a slight  
 stagger, and then we  
 travel, bold cunitas, 'til  
 we release all thought,  
 submitting to god's details,  
 earthly, moonly arcs  
 setting us adrift

con el  
 ritmo: paso  
 básico, one,  
 two, three,  
 noting the  
 traffic, a  
 cruzada's sensitivities,

claiming, yielding  
 yours, then  
 my, will,  
 sleek as  
 seraphim's sect,  
 my guiding  
 beacon upkeeping

grace with  
 steady potency,  
 a fire's  
 gentle warmth,  
 zest of  
 willful feathers,  
 oomph and

rise of  
 corioli: caressing,

spilling, spinning,  
ganchos, gopecitos  
ochos, boleos:  
giros resolve  
us homeward.

### *3. The Lessons of Water*

the way of intercepting  
passion: neither anger nor  
desire, just pure  
expressions, our blood  
illumined, intimate, and known.  
we absorb, miracle  
all violence to

beauty with our  
synergy, our feet  
burnishing the wood-floor  
'til we remember  
nothing, not even  
our names nor  
how we came  
together. . .

<sup>1</sup> Eric Gamalinda, "Five Tango Sensations", anthologized in *Zero Gravity* (1999)

# SNIPER

SEAN AHERN

Hold my back  
to the bullets peeling  
the concrete from my shell.  
Forget these precious seconds spent  
earning this hell. Exhale for sight.  
count the pace

of flashes  
slow chain  
echoes  
thud THUD  
thudding.

Keep the revolutions thick  
for spinning shadow onto night.

As the body sets,  
cold forgets the signal in the stress.  
How long does it take for skin to freeze?

Shiny metal tags.  
decorations  
lose all memory of fingers and  
toes, what they mean,  
what they do. When the silence peaks,  
RUN.

Dispense rounds  
to the rain, knees  
drop to mud  
in slick streets and the wet  
between teeth seeking sky.

I'm the On-Air frequency  
my voice speaks the caliber  
of whispers threading words  
that fold the universe  
down to morsels  
easily swallowed.



# Supermarkets

JENNIFER FLOYD

I remember you coming at me like a freight train with loud speakers rattling off the NASA launch sequence. I remember your footsteps sounding like the little drummer boy's beat on cheap aluminum siding. I remember the way your glasses reflected my face like a painting, and I thought that if they broke I'd end up like Dorian Gray. Billions of little synapses bubbled, clever little quips would rise to dismissal in a flurry of little thought abortions. It was a brain massacre; a grey-matter genocide.

I squeaked.

You laughed, "Oh, that's too much."

But it was clearly not enough.

Your giggle would have orbited my brain for months if it hadn't been for those Christmas songs they piped in, less penetrating more depressing.

Aisle seven; twinkle lights and holiday cheer.

Doorbusters, there really *is* nothing like sadism in the morning.

It wouldn't do to imagine four legs entwined in a bathroom stall. It wouldn't be right to mention two sets of brand name heels clicking on wet tile under blue florescent lighting. If it had been more like a song,

and less like amateur karaoke it would be right to explain.

It wasn't. You weren't. But, I loved it like stealing.

On a Sunday morning the howl of the airport was only good for suppressing sound. The human mouth is so good at so many things, but you were always intent on talking.

"Writing a book?"

Aisle six; PVC, sprinkler heads, and *duct tape*.

I'd imagine all my little insults rising up with the smoke of your cloves, right in your eyes so they'd water. Sentiment isn't on any aisle of any supermarket, but it should be.

A carousel of good intentions and bad cravings, duck, duck, goose with condoms. Tag with that vrr-vrr sound that made you drool like Pavlov's dog. If sexuality is the yardstick we've put to humanity, you and I have caused too many splinters.

Aisle five, school supplies.

I remember the look on your face made me feel like Vlad, intent on keeping all my old lovers on stakes to rot around me. But some people just have a way of sticking to you, like smoke or hair dye or Elmer's glue. I'd have explained it if I didn't know that honesty was the first cue to our final bow and I wasn't high enough on the marquee for that.

Aisle three, DVD's.

I remember you walking away with a trail of poison breadcrumbs. I was chasing and gobbling soot. Often the bitter things in life are just bitter, the lemons are just lemons, and you were the same. It was a trap, but I've always been a happy rat and one more piece of cheese is a temptation too enticing to bear.

Aisle nine, pet supply.

Then it wasn't a duet anymore. There were four arms and two sets of lips, but it was a monologue through and through. Or maybe it was my turn on the stage and my voice was cracking, my rhythm was off, and I rarely made eye contact with the crowd. I feel like I've become an acrobat who fell past the net, a sword eater that managed to give herself a tracheotomy, a juggler who couldn't quite catch but smiled all the while, that toothy nervous grin.

Aisle twelve, toothpaste.

The apologies were exchanged through a sliding metal drawer. The pen I signed it with was attached by wire to the counter. But sorry is a band-aid, and thank you is masturbation when you don't mean it. But, you did mean it was open season, your firing point was point blank range and you never missed.

Ammunition, aisle twenty.

"Men do it like dogs in a water dish."

Or like a cat to a saucer of milk? Pushing its head down, making it drink. My head spun like a compass but my eyes always managed to focus on you. Does that make you true north? If there were anything true about you, I'd be the last to know. I think your conscience needs a hamster wheel, a little exercise. Your heart would smell like woodchips rather than sulfur, at least.

Candles and air fresheners, aisle ten.

In the beginning it was like a rollercoaster slowly clicking to its apex. You could count it off, one, two, three... But then we hit the release and all I got was a head full of bruises. It was too much like a bad movie, a bad trip, a parade of bad actors, a barrage of mistakes that pierced my side.

Aisle fourteen, first aid.

There wasn't any blood and water.

"Knives...," you'd said.

"It'd be a penetrating experience."

"I think it would expand my horizons."

"It could at least steel one's heart."

You laughed and it filled the room with a million little happy needles and hot charcoals I'd have to navigate through to get home. Good things always burn in the face of finality. Sugar is often sweetest right before the bombs fall. You never understood the notion of leaving any more than you understood history or algebra. No, you didn't wrap one finger on the trigger I thought we'd both pull. You just stood there with that dim look, surprised that the ride was over, the curtains closed and everyone had to go.

Aisle one, the long road home.

It was then I felt the hot sand beneath my feet. I looked at a dim lit horizon and felt, all at once, the emptiness it conveyed. I was the shepherd of Midian, on the run from your wrath. Was it simply sexual preference, or was it that you turned out to be another billboard? Were you just another sign spouting false advertisements to weary foot soldiers, all too promising in desperation but up close nothing like your object? I don't know. But every time I see those Joshua trees, hanging like philosophers, I flash upon you. I imagine you're the lock I'd rather not open, the voluptuous volume I'd rather not take from the shelf. But I have, I caressed your pages and I'll always be wandering around without seeing the promised land.



# A LIZARD WITH A LADDER OR SMOKE THE MONSTER OUT

TYLER DEAKINS

*Be mad and merry or go hang yourselves.*  
— William Shakespeare

I

There's a girl with cut green eyes who sleeps in my bed.  
You'll ruin yourself up there, and I was the last one  
who knew where you got off to, or cared to help you down.  
The wax will melt and the feathers come loose and you'll end  
up drowned with the rest of the escapists and saboteurs.

Nietzsche says it's all chaos  
without a carefully organized network of lies.  
And of course, there were others—  
Pseudo-Paul says serve your earthly masters,  
says fear and trembling,  
says as you obey Christ;  
Babo threatens to hoist up our chalky white  
skeletons in place of the figurehead.  
There's a painter I am who's in love  
with a world of portraits and landscapes.  
Each brushstroke is a lie and I've a masterful hand.

Life's no good unless  
you can paint it all.

So when I lay her body on a raft  
of pine and butterscotch her skin she glistens  
like the best sugar cube you ever tasted.  
As she dissolves into the distant,  
liquid blur of the sea,  
there is a tape playing in the VCR,  
there is singing and there is laughter.  
The soot from the chimney tickles  
the monster's nose and: there goes Bill...

II

At night I take my sleeves off  
because I think someone ought to see.  
When I find the girl standing  
behind the bakery counter  
with scars and fresh wounds running  
up her arms I grin like a sickle cell  
and show her mine. We fall back

into the refrigerator, twist each other's hair  
 into knots, and fuck like rats  
 beneath a rack of miniature cheesecakes  
 with almond pupils and cellophane lashes.  
 The eyes look every way but down and  
 I'm glad because I'm certain  
 they wouldn't see things right.  
 There are no traces of you at the bottom,  
 just user and used, and we go both ways.

## III

We grow tired of lost causes and southern belles.  
 We are the stuffed men with ears of cotton and  
 eyes of glass, forgotten wartime relics from  
 centuries past. We tighten belts above each other's elbows.  
 Our eyes go dim. Our mouths runneth over.  
 We scare crows like scarecrows and  
 we will eat you alive.

We want to live with the ducks in Anaheim,  
 to come out at night and watch you sleep.

