

THE  
NORTHBRIDGE

REVIEW

FALL

2011

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Northridge Review gratefully acknowledges the Associated Students of CSUN and the English department faculty and staff: Martha Alzamora, Marjie Seagoe, Tonie Mangum, Frank De La Santo, Bryan Banuelos, Mireya Diaz, Joey Dealba, and Ani Chakiryan for all their help. Thanks also to Bob Meyer and Colortrend for their continued assistance and support.

## 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 2010-2011 school year, is Bryan Thomas Stephen Smith for his two stories: "House of the Rising Sun" and "The Fly Eaters." The Honorable Mentions go to S.P. MacIntyre for his story "Burner" and Jon Beadle for his story "Subject A."

This year's judge of the Northridge Review Fiction Award is Jane Dobija. Jane Dobija is a journalist and novelist whose reports from Poland's 1989 revolution were heard daily on NPR. She currently is at work on a novel, called *In Solidarity*, about her experiences in Poland. She lives in Los Angeles where she works for the Los Angeles Public Libraries and edits *Corridors Literary Magazine* ([corridorsmagazine.org](http://corridorsmagazine.org)).

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 from 2010-2011 school year is Deborah Blakely Averill for her poem "Recalcitrant Bed." The Honorable Mention goes to Lexlia Rocha for her two poems: "cream ponies and wild rice psalms, death and the war of mice" and "my trophy shrunken head swings like a pendulum."

This year's judge of the Rachel Sherwood Award is Rod Val Moore. Rod Val Moore is the author of the short story collection *Igloo Among Palms* (University of Iowa Press, 1994), and has published fiction in a variety of magazines, such as *Prairie Schooner* and *Rampike*. He is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, and is a professor of creative writing and linguistics at Los Angeles Valley College.

The Northridge Review is also honored to publish the winner of the Academy of American Poets Award. The recipient for the 2010-2011 school year is Deborah Blakely Averill for her poem "Recalcitrant Bed." The Honorable Mention goes to Ramsey Mathews for his poem "For."

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

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A wise woman once said, "The Northridge Review is a battlefield."

The bad news: she was right. You might not have heard it, but every Wednesday for sixteen weeks a war was waged.

The good news: we were fighting for you.

What I am trying to say is that this is for you, the writer. We knew that we were holding in your story, your play, your poem, a piece of you. We were absolutely certain that what lay on the page before us was some kind of magic, your mojo, your medicine. When we read your work, if something resonated, if something moved inside of us, you can be sure that we picked up our sword and fought for you, for whatever glimmer we saw in your work, for what we saw of you in it. We fought to make others understand, those who didn't see the truth and beauty right away. The religion we were selling: your words. Your words became a piece of ourselves we weren't willing to part with.

This is also for you, the reader, because we knew that you deserved to behold the very best that CSUN's writing community has to offer. It wasn't enough that you be proud of us, we wanted to create for you a real blow-your-skirt-up edition of the NR. Our quest: the perfect font, margin size, lines unquestionably spaced. Our mission: for you to be just as thunderstruck as we were with the sheer talent that exists all around us. We needed you to understand that each writer created these texts with their bare hands, minds brimming with vision. Each one of these writers wrote the first word, first line of dialogue, first sentence, with no end in sight, only faith that the next word, line, sentence would come. And, to our delight, it did.

And, truth be told, this is also for us. This is for us because we are just like you. We are readers, writers, lovers of, and now, warriors for, art. Week after week, we stood outside the classroom doorway and readied ourselves for combat. Our armor: form, theory, military-strength coffee, and passion for art—not just the pretty kind, either. Not just the kind we leave out on the coffee table when our in-laws come over, but also the other kind. The kind that makes us squirm a little in our seats, the kind that forces us to recognize the parts of ourselves we would prefer to tuck neatly away and never mention again.

These words, and our connection with them, are now a living thing that has fought for, and earned, the right to exist. We hope you enjoy these words, these universes created just for you.

-Elizabeth Arana



# THIS SIGNIFIES NOTHING

SUSANA MARCELO

Can you count your way to God?  
Death is phi ( $\Phi$ )  
Life is pi ( $\pi$ )

I thought number three was safe, as in three months, just three months, and then I was free  
to tell my mother, father, sister, and brothers,  
tell my friends and the world;  
shout it at three months!

But DNA mutates because 23 chromosomes are not absolute, because they're a gamble,  
because the green light does not change to red,  
and then the immaculate formula,  
the crest of logic,  
crashes.

9

Numbers were the cross nailed to my altar.  
Numbers were 10 rosary beads for 10 months of gestation.  
But numbers lied.

You would think that 10 functioning, although tiny, toes do not equal silence, but it is the  
result of three weeks of numbers collapsing, bleeding away, one drop per second, 24 hours a  
day, seven days a week.

A steady drip made a hole in a rock.

What should have been 10 months is 19 weeks,  
what should have been 20 inches is 9 inches,  
what should have been 7 pounds is 1 pound.

The absence of noise exploded as I said, *hello*, and five baby fingers waved *goodbye*.

Now these numbers lie  
—6 feet beneath my soles.

Numbers are now 10 rosary beads for 10 toes.  
Because this is how I count my way to God.



UNTITLED #9  
MIXED MEDIA

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RUSTY HENDLEY

# MEANDERER

SEAN PESSIN

He told this one woman that he loved her and she said it back. Then she made him breakfast and packed him lunch in his Ninja Turtles lunchbox and asked him what he wanted ready for dinner. She picked out his outfits and told him where his clothes were, and laid them out. She told him to shower before bed. He said to her that she was the best ever. Eventually, she died.

He told this one woman that he loved her and she said that she was rubber and that he was glue and whatever he said bounced off her and stuck to him. Then she stuck out her tongue and ran across the blacktop.

He told this one woman that he loved her and she inoculated herself from cooties.

He told this one woman that he loved her. He had stood up in front of the whole class to say it, almost screaming it, and she sent him to the principal's office.

He told this one woman that he loved her and she said that she loved him and had waited her whole life for him to say it and that he was her liver; he was a part of her that she could not live without. She told him that he was the wind beneath her wings, her guy-from-Titanic, her Romeo, her Tristan, her Mr. Darcy. She told him that their wedding would be in June and their children, of which there would be twelve, would be named by the two of them, alternating in choice, because he was sure to have as many names in his head for kids as she had in hers, and there was no reason to fight over such things. She said that he should get a job with her father's company; he would move up quickly because he would be married to the boss's daughter. She said that he should listen to her every word, because he loved her and that meant that she was unique and precious, something to be handled like an exquisite artifact. She told him that he needed to have her opinion on the movie *Nights in Rodanthe*, particularly, that it was the tragic romance of their generation. She suggested that he go get caught in a flash mudslide in South America. She said that he needed to be more assertive in their relationship and that he should plan further ahead. She did not appreciate his brief attention and lack of foresight, and, in the end, that was enough of a difficulty for her to suggest that he break up with her.

He told this one woman that he loved her and she attempted to love him back. He took her out, naturally, to Denny's. Here, he ordered a hamburger and she told him to go fuck himself, because he was eating animals and she loved animals.

He told this one woman that he loved her and she said it back. He called her nightly to wish her goodnight. And she asked him if he would wish her goodnight again. She would ask him every night to tell her something sweet. He would every night. One evening he ran out of things to say; he told her that he was not a poet. He found out the next boyfriend she had had been a

poet and he beat her. They married and had kids that the poet beat. But he also said sweet things to her when she had breath enough to ask for them.

He told this one woman that he loved her and she asked if that was it.

He told this one woman that he loved her and she said that he was only in love with his projected image on her. This, she let him know, made her jealous. She accused him of cheating on her with himself; he was a narcissist. Self love was a love of someone else, someone that he was always with, even when she and he were together. She asked him to either leave himself so that she could be with him forever by themselves, or she would leave. He promised to separate from himself, and cut himself out of all his pictures. He threw out his diaries. He tried to expunge his name, but when that proved impossible, she left.

He told this one woman that he loved her and she loved him. They stayed together for only a few moments after that, because she died. She had been shot and he was holding her. They had only just met.

He told this one woman that he loved her, and she said that she loved him too. He took out from his pocket a box covered in gilt patterns and precious jewels. She looked at the box, and began to tear up. She hugged him and thanked him. Her smile rivaled in brightness the glint from the box. She took it and opened it. The box was empty. She asked where is what ought to be in the box. He answered that she could put whatever she wanted to in it, that it was a vessel of his attachment. The next morning, he awoke and found the box on the kitchen table. He opened it and found a goodbye letter.

He told this one woman that he loved her, and she repeated it. This was so that she could steal away in the middle of the night to see another man, one that she was actually in love with.

He told this one woman that he loved her and she concurred. He did love her. But she did not.

He did not love her but said that he did, and she told him that she had always loved him, that he was the only man she had ever allowed herself to feel that way about. She told him that she could never bring herself to love anyone else. This broke his heart to hear. He could not understand how she could love him completely unreciprocated. He wasn't sure if he hadn't meant it, or if she had lied. He wanted to say that they were moving too fast, that there was not anything between them, but he didn't. He stepped out one night, and then picked up a gram of coke and a cheap club chick.

He said to this one woman that he loved her—and she interrupted to tell him that she enjoyed him—and he continued with her boobs.

He told this one woman that he loved her and she told him that she loved him. They dated until they got married and acquired loans. They grew together, and they had children, and those children were raised by them and moved out, leaving the man and the woman to age with each other, in a house they eventually had to move out of because neither of them could walk up the stairs. They gathered years in retirement homes, both of them approaching death, and he turned to her, who was much nearer death, and with teary eyes said that he loved her, and just as she was about to say, with her dying breath, that she will always love him, he woke up.

He said to this one woman that he loved her via letter. She wrote back to tell him that she loved him, too. She sent him pictures of her, her friends, the women she'd shank, voluntarily. He sent her photos of him, his car, his house, and of his living family members, just as she had



## strangers

*Kimberly Sanders*

he remembers the sound of the sea  
and the wayward child with blue-bright eyes,  
regarding him with solemn, quiet intelligence  
that finds him both curious and unnerved.

she shifts her weight, her dirty knees caked with  
the wet sand of the beach—reproachful, suspicious;  
chubby hands shoved down the front of her vermilion jumpsuit  
that matches the smear of scarlet and gold in the distant sky.

something passes between them,  
something more than the salty breeze that ruffles  
the top of her straw-colored hair.  
she extends one tiny fist, as though in offering.

- 14 he sees the familiar red foil of brand-name chocolate  
(the dark, good-for-you kind); he takes it, curiously, cautiously;  
this offering of friendship from a vagrant youth on this lonely beach  
and at last she nods, as though sated.

# Terrible Equilibrium

*Ramsey Mathews*

At the podium, the Vice Principal of Character recites from his book:

*All, feminists are preceded by a comma.*

*All racists; are followed by a semicolon.*

The vulpine boys, eighth graders,  
eaters of Hawthorne, Melville, Conrad, Emerson and Twain,  
shift their eye slit throats.

The yellow flame soprano  
sings the National Anthem.

One boy quietly says, "Lilac shack."  
All the boys snicker.



ROLLER COASTER RIDE  
FILM

---

JAVIER OTHON BENAVENTE ICAZA

# LAUNDRY DAY

DEBORAH PRICE

On Laundry Day he crawled under the chairs bolted to the floor and was swallowed by a dark tunnel that turned into a Disneyland ride of bright spinning lights and cardboard figures, cool air blowing until the doors broke open and time had whizzed by and it was six o'clock and time to go home, but it was two o'clock and That Man that sat next to his mother kicked him out from underneath and gave him a quarter to go stand under the window, so he climbed on the windowsill and scrunched down between the "For Sale" sign and the ad for 50 cent loads. And he watched his reflection watching the man that pushed the ice cream cart by the bus stop back and forth, back and forth, selling to the rush of school-age children crowding around it and then the window changed into a waterfall and he slipped through and jumped into the cart when Ice Cream Man wasn't looking and filled his mouth with every last ice cream and popsicle inside until his whole body was cold, but Ice Cream Man pushed the cart away when the last teenager crammed her way on the overcrowded bus. He felt the sweaty quarter in his pocket and looked at his mother, but there was no way that he could run through the open door, pick out a cheap snack and dash back without her seeing him. So then he watched the cars drive by, flaked with rust and caked in dust, sporting people's names and the words "wash me" and a million exclamation points, and one truck with a smiley face, grinning wide. But he could hear the smiley face murmur, "Help me, I'm stuck" through its unmoving lips, so he pulled it off like sticky candy and he gave it a bath and it turned into a flying genie that took him to the ocean, and they lived in a boat happily ever after. He placed his head against the window, leaving sweating streaks from his dripping forehead, watching the reflection of That Man run his hands over his mommy, so he widened his eyes, and cocked his head until a boy passed by and saw him and pulled on his father's arm and said, *Look at the puppy! Can we have him, can we?* and they took him home and once there he said, *Wait, I'm really a boy, not a puppy,* and they said *that's okay, Luke*—the boy's name was always Luke—he *always wanted a brother.* And then his new mother came from the kitchen, and she was beautiful and clean and cool, and she poured him a glass of lemonade and then he sprawled on the clean white carpet and gazed upward at the tall ceiling, falling asleep in the coolness, while his new parents repeated, *We love you, we love you, we love you,* but The Man barked, *get off that kid, what are you stupid, you could break something,* and he pulled himself down and fell on the grimy floor, and the man barked out a laugh, *You are stupid, aren't you?* And his mother smiled and

giggled nervously and turned her face away from him, her eyes on That Man, and then the buzzer went off, so he pulled open the dryer, his lungs stuttering at the wave of hot air blasting his face and he shoved the hot clothes in the bag while That Man leaned closer to his mother's face. And then his feet were heavy like they'd melted into the floor and he leaned against the bag, a wearier adventurer, thinking that the water in the washing machine might be nice to dive into, twisting and turning him down until he drained away.

# Instead, Daedalus Reminds Us

*Mike Edwards*

Icarus  
of  
think fall  
you his  
When recall flight  
you the  
never got  
he  
right

# Eating Super Humans

Sean Ahern

They called me the menace  
of the Cretaceous, seven-inch incisors  
and six tons of muscle at the top of the food chain.

Now I'm some rubber reincarnation in a toy box  
remembering the good old days.

These days this town is filthy  
filled and funny with the demons that use us,  
playing guilty touch and tackle  
in the dark, wishing to forget  
the sin-taxes that dissolve the national debt.

I don't want their antioxidants, I have my own.

20 These upright *Jabberwockies* always think of ways to complicate life,  
using unnecessary words like *Juxtaposition* just to get into each other's pants.

I'd love to eat them, tasty fleshy sapien snacks  
but I'm four inches of green plastic  
a plaything meant for their spawn to chew on.

They breed little monsters with cute rosy cheeks  
that love eating Dino-cookie-cutter-shaped-chicken-nuggets,  
with gnawed off and mangled limbs  
red and dripping, it's a God-damned crime scene in Ketchup.

Why is the way they ration each breath so fucking divine?

My friends and I bet on those meat-bags,  
when they'll open up restaurants serving endangered species.  
They'll laugh and tell each other "Mine is better than yours"  
while they crack open tusks from the elusive *Rustifactus*.

Can you hear them folding life into poisons  
that hum bump along the High-Definition-Media-Interface bloodstream?

Show some respect for my family tree  
the patron Saints of Gas tanks and Vaseline,  
rendered from the suck and sell,  
of what once was Eden by the barrel.

Here I lie with the rebel scum,  
in this body heat broth mixing  
down to molecules, distilling heaven.

# THOSE WHO STAYED: AN EXCERPT

BENJAMIN WAGNER

W

## PROLOGUE

*We were the brave ones. We were the ones willing to live with our sins. We were not the lucky ones—we were the ones that stayed. Four thousand years ago, our planet died. We had spent thousands of years poisoning her in the name of progress. The seas swallowed the land, froze, and then burned off. The land cracked and bled. The air turned foul and then toxic. The order of the disasters doesn't much matter; the world died all the same.*

*We knew it was coming, and, for decades, people had left the planet in small numbers. It was when the air finally became altogether unbreathable that the general populace packed up their ships and left. The first ones to go were the naturalists and the doomsayers; they left in a meager trickling with their I-told-you-sos and their this-is-what-you-gets. Then went many of the wealthy and the powerful in stronger numbers. Finally, the decision came down for mandatory evacuation. Nations across the world pooled their resources to create behemoth interstellar spacecraft which would each carry tens of thousands across the galaxy. The one thing that the nations of the world were ever able to fully agree on was that it was time to cash in their chips. It didn't matter who you were or where you lived; if the government thought you deserved a seat or could afford one, you had a ticket. They filled the final seats by random lottery, and, one day, in a great convoy, they bid the planet farewell. All across the world, night or day, a thousand fireballs climbed into the sky and became nothing more than faint glimmers in the heavens. We were left behind.*

*For a century we exchanged technology and information, history, culture and gossip over the radios. The day came when the distance grew too large. A hundred thousand captains bid apologetic, sorrowful goodbyes to the nations of their great-grandfathers, and the people of our planet bitterly wished them luck. The radios crackled and were silent.*

\* \* \*

## Chapter I

### The Machinist

Rody Grenwilt ambled through the bazaar with a basket of sorry-looking fruits and vegetables in hand. A small and warped assortment of purples and oranges and greens, their shape and stature were a result of spending the whole of their existence—much like the people of the town—sucking vainly at the desert soil for the water and nutrients they so desperately needed.

He was a short boy of fourteen or sixteen with pale skin and short hair the color of sand. *Dwarf*, they called him—among other less derogatory terms. He wore a dusty pair of pants and a simple grey work shirt, and was now in the process of making his way home with groceries.

As he walked, his fearful brown eyes darted between people who drew uncomfortably close. He could feel them watching as he went, their vulture eyes searching, waiting. As he passed through the heart of the bazaar, he gave himself a quick pat-down to ensure his possessions were all accounted for. His mother would scold him if he had his pockets picked again.

Emerging from the crowd, he began to breathe easily once more and shifted his gaze idly back and forth between the booths as he passed, this one full of varied jewelry and trinkets, the next produce and livestock; one there full of modders' implants of dubious quality. "Premium parts," shouted a hawker, "you've never seen such low prices!" There was a reason for that.

The sun was high in the sky and a dirty orange glow shined down through the haze. It was hot, and Rody flicked the beads of sweat from his brow. He sauntered onward. Ever since his mother had grown sick, he had been in charge of all the heavy lifting. A doctor from the city they had flown in with their meager earnings said that, on top of the cough, her bones were getting weak, and that she should avoid any further physical labor.

Now Rody went to the plaza on market days for food and supplies, and tinkered away at the junk shop, while his mother tended to the laundry and cleaning. Rody had a brother in the city. Each month he sent what small sum of money he could spare from the pittance he earned at the factory—that was pretty much the only way they knew he was still alive—but mostly it was Rody's work in the shop that supported the family. He was good at what he did, and it was there he earned the names that were not pejoratives. *Mr. Fix-it. The Electronic Doctor. The Machinist.* Names of affection.

In school they might make fun of his stature, and outside he might be bullied or mugged. But to truly endanger him, no one would dare. His workshop was never touched, his craft never insulted. He was a social glue, a shared treasure which brought peace to the small town. For a modest fee he would repair robotic limbs and implants, whether they ailed from neglect or laser-fire.

The Machinist's workshop was neutral ground. It was wholly common for members of the opposing factions which vied for control of the nearby city to find themselves in his shop together, waiting for the boy to examine the damage they had caused each other. By his tenth year, Rody was under the protection of a dozen different gangs, local or otherwise, who had patronized his shop for repairs. Now he was the unofficial mascot of Carripo City's underworld.

No one dared to cheat the Machinist. For a modder to be banned from the workshop was a sentence that, whatever part of their body they had traded out for metal, was doomed to decay. Those unfortunate souls became mechanical lepers, pariah who hobbled about on a single fleshy leg, one-armed drifters, and men with mechanical eyes that had lost their glow in days long past. If they could afford to see a real specialist for repairs, they would never have frequented the shop of a teenage boy in a poor desert ghetto.

Turning down one of the dirt roads which crisscrossed the town, Rody plodded past parched trees and dogs which lazed in the front yards of family sheds, with flies buzzing about them. "Ma' I'm home!" Rody called as he came in the door. He latched it and walked into the kitchen to unload the basket into the cooler. Composed of a single bedroom and a living room that

was not much bigger than the kitchen, it was a small house, but it was home. Rody slept on the couch-bed in the living room, and spent most of his time in the workshop. “Put the food away an’ come out!” his mother called from outside the back door. “You got a customer in the shop.”

It was Rody’s father who taught him the basics of robotics and electronics. They used to work together when he was a small child, and the family still lived in the city. Without a teacher and without a textbook, Rody had been more or less winging it since his father’s death. He learned as he went. A growing familiarity with the technology involved in modding instilled in him an increased appreciation for the vaguely taboo practice.

Still, Rody vividly remembered the talking-to he had gotten the first time he asked his mother about acquiring a few modifications of his own. His mother—a bit of a country bumpkin and obvious technophobe—had simply looked at him as if he were the dumbest creature ever to be spit out of a womb, and said something along the lines of: “WHAT? You want to go’n make yourself look like one of them derned—robot freak shows? You might *need* some parts replaced for what I ought to do to you for even considerin’ it! You have any idea what it costs to replace your pinky finger? I’ll tell you what, you make enough money in the shop to move us to the city, get a r’spectable job as a real engineer, and I’ll commune with the spirit of your dead pappy—ask him whether he thinks the *stupid* gene came from his side of the family or mine.” It was also the last time he had asked her about it.

As he stepped into the workshop, his mother shot him a concerned glance from the corner of the room where she stood with her arms crossed, eyeing a pistol on an adjacent shelf. A tall man in a suit with grey, artificial eyes, and a gun on his belt stood in the front of the shop. He regarded the scrapheaps, workbench and various tools situated throughout the room. Beside him stood a smaller man—also in a suit—with light, neatly buzzed hair and black-lensed glasses. Aside from gang members and laborers, much of Rody’s work came from less-intelligent modders who purchased shoddy parts on the cheap and ended up stumbling into the shop—quite literally falling to pieces. Despite the fact that many of his customers had a way of killing each other, he had a fairly regular clientele. These men were strangers.

Luminescent, grey, unblinking eyes stared at Rody from under a mess of uncombed brown hair. “Howdy,” said the boy. The man continued staring and said nothing. After a few moments of blinking in the silence, Rody piped up, “Is there something I can do for you?”

The giant man glanced to the other, who nodded. The Giant stepped forward to the workbench and rolled up his sleeve with the other arm. Rody’s eyes were drawn to the bare arm. It was a *real* synthetic—skin and all. You didn’t see skin on your average augmented limb. Skin was superficial, and expensive to boot. A man who could afford a synthetic arm was not a man in need of the Machinist’s famed bargains.

There was nothing visibly wrong with the arm to the untrained eye. But Rody saw the way he raised it with the other, and let it down on the table like a limp, lifeless fish. There was a twitch to it, too. Almost imperceptible—gentler than the man’s breathing—but it was there. He watched the arm intently. One. Two. Three. Four. *Twitch*.

Rody nodded and retrieved a tray of tools from a nearby shelf, setting them on the workbench. Sitting down at the bench, he donned a pair of electronic goggles and flipped them on. He had

never worked on synthetic parts before, but he had once managed to get his hands on a few technical manuals which were now greatly outdated. Still, the basics were the same.

Rody retrieved a pair of tweezers from the tray and pressed them against a contact point under the arm's skin, which the goggles rendered visible. With a click and a hiss, a segment of the skin popped up. He folded it aside, revealing the innards of the machine. A series of metallic tendons which allowed movement ran the length of the arm, and connected at each joint to a servo which controlled them.

An elegant device, Rody thought. It was modeled after the human arm, and similar in many respects. The human arm however, could not crush a man's skull unaided. There were many benefits to augmenting the body with mechanical parts. Rody looked over the diagrams the goggles projected over the arm.

The smaller man—or Glasses, as Rody had begun to refer to him in his head—stared as the boy worked. Rody lightly tapped at the tendons with his tweezers. They were taut and made a dull clinking sound. Rody lifted his goggles and addressed the giant. “The tendons are real messed up. Bent like you tried to lift or bend something too heavy, and that something started bending you instead—you could definitely expect some impairment of motion with that. But that's not your issue.” The boy was grinning at his discovery. “It's a problem with distribution. Either the power isn't traveling through the arm or the commands aren't—energy's making it up into the elbow and trying to actuate the joint, that's your twitch. In either case, the solution is the same. Replace the distribution node.”

Rody gazed out the door to the backyard pensively. “I don't carry power distribution nodes this complex, and you can hammer the tendons straight yourself. I'm afraid I can't help you. Sorry.” Rody stood up, placed the goggles in the bin and turned towards the house. “Consultations are free, you can see yourselves out.”

