Editor's Note:

All of the 55 writers in this issue were invited to submit work because they are affiliated with Brescia's creative writing program and because they are from this region or are writing in it. Some are current or former Brescia students, some have given workshops or readings at Brescia, and some have read at 3rd Tuesday Coffeehouse, which is produced by the Brescia Writers Group. The result is an assemblage of talented writers from Western Kentucky and Southern Indiana.

The policy of Open 24 Hours is to present work that is truthful, fresh, artful, provocative, and clear: work that—though it may be disturbing in subject and language—deserves to be read.

D.B.

The views expressed in this journal are, of course, those of the writers. Address all correspondence to David Bartholomy, Brescia University, Owensboro, KY, 42301 or <david.bartholomy@brescia.edu>.

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In real life, loving so often transformed into loathing.

Mary Welp  p. 6

“Love is relaxing with a cup of coffee and rubbing the dog behind his ears.”

Scott Luter  p. 15
Erin Keane

Alice in Wonderland

Eat Me, Drink Me—that kid would put anything in her mouth. Alice grew up, got high singing it’s only teenage wasteland behind a towering set of Midwest stadium bleachers, sped a Camaro out of town with the oldest guy left in school. Now she waits tables, drives customers crazy with questions: the duck, sir, an excellent choice, but wouldn’t one prefer the duck? She likes the thirsty, mad men—the one they call untouchable, she calls mine—who will jump for the hell of it into her, touching and rearranging as they fall, shrugging through a bottomless hole narrow as a set of shoulders, chewing both sides of the mushroom just to keep up. In the mirror, Alice practices a smile so horrible it makes the rest of her body disappear, and at night, the cards leap into her hands. She shuffles like a pro, following each ugly face through the deck, can stop on command and name the next number. Alice carries a gun—pearl-handled but packed just the same—a girl needs a gun these days—shoots public park squirrels out of trees, whispers they ask for it, they ask for me by name out of the corner of her sly grinning mouth.
Selina called in sick not once but twice. She ignored two messages from Hank inquiring about her health. Why did men persist in inquiring about a woman’s health rather than her heart and soul? Late in the evening of the second day, after her son Charlie was asleep, she checked her email. Hank had written: “I meant what I said, Selina. I want to burn into you with my eyes. And then with my whole self. Please take this the right way, Selina, please. I’ve got to have you.”

“No you don’t,” she said out loud to the computer screen. “You most certainly do not have to have me. Or you would.” She sat for several seconds, then, before she could stop herself, typed, “The kissing is what I’ll miss most, Hank.” She clicked on Send.

Hank was sitting right there (doing what? re-programming his cell phone? hooking up his new beeper? adjusting his utility belt?). He IM’ed her: “What do you mean by using the future tense as if it’s a given?”

She IM’ed back: “I’m too old to use IM.”

Again the box came down over her regular screen: “How can you be young enough for email but too old for IM? Where do you draw the line?”

“Where do you draw the line, Hank? I’m signing off.”

“But not forever,” his box said in response.

She turned the computer off. She silenced the ringers on the phones. She was not yet ready to face him.

The next morning her voicemail had one line from him: “The future is not a given.”

But actually, of course, it was. After all, here we were, today, which had been last night’s future, and there was never any way it wasn’t going to be. The future was, in fact, a given.

Selina knew, though, that Hank did not mean to sound like some wacky philosopher exploring the space-time continuum. He meant, without knowing how typical it was, to sound like the infinite number of philandering men who had roamed the earth from the beginning of time, the ones who don’t want their mistresses to leave them but want even less for the mistress to become the wife. Who were they comforting with their lines about “never knowing what the future would bring,” as if the future were the tooth fairy or Jolly Old Saint Nick? They were comforting themselves with delusion. The future depended on what you did, what you planned for yourself. The future was not the Easter Bunny.

This was what the Mormons and the Muslims had understood, not to mention the ancient Chinese, the Turkish sultans, Henry VIII, and a walloping bunch of African tribesmen, with their multiple wives and all of those concubines: they had to make their own future. They had to throw off the chains of monogamy, and they had to do it out of the closet. If only the laws hadn’t been patriarchal. If only the concubines had said, “Wait a dog-gone minute here, buster, where’s my hunk of the pie?” How would history have been different if Ann Boleyn had been able to track Henry’s move-
ments with a cell phone, if A’ishah had been able to convince Mohammed to wear a beeper?

Selina could not stop thinking about Hank’s utility belt. God, it was so geeky! It was beyond geeky. It was Bill Gatesy. It was unconscionable. But it was bringing out the Oscar Wilde in her: either that utility belt goes, or I go. The utility belt just might enable her to cut the cord.

She went in search of her sole source of late-night comfort: Charlie Rose. If there was one thing she could count on to calm her down it was the black background of Charlie’s set, his round oaken table, and his perpetual lack of effrontery, which occasionally even devolved into blubbering stupidity. It had gotten her through postpartum depression. It could get her through this. Three nights running, the show might be a total waste, but then, wham, one night, you turned it on, and there was Susan Sontag. Or William Maxwell. Tonight looked to be one of the bad nights. Morgan Freeman was the guest, a man who had more to say on the silver screen than in a somber New York studio. The two men brought out the very worst in each other. Charlie played a clip from the current thriller Morgan Freeman was starring in, and the chat began:

Charlie Rose: So here you are in this movie.
Morgan Freeman: Yes, there I am.
Charlie Rose: I mean, let’s just say it, here you are.
Morgan Freeman: Yes, here I am.
Charlie Rose: And there’s Ashley Judd.
Morgan Freeman: Yes, there she is.
Charlie Rose: And she feels betrayed by her husband.
Morgan Freeman: Yes, she feels betrayed.
Charlie Rose: By her country, too.
Morgan Freeman: Yes, by her country.
Charlie Rose: But you try to help her get to the bottom of it—or, in this case, perhaps the top?
Morgan Freeman: Yes, I do try.
Charlie Rose: But she has to keep trying.
Morgan Freeman: Yes, she does.
Charlie Rose: And it takes a long time.
Morgan Freeman: Yes, it takes quite awhile.
Charlie Rose: And it might not make sense to everyone.
Morgan Freeman: No, it might not.
Charlie Rose: But there you are.
Morgan Freeman: There I am.
Charlie Rose [picking up newspaper, putting on reading glasses]: And The New York Times says you have [rattling newspaper], you have, you have your usual “touching, inscrutable individuality.” You are known for that, aren’t you? Your touching, inscrutable individuality.
Morgan Freeman: Well, I don’t know about that.
Charlie Rose: But here you are.
Morgan Freeman: Inscrutable.