We want to undress the girl playing Alice,  
 to hang our hats from her nipples and  
 introduce her to our mothers.  
 We want to spend the rest of our lives  
 tripping over the undergrowth of some  
 endless English wood with duffle bags  
 full of conch shells and blotter paper.  
 We want the pill with the perpetual half-life.  
 Smoke like curtains. Blood like liquor.  
 Pink elephants on parade.  
 We want the stall on the left  
 and the boot in the face—  
 everyone adores a fascist.

The darkness surrounds us.  
 What can we do against it, or else,  
 shall we? The air is thick and the plankton are  
 shimmering. When I wake in the vacant  
 lot behind the church, I think  
 the weeds would be willows  
 if I were six feet shorter.

## ONCE INSIDE A CANYON

ERICA STUX

Centuries ago, Sinagua Indian women  
toiled to bring water up  
steep canyon walls to their rude abodes:  
simple walled-in shelves,  
ceilings of limestone, and  
charcoaled rear walls,  
halfway between sun-scorched scrub  
and cool oak-covered oasis below.  
Cacti on south wall,  
pines on perpetually-shaded north,  
climates separated by alignment to  
the sun as well as altitude.

We tramped down the foot-path  
dotted with purple prickly-pear blossoms,  
the stillness broken by only shrill bird-calls,  
peered into the abyss, bottom concealed  
by outcroppings, then  
huffed laboriously upward, wondering  
how the Sinagua women managed that climb.

# When Birds Hibernate

JENNIFER LU

The first and only time that Li saw him was at a distant cousin's wedding reception. She wondered how she could have spotted him amid the five hundred or so guests, the elaborate centerpieces, the dozen wait staff scurrying around, and the colorful fountain by the multi-tiered wedding cake. He couldn't have been that much older than Li, probably in his early twenties, and she was not far from finishing her first year of high school. She hadn't fallen in love yet, and she wasn't sure she knew what love was, but she knew this. She knew that right before she decided to call him "Meng," she felt a subtle string of shocks across the landscape just below her belly button. A separate nerve that disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared.

Li decided that this Meng was not particularly handsome, by virtue of the disproportion of his facial features. His eyes seemed too close-set and small for his wide nose. But he was the tallest of his friends with shoulders and chest that jutted out, hair slicked back in an arch, like a crown on his head, and lips that were full and red. He looked like the leader of an animal pack, the one who marks and keeps the territory, who wrestles down the prey, who gets to eat and mate first. Once Li

had her eyes on him, a flutter erupted in her pelvis and she couldn't look away, suddenly knowing why females are drawn to the brawniest, most flamboyant male of the group.

Feeling embarrassed because she had always prided herself on being attracted to the mind, not the body, first, she turned back to her table only to discover that nothing there had changed from a few moments before—her mother, back turned, still nodding solemnly to the low rumble of the exorcist's voice. The exorcist's name was Penny, the latest manifestation of her parents' unwavering affection for her brother Andy. Li wished Andy weren't sick at home but here instead to keep her company, to distract her from Penny, a woman with the meanest gaze that Li had ever encountered. Even her smile seemed infected with malice. It was her eyes, intense and perpetually narrowed in her attempts to read all of the earth's dark energies, one of which she'd traced to Andy's circular but increasingly frail body.

"Of the sixty tables at the restaurant, why do we have to sit next to her?" Li had asked her mother while they were getting ready for the banquet. In front of the mirror, they stood at the same height, just shy of five feet. "There's always a nasty expression on her face." Further, Li found it ridiculous that Penny dressed in even more fashionable attire than the girls at her school and put red highlights in her flat-ironed hair, and ridiculous that Penny called herself Penny, a name that Li deemed too sweet for her, the antithesis of an exorcist.

Her mother had laughed. "Silly girl. Penny has a good reputation. I've heard people talk about what she can do. Seemingly sane women beat themselves to a near pulp under her spells, men who died and were

resurrected in a matter of minutes. These were people who needed a higher mental authority to counter their scarred minds. All of them walked away a different person, more elevated than they ever thought possible. She has tremendous ability, and will help our family a lot." She elongated her neck like a swan, angling her head forward so Li could clasp a pearl necklace for her.

One of the things that Li learned as a teenager was that, by "our family" in her mother's statement, she really meant "Andy." Another thing she learned was that although love needed to be continually negotiated between her mother and father, they would never withhold it from her little brother, the elder of their two sons. From the moment of his birth, Andy, named after a famous singer in Hong Kong, was their parents' little lucky Buddha. Endearing roundness and toothless grin were his baby trademarks, not to mention that his zodiac animal, the bull, aligned perfectly with their father's, the monkey; whereas, Sam, the younger son, the tiger, was the glitch in their father's universe, and their father rarely let Sam forget it.

As it turned out, the moment right after the MC presented the bridal party and Li was using her chopsticks to swirl the julienned jellyfish and ham on her plate was also the moment that Penny would reveal how she would help her family. Penny, half-closed eyes tilted toward one of the low-hanging chandeliers, as if what she was about to impart was detectable in the dangling pieces of glass, grumbled to Li's mother, "The spirit that was trailing you for many years since birth has taken up residence in Andy's body."

Li's mother gasped loudly and Li stifled a groan as others at the

table stopped in mid-chew to look at them. Unlike her mother, Li did not like an audience.

"That's why you've been unlucky in some areas in your life," Penny continued. "Now, I can expel it from Andy's body, but I don't know if I can get rid of it completely. It may very likely start chasing you again."

Li rolled her eyes, letting her chopsticks fall to the plate in a clang as she spoke up. "There is no such thing as ghosts." She was about to say more, but Penny silenced her with a single glare. Li, though silenced, glared back.

"A strong bird will be needed to perform the ritual," Penny continued.

"We have three chickens at home for you to pick from, and one of them is a rooster," Li's mother said. She then proceeded to fill their tablemates in, with animated hand gestures, on the background of her son's medical history, which, until a moment ago, had not involved a family spirit. Li knew that for a long time, her mother and father had entertained two possibilities for the sudden onset of Andy's mysterious illness: perhaps on that frigid winter night, when they didn't shut all the windows, the wind came in, settled into Andy's lungs and never left; or perhaps it was the time, some years ago, when he was playing among the shoes and proceeded to put one of them in his mouth, sucking on the sole for who knows how long before his mother marched over and yanked it from his mouth. Li could still hear Andy's heart-broken sobs reverberating in the house. He had managed to get hold of another shoe before his mother picked him up, shaking it loose, causing another round of bawling. Then Li's father had snapped at Li, "Well, don't just stand there. Put the shoes in the closet!" Until that moment Andy had been a

perfectly healthy baby; after that, they'd had to take Andy to the family doctor again and again, filling the refrigerator with cough, fever, and decongestant syrups, but to no avail. The symptoms would taper off gradually, but return with a vengeance, back and forth it went to this day, so now, nearly a decade later, his soft and plump eleven year-old frame seemed to be wilting as opposed to approaching puberty.

From the start, Li's father's mind had refused to rest until he found the cause and cure of whatever it was that Andy had contracted. Li could only reason that the pit of his stomach had prompted her father to turn to the lunar calendar hanging on the wall, for he seemed convinced that a form of wisdom existed in the symbols adorning the bottom half of the pages, that the answers to the family's prayers were embedded in the animal figure, perhaps, or the quartet of Chinese characters shaped like a box in the corner. He started checking three times a day, once before he left for work, then when he returned home, and once more before bed. He grew even sharper with his wife, snapping at her when she tried to call him away from the calendar.

Then, one day, he and Li's mother took a trip to the local temple and, when they returned, spoke in hushed tones for the rest of the evening. The following morning Penny knocked on the door and was introduced to the family. Unlike subsequent visits, the first one had been brief. She'd hovered over Andy's reclining body on the couch, nodding here and there, muttering to Li's parents. Li, while serving tea to Penny as ordered by her father, grimaced when her eyes met Penny's.

Ever since then, Li's father believed that he was quite intuitive

when it came to the lunar calendar, often consulting it before doing anything, from heading to his favorite restaurant in Chinatown to going grocery shopping. That was how and why he had bowed out of today's wedding banquet; he was supposed to accompany Li's mother, but decided otherwise after scanning the calendar earlier that day.

"Today's coordinates are not compatible with my sign." He'd let the pages fall from his fingers, shaking his head. "I'd better stay home to avoid any misfortune."

As her father returned to the couch, Li could see her mother's jaw tighten, lips forming a straight line. From this moment until further notice, love would remain yet another question mark between Li's parents. Li's mother didn't say, "But you told me you would go." She didn't say, "You're such a jackass." During these not infrequent interruptions of love, there were always clenched teeth, difficulty in breathing, sometimes mini explosions, mostly silence. At least when it came to her husband, Li's mother had learned that most of the time, it was just easier to not say anything at all. Letting her tongue go limp had become a habit, another reflex her body remembered.

This time, she took the silence with her to the kitchen where she started grilling a halved ginger root over a low fire on the stove. The ginger, when charred enough, would be rubbed into the tendons of Andy's chest and back. The tendons would crunch under the pressure of the massage. The blood would be drawn to the surface of the skin, and the skin, chest, and throat would feel a cooling, numbing sensation. Li's mother took comfort in knowing that this home remedy had been passed down from her parents, and it was something that was hers. Meanwhile, Andy

waited in the bedroom, trying to sleep off his fever. He had been excused from school for the third day in a row.