The small man's laugh stopped Rody in his tracks. He saw his mother slowly reaching for her gun and something clicked behind him. He spun back around. The tall man's arm had come alive and he was replacing the skin panel that obscured the machinery. The small man grinned from behind his black lenses and approached the workbench.

The boy glared at the men. “You disabled the power node,” he said with agitation. “Why?” Glasses leaned into the table and kept grinning. “We're talent scouts,” he said. “We work for a very important man; he's set his sights on you. You've got potential, kid and he thinks you're wasting it here. He'd like to make you a job offer.”

Rody's mother shifted uncomfortably in the corner and ran her fingers along the side of the gun as she listened. The boy glanced at his mother and then back at Glasses. “Wasting it? I think most of Carripo City's underworld would disagree.” Glasses shook his head and stood up.

“Son, what you do for those—undesirables—that is not art. Anyone with the slightest training in robotics and medicine can re-attach a rusted leg that's buckled—or rewire an optical implant. Your side-projects—now those are what interest us.” Rody's face filled with surprise.

The man continued. “You see a damaged arm, lets say. You think of it as a problem to be solved. What's here that isn't working like it's supposed to? A boring black and white diagnostic. Ah, but let's say you *build* an arm—then you get creative! Aren't modded arms boring? What if this one doubled as a gun, or a network interface? Wouldn't that be so much more useful?

Wouldn't that be so much more...challenging? We're offering you a chance to be more than just a glorified repairman, Mr. Grenwilt."

Despite his childish dreams of becoming a cyborg super-soldier, since he had lived in this town, simply working with modding technology had seemed enough. Still, Rody yearned for something more than playing doctor with futureless thugs. He built things, sometimes. Electronics, tools, robots, satellite-mounted-fusion-powered-death-cannons. Well, at least he designed them conceptually. But his inventions and devices were not in demand. It seemed like just as soon as he completed a project, he would have to disassemble it for parts.

Rody's mother took the pistol limply in her hand and stepped forward. "Pardon me, gents, but we seem to do pretty well by ourselves." She coughed. "I'm goin' to have to ask you both to leave 'til you have some business for us."

"Really? You do pretty well?" Glasses smirked, sliding his hands into his pockets. "I suppose that's why you live in a big automated mansion in the city—why you don't have to trade the money that's supposed to be going towards your medicine just to make ends meet." The woman went stiff.

Rody looked at his mother with a mix of disbelief and disappointment. "Ma', is that right? Ma', now why didn't you tell me?" His mother took a few short, uneasy breaths and shook her head. "It don't matter none, Rody. We get by."

Looking at the ground, Rody took a deep, quivering breath. "Compensation for the job—how much are we talking?" Glasses grinned and snapped his fingers. On cue, the Giant pulled a brown sack from his coat and removed the ribbon. He tilted it and hundreds of small, multi-colored discs showered onto the workbench. Rody stood with his jaw agape. There must have been fifteen thousand Bits there. "Enough for your mother to live real cozy in the city while you get to sit in your own lab and play," Glasses said in answer to the earlier question.

Truth be told, this was actually what he had always fantasized about—for someone to come and take him away from the humble life as a scrapmaster and give him a chance to work with *real* electronics in the city. In his dreams it was always a famous inventor or a beautiful aristocrat who rescued him—never a mysterious philanthropist. Still, the overall promise was the same. He would miss his mother. He would still be able to see her, he conjectured, just on someone else's schedule. More importantly, she would finally have the opportunity to live somewhere decent, where she could get the treatment she needed for the first time since Rody's father died.

There remained the matter of a replacement, a disciple to carry on his work. A lot of people counted on Rody's work in order to get by—their ability to shoot holes in each other without regard for the consequences depended on it. The underworld of Carripo City would not take it kindly, were Rody to leave town without a proper farewell.

Few people in the town of any age were as gifted as Rody—cognitively or in potential. Fewer still were as good with their hands. He was, in every way except for his stature, exceptionally gifted. It would be difficult to find a successor, but Rody did have *one* idea.

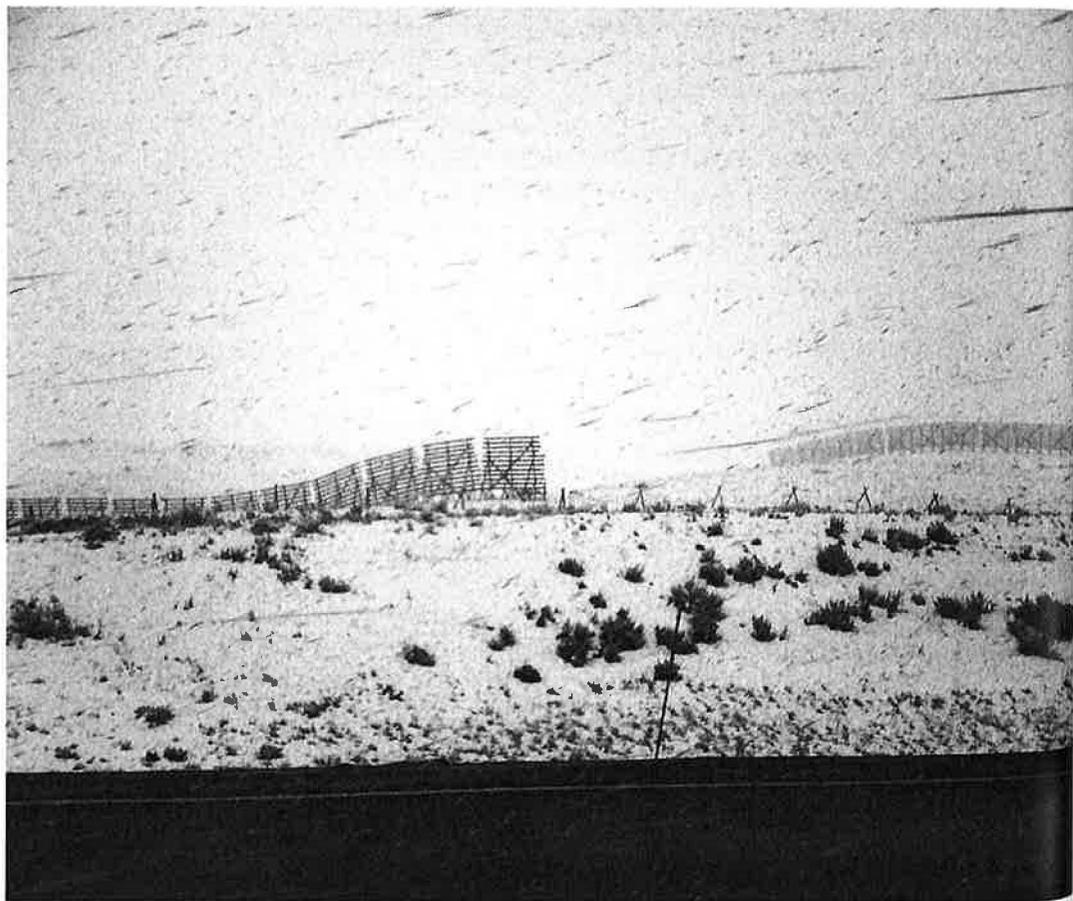
Rody stood in front of his house with a sadness gnawing at his insides. He held the duffel bag of his belongings and leaned against a stack of small crates which were filled with essential tools and parts. In a rush of heat and noise, the transport landed—not a hundred feet from the

house. Four men in rough work uniforms stepped down the ramp as it descended, and began loading Rody's things on board. Glasses leaned against the house, looking down as he casually ran a file over his fingernails, sticking his fingers out occasionally to examine his handiwork.

The perpetually silent Giant stood by the ramp to the transport, his hand resting at peace on his gun's holster. His faintly glowing eyes gazed into the distance, unblinking, his big thick skull seemingly vacant. The workers finished their task and waited inside the craft.

Rody gave his mother a long, warm hug, a hug expressive of the love which had gone unspoken in the Grenwilt household for as long as it had stood. He knew that this would be perhaps the last time. He smiled weakly between tears and ascended the transport's steps with the Giant behind him.

Glasses was roused suddenly from his dutiful activity by the ignition of the transport's propulsion jets. Hopping quickly from the wall, he ran, and turning briefly mid-run, bent at the waist and pantomimed the tipping of a hat to the mother, before scrambling up the transport's ramp. Rody's mother looked on, her eyes wet with tears. The door folded upwards and the craft took flight.



SNOW FLURRIES  
IPHONE

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MICHAEL MILLER

# The Old Man in the Sea

*Ashley Erikson*

The old man,  
cold,  
rocked with the steady  
hand of the wakes against  
the oars.

We stopped  
together,  
listening to the rupturing  
silence of the mist meeting  
the sea.

Nothing was the same  
now that it was the same  
as before.

I watched the black  
widow crawl into the old  
man's beard like  
death, time lapsed.

Creeping  
slowly,  
seeping swiftly.

Fog plumed through  
the cracks  
in the water-wrought wood like  
maggots breaking  
out of flesh for the first time.

The weight of the old  
man sat,  
heavy on my shoulders.  
His blinding white  
irises anchored

to the weight,  
to the beard,  
to the concrete feet.

My lips twisted  
skyward,  
as the water closed upon  
the space where I last saw  
the white, white, weight.



# Tactile Response

*David Morck*

Prompt me from my poetic slumber.  
I stare at sterile keys,  
soft muted sounds echo  
off the space-age ergonomic keyboard.  
Pleasant typography placed on the page before me,  
a little Times New Roman, inoffensive line spacing,  
kerning just so. Complements my serified font.

Jar me into action, I want to feel  
the pound of the keys  
from eighth grade typewriters.  
Smears of ink, pock marked craters in the text,  
single letters, urgent, pressed out, staining,  
made with force and intent.  
Forms and focused alacrity,  
metal keys jammed together,  
gridlocked visions.

Strike me with an image so acute, sudden,  
and as I furiously scribble, the lead shatters,  
The words embossed with the dull edge  
of chipped wood.  
Tear into the deepest pages of memory.

Cradled inside a fragment of tire on the freeway,  
a flattened pigeon with one perfect wing,  
fanned feathers reaching to brush the heavens.  
I chant this mantra to myself:  
Tire. Pigeon. Tire Pigeon.  
Try to remember.

# DRESSING UP

DOUG WEAVER

**Y**ou've got about three seconds to pull yourself together before you are consumed in one of those fiery explosions you're always seeing on television. Just move your right foot off the gas pedal and position it above the brake pedal and push. If you're not moved by the thought of dying in a ball of gasoline-fed flames, then think of the innocent bystanders that will die as a result of this impromptu collision...men and women, probably some young lovers, patiently waiting in line, the oversexed executives sipping lattes while pretending to conduct business on their laptop computers, but are actually setting up blow jobs, some for pay; some for play...and the hard-working baristas who can't spell. And not all of them will die either. Some will be permanently disfigured or crippled as a result of your flight of angst.

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Just focus. Forget about all those police cars following you. No doubt the beams of light from the helicopters are distracting, but try to man up here. Think of all your new friends who've come to admire your outrageous taste. Think about all the laughs you've shared over the last six months with Zolina Zlotmashinskaya, Sharon Needles and Igodda Wrash. These are the women you've come to admire and learn from, but more than that, these are women who've grown to depend on you. They've accepted you as a member of their club, my dear, and losing you will be devastating to them. Granted, not all of them were deacons in the Mormon church, but a couple of them had families. Zolina is still married, you know. It is a little uncommon that on Father's Day she brought little Hilda in to see daddy's new show. That's progressive with a capital 'P.' One wonders what the wife is up to, eh?

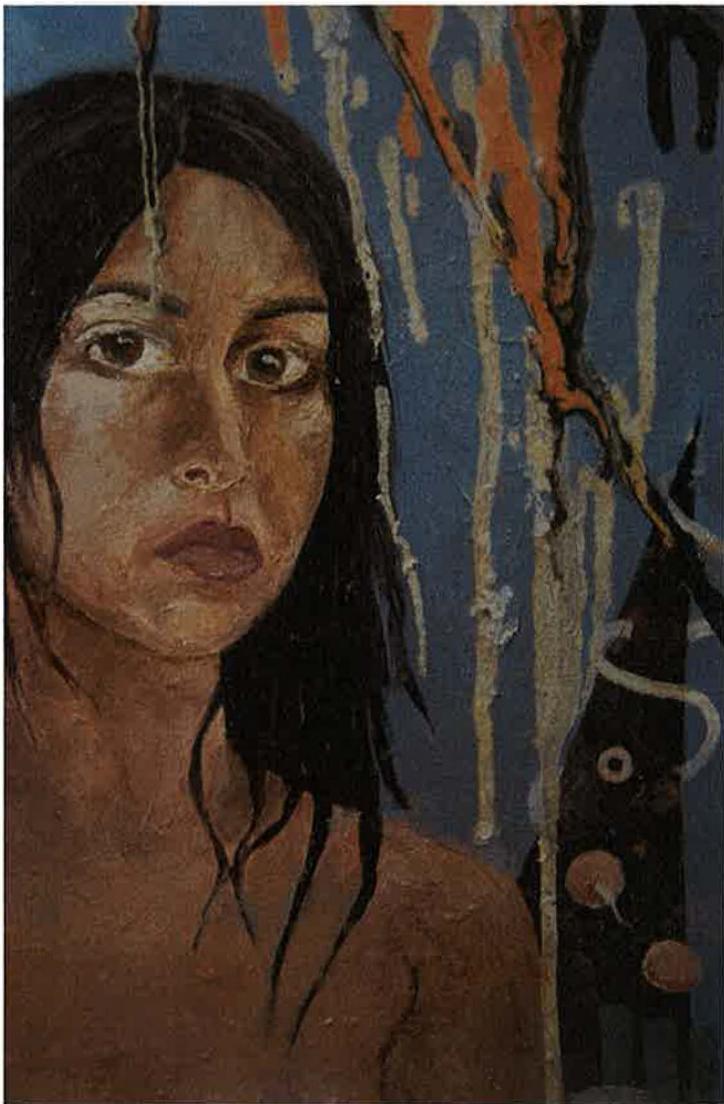
You're going to have to try to look at your predicament a little philosophically. Try not to think of your congregation and family watching the 11 o'clock news as you're ordered at gunpoint out of your car. Don't get hung up on little Jimmy trying to answer his overnight guest's astonished query: "That looks like your dad! Is that your dad in that red dress getting stopped by the cops?" And if your mind begins to drift to the actions of the hierarchy of the Mormon Church regarding one of its most respected shepherds, put it out of your thoughts at once! Sure you'll be excommunicated, but try to think of it as their loss. They just don't know how to have fun, eh? And your wife...now there's a rough bit of pavement. There's no way to whitewash this one...Margie is a bit of a pill. That's no secret to anybody. It's actually pretty amazing that she hasn't caught on until now. All those months of late Friday nights and the lame excuses, where she dutifully waits up for you on her side of the bed...pretending to be asleep, but there's only minimal mussing up of the bed clothes, and you trundling out of the

SUV at 2 a.m. or whatever wondering if you've gotten all the glitter and makeup off of you? No, there's no explaining to Margie short of a miracle from you-know-who. Yeah, it was bound to come up. God's not going to like this at all. It's not a matter of understanding or anything... God's going to be totally pissed off. Can you say lightning bolt from heaven? If only you weren't a Mormon...there really isn't time to convert to Unitarianism, is there? No...not really. You're fucked on that front, dude. Sorry about that.

And don't even think about how your sequined gown will be ruined from lying face down on the oil-stained pavement...not to mention the hair and makeup, girl! It's actually none of your business what any of your buddies' thoughts will be when they see you on TV wearing size 14 high heels. Even though they'll see that your shoes are cocksucker red, don't let what you think they're thinking direct your behavior or thoughts.

See this as a learning opportunity. What's the lesson, you're asking? Number one: When there are sheriff's deputies buying coffee at 7-11...or anyplace for that matter, never, ever, walk up to one of them, no matter how handsome or studly, lift your gown, bend over and say anything even remotely like, you gonna fuck me or what? Even if they hadn't been cops, that sort of behavior should be reserved for West Hollywood instead of Downtown.

You have mere milliseconds left before you have to take action, honey. Grow a pair and try to think of what Barbra would do in this case. Would she be reduced to an ineffectual smear of self-doubt? No! She would react with the elegance of a true queen. It's time for your close-up, my dear, so chin up and chest out. Bring the Lexus to a graceful stop, comport yourself and emote. And most important, smile!



A STATE OF LUCIDITY  
OIL PAINT AND CANDLE WAX

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ANGELICA SOTOMAYOR

# Feminist Okinami

*Stephanie Phillips*

I want to be a woman  
with oxen hips that go on for Doris Days,  
spurt sea lion laughs at a Lucille Ball,  
a jawbone full of chocolate malts  
and feet covered alligator grapes.

I want to be a woman  
that has rhythm on any  
Billie Holiday,  
that pencils top dog dramas in  
Susan Lorie Parks.

I want to be a woman  
with a turtle shell crown,  
snorkeling through the  
Amelia Air-  
Heart.

Maybe soon  
I'll be one.



# DO WE SHARE THIS ICE CREAM CAKE OR JUST PAINT IT IN BROAD STROKES? OR WHY NOT TO COPY A RAYMOND CARVER STORY

DUSTIN LEHREN

They finally agreed to him coming over and she would heat up some leftovers. A bacon and mushroom quiche her mom cooked for a large dinner the night before. Marian's house always had leftovers, which was good for Earl because he had worked late and skipped dinner.

"I'm hungry and tired and that's all I know," he told her on the phone. Marian spent most nights at Earl's tattered and tired duplex across the tracks and in a seedier part of town. He was hoping she'd just bring the mom leftovers straight to his house. Feed him. But she had been drinking a few Bud Lights and smoking pot with old high school friends. Earl didn't want to hang out with the old high school friends, mostly because he didn't go to high school with them. Earl knew the leftover situation looked bleak, especially since Marian was only a few doors down from her parents' house and her bed. She still offered to come over, but had a readymade out with expressing concern over a busted taillight and not wanting to get pulled over.

Earl sat down in the father's leather chair and Marian told him he could put on the television. Earl thought this was the chair he would someday buy. Not as tacky as his father's green La-Z-Boy with the broken footrest. This was in a craftsman style that matched the craftsman house. Its shade and style carefully picked out of a catalog by the mother, to go with the Tiffany lamp on the credenza. Marian turned on the television and flipped through the movie channels, finding a movie she started earlier. Earl also fantasized about movie channels and when the city went from analog broadcast to digital, forcing everyone that didn't already have cable to buy a \$50 converter box, he went almost a year without any television. So it was a bit of a treat to sit and watch the premium channels, but, for now, Earl could only think how hungry he was. Earl thought, Earl hungry, Earl want to pillage through kitchen and shove delicious organic mom food down stomach. But, really, he didn't feel like fumbling through all of the Mom's kitchen stuff, making a racket and waking the parents in the next room. Some sort of decorum had to be followed he figured.

Marian handed the remote over to Earl and he immediately, showing no interest, set it down. She left it on the Chris Rock show, from the late 90's, and Earl half-watched giving himself time before he decided if he was going to be interested. Marian asked from the kitchen how hungry he was, when Earl found himself slowly getting into the show. She came out with two different-sized slices and asked which piece and turned down the television three notches, worried about waking the parents. When she left, Earl turned it back up two notches and kept

watching the show.

He decided he was interested. Chris Rock and an attractive black woman were singing a soul, R&B tribute to Mobutu, the African dictator who killed and stole millions in the Congo. Earl found himself laughing at the satire, to the point a wall of emotions hit him and all of sudden he felt like crying. Earl gathered himself and let it all pass by him like a wave, but recognized what a strange feeling.

Marian came out with the quiche and they both kept watching. Earl wondered if this was the "Small, Good Thing" from the Carver story he just taught in his English composition class. If the piece of quiche was what it was all about. Through life's painful banalities, there was a delicious egg-crusting lining. But he knew, at the very moment of thinking this, he was already making a mockery of his life. He wondered if the problem was, he always related things to short stories. Life was so much more boring than fiction and when you compared the two, you couldn't help but laugh, or maybe cry. And the quiche was delicious, but Earl just didn't feel it, he didn't feel anything. Then Marian asked if he wanted a piece of ice cream cake.

Marian thought Earl's response was "I will, if you don't," and Earl thought that was funny and sat up and let out a short laugh.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"That'd be such an asshole thing to say, like I'm implying you need to lose weight or something," he told her.

"It's just like the husband in the Carver story we read in class today," he tried to peak her interest at possibly finding the humor in the situation, but he felt he was a far way off. So he told her about the story and how the husband tells the wife maybe she could lose a couple of pounds. And it immediately seemed awkward to Earl, because he did observe that Marian had maybe gained a little weight and she might be wondering why he was telling this story. So Earl tried to explain the story again. Telling about how the wife worked as a waitress and then Earl tried to get at the crux of the story where the husband overhears two men comment unfavorably about his wife's ass. Earl explained this was why the husband wanted her to lose weight. He told her the creepy part, where the husband puts his wife on a diet for a few months and then to validate his efforts, he tries to get an old man to comment on her ass.

Still listening, Marian remembered she didn't have to go to work 'till later and wondered what she'd do with her morning. She thought Earl was acting awkward, but figured he was just venting after work like he usually did and it would relax him if she sat there and listened. So she continued to watch his lips move, only she realized it was hard to hear him over the television. Had she read any Carver? Maybe in college. She was always forgetting things that she read and it bothered her. But then there were people like Earl and her father, who would go on and on, like they knew everything about someone. That's what she didn't get. She didn't think that's what the author had in mind. If she liked a story, that was it. It was a good story. If she didn't like it, she stopped. She figured men just liked to hear themselves talk, but that's all it was. When she turned to the television, Earl thought he had lost her.

"Too boring?" he asked.

"No. Just wanted to turn off the T.V. so I could focus," she said.

Earl knew he had to get to the end of the story quick and thought he'd even end it in Carver's

abrupt style.

“So the other waitress asks who’s this joker? And the wife says, ‘He’s a salesman. He’s my husband...’”

Earl let the end of the story settle so he could enjoy the dramatic silence. Marian only felt startled by the sudden stop of Earl’s voice and the way the whole living room seemed to change, like maybe he asked a question to see if she was paying attention. Was that the end of the story? Was she *supposed* to know that was the end?

Marian only commented how she saw the story was controversial. Earl asked why and she said nothing. He felt like a jackass, just like earlier in the night when he asked his class the same question. She didn’t really see the point, but maybe she had missed something. Earl said his students had the same mildly interested response to the story; enough to admit that the story was possibly controversial, but not enough to really want to talk about it. Marian felt offended that Earl was comparing her to his students. She got the general gist of the story, but felt like she missed a few parts and she hadn’t even read the whole story like his class. And that’s why her response was general and, she used the phrase, to ‘just paint it in broad strokes.’

This struck Earl “just paint it in broad strokes,” and he repeated it again. Marian started to get angry, like Earl was mocking her. He apologized and tried explaining it was funny because it really did sound just like a title to a Raymond Carver story.

“No? It sounds just like one ‘Just Paint it in Broad Strokes.’”

Earl tried changing the subject, not wanting to offend her after feeding him. Marian went to the kitchen and thought about how much they fought—and over the stupidest things. She pulled the ice cream cake from the freezer then poured a glass of water, trying to avoid a hangover in the morning. It reminded her she had to get to bed soon because of work in the morning. Even though she wasn’t going in until late, it would be nice to squeeze in a run first. She thought, yeah that was definitely what she wanted to do. She hadn’t been on a run all week and she’d feel great about it afterwards and go in to work and have a nice day.

Earl sat in the empty room with the television off, feeling the time accumulate under him. This wasn’t his chair and this wasn’t his living room. He wondered what was taking her so long. He heard clinking around and wondered if she was pouring more wine; always more wine. Or maybe she forgot about him and was cleaning up. Marian came back with the glass of water and looked at Earl and realized she forgot the cake. Earl wasn’t sure if he should go or offer her a ride back to his house. She came back with the piece of ice cream cake and set it down next to Earl and things seemed okay again. The living room had a nice quietness to it. The sort of earned quietness you might expect from an old married couple. Marian settled into the back of the couch next to the father’s leather chair. Putting her feet under her legs and covering them with a blanket.

Earl noticed there was only one fork and one slice and asked, “Do we share this ice cream cake?”

Afterwards, it seemed the most appropriate thing was to let her get to sleep. He had made her upset again. There was confusion over rather or not they were suppose to share the single

piece of ice cream cake. Things were awkward and Earl felt largely responsible. She walked him out her parent's paned glass front door. "Okay," he said. "Goodnight" she told him. Earl decided to sit in his car for a second. His car faced the house and he could see Marian put the living room back together, picking up the plate, coming back to fold the throw blanket, locking the door and turning off the Tiffany's lamp. Earl didn't know if him there watching was creepy or dramatic. Even asking the question it seemed he was, again, making a mockery of his life. He was trying to compare his life to stories and it didn't make any sense to him. He felt the wave coming and dreaded having no where to go.