Selina smacked her head. What she wanted more than anything in the
world was someone to watch Charlie Rose with. She longed for the skin of her arm to be warmed by the skin of his (the fellow viewer’s, not Charlie’s) and for one of them to be able to turn to the other and ask, “Can you believe that is all Charlie has on his mind at this moment? What else is he thinking about?” She wanted a bedmate with her (preferably one who liked to have sex as much as Hank did but who could also cook and did not wear a utility belt) who would help her get to the bottom of what was in Charlie Rose’s mind, the mind inside that handsome chiseled face that sometimes asked such dull questions you thought he was going to slump over in his chair. Selina wished someone could pay her to devote her life to studying Charlie Rose. How did this narcoleptic Southern gentleman end up in the most coveted seat in New York, able to get anyone in the world to talk to him? Nelson Mandela, for goodness sake. Joan Didion. He got Joan Didion to take off her sunglasses! Selina had done a bit of research on Charlie Rose’s past, and it turned out that his breakthrough moment had been a three-hour interview with Charles Manson. She felt both desperate to see the footage and repelled by the notion, but it wasn’t in the cards for her, anyway. The only place a videotape of the interview was available was at some white supremacist’s web site, and Selina had no intention of funding any such organizations, no matter how much she coveted their goods.

Charlie’s next guest was a film-maker who looked young enough to be dating Selina’s daughter Reta. Surely this child was not yet out of college. But wait. He had graduated from NYU film school. Then Charlie said to him, “So. You’ve come a long way from Louisville, Kentucky.”

Louisville, Kentucky? Selina turned up the volume. The kid was saying that while he had come a long way from Louisville, he had also gone back there to make a film about a nursing home.

“It’s a documentary, then?” Charlie asked, knowing full well it wasn’t. Or did he? What did Charlie Rose know? Was he even sly enough to be pretending?

The kid, whose name was Morgan Landebaum (and whose parents probably belonged to the same country club as Hank and his wife), corrected Charlie. It was not a documentary, it was a mockumentary.

Charlie Rose leaned into him. “So you’re mocking the geriatric population?” he said. “Just for fun?”

Morgan Landebaum said no, he most certainly was not mocking the geriatric population, that his intention as well as his final result had been to portray the elderly in a sympathetic though not a sappy light. His central subject in fact was a retired Shakespeare scholar who happened to be a Southern belle.

“But there’s that word mock right in the word mockumentary,” Charlie pointed out.

Here we go again, thought Selina.

The kid explained the concept of the mockumentary, that it was not mocking the people in the film but was satirizing the whole genre of the documentary. There then followed a twelve-minute discussion of whether the genre of documentary had ever been in need of satirizing, with both Charlie Rose and the kid Landebaum coming out in favor of documentaries, even going so far as to compare their favorites down through the
decades. Finally, they got back to the film in question, which was called *Notes on a Straw-Hatted Woman*.

“What’s it about?” asked Charlie, in that short-term-memory lapse manner of his, as if he’d just this moment met his guest for the first time.

Morgan Landebaum backed up in his seat. You could see that he was one second away from saying, “Check in, Charlie Rose.” Instead, he scooted up to the table, took a deep breath, and explained that in a nutshell his film was about an old Southern belle with dementia, who missed her Jack Russell terrier more than she missed anything else about her previous life. In the film, she calls out to all who pass by (fellow patients, medical staff, anyone on the grounds of the building), “Where’s Jack Russell? I’ve lost my darling Jack Russell!”

Selina dropped the remote from her hand.

Charlie Rose said, “And it says right here in the *Entertainment Weekly* [he started rattling news pages again] that you’ve used extras from the nursing home, some of whom didn’t know at the time they were being filmed.”

Landebaum said that only those who were incapable of comprehending didn’t know they were being filmed.

“Well, how ethical is that?” Charlie asked. “Not that I myself believe it’s unethical, but I can imagine there might be some who would.”

Selina turned off the set and pulled the covers tightly around her. The notion that she and Hank might, after all of his stealthy self-protection schemes, be caught on film and projected across the screens of America made her want to laugh and cry at the same time. But Selina was quite bored with crying. The last few times she and Hank had been naked between the sheets, she had cried. It seemed so typical. And ridiculous. There was something about crying that was fundamentally wrong, an imbalance. There is almost nothing the non-crying person can do when the crying person turns on the faucet except offer tissues or water—or perhaps massage the hand or give a hug. (Though wasn’t trying to hug a crying person rather like trying to hug a vomiting person?) During a crying jag, reciprocity evaporated. It was the flight from reason and dialogue. There is nothing the non-crying person can say that matters. Nor can he simply walk away. So there they’d be, trapped, with Selina sobbing and Hank either saying nothing or mouthing platitudes, yet clearly miserable, until, finally, he just fell asleep. And afterwards, though there might be a temporary kind of cleansed feeling, some fundamental thing still would not have changed. Crying took over and shut things down (even while emptying out other things). She was definitely fed up with crying.

Laughing was another matter. And the part of her that was still capable of viewing her own life as a comedy wanted to laugh uproariously at the absurdity of her nursing home strolls with Hank. She thought of the times that Hank had stopped to chat with the straw-hatted woman, doing his good deed for the day. The man had a need to be liked and admired, even if by a senile woman who never remembered him from one day to the next. It was not only her admiration Hank sought, however. He wanted others to note his kindness to strangers. He wanted congratulations. He wanted this most avidly when it served as a possible means of getting him out of a
dicey conversation with his mistress.

One sunny, windy afternoon, as they strolled the grounds of the Masonic Home, weaving in and out of discreetly spaced wheelchair groupings, Hank, sans utility belt, mentioned his upcoming summer trip to the South of France. It was the first Selina had heard of it, and for approximately three seconds she thought he was proposing a getaway for the two of them, when in fact what he meant was a twentieth wedding anniversary trip, which he insisted was all his wife’s doing and nothing but her doing, as the two of them had nothing, absolutely nothing, in common, not one single thing—to wit, the way they always slept with pillows between them and would continue to do so on this trip, and let’s not forget that she’s got a sister over there in Strasbourg, and Hank would hardly be spending any time at all with these people while they were gone, in fact he didn’t even like the South of France and had nothing in common with his in-laws, all of whom were avaricious capitalist Republicans.

“Hank.” Selina stopped in her tracks. “Who doesn’t like the South of France?”

He took her arm and tucked it into his. “Well, you know what I mean,” he said.

“Have you ever been to the South of France?”

“Yes!” he snapped, looking as if she had just accused him of murdering a litter of golden retriever puppies. “In college. In Provence, I got sick from a tomato tart and have never been able to eat that bastard vegetable since. In fact, just the other day I saw an article about how good tomatoes are for you when they’re cooked because of the lycopene and its cancer-fighting properties—and, well, you know I need all the protection I can get in that department, and—”

“Hank!”

“Yes?”

“Stop. I get it, man, that you’re married and you have to do marital things. But I’m going to tell you this because I want us to get off this track. I don’t believe you about how bad things are with your wife. If they were that bad, you couldn’t stay there. Could you? You couldn’t go overseas with her, right? I mean, you wouldn’t. That’s a lot of cramped space to share time in—the airports, the planes, the cars, the hotel rooms.”