As the pungency of the ginger wafted in the air, Li went to the backyard where Sam was throwing rice on the ground for their rooster and two hens, making them dart in circles, clucking wildly. The hens were much quicker in picking up the rice, which triggered the rooster to inflate his coat of feathers, and he hopped on one hen then the other, wings spread at maximum span, driving his beak into both of their necks, forcing them to drop the food. He had done the same thing when they were first brought home, a few weeks following his arrival.

Sam waved the rooster off, muttering, "So mean. What an asshole."

Li poured the rest of the rice out of the pot, "That's the way they are." The hens ran to gather their share before the rooster started flapping his wings again on elevated legs. "They are programmed. It's the domination ritual."

"Do you think we can reprogram our rooster?"

Li thought for a minute. "It would take some work, but if we keep trying and stay hopeful, maybe we can do it."

Sam, still a lanky boy at ten years old, smiled as readily as ever, especially when it came to the chickens, and he smiled then at Li's remark, baring his crooked teeth and squinting his eyes into upside-down moon crescents, as Li's eyes did on a smaller scale. He was the one who started picking up the birds first, walking around with them under his arms for as long as they let him. Li knew that he often thought of the day he'd seen the rooster's head poking out of a paper bag their mother had brought back, and then his body unfolding out onto clumsy legs. At

first the rooster, face pale and unsure of his surroundings, did not move from the base of the stairs. The comb had just sprouted on his head, and the wattle was pink, but both parts would later bloom into a healthy, bloody red. Sam, Andy, and Li had watched in fascination as their mother threw day-old cooked rice on the grass. The rooster, suddenly alert, waddled and bobbed his way toward his first meal at his new home, and they left him pecking and exploring long after the last grain was gone.

The rooster had continued to make himself at home in the backyard. He roosted to sleep in the same spot every night, underneath the sink of the laundry machine. As the days went by, the comb on his head grew tall while the wattle lengthened, swaying side to side when he walked, reeling when he raced toward his food. Due to the exercise—roaming from the backyard to the driveway into the front yard and then back again, not to mention the dirt clawing and sunbathing—he transformed into a robust, model bird. It showed in the definition of his broad chest and muscular thighs. His legs were long, thick, and yellow. The feathers were glossy brown, fluffy in the belly, stiff on the back, culminating in a burst of purple in the fan-tail that stood straight up from behind. He had also begun crowing, as if to broadcast his growth and development to the neighborhood. The crowing could often be heard during random parts of the day, above car alarms and traffic sounds.

Li noticed with Sam it was different and that, despite the ready smile, there was an uncertainty to his step, a slump in his shoulders. He knew his father was always watching him, waiting for a chance to issue punishment. As for Li, herself, as long as her chores were done and she

didn't talk back, her helping of love would be served. Otherwise, it would be yanked out from underneath her so that she fell hard—even though as she got older she would learn to pick herself up more easily each time.

But for the first two years of Li's life, love had not been such a precarious thing in this household.

As testified by multiple early photographs now stored in a tulip-covered memento box, Li had made it through toddlerhood pretty peacefully as an only child, albeit female, with a perpetual bewildered look and hair that stuck straight up, the tips meeting to form a cone on her head. In one photograph, she was in a walker trapped in a corner, legs splayed crookedly and mouth also crooked. A hand, her mother's, was on the walker, ready to dislodge her. In another photograph, her mother was carrying her like a trophy, one hand propping up her diapered bottom, Li's vibrant yet bewildered eyes staring past the camera. As a teenager holding fast to such pictures, Li supposed that being a baby had not been bad at all. She had seemed like another part of her mother's body, an extension of that maternal space. Her father had kept his distance as the photographer and, later, Li would wish that he had stayed the distant photographer.

Then, when she was two going on three, her mother disappeared for two weeks then returned with her first little brother, Andy, and then a second one, Sam, not even a year after. Both times, Li remembered being dropped off at the neighbor's house, but she did not remember her mother getting large with child. One second her mother was gone, and shortly thereafter her father was gone with her, and the

next they both returned, she barely able to step out of the car as he marched, purposefully but delicately, toward the front door, holding the baby at arm's length, as if carrying him close to the body would hurt the baby. Not that Li's mother or father had forewarned either time that there would be a new addition to the family, but Li decided later that having brothers, any siblings, was a privilege. Babies were light beings, ready to smile, ready to love, and Li's brothers were no different.

But, with the arrival of her brothers, Li would realize that, as a girl, and the oldest child, she'd have to work hard now so her parents would continue to find her special.

The realization dawned on her when she was five years old, standing at the sink on a metal chair, steadfastly washing the baby bottles which, once clean, she would fill with whole milk for her two little brothers. She would then stack them in a small cooler on a bed of ice, and place the cooler by her parents' bed for easy access for her brothers, who, before drawing the blanket to their chins, would reach for a bottle of cold milk, and if needed, have another in the middle of the night. The first night she had been sent to wash the baby bottles, she'd wanted to watch a soap opera with her parents on the Chinese channel, but they both said, simply, "We will not kiss you if you don't do your chore." Kiss for them meant affection, hugging, love. It was her first time hearing them threatening to withhold the "kiss." Bare feet rubbing against each other to keep warm on the metal chair, and sleeves heavy with soapy water, she prayed that night, and for many nights thereafter, for the permanence of her parents' love.

Now, as a teenager, Li had decided it wasn't just fear of the absence

of love, but also guilt that prodded her to do as she was told. A part of her felt that she existed to be whatever her father couldn't be to her mother. Since he didn't help with the chores and didn't want the boys to, of course Li had to take on the responsibility. Since he had decided not to attend the wedding at the last minute, of course the next oldest person had to go to represent the family. Li could see the expectation on her mother's face each time. Where did the guilt come from? Was it the same guilt her mother felt, while pregnant with Li, when she left her parents in China for America with her new husband? Perhaps it had been transferred to Li in the womb, like the crescent-shaped eyes that she and Sam may have gotten from their grandparents, who remained in China and whom they would never meet.

Of course, Li was not the only one who wondered how things could have been different. Her mother once confessed that there had been a man before Li's father. Sometime after their wedding, Li's father had slapped her mother hard when he found out she'd run into this man. Before Li's father was in the picture, this man and Li's mother had been on the verge of falling in love.

"He was tall. And kind," her mother revealed, the corners of her lips turning up just slightly, flecks of light showing in her eyes. "All the girls flirted with him, but he only paid attention to me." But the village matchmaker had recommended someone else to her family. Still, Li's grandparents had given her mother an opportunity to choose. They wanted their daughter to be happy, after all. Li's mother knew this other man was what her heart wanted, but her heart wanted just a little more to be the best daughter any parent could ask for, the best daughter

in and beyond her village. So, summoning all the demureness she could muster, she whispered just loud enough for her parents to hear: "Mother and Father, what you choose will be the best for me." They went with the matchmaker's advice, which must surely be auspicious for the family name and future.

"His name was Meng." Li's mother smiled with her eyes again.

That was what popped into Li's head again then at the wedding banquet: the name, "Meng." Her mother had finished sharing the story of Andy with the table just as the third course, lobster with ginger and scallion, arrived hot from the kitchen. Li did not join Penny, her mother and the rest in burying their chopsticks in the food. Rather, Li turned her attention to the stage, where Meng and the other groomsmen had gathered to give a collective toast to the groom—a group performance of the classic song, "Friends." As the men joined arms, infusing the song with their mutual emotion and eventually pulling the groom onto the stage with them, Li's heart began to race and the hair on the back of her neck stood up. Meng's voice was the loudest, his face wrinkling up then relaxing, and back again, the only voice extending to the very last note. Scanning the banquet hall that housed these guests, many of them very likely friends of friends of the bride and groom, Li realized that no one else was affected by this celebration of friendship. They were caught up talking or murmuring their appreciation for the ten-course meal.

By then, the groom and bride had danced their first dance, and the MC was summoning more people to the floor, where Meng was already dipping a girl with a ballerina's body, effortlessly folding her into the crook of his arm as her fingers graze the floor before floating back up

toward his neck. His mouth moved seductively, almost in slow motion. Li thought he may have whispered the girl's name but she couldn't be sure. When he laid his lips on hers it was as if he was showing everyone how to kiss, how to woo, how to win the girl. The spotlight was on him without him asking for it. His friends cheered him on from the sidelines, but Li could tell they all wished that they had a little of his physique, his bravado, and that they could dip a girl like that or have a girl that wants to be dipped like that. Li, on the other hand, wanted to be the girl. She wanted the supple, graceful body, and to be handled by someone who is both lover and protector.

For the rest of the evening, only half touching her food, Li imagined the girl with the ballerina's body, a lot like her own body and her mother's body before childbirth, as Meng's future wife. They would have a girl first, and they would love her. They would have two boys next, and Meng would bring his daughter to the hospital each time, bouncing her on his knee while they waited to be summoned to see his wife and son. He would feel an implosion of love meeting his sons, as he did with his daughter, the impact of the emotion traveling from the ribs to the tips of his fingers and toes. Meng and his wife would realize, perhaps like the real Meng from Li's mother's village, that though they had been born into Chinese mythologies, cultural boundaries could surely bleed together, and that they wanted their children to learn more about life than Confucian teachings. They would discuss this while Meng was stretched out on the floor, as he often would be with his children, and he would allow them to clamber over his chest to beg to be lifted up in the air.