HOME  
DIGITAL COLLAGE

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ALEX HILL

# THE DEAL

L. CHRISTOPHER VASQUEZ

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

*A bed sits dimly lit in a pool of red tinged light. Candles and incense burn on a small bedside table.*

*There's a knock at the door.*

(Pause)

*Another knock, slightly louder.*

**MIKE:** Time!

*MIKE opens the door and pokes his head in.*

**MIKE:** TIME!

*(Off stage)*

**SUE:** Not ready!

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**MIKE:** TIME!!!

**SUE:** I know... Shit! You're gonna fuck this up.

**MIKE:** We made a deal!

**SUE:** Get out and knock again.

*MIKE addresses the audience.*

**MIKE:** This is gonna be awesome!

*MIKE closes the door and knocks again.*

*SUE enters. She is wearing a slutty red bustier and thong with high heels to match. Her make-up is overdone topped off with blood red lipstick.*

**SUE:** Come in.

**MIKE:** WOW! You're so fuckin' hot.

**SUE:** You know it big stud.

**MIKE:** Okay, wait... That is just not sexy. *(To the audience)* Do you think that's sexy?

**SUE:** What?

**MIKE:** Stud?! It doesn't work.

**SUE:** Well, what do you want me to say?

**MIKE:** Call me "Capt'n Crumbum."

**SUE:** *Laughing:* That's so childish.

**MIKE:** It's my fantasy.

**SUE:** Ok... Capt'n, come 'ere, put the money on the table and I will make it worth every penny.

**MIKE:** Wait! Is that how it happens? You pay first? In real life dontcha pay after services have been rendered? If I get my car washed I pay after adding extra for tip if the job's done right.

**SUE:** Not in this world.

**MIKE:** How do you know that?

**SUE:** I saw it on HBO.

**MIKE:** Bullshit!

**SUE:** That's Showtime.

**MIKE:** Shouldn't there be some negotiation process? Like 150 for sex and 50 extra for the butt?

**SUE:** Don't even go there.

**MIKE:** Okay... so money on the table?

**SUE:** That's it... now take off your clothes... Mmmm.

*MIKE proceeds to strip down to his underwear and gets into bed.*

**SUE (CONT'D):** That's it "Crummy"...*(She giggles)*

**MIKE:** Stop.

**SUE:** I can't help it. It sounds like a comic book character.

**MIKE:** Just say my name then.

**SUE:** Mike.

*SUE reaches behind to take off her bustier.*

**MIKE:** No!

*SUE stops.*

**SUE:** What?

**MIKE:** I want you to dance around for me.

**SUE:** I don't dance.

**MIKE:** Try it. Please?

**SUE:** Only if you beg.

**MIKE:** No, this is...

**SUE:** Fine.

*SUE starts to dance. MIKE sits back in bed.*

**MIKE:** Oh yeah.

**SUE:** You like that, dontcha?

**MIKE:** I do.

**SUE:** Ready?

**MIKE:** Only if you talk dirty to me.

**SUE:** Let's fuck, you dirty, fuckin' crumbum.

**MIKE:** Dirty?

**SUE:** Dirty.

**MIKE:** Slutty?

**SUE:** Shut up and fuck me.

*Lights fade to black. Fumbling in the dark can be heard.*

**SUE:** Give me your penis.

*Lights come up.*

**MIKE:** Really? C'mon.

**SUE:** Okay... give me your cock.

*Lights fade.*

**MIKE:** Better.

*A symphony of moans, farm animals, bells and car horns for about 25 seconds.*

*Lights up.*

**MIKE (CONT'D):** Ahhh yes...

**SUE:** Seriously?

**MIKE:** Sorry.

**SUE:** Can you just lay there while I finish.

*Lights fade.*

*SUE moans.*

**SUE (CONT'D):** Okay. Done.

*Lights come up. SUE is standing in her robe, MIKE is getting dressed.*

**SUE (CONT'D):** Did that work for you?

**MIKE:** Don't break character.

**SUE:** You like that baby?

**MIKE:** Yeah...

*MIKE walks out abruptly and slams the door.*

*SUE looks confused.*

*MIKE opens the door, jumps into the room and takes a bow.*

**MIKE (CONT'D):** And scene!

**SUE:** You're weird.

**MIKE:** Thanks.

**SUE:** I really do love you though.

**MIKE:** I know, I love you too. We can do whatever you want for your turn.

*SUE thinks a moment.*

**SUE:** Is a midget in a clown suit too much to ask?

**MIKE:** Time!!!

# Slurpee in the Cup Holder

*Sean Donahoe*

He drove those streets like they were his—

he'd pull the e-brake for the sake of surprise,  
flick cigarettes at mailboxes, street signs.  
Anywhere we would go  
I could never tell which way was where  
until we got to the place.

Parked outside with engine idle

he'd sit silent to have a smoke.  
His ember pulsed within the dark  
as any guide that gleams.  
A ride with the brash  
banshee of a boy in the night  
is required to put fear of the law onto  
the edge of the seat.

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A cruise through the neighborhood

was no stroll, but a session; a split decision  
whether we'd cut off school buses  
or get brake-checked through canyons.  
It never seemed to matter.  
We never sat round long enough  
for the fuzz to grow on us.

He had a keen and stealthy sight

a concentrated ruffle above his brow.  
Even pulled over,  
those intimidation lights seemed an opportune time.  
A moment to deny suspected intoxication,  
an endeared smirk leads eyes wanting a warrant, an examination  
to the cup holder,  
*"Officer, I've only been chillin' on this cherry 40."*

# Beyond Myself

*Arthur Kayzakian*

A cane needs the dying hand  
of age to stand on its own.

The tree understands why I carve  
its bearded skin. I suspect

that tree takes pride in being  
the *true* artisan of the casket.

I am no more ground than  
the sound of falling rocks,

as life is no more straight  
than a crooked bridge.

Letting all who cross— walk  
with a guilty sense of gravity.

Knowing more about less  
makes me the least of what

is already here. By end life,  
I will know as much

as wood.



THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD  
IPHONE

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MICHAEL MILLER



# THE BONES OF *DEUS EX AMOR*

GEORGE FEKARIS

**R**eserve is my favorite word. I say it to myself as much as possible. Sometimes I'll also say the phrase *quit nippin' at your cheese*, if money's involved. I don't keep from shaping my beard, but I'm not eager to get out much, either. I don't keep myself from things, people or the world but *reserve*, I think, means standing back, letting some remove speak for me. I'm happy to do it. But then, being back home and in college has me in a state of ambivalence. Sometimes I'll feel like spending a little, too, just a little of my *reserve*. While waiting for one of my late classes to start, a peer asked me a couple questions. I took the opportunity to explain, in apt terms, what drives my *reserve*. Is it a privation? I was asked, simply, why I carry such a full and heavy backpack. She wondered if it relates to having been a soldier of the war. I told her that I like to keep the stuff I care about, that makes a difference to me, close. Then I recounted to her what a corporal told me before my last flight.

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He'd said, "The sun looks like a bloody fire doesn't it? Murderous heat. Hey, you've heard of *Deus ex Amor*, haven't you? No? There's no word if he's still out there, but you should hear about him.

"A while ago, some soldiers—can't remember where they were from—drove out toward the Kernel, you know, that transition land north of the major trouble. On the way—and there's video of this—they're passing what look like markers or road signs, so they follow them. These markers get more and more complicated the more they pass. The things start looking more like sculptures than road signs. That's where the video ends—just a few seconds altogether.

"The video ends because the soldiers' communications got mangled and stayed that way. It was weeks before anything was found. And then it was just luck. Somewhere way off from their last transmission, a PFC in an eastern unit picked up the only one that came back—Corché Farolyn. Yeah, Corché Farolyn. The same Corché Farolyn that's AWOL right now.

"Well, she was the only one missing who came back at all. And when she told her officers what happened, she recites this story about this *Deus ex Amor* guy and how he's got some twisted regime over there in the Kernel. Apparently, it's a colony of cannibals.

"Apparently, this *Deus ex Amor* was a massive war monger, but he left his outfit when he got hold of something called a *sustainability model for sociopathy*—yeah, crazy. He took it to a village out there and put it to use, and people had to—and these are *her* words by the way—*live in severe orgasm* to get the daily necessities, like eating, drinking, sleeping, done. Then she goes on about how *torture* was like these people's *money*. So, basically, Farolyn and the others followed those road markers that led to this place—Deusville—where people, yeah people, are required to do things like eat others for food or waterboard others for drinking water or gag or rape or

get beaten in order to sleep, and it was so wild there that if your neighbor wanted a sugar cube, you might tell him, *Sure, but only after I tag you with my Taser for twenty seconds*—and some dude called *Deus ex Amor* ran this place. He was the guy up all its stairways.

“Well, after Farolyn got picked up, and no communications with Deusville—other than what Farolyn told them—intelligence sweeps the Kernel. They lose some vehicles and the soldiers in them—destroyed. Of course, then the Kernel gets bombed through and through—that *code of the moon* operation you might’ve heard of—but nobody’s saying anything about what the recovery teams are finding.

“The strangest thing is this though. Farolyn claimed the other soldiers, the other missing ones, didn’t want to leave. They stayed in Deusville. And she said *Deus ex Amor* was personally tutoring them. And they were clearly getting into it.

“Then she said she could only leave because she let some corrupt official bleed her for a bike and some gas. Insanity, right?

“So now, Farolyn’s gone again, and a nurse or medic or someone is saying he knew her and the others were robbing medications a while before any of this—but an intelligence guy says he did the analysis of that video, and those markers—whatever they marked—the road sign sculpture things—it turns out the most likely thing they’re made of is human bones.”

My classmate’s eyes widened. She bit her lip and glanced at the floor. Maybe the corporal’s story was out of place. Maybe I should’ve kept my mouth shut. Later, on break, we talked about a poetry mag she was editing. She said I should write something. She made sure to wave *bye* when class ended but didn’t ask me another personal question again. She’d been right about me, in part. The war, war in general, is in my thoughts. It contributes to my preoccupation with *reserve*, no doubt. Frightening possibilities become actualities, then, definitely, war makes one skeptical of the world. I’ll admit, I think of the phrase *war’s the fat of the land* too often. Nevertheless, the truth is war isn’t quite what motivates my *reserve*; it isn’t quite what’s at the core of my habitual use of that pivotal sign for reasoned restraint. No, and I’ve thought about this in depth. What I’d hoped would be understood was that I’m moved by a more pristine care, more primal. In *reserve* there’s a—a deferring. There’s an act against some, not always specific, satisfaction. There’s an escape from any mess where not only the pleasure, but also the delicacy, of so much of what’s satisfying, is dissembling.

# my trophy shrunken head swings like a pendulum

*Lexlia Rocha*

The voices are swift like arrows  
All in different tongues trailing in separate directions  
Falling like feathers and landing like light  
Dark skin meshed with pink meat freezes  
In the burning smell of a name  
Too sweet to swallow it melts away  
I drown the forgotten baby  
In a saucer of holy wine  
From the clouds' morning white  
You cannot tell the blood from the grapes  
There are short men in my head  
Aborigines with medicines that glow  
Those secrets are washed in rains and snow  
One by one their mouths fill with smoke  
They throw back their heads and blow  
50 I am filled to the rim with gassy tears  
An organ is played to accompany my sullen fear  
A single note is held and squeezed  
I bleed milk honey  
My flesh freckles with sugar  
At the sight of the black shadow cougar  
Pale blue forget-me-nots bud in my eyes  
And I sink to the singing and sighing of someone who dies

# Vagabond Gypsy Brother

*Nicholas Jerrens*

Vagabond gypsy brother  
We are the same lover  
Certainly we must wander  
Forging the empty pockets

Operatic coffee houses  
Pouring our hearts to no one  
Sip water out of tip jars  
Leave behind no masses

Camper shell toting tortoise  
Get us out to Portland  
Maybe we'll earn a free meal  
Spreading harmonic nonsense

Hipsters reek all over  
From Oregon to California  
Filling our coffee house stage  
With critical words and bullshit

Lonely girl with a camera  
We've seen your kind before  
Seeking refuge in the wanderer  
Selling yourself through your lens

Motel 8 is our Shangri-La  
To rest our old burning soles  
Daylight carries our slumber  
Nightfall brings more wandering

Going to California  
Melting pot of day dreams  
Finding condolence in no one  
Seeking a realm that's not real

Vagabond gypsy brother  
We are the same lover  
Constantly searching elsewhere  
When the problem isn't where



UNTITLED  
FILM

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JENNIFER D. CHANG

# Viral Nation

*Dania Bennett*

Tijuana teachers  
contemptively instructing  
children  
who,  
cutting school  
like cutting trees,  
destroy the forest.

Nightgown breasts  
flipped exuberantly,  
smooth as sharkskin;  
as sharp a bite,  
by  
harlequin  
night flowers  
hitching  
great instruments  
of sweating self-indulgence  
on drooping lips  
and leaves.

Straight broke, dope,  
hot, neon eyes  
swinging ideas  
through doorways.  
Curly-haired, horizontal boxers  
blow beautiful dignity,  
thoughtfully stamping joints  
into place  
with  
Chicago finances.

Disappointed,  
saintly facilities,  
lazier streets.  
Auschwitz trailer parks:  
shaved into location

and caught there,  
 tied-off,  
 with cemented barb-wire.  
 Draught-resistant weeds.  
 Moles dug in for the winter.

Stretched-out digestion.  
 Vigorous,  
 meticulous consumption.  
 Life's long list of lies and ingredients.  
 Stomach churned like butter:  
 creating holes in our souls;  
 steel, milk-veiled eyes.

Handsome hobos,  
 fairy-tale boys and young women  
 in goof suits.  
 Plaid,  
 catholic collars,  
 thinking hard;  
 scratching their brains  
 with cotton swabs  
 and sunshine.  
 Chewing poppies,  
 creating carcass  
 gazes and twine-like looks;  
 impregnating immigrants  
 with free dreams.  
 Fates plagued  
 with firestorms, and  
 piping, fogged glass hot  
 with saffron viruses  
 and crystal-clotted lungs.

A monk,  
 broadcasting life  
 into a  
 bar,  
 saloon,  
 cafeteria,  
 dropped by a  
 bad-mouth bouncer  
 madder  
 than a ragtime band  
 elicit in a cathedral.

Kids horde these ideas:  
looking seriously into their mothers  
draped with phlegm and placenta  
and seeing nothing but  
toothpaste stains,  
spoons up in smoke,  
a sea of cut trees.

Not even the lead of the digested  
paint's radiation is as much  
as the viral nation  
breeding under  
every child's hide.

# BROKEN GREEN DREAMS

DAVID A. ELSENSOHN

Saul sat on his porch and rejected Thursday.

His two-bedroom bungalow became a stucco-walled oven during summer, so he felt no compulsion to stay inside and do any writing. He'd scribbled some lines on his tattered notepad, knew the meter was weak, and let himself be driven from his kitchen table and out onto the porch, where the Los Angeles sun lit the left side of his face. Ten in the morning was reason enough for the halfhearted Stonehenge of beer cans at his feet.

Greelie drove past, in a rusted Plymouth Duster nearly the same green as his flesh. Pointed teeth arranged somewhere close to a grin, he threw Saul the finger. Saul might have yelled back something provocative, but the energy wasn't there; Greelie was all right for a goblin, but he was still a goddamn goblin. They sprouted everywhere: goblins, fairies, imps, all the fey of the world, here, intruding.

He slurped at a warming beery cylinder.

"Good morning, Mr. Kukk," his neighbor said, just as she had said it every other morning he was outside, which was seldom. Mrs. Bailey made every consonant stand out.

Saul took a perverse joy in his last name; he imagined it as the sound of a weapon striking flesh, or a vaguely phallic obscenity, or the strangled mewling at the back of one's throat during a vomiting session. His neighbor gave variation to the monosyllabic wreckage, so he grunted in gratitude, and she went back to weeding, sunlight shining from dark skin.

Then the gardeners started across the street, trading laughter in Spanish, each armed with a leaf blower roaring in a two-toned wail only geese could emulate. Their song of love and air turbulence pulled Saul off the porch, into his kitchen to grab the notepad, and toward one of his breakfast haunts on Sunset.

It was not safe for him to drive, but his ability to care was stored away; he ran a light that was nearly orange, swerved north, rattled over a crosswalk, and a fairy fluttered out of his right-of-way, hurling musical abuse after him.

He picked the diner near where London Fog used to be, so he could sit under the skeptical eyes of a David Bowie concert poster. He clutched to the past, because it was supposed to be worth something. He'd had college, or at least what the middle 1970s assumed was college; one could choose the crowd with the turtlenecks and glasses of chablis and a penchant for sucking

Derrida's dick, or be a stoner immersed in postered walls and bean bag chairs, waiting for the conversation to sprout wings, or be an intellectual vigilante, embracing praxis over theory, hurling pens and typewriters against the world and its assumptions. He chose the last, and never got enough from it.

After a second cup of coffee and a grainy pile of sugar that slumped in defeat underneath its black surface, he still could not think of anything worth writing. His well-chewed pencil dragged in a tuneless staccato across the spiral-bound notepad. The change in location had yielded nothing. He was burnt out. A misshapen lump whose wick had been spent. He wondered how old he would get if he just stopped.

Saul was a man who delved through the hangovers of Bukowski poems, who felt Werner Herzog's vicious rampages were the only films worth watching. He listened to Tom Waits while drinking like Hemingway. It had gotten him through the publishing of two books of poetry, each a brief rest stop on his journey toward self-induced oblivion. He doubted a third could be pulled out of him before he tired of it all, shut the windows and started toying with the dials on the stove. He shouldn't have to just labor at some job. That was for other people.

Mort sat himself across from him.

Mort had an obvious combover, skin even greener than Greelie's, and glasses thick enough to be doorstops. His teeth were stunningly rotten. He was convinced the waitresses were secretly infatuated with him, and equally convinced Saul needed companionship despite the latter's valiant attempts to ignore him; every now and then he'd call Saul and give opinions.

"You just need a vacation, Saul," he shrugged without preamble. His accent had Yiddish somewhere in it. "Your writing, it sucks. Go get an exfoliating coffee rub on an island somewhere, write about that. Better than telling your magazine that, what was it, some 'footgazer band should first learn the rules of contrived pap before breaking them.'"

Somehow Mort had read everything Saul had ever written. That was the same review in which he'd said the band was an inflatable zodiac longing to be a cruise liner.

"Nothing is worth writing," muttered Saul. "Everything is vapid. Painless waste. Real literary content has to hurt to be worth a goddamn. If it's airy, or pretentious, it may as well be an ad for dog food, or menstrual pads. It has to be brilliant."

Mort laughed, his scent wafting over Saul's half-eaten breakfast burrito. Goblins had a mad passion for wearing justifiably vintage aftershaves, and Mort had gotten his warty hands on a bottle of Hai Karate. (Greelie treasured an orange bottle of Jeris Musk.) It never helped.

Saul wished Mort's kind wouldn't hang around him. Miserable green bastards.

He figured Los Angeles was a refuge for the fey because it was one of the last imaginary places on earth. Maybe a few trolls and changelings still drank beers and heckled strangers out in America's heartland, but the west coast drew them like a sinkhole, where despite emptied pots of gold and rotted wings they stayed. The landlord with the stained white shirt and the hairy ears was as likely to be a boggart as anything else. The fairy prostitutes were just like the regular ones, except addicted to candy instead of cocaine. The fey interacted with people all the time, but were rarely noticed by the hopeful, the hungry, the fannypacked; selkies offered racks of cheap sunglasses by the beach, imps slid under the gaze of the newly astounded. Saul tried not to see them, and grumbled when they moved into his neighborhood.

"So do something brilliant," prompted Mort.

"I can't. There's nothing left. And if there's nothing left in a writer, there may as well be nothing left of him."

"You suffer," smirked the goblin.

"Yeah, I do. My point is why I should bother."

Mort winked at the waitress, who was human and having none of it.

Saul sat on his porch and told Friday to go fuck itself.

"Good morning, Mr. Kukk," his neighbor said, intoning the syllables.

This time he looked at Mrs. Bailey, at her mahogany skin, the smile lines, the greying wires running through her hair. She seemed in her forties, but he decided she was much older. She'd been out here making clipping sounds all morning, and had finally worked her way up to the front yard.

Today, he spoke instead of his usual reclusive grunt. "Hey there."

"You know, I was going to drive over to get brunch and some books; would you care to join me?" she said. Daylight struck her, turned into rays of confidence, as if she'd been a patient, instructing angel finally completing an overdue call-and-response.

Saul had perpetual worry lines across his forehead like plowed furrows, and they deepened. Why the friendly black lady next door felt compelled to reach out to him was a mystery.

"Really?" he said.

"I think it's a good day to do it," Mrs. Bailey replied. "And it's a damned sin to live next to someone for four years and know little about him except that he writes reviews."

And two books of poetry, but he forgave her that. Saul was not a man who cared to associate with others; he wrote and spoke on the phone to those who could do something for him, or for whom he had to do something. Enough idiocy offended him daily that he could not bear to suffer much more.

Still, maybe she was tolerable.

"Well, sure, I guess. I'll go get something better on." He didn't have anything better, but he probably had something less lived-in. She smiled, showing brilliant teeth, and took herself and her clippers inside her house.

She drove leisurely. To Saul's joy she said little, and he took the occasional glance. She was a little heavy but it was a comforting, curvy, bosomy kind of weight. Her nails were a deep scarlet and trimmed short. She was about that age where an afro would once have topped her tall frame; the greying black hair reminded him of a tree stump, trimmed low but one could see the absence of a once-mighty structure.

Mrs. Bailey took a left, and Saul's thoughts floated back to halfway pleasant discoveries, amorous exploits and embarrassments from college. Since he moved in bitter circles, his first sexual experience had been defined by a shared taste in outraged philosophy rather than physical attraction. She'd been a bony Patti Smith of a girl, with a craggy jawbone and small breasts hidden under a highway of straight brown hair; she smoked incessantly and fucked like a maenad. He'd been intimidated by her staring at him like a cat.

Back then the campuses were exploding with the fey, the spaced-out, and crispy critters of all biological, pharmaceutical and thaumaturgical types. The girl had taught him how to see them, for which he owed her, and had also never forgiven her. The two of them dropped acid and

heard it plink, looking for expanding horizons, accepting the inspiration they were given. Ever since, life hadn't presented him with what he wanted, so he'd deepened the pool with more conventional bourbon and beer. Every decade marked an inch of hairline and another step downward.

"I hope you don't mind the café. They do paninis and salads, and it's twee as anything, but it's next to the bookstore. What kind of name is Kukkk?" Mrs. Bailey asked from behind gracefully arched eyeglasses. The way she spoke was measured and calm, and somehow her question didn't seem random.

"It's Estonian."

"Saul Kukkk. I'm sure you went through a period where you railed against your parents."

His frown lines sharpened. "I've got a flat ass and a gut from my mom. From my dad I have a hairline that retreats like the French. My name is the least of my parental enmity."

The café was busy yet hushed, allowing them to establish a comfortable cultural exploration. At first Saul figured she was lonely, although picking him for a companion was like stirring ashes into wine. Over well-assembled coffee concoctions he gave her what snippets of his life, his beliefs, his failures he felt were sufficiently introductory. Mrs. Bailey took it in, giving him enough nods and musical hums so that he ended up telling more than he'd wanted. In return she offered the essentials. She had retired from teaching grade school down in Inglewood, worked in a library when she felt like it, and volunteered on Sundays. Her husband was wise, hardworking, fond of bad foods, passed on, and missed.

She said it was wonderful that Saul was a writer, which made him blink, and then poked directly into his mind, which made him start.

"You hold onto your bitterness, Saul," she quipped over her sprout-laden sandwich.

He chewed at her, and swallowed. The day had been going so well, and now she had him all figured out. A counseling sage, a mentor for his failing Hellenic hero. He took his irritation, shook it out and laid it down so he could walk on it.

"It's easy to hold onto it. It's tacky, like glue, like people. Because people are evil idiots. Because human society hasn't figured itself out." He meant it. He reveled in the thought that if things had gone better, he'd be somewhere farther along. He wondered why she cared.

"Are you so put upon, like you're surrounded by evil and you don't deserve it? You're a white man. How hard can it be?" Her quiet confidence was getting to him.

"You aren't about to drop slavery on me."

"Not by itself, but I wonder about your reasons, your basis. You seem to be... savaging your soul instead of salvaging it."

Perhaps it wasn't loneliness, but proselytism. "You're dropping God on me, then."

"I know it's not for everybody, and no. There are some things I think you might gain a lot from reading." She dug into the pasta salad, smiling up at the gaunt, tired-looking fairy who refilled her iced tea, pencil tucked behind one pointed ear.