“With pillows between us.”

“Spare me.”

“We do have pillows!”

“I don’t care about the fucking pillows.”

“The pillows are all we’ve got between us, the only thing we have in common.”

And that was when Hank saw that the straw-hatted woman’s hat had slipped off her head and fallen backwards to the ground. In her paralyzed manner, she was frantically whisking herself back and forth, from left to right, trying to see around to the back of her wheelchair. Hank dashed across the lawn to help her like a doubles partner going after a topspin lob. He scooped down to catch the now-skittering hat just as it was about to land at the feet of the sleeping man who habitually wore a kilt and insisted upon keeping his bagpipes (which he very probably had not played in at
least ten years) across his lap. The man sat up with a start and inadvertently kicked Hank in his blue-jeaned ass, causing the latter to shout, “Hey!” which he quickly amended to a “Hey, there, sir! How are you today? I’m just trying to catch Madam’s hat!”

The kilted bagpiper growled at him. The now-hatless woman began to wave her arms and shout, “Jack Russell! Jack Russell! Give me back my hat!” Followed by:

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance, or nature’s changing course untrimmed.

She shouted the word _untrimmed_ with all her might, then reiterated, “Unhand my hat, sir! Kindly unhand my hat!”

With a gentlemanly bow, Hank presented her with the hat then remained bent over whispering into her ear, and before you could say Jack Russell again, he had the woman blushing, giggling, and holding onto his arm as if he were her long-lost teacher’s pet. As Selina herself had once been, the straw-hatted woman was charmed by Hank’s manners. Yet these manners, in the way of all manners since the beginning of civilization, existed only on the surface. Selina didn’t know how much more she could stand there watching, so she began to back away. There was no telling how long it would be before Hank forgot his monologue and remembered her. Though they had driven in his car, she was not a bit above slipping out and running home. After all, her house was only two miles away. She could do it in twenty minutes or less. She looked down at her feet, only then remembering that she had worn boots today in order to ward off possible spring-related muddy conditions. Glancing back at Hank and the straw-hatted woman and finding herself unobserved, she’d begun walking steadfastly toward the entrance pillars of the Masonic Home, when, out of nowhere (or so it seemed), the kilted man raised the bagpipes to his lips and began to blow. Not only was he out of practice; apparently so was the instrument itself, for it sounded like the cry of a dozen male cats being castrated without anesthesia. Selina bolted. She high-tailed it. She shot through the pillars with thoughts of wanting to set flame to all extant copies of Robert Burns’s books, for not a single cultural force in this world except for the sound of bagpipes brought out genuine prejudice in her. Bagpipes made her want to see Scotland blown off the map. Who the devil had come up with the blasted things? As she cleared the Masonic Home and turned the corner, she peeked back through a chink in the bricks to see that the music had not only brought the staff running from the retirement home, but a camera and crew had arrived as well, and Hank seemed to think nothing of it. There he stood, shaking hands with a bunch of twenty-somethings, whom she only now realized must have numbered the kid Landebaum among them.

Hank was very likely going to show up somewhere in _Notes on a Straw-Hatted Woman_, but since she, Selina, had escaped being filmed alongside him, how could he be anything less than thrilled to see himself on screen?
(He would be worried, though, about the ten pounds the camera was said to add to the human frame.) Or had there been filming from a distance prior to the blowing of the bagpipes? Only the movie’s Louisville debut would tell.

She realized now that she had the kind of power some women would give their last shred of estrogen for: she had the power to make a man squirm. If she were to let Hank know what she had figured out tonight during Charlie Rose, he would do anything necessary in order to meet her wherever and whenever she saw fit. It nauseated her even to host such a thought in her brain. It nauseated her more to picture the reality of Hank’s full-out paranoia—the all-consuming autistic Tourette’s Syndrome demand of it. Still, she felt the need to tell him.

Selina had seen an article in her therapist’s waiting room called “The Sociopath Down the Block.” In it the author, a Berkeley psychologist, claimed that there were far more sociopaths among us than previously imagined—that perhaps as many as one in twenty people was a stark raving criminal-in-the-making, a man or woman without a conscience. This meant that in any given classroom, boardroom, or movie theatre across the nation, soulless creatures lay in wait to ruin your life. What had happened to the word soulless, Selina wondered? How had it fallen by the wayside, along with sin and punishment? Was Hank a sociopath? Was she? She didn’t think so, but she had been scared to read the fine print of the article to find out.

Oddly, Hank seemed least like a lunatic when he sang to her. For many human beings, precisely the opposite might be true. When the singing started, it was time to call it a day. But Hank had that voice that could do Leonard Cohen, Lou Reed, Johnny Cash, and Greg Brown. Sometimes when she answered the phone, he began by singing into her ear without so much as a howdy-do. The gravel of his vocal chords made her have to sit down if she was standing. He always knew just the right lines to use and (unlike with his conversational methods) when to stop. It was almost as if he had gone to school and majored in The Art of Low-Voiced Seduction. How he got her with that voice. He sang as though he were channeling these mature and seasoned men—but also like a little boy crooning to please his mother. It was a winning combination. Yet a man was not his voice alone. Especially not Hank, whose monologizing speaking voice, in contrast to his singing voice, had begun to fray her last nerve. Why couldn’t life be the way it was in Jane Austen novels, with the lovers first believing that they detested each other and then incrementally discovering that in fact they had been in love all along? In real life, loving so often transformed into loathing. The world had lost its sense of the irrational fatalism of love. And precisely because of this, she determined it was best not to let Hank know anything at all about the movie he might soon be appearing in. Let him find it out when he read it in the paper—just like everyone else.

(Excerpt from the novel Pilot Light)
Yesterday, in the public library, a man stopped by the table where you were reading Carolyn Forché, leaned down and mumbled something with rubber band lips that you asked him to repeat. A ribbon of drool fell from his mouth and he said, *Are you a boy or a girl?* In your best library voice, you whispered *Girl*, and he sidled away, leaving you distracted and remembering how you complained to a friend about lesbians in Kroger who stare at you and your butch hair until she finally said, *For God’s sake, put on some makeup and earrings!* Later, when you took off your coat in the diner, a car salesman at the counter stared at your wild breasts and you thought, *I just can’t win.*

Likely, there are nights when you fear you will always live alone, wonder how you will manage the back stairs when you are old. Tonight, put on some Dylan, maybe *Blood on the Tracks*, and pace from the couch to the window and back again. Feel rough wood beneath your feet. Forget about your hair and your father who joked he’d need a whole wall in the family room just for pictures of your husbands. Resist applying the Buddhist principle of only so many breaths in a lifetime to, say, orgasms or the number of photos in which you are smiling.