The day after the wedding banquet, Penny paid a visit to Li's home again. This time, after checking on Andy, she conducted a comprehensive study of the corners of the house, a red string with a Chinese coin swinging from one hand. Li, coming in with clean laundry, noticed that Penny had narrowed her eyes at the nook between her parents' room and the brothers' room, where Andy and Sam used to play. With her foot, Penny nudged a bag of toys, most of which were donations from family friends over the years; the few that were purchased were requests from Andy that had been granted: a giant stuffed puppy with tear-dropped eyes; Ninja Turtle action figures; a remote-controlled car, purchased shortly after Andy got sick to brighten his day. Such that on that day, they had both dashed through the front door to add the new car to the other toys on the floor. The car happened to be equally coveted by Andy and Sam, who loved each other and managed to be best friends despite their parents' obvious favoritism.

They were making sound effects, giggling, rolling on the floor. Then Sam accidentally whacked Andy on the jaw as he went vroom-vroom in time with the remote control, causing Andy's face to crumple into loud wheezing yelps. Their father had already grabbed a wire hanger from the closet by the time he charged with flared nostrils to their corner, and without asking any questions, had started swinging at Sam anywhere the hanger could touch.

Li had run to grab her mother, who in three large steps from the kitchen yanked her husband back by his arm still aimed at his cringing son. He was breathing hard through teeth that were mashed together, but he dropped the hanger. Instead of picking up Sam, Li's mother

picked up a stunned Andy, who was no longer crying, and turned to her husband, "What the hell are you doing? Wasn't this how your father treated you? You have become just like him." Remorse washed over his face, and he quietly left the room, quietly left his wife's and daughter's glowering looks, quietly left Sam crouched in the corner, bits of skin curling up on his arms and legs. Sam's mouth had taken the shape of an 'o,' releasing a sad whistling that continued for another half hour, during which he squirmed away from his mother when she tried to comfort him, before he allowed Li to lead him away by the hand.

As she dropped the clean clothes on her parents' bed, Li couldn't help but feel heavy sadness thinking about that incident, one of the many. She turned to see Penny taping a yellow protection flag at the top of the door, her lips moving in a low chant. Penny would also tape more of the same flags above the other bedroom doorways, flags with prayers in black calligraphy that would remain there for years until the edges were frayed with age. Then Penny and Li's parents made their way to the chickens in their backyard. Through the kitchen window, Li heard Penny talk about the rooster, about how his strength and vitality would be important elements in the imminent service. "I'm glad that you have been taking good care of him," Penny said. "We shouldn't waste any more time."

The three of them looked through the calendar together, with Li's father interjecting every few seconds to offer his suggestions. Penny shook her head each time, and Li could tell that although he was smiling politely at Penny's explanations, the language of exorcism confused him. Li's mother looked annoyed, her jaw tightening once again.

The day of the service, Li and Sam were instructed to stay out of the way because something very important was about to happen. They couldn't even sit next to Andy in bed so they watched television in the living room with the volume on mute. Now and then, they stole glances at what Penny was doing.

Penny did not bring any assistants. It was just her at the mah jong table folded out in front of the altar, lining up paper lanterns and faux dollar bills above a set of cymbals. A hand-drawn chart of androgynous faces billowed above like a sail.

She turned to Li and Sam, gesturing to the chart, "The faces here represent the earth gods that we will pray to about Andy's health." Li thought the quality of the drawings resembled children's artwork from a grade school classroom, but there was something arresting, something all-knowing, about those faces. Li's mother joined Penny at the altar to sift through the faux money, fanning them out on top of colored tissue paper and a textured paper shell designed to hold all of it together so that it became another offering. As Li's mother lit the offering with a lighter and made her way toward the front yard to transfer it to the burning pot, Penny started tapping the cymbals together. Holy men had visited their home before, marching around and reciting prayers, so maybe, Li thought, this service would turn out almost just like it.

The next time Li looked up from the television, her parents had appeared with the rooster, his wings held back with black string. She and Sam were not alarmed because the holy men had also used the rooster before in their prayer ritual. As Li expected, a small incision was made on the side

of the rooster's beak to extract a few beads of celebratory blood for the ancestors, then Penny dipped the beak in a bowl of rice wine a few times before bowing earnestly with the rooster at the altar. Li could see drops of wine flying from the movement. Her parents looked on in consternation. Andy was waiting half-asleep in his bedroom.

Meanwhile, Penny chanted a series of verses slowly then rapidly, and although it sounded like a different language altogether, Li guessed it must be the prayer to urge the troubled spirit to leave Andy's body, to spare this innocent boy and to find another vessel to inhabit. Penny then took the rooster to the same corners of the house she'd visited the other day, bowing at each spot.

Finally, she made her way toward the bedroom, signaling for Li's parents to follow. Li and Sam sprang from the couch to peek through the space from the half-open door. They saw their father holding tight to the rooster's squirming legs and their mother unbuttoning Andy's shirt while Penny continued chanting under her breath. Penny guided the rooster toward Andy's body, and then dragged the bird up and down the boy's pale, bare chest. It was a shoveling and sawing act all at once. Fast then slow. The rooster blinked listlessly, his beak open in pain and shock. Outside, the hens screamed and screamed, as if they knew something terrible was happening. Li didn't know how long this took, but it couldn't have been more than a minute. The rooster's eyes were now unblinking and glassy. His body gradually became still then stiff, feathers no longer glossy but opaque like discarded fish scales. The deed was done. Li's mother and father took the dead rooster to the driveway and heaved it into the trash bin, the impact sending up a

cloud of dust and food particles.

A feather from the rooster's fan-tail had detached itself from the body, and Li picked it up from the floor when her parents were not looking, to add to her tulip memento box with the photographs.

When Andy got out of bed the next morning, he still looked a little ashen, but otherwise revived. He watched cartoons with Li and Sam for the first time in a long while.

Aside from Sam's solemn observation that "the rooster will be asleep for a long, long time" after Penny left their house with all of her instruments, none of them would bring this up in the future. It was as if they preferred to forget it ever happened. More roosters would come and go in their lives, each serving his purpose, but Li and her brothers would never become as attached to any of them as they had to the initial one that had cured Andy. Although Andy's health improved and he would not get sick like that again, his body would remain soft and in a state of perpetual boyhood. Sam, on the other hand, would shoot up past his father in a few short years, complete with wide shoulders and deadpan face.

Soon after, Li procured two more photographs from the family album, once the album had gotten so full that her mother wouldn't notice. One was a close-up of Andy in a walker, Li's old walker; his face was lifted to someone, perhaps their mother, mouth open in a big, heart-shaped (toothless) smile. The other was of Sam sitting on a metal chair, with so much joy on his face, his toes not anywhere near touching the edge of the seat, reaching out with a small fist to the photographer, their mother, while their father held him in place. Their father, although smil-

ing, gazed sideways at Sam with visible hostility. In both photographs, Li's brothers were free and full, empty of burden. She could see it in their eyes, dark and round, like a baby bird.

From teenage years and on, Li could only gaze at these pictures longing for a shred of that past, longing for these former selves. Once they all grew up and recognized the smallness of their bodies in the vast world, it became a different story, many stories.

She found herself considering the same question over and over: If an illness, a spirit, could be passed from one body to another, as guilt and pain are, how do you learn, on your own, to purge yourself of these burdens?

That was when Li remembered that when she was seven years old, she challenged her brothers to a hot pepper eating contest. Their parents were not home, and there was a nearly-full jar of hot yellow peppers in the refrigerator. They each grabbed one from the jar, and on the count of the three, proceeded to take a bite first, then another, but before they could get to the fourth nibble, their mouths were simultaneously blazing and salivating so much that they had to toss their leftover peppers in the trash.

Between gulps of water, Li suggested another game. In order to cool down, they all had to take a nap under the blanket with their shirts off. Since their parents' queen size bed was available, there was plenty of room for the three of them.

"Pretend the blanket is a huge wing, a shield that can keep us from harm," she said, climbing onto the bed. She folded her shirt into a neat rectangle, and instructed Andy and Sam to do the same. "So you're safe

already, under this wing, but you also need to use your imagination to cool yourselves from the hot peppers."

A few minutes into the nap, both brothers cried, "I don't know what to imagine! And my mouth is still burning."

So Li whispered, "You can be a part of my story, then. You need to concentrate on imagining this, and try really hard to fall asleep in order for this to work." She paused. "You are both on my back, so hang on tight, and we are taking flight, up, up, up, leaving everything behind. We are so elevated in the sky that when we look down, you only see squares and circles where there once were buildings and trees, and then the mountain ranges start to look like massive tree roots. We have never been so light, but it will feel so familiar, like coming home. Later, when we are ready for a break from being so high up, we will swoop back down gracefully, and we can see a lot of snow, but it's not freezing for us because the cold is extinguishing the hot pepper heat from our bodies. We are our own airplane, just soaring and soaring over white-capped mountains. And this will go on forever."