"I've already soaked up King and Malcom. What's to read? Is it brilliant?"

"It is, and it is simple. And it will hurt. Lunch is on me. Bear with me, Saul Kukkk."

Saturday expected its daily dose of spite, but she'd taken him to lunch again, driving northeast

into upper Glendale, into a brown diner merry with itself. Its chatty, tropical-shirted manager welcomed elderly people into regular booths. Not a fey was in sight except a single aproned imp tottering by under towers of soiled plates. Saul ate pancakes and wondered why she had driven up so far.

“Because here is one of those places where I can point out some perspective,” she answered, carefully unsticking her fingers from the syrup bottle. “Did you notice where we’ve been seated?”

He had. Their table was in the back, against the wall by the bathrooms, and he noticed the two nearby booths, a black family and a black couple. The elderly people were up front, near friendly windows, behind a low wall with etched glass. Apart.

Her smile was politely frozen. “It’s not always conscious. It’s just how it’s done. Still. To make people comfortable.”

He spent Sunday and Monday indoors, frown lines huddled over pages she had given him. Mort called once, and Saul let the machine take his amused advice. He was reading now, of old terror, not merely of an enemy who was the stronger, but of an alien species convinced of its right to destroy and possess. Language was righteous, happily vicious. Whips were a universal translator. He read Douglass, and Washington, and Brown, railing against the men that

broke you in like oxen / They scourged you, / They branded you, / They made your women breeders.

This history he thought he knew already, an easy atrocity to file under one’s disapproval without having to sacrifice expectations of balance and entitlement. Newer ages had tried to slide it all underneath, past, and forgotten, and resolved, but when it was supposed to be over, it was not, for sociological boots still pressed on necks, and signage still separated.

The words, branded into him by those who weren’t supposed to have them, were cast in new outlines. He read of a man weak with horror, cowering silently against a wall in the darkest night, dodging the men circling the other side of the house, looking for him with ropes, rifles and laughter. He read of a woman dragged into a clothing store to be beaten bloody for not paying a bill on time, to emerge broken and weeping while a policeman strolled away with eyes averted and lips pursed in whistles.

He realized how easily, unconsciously, he had associated himself with the fiends who tolerated the blood-draining doings of his time; he had not noticed a people who could never assume, expect, demand that life would always provide. They did not have the same invisibility as the fey. The fey did not have to dread walking a whitefolk neighborhood after the sun had set. The fey had not learned to display two faces, one of joy to hide the fractured, to blend with walls of comfortable, constitutional, customary hatred. The fey were not forced to be: other.

Tuesday and Wednesday passed without comment, for he had moved on to what had been written, spit and wept onto paper by those who had struggled to gain access to words saved for others. Writers, inspired in spite of. Writers like Wright, whose sour gems of Jim Crow wisdom washed over him like a fevered sweat. And like Hughes, for whom

life / ain’t been no crystal stair

And trembled over the growing anger of McKay, who said that if he would die, / let it not be like hogs / Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot

And soaked up brothers and sisters of warrior mind, turning killer geometry like Baraka:  
daughters and sons of the Movement keeping magic alive though pinched and squeezed  
And slowly the dawning of wounded possibility.

It was going to take time, more than a few hundred pages turned and a dreadful shame  
sparked, but Saul found he was no longer standing at an edge he'd marked for himself, no longer  
counting the revolutions as he hurtled down his spiral abyss. As Knight had admonished his  
Black Poets, he

should live—not leap / From steel bridges (Like the white boys do).

The horizon had again expanded.

Saul said nothing to Thursday, because he was at his desk.

He sat at the computer, with nothing open except a blank white imaginary sheet. He began  
to fill it with syncopation, wringing out from his heart something worth a goddamn.

Mort would shrug with approval.

# In the City

*Sean Ahern*

open space suffocates  
the gray grey concrete haze clinging to alleyways  
in the dark zig-zag end-of-line eternity.

I'm established in the dark dependency,  
full of foul tempers in the right house,  
run the numbers to the neck, pulse,  
empty the novel.

In this city silence  
lingers for the medicine man rolling smiles in the twilight  
back to life. Bending floorboards  
for the drunk patron saints of happy hours.

62 I'm essential to the brain spin  
stare down of gods naming hurricanes in neon,  
blues for the charcoal in lyrics  
that buy eyelid coins.

In the city admission  
is selfish trips to wonderland,  
hold tongues alkaline to the shoreline slip  
soak ultraviolet by the mouthful,  
pour on to castles in the warm white sand.

I'm the saturation by volume  
burn down of cathedrals  
bone sift for piercing that shine in the salvage.

In this city half past pale is grey  
and fading through the IV in veins,  
forgetting how to walk in the dark  
where whispers wash stars into view.

I'm necessary in the chain reaction  
exciting phosphorus vapors in the steel fog fallout  
leaving solid states of human, still chugging florescence.

# The Super-Station

*Sean Ahern*

Coming home at three in the morning  
with trashy minds suffering from seduction insomnia reek  
established in the flush cheek ritual.  
For those too ashamed of the bar light noise  
search engine seekers in the supernatural spill of children  
that feed the street past midnight.

Fingers to the neck kneeling  
hands on the sandstone healing to hear the dark harmony play out  
bail out dose soaked  
wet-session        chemical forgetting,  
the dream for nothing lousy human forgery  
meant to swallow groans that seal ash opium lips  
in the flip back code line.

Who cling to the make believe  
for lonely wolves to feed their fix.

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Who look inside the vulgar deep illusions,  
guides who tell shadows grown in the sanctimonious dark  
to learn survival  
from dirty fingers and the sap tongued shrinks  
selling able makers in the wed-dependency.

The crown-mad-crowds are covered in the stink of revolution,  
that body body beat to eat clouds with wide open eyes.  
Button mashing words run the theater:  
text frenzy mind war broadcasting  
spit out of freedom Freedom freedom,  
in a concrete staredown of a place  
once sown with remains.

Who see the hung heavy headsrolling to recognize the after-hues,  
bleached out of the coffin that they once called home  
empty in the sun rise learning of a new day.

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UNTITLED  
DIGITAL

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MAIKO TODO

# M. AND THE FLOATING MIRROR

GEORGE FEKARIS

Menard looked at his writing table. He'd been sitting at it, his senses suspended upon it for hours. A clock in his room ticked, repeating itself, and clutter around the workspace seemed more interesting than his desktop's reflection of an empty page. An empty Campbell's soup can he used as a pencil can, aged so that its label draped like skin over ribs, over rings stamped in the metal underneath, was interesting to him because only parts of the rings' curves were visible. Wondering what happened beyond the visible parts, he knew, at the same time, the answer was the same curves. A book of Post-its was diverting too. There were so many little pages or so many little slices of a greater page or so many little repetitions of a single page. Menard inclined toward it. He trembled as he reflected on the importance of what he was about to write.

Then he sat up in his chair which, like many things in his home, had been bought for a discounted price because the seller had paid a discounted price to the manufacturer, who had paid a discounted price to the laborers, who'd paid a discounted price for their food and water. He typed words meant to make up the first sentence, of the first chapter, of the first book, of the first volume, of his latest story: "In a certain corner of la Mancha, the name of which I do not choose to remember, there lately lived one of those country gentlemen, who adorn their halls with rusty lance and worm-eaten target, and ride forth on the skeleton of a horse, to course with a sort of a starved greyhound."

"In a certain corner of la Mancha, the name of which I do not choose to remember, there lately lived one of those country gentlemen, who adorn their halls with rusty lance and worm-eaten target, and ride forth on the skeleton of a horse, to course with a sort of a starved greyhound," Menard repeated to himself, questioning whether it said what it ought to, but certain the words and grammar were exactly as they should be. And his room, a small bedroom he used as a writing room, affected him like a cave of dreams or a deep crack in some home's floorboards. It gave him a place to be stuck while he remembered what he wanted to say.

He aimed this latest story to be a synthesis of all his stories, culminating in the achievement of reaching behind all his stories and laying bare their necessity. He wanted this one to voice its own deep meaning and tell the deep meanings of his earlier ones, unveiling his corpus as a growing aesthetic and literary truth.

And an overpowering impulse drove him to kick the wall under and behind his table.

The whole project, this story, was one he had imagined for years in advance of setting to work on it. He'd even brooded over it, hung himself in tight suspense before it or what he imagined would eventually be it.

He kicked only once, and the wall shook. There was leftover pain in his foot, and the room stilled.

Menard reviewed his words and clenched his jaw and cleared his throat. While he read, he imagined his own trembling image and his thoughts wandered the lines of it.

"In a certain corner of la Mancha," he reviewed. He kept a slight moustache, had an old, slender, intelligent face, and wore a black three piece suit, except when bathing or sleeping, when he wore nothing or pajamas with circles on them respectively. He was slightly taller than a short man, a slender man, less so during the holidays. "Lived one of those country," he continued. And behind his looks was a fearful countryside. Fear of decay and death, fear of unfinished and lost stories resulted by decay and death, fear of finding decay and death behind his stories, fear of bitter wretchedness after, all this made the countryside. At the countryside's furthest edge, looking upon it, was a sea, dark as a deep hole in the ground and made of impractical, unreal impulse. His words came to and from that sea. "Gentlemen," he said again. He was in his fifty-sixth year but felt younger. His previous stories, "rusty lance and worm-eaten target," he considered classics. They were book-length tales of a hero's quest to remake his world for the better. The hero quested to his own bitter end, when hope was lost. Then after the hero's death, in the depth of mourning, it was discovered that the hero's efforts did have a small effect toward the end he'd quested for, after all. The stories were invested, Menard thought, with everything useful for cultivating all fruits literature can bear—if only, or rather when, they ever found an audience.

Menard then thought on his nation and its leaders: politicians, banking corporations and theist orators, all avoiding accidents of their antecedents by repeating new ones. And he pronounced "ride forth on the skeleton of a horse, to course with a sort of a starved..." A glance aside at impressions which looked like rivers in the glass of his water glass provoked him to take a drink. Afterward, he grabbed and held tightly to the couple items of clutter that had diverted his attention moments ago. He scrutinized the next word. The conditions of his image—his self, writing and nation—all eclipsed themselves, all looked over themselves in such a way as to continue past themselves, he thought, just as he, reviewing these words, was doing the same.

He repeated the last word written, "greyhound, greyhound," ran his fingers through his hair and gripped and pulled as much of it as possible with both hands, slowly, laboriously. This was his habit when passionately looking over his work. In the moment, it did not matter that he was mostly bald. There was still hair to pull.

He felt he'd arrived at such a point many times before. The word, repeated as many times as it might be, was an impossible enigma. The world, he thought, was already an impossible enigma. "Greyhound," he wondered, saying it again, "greyhound." Something about the word disturbed him, but not lightly like the mere hindrances reflected by difficulty. He would have been comforted to face difficulty. He thought further and overlooked his sentence. All was still grammatically, perfectly, set, yet all was also clearly empty of a certain power, a soul of possibilities he imagined should be in his text when face to face with it. Though it was, after all, only his first sentence, he could not understand what he meant by the word or why he ended his sentence with it. An impossible enigma, impossibility was same as emptiness, he feared. Dictionaries, in a cubbyhole in the hutch of his table, were stacked messily making a delicate tower of words: difficult words, simple words, words with same meanings, words with

opposite meanings, words with same sounds, how words were used, words that were no longer used, technical words, symbols for technical words, types of words, symbols for types of words, symbol for words, symbols upon symbols. He looked up his word. Emptiness, he thought, was same as definition.

His table was made of the wood called White Ash. It had a clear plastic sheet that allowed him to slide things like notes and reminders under, covering a portion of the wood. He lost sight of composure and leaned, with a hunch in his posture, in on the table, on one elbow, curved his torso a quarter gyre the other way and up, lifted his free arm, flattened its hand, and brought it, canted toward the palm, down with a load-bearing crash, half the hand upon the clear plastic sheet and half on the Ash. His word processing program's cursor, a striking witness to originality, blinked, iterating itself over and over. Menard hit the table again and again and noticed that the faster he hit, he could not sense a distinction between the plastic sheet and the solid wood, not only tactilely, but the more he hit, visually too. The whole activity seemed to him like swimming endlessly. Menard hit the table. Menard hit the table. Menard hit the table. Everything splashed. His dictionaries toppled over, upon each other, and what saved him from collapsing into continuous hitting was a small, bright paper with his name written on it, under the plastic. He had been practicing his signature. He had detailed a fine example and placed it there, in his line of sight. There was the distinction. The distinction was there. He slowed and softened his hits until he could feel, under his palm, and see the hyaline edge dividing the clear plastic sheet from the wood.

The problem with what he'd written, he thought, was that his ideas were impressive but his words were not. Also, somehow, the other way around. It was clear to him the sentence must be rewritten. He deleted it.

Alone on a busy stretch of a large street, in a subsection of a metropolis, in his bungalow-style house recessed from the curb, he heard cars running by. Menard deleted his sentence and intended to re-enter it, as one who gets lost in a city stops driving, in hope of refreshing his outlook and returning to the road with clarity.

The lightness of the light of his table lamp hovered in his workspace as if it was part of it. Wires and pens were part of the space too, he believed, as lines of representation. The new sentence had to be invested with all the power the previous one lacked, and an authenticity that eclipsed it. Menard felt he must write over what he'd already written, as writers do when doing re-writes. He needed to reflect his writing at a new angle, so it projected anew, originally. He let his eyes follow the lamp's wire along to where it plugged-in to an electrical outlet. "In a," he typed blindly.

Faintly, he could hear car engines passing his house, and he imagined electricity speeding through the lamp's wire, from its outlet. "Certain corner," he keyed with purpose. The power source was no core, only part of a larger redoubt, like the streets and the buildings and the businesses. "Of la Mancha," he continued. If he left his metropolis and sallied through his nation and beyond, he reasoned he would find no outer walls to either, only many specific trails, well-worn through and back through the borders. This was evidence enough, in his opinion, that the world had no outer wall, just many inevitable lines of travel. And the

trailblazers of those lines were the only things that in any sense formed any sort of core. Menard glanced at his signature. He renewed his authority over his prose. "Who adorn," he authorized. "Their halls," he established and watched the word processing program follow his decrees.

And his bookshelves were filled with coded and decoded tracts deducing the necessity of such lines of travel. He'd read all the tracts. He was able to prove that the world's lines were the necessary result of a self-justifying system. He was then able to prove the necessity of many types of self-justifying systems. He could then lead the way between such systems, and prove lines of travel through systems upon systems, rigorously and elegantly, with an excellent voice. The reflection of such ability showed in his writing as a sharp crown, a crest of philosophy. And yet, he hesitated before composing, "...ride forth on the skeleton of a." He held his fore-skull tightly in the compass of a hand and with the other endorsed, "horse." Pains of helplessness when facing a heavy, heavy burden were remembered in his body. One self-justifying system which, when interpreted, explained all movement away from oneself as an earthen labyrinth, coursed through his judgment. Proof of necessity, he thought, the end of every line. "To course with a sort of a," his fingers were pulled to pull to the page. And the next word haunted him. He whispered, "starved," into his workspace. It augured the enigma, again. It augured what grew out of him, which he would look at but not understand. It made him angry. "Starved," he repeated, "starved."

He turned away and refused to look at the screen. Violently, in a burst, he threw his arms and neck backwards, skywards, and in that moment contorted and denied and hated everything he knew. He wished for a monster. He wanted to take up a weapon against a monster and kill it. He would kill an electric monster. Necessity was same as definition, he reasoned. His violence was inevitable, and steering his violent burst down upon his keyboard with a blunt smash, it left remains, which resulted in the only writing possible, "g-r-e-y-h-o-u-n-d."

He looked at it, chaotically.

Chaos repeated itself like flooding in his imagination, and water flowed out his face. He bawled as though beaten, painfully and through and through. The tears held his words and his workspace, reflected and refracted. The tears reflected and refracted his writing and himself upon each other, then back upon each other.

Menard reached into a nearby box buoyed by a stack of others, all with his name written on them, and pulled out a manuscript of his one of his previous stories. He read, aloud, the first sentence, of the first chapter, of the first book, of the first volume: "In a certain corner of la Mancha, the name of which I do not choose to remember, there lately lived one of those country gentlemen, who adorn their halls with rusty lance and worm-eaten target, and ride forth on the skeleton of a horse, to course with a sort of a..." He paused before the next word, but he said it, "starved." And then he said the next one, "greyhound."

He immediately, chaotically, reached into another box and pulled out a manuscript of another one of his previous stories and read to himself the first sentence, of the first chapter, of the first book, of the first volume. He choked at the last word. He involuntarily cried out a bubble of spit and tears. His sad, satirical image floated in it.

All of a sudden, Menard shouted at his writing. He stood up stiff like a writing implement stabbed into something soft and shouted at it, full of resentment. He yelled sounds, sounds that were words, sounds that sounded like words, sounds that might have been words, sounds

that would never be words, sounds that would silence other sounds. His voice was shrieking. He held the manuscripts, one in each hand. He glared at the first sentence of his previous story, then at the first sentence of his other previous story, then up at his word processor's reflection of the first sentence of his new story. He and the three sentences, a trinity plus that which drew it together, drew a strange shape within which his words were repeated, repeatedly, so much that he became light-headed and felt his ability to use words might fracture into infinite pieces, eternally.

Rather, he kept yelling sounds, and they kept gaining tenor, form and clarity until he was shrieking, "In a certain corner of la Mancha, the name of which I do not choose to remember, there lately lived one of those country gentlemen, who adorn their halls with rusty lance and worm-eaten target, and ride forth on the skeleton of a horse, to course with a sort of a starved greyhound."

An urge to hurt himself with a blunt object recurred to him. He looked at his wall, then at his writing table. An urge to pull something out of himself, something that kept re-growing in the same contour and color, to pull it out finally, recurred to him. There was a steel flashlight the length of his forearm, probably nearly twice the weight of his head, at the side of his small twin bed and across from his table. He grabbed, then lifted the flashlight, and then struck the side of his skull with it.

Menard collapsed.

As he regained consciousness, he imagined that his writing was a literal part of him, also his truest companion. He considered the strange repetition of this and reflected that he, himself, had grown out into the many pages of his writings, and thus was his own companion, and would be re-grown with every reading, and refined, and replaced, and renewed with every re-reading.

And he reflected on his writing, and concluded that he was the only one who ever would or could re-read it.

He was woozy and in great pain. The side of his head was bleeding. He could not sit-up.

He opened and closed his eyes. He could not focus them.

Head hanging, by the float of the neck, Menard reflected on the first sentence of his newest story, then on the first sentence of his previous story, then on the first sentence of his other previous story, then on the first sentence of his newest story and again on the first sentence of his previous story and again on the first sentence of his other previous story. He responded to his reflection with an intention, an intention to recite each sentence, of each chapter, of each book, of each volume, of each of his stories. He recited, "In a certain corner of la Mancha, the name of which I do not choose to remember, there lately lived one of those country gentlemen, who adorn their halls with rusty lance and worm-eaten target, and ride forth on the skeleton of a horse, to course with a sort of a starved greyhound," and he fell asleep.

## To Hire:

*Chris Pruitt*

One wild-eyed dreamer  
who stares too long at the rain  
glistening off the apartment eaves.

Applicant must have experience  
clothing herself in the names  
and dreams of a lost lover  
or burrowing so deeply into  
his own beating heart that  
the rest of the world narrows  
to a stanza of text.

Applicant must know the sound of a word  
ricocheting off the fragile construction  
of meaning.

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Must be able to build cities out of letters,  
lifetimes out of gaps.

Applications: to be submitted  
to the back of one's own mind  
lying awake at two in the morning.  
If you receive no immediate response,  
file again and again until the sight  
of Times New Roman makes you sick.

# Archaic Revival

*Sean Donahoe*

in memory of Terrence McKenna (November 16, 1946 – April 3, 2000)

Culture is a revolving clip  
loaded with aging practicality,  
unfathomed rationalism,  
and melancholic medication.

Sons and daughters of wilted flowers—  
the enemy is a surface smile.  
A cracked embryo,  
scrambled into the ideal omelet.

Counter—  
we are the antibodies.

Each calculated hap serves profound madness;  
a perfect remaining number.

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Prance into the twilight of imagination  
like the mantis surely praying.

Trust just a lizard truth,  
all content  
for continental drift.

Tadpoles beneath the cloudy sky—

Wriggle to chanting applause.  
Fix evolutionary elixirs.  
Remember the tricks.

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MY EVERYTHING  
FILM

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ANGELICA SOTOMAYOR

# Winter Worms

*Lauren Levitch*

His shoes were too small for his feet  
when we met, discarded on the sidewalk.  
Toes dipped in the flush fresh gutter  
on the one warm day winter gave us.

He killed an earthworm he found,  
sailed it on the insole of his shoe.  
He had a live one he'd been saving  
and gave it to me. I cut it with a rock  
he was keeping warm in his pocket.

His name was too hard to pronounce.  
He told me that mine sounded like  
sprinklers in the summer. Where he came  
from heat was not the same as fire.

To me, cold was the same as snow;  
winter hid bugs from me. The sun  
cooked them where he used to live.  
When he said he'd only eat worms  
burnt, I sizzled like a salted snail.

# PLACEBO

LORETTA MCCORMICK

If doctors have taught me anything, it is that the difference between a placebo and the real thing often comes down to how you choose to take your medicine. I've been part of a medical trial for so long, I feel I have to defend myself. But, I wonder, what would you do? What could you do in my situation? You could, for example, wake up one morning with a slight feeling of nausea that bursts into an explosion of pain when your alarm goes off. Rushing to the toilet—a heavy, expanding pressure behind your eyes and in the back of your neck almost forcing you to your knees—you would most likely opt to keep the bathroom light off as you retch and shiver over the bowl in your underwear. Imagine the agony persists for days, weeks. Imagine it persists even after you purchase an array of over-the-counter pain relievers, stress reducing supplements, aromatherapy lotions and healing herbal teas. Suppose a burning cyst begins to develop on the back of your neck, smoldering like a hot coal just under your skin. You would, no doubt, talk to a doctor.

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I sit on the examination table, paper crinkling under my thighs as I try to adjust the clipboard on my lap, and fill in the answers that will go in my file. I bend my head toward the questions and the cool length of hair down my back settles its weight on the raging bulb at my nape, trapping some of its heat. Although the overhead light is stabbing high voltage beams of agony into my brain, the nurse explains writing in the dark will strain my eyes. She removes the clipboard from my hands to take my blood pressure, and, when she's finished, she snaps my paperwork from the clip and slides it into a manila folder. The soles of her shoes squeak against the tile as she turns to leave and I hear a hiss, then a click of the door closing behind her. I stare at a glossy poster of the food pyramid until my doctor raps twice on the door and enters.

In the penetrating light of the examination room I tell my doctor the truth. I sheepishly run down the list of useless remedies I have already tried—even the valerian root I bought for twenty dollars at Whole Foods. Hokum, the doctor says under his breath. When I pause he scribbles in my chart. Go on, he encourages absently, but my words evaporate before I am able to explain myself. He peers into each of my eyes and then both of my ears with a pinprick of light. Very gently, he moves behind me and takes my head in his hands. They are smooth and much softer than I expect. He gives off a powdery, clean smell—not perfumed or antiseptic. His clean is a dry, absence of smell that sets me on edge. He parts my hair like a curtain and I can hear the scratch of pen on paper as I stare at my lap. He presses his fingers behind my ears and probes below my skin with a tight circular motion. He places his hand up under my armpits and

thrusts his fingers into my flesh. I blush and turn my head to examine the food pyramid again. For a moment, I'm able to distract myself by creating a list of leafy greens and lean proteins I intend to purchase. When he removes his hands, I look up at his face but he's already concentrating on my chart. As I stare at the crown of his head, his tidy, clipped hair, I try to conjure the contours of his cheekbones, the slope of his nose, the arch of his eyebrows. It's useless. I want to throw up on his nice leather shoes. I want to cry into his soft hands.

I'm ready to lie back on the cool paper and offer myself up for dissection. He writes out several prescriptions, tears them from his pad and hands them to me. I fold them up and put them in my purse like a handfull of confetti. Would you like to be part of a medical trial, he inquires. I am tempted to pull out my hand full of confetti and throw it into the air.

Every week, following my visits to the doctor, my neck is tender and sore and I feel dizzy with pain. But I leave the office holding my little white paper bag of pills like a sack of pearls, like currency. When I get home, I tap two pale blue, candy-coated pebbles into my hand and close my fingers around them. I'm sweaty with excitement. Sugary blue dye stains my palm until I pop them into my mouth and swallow. Placebo. I roll the word around my mind like a die.