In the morning, put on your coat, walk through the door and down the stairs. Follow the alley to the street where a row of Victorians stands in scoured yards. See past the littered hedges and ruined Christmas wreaths. Find the purple crocuses floating on the dry grass. Breathe. Wait. Breathe.
Steven Skaggs

**Yin and Yang**
(for J.D.)

Like blind on braille
my doubled fingers
read the porcelain groove on your chest

and I think of yin and yang
where a wholeness is reached by full-and-null
which full-and-full cannot achieve.

That deepness in you
makes others seem mundane:
a disfigurement of excess

like an oration
too florid for sincerity
or wealth pedestaled in gold leaf.

Hyperbole
imbalances them,
while your dynamic profile

gathers its see-saw pivot
and writes its own completeness
in a sine wave across your sternum.

Bernd Sauermann

**Love as a Token Economy**

The price of my love is a pound of salt and a dying blue flame,
so she spends the night bartering for a glass of water.
This morning the eye of the storm looks thirstily out to sea.
This morning the levee is breached.
This morning water will come together with water.
So shall I shun the beach? The sand? The sun?
Can I afford the sun but not the flame-resistant cloth?
Can I afford this clumsy swimming motion?
Splinters from a slippery deck?
Shall I trick meager clouds from the sky?
Or resume the liberal application of salve?
Shall I hold under the very thing I love?
My pillars quiver as if rocked
by the blows of Neptune himself.
I hold a head.
I hold a heart like a dead crab,
and I stare into thirty-three blue eyes
burning like driftwood.
I dig a hole in the sand.
I dig it deeper.

Scott Luter

The Reason I Don’t Write Love Poems

is not because I don’t love my wife,
my family, or my floppy-eared dog.
Love poems are boring.
They’re chess sets missing a pawn,
houses made of half-decked cards,
cars with rusted floors.

Love is like floating a canoe.
It’s scary at first, hard to settle into
like a tough hotel bed, but before you know it,
you’ve rounded the curve, you’re
on the home stretch.

It’s a long bout of exercise,
like stretching, teaching your legs
to run three miles without stopping,
or learning, by feel, the perfect golf swing.

There will always be times
when the canoe leaks, the ball slices.
Love is about taking down the notes
and going back to the barn.
Love is relaxing with a cup of coffee
and rubbing the dog behind his ears.
Love is sitting down and beginning to type:
The reason I don’t write love poems....
Abi Beyke

Untitled (for Merrick)

I haven’t forgotten
Rufus. Hallelujah
in your basement.
The intimacy
of song
shared by strangers.
Watching
your lips,
silver hooped,
forming notes.
Wondering if it would
be difficult
to kiss you.
Finding out
that it
wasn’t.

I haven’t forgotten
the mornings
after.
Lying,
watching you
breathe.
Placing my
head
on your chest,
over your
heart.
Hoping
you could feel
me.
You
never stirring.

I haven’t forgotten
the last
night.
Waking,
fumbling
in the dark
for a light.
Feeling the
crunch
of plastic
beneath my
bare feet.
Realizing
there were
others.

Kathleen Driskell

Ring

She said: My darling green and slick fish of a daughter, still sealed tight I unwrap this to show you the only one left behind with me, not to give a perfect circle the fine minister said, said at the altar when it was slipped upon me did the slip upon me and now here it is, walked off my thin finger forever (perhaps) and yet somehow still at home now in my palm, see? Look at this, a heavenly loop. It’s a butterscotch on the wet tongue, halo around the sly lamppost on a cold rain-flung street, gin-ring at the stemmed base of a quick martini, green olive left behind with pimento sucked out full ripe kiss remembered on a cocktail napkin, the bombast and charming lure of a shining hoop snake rolling dark rolling out of a dream, just one swinging handcuff yet left at the bedpost, yellow frost around the stunned eye of the gaffed sailfish, stiff lens of spy glass, burnished beetle spinning, spinning on its back, seen only once the tree has fallen, after lightning has struck that delicious winking secret delicious and, yet untold, that winking secret that begs to be fished out of its deep and narrow hole, perhaps you are who you think you are, or perhaps you are your mother’s daughter or perhaps you are your father’s. Know this now, standing here in the bright triangle of moon light on the knotted floor: There are some rings woman shouldn’t hand down to daughters, should not mind misplacing, should not stoop to un-wrench the kitchen pipes to retrieve, but rather, and merrily, should allow the faucet’s full cold flush to carry them off and into the swift current of mean and sour rivers.
Dani watched the full moon shimmy up the tree line along the Milwaukee River while she waited for Ev on the restaurant patio. The silver shaker of martinis she had ordered formed a ring of sweat on its beer mat. The pair of stemmed glasses beside it had lost their frost. A hush fell over the diners enjoying the unseasonably warm September weather as the moon’s bright face backlit the turning leaves.

Dani attributed her rising annoyance to the Norwegian sense of punctuality her mother had taught her. Ev had suggested meeting early, so he could be home for his daughter’s nine o’clock bedtime.

Happy hour crowd sounds spilled from the bar. Dani turned to see a waiter holding the door, showing Ev where she sat. She filled her glass and sampled the bitter cocktail as he wove his way through the now crowded tables.

When he reached her, Dani smiled at him and then raised her glass to salute the moon rising above the trees. “To a perfect Wisconsin evening. The moon looks just like a drum of new cheddar cheese.” A bit of gin sloshed over the rim of her glass.

Ev leaned on the metal chair opposite her and replied in his dry British accent, “I wonder if it might be wise to ask my publisher for a more graceful editor less prone to cheesy similes.”

Dani grinned, still eager to please him, but the gibe made her uneasy. She had not misunderstood; their meeting was not about his book. She sipped her drink and let him watch her eyes slide from his face to his toes and back up again.

His dark blonde hair was freshly trimmed and tidy as usual, except for the boyish forelock that always drooped across his left eye. Perspiration beaded his hairline where it was beginning to recede. His uniform—dark sport coat, checked shirt, silk knit tie and tailored slacks, all picked out by his wife—looked stuffy amidst the denim, khaki and tee-shirts of the River West crowd.

Maybe he was embarrassed about arriving late, Dani thought. And maybe his charcoal suede jacket was rushing the season.

Her own wardrobe choice—stovepipe jeans, gray cashmere tee and tooled leather mules—had taken an extra 15 minutes to select when she dressed for work. She was going for casual elegance, not an easy look for a five foot two redhead from Darlington, Wisconsin, to achieve. Her husband, Wren, called the outfit her urban cowgirl get up.

She set her glass down with a sharp rap and gestured for him to sit. “If I hadn’t paid for the drinks, Dr. Taite,” she said tartly, “I’d guess you were planning to deduct them from your taxes.”

He pulled off his tie, shrugged out of his jacket and eased into the chair. “It looks like I need to catch up.”

She didn’t correct him. Instead, she recalled his approach at their first meeting.