# I CAME THIS

LILIT MANUCHARYAN

close to  
telling you  
tonight

right after  
we had  
dropped off  
the others

when I  
accidentally  
pressed the gas  
at the  
red light  
instead of making  
a right

and you panicked  
and gripped  
onto the dashboard

then, laughing,  
continued  
to sing along  
to Hedwig  
at the top  
of your lungs

I swear  
I was *this*  
close  
tonight  
as we sped  
through  
the slumbering  
world at  
nearly  
half past two  
to finally  
telling you  
that I

# CONGENITAL AND NOT COMMUNICABLE

HARUKO HATAKEDA

teeth talk to teeth  
when microorganisms relate.  
sounds cancel  
each other out.  
it's not a theory  
but we duplicate experiments  
for their results.  
cancel me out.

cancel me with your  
dull pencil.  
press down hard—  
pressure applied—  
i want to be able to read the strokes  
of your lines and see the dents  
on white. to feel where you  
led the tip when i use my fingertips.

cancel me with an  
any-color-of-your-choosing pen.  
scraping surfaces  
of paper until you're sure  
there's no ink left, or no  
ink left to coax.  
until it's given all it can give.  
sobbing against the ragged spaces,  
shredded paper surrounding it.

cancel me with  
the marker you don't use,  
the one with the frayed point mistaking  
your neat alphabets for mold,  
the one you'd rather not use since it  
also leaks when held.  
you're hoping it will run out of ink when  
you're not looking because you're—oh, not

because you're a coward.

breaking arches at their bases, bases  
laughing in saturation, saturated  
down to the marrow, marrow  
i can squeeze out with my teeth, teeth  
i'd have talking to your teeth, introduced to each other like two  
playmates. *here, teeth, meet teeth. say hello to teeth, teeth.*

meet me here again tomorrow.  
come with your toys next time.  
let's explore the places we're told not to go.  
don't forget to brush and floss or not.

we'll plan behind our own backs  
as teeth talk to teeth. breaking out  
of all our old paces.

TO A COMMON PROSTITUTE FROM A COMMON PROCUREUR

TYLER DEAKINS

Before vision gave way to perception I held  
in my hands the climax of a seventy year affair—

the pendular precision of your second-hand symmetry,  
the peaking arch of your Roman shoulders,

the maple-bright warmth of your neck,  
the straight rigidity of your truss rod spine—

And what now of the sprawling frozen waste?  
What now of gravediggers and divine decomposition?  
Are the depths of the sea no longer endless?  
Voyage dans La Lune? Little green men?  
And what ever happened to Jack Reed?

You were my first. I held you on my  
lap and you looked up to me with

shining machine-head eyes. My hands  
slid down the length of your fretboard.

Anything to pass the time and  
keep that song out of my...  
Oh my darling,

oh my darling,  
dreadful sorry  
Clementine.

I memorized the topography of your body,  
used your body,

If I don't see you then  
you don't exist but...

learned notes, chords, scales, modes,

Are we not spiraling?  
Both fox and rabbit?

staccato, legato, glissando,

There is a monster  
under the bed—  
with knives in his mouth.  
You've every reason to be afraid.

espressivo, allegro, allegro, etcetera.

And we sure had some fun, didn't we?  
Before the war began? Before we waved

goodbye from our sandboxes and shoved  
off for the European theater? Wasn't it  
something? Weren't you my Lucille? Wasn't the  
whole goddamned world a great big oyster shell?

You were mine—

until an officer who was just passing through stopped  
to laugh and ask what I was doing up there with

that thing and didn't I know that the roses had been  
painted red? Turns out you're a cheap scrap of laminate,

a mass produced toy made up in polyurethane—  
same as everyone starts out on.



# THE INVISIBLE MONUMENT

SANAM SHAH-MIRI

Spices with handwritten labels  
I can't read  
cramp for space  
borrowing heavily from the Arabic alphabet.  
And when I ask, "What is *shambalileh*?"  
she cannot translate it for me  
despite her degree in English.

"Can you say it in English please?"  
She uses language against me:  
"You should know that by now."  
I don't know  
which pot is the correct size,  
what the difference is  
between a plate and a bowl,  
a napkin, a towel or a tissue, in Farsi.

Now tell me in English, what is the difference  
if I use a slightly smaller pan instead of the fancier one  
with the lid?  
What's the difference  
between using oil or butter?  
The difference, my mother sighs,  
is big and important,  
an invisible monument:  
"Watch and learn."

Questions congeal on my tongue.  
When released, they crash and spill to the floor.  
The samovar is straining, the heat is rising  
up the fogged windows like a *hammam*,  
like someone's taking a bath.

I test the water.  
"I know you're tired. Teach me so I can do it instead."  
Hot.  
"You can't do it. It has to be just right."  
Clammer. Without nourishment  
resting in its curved armature,  
the spoon settles in sync with the other disregarded.  
The scratchy Teflon pot  
where the stew is stirring  
evidence of sloppy starts.  
As the kettle starts to whistle,  
she picks it up  
and pours herself a cup.



# Experimental Fiction

SEAN PESSIN

*I found the carcass of a dog on my stoop. "It was a huge golden retriever. When I came across it, it was only a pile of flesh and bones. It used to be a scientist." I said this to my mother.*

She never believed me, and today was no different. She chastised me for showing her the remains, then had me help her dispose of him. *I knew what happened the second I saw the body lying there. This scientist was murdered.*

*Clearly, the scientist had been a man. He had been neutered a bit late in his life; his testicles were clearly removed, and had woken up late that morning because his coat was distressed. He probably stumbled out of bed doggedly and tripped on the pile of clothes that had accrued next to his bed over the course of the week prior. I am almost certain he kicked the pile, but was forced to return to its scattered remains after his breakfast nutritional bar to find his keys from one of the pants-pockets, "the pair he had worn yesterday."*

My mother told me to shut up as she went into the kitchen to retrieve a trash bag and the number for animal control.

*As he continued to fall forward in the course of the morning, into his car,*

*through the coffee-hut drive thru, down the highway, past the security booth at the front of the parking structure at the large pharmacological laboratory he worked at, out of his car and to his designated lab, he didn't think. His course had been the same for almost two years, it seems, because the padding on his paws was worn in specific, centralized areas, indicating consistent, repetitive travels.*

*He landed himself in the locker room and slipped into his jacket and goggles. Our scientist perhaps contemplated the ocean of work he had to finish before he could go home, and interrupting his thoughts was the image he saw; he managed to catch himself in the mirror for a second, take a breath, then dive into paperwork.*

"He noticed the protesters, he had to have, since he had a window office and they were surrounding the building with picket signs and banners, all reading the uniform calls to end animal testing."

My mother ignored me.

*Since his window was small and rounded, it would be reasonable to assume that he daydreamed about being in a fishbowl or a submarine, depending on whether or not the signs were colorful. If the signs were colorful, they most likely became fish in his distorted reality. If he felt like the office was wetter than the outside, he might have been the fish. Either way, he didn't care about their message. He signed his life away when he okayed, in this absent-minded state, the allowance of increased testing, to the chagrin of his vocal opponents. "But fish don't make sounds."*

This caused her to glare at me.

*As lunch approached, the protesters got news, through tapped phone wires that there was an order placed for more cages and double shipments of the next six months' mice. This acted to demoralize some while others became infuriated. Many of the protesters reacted poorly, suggesting violent acts, but only one of them found*

*themselves perturbed enough to take a few of those ideas to heart. He snuck into the parking structure, and waited for anyone to come out.*

*It, if I piece this together correctly, was the scientist's wife's birthday. He called her to say that he'd be working late that night, and to not wait up. He lied. "It was her special day."*

My mother was not around to hear that one. My mother dug through her purse for her cell phone to call animal control.

*The scientist had forgotten her birthday last year, and had bought for her a diamond tennis bracelet, to try and escape the doghouse that he had been in for the last eleven months and twenty-nine days. Everyone knows that there is no inherent meaning in the tennis bracelet, but it is still a nice gesture, and one that she would have recognized as effort. He held the tennis bracelet in his hand as he flashed his security card in front of the door sensor to leave earlier than usual, but still later than everyone else on his team, and that is most likely when the assailant became offensive.*

*Since the security records only show one entrance and two exit punches, it is probable that this is when the assailant had the scientist throw all the chemicals and treatments into a large canvas bag, readied for this particular outcome. Conjecture suggests that the shock of all of this kept the scientist from tripping any of the alarms as a deterrent for what was to come. Or, the assailant measured his attack, and only lifted the pass off the scientist after incapacitating him, leaving his body while he looted.*

*From here, I can only speculate the events. The scientist was dragged or dragged and brought to the lair of the assailant. "He was tied to a pipe or chair," I told my mother.*

My mother was talking to animal control. "No, I don't live here, but I am here now and there's a dead dog on the stoop." My mother kept clicking her acrylic nails, and my mother never looked at me.