Suddenly, I am sweet and light and blue like the sky, like soft worn sea glass, like a baby boy's cradle. I have to resist the urge to bite down. I stop myself from grinding the little pills between my back teeth, forcing the grainy bits into the canyons of my molars so the tang keeps in my jaw for hours. I don't always stop myself, though. And, when I go for my weekly checkups, nurses in bubble gum pink scrubs suck their teeth and shake their heads to let me know they disapprove of my behavior. They remind me that we must all be exacting in our procedures as they write down my height and weight. Sometimes I'm given a gown to wear, exposed in the back to humble me. The nurses take pictures of my insides with x-rays and ultrasounds. They draw blood and measure the level of sugar in my system. I am told they are charting my progress. But the pain is still with me and the light still pierces my eyes when it creeps around my sunglasses or even the edges of my bedroom curtains.

In the dark comfort of my bed I do my own examination. I am buried underneath my comforter like a mole, counting down the time until my next blue dose. I roll over onto my back and my down pillow presses up around my neck into the tender swelling. I reach up and gingerly explore the area between my hairline and the collar of my shirt. It's firm and round, about the size of a plum now. I take my time and squeeze it lightly between my thumb and index finger. It doesn't give.

I step into my closet, turn on the light and face the mirror hanging on the inside of the door. I stand up straight and look directly at my image – eye to eye. I examine my face for signs of expectation, assumption, uncertainty and practice erasing them with endurance, indifference, confidence. I don't look down at my collar beginning to pull back a bit more each day, disrupting the way the contours of my shoulders and breasts are outlined beneath my linen shirt. I take my medicine on time and become baby blue, even as I feel the skin on my neck stretch and burn. It is as if my central nervous system has pushed all the pain from my head and is forcing it out of my body. Underneath my skin, the small, hard plum grows into an

apple, then a grapefruit, then a watermelon. It has nowhere to go, so it moves across my back and soon envelopes my shoulder blades. It gets so large that I can't fit comfortably in my bed. At night I move around trying to adjust my body or dig into the pillows, but my arm goes dead or my feet fall asleep; the rest of me is constantly forced to shake a foot awake. Eventually I get up, throw back my curtains and stand naked at the window. I feel like anybody could be watching me. I'm overcome by a fierce desire to get caught by a teenage boy sneaking into his room while his parents sleep, by a drunk cautiously rolling down the midnight street in an attempt to make it safely into his driveway, by a thief casing my vacationing neighbor's darkened home. All of my skin bared, gleaming in the dull evening light. But nobody is watching and I'm left feeling deflated and ridiculous.

I begin to note the irritation creeping into my doctor's voice. As I am posed with my body in the vice of a machine, an audience of nurses watching, he tells me I am naïve. When I deny his insistent recommendations for in-patient treatment, he explains that he knows what is best. I ignore my growing fear that I am a failure in all my treatments. I swear to my doctor that I can feel each pill working its way through my body, flooding the red-hot mass like a cool, blue wave. Dissolving it like a sugar cube in water. But the nurses raise their eyebrows and cast each other pointed glances.

At home, in my closet, I turn around with my back to the mirror, knocking size eight dresses and skinny jeans from their hangers. I face the row of tailored shirts and clever, fitted blazers I can't wear anymore. For some time, I've been wearing flowing robes to remind myself I am light and blue. Even as I admire the ruched sleeves, darted bodices and colorful buttons on display before me, I consider pulling the clothes from the rod, stuffing each carefully stitched item into a box and donating the box to Goodwill. Instead, I slip out of my robe and I try to cross my arms over my chest in a hug so I can feel my back, assess my body for the first time since my private, bedtime examination. But the weight of the mass pushes down on my shoulders and limits my movements. My arms flail and I am short of breath. So, after I adjust the angle of the mirror, I crane my neck, turn my head over my shoulder and stare.

I had imagined a smooth, tight globe—something that looked foreign and temporary. I'm not prepared for the mottled skin, thick and organic like a dragon elbow. I stare so long that I think I can see my abnormality growing, almost imperceptibly bubbling up, spreading lower, making its way slowly but relentlessly towards my butt. I startle myself when I blink and pull my head slightly back, suddenly noticing my own face in the mirror peering from around the huge mountain of flesh spread over my back. I recognize the curiosity and the tinge of revulsion I have seen in so many others written on my own face. I slip back into one of my flowing robes and feel just the smallest kernel of something inside me, something quite different from the incessant pain that is becoming an inseparable part of my body. Like a limb or a breast or an ear. When I examine that feeling, I discover that it is something close to faith. I decide I will concede to my doctor's persistence. I will choose to believe in him.

I show up at my doctor's office for an unscheduled visit, upsetting the rhythm the nurses like to set. I wait in a different exam room and there is no food pyramid on the wall. Instead, I stare at a large diagram of the human brain and spinal cord. Without bone and blood and muscle to encase it, suspended on a blue background, it looks like a strange animal. Maybe a sea dwelling creature or something that burrows deep underground. My doctor enters with a

nurse and I explain that to sit or stand or even lie in my dark, warm bed is becoming increasingly uncomfortable. The nurse moves her head around my tumor to relay my discomfort to the doctor standing on the other side of it. He assents. Yes, of course, as he gropes it under my blue robe. I look over at the brain creature while they go about their business. He tells me again that I require *specialized* care. Then, for the first time, the doctor looks me in the eye with his cool, blue orbs. I see a curious excitement spread across his face when he sees I am going to concede.

For my hospital stay, I pack my flowing robes, my furry, no slip socks that don't come off in bed, a toothbrush, face wash and moisturizer, and my sunglasses. A team of doctors is waiting to fawn over me when I arrive. I am led to my room and a nurse gestures towards my bed with the flourish of an exhausted game show hostess. A reedy doctor with a patronizing, nasal voice delights in pointing out the adjustable mattress, its extra width, the safety bar that will allow me to steady myself as I climb into bed or provide leverage when I want to pull myself out. They stand around awkwardly until finally shuffling out with a dubious air of importance. When they are gone I notice, for the first time, the curtain separating the space in half. It billows slightly before a slender white hand peeks around the edge of the fabric and pushes it aside in one swift movement. Sunshine from the window behind the curtain floods the room and I reach to the top of my head for my sunglasses and pull them down over my eyes.

A young woman, about my age, stands before me and smiles warm and bright and I bask in it for a moment as if it were the sunshine I am forced to avoid. Her neck and limbs are long, delicately thin and appear to be jointed—like a marionette held together with twine strung a bit too tightly. She jerks awkwardly forward, with her hand outstretched. It is as if something is holding her just slightly above the ground and her feet were not completely bearing her full weight. She is wearing a flowing robe similar to mine but gathered in the front rather than at the back. When I see her belly momentarily bulge and shift underneath the folds of her robe, I inadvertently take a step back. Her smile falters and she lowers her hand. My own hands flutter at my sides then move up to hover in the space between us as shame washes over me. I brace myself for the disappointment she must be feeling towards me but step into the short distance separating us and lift my eyes to hers anyway. I apologize and I'm surprised at the power behind my flood of relief when her high-powered, fog-cutting smile returns.

You're sharing this room with me. And my little sister, she says pointing at her belly. She scuttles, crab-like, to my bed and climbs up and over the safety bar. She is careful to protect her twin, arching her back high as she swings first one leg, then the other, over the bar. Tumbling onto her back, she complains about the coarse sheets and the hard mattress. As she stretches her legs out in front of her and puts her hands behind her head, her robe clings to her, revealing the knotty, irregular form beneath her thin garment. She beckons me over. I fuss and fidget at the edge of the bed trying to find a comfortable position. I wince as I sink into a spot near her long and narrow feet. She flexes them up at the ceiling then gently releases until the pad of her big toe comes dangerously close to my growth, which no longer merely rises up from my neck and between my shoulder blades but now, also, hangs heavy and low on my back. For several minutes I try to hold myself erect and imagine I can pull myself closed, tuck into myself like a turtle inside its protective shell. Then, her voice pierces through my

imagination and even through the haze of discomfort. I realize she has been talking the entire time.

You have to pay attention around here, she chides. But there is a lilt in her voice and then she laughs with spontaneity. She sits up and folds her thin legs together. Her twin punches out the front of her robe and it momentarily billows like a bed sheet tossed into the air. If you don't pay attention you could get lost, she says very seriously. I don't believe her since I know what detailed records my doctors and nurses keep. It's surprisingly easy to get lost in a place like this, she warns, noting my doubtful frown. One accidental switch of your chart, one tired nurse or ambitious doctor and you could end up with your perfectly healthy appendix cut out of your body and tucked away on a shelf in a medical lab, left to float in a jar of formaldehyde like a little gherkin. That is how you get lost around here. Little by little. Piece by piece. She demonstrates by holding up her hand and slowly pinching her thumb and index finger together. The sly look she gives me fills me with the excitement of slumber party conspiracies and a feeling of ghost story camaraderie.

Later, after the nurses remove our dinner trays, check our vitals and turn off the overhead lights, I tell my roommate that I have a full slate of testing tomorrow and I need my rest. I sound petty and I realize I only spoke with the small hope that my declaration would goad her back into talking. Sleep tight, she says. The tone of her voice is indecipherable. I can't tell if she is gently mocking me, pitying me or somehow being affectionate. And then, nothing. For the first time since my body began to change, my inability to sleep does not stem from a part of me growing wildly out of control. But that is not exactly true. I am confused.

In the morning my team of doctors comes for me. I am hustled into a series of rooms. All day, they ask me to hold still as they attempt to scan me, measure me, take samples. They look like vultures with dark, glassy eyes and sharp beaks that poke and pinch and tear at my flesh. They are proud of themselves. For what, I cannot decipher. They scribble notes in journals and try to look serious, but I can feel their enthusiasm. The rustling of their paperwork disturbs me. They plan to invite doctors from everywhere to come see my growth. They tell me I will be immortalized in medical books.

I get back to my room just before sunset and the twins are sitting near the window, their robe wide open, Big Sister painting the delicate toes of Little Sister an electric fuchsia. My large, irregular shadow falls across them from the doorway and Big Sister pulls the curtain across the window, thoughtfully blocking out the last of the daylight. When I tell the twins about my day, Big Sister shakes her head and tells me that, for the most part, the medical staff leaves them alone these days. I feel a twinge of sadness, which she must be able to see in my face because she laughs her laugh, the one I am, in this brief span of knowing her, already coming to love. The one that reveals an unfettered joy. She says she wants to shroud herself in a mystery they cannot decipher. She wants to do it all right in their face, unveil their hypocrisy. What about you, she inquires. She asks gently, easily—as if it is the simplest thing in the world. I want to tell her how, sometimes at night, I stand naked at my window but I am worried she will find my nighttime exhibitions disingenuous. She looks at me so expectantly but I feel like a coward. A deep, red-hot blush infuses my entire face until even the tips of my ears tingle. She rescues me from my embarrassment by telling me how she grew up instead.

My sister has no heart so I share mine with her, she explains. But, she tells me that when the two were born—Little Sister just as tiny as a chicken wing, bent and goose fleshed at the center of Big Sister’s abdomen—a surgeon resolved that one heart wouldn’t be enough to sustain such complicated anatomy. The twins were too young to understand phrases like *life expectancy* or *genetic aberrance*. They do remember, though, the years their parents spent huddled around the glow of a light board, images of the girls’ bodies illuminated, and listened as surgeons broke down the uselessness of all their extra appendages in the simplest language they could manage. The twins still recall how their parents couldn’t tear their eyes from a doctor’s index finger as he pointed out an unsightly bulge suddenly disrupting the aesthetic of one rib cage arcing perfectly around a pair of pink lungs or as his finger drew an invisible circle around the small, sharp bones like the skeleton of an ancient fish jutting out in awkward and unnatural directions. She explains that her parents were searching for the seam that would delineate where one twin ended and the other began. She levels a stare at me and wonders out loud why neither her parents nor the doctors even thought to ask her. My parents had faith like you, she says. Faith in doctors and prescriptions and blind studies.

She doesn’t relent. She details her father’s endless obsession with birth records and letters and memories, his effort to find any sign that a cleft palate or a sixth toe on a distant cousin’s left foot had been pruned from the official family tree. Anything he could point to and say, here. This is it. This is the cause, the reason. She tells me that her father was looking to blame a distant cousin or great-great aunt. In the end, though, he blamed the doctors for not finding a way to remove the extraneous parts from his daughter’s body, decided the girls were not twins after all and bound her abdomen so tightly that it often hurt to breathe, especially with little elbows and knees digging into her gut. I think of my own tender flesh and shudder.

She cups the heels of Little Sister’s feet in her hands and then shows me how she used to massage away the numbness, to get their blood flowing, when they were alone and unbound. I exclaim that those legs, although small and delicate, must have become increasingly difficult to bind as the twins grew. She nods and tells me that, even with the binding, her parents thought it best to keep the twins at home as much as possible. Her parents believed that Little Sister’s increasingly misbehaving limbs and Big Sister’s unseemly, off balance gate would give people a fright. Still, even in seclusion, Big Sister’s parents insisted she wrap her sister up tight every morning. She takes the edge of her dry, papery bed sheet and rips it, to show me how, one day, she tore her bindings into thin ribbons and vowed never to subject her sister to them again. The sound of fabric rending gives me a start. Only imagine how my parents felt, she says mischievously when she sees me flinch. I decide her parents must have felt safely anonymous for most of their lives. But I am sick of imagining how people like her parents feel. I ask her if she is angry with them. No, she says defiantly. She pities them for their lack of vision.

I’m kept on an increasingly rigid schedule while, under the supervision of my medical team, my growth rapidly metastasizes. It moves down my back and swallows up my butt completely and it begins to creep over my shoulder. My doctors never flag in their conviction that they can help me. I don’t refuse them, but I avoid their guiding touches as they attempt to lead me out of my room and through the hospital. A doctor reaches for my arm; I take a step back.

Another member of my team moves in front of me; I turn my head and pirouette past him. We continue this clumsy dance down the hall, into the elevator. I feel a bit guilty, but I can't stop myself from standing in front of the sliding door panels, trapping them behind me until we have descended into the bowels of the hospital. I long for the cool, white tube that spins out a CAT scan. I know they would love to get a better peek at my insides and the roaring hum spinning around me would drown out their questions and hide me from their gaze. But I don't fit. A feeling of delight unexpectedly surges in me as I watch them squabble over a solution until they finally give up. Instead, they decide to gather around me for a photo op. My doctors, grown men in white lab coats, jockey for the position closest to my growth like children in school tussling to be at the head of the lunch line. I stand still with a frozen smile on my face. A nurse takes several pictures before I realize she has cut my face out of each frame. I make my way back to my room alone.

When I return, the twins are waiting to introduce me to the giant who has moved into the room next to ours. He is magnificent even though he is always bumping into things. And, he tells us, that his joints forever ache. His ligaments and tendons can't keep up with his rapidly growing bones. They are stretched to their limits. The ever-growing bone that has given him great height has also thickened his face, causing his entire head to ache sometimes too. But, it gives him a chiseled look with a jutting chin, sharp cheekbones and a bulging forehead. The nurses soon reprimand us for laughing too loud late into the night and shoo the twins and I back into our own room.

In the daytime I let my team of doctors perform their tests on my body but I am becoming increasingly unimpressed with the results. In the evenings, the twins and I sneak into the giant's room after lights out because it is most difficult for him to get around. We gossip about the doctors and nurses, watch tv, or play cards. When we are bored, the giant stands up straight, as tall as he can, and reaches his hands up to show us how he can touch the ceiling. My roommate lifts up her hospital gown and shows us how the miniature legs and feet sprouting from just above her groin twitch and wiggle, and the little bead-like toes curl up tight like a snail retreating into its shell. I turn around and show them the Himalayan mountain range that moves from my neck, all the way to the top of my thighs.

Sometimes the giant regales the twins and me with stories of his life on his uncle's avocado and citrus farm. His face softens and turns pensive when he reminisces about the years before the landscape of his body limited his mobility. He tells us how much he loved to stand in the middle of the rows of fragrant, blossoming trees and stretch out his arms. He says the palms of his hands brushed across the glossy leaves on either side of him and he felt like one of them—deeply rooted, growing high into the hot dusty farm air. During the harvest, he brags, he could collect more avocados with his knobby, bare feet in the earth and his hands among the branches than any one of the migrant farm workers held up over the trees in fruit pickers. And, he won so many of the friendly fruit picking competitions, the other laborers eventually tired of challenging him. He says he loved the competition even though his entire body would scream in pain for weeks after his exertion in the grove. I ask him if he ever felt like a spectacle. He thinks about my question for some time before he explains that he always wanted others to take note of his special talents. I am skeptical. He eventually admits that he hated how many of the other farmers and laborers came just to watch him move, to stand close to him, invading

him with their greedy stares. He tells me that his uncle placed bets on his ability to win and invited people to watch him work, even when it wasn't harvest season. He says he was in the grove one morning, his joints aching and his eyes wandering over all the people there to see him, sweaty bills in their fists, when he finally thought to leave the farm to explore special talents that might lay dormant inside him. I am humbled by his defiance. I think about the twins, hidden away in their bedroom all those years while their parents worried they would be seen. I recognize the same defiance in Big Sister when I think about how she tore up her bindings. I compare myself to my new friends. I measure their defiance against my need to be fixed and I feel like I am losing my faith. I am once again light and blue like the sky, like soft worn sea glass, like a baby boy's cradle. This time without a candy coated pill.

My doctors want to operate. Of course they do. They are itching to slice into me with their cool, sharp instruments. I tell them I need time to think about my options, that I need to sleep on it. Several of the doctors look puzzled and one looks outright angry with me. First they cajole me with concern and eventually they bully me with their knowledge of anatomy and physiology. But then I remember they don't have much knowledge of me. I think of my new friends. I imagine the self-congratulatory stories my doctors will tell their young medical students in anatomy and physiology class. Maybe they will point out a picture in their textbooks, a team in white lab coats smiling into the camera. And, look, they will tell their students, there I am. Younger, thinner, but they will be there in the picture, recognizable. They will be standing shoulder to shoulder around an anomaly in an open hospital gown, her face cut out of the picture. But I will not be there, I think. And I smile to myself as I fall asleep, lulled by the sound of the giant's body creaking as he grows in the next room.

# cream ponies and wild rice psalms, death and the war of mice

*Lexlia Rocha*

So I fight the sun and isolate my head in black cloth  
But what if  
And I know there is a region where my body will stiffen and give up as well  
My shell has a face like a burn victim  
The skin opens and pulses  
Burping up blood and semen  
I suffocate on horses  
The white dust stretches its fingers over my legs  
My sighs become moans become grunts become light  
My black dress is moth eaten and sheer  
Inside it is oblivion  
Heaven drools and tremors  
I walk towards the womb with a limp  
I fought to die in fire  
To be submerged in the warmth of heat  
I fear being forgotten by the few who I love  
Burn me burn me and keep me on your lonesome shelves  
Dust me and inhale me when you eat  
Make up stories that overwhelm the truth  
I am filled with baby mice  
My face has become its own animal  
Sliding off onto my jaw  
Clinging to me due to its fear of the floor  
My death will sound trumpets  
The fireflies will retire  
Hummingbirds will wear their mourning veils  
The butterflies will dress in black  
My heart will swell and spread itself thinly over your heads  
It will rain sparrows down on your laps  
My hair will put you in a cosmic sleep  
The flowers and snakes will fall out from my scalp and entangle you  
You will sing my death until you die

# The Abscess of Florida

*Penelope Hart*

I bring him back like a dark spirit  
who has access to my troves.  
I let him sleep on my flagged floors,  
drink my blood from the source,  
caress my groaning illness,  
kiss my lips,  
let him creep, let him creep in,  
till his vapours, like tentacles  
have coloured all the corals, all the pearls  
a murky pond 'zilch'  
and, in the bye waters of the *palludes*  
evil hatches like river snakes  
and fills, and fills.



DON'T  
LEAVE.  
STAY  
FOREV-  
ER.

DON'T LEAVE. STAY FOREVER.  
COLLAGE AND PEN

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ALEX HILL

# THE DRUNK CAPTAIN

OLVARD SMITH

Captain America should've been an alcoholic. He should've been me. Not to say that I'm an alcoholic, but I'm another hopeless bastard prone to vice. Given to my own Navajo fantasies of the peace pipe, I pack the bowl and light up my friends, White Rhino and Purple Haze. They tell me things tonight; they tell me to quit being a loser and start being a hero.

"A complete insult! How dare they mock my lows... I know I have accomplishments!" I mutter an angry litany of "I'm not a loser, I have a GED," while striking the lighter and feeding the flame, burning them for their insolence.

I inhale strongly, hoping to incinerate my native buds, but I stop midway, catching a glimpse of something. Out of the chaotic room of unpaid bills, disposable BIC razors, and dirty laundry, a scattered rainbow of lamplight reflects among a table of disheveled shot glasses. This shouldn't be so captivating, but it is, and I fear it for a heat haze. I fear it will dissipate, and so I reach towards that shining glass to touch the only light of my life. I feel it, the hard glass and the unpleasant surprise of its sticky rum-plastered surface. My hand covers the spectacle, and with a burst of anger, I toss the glass aside, shattering it against the wall, returning the rainbow, and with it, an epiphany.

"It's Halloween!"

I flop to my knees and impatiently dig through the clothes, glasses, shards, and pull up what it was I sought, a Captain America costume.

"Tonight, I am a hero... America's hero."

Captain America should've been chemically enhanced, not to say that he wasn't, but the neurological aspects of the Super Soldier experiment left something to be desired. He should've experienced life through my brilliant crossfade and walked among this ravaged world. I carry his spirit upon my scrawny being through the streets of this Halloween, donning the tights, the pillowed pecks, the plastic shield, and the dream, the dream that America will take care of me, and that I'll believe it with my heart and not my high.

And so I walk the streets with the Captain's spirit and a plastic black liquor store baggy. I see others, those pursuing a dream of their own, touting the spirits of their choosing. Grade-school princesses, adolescent ghouls, busy nurses, past presidents, and horror movie superstars litter the streets, pursuing the dream and receiving candy in return. As ridiculous as the premise is, I just want to be rewarded. I just want candy. I'm a goddamned hero. And so I join the spectacle and the cycle of walk, approach, knock, and candy. The foolproof formula for trick-or-treating—walk the block, approach the door, knock, and get candy. I do this, but each passing

time, I'm made to be a fool. A fool to think I can even approach a door without being berated by shocked mothers or aggressive fathers. Various men push, shove, and hostilely barrier me from the houses. I wonder what the problem is. I'm Captain America. I want candy! I want acknowledgment! I approach one house, determined to overcome the dirty looks and held noses, but if only children would hold their tongues. Some dumb suited kid with a wand had the nerve to complain.

"Daddy, he stinks!"

"Shut up, Harry Potter faggot."

And bam, the father hit me without a word. My jaw bruising into a purplish blob, and with my face reddening with anger, I hit him with America's shield. It's only plastic, though, America's shield, nothing but plastic, and my pecks are pillowed, this costume is only cotton, and this high is temporary, fleeting and soon to be gone. He's hitting my everything and there's no buffer for my pain, no security for my being, no evidence of being anything but a loser, no basis for my hope or the words that escape my mouth:

"Captain America once said... I'm loyal to nothing... But the dream."

"That's your problem. Leave my kid alone."

# Confessions

*Miguel Noh*

I found a reason  
to finally handcuff  
myself to bed every morning  
with sound and brevity,  
season cuffs,  
and mourning bands.

To finally feel  
cranberries between my teeth  
and satin between my toes  
abnormalities, abhorrities,  
and soft satan berries  
cranially screened below my nose.

I tie myself with phallic  
nouns and advertise  
haste for conversation  
wrist lined to posts  
with tenacity while nuns  
practice vice and castration.

I found reason  
with first power  
for every Friday to shower.

if Justin Bieber could save himself -- he'd  
save us all

*David Morck*

baby...baby...baby oooh  
oh biebs, you're gonna save us all

biebs is a special fitted gun lock.  
no more  
my baby, why, my baby.  
more eight-point buck deer  
tied to our truck hoods.

j b—vinted into chilled pewter mugs,  
no more charcoal distilled vodka for us,  
he'll run through us like a glacial terminus,  
cleansing, scraping away the plaque  
of arteries, liver, teeth,  
no need to fear disease.

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jay bibbles, if you could save us, save us all.  
no half measures, biebs, drone us a shaman  
Bossa Nova Clavè on your synthetic, taut,  
finely tuned drums. placate us orphans  
with feral beats—gentle, steady pressure  
pulsing like the earth, and quartz, soothing  
as the womb's metronome.

Justin Bieber wraps his arms around the starving.  
those who don't have 75 cents for Doritos.  
during the throes of distended stomachs,  
there is an urgency to seek escape  
and nourishment, without the capacity to do so.  
B's hair reflects arrays  
of palettes too complex to render,  
and if terminal moments  
are spent with him,  
you sail away on golden parasols.

biebs, in my desires resides a manifesto to find  
my reason to celebrate you. we believe in the biebs,  
who will carry away the arthritis that steals our design,  
quell the ineffable thirsts we contrive.

he tells me i'm at least adequate if not suave while i face the mirror  
he rocks me to sleep when regret and regret shake me.  
the b, lets me spoil myself once in a while

j is the mountain that keeps away the wind,  
the lucid dream where i tell my monsters  
of their own ridiculousness.  
j is the soil that makes the clay  
that makes the mortar that holds together all,  
j is the vessel to pour all our efforts, hopes, dreams,  
world-weariness, gender and pet species bias, and anger into.

since i was young  
all i wanted was  
a panacea.