“He pronounced the words with an exaggerated Scottish burr, emphasizing

Danielle Masters Morgan—such a grand name for such a wee lass.”
each syllable as if it were a key to a code he had just broken.

She had glanced up from the manuscript she was proofreading. No one had called her Danielle since the day she was named.

He introduced himself as he took two quick steps across her eight foot square office and reached across her desk to grasp her hand. “Evelyn Taite. My patients call me Dr. Taite. My friends call me Ev.” He turned her hand so that it rested on his palm and bowed over it ever so slightly. “I hope you will.”

She liked the sound of her name in his lilting baritone and the feel of his palm under hers. “Let me be sure I understand,” she responded. “You hope I will—call you?”

Ev’s appreciative laugh warmed her as he slowly backed out of her office. She moved to the door and watched him work the hall, charming the marketing director next, then the acquisitions editor, and even the production manager. When he walked into the publisher’s office, she wondered how annoyed Mr. Singer would be that she had let the unexpected caller disturb him.

Ev had presented himself to the Gemeinschaft Press in lieu of a query letter. He produced a copy of his anatomy notes from his university days. They were filled with clever alliterations, rhymes and drawings which he claimed had helped him pass exams in the demanding English schools where he was educated. He proposed a lighthearted study guide for anatomy students.

It wasn’t their sort of book. They specialized in regional properties, books about the wildflowers of the Great Lakes, the beadwork of the Ogallala Sioux while in captivity, and histories of the state’s notable German-Americans. The manuscripts usually had their beginnings at the graduate schools in the city.

Ev had done his homework, however. A single topic study guide—a Cliff’s Notes of sorts—required a relatively small investment, he suggested. A limited first printing could be distributed to the local universities. He would recommend it as a study tool to his students and to the advisers at the medical college where he taught a few classes, as well as to his colleagues at the clinic where he was an administrator. Its large staff had college-age offspring studying health care at schools throughout the country. With good word-of-mouth, a marketing push and luck, they would generate orders from college bookstores around the country.

Mr. Singer brought the project to Dani. She had been asking to edit a book. No one in the firm had experience with this type of property, he told her, and she had a medical background.

The more likely explanation, Dani suspected, was that no one else wanted the project.

“I will need your advice,” she replied, remembering to be political as well as delighted.

“Experience is the best teacher,” Mr. Singer answered brusquely, “but you can begin by calling Dr. Taite with the news.”

As far back as Dani could remember, no one except Ev had used her formal name. Her mother had picked it, so the family story went, but her father gave her the name that stuck.

Before they married, Greta Hoffman extracted a promise from her hus-
band, Carl, that they could name their first son Daniel for her brother who died in Vietnam. But each child had been a girl. After the birth of their fourth daughter, Greta quietly told Carl they would name her Danielle. The naming was her way of saying the girl was the end of their line; she would have no more children.

When the nurse brought the baby to his wife’s hospital room, so her mother claimed, Carl took his new daughter from the bassinet and lifted her high. “Ah, Danny girl,” he was said to have cried.

Dani knew her frugal German Lutheran father was no Irish charmer. His fabled words were more a lament than a welcome, she believed, because there would be no son to inherit the dairy farm that had been in his family for three generations.

The exaggerated attention a family gives its baby ended as soon as Dani was old enough to help with the farm chores. She merged into the herd of Hoffman girls who were expected to pay more attention to their homework and farm chores than extracurricular activities or boyfriends. Her father’s refusal to requests for such luxuries as class rings and senior trips defined his responsibilities as he saw them: “There’ll be none of that. I’ve the four of you to educate and marry off.”

Dani didn’t ask when it was her turn. Instead, she took a job at the local hospital where her mother headed the medical records department. Her father excused her from chores when she started earning money.

Dani dated little in high school and college. Most of her hometown suitors, she thought, had shown more interest in the Hoffman acreage than in her. Her college dates were no better. The fraternity boys focused more on their parties, and the English majors on their GREs. Only twice had she seen an unbidden flicker on a man’s face that clearly said, I choose you.

She married both of them.

The moon bobbed in and out of the rearview mirror as Dani drove back to her Eastside duplex. A luminous pale yellow at six, it now appeared as a distant silver disc high above the city’s skyline. She parked her Fiat in front of the two-story brick bungalow that she and Wren had bought when they married. The upstairs windows formed a bright line of light above the dark downstairs unit.

Their renters, the Salvatores, were in. Where was Wren? It was early in the semester for him to be haunting the Gasthaus on campus, Dani thought. He usually took a few weeks to decide which students he did and didn’t want to drink with. He could have stopped at one of his North Avenue or Brady Street haunts, but he was supposed to be drying out after an all night bender two weeks ago. Wren’s alcohol fasts were usually good for a month. So, where was he?

Dread swept through Dani as she unlocked the front door to the duplex and then the door to their apartment. Slipping out of her shoes, she moved quietly through the living room. She listened before opening the door to the bedroom that Wren used as a study.

The only sound was the drone of the city.

Her mother had set night lights throughout their farmhouse, but here the street lights and the electronic digital displays of appliances made
them extraneous. Dani realized her mother’s night lights were not so much an example of her efficiency, as her surrender to the erratic habits of a husband who would wake up unexpectedly to check a cow in labor, a weather report or a feed bill due date.

In the short hall that separated the apartment’s bedrooms and bath from the kitchen, Dani saw light leaking from the laundry chute door that stood ajar. She opened the small wooden door wider and peered down the chute.

The outdated convenience allowed laundry to be dropped directly into a wooden pen near the zinc laundry sinks in the basement. It also would allow a fire to shoot up the center of the building. If they changed more than a faucet in the 1926 bungalow, the city’s fire codes would require its elimination.

A stripe of light shone on the dish towels she had dropped in the chute after breakfast. She could hear the faint strains of music.

Wren was in the coal bin.

Two years ago, she had scrubbed decades of grime from the old coal bin in the basement and persuaded a student who worked part-time as a carpet layer to cover its floor, walls and ceiling to create a space for Wren’s sound system and albums. There he could listen to music without Ann Salvatore complaining that his late night music sessions kept her awake. When the door was closed, the space was virtually sound proof.

Ten years as a landlord had taught her the value of tenants as dependable as the Salvatores.

In the kitchen, Dani saw the door to the back entry was open. Light and music seeped up the basement stairs.

He’s listening for me, she thought. Did he hear me come in?

She waited for the sound of his steps.

The rustle and thrum of a rock ‘n’ roll drum floated up the stairs. A guitar laid down a line of melody, followed by a honky tonk keyboard, then a male vocalist. Warren Zevon, she guessed, but Wren owned a shelf full of similar singers and bands. It could be any of them.

It was like him to wait until the song finished before acknowledging that she was home.

She hurried to the bathroom, stripped off her clothes and turned on the shower. She wasn’t sure what to expect when he came upstairs, but she didn’t want the smell of Ev on her when he did.