*Usually, when someone awakens from a drugging or concussion, if they don't slip into a coma, they awake groggy. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the scientist awoke disoriented and incoherent. He could have asked where he was, and if he did, he would have been met with a jeer or taunt or an insult. Then the assailant would begin. He would have grabbed any of the instruments in the bag and used it. With the scalpel, he slashed at his face, which must be fact, as there was a gash on the snout of the dog lying on the stoop. There were many other things in his mind, but the scalpel did not provide enough of a visceral edge to satisfy his sadism. He might have grabbed a handful of syringes and stuck them in the arm of the scientist. As his veins pumped full of the chemical cocktail, he probably passed out again. Either that, or the guilt that he was made aware of by the torture triggered the transformative process that struck him with the affliction of being a dog.*

*When he eventually awoke again, he'd have been a dog. This might have overjoyed the assailant, or it might have pissed him off. Either way, the torture began, and he did things to this man that even Soviet scientists would have found distasteful, and they used to decapitate dogs and staple the severed heads to the necks of other dogs. "This must have gone on for many months on end."*

My mother was on the phone. "I can't do this any longer. You and your husband work long-ass hours and I'm not paid enough to take care of dead dogs and retarded kids. You didn't even tell me he -" My mother was fidgeting.

*So did the assailant, after he felt retribution had been paid. The catharsis must*

*have been great, because he let this dog go, to tell the world of the psychopath that had been mutilating him. But the man could not do anything, because he had no hands. His ability to bark had been removed by the assailant. Most likely he ran around wheezing for help or attention, but he was mangy from the mere hours of neglect. His slow realization that he had no voice spooked him. In his panic, he ran in front of a bus, got hit, and tried to find a place that he might lay down and die. This happened early in the morning. Since I discovered the dog in the late afternoon, he had long since died. "It is a sad story."*

"Wait here until your fucking parents get home," my mother said as she looked at me, and left.

# SURVIVAL

MELISSA MOREHOUSE

wings meet at the spine,  
flay open fingers,  
knuckles

grab a rabbit  
by the neck's nape,  
twine the ankles,  
hang it on a branch

broken,  
twisted,  
the strata curves,  
overturned,  
failed attempt  
of the foiling process

blades trim  
grass,  
fat,

fur,  
crows have no room  
to escape

forests evoke riddles,  
myths,  
prickle the flesh  
as shadows taunt,  
linger at the corner

the eye distracts  
from the face  
and only reveals  
half truths  
reflected,  
refracted thoughts

intelligible,  
indelible,  
the cipher  
is *in* the skin,  
telling all

# THE FIRST OGRE

JAMES MEDINA

The Ogre came again today,  
he ate all the crops  
and left the ground barren and dry.

The Ogre came again today,  
he ate many lives  
and left the families in the dust.

The Ogre came again today,  
he ate the sun and the moon and the stars  
and he left us in darkness.

The Ogre came again today,  
and saw that we had nothing.  
He took his mighty arms and plowed the ground  
and made the ground green.

The Ogre came again today,  
and saw that we had no nation.  
He dipped his fingers into the mud  
and built a village.

The Ogre came again today,  
and he saw we had no light  
he breathed a mote of fire  
and it shined the night.

The Ogre came again today,  
for a feast of bread.  
We gutted him and stewed him raw.

We ate every bit,  
and threw his bones to the starved dogs  
and now we are filled.

We have eaten the truth of him,  
now we are Ogre.  
Tomorrow we will go hunting.  
We will have red meat.



# Welcome Home: A Series

JESSICA KUBINEC

When Sarah and Jennifer decided to photograph their father, Jennifer tells me, it was an attempt to show him, in his more lucid moments, just how crazed he could be. The first picture of the collection is certainly the most benign and, while Jennifer states she did not initially look at the photos with pride, she mentions she took them to find humor in an often-humorless time. She says Sarah was brilliant at grabbing that light; she could look at a hopeless situation and find the “silver lining in the dismal storm that was ripping up our foundation.” This first picture, in its original form, like all the others, is in black and white. Most of the photos were initially shot from a simple disposable Kodak camera, but apparently when Rite Aid stopped developing the “darker photos,” they had to switch to Jennifer’s Rebel and Sarah would develop them herself.

I ask Jennifer how looking at that photo now—especially being the start of her illustrious career—makes her feel. She squints at the photo and draws in a deep breath, searching for a seemingly blocked memory.

“We decided to put his hair in a faux-hawk.” She laughs at the now

flooding recollection. “I mean, his thin, grey hair was getting so long and it would just look ridiculous. Especially the way his tongue would persistently attempt to wet his dry mouth, that would definitely make for an even funnier image.” She pulls absently at her bottom lip; it seems to serve as an almost guide through her past. “He was languidly rocking his head back and forth, you know? It was like he was desperately hoping our nimble little hands would fail this time. We used to always ‘sneak attack’ him when he was boozy and he resisted as much as any person in his condition could, but we always prevailed. I mean, a third his age, much more sober and this new found drive to capture any drunken encounter; of course we triumphed.”

She pauses with a breathy laugh; her eye surveys the photo and I can see she doesn’t want to remember anymore. It’s almost as if she’s afraid a floodgate of traumatic experiences will pour through and she won’t be able to stop. But walking through the gallery, beginning to end, it’s simple and immediate to experience this trauma through her eye.

She gives me back the photo and looks around for the server. She has downed four iced teas in the last half hour; she seems to drink them with a sort of authority on the matter of drinking, but she has been sober since the last of the series was snapped. The photo is quite brilliant

though; his hair has been masterfully sculpted, rising three inches off of his head and shimmering with all the delight that gel promises to deliver. With his lip protruding, hoping for some momentary relief, he pours just a little bit more into a half empty mug. He seems defeated and delighted all at the same time. I ask Jennifer about this look.

She finishes off her fifth iced tea and says, "I don't know. His feelings were instantly mutable. Like, after we finished with his hair he was breathless and violently ripped the chenille blanket off his legs, pushing himself to the edge of his awful three-piece sectional. God, I hated that couch. It was one of those couches that had built in recliners on either end with fold down trays that had cup holders." She shudders at the thought of this couch. "His feet were fumbling to find his house slippers while he pushed three times and finally raised himself off his seat. He shuffled to the kitchen, grumbling something about taking advantage of an old man, still pressing his tongue to the front of his mouth. Sarah and I were giggling mercilessly. We loved to shake up his routine with high hopes that just maybe some light would come into that airless room. But we heard the refrigerator open and the cork pop, and that just made me more determined to get this photo. So we crept towards him and captured the perfect moment. 'Awe! Come on!' he yelled, 'I bet you think that is so funny.' He made no eye contact; he just sipped his drink and shuffled back to his permanently indented recliner. I told him not to get grumpy because we were just gathering proof. And Sarah tried to smooth him over by letting him know we were only playing around.

"Sarah was never as honest as I was. I had to tell him why we wanted him to look at the pictures, how I thought maybe he would be embarrassed and want to change right away. But that tough kind of love never seemed to work on him, it only made things more volatile between us. He would drink more to ignore the humiliation, which seemed for him the best way to go and then, when he was good and boozy, he would giggle along with us over the tumult that he was taking."

Jennifer leans back comfortably in her chair letting her arms dangle by her side. She seems to have gone back to that moment. I don't dare interrupt. There are only a few times in a writers life, well in my life, when an artist lets her guard down.

"Like when we ran to get the camera from my room when he fell out of his bed. I took about ten photos in black and white of him; ten still shots of the progression from the floor back to the bed. I was still using the disposable camera at that time, and while, yes, I might have been caught up in the moment, he took what seemed to be an insurmountable length of time to get back on his shaky legs. We said we'd never interfere in the process, kind of like animal planet where the lion rips the zebra ruthlessly to shreds and a voice-over excitedly states the blow by blow; except, in his case, the bottle was his lion. Only thing we could do was to document his seemingly ceaseless decline that had this grip on him. Sarah decided to make a kind of flipbook of those shots that I had captured and she titled it 'The Big Fall.' It had a brilliant blue cover with black and gold, star-print tulle that I had kept from a Christmas present, tying it all together. She cut out letters from a magazine for the title, which kind of

looked like a blackmail note that could have said, *if you don't get better we will publish these.*" Jennifer pauses thoughtfully and smirks, "I guess we kept that promise."

"Did you know you would be a sensation because of your father's alcoholism?" She plays with her blindingly red hair and after a moment of reflective pause continues.

"Part of me felt awful we were mocking a very sick man, and the other part knew this was my only way to cope. Finding humor in the situation seemed to make it possible it could eventually come to a hopeful conclusion, you know, one day he would look at his big fall and realize the desperate situation. No, the book did none of that for him, but I still think it can have a profound effect on others. Especially since his was a tragic end. He did grow drearier and drearier and, initially, I thought he was consuming more to quell his embarrassment, but, when I began to move away from him, after Sarah had moved out with her boyfriend, his consumption increased as usual. Looking back on it now, he just kept drinking because that was what he wanted to do." Jennifer abruptly stops and shifts uncomfortably in her seat. "Look, could we continue this another day? It's starting to make me tired."

"We are almost finished, I promise I won't take up much more of your time. Besides the next time we meet I'll probably have more questions for you." I call over the server and ask for more iced tea for Jennifer. "I promise, a few more questions and I'll have all I need for the interview. So, you said Sarah moved out. Did she still help you with the photos?"