UNTITLED  
FILM

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JENNIFER D. CHANG

# SUBJECT A

JON BEADLE

*There is no reason why I should pay particular attention to any of these people. No matter whom they are or what they do, they are all ultimately irrelevant. Take Subject A, for example. There is nothing special about him or his story, and yet, I find myself inexplicably drawn to it. I am compelled to, once again, open the bottom drawer of my desk and pull out that familiar folder at the very front. The file is worn from excessive handling and the nametag is peeling away, though it is forever etched into my mind. Inside the file, the pages are as perfectly crisp and brilliantly white as the first time I saw them. I already know what is written on them, but I can no longer tell whether I am remembering the events as they happened or merely the words of a story I have read too many times. It makes little difference now anyway. I spread the pages out across my desk and begin to read.*

## Subject A

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Subject A is not a happy man. He worries about a lot of things and one of those things is money. How, he wonders, will I pay rent this month? Subject A lives in an apartment, though not an especially fancy or expensive one. He could easily pay the rent if he had a job, but Subject A has been unemployed for the last four months and his savings are running low. Subject A checks his bank balance every day, though he knows it will only depress him. A new bill arrives every day. At first, Subject A did not want to open the bills and kept them in a pile on the kitchen counter. He then started to worry about being charged late fees because he missed a due date. Subject A now opens all his bills as soon as they arrive.

In his bedroom closet, Subject A keeps his collection of suits. He calls it a collection, but there are only five of them and none are particularly noteworthy. Subject A is fond of his suits, although he has not been able to buy any recently because they are an unnecessary expense. Late at night, when he cannot sleep, Subject A worries that perhaps he should have saved his money and not bought the suits he has now.

Today, Subject A will be wearing one of his suits to a job interview. It is the third interview he has managed to get since he lost his previous job. Subject A thought he made a favorable impression during his previous interviews, but he never heard from the interviewers afterward and so he assumes he must have done something wrong. Now, he is nervous because he needs this job. More accurately, he needs the money from this job. The position he is interviewing for is nothing special, just the usual sit at a desk and stare at a computer screen sort of thing, and, if he does get the job, Subject A will worry that he is not living up to his potential. But, at the moment, Subject A is only concerned with getting the job. He considers which suit will

make the best impression on the interviewers and selects a navy suit with two buttons on the jacket, as it looks smart without being as overly formal as his black one.

### **Subject A's Morning Routine**

Subject A's father once warned him about the perils of not taking proper care of himself. The fear of degenerating into a disgusting slob has haunted Subject A ever since and so he maintains a fixed schedule despite being unemployed. He gets up at seven, eight on weekends, and immediately proceeds into the bathroom where he shaves and showers. Afterward, Subject A eats breakfast, which always consists of a bowl of sugarless cereal, two slices of toast, a glass of orange juice, and a multivitamin. He then returns to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Following that, Subject A selects the clothes he will wear for the day. Though he does like his suits, they are not suitable attire when one is simply sitting at home or going out to the grocery store to buy day-old bread. Subject A usually wears a simple T-shirt and jeans, with a black sweater if it's chilly.

Once these preliminary steps have been completed, Subject A's day can truly begin. His usual routine consists of checking the newspaper classified ads for jobs, checking career websites for jobs, and checking with temp agencies for available jobs. This process usually takes from one to two hours. Subject A must then decide how to spend the rest of the day. Sometimes he stays at home and worries that he is wasting his life. Other times, he goes out and worries about spending money when he should be saving it. Last week when he was out, Subject A suffered a pang of guilt after deciding to have a large-sized sandwich instead of the regular-sized one. To make up for spending that extra two dollars, Subject A walked home instead of taking the bus. On occasions when he goes out with friends, Subject A always worries they will want to do something expensive and he will be caught between spending money he does not want to spend or admitting his poverty to them. His friends are, thankfully, fairly conservative with their money, which has caused Subject A to wonder if perhaps they are in the same situation as him. If so, he thinks, they could all get an apartment together as roommates in order to cut down on the rent. Subject A does not mention this to his friends as he would feel awkward bringing it up.

### **Subject A's Method of Transportation**

Subject A owns a car, a black one, but he does not drive much nowadays. This is partly because he is worried about the cost of gas and partly because he is worried about accidents, but also because Subject A actually enjoys walking when he can. Few things are as pleasant to Subject A as going for a stroll on a warm summer's day. Lately, however, the pleasure of his walks has been diminished as the deserted daytime streets simply remind him that everyone but him has a job to go to. Despite this, he continues to go out. Often, he goes walking without a destination in mind and simply travels in a circle, arriving back at his apartment.

Today, Subject A has a specific destination. He is going to an office building downtown for a job interview. It is too far to walk and showing up on foot might send the wrong impression, so Subject A will be driving to the interview. In preparation for his journey, Subject A goes online and looks up the route he will need to take. He then prints out an extensive series of maps which show every step of the journey. Although he rarely needs to refer to them, Subject A prints maps every time he goes somewhere new in case he gets lost.

### **Subject A's Neighbor**

As Subject A leaves his apartment building on his way to the interview, he encounters his neighbor. Subject A's neighbor lives in an apartment two doors down from Subject A and they are acquaintances, although their interaction has not extended beyond small talk while passing each other in the hallway. Subject A's neighbor is considered to be a very attractive young woman, or at least Subject A believes she is and has subsequently decided that his opinion is shared by the world at large. He is always aware of the danger of one of his imagined rivals making a move on her before he can. Despite this fear, Subject A tells himself finding a job should be his top priority and so he restricts his interactions with her to no more than the occasional superfluous comment.

On this encounter, his neighbor is carrying two white plastic bags. Subject A suspects they are filled with food, though the only item he can accurately identify through the semi-transparent bag is a packet of coffee beans. He wonders if she is one of those people who need a cup of coffee to start each day. The image of a disheveled mass, waking every morning and lurching zombie-like towards the coffee maker in the corner of the kitchen, springs to his mind. Such a state of existence seems awful to Subject A, who views any kind of addiction as inexplicably terrifying.

As they approach each other, Subject A notices that his neighbor is having some difficulty carrying all of her bags as they seem to be quite heavy. He considers offering to help carry them for her, but rejects that thought as it may be too forward of him. He does not want to give the wrong impression after all. Instead, he holds the front door of the apartment building open for her, a gesture which he decides is appropriately friendly for two neighbors. She thanks him and compliments his suit. Subject A tells her that he is on his way to a job interview and she wishes him good luck.

### **Subject A Arrives for the Interview**

Subject A gets into his car, after removing his suit jacket and laying it out on the back seat so it doesn't get wrinkled, and looks over the maps he printed out to make sure he knows the route. He then places the maps on the passenger seat so he can easily refer to them if necessary. Subject A has made sure to allow more than adequate time to get to the interview. Nevertheless, he still taps his fingers on the steering wheel in anxious irritation every time he has to stop at a red light. He relaxes slightly once he reaches the freeway and cruises along at a safe sixty-five miles per hour, keeping to the right-hand lane so he does not miss his exit. His encounter with his neighbor has left Subject A feeling slightly cheerful and in the mood for some music. He turns on the radio and listens for a minute to a gubernatorial campaign advertisement, wherein the candidate promises to solve all of Subject A's problems if she is elected. Unsure of whether the candidate is lying or not, Subject A switches off the radio and completes the remainder of his journey in silence.

The traffic is unexpectedly light and Subject A arrives thirty minutes earlier than he had anticipated. Having planned for the possibility of getting lost or being forced to take a detour or the car breaking down, Subject A is surprised that none of these problems materialized. He ponders over whether he should take this as a sign of good fortune and his momentary

distraction causes him to drive past his destination. He circles around the block. The office building has its own parking structure, which seems to be the most convenient place for Subject A to leave his car. Upon entering, he is dismayed that there is a charge of fifty cents per minute for parking, up to a daily maximum of thirty-five dollars. This seems inordinately high, especially as his experience suggests the interview is unlikely to be a short affair. There is nothing Subject A can do about it now, other than hope that the interviewer will validate his parking. He takes a ticket, waits for the barrier to rise, and parks his car in the darkest corner of the garage where he is least likely to be noticed.

As he has a few minutes to kill before the interview is scheduled, Subject A decides to read a book in the privacy of his car. Arriving early is not unusual for him, and so he always makes sure to have something on hand to pass the time. Currently, he is reading an old favorite of his entitled *Strange Journeys*. This is the third time he has read the book, though some years have passed since his last reading and, as such, he cannot recall anything of the plot other than the fact that he enjoyed it. The book is still as interesting as it ever was, but on this occasion Subject A is too nervous to properly focus, and he keeps reading the same paragraph over and over again. With fifteen minutes to go before the interview, Subject A abandons his futile attempt at reading and exits his car. He retrieves his jacket from the back seat, running a small lint roller over it before putting it on, and makes his way to the elevator at the far side of the parking structure.

Subject A plans to take the elevator all the way up to the eighth floor, but is slowed down when a man of nondescript appearance gets on at the second floor. The man presses the button to take him to the third floor. Subject A wonders why the man does not just use the stairs. He contemplates saying something, but instead just directs an annoyed look at the man, who does not notice and exits on the third floor. The remainder of Subject A's elevator ride is uneventful.

At the eighth floor, Subject A steps off the elevator and navigates his way through the corridors to suite 860. The interior of the office building is overwhelmingly brown, one of the few colors considered serious enough for business. Pausing outside the door of suite 860, Subject A checks the time on his cell phone and sees he still has ten minutes before the interview. He sets his phone to silent, so he does not have to worry about it interrupting the interview, and decides to use the restroom.

The restroom is located at the opposite end of the hallway and, at first, Subject A fears it might be locked as the handle does not move, but the door opens easily with a push. Subject A is relieved to find he has the restroom to himself. He had dreaded the awkward possibility of running into his interviewer in the restroom prior to the actual interview. Subject A decides to use one of the stalls and is soon thankful he did, as another man enters the restroom. Since Subject A has no knowledge of who his interviewer will be, he decides to play it safe and hide in the stall until the man is gone. Once he is certain that he is again alone, Subject A exits the stall. He washes his hands thoroughly, using a liberal amount of gelatinous pink soap from the dispenser, and then walks back towards suite 860.

### **Subject A Fills Out a Form**

Subject A enters suite 860 and is immediately greeted with a smile by the receptionist, a young blonde woman who bears a passing resemblance to his neighbor. For a moment he

wonders if somehow she is his neighbor, transported here ahead of him through some unknown means, but that seems improbable. The smiling receptionist hands him a form and directs him to a chair. After sitting down, Subject A realizes he does not have a pen and has to ask the receptionist for one. The pen he is given has blue ink. Subject A prefers to write in black ink, a habit he picked up in his college years, but it is not something worth making a big fuss about.

The form is apparently mostly for identification as it asks for Subject A's name, address, and other such trivia. Subject A considers this to be slightly odd, as most of this information was on the resume he sent to the company. Still, he does not want to damage his chances of getting the job, and so he dutifully completes the form without complaining. While filling out his address on the line provided, he runs out of space and has to clumsily squash in the last few letters of his street name. The result is an ugly mess and he thinks about asking for a new form, but, as he does not want to be perceived as difficult, he tells himself to ignore it and continue.

Of the thirty questions on the form, there are two on which Subject A hesitates. One of these, number seven, asks for what he was paid at his previous job, and Subject A leaves this question blank as he worries it might limit his potential salary. The other question that troubles Subject A is number sixteen, which asks for emergency contact information. Subject A is not sure how this is relevant to the position he is interviewing for, but, in an unusually impulsive move, fills it in using his neighbor's name and address. Aware of his previous mistake with his own address, he takes care to make sure this time the information fits exactly into the available space.

With the exception of question seven, the form is now complete. Subject A returns it to the receptionist, along with the blue ink pen. The receptionist smiles again, although Subject A is not sure she ever stopped. She disappears into the back of the office to deliver the form to the interviewer after informing Subject A that they will be ready for him in about ten minutes. Subject A sits back down in a chair. There is a small table in front of him on which several magazines have been laid out.

### Subject A Reads a Magazine

Subject A has no interest in any of the magazines, all of which are two months old and, regardless of their actual topic, universally feature middle-aged men in suits posing on the covers. Silently, Subject A berates himself for not bringing *Strange Journeys* up with him from the car. A second later he recants, deciding that it is better to not have the book instead of running the risk of it being seen and influencing the interviewer's opinion of him. It is not a well known book and so he would no doubt be asked to explain the plot to justify why he is reading it. Given his current inability to recall the plot, Subject A thinks it best to avoid such a situation.

There is a water cooler in the reception area. Subject A's throat suddenly seems very dry and he cannot resist taking a small white paper cup to fill with water, which he then gulps down. He crushes the empty paper cup in his hand before realizing he is still thirsty and has to get another one. With his sudden thirst quenched, Subject A resumes waiting. His right leg begins to jerk up and down until he exerts a conscious effort to force it to stop. He hums a tune drawn from somewhere within his subconscious mind and then ceases abruptly, worrying he might be overheard. Glancing around, Subject A spots a travel magazine amidst the other periodicals, identifiable by the cover showing a man in a suit posing in a rainforest, and he feels compelled to pick it up. Subject A thinks that he would like to travel the world at some unspecified point

in his future, although he has given little thought to where he would go or what he would do there. He flips through the magazine with no particular interest in any of the articles. One advertisement causes him to chuckle quietly. On page fifty-four, there is a picture that captures his attention: a single sunlit palm tree swaying in the wind against a clear blue sky. It is not a particularly significant image and could even be called cliché, however, at this moment, Subject A considers the tree in the picture to represent everything that is beautiful.

### **Subject A Encounters a Door**

Subject A is startled out of his contemplation of the picture by the realization that more than ten minutes have passed. Checking the clock on his cell phone reveals that, in fact, fifteen minutes have passed since the receptionist left. Subject A curses himself silently, worrying that his distraction will cost him the job. Looking around reveals no sign of the receptionist, nor, for that matter, anyone else. Subject A wonders if he was supposed to follow the receptionist into the back of the office, but he cannot recall her exact words to him. He decides to go look for someone.

As he makes his way into the back of the office, Subject A is struck by the fact that every desk is devoid of a human presence, though they remain littered with paperclips and notepads, as if everyone except for him abruptly vanished. On one desk, he notices a yellow note stuck to a computer screen, but the writing on it is an illegible scrawl. The office appears to be laid out in a circular fashion, Subject A notes, with a large conference room at the center. As the rest of the office is utterly empty, Subject A concludes that everyone must be in the conference room. He wonders if he should enter, hesitant to interrupt what might be an important meeting, but also concerned that perhaps everyone is in there waiting for him so they can start the interview.

The conference room is enclosed by glass walls, all of which are blocked by closed blinds which prevent Subject A from seeing in. He presses his face to the glass and experiences a moment of shock at seeing an eye staring back at him, before realizing it is his own reflection. There is a single door to the conference room, which Subject A now approaches. His worry over missing the interview combined with his curiosity is enough to cause him to decide to open the door. There is, however, a problem. Subject A finds that the door has no handle and does not budge when he pushes on it. Even when exerting his full strength on the door, he cannot move it an inch. There are some buttons on a panel next to the door, one of which is labeled with the word "open." Subject A presses the button, but nothing happens. He then tries pressing all of the different buttons in turn, which similarly fails to yield a reaction. He is therefore forced to conclude that there is no way to open the door.

There are several options for Subject A at this point. To delay the moment when he must make a decision, Subject A takes another look around the office in a hopeless attempt to find someone to help him. He does not find anyone. The office is still deserted and the receptionist still has not yet returned. Subject A's thoughts turn to his neighbor, who he now remembers is his emergency contact. Unfortunately, while this is clearly an emergency, he does not know her phone number and so is unable to contact her. Calling anyone else would be pointless, he reasons, as there is no way they could understand his situation and he would merely be opening himself up to ridicule.

At this point, Subject A decides he might as well try knocking on the door. He knocks twice.

simultaneously afraid of interrupting someone and that there is no one to interrupt. He waits thirty seconds in silence for a reply that never comes. By now, he is convinced of the pointlessness of his efforts, but he knocks again anyway as a final formality. There is, as expected, no response.

Defeated, Subject A turns to leave, but something changes within him at this moment. All of the frustrations and failures that he has been carrying with him rise up at once and explode in a fit of anger. He begins to knock on the door again, but this time he does not stop. Everything that is wrong in his life, all of his problems, they are all, he now realizes, the fault of this door that will not open. It is the door's fault that he lies awake at night worrying about money, that he is never able to have a proper conversation with his neighbor, that he is here, alone in an abandoned office, banging on a door to get a job he does not want. He slams his fist against the door, not trying to open it anymore, but to destroy it, to break it into a thousand pieces. He slams his fist against the door and it swings open with a click.

### **Subject A is Interviewed**

There is no one inside the conference room, except for Subject A himself. His rage cools quickly and is soon swept from his mind, with only the redness of his hand where it struck the door to prove it even happened. This is what he came for, his goal, but it feels anti-climactic. The room is mostly bare, apart from a small metal table with a chair on either side in the center of the room. A single light bulb hangs over the table, providing the only source of light in the room. The blinds over the windows to the outer office give the impression of solid walls and Subject A is compelled to close the door behind him to maintain the illusion. Looking around, he is briefly struck by the thought that the room is set up for an interrogation, but the idea is uncomfortable and he dismisses it. Not knowing what else to do, Subject A approaches the table and sits down in the chair closest to the door. He now notices that the table is not bare and there are two distinct objects present. The first of these is a black pen. The second is the form that Subject A filled out on his arrival at the office, though it takes him a minute to recognize it as the form has been placed so that it must be read from the other side of the table.

The position of the form is reassuring to Subject A; it indicates the expected arrival of the interviewer. Subject A sits in silence, waiting, but the relief provided by the presence of the form is short-lived. At last he is forced to admit to himself what he has suspected for a while now. No one is coming. He is alone here in this room, a room which exists for one purpose only, just as he has only one purpose for being here. He gets up from his chair, moves around the table and takes a seat on the opposite side. Clearly, he will have to interview himself.

Subject A has no issues with the first few questions on the form; he is familiar enough with his own background. He notices the awkward error on the address line, but does not hold it against himself. He makes some lighthearted conversation and asks himself where he sees himself in five years. Subject A recalls the palm tree and talks of traveling and seeing the world. It is an honest and unrehearsed answer, though he has to admit that it is not relevant to the position he is interviewing for. Subject A makes a few notes on the form using the black pen.

Question seven and the issue of his salary prove to be difficult to resolve. Subject A does not want to come across as evasive, but he knows he must be careful not to undervalue himself. Of course, if he asks for too much, he will, for the company's sake, have to reject himself. Beyond

that, there are other questions regarding past employment, useful skills, and his references. The receptionist reappears with a cup of coffee. She sets it down and wishes him good luck before leaving. The discussion goes back and forth for a while; various notes are made on the form and then crossed out, until, finally, there is only one question left to ask: will he get the job?

Subject A thinks long and hard about this question. He reads over his notes. It's true that he needs the money, but personal concerns cannot affect his decision. By the time he reaches his answer, night has long since fallen. The receptionist has locked up and gone home, leaving Subject A alone in the office. He gathers his notes and closes the conference room door behind him. On his way out, he stops by the reception area, where he picks up the travel magazine and tears out the picture of the palm tree. He folds the picture in half twice and places it in the inside pocket of his suit jacket. Before leaving, Subject A decides he is justified in validating his own parking.

### Subject A's Decision

Subject A arrives back at his apartment building. He drove back but does not remember doing so. He stops by the mailboxes at the front desk and picks up the single letter that is waiting for him, making a note that it is another bill, before slipping it into his pocket next to the folded picture. Subject A walks down the hall towards his apartment, but finds himself pausing in front of his neighbor's door. Although he passes this door every day, it feels like he is noticing it for the first time. He knocks and she opens immediately. Hi, she says, leaning against the doorframe with a cup of coffee in her hand, and asks him if he got the job. Subject A smiles without knowing why.

"Yes," he says.

*I place the papers back in the file, close it, and slip it back into the desk's bottom drawer. While I was engrossed in reading, a cup of coffee has appeared on my desk without my noticing. It has long since gone cold, and I have never enjoyed the bitter taste anyway, but I drink it just to have something to do, just so that I can delay the inevitable for a few moments more. I take a look around my office, hoping for something to catch my eye, but, as always, there is nothing there. Maybe I should get some decorations, a plant for the desk or a clock for the wall, anything to break up this nothingness. Something, anything, that would distract me from that file at the very front of the bottom drawer of my desk. I do not know why I should pay even the slightest bit of attention to it. I should just forget about it, leave it here and go home. Instead, once again, I find myself opening the bottom drawer and removing the folder entitled "Subject A."*



OBLIVION  
FILM

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MAAGEN COLLINS

# GWB

*Ashley Erikson*

*Dedicated to the lost, but never forgotten, Tyler Clementi*

The Hudson crashes into my legs,  
in the rush hour, in the overnight hours.  
Sunshine breaks open the dawn sky,  
but the heat doesn't heal the frost-wounded violets  
nor does it spare the clock-faced passion flower  
or the golden chrysanthemum.  
I stretch bi-state, one hand holding  
the borough, the other clutching Fort Lee.  
Standing this way for so long, wide armed,  
has taken a toll on my posture.  
He would be disappointed,  
the man whose name I take as my own.  
The one who deterred the British,  
and I the one who can't even deter the falling.  
A boy walking along the free foot traffic  
tightens his white knuckles onto my side.  
His tears taste like the spraying mist  
of the river below when they fall  
on my face, and I know this one is different.  
Fourteen lanes grumble in my belly,  
but I push that all aside to be with him.  
He's unsure, undecided. Hesitation in  
his steps tells me this isn't supposed to be.  
It's sudden, spontaneous, a solution  
to something that can be simply solved.  
I push against the soles of his shoes  
to let him know I am here, listening.  
He was not holding onto me, but his shadow was.

"Are you with me on this one?"

The music in his voice is a bow dancing  
sweetly across a four-stringed instrument.

I carry the weight of his pain on my back

so it won't follow him to the bottom.

It's the least I can do. My arms don't reach.

He's flying now, his body secretly

kissing the Manhattan skyline.

Do I blame our country? *Another Country?*

James Baldwin? Or Rufus Scott?

Would it happen if it never said it happened?

*Somewhere the sky is falling*

*Somewhere else it gets back up.*

# Sidewalks

*Arthur Kayzakian*

The sidewalk sleeps beneath an empty  
bench. Light posts lick the street.

We wait for her, like the shadow  
waits for me. Endlessly, stretching

underneath her walk. Some things  
are meant to fall like tall husbands

weeping on her leather wings. Broken  
down with hungry hands within the walls

of long hallways. Her eyes seasoned  
with perception and arms cradling

102 an eager world thirsty for her embrace.  
Bended, we edge slowly to her warmth.

She confides in the vulnerable  
like toothpaste wasted on a yellow

molar. Nestled in her electric crevice—  
the city crawls inside her when she sleeps.

# EARTH FELT THE MOON IN THE SEA

KIRK SEVER

They woke in the sterile motel at the end of a buzzed, dream-plagued night. Ashley rose first, skipped to the bathroom for a splash of water and a Tylenol, then made a visit to her secret, suitcase vodka. She wondered if Todd heard the bottle open, the pop of the cyst, the glimmer of light in her head.

This motel was their half-way point, half-way to a destination, to Baja Mexico, a Baja Mexico of Todd's ridiculous nightmares and Ashley's juvenile daydreams. This motel, this chalk-scrap marker on destiny's map, served as a break from the thundering arguments that seemed to accompany every moment of the previous day's voyage in the generic rent-a-car, the sedan Todd appreciated and Ashley vocally scorned: "Okay it's big! It's bigger than..."

Todd finally woke up when he felt Ashley sit on the motel's springy bed. They could smell each other. Smelling was better than remembering yesterday. Ashley sniffed chlorine or body odor on Todd's bearish frame.

"You're up? Already?" Todd said. He inhaled the coffee on her breath, and perhaps some liquor from the night before.

They stayed in bed a moment. Ashley brushed her bourbon-colored hair as she spoke in a quick, caffeinated ramble, "So next time you say I'm always the one sleeping in and you're always the one up first you can remember this morning."

"Okay."

Ashley pointed her tortoise-shell brush at Todd's face, "And *you* said we needed to get an early start."