Her first thought, when she followed Ev to a parking space in front of Room 108 of the 20-room motel near the VA hospital, was that the night would be amusing.

She and Wren had honeymooned in California at a Ventura County motel whose claim to fame was its history as a bordello for WWII Army officers. The motel’s sputtering neon sign, its closet-sized lobby paneled with blonde wood, and the joint they had smoked in the parking lot, set them snickering.

When they spied the atomic turquoise swimming pool that overlooked a wide expanse of Pacific Ocean and an offshore oil platform, they broke into noisy guffaws.
“It’s so...Motel 6,” Dani had gasped. “For three figures a night, they’ll leave the oil rig lights on for us.”

Wren had assumed his lecturing stance. “This Best Years of Our Lives hovel, my beloved, is the heritage we pass on to our young. This sacred site where our brave young men spent their passions—”

She cut him short: “—on the even braver women giving their all for their country.”

The glares of other guests encouraged them to take their grass-laced laughter to their room.

Dani found little to laugh about in the shabby room Ev chose for their tryst. His tendency to penny pinch had not escaped her attention. He overrode suggestions to meet for lunch at the city’s hot spots in favor of its storied custard stands and neighborhood bars. She had weighed his surprising interest in the local color against the likelihood that his wife checked his credit card slips.

The jury is in, she decided, when he found the light switch. The bed was bolted to a wall covered with fake walnut paneling, as was the TV opposite it. The room’s sun-bleached drapes gapped open and could not be closed. Critical drapery hooks were missing and the cords dangled uselessly from their track.

After fiddling with the curtains, Ev switched the light off in favor of the illumination from the parking lot.

“Very film noire,” she remarked, making up her mind to go through with what they had come to do, despite her growing sense of insult.

Dani had expected the seduction to be the drawn out, delicious journey new lovers make, a reawakening of secret senses and sensations that would compensate for Wren’s neglect. Ev’s single minded pursuit of an orgasm didn’t take long, however.

She didn’t need to tell him she was unimpressed. She dressed, dashed across the street to buy a beer, and returned before he had gathered up his clothing and peed.

Dani shut off the shower. The bathroom’s ancient plumbing groaned its usual complaint.

If Wren doesn’t know I’m home now, she thought, he has a newfound fear of shower bandits.

She opened the bathroom cabinet and reached for a bottle of moisturizer. Her eyes fell on the prescription bottle of Clomid that she had taken for infertility two years ago. She and Wren had abandoned the effort when the monthly pressure, suspense and disappointment became yet another reason to work late or to order one more drink before going home.

Rubbing a clear space in the mirror, she studied her face. A sore red spot was forming on the left side of her chin which meant her period would start soon. Her short haircut that looked pixyish and cute in August had grown shaggy and shapeless. In the fluorescent light, her freckles looked like rust spots rather than a sprinkling of cinnamon on cream. The combination of her red-gold hair and gray eyes could be arresting. Once, Dani remembered, Wren had whispered in the midst of lovemaking, you look like an angel on fire.
She pulled on the white terry cloth robe hanging on the bathroom door hook and prepared to leave her temporary sanctuary. She would say she had worked late, she decided.

In the hall, the open back door created a draft. Dani shivered and wondered if Wren had called her office. She hurried to the bedroom phone to check for messages. There was a single hang up at 7:27 p.m.

She ran through a list of possible callers: Wren, Kathy Taite, and her colleagues who knew the hours she’d been working.

Truth is the simplest solution, she thought: I met Ev for a drink. They all know he’s disappointed that the study guide missed the fall semester sales.

The music drifting up from the basement had changed to a plaintive female singer.

Dani heated milk with honey, her mother’s remedy for every ailment except chest colds. She poured the steaming milk into a mug and carried it to the living room where she and Wren had listened to music together until she moved his sound system downstairs.

There was a time when I knew every song he played, she thought. How long has it been since we listened to music together? Two months? No, three.

They had gone to a Summerfest concert and left early. Wren’s pointed complaints about a rewind band made it unsafe to remain with the annoyed fans surrounding them.

In his music den, he spun Gillian Welch and Mary Gauthier CDs for her until she threatened to kill herself or go to bed if he didn’t choose something lighter. Then he pulled out Nina Simone—the high priestess of soul he had played for her when they were dating. The music rekindled their passion that had lain dormant for months.

It lasted the length of the CD.

Dani had found Wren’s dark side electrifying when she chose his creative nonfiction seminar as an elective for her master’s degree in professional English. His students joked about his intensity. They mimicked the way he ran his hands through his unruly black hair when he discussed the writers he assigned. They commiserated about the way his eyes—so black the pupils were indiscernible—bored into them as they stuttered through their presentations.

He provided unflinching critiques of popular culture in his lectures and his writing, and expected a similar rigor from his students. She had been stumped for a topic for her first paper until she started writing about her husband’s funeral. When he handed the papers back, he asked to see her after class.

He had given her an A-, the lowest mark she had earned in graduate school. Her paper was covered with editing marks.

She was horrified. “It looks like you bled all over it.”

Wren slouched against his desk, his arms crossed, his lean frame forming a convex curve that curled toward her. The stance suggested someone who had known pain and remained watchful that it might come again. He looked at her without pity or dread.

“Appropriate, don’t you think?”
For the first time in months she felt safe.

“How’d a Wisconsin gal like you get a name like Dani? Add a Lee or a Lynne and you can claim kin to any waitress at any Waffle House in the South.” His self-conscious laugh ended in a hiccup.

“I’m named for a dead man. Does that fit your stereotype?”

“If it was an uncle,” he conceded. “One who died in a hunting accident or a shooting war.”

Their eyes met as the shock of his jest shot through her.

His Adam’s apple bobbed his embarrassment.

Dani stuffed her paper in her backpack and walked toward the door.

He called after her. “Your topic was brave.”

She shuddered as she reached for the knob. “It was the second worst day of my life.”

“What was the first?”

She paused, surprised that she wanted to tell him. Death came with so many taboos. The strongest was not to talk about it. No one wanted her to recount the night Tim had sped across a field on his snowmobile, hit a fence, and lost his head and his life in an instant.

Her husband’s startling death had set her apart, making her instantly too old for friends her age and too young for most people who had lost their partners. Her friends flicked their eyes toward their husbands or one another if she spoke of the physical loneliness. Her mother looked uncomfortable and her sisters looked envious if the talk turned to money and her unexpected independence.

Widowhood conveyed power, as well as grief. As Tim’s wife, she did not have to mourn him from the sidelines. She made the arrangements, received the condolences and inherited his estate. She stood first in the grief line, sat last in the pew, tossed the flower of her choice into his freshly dug grave.