"Yeah. Well, initially I holed myself up and began to write bad po-

etry while listening to bad music. It's amazing how being caught in someone else's void really does act like a giant black hole. Any creative verve I once had had magically disappeared when Sarah left. Moving out was not an option; even though I was moving closer to my mid-twenties and could not see myself there in my thirties, I felt I had to be there for those big falls. So, after a momentary break I took up the image collecting again. Sarah still developed them; she had a knack for keeping their integrity."

"Why didn't she want to be part of the publishing end of the series?"

"Sarah no longer found the humor in the situation, and we fought about airing our dirty drawers." Jennifer has a wry smile on her face and just as soon as it appears her eyes grow pensive and she nibbles on her straw. "But she saw how it pulled me out of that black hole. And somehow the collaboration made the situation less real and more like shots I had manipulated and set up purposefully."

"You know, catching him on the couch, mouth slack with the inconspicuous coffee mug curled tight to his chest; that's 'Long Day.' Then the one where he was bending down to pet Blackjack, his cat, and wound up falling towards him face first into his constantly dust-ridden fur. Since Blackjack's wide green eyes glowed, I called that one 'Oz.' But one of my favorites, for lack of a better word, was the simple photograph of him sitting on the couch. Seemingly, everything is ordinary; he has the picture-perfect smile, his hair happened to be combed in place that day, and he is stroking Blackjack's fur in the normal reclined position. I had to call that 'Everyday Day' because of the bottle of those bright blue pills strewn all over the partition next to his favorite mug."

“Yes, that is one of my favorites too. It does seem to have a positive air and then you look to the left and it’s shocking. Was it hard to take the ‘Home Sweet Home’ series?”

“It’s hard to look at it. At that time I had the Rebel and carried it everywhere around my neck; it weighed me down more than I realized at the time. I had gone through dozens of rolls within a month and began to depend on the antics. By this time, I never even said anything to him about the photos and he began asking to see them.”

Jennifer twists her mouth and lowers her voice, apparently mimicking her father. “So, what do you have for me today? Oh, man, that’s a good one! I really hit my head hard that day. Awe, come on Jenny, can’t you leave out the bathroom ones? That’s embarrassing. Now, I thought you weren’t gonna set up any shots, all candid, right? Well, I didn’t do that; nope, nope, I don’t like whisky. That was from one of your friends!” Even though the subject matter is intense, this memory reveals a fondness for her father.

“When I came back from San Francisco though, it took all I had to press the button. Sarah and I always said not to interfere, it would compromise the integrity of the shots, and I did hesitate for a moment, but as I waited for the ambulance it’s all I could do.

“Before I left for the weekend we had fought ferociously. He didn’t want me to leave because, while he said nasty things, he felt me slipping away. He would guilt-trip me about how he’s ‘lost one daughter,’ and was especially cruel since I had been spending more time in my room on the phone with my new boyfriend. I did all I could to keep him from

my father, but my giddiness gave it all away. I finally had to tell him I was going to San Francisco for the weekend and he said something to the affect of ‘this guy doesn’t care about you, he’s just using you and I won’t be here when you have to come back.’ Wow, yeah, that was a hard one to hear.” This is the first moment I hear a crack in Jennifer’s voice, but she nibbles her straw and regains her composure so quickly. She’s a pro at maintaining emotional control. “I mean, he was never verbally abusive to me, but, man, when his routine was threatened.

“So I got back and I can remember the stark contrast from being simply elated and in love, to seeing him lying face down in the middle of the living room floor, naked. The front door opened right up to the living room and there he was, breathing, not breathing, I couldn’t tell and I didn’t want to touch him for fear that he wasn’t; I mean, the smell was putrid in the house. I was only gone for the weekend and it was as if he had had a goodbye party for me. I was shaking so badly and I called for an ambulance. The operator asked if he was breathing and does he take any medication. He could hear me talking on the phone and he started to moan and I could barely make out that he said, ‘no, Jenny, don’t do that.’ I told them he drinks and takes Ambien. That was the first time I ever said that to someone. As awful as this may sound, it actually felt good, like I was not simply hiding behind my camera.

“I began snapping the pictures for ‘Home Sweet Home’ and I was shaking like crazy. Normally my photos would have a still background and my father’s the shaky one, but this time everything is shaky; I had to set my shutter speed to 250 for the shots with the EMT’s. I wanted

those to be super crisp, but I actually like the way they turned out when it was just him and I. There's an honesty to the situation, I can actually see myself in those few shots and I think it reveals how personal of a moment it really was."

"Well what about now? Are you going to continue with photography?"

"No. I mean, I'm grateful I'm able to share a troubling time, but it only seemed right to store the camera away after he passed. I have other ventures I'm working out, though."

Jennifer asks if I'm going to edit the interview and I ask if there is anything she wants me to take out. She simply shakes her head, no, and regardless, I think the photos say it all.

Jennifer Goodes collection "Welcome Home" now showing at the Angels Gallery: 754 S. Grand Ave., L.A. Tues.-Sat., 10-6, through Mar. 20. (310) 936-1941, [angelsgallery.com](http://angelsgallery.com).

## DNA

DOUGLAS WILLIAM DOUGLAS

Judicial sanctuary echoes murmuring legalese;  
I am summoned before the jurist's altar.  
What need have I of lucre to purchase  
Holy Indulgences for forensic favor?  
My chemical paternity offering, pubescent sin's penance  
Petitions with learned graphs, atoms' documents,  
Molecules linking familial souls.  
From towering mahogany pulpit  
The jurisprudence minister declares heretic  
Sage science presbyters.  
Ex cathedra, pontiff of tort spurns their doctrine  
Of the adenine, the guanine, the thymine, the cytosine.

Though flesh of my flesh, I must bow,  
Accept each annum's allotment — four and twenty days.  
They pass as treasures of remembrance,  
A cache of glittering moments,  
Kinescope to maturity my spasmodic witness.  
His tiny hand, once in mine, soon wields a pencil

Then a bat then two tons of speeding steel.  
 The times he tested me with scholar's words —  
 'Sententious', 'Egregious', 'Aphorism';  
 His glee when I was stumped.  
 Together frolicking scuba aquanauts  
 Feeding frozen peas to darting tropical rainbows.  
 Brave dives from rock outcrops  
 Plummeting into deep jungle pools —  
 Smiling proud, he challenges, "Now it's your turn."  
 His golden hair, his grey eyes, his bloom of acne, all herald  
 My adenine, my guanine, my thymine, my cytosine.

I failed to notice he'd grown to tower over me  
 Until a doc-eyed classmate, mesmerized,  
 Gazed up at him and cooed, "You're so tall."  
 Ruddy crimson blossomed his cheeks,  
 Vessels dilated, corpuscles flowing,  
 His collar moistened of embarrassment.  
 Then she asked, "Is this your Dad?" and he glanced at me, silent.  
 Did his sly smile imply perception of that unspoken truth?  
 Though legal edict forbade me to unmask,  
 His friend could see we shared  
 Some adenine, some guanine, some thymine, some cytosine.

I still visit him each month, as the court allows.  
 Sharing verse, ballad, prose, rhyme;

My words drift down, decorative frosting piped  
Onto cake layers of mowed grass over moist loamy earth,  
Then varnished oak beneath which he slumbers.  
I don't know the details  
I don't want to know the details  
But dreams scream the details:  
A swaggering, hormone-charged challenge of screeching tires,  
Back seat empty bottles roll, thud and clink  
Redolent with musty hops and malt;  
Or pungent, numbing vapors of smoldering weed.  
The starburst splintered windshield glass,  
Crimson glazed and dripping,  
Dripping on that mangled steel machine  
Was his adenine, his guanine, his thymine, his cytosine;  
Our adenine, our guanine, our thymine, our cytosine.

# Silent All These Years

JAMES BEZERRA

As a girl, she called them *honey birds*, because *humming* was too much for her small (pretty, but misshapen) mouth. She would sit alone in the window seat in the little oak study and watch them dart like magic back and forth from the feeder. She would sit and wait for them, and while she waited she would read whatever was at hand.

As she grew older, her language was never corrected. Her father was long dead and her mother, a scholar of Greek mythology, had never really wanted to be a mother at all. And so as the years carried on, she created her own internal and secret language, which she seldom felt compelled to speak out loud. So it was that they went from *honey birds* just to honey birds.

Once, during one of her inexplicably sudden, but infrequent, bouts of intense parenting, her mother came upon Lily in

the study and found her reading a book of sheet music. The music said this:



“You can’t *read* sheet music,” her mother said.

But Lily knew differently. She did not reply, but just gave her mother a sad look.

So her mother, in her typical over-reaction fashion, hired a piano teacher to come three times a week. Together Lily and Ms. Campbell would sit at the old piano in the study and play. After only a few weeks of this, Lily’s secret language began to sound like music.

## Devils and Gods

For almost two thousand years they had been exiles. And, eventually, misanthropes. They had learned—as so many before and since had—that humans are fickle and that their attentions and devotions can change quickly, and completely. Some might recognize them by their names, but most wouldn’t recognize them at all.

When Constantine converted the world to Christianity, he put them out of work. Within a few short generations, no one believed in Muses anymore. So by day they found whatever work they could, as seamstresses, as plumbers, as bureaucratic officials, as assassins; but by night they slipped through bedroom windows, and whispered. They had some successes; Urania found Galileo, Melpomene and Thalia found Shakespeare, Erato found Shelley, Clio found James Michener, Terpsichore found Baryshnikov. One spring night, Polyhymnia found a little girl called Lily.