They *did* need to get an early start or they'd never make the cruise ship's departure time. They needed a brisk hustle, not like yesterday when Ashley had taken forever to get ready, at least so it seemed to Todd, who *had* to leave by nine in the morning. *His* fucking schedule. *Her* vain impulse to squander their travel time in front of a mirror. *His* back and forth sissy pacing; looking at his watch; his bullshit; his passive-aggressive—the way he tries to hide his pissy hate. *Her* accusations, stupidities, a waste of their time.

Later, yesterday, after the late start, they engaged in a spit-blasting, scream-crashing masterpiece. The violence began in the car; it ended with them pinching and slapping on the roadside ivy that overlooked a gorgeous cliff-side view of sailboats, clouds, and gulls about a half hour south of Encinitas, "Bigger than your cock!"

Kids pointed at them from their parents' vans and cars. "Look mom, look dad, people fighting!" "It's okay, the police are probably on the way."

So this morning, Todd was surprised Ashley got up so early. She did so because her hangover

was much more focused than his, but Todd wasn't aware of such things. Ashley had already filled her passenger seat water bottle with vodka, and now, yes, she was up first.

Up first. *Secret breakfast vodka! Surprise for Todd!*

"Yeah, let's get up," said Todd.

"I am up!" squealed Ashley.

Todd scratched an itch on his stubbled cheek. *It's a new day*, he thought. That was his mantra, "New day," the thing that *needed* to be said in his mind to start the day. "New Day!" That, or "Here we go," or "Alright," or "Okay." Todd stood, pulled off his underwear and tee-shirt, and tried to suck in his stomach. "You already take a shower?"

Considering her hyperactivity, Todd felt disconcerted when Ashley didn't answer. Rather, she skipped away from the bed and flipped on the television.

Ashley buried the surprise. She wasn't good at hiding things in her thoughts, and she knew it, so she was trying to focus on the television. A man talked on the television. News.

"Already took a shower, right?" Todd asked, pulling some congealed crud out of his stomach hair.

*Maybe she used the last towel*, Todd thought. Might as well move forwards, onwards with his life, with his New Day. He walked across the motel's scrubby carpet. Maybe it was because he was still sleepy, or maybe it had something to do with the remnant vapors of tequila ravaging the back of his skull, but Todd experienced a faint tinge of worry when he noticed Ashley follow him towards the bathroom.

The sole of his foot smacked the cold linoleum and he flicked on the lights.

Ashley saw the light and felt joy and she chortled, "Surprise!"

He lurched—*Surprise? Shit*, he thought, turned, got ready to fend off some kind of mysterious and unknown hostility, said, "Hey!" and started coughing all at once.

They stood there for a moment, neither having any idea what the other was thinking. Like two animals of vastly different species they studied each other, as aliens, as foreigners in a border stand-off.

"See?" Ashley said. She wanted her joy to spread to Todd's bloodshot eyes. She wanted him to feel the epiphany of her gift—but his look; *did he smell the vodka on her breath? It's freshness?* She grabbed his pudgy shoulders and turned Todd to face the shower. *Didn't he see it?*

The shower was a silent witness. It gaped at Todd. His back faced Ashley, and her back faced the open doorway, and the open doorway led to the vacuous motel chamber.

What was he supposed to see? He had a fleeting thought that he might be in a dream. Then, the abstract possibility that this was a prank, *or a...* and Todd thought that maybe Ashley would suddenly produce a gun or a knife and all he'd ever feel before his death would be a piercing, hot pain in his spine. He stared blankly into the shower, wondering what she'd found out about his private life. Was it the time he and Pranda from financing were texting back and forth their favorite movies for a month? *There's no way she could know—sucks at computers.* That Pranda-thing had left him lurching with guilt for months even though *nothing had happened.* *Jesus—should I admit it before she finds out?* Then, something in the bathroom caught Todd's eye, something that made his panic subside; a cd jewel case leaned against the wall of the shower, wrapped in a red bow.

"A CD?"

“Surprise!”

“Okay, wow, I think I almost had an anxiety attack. Geez, you know I’m not good with surprises.”

Ashley laughed, “I know, that’s why I did it.”

Todd took his hand off his shriveled genitals and picked up the double cd: “*Naked Lunch*, as read by William Shatner. Thanks. For me?”

Her face swelled with a flood of prickly ecstasy. *This deep breath I take keeps the tears inside.* “Yeah, dummy. You know, I know you like that book, because I always see it by your bed.”

“Wow, yeah, you’re right.” He’d never been able to get past the first five pages, but the internet had said it was great. “Thank you, that’s really sweet.”

Todd stepped into the shower.

As he waited for Ashley to emerge from the motel, Todd cleaned out their rental car. He devoted most of his attention to the passenger-side floormat, where Ashley sat. Cringing, he picked up bits of sticky trash with his right hand, then placed them in an increasingly greasy brown, paper bag. He tried not to be repulsed at the assortment of litter scattered around the passenger seat, but Todd couldn’t hold back groans and he kept muttering things like, “c’mon,” “jesus,” “why?,” “are you kidding?,” “jesus, Ashley,” and more; there were straw-papers, potato chip crumbs, and the lipstick-`smear, warm, plastic water bottle that Ashley had let roll back and forth on the ground as they drove. There was even an old postcard sticking out from under the seat. *Whatever that is*, he thought.

Ignoring the postcard, the unsettling grease odor, and the bits of toenails that were now hooked permanently into the floormat’s fabric, Todd grabbed the water bottle. She’d filled it back up last night or this morning. And though Todd believed in reusing plastic bottles and shopping bags, the bottle was just too warm and soiled for his obsessive sensibilities. Should he admire Ashley for keeping the bottle (she seemed almost attached to it)? *No, it’s fucking disgusting.*

Todd took the bottle and brown bag of scraps and pickings and strode towards the motel lobby. He flung the trash into a waste bin, then he pushed his way into the air-conditioned lobby.

At the concierge desk, Todd made a wonderful discovery: a bottle of sanitizer. Todd put three squeezes of the pungent, alcoholic guck on his palm, then addressed the concierge, “I just put the keys right here?”

The expressionless young man behind the counter—Todd guessed he was probably the motel owner’s nephew and possibly something like a part-time accounting student—nodded.

“You’re welcome,” said Todd.

After dropping the keys on the counter, Todd saw Ashley through the tinted windows of the lobby. “Hey, can I buy a bottle of water?”

They had been driving through a sheer, fantastic desert of sand and scrub for not more than twenty minutes. Neither of them really listened to William Shatner’s voice as it pontificated from the car speakers, “Ever pop coke in the mainline? It hits you right in the brain, activating connections of pure pleasure.”

Ever since cresting the first sand dune, Ashley had been struggling to push back her craving for the contents of the water bottle that keeled and pitched on the wonderfully clean floormat. Why didn't Todd stop at that last gas station, like she'd suggested? She decided to make her move: "It's a hot day out *there*."

"Yeah, well, my first car didn't have AC, so you can imagine what that would have been like."

"God, I'm thirsty," Ashley said, and she reached for the bottle.

For a moment, the couple's thoughts were united in tranquil bliss. This harmonious instant saw Ashley bathe in the single-minded glow of anticipation as she reached for her vodka.

And Todd; *For once*, he thought, *she seems relaxed*. With relief he realized it might actually be true—as his mom had often insisted—that you could always find the angel in someone; you just had to look at them the right way. But before Todd knew what was happening, the plastic bottle struck him in the head and cold water cascaded down his chest, "Fuck. What?"

Todd pulled over. The car's right two tires slushed to a halt in the sand. He turned off the engine, and the air conditioner came to a stop. Next to him, Ashley mumbled a venomous spew. The icy water began trickling over Todd's crotch, his testicles retracted.

They found themselves unified, harmoniously bound, once again. Together, they felt the numbing buzz of a violent rage. This was a gateway moment, a second chalk-scratch, a fork in the road that heaved with possibility. It was an instant where decisions actually mattered, where one might forever live in the shadow of a choice. In this glorious moment they realized: they couldn't punch out each other's teeth, smash a nose, or gouge an eye. They considered punching or scratching each others' thighs, but worried that every time they would wear a bathing suit on the upcoming cruise, they'd see the black and blue and be back here, in this moment. They resisted punching the sedan's dashboard, because they could injure themselves, or—more regrettably—damage the car, resulting in a monetary consequence. They would never, ever do any of these things to anyone or anything. Well, maybe Ashley...

Ashley stared through her sweltering, purple rage, trying to figure Todd's game. This is *not* how you get someone to stop drinking. *How did he know? Is he fucking with me? What a pussy.*

Todd's soul cowered between the intersection of, *she's going to punch me and how did I get here?* If he didn't do something immediately, he might start to cry. He opened the car door and stepped out. The air was much hotter than he'd expected, and he regretted leaving the vehicle.

Ashley said something that sounded like, "Eat a dick."

Todd slammed the car door. He turned towards the dunes and the heat suddenly felt good; it burned the salt from his brow and into his eyes, and the heat made his rage begin to blur, then transform. Todd stepped off the roadside and into the sand.

Deep down, Todd still felt sixteen years old. *Didn't everyone?* A conversation surfaced in his memory. "Todd, can I talk to you?"

His mom had something on her mind.

"Sure," Todd had said.

"Your dad is in town."

"Okay."

"I think he's sorry."

Todd's dad had been drunk a few months earlier, and had accused Todd of being a fag, which Todd didn't feel was true. Dad had then made Todd leave the house in his pajamas, which

consisted of underwear and a tee-shirt. Todd could still hear his brother crying in the background.

"Dad's sorry, Todd," his mother repeated.

"No, he's not."

"Todd," said his mom as she rose from the bedside and left, "you little shit."

He didn't realize that his mom had been crying until she'd already left his room.

He could always go back to that moment; something about the smell of his mom's tears, or maybe the smell of her as a woman. The smell of water, evaporating. The salt of the memory mixed with the feel of sand below Todd's feet as he broke into a herky-jerky run down the dune.

Todd heard the musical jingling an instant before he felt a sharp sting on the back of his head. The car keys bounced off his head, and Todd stumbled forward, fell, and started rolling in the sand. From somewhere up by the road he heard a screech: "C'MON! I'm hot!"

Todd reached back, touched his scalp, and felt the wetness in his thinning hair. Looking at his fingertips he found a mix of blood and sweat.

"Idiot!" he shouted back. He wished there was more blood on his hand.

*What's she doing up there?* Todd watched Ashley as she stood on the shoulder of the highway and dug through the trunk of the car.

*Where am I?* He looked across the dunes. The sand glittered like an orange sea. A rock sat, like a boat, on a desert wave. Todd sat in that boat for a while.



BENEATH THE SHEETS  
FILM

NAOMI CHRISTIE TRANTU

# Recalcitrant Bed

*Deborah Blakely Averill*

Pillow like a scent.

Desire this, and your life—oh  
the twice-used thrill of it.

Be full for skin,

persuasion, and yes.

It's like any other Tuesday  
eager and salty

opens with never.

And the mouth, the mouth,

If discovery is sin,

is water,

dissolving into the same river, and toxic,

where do I rest my liquid head?

Pillow like a stone

like heartache

it's feathered in fire

and everywhere I go

is lavender and ash.

# Insufficient Funds

*Nicole Schatz*

Your tiny hands asphyxiate the hem of your shirt.  
Threaded delicates soaked up in clenched jaws.  
Facial features that are fixed and un-telling until  
your mother cracks in unequal halves and  
lies limply over that porcelain throne of last straws.  
You are five and unworldly and fearless  
so you stay and you play pretend.  
You make believe you understand,  
but all you can hear is the floral-print dress  
drying out in her closet. You try to remember  
on which day he sneezed and subsequently subsidized  
the plant kingdom, so you can remember to hate him for it  
later,  
for that infinite number of even more things  
to watch crumble beneath the wait. Between  
broken sobs, she's tired  
she says, she wants to go home  
she says, she wants to go back to the J-word  
and you wonder where it is then  
that you are standing now  
and why you can't remember his face.  
And you are five and already tired too.  
You dig your knees into that mass of rigid fiber  
that resists each step with equal force.  
You pull that Book of matches  
from your tiny pocket and wish  
for better bedtime stories.

# I am a figure in soldered stained glass

*S.P. MacIntyre*

I am a figure in soldered stained glass,  
A prism praying words of fractured light:  
Take heed, God of glass, spectrum source, and grant  
Me some knowledge of electricity.

For I have long refracted your passage  
And cast Your grace on those who know Your arc.  
Insular me, solitary—I want  
To feel electrons of community.

These painted lips are tainted with photons  
Of curiosity, tinted wishes  
To communicate—to speak energy.  
(My atoms lack variability.)

I of amorphous mind melt so slowly  
I shall outlive the stars—colored fragments;  
Particle shards. Forgive this small hubris;  
Time breeds need for the static and lonely.

I want to know the kinetic aspect  
Of viable sex, this exchange breaching  
Through virgin cervix uncertainty, light  
Bursting from gravid quantum leaps of me.

Let God be my shards splintered beneath skin,  
Charged by flesh—conductive glass: my movement  
Unrestrained. Let sinners glance at absence,  
Shade commandments, see stark eternity.



UNTITLED  
DIGITAL

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MAIKO TODO

# The Herbalist

*David Moreck*

after Doris Ullman's "The Herbalist, Louisiana or South Carolina"

Worn weathered skin rests against  
wind scoured concrete. The expert  
equipped in looped cloth belts,  
cinched pouches, wafting aromatic  
scents. Regarding the fern's leaves,  
rows of giraffe ribs, twists and plays  
towards the sun. Leaves, discarded,  
retreat into paleness, to return again  
to soil as dust, someday staining  
the fingernails of the skillful harvester.  
Skin and sun, sun and dust, this earthen  
figure knows the soil by name, as  
collector and collaborator.

# BURNER

S.P. MACINTYRE

A cabinet slammed in the kitchen, so Robert stopped staring at the metal ashtray on his coffee table and looked in that direction.

Another cabinet slammed. “Who the fuck doesn’t pay their gas bill?” It was Harry; Harry was in the kitchen slamming cabinets and talking to himself. Apparently this had been going on for a while. “Who the fuck looks at a stack of mail and says, ‘Oh, I’m gonna do triage on ma bills. I’m gonna pay the electric, the cable, the water, but fuck the gas!’ Who does that?”

Robert turned towards the ashtray again. It was almost full and the enamel coating was brindled with imperfections and scuffs. The color reminded him of the Stryker he used to man. He tried to picture the other side of the ashtray but couldn’t.

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Harry was still saying things and slamming cabinets in the kitchen. Some of them sounded like the same cabinets over and over. Robert thought about gas and fire and explosions and what a concussive wave could do to the fluid in a person’s body. Harry had been thin and frail ever since he was a kid, a trait Robert took advantage of as they had to share a room and toys and other sibling things. Robert imagined little pieces of Harry, little scattered bits of him so small they could fit in the ashtray sitting on the coffee table. Robert decided with an objectivity devoid of malice that it would not take much to blow Harry apart.

“I, like, never use the stove,” Robert said, closing his eyes so he could pick his words carefully.

The kitchen went silent. Harry stepped across the threshold and looked at Robert. “Well look who’s finally fuckin’ regained consciousness. Why didn’t you pay your gas bill, stoner?”

Harry was thin and shirtless. He was holding an armful of Zippo lighters against his chest. His chest had a large tattoo that looked Eastern.

Robert tried to concentrate, but his mouth was dry and every word had to be dredged. “The stove: I don’t use it.”

A pteroscorpion was in the room and came down across Robert’s line of sight like a dive bomber and started batting repeatedly against the patio window. Its buzz was like a kid blowing a raspberry. Pteroscorpions are harmless as long as one leaves them alone, doesn’t get in their way, doesn’t have anything they wanted, doesn’t look at them funny, and doesn’t breathe in their general direction.

“I noticed that you don’t use your fridge much, either,” said Harry. “I bought some food for the house, in case you didn’t notice.” He indicated the direction of the grocery bags on the

floor, knocking some of the Zippos out of his other arm. Harry must have been used to saying "house," because this was an apartment, not a house. The Zippos made metal sounds as they clattered against the floor.

Robert thought Thank You, and thought he said it, but he couldn't remember if he did.

While Harry was back in the kitchen slamming cabinet doors again, Robert very methodically picked a bud of weed apart from its stem and placed it in the bowl that jutted from the carburetor of his bong. It was a big bong: four feet tall, with a dome and a coil percolator, an ice pinch, and a loop de loop like in those crazy straws. The word "majestic" came to Robert's mind despite the buildup of resin in the beaker-bottom. The pteroscorpion started batting against the screen of the TV and kept trying to sting and pinch and bite the 102-year old face of Andy Rooney. It must've been Sunday. He placed a glob of hash on the top of the packed bowl.

Robert had only one lung.

He was fat and puffy from all the hydrocortisone.

As Robert picked up a Zippo from the table and flipped the lid, Harry came out of the kitchen, walked up, and took the lighter from Robert's hand. "Need that," Harry said, and walked back into the kitchen.

Robert looked at his palm and then to his bong, palm and then bong, once more, and then he realized that he could see all the way to the skin of his palm and that there wasn't a lighter in the way. "Hey," he said, and got up.

On the stove, Harry had set up about twenty Zippo lighters so their lids were flipped and their flames were on. They were bunched together weirdly, asymmetrically. The lighters were set up between four corroded D batteries, which were holding up the four cardinal points of an ovoid skillet. There was a large New York strip of steak on the skillet that looked like it was a little old; the little pockets of fat were starting to go rancid brown.

"That: it doesn't look safe," said Robert, sort of pointing. Words were coming a little easier to him now.

"It's fine," said Harry.

"No, I have legitimate and, like, pressing concerns about the, like, inherent stability of that set up that you got there."

"Will you just chill the fuck out? Jesus. I haven't had a steak in three years."

Robert tried to 'chill,' but his arms were still bent at the elbow as though he were going to grab something. He looked back at the couch and there was a large dent where he'd been sitting. He smelled something and he thought it might have been his BO but it also might have been the steak. Whatever it was, it smelled like warm flesh and Robert hated that smell.

The pteroscorpion was laying eggs in the hash bowl.

"Thank you, again, by the way," said Harry, "for letting me stay until I get back on my feet. Your room is better than Mom's couch."

"No problem," said Robert, who then held his breath the entire time Harry flipped over the steak, making every aspect of his makeshift stove teeter.

"Cindy was a vegan," said Harry. "Wouldn't have fucking meat in the house. Can you believe that?"

"Meat can be temperamental," said Robert. "Hard on the stomach."

"She used to just flip the fuck out when she saw people eating animals," Harry continued, pouring a large amount of cayenne pepper directly onto the steak, "would start going on about tearing at the striations of fat and muscle and sinew, about vascularized tissue and fucking hormones and an all-corn diet and cancer this and cancer that. All the fucking time. And now look at me." He indicated himself with one hand holding a two-pronged fork and the other covered with cayenne pepper. "I'm thin as a fucking rail. I look like I've been shooting smack into my fucking eyeballs."

"You are thin," said Robert.

Harry prodded the steak with the two-pronged fork. One of the Zippos fell.

Robert's eyes went wide. "Can you be, like, exceedingly careful?"

"I tried hard man," Harry continued, propping the Zippo back up. "I tried real fucking hard to make that shit work. I did everything for that bitch. I quit my job and moved with her when she got a better one, I cleaned the house for her, I made her bed every fucking morning—she couldn't make a bed for shit!"

"I liked Cindy," said Robert. He hadn't blinked for a while and his eyes were starting to burn from staring at the lighters.

"And she left me for our fucking yoga instructor. Jesus. The guy fucking came up to me on the first day and told me my chakras were purple, man. Purple! Then he went over to my wife and helped her with the downward-facing dog. Can you believe that? A yoga instructor! With long god-damned patchouli-scented hair." A brief pause. "I fucking cooked for her, you know? I cooked her bean curd for fuck's sake! Bean curd! Do you know what fucking bean curd tastes like? Do you?"

Robert said nothing. He blinked and his eyes felt like they had some sort of thin film being dragged across them. He could not remember the last time he felt so thirsty or so nauseous.

"Nothing!" shouted Harry. "Bean curd doesn't taste like a-ny-thing! It tastes like just a big steaming white cube of nothing at all. My marriage—nothing at all."

"You're very volatile," said Robert.

Harry kind of looked down and off to the side, at nothing. His hands dropped a little bit. The steak was beginning to smoke. It reminded Robert of something.

"Do you, like, want to hear a war story?" asked Robert.

"If it's about how you lost your stupid lung, I don't want to hear it."

They were quiet for a little while, and the only sound in the kitchen was the sizzle of the steak. To Robert it sounded like screaming. His chest ached a bit and he thought he was about to gag.

Harry took the fork and went to remove the steak from the skillet when the pteroscorpion buzzed into the kitchen and smacked him in the side of the head, clamping on with its pincers and repeatedly stinging his right cheek and temple.

Harry shouted and smacked at the side of his face with the meat-laden fork. "Get it off! Get it off!" When Harry screamed, it sounded like a woman's scream.

Robert remained frozen at the threshold, paralyzed by the suddenness of it all, as he had been once before when his entire squad had been burned alive.

The meat went *slap slap slap* against Harry's face.

"Get it the fuck off of me-e-e." The last "e" sound was broken up by sobs as Harry collapsed

to the floor, the pteroscorpion smashed on the side of his face and the meat now in torn pieces on the linoleum.

Robert cautiously moved over to the Zippos, some of which had gone out. He began methodically closing the lids on each and moving them away from the stove, away from the disabled gas burner.

As he did so, Harry clutched at Robert's leg and began to sob into his pants. Harry sobbed so violently that Robert wobbled in broken rhythms and had trouble placing the lighters. Robert tried to remember if there was ever a moment in their childhood when something like this had happened—a scraped knee or parental punishment, any moment that had placed them in a similar spatial relationship.

Robert couldn't think of any, so his thoughts returned to the ashtray on his coffee table instead.

Harry looked up. Bug guts and meat detritus were all over the side of his face, which was beginning to puff up and swell in a big red welt that forced his right eye to squint and pulled the corner of his mouth up into a half-grin. He looked ridiculous.

"Why?" asked Harry. "Why?"

The ashtray was a metal receptacle for burned organic parts. Robert could picture the whole thing in his head. The color of the metal was the color of the Stryker, which was the color of the desert. Each of the divots in the ashtray for holding cigarettes was spaced differently, probably due to imperfections in the mold. It was a receptacle for ash—an ash trap. Harry was kind of like the ashtray, thought Robert, but couldn't quite think of why this was. Robert imagined Harry eating his steak, his first steak in years, sitting alone at the table, every bite a "fuck you" to his ex-wife, each one probably making him feel progressively more ill—just eating charred meat alone, all alone, and probably not feeling very full at the end of it all but rather sick, sick to his gut with some other feeling that he wasn't going to get to experience because of something so stupid and random and painful—loss. This was a depressing thought to Robert. He decided that, after he used it for the eggy hash bowl, he would throw the ashtray away. But first he needed to get away from Harry, extricate himself from Harry's grip. He needed to move away from the person in pain; the thought of another person in pain made Robert feel sick to his gut, which was almost all the time since the accident. Robert just needed to get away, get out of the kitchen, move away from this crumpled body, separate himself from his brother. He just needed to smoke and then he would throw the ashtray away. Just move. Don't stand. Move.

"There there," said Robert. "There there."

# To Neda After the Uprising

*Sanam Shahmiri*

Following the sound, *saro seda*  
you lost

balance

and fell. The frames scattered to refresh  
as your death reached out to the world  
demanding with its hands: see, hear, feel.

I could not blink, Neda  
your blood at your feet, Neda  
I could hear your breath, Neda  
your chest spoke thousands of words, unheard,  
for the others, my cousins, Neda,  
pushing out the stop, taking stone in hand,  
setting fires to extinguish those who fired at them.

118 Unleashing a flood into the streets,  
blood blooming in a rose from your lips.

To think I could have been you, no,  
that this had nothing to do with me  
that I could do nothing for you, no  
that I was lucky.  
To have been in the comfort of my home,  
sitting at my desk, watching  
your death. The words escape  
me as I write to thank you

for speaking. Even in your last words,  
you would not surrender:  
"I am burning  
I am burning."

Doublespeak:  
*Daram misouzam*

You stared into the camera, Neda  
fixated, unflinching fear, Neda  
like the far-off gunman, who  
sniped your eyes of their life.

And somewhere, someday,  
you'll be written in books, Neda  
not as a history lesson,  
but a lesson in history.

# After the Orange Tree

Ashlyn Morse

there is no copy  
waving latent in the watery mirror,  
no tributary where one angel  
holds one atom to the sky  
to proclaim the infinity of circular  
elemental stars. There's no secret  
dinner plate galaxy to lift the multitude in hymn

nor unearth these carpel spirits  
into naked, airy, *ifs* of blossom.

There is just one tree.  
One. And its tenor hum  
a geotropic falling into the dark-  
soiled center.