All of this she had described in her paper, along with the red lights flashing in her driveway at midnight, the silent ride to the hospital beside the silent sheriff’s deputy she had known since childhood, the sight of Tim’s boots when the attendant pulled back the curtain of the cubicle where his body lay on the gurney. She even wrote about the drive to the cemetery where Tim’s parents showed her the six plots they had bought: two for them; two for Tim’s grandparents; one for Tim and one for her, if she wished.

The grave markers were flat squares of bronze with retractable vases that could be raised to hold flowers and later lowered so that a groundskeeper could cut the grass unimpeded. The plaques were too small to hold more than a name, two dates and a choice of a scroll, a flower or a pine cone.

She had wanted Tim buried in her family cemetery with a broad marble marker that read Timothy Christian Masters, beloved husband and son, and a saying so perfect that all the generations that came after would believe that they knew him.

But Tim was his parents’ only son. Four generations of Masters lined up for eternity might comfort them. They lived a mile from the cemetery; they could decorate his grave every week. She pretended to be grateful and cried all the way home in the backseat of their car.

In the months after the funeral, she deposited the insurance checks, paid his last bills and sold their house. She found an apartment that she could
care for herself. Their friends and his family were careful to invite her to their cookouts, camping trips and holiday parties, but it was at such gatherings that she felt his absence most acutely.

Moving to the city to earn a master’s degree allowed her to appear whole, rather than half of a pair. No one at the university knew she was a 25-year-old widow unless she told them.

And yet, Dani thought, her first year as a widow was the subject of the first paper she wrote for this exacting professor who sounded more like a country singer than a scholar.

She turned back to Wren. “Which do you think was the worst day of my life?”

He didn’t hesitate. “The cemetery plot.”

A month before the semester ended, they began dating. Their courtship maintained the tentative quality of their first encounter: need and curiosity underscored by uncertainty. She later wondered why they hadn’t waited the few extra weeks. Writing papers for Wren as her professor had been daunting. Writing for him as her lover was excruciating. She couldn’t separate what he thought of her from what he thought of her work.

Wren wooed her with tales of growing up in a Kentucky town smaller than her hometown. He punctuated his stories by playing cuts off CDs that underscored their emotion.

He was the son of a Methodist minister father and a mother whose proudest accomplishment was her ancestry. When his father died at 45 of an aneurysm, the only job his mother could find was selling ads for the county’s weekly newspaper. At 14, he moved with her and his sister from the parsonage to a trailer at the edge of town. The change in fortune fueled Wren’s determination to reverse his fallen status. The rawness of the experience convinced him that he lived under the eye of a God who would leave him to fend for himself in a crisis.

Dani carried her cup of hot milk to the living room. The moon, near its transit, was no longer visible from the windows, but she could see the shadows it cast overlaying those cast by the street lights.

The yin and yang of the two men struck her: Ev, thick and muscular; Wren, lean and wiry. The Englishman’s sunny nature and frank materialism had been a relief after years of her Southern husband’s brooding introspection.

Tim had been another story all together. Light-hearted and fun-loving, but serious about learning his father’s lumberyard business so he could take it over and support the family they both wanted. But that seemed so long ago, now.

They had been young together, and nothing truly bad had happened to either of them, until the end. Then she was left to endure it alone. It had changed her, made her almost as glum as Wren.

Had she fallen in love with him to escape her depression? And what was the point of going through that now, she wondered, just as the answer came: All any of them had to do to win her was look, really look at her. She had depended on their gaze of desire to feel real.

As the unpleasant insight sank in, weariness replaced the excitement of the night.
If not tomorrow, then soon, she would have to deal with Ev and Wren. Ev’s impatience that the study guide was still in production fit a pattern, she realized. He was no more interested in the steps necessary to publish it than he was in her gratification. There was no need to make him a problem, however. She could ignore his displeasure as long as the study guide reached the bookstores by spring with a proper sales push.

But what about Wren? The only sign of him was a change of CDs. The need for sleep overtook her. If he could wait, so could she.

Their marriage was no more a blueprint for purpose than it was an antidote for despair. His love could not sustain her, nor her love make him whole. She was alone and so was he. She would have to learn to love herself, with and without him.

(Excerpt from a novel-in-progress)

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Rey Ford

**Outside the Lines**

Between worlds
the weather stays confused.
Blue clouds
leak pink sunlight,
and the green moon
watches morning.

I, however, thrive
between civilizations,
bringing my sanity
in thin slices
to the dinner table.

But you, well,
between then
and now,
I will never
understand.
Kelly (Thompson) Lee

Poem

You are the poet’s heavy weaving on white paper, one multifaceted meaning rhythmically rested against another bound in a busy notebook edges tattered with experience.

Buried deep within your diction is a simple story of love, intense then lost, recorded and unforgotten.

Cheston Hoover

Ultrasounds

Like reading in the dark, our eyes strain to decipher the faded, fuzzy image black from movement... a cheek, a hollow socket of eye, a grey lump of a clenched hand....

Mesmerized by the vague, seeing what we want to see, my wife says, “She has your lips,” and the nurse presses on her round belly, an amniotic mountain of life, causing a somersault and a kick, a faint tremble that tickles my palm.

The desire to touch, to feel the baby’s skin cradled inside my arms intensifies like hunger, and I am humbled by existence, slowly submitting to a new life I must guide.
**Tom C. Hunley**

**Why I’m Becoming a Helicopter Dad**

Our corgi, Tazsy, used to stand on hind legs, her front paws clawing the sofa, breathing horse meat into our faces, until we shared our spaghetti with her. Now our son, Evan, wants our spaghetti, too. He crawls into our laps, insinuates his way into reaching distance of our plates. When we pull the plates away, he thinks we’re playing. He glides his sticky fingers across our plates. Instead of “please” or “thank you,” he says “shoe” or “yay,” comments which, in context, make no more sense than Tazsy’s yap. He takes what he wants, puts the rest back on our plates or hurls it on the floor, then, smiling, comes back for more. Tazsy used to whimper, truly apologetic, whenever she had an accident in the house. Evan wriggles like a wrestler while we try to change his diapers. He smears his own feces on his hands. He would fling it at us like a funny monkey if we let him. He squirms out of grasp, runs naked into the living room, and is not at all sorry.

The perfect parents at the library’s Peek-a-Book Babies group are always sure to point out that they have a perfect boy who listens to every story with hands perfectly folded and purrs like a kitten. He can say a hundred words—sometimes two in a row, and in the right contexts—and he uses his potty chair the way a cat uses its litter box. He is perfect. He will get all A’s in school, and he won’t let our son copy his answers. He will win the spelling bee. He will be the class president prom king quarterback. He will grow up and marry the woman who will have broken Evan’s heart. He will hire Evan just so he can fire him. We won’t be able to stop any of it. We won’t be able to protect our son from the perfect people who will be perfectly happy to run him over after he pumps gas into their perfect cars. May his first sentences be “That boy is a perfect ass” and “I hate him.” May he, at least, fling a diaper full of feces at the perfect boy, at the perfect parents.