### Taxi Ride

She grew up and went to music school in the city. Most people she met assumed that she was deaf because she never spoke. When they would hear the sounds of the piano melting out of her apartment, her neighbors would say to one another, "Isn't it amazing that the deaf girl plays the piano so well?"

Her little studio apartment was near the top of the old building and on the rusty grate outside her window she hung the bird feeder, filled with water as sweet as honey, and eventually the little birds found her. They would dart down from their homes in rooftop gardens and sniff the sugary scent. They would navigate the updrafts of urban heat and streak between the cold glass of the buildings, far above the noise and asphalt of the city. The air outside her window would sizzle with the sound of their tiny wings and she would watch their little bodies dart up and down and back and forth and she would sketch their fast,

flighty movements in her notebook like this:



### Siren

Eventually, Lily began to attract men.

They liked her body and the shape of her small mouth. They also seemed to like that she didn't talk much. When her first boyfriend fucked her and then left her, for days her little apartment was bursting with sound that was loud and chaotic and careening like a car crash. It was so loud that little honey birds were too afraid to approach her window.

She played with her eyes squeezed tight to keep back the tears. If she had opened them, she would have seen that her apartment was a complex mess. It would have looked like this:



When she finally fell asleep at the piano, Polyhymnia slipped past the feeder and through the window and soothed her, and softly sang right into Lily's dreams.

### **In the Springtime of His Voodoo**

But it was not just the Muses who were underemployed. Dionysus was out of work too, and lived in her building. His face was sharp and beautiful and he gave her a mischievous smile one day in the lift and said, "I love the shape of your mouth," and it made Lily's lips curl up into a small, shy grin. She didn't speak much over wine at the Greek restaurant, but he did. He told her what else he liked about her body, and what he planned to do to it. Lily listened silently, but in her head she heard a new kind of music. Then, later, his hands were hot and thorough on her flesh, his lips were wet and intense on her small mouth, his body was smooth and everywhere on hers. She was frenzied and swept away in a fierce ecstasy and afterward she slept for three days. When she woke up she spoke, she said to him, in a way that only made sense in her secret language, "I felt like an orchestra."

He was making tea in her kitchen and he replied, "I get that a lot."

### **Secret Spell**

But the Muses knew this song, they had heard it all before, and Polyhymnia was worried. "She is so delicate," she told her sisters. So a plot was hatched to save Lily from the fate of so many Maenads before her, those female devotees of Dionysus, so often led to primal, orgiastic frenzies of violence and self-destruction: Jezebel, Cleopatra, Joan of Arc, Janis Joplin, etc.

Terpsichore gathered up her monkey wrench and other tools, Polyhymnia collected a small quantity of poison, and all the sisters went to work.

### **You Can Bring Your Dog**

Lily's upstairs neighbor was a kind, bespectacled man who lived with a little wife and a pampered Pomeranian. He was a professor of history who was suddenly and inexplicably offered a department chair he didn't remember applying for. The only catch: it was in the distant land of California and he needed to move immediately. Luckily, while getting her morning coffee, his small, round wife met a beautiful, ageless woman who ran a coast-to-coast moving business.

### **Putting the Damage On**

At night, while he slept, the tattooed Fokine's basement apartment flooded. He liked the basement because his feet were very sensitive and he could tape down a long, bamboo mat on which he could practice dancing for hours. The building super, who had never liked the lithe Russian with all the music tattooed on his body, accused him of loosening the pipes and Fokine asked simply, "Why would I do that?"

As luck would have it, a city building inspector happened to pop in for a random inspection that very morning. She was beautiful and it was impossible to place her age. She declared the apartment unlivable.

Having moved to the city only recently, to dance in its world-renowned ballet company, Fokine had no friends and nowhere to stay. Luckily, while getting a cup of coffee and searching the newspaper for cheap rents, he met a woman who ran a coast-to-coast moving agency,

who mentioned that she knew of an empty apartment.

### **Cruel**

Carefully, Polyhymnia balanced on the rusty grate outside Lily's window. Ever so carefully she lifted the lid of the feeder. And even more carefully, she dropped – drop by drop – the tiniest amount of poison into the sweet water of the feeder.

### **Northern Lad**

Lily's nights were long and thick with the wine and the lovemaking.

Her days were spent sleeping, or missing him while he was gone all day. He was all that she could think of. Her grades were suffering and she had barely hummed, much less played a note of music, so exhausted was she from the ravenous nightly lovemaking.

She would sleep for days at a time. When she did drift in the netherworld between asleep and awake, she heard the sounds of movement upstairs. There was a strange sound, a ripping, like duct tape being applied to the floor. Then she listened to a thumping that began slowly at first, then grew louder and more rhythmic:

THUMPthumpthumpthump. ThumpTHUMPTHUMPthump.  
ThumpthumpTHUMPTHUMP.

She wrapped herself in a sweaty bed sheet and stood in the center of her little studio. Listening:

ThumpTHUMPthumpthump. ThumpTHUMPTHUMPTHUMP.  
ThumpTHUMPTHUMPTHUMP.  
THUMPTHUMPTHUMPTHUMP.

THUMPTHUMPTHUMPthump. THUMPTHUMPTHUMPthump.  
THUMPthumpthumpthump. Thumpthumpthumpthump.

She was drawn to the rhythm of it coming down through the floorboards and she watched the little rivulets of dust drifting down from the ceiling.

And then she realized that he was dancing.

She opened her window and let the breeze breeze on in. It was cool on her skin. She looked out over the city and listened to the thumpthumpTHUMPTHUMPing of his dance.

She sat down at her piano and listened to his rhythm. Then she began to play, matching it.

He stopped.

Upstairs, Fokine looked down. Confused. He thought. He shrugged. He started to dance again.

Lily started to play again, matching him. Supporting him. Leading him. They became a ballet.

The honey birds were not afraid of this music. A tiny darting shape zipped through the window and around the apartment, a blur of wings. It was accompanied by a few fellows and they formed a buzzing cloud around the feeder. Lily smiled a small smile at them and kept playing.

The first one sipped the sweet water, then the next, then the next...

And then, to her horror, the first one stopped beating its tiny wings. The blur and sizzle sound ceased and the poor, tiny thing dropped away from her window, falling toward the earth.

Lily almost cried out, her fingers froze over the keys.

Then the next one dropped – tiny cardiac arrest – and fell away. Then all of them followed; little projectiles plummeting toward the

street.

At this Lily screamed. Lily, who barely ever even spoke; she shrieked with all of her body and all of her soul.

At the sounds of this shrill, loud, prolonged, terrified shrieking, Fokine — wearing nothing but his dancer's leggings, his chest bare but for the ink in his skin — dashed out of his apartment and down the stairs. People were popping their heads into the hall, "What is that?" they asked each other. "Is the deaf girl screaming? Do deaf girls scream?"

Fokine banged on the door, but no one answered. The screams continued, now joined by the bellows and hollers drifting up from the street: people being pelted by dead birds.

He pounded harder on the door.

Then — in a moment of inspiration — tried the knob. It was open. He burst into her apartment, his English accented "*What the hell is going on?*"

Then Lily, wrapped in the sheet, silhouetted against the afternoon window glow, turned quickly toward Fokine and...

...she heard the tattoo across his chest. She stared at him, her small mouth open just a little bit. The tattoo sounded like this:



She remembered it from that very first book of sheet music so long ago. Amazed, she studied him and listened to his skin.

"Are you okay?" Fokine asked her, tenderly now, seeing as how she was nearly naked, and possessing of the prettiest mouth.

She nodded slightly; she didn't want to take her eyes off of him.

Out the window and up, on the building across the way, the sisters watched with binoculars. "Oh," Erato said, "yeah. They are *totally* in love."

### Precious Things

Dionysus knew he had been outplayed. He was not bitter and he was not malicious. That he led women to disaster was an effect of his intensity, never his intention. But he understood nonetheless.

As was his graceful way, he left a bottle of his best wine outside of Lily's apartment. There was a note. The note said: *I only wish ours had been a symphony and not just a sonata.*

*Best wishes,*

*D.*

### Bliss

Lily washed the sheets.

She changed the water in the feeder.

They drank the bottle of wine while they sat in her apartment. He taught her the Russian word for music: *музыка*.

"*Mooozeeka*," she tried.

He laughed, "Yes!"

*“Da,”* she corrected.

Later, they didn't speak at all, they didn't need to. In bed, her hands and eyes and lips learned the music of his skin.

He learned to hear her moods in the tones of the piano.

The neighbors would listen to the music as it wafted down the stairs and seeped through the building like a sweet smell. They would smile at each other and nod, happy that the deaf girl had finally found a good man.

From time to time, Polyhymnia would check in. As she peered through the window, a little honey bird zipped up to her. She reached out to stroke it softly and it let her.

For just a moment Polyhymnia considered slipping into the apartment and singing into Lily's small ear, just like she used to, but poised there, in the quiet of the night, she could just barely hear the small sound of Lily's dreams.

She was dreaming music now all on her own.