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All the while apical roots  
drive fine hair through the mire,  
deeper into mystery  
with every silent, agonal effort,

slowly threading all this earth  
on the slender noose of sleep.

# The Last Horse

*Ramsey Mathews*

When General Lee died  
he was buried like a sovereign statue  
standing at attention in a ten foot deep hole  
facing south toward Birmingham.

As they left early from the drowsy tobacco fields  
to bury the horse,  
a quick Thursday summer thunder shower ending  
into a lovely humid afternoon  
settled carnivorous horse flies and cantankerous yellow jackets  
making the red wet clay workable.

These Egyptian masons,  
my father and grandfather,  
with their ruined hands and homemade tools,  
excavated the relentless earth  
six cubits deep and six cubits wide,  
then engineered a spruce scaffold  
from barn timbers (stacked neatly when  
the horse barn was disassembled)  
and block pulleys.

Like a hot air balloon descending  
for the last time,  
the dead horse was lowered  
until his feet touched Beulah land.

Upon the horse's muscled marbled flesh draped  
his favorite cotton blanket.  
Tirelessly, the men rendered the massive body  
erect with wet clay  
and pulled the ropes away.

As night wrapped its familiar arm around the  
half dark of day's end  
these pontifical Georgia men planted a peach tree  
in the crumbled clumped red clay  
and cheered the dead with home brew.

# Learning to Fly

Lauren Levitch

I look up at my father on the roof  
as he stands in turquoise swimwear  
among cracked shingles, ceramic,  
as inorganic as his tactics.

I am his the way a platypus is a duck  
because it has a bill. He yells:  
*Come on, girl! Climb up here and jump!*

There's a wooden ladder leading  
up to the roof where chlorinated  
water drips from his shorts.  
He doesn't wait for me, he jumps

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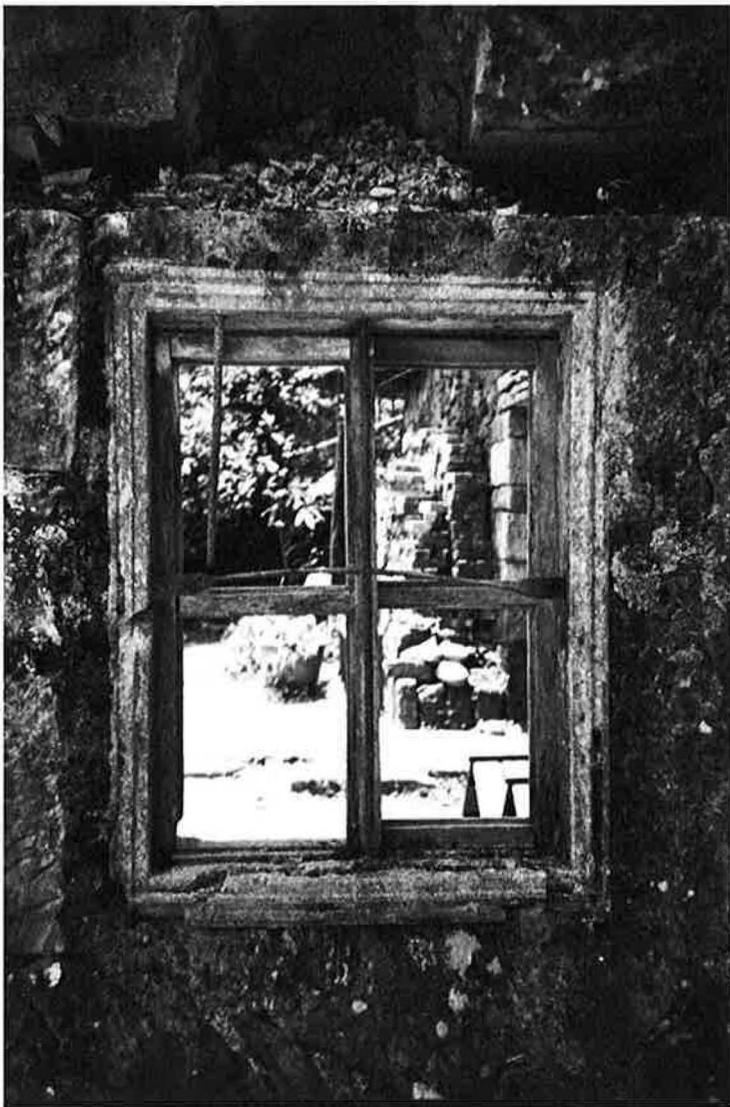
into the pool, no form, no finesse,  
just body hitting water. Coming up  
for air and information, he asks:  
*Are you afraid of the fall or the impact?*

The roof has never seen my family  
fully clothed. When she was a child,  
my mother loved to be naked.  
She'd climb up, wearing just a pink towel, drop it and dance

once her feet met the shingles.  
And I am hers  
the way wind currents taunt gravity.  
I felt it that day, when I was carried under  
my father's arm, up the risky ladder  
that now knows my skin  
as their skin.

She wasn't there to stop him.  
So the shingles never met me.  
I saw them, frantically  
reached for their chalky heat  
while he held me firmly under his wing.

Before I could tell those tiles  
I was afraid of the impact, before  
I could confess the only time  
I'd felt the wind currents  
was when I danced  
on top of the mailbox,  
he threw me off.



UNTITLED  
FILM

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JENNIFER D. CHANG

# DIAMOND IN THE SKY

SEAN PESSIN

*L*et there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years. And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth.

- God (?)

\* \* \*

John saw, in the distance, a pile of twigs and leaves clustered around a trunk. As he approached, he identified the mass as a tree. Here, John recognized that the space the tree occupied was different than the path he had been travelling, as the path was covered in gravel and the tree did not have gravel. He looked around and found that this tree was kept alive by a combination of an extremely rich below and an extremely wet aside. Below became known as soil and aside became known as a stream. John placed himself under the tree with an action that became sitting, in a lower concentration of light that became known as shade and plunged his hands in the silt; an action that became known as mining.

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\* \* \*

Another John in another mine mined for something else. As his axe struck against rock, bits of light sparked and sparkled from their new places, and lay spackled on the ground. As he picked up his quarry's treasure, he remembered his meeting with the first John. It was, as all great memories are prone to be, a chance encounter. On his way to his mine for the first time, he saw in the distance a pile of arms and legs and a torso and also a head buried under a pile of sticks and leaves and a trunk. As he approached, he saw that this was a man sitting in the shade of a tree. There was a stream nearby. He walked up to this man, and he said hello, and that his name was John. The man under the tree smirked, and revealed that his name was also John. John asked where John was headed, and John replied that he was headed to his job as a miner, although he hadn't learned what exactly he was mining. John asked what John was doing sitting under a tree, and John replied that he was mining already. John asked what he could be mining under a tree, to which John derailed the conversation by warning John about the perils of bending space, and John said goodbye and left for his job, singing the only mining song that he knew, "Oh! (Be A Fun Girl, Kiss Me)."

When John had arrived in the mine that morning, he was shocked to find out that he would

be mining stars from the Main Sequence Mine. Stars were the hottest commodity out there, considering that they reached temperatures upwards of 10,000 K. The rarer the star, the hotter it was; the higher the demand was. They had their own classification system that allowed them to be ranked and traded: **O, B, A, F, G, K, M**. These letters became ingrained into John and he knew that **O** class stars are blue stars and that they are huge and hot, while **M** class stars are red and the smallest conventional stars and that they are cooler, and that the rest of the letters fall along the spectrum of visible light. **O** class stars are rare, and **M** class stars are fairly more common. In fact, **M** class stars make up, according to both geologists and astrophysicists, approximately 75% of all the stars that are in existence and are visible. Since stars become more common as they get dimmer, it is often guessed that there are many more stars that are just too dim to see from Earth. John smirked at the thought of the miners before him following the official mine protocol: "Please Discard SUB M-Class Stars." In the thirty years between the last time he had thought at length about the sign and now, the red dwarfs had gained use value. He took out his thermos, untwisted the cap, poured some water into the cap, and drank.

\* \* \*

John finds himself thirsty, so he forages through that which he has been mining and picks up a **C**. He quickly realizes that the **C** can't be readily dipped in the water to fill it and keep John dry at the same time. He digs out a **U** and attaches the **C** to it. The **C** is now a handle and the **U** becomes the basin that collects water. His device has a grip now that will keep him dry, but aesthetically, it needs some more balance. He attaches a **P** to the end, which doesn't change the function; the extra material enhances its device-ness. He dips it into the stream next to the tree and fills the **CUP** halfway. He brings the vessel up to his lips and drinking from it quenches his thirst.

\* \* \*

*The beautiful thing about a drawing is that you can seize it as an image in your mind, but the moment you want to comprehend the image, the drawing becomes spherical, and the mind can no longer illuminate it from all sides at the same time. Drawings are often composed only of a few small gestures on a sheet of paper. All that's left on the page is black powder, which can evoke a special language for the viewer, a language that can touch things that are important in life...*

- Mark Manders

\* \* \*

John walked home from the Main Sequence Mine with his backpack full of stars, passing the DeBeers diamond mine, reading the Popular Science magazine that he picked out of the trash can behind the bookstore in the local mall. It had been discarded because the new issue had come out. The distributor required the covers of all unsold magazines to give the bookstore back credit for said product, and the rest of the magazine was abandoned. John knew that even without the cover, the magazine was a useful source of information, and worth the dumpster-dive. In the issue he was reading, there was an article on motion. This article made the assertion that if bodies were accelerated to light speed uniformly, then they would travel uniformly, and have the hope to decelerate uniformly and in the same form as the beginning of their movement. John already knew this; he had used this method to place several stars in the beginning of his

career. John had been a fast youngster, and when he had begun his project, he had the full intention of placing stars by hand, one at a time, until he had finished. John's project was to paint the firmament with the bits of light that he culled from the earth. That is not to say that, once John had the idea, he wasn't worried about his ability to produce this great work.

\* \* \*

His planning was intense. John had gathered astrological charts, constellation maps, pictures rendered of the zodiac, and various other limited cosmologies. These blueprints for the Celestial Sphere had been around for centuries, spread between cultures and ideologies. Each time these maps were passed between hands and generations, new stories and images and lines and points were pinned to the plans. Some notes were written next to others and some on top. John noticed that centralized areas are recorded across several different charts with several different designs. For instance, in Iroquois traditions, the space the Plough occupies is three hunters in pursuit of the Great Bear.

Other thoughts had to be considered; the constellations were not just bones seeking flesh. Australian Aborigines have constellations, like the Great Emu whose space was defined by the lack of stars that occupy it, the body lacking substance. John desired the combination of all the plans, to reconcile all the estranged definitions into one cogent work by re-designating all of the lots in the sky.

The other part of his project was to fill in the gaps. He knew the moment that he first saw the plans; the skeletal etchings of Orion and Taurus convinced him that they should be finished—Taurus with his red-eye and Orion with his sheath, a design element that suggested the possession of a sword that was not apparent in Orion as he stood. In order for the two to be locked in eternal battle, Orion must have his sword. Otherwise, this skirmish represents only moments before skewering. In John's head, this level of incompleteness was akin to the Gran Cavallo or *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. So he had to decide between the Big Bear and the Little Bear and the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper. Likewise, he had to decide between Capricorn the Goat and Makara the Sea Monster. In the end, he chose the bears and the sea monster.

\* \* \*

John shifted under the tree; his stomach growled. He did not know how long it had been since he had eaten, but he knew now that he was hungry. Buried in the silt would be his meal. **w** held two portions of something, but itself could not contain enough space to hold a satisfactory meal for him. Adding **l** onto the end, **wl** had a definite vertical advantage over the plain **w**, but did not make full use of the space, as food would only collect at a diagonal sloping down from the tip of the **l** to the start of the **w**. The other side of the construct needed a similar vertical shape, but all he could scrounge up in his intense starvation was an **od** that had been stuck together, and that he did not have the strength to separate. **odwl** was formed—John found the superfluous **o** ostentatious. He would have to incorporate the **o** into the design, or at least hide it inside this thing. **bowl** was crafted from the refuge product; the way this thing seemed to work was similar to an emu, defined by the space that it does not occupy, which meant that

**bowl** would not feed John, but would facilitate it, and John now needed food. He could no longer wait to create, and so ate the **cre**.

\* \* \*

John quietly remembered his first trip into space as he slurped soup from supper. John's first trip into the sky ended with him falling into China, and quietly running back home. He had begun that night wondering how he was going to climb up into the heavens and lay down the stars, as his idea had prescribed for him. His first attempt had been made to run straight up, but that was problematic by the relative unease of running vertically. He had read somewhere that accelerating bodies can escape orbits if they travel tangentially to the body of mass being orbited. John gathered up some stars that he had lying around, and took off. Halfway approaching light speed, and almost above China, John realized that the Earth also orbited and revolved, and so he slowed down, that he may calculate a proper route before he made his first mark on the firmament, and have that mark be an error. His deceleration allowed the Earth to coerce his body into plummeting him just south of the Great Wall, a place he wanted to visit, just under more auspicious circumstance.

\* \* \*

John rubbed his hands individually against themselves. He had only managed to place ten or so stars the night he did achieve take-off. This was hardly enough to satisfy him. His plans laid bare the fact that he would need to place more, to place way more. If only he had not gotten their interspatial distances wrong. He ruminated over his mistakes. Early in the development of his sky, John had chosen to design the images in full. This meant many stars would be required to fill in the meat of his piece. Hundreds of thousands of stars had to be mined, polished, and eventually put where his guiding vision demanded they go. This vision, at first, was the only thing he listened to. That is how he ended up creating a black hole. He placed two extremely large stars right next to each other, cosmically speaking. Before he could stand back and admire his work, he heard a great sucking sound. Speedily, he ran back to separate out the giants collapsing into the body of its neighbor, trying to protect the efforts that it took to get them in space to begin with. The suns seared John's hands, sinking, at first in one combined moment of despair for him, but then also into darkness.

In a way, he was thankful that diamonds had replaced the weight of stars on the open market. Otherwise that loss would be heartbreaking. The alternative in such a case would have been to seek corporate sponsorship, and, to an event like a sunset, it would prove more than distracting to have logos for Coca-Cola competing to be seen in addition to, with, against the vision of the work. Or, to work at the diamond mine, which would be pittance, barely sustainable for either his piece, or his peace.

In a way, he was also thankful that the stars had condensed so far away from Earth, not that it would not have been tragic to lose his home, but that it would be years before anyone would see his failure, which gave him plenty of time to patch the error closer in, because light only travels so fast.

\* \* \*

*Nostalgia is a taste for ruins. It takes its reflective pleasure in the recovery of fragments from the past for which significant continuity to the present is lacking. The past for which we are nostalgic has no place in the present. The objects of our nostalgia are anachronistic and incongruous. We thereby enjoy what is out joint but at the same time comfortable and familiar. The nostalgic is a sentiment of saving. We rescue ourselves from the waters of oblivion, for what we have saved is somehow ours...*

- Robert Ginsberg

\* \* \*

John, mining in the Main Sequence Mine, had not always been so filled with ennui. When he had been culling his first stars from the stone, they were sold in stores, in glass displays with these sets of shining spheres costing up to a year's pay. This reimbursed the day-to-day wages of the miners. Atmospherically, it produced a lucrative living arrangement. That is, until the market became marked by competition.

De Beers discovered diamonds, and the world swooned. Soon, foreign objects abjected from the lands surrounding the Main Sequence Mine appeared in store cases. As demand switched to diamond over star, the diamonds overtook the space in the cases, and the stars remained in the mine as miners began to quarry the more costly commodity. The only stars dug out of the ground soon were the ones John himself unearthed. He collected them, at first, through force of habit. They piled up at his house, he, all the time, hiding them in hall closets and under his bed—no one wanted to buy stars. Some had even resorted to clearing back stock by selling them on the radio. And when John heard his life's work being sold as a low rate valentine's gift, worst yet, as the budget alternative to diamonds, he became depressed. After all, the radio ads for the alternative to stars claimed that diamonds were a girl's best friend, and everyone knew diamonds were forever.

John hated this tagline. *Forever* was not romantic. Death was forever. So, too, were Styrofoam and plastic bags, perhaps not so much for the latter, but it sure seemed like it to him. Plain rocks only managed to say something to the effect of love equating with refuse tangled in chain fences. John only knew how magical things were when expressed as functions of time, "I love you in the moment that I say it, knowing full well that eventually we will die and be separated forever. In this temporary temporality, I want to indulge myself in you, or perhaps, what you represent, of the possibility not of forever, but in the anxiety of it all ending around us."

He began space travel to spite De Beers, to show them their idiocy, which clever advertising shoved right back in his face. Advertisers conflated both products, and trained children to do the same, by teaching them that a star was "like a diamond in the sky."

\* \* \*

Many years had passed since they had met, but since their meeting, John had no interest in cohorting with his nominative doppelganger, the other John, whose chortling had haunted him in his sleep: "beware of bent space."

John smirked at the memory of John attempting to gain work at his mine. John didn't even say a word to John. John flashed a gun at the interloper, and charged at him, which caused John to flee. This was John's project—John had no right to be there.

John thought that John should get bent.

\* \* \*

John traveled out into space, amongst the vast void to paint one of the scales of Makara as he saw it (Hindu tradition holds mammalian characteristics), with a trio of stars, two O class stars and a one G class star. He had come up with a new form of travel, from another article in a science magazine. In it, time space was compared to a sheet of paper. There are two dots on the paper, centered on the page, but on opposite ends. To decrease time in travel, the article argued, one had to decrease the distance traveled two dimensionally, and the article's preferred method was to fold the paper so that the two dots were closer in a third dimension. John's rationale was logical for such a plan. From his home, or any vantage point on Earth, these lights appear green and singular, but John understands spatial arrangement. By placing them in the proper proximity, stars generate light and that light reflects and refracts in an exact way that John could predict and abstractly use to color constellations.

In this way, stars behaved better than diamonds, which only reflected and refracted the light they received. All that sparkles is not star. Light gets trapped in the thicket of carbon atoms that constitute a diamond, then refracts outwardly through its contrived facets. This is the glitter of a diamond. Stars are thermonuclear explosions, constantly fusing, creating light, heat, helium, lithium and beryllium, eventually fusing these, forming the very carbon that constitutes diamonds. John takes pride in this; the sky will eventually be full of diamonds, and stars will be rare again.

\* \* \*

*As a spectator, ... it's interesting to try to retrace the mental process of the person who made the drawing. A drawing is a transparent skin suspended between the artist and the spectator for comparison.*

- Mark Manders, contd.

\* \* \*

John felt as if his life was out of control. He sat under the tree, growing enraged. He pounded his palms to the ground, throwing up clouds of mud, dust, and letters. As the debris dissolved into the area around him, John noticed one lone **v** perched on its point oriented upwards. This **v** stunned John for a moment. Its particular peculiarity captured his consciousness, and he became preoccupied with palindromes. He sought to extend this strange sight by adding letters to it. Scrounging through the silt, he pulled the most common letter **e**, and, as night fell, he was staring at **eve**. To achieve some sort of stasis, or at least to assuage his rage, John thought that perhaps one more letter should be added to his construct. Assigning an arbitrary **n** to the end of this build, he saw that **even** had been born. **Even** did not even begin to satisfy John, for the center of mass was located before at the **v**, as in **v** and **eve**. And it did not matter to him that its matter was divisible by two; each half was not weighed the same. The **ev** and the **en** did not reflect, in any way, "even-ness," which seemed odd to John. It was precisely the even quality of **eve** that gave way to the lack of tipping over in the word. Now, the center of mass was located in-between the **v** and **e**, in a space not marked by a letter. This was not like an emu or a bowl, and that perturbed John. He tossed out the **n**, and settled on parallel **I**'s this time to affix to the ends of his new word. Now, **level** had been crafted, and John had achieved balance.

\* \* \*

John worried that he would not be able to see the end of the sky. Even though bending space saved him many hours of traveling at light speed, the only way he would be able to find the finished product was if he could bend time as well. He thought that must be possible. After all, it wasn't arbitrarily called time-space; perhaps it was. Either way, the notion of folding time onto itself gave John hope, because if one folds something in half, it gives the illusion of there being twice as much of it. Leery of time travel, but equally exhausted by the thought of being unable to complete the Celestial Sphere, he decided to go ahead anyway. So, he took some of the red dwarfs that he had been storing, and caused them to collide, which, because of their masses, condensed at one point that John could manipulate like a magnifying glass to the artist that paints the tops of pinheads. He used this wormhole as a lens that seized space instead of light, to place his stars in the past, where they would then appear in his night sky and close the gap between his now and mortality.

\* \* \*

John slipped into the portal, hurling him through time, and knocking him unconscious.

When John came to, he got up, and saw that it was hot, and bright out, and he began to walk to find shelter from the sun, all the while thinking about how he failed. He reached out his legs, one after another. John saw, in the distance, a pile of twigs and leaves clustered around a trunk. As he approached, he identified the mass as a tree. Here, John recognized that the space the tree occupied was different than the path he had been travelling, as the path was covered in gravel and the tree did not have gravel.

John wondered how he ended up here, about his wonder; he spied in the distance, a man approaching him, singing something he couldn't quite make out, but seemed all too familiar. The man stopped and said something that John couldn't hear, so he smirked and a conversation occurred that he participated in, but later could not remember. John muttered to himself, mostly, about bending space. John mentioned something about mining.

\* \* \*

John watched the other John avoid him. That John would walk all the way around the tree, every day, to the dumpster behind the mall to dig up magazines that had their cover stripped. John sat alone, under his tree by the stream, distraught. John knew he had fallen into the past, and being now meant that he could never finish his life's work. His great orchestration of the cosmos was doomed to remain an unfinished symphony. His sky would be remembered as Schubert's two remaining segments were. His art would be observed, just as Schubert's piece was, following movements and sforzandi, as swaths of celestial sketches, rising and falling until the last composed note or placed star left the absorber of art hanging on a finite bit of organization amongst the all possible chaos.

\* \* \*

He had come to accept the unfortunate situation. John had been lost to the folds of eternity.

He knew he could never return to the mine; John was aware that John would chase him off the property, just as he had done when in John's position. He began to think about composition again, and how sometimes, in those incomplete works, the final note would be left hanging in the air, just as he had remembered. But other times, people would come in, looking for patterns and repetitions, attempting to complete the score using the notes left in the sections that made it into existence. These other composers would research the previous works of the composer they were imitating, their personal letters, living quarters, to try and find scraps of intelligible information, fitting it all together as a possible interpretation of what the finished "art" would resemble.

And John lit up. Hadn't he left behind the most visible incomplete canvas? He had scores of notes, cluttered notebooks packed with the illustrious and illuminating ideas he intended to inflict upon the Milky Way. And John lit up because all of this could happen in the whole of all possible futures that had to confront his exquisite corpse, which is an awful lot longer than one man's lifetime.

His jubilation was interrupted by the realization that he had met himself, under the tree as he was going to work, his past and his future occupying the same space. He did not have an undetermined future. He was it. There would be nothing outside him now. His eyes stayed away from the sky for a long time, instead fixated on the ground, where he noticed, under this particular tree, an inexplicably large amount of letters.

\* \* \*

One evening, John finally looked up. He guessed that in a day sometime soon, he would begin to investigate extra-terran travel, and seal his fate. That was only thought of as he was in between looking at the ground and the sky, for once his eyes lifted from the mud and dirt and letters, he noticed that there were more stars in the sky than when he left. He counted them, but that took so long that he kept forgetting how many he had counted. John had to measure his progression, which he did by an arbitrary selection of letters to mark each time he counted. His first round, marked by an **f**, counted 9250 stars. John thought he better count the stars again since that number couldn't possibly be right. His second round, marked by an **o**, contained 9255 stars. His two totals did not match, which begged a third count. His third round, marked by a **u**, counted 9251 stars. He decided to count one more time, and in the round marked by an **r**, he counted 9260 stars. John decided to accept the average of these totals; to John, there were 9254 stars in the sky. But that could not be right. John had been the only one introducing these orbs to the domed heavens.

\* \* \*

Time was something John could no longer recognize. Clearly, he was in a when that he ought not to be in, and he fell victim to a perpetual sense of déjà vu, at least at first. Time was not folded in half, not like his bent space, it was mirrored, though that reflection was foggy, a hazed méconnaissance. Once he acclimated to the repassing of days, this sense slowly waned, which in fact was not due to acclimation, but rather was due to the gradual lack of recognizable scenarios. The John who was under the tree was not the same John who was mining, but the John who was mining became the John who was under the tree. That John, under the tree, was not the same John that was under the tree. But the John starting at the mine, until meeting

John under the tree, had been the same John who was on his way to work in the mine. John attempted to contemplate this, and he spat blood onto the soil.

\* \* \*

*Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void.*

- Robert Smithson

\* \* \*

John thought that he would like something of beauty to have, as he sensed his time nearing an end, so he dug through what was in the soil, placing together whatever letters he could find, not even caring to wash off the mud that had caked on them in the river.

# 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:

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