**Lindsey Lonowski**

**View from Above**

My dream is that one day I’ll remember where I came from but with the detachment of a child one who takes a few piano lessons decides she will never be concert level and quits.

Let’s just hope her mentor didn’t beat her knuckles with wooden rulers or run the metronome incessantly until she heard it in her sleep and began counting rhythms instead of sheep.
Sometimes I watch you while you’re sleeping
and think how easy life would be
if I could trade you
your normalcy
apparent relaxation
all but non-existent contemplation
your easy snoring slumber
for my ability to
listen to music with my left ear
hear a movie with my right
and find that there is still room
to think of everything.

Which is the normal person?
The one who has never considered suicide,
or the one who has never considered living?

In my dreams, I often take your hand and we fly
far above the vastness of Earth
and we don’t simply watch
but feel its veins—from oceanic tides
to the winds of hurricanes
from the birth of a baby to other everyday things
like eating and sleeping and crying

so we can experience how everyone else does it.
Maybe I find some strength there, from our perch
in finding there is no such thing as normal.

And just so you know:
I am not asking for a free ride.
I don’t want to load a backpack then
put it on a horse to carry fifteen miles up
while I walk lightly beside.
I am not that type of woman.
I just want to stop and sit when the time is right,
to know when the time is right.
I just want my dog to carry her own water.
I need a tattoo of the Libran Balance on my
forehead, where She can rule.
I would cherish a little of what I see in your eyes....
No more abuse, self-inflicted
or otherwise.

So I am giving back
every smack in the face
every verbal sucker punch
every fake and weary word that meant the world
didn’t have time for me.
I’ll give it all back
for the chance to start fresh
beginning with myself.
“Billy hid under the covers, but the ant knew where to find him. It was as big as a man.”

Terry Bisson  p. 31

“Sexual activities involving foodstuffs—whipped cream, zucchini and so forth—hold little appeal for me personally; I have too much respect for food.”

Phoebe Athey  p. 45
Terry Bisson

Billy and the Ants

It was a beautiful morning.
“Die!” said Billy.
The ants were marching in a long row, up the driveway toward the garage.
“Rat-a-tat-tat!” said Billy, making a machine-gun noise as he slid his shoe along the concrete.
The ants died, ten at a time.
“What are you doing?” Billy’s mother asked.
“Playing,” said Billy.

There was a drain at the bottom of the driveway.
Billy got his water gun.
“Flash flood!” he said, washing the ants down the drain. They tried to swim but it did them no good.
“Stay out of the street,” said Billy’s mother.
“Yes, ma’am,” said Billy. He knew better than to go into the street.

“Oh boy,” said Billy. These ants were bigger.
“Boom boom boom,” he said, making an artillery noise as he hit them with the hammer.
Each ant left a little spot on the concrete.
“Is that your father’s good hammer?” asked Billy’s mother. “Put it back.”

“Where are you going with that steak knife?” asked Billy’s mother.
“Playing soldier.”
“Well, don’t go out of the yard.”
“Yes, ma’am.” There were lots of ants out back, by the garbage can. They were bigger than the ones in the driveway.
“Fix bayonets!” said Billy.
The ants tried to run.
“Die!” said Billy, as he stabbed them with the steak knife, one by one.

There were even more ants by the garden shed.
“Enemy sighted,” said Billy.
The ants were hiding under the grass, but it did them no good. They were almost an inch long, and easy to find.
“Bombs away!” said Billy, making an airplane noise as he dropped the bricks on them.

“Lunch!” said Billy’s mother, from the house.
“In a minute,” said Billy. He was looking around for more ants to kill.
“Peanut butter and jelly!” said Billy’s mother.
Peanut butter and jelly was Billy’s favorite.
“Coming!” he said.

“Your father called,” said Billy’s mother. “He’s coming home tomorrow. He’s bringing you a present.”
“Can I have another sandwich?” asked Billy. He had a lot of ants to kill.
“Of course, darling,” said Billy’s mother. “And then it’s nap time.”

Billy hated naps. He lay on his bed, on top of the covers.
He heard a scratching noise outside.
He got up and looked out the window.
There was a big ant, as big as a rat. It was trying to climb up the side of the house to the window. Its feelers were waving around.
Billy got his bow and arrows out of his toy chest. The arrows had rubber tips. He pulled them off and sharpened the arrows in his pencil sharpener. It was electric.
Then Billy leaned out the window with his bow. The first arrow bounced off the ant, but the next two went all the way through and stuck out the other side.
The ant fell on its back, waving its legs in the air. The arrows looked like extra legs.
Then Billy heard his mother’s footsteps. He jumped back into bed and closed his eyes.
His mother opened the door. “Are you asleep?” she whispered.
Billy knew better than to answer.

“Go play in the back yard,” said Billy’s mother, when his nap time was over. “I’m cleaning the house.”
“Yes, ma’am,” said Billy.
He took his bow with him.
The ant under the window was dead. Billy buried it in the sandbox so his mother wouldn’t see it. First he pulled out the arrows. They were covered with yellow ant blood.
“Cool,” said Billy.
He wiped them off in the grass and looked around for more ants to kill.

He didn’t have to look far.
There was an ant on the seat of Billy’s swing.
It was as big as a cat. It had a sharp snout and big pincers. It was waving its legs and trying to swing.
Billy shot it three times but the arrows bounced off. Then he got the pitchfork out of the garden shed and speared the ant through the middle. He pinned it to the ground and watched it die.
Billy kicked the ant’s body into the bushes and swung for a while.
Then he got tired of swinging and spun around.
“Suppertime,” said Billy’s mother, from the house.
“In a minute,” said Billy.
There was an ant between him and the back door. It was as big as a dog. He would have to kill it, but how?
Billy got the shovel out of the garden shed and raised it over his head. It was heavy and the blade was sharp.
He hit the ant twice, breaking it into three pieces. He watched from the back steps as each piece died separately.
Then he went inside to eat.

“How big do ants get?”
“How should I know?” said Billy’s mother. “Eat your Brussels sprouts.”
“I don’t like Brussels sprouts,” said Billy.
“Eat them anyway,” said his mother. “Then you can watch TV for one hour before bed time.”

Billy was watching his favorite show when he felt the couch rock, back and forth.
_Uh oh_, he thought.
He waited till his mother left the room, then looked behind the couch. There was an ant, as big as a boy. It was looking up at him. Each eye was made out of lots of little eyes.
Billy grabbed a poker from the fireplace and jammed it into the ant’s eyes, first one and then the other. Yellow stuff came out. After a while, the couch stopped rocking.
“What are you doing?” asked Billy’s mother.
“Nothing,” said Billy.

“Bed time,” said Billy’s mother.
There was a little hatchet by the fireplace. Billy’s father used it for splitting kindling.
Billy took it to bed with him.
“Can I leave the light on?” he asked.
“You know you’re too big for that,” said Billy’s mother.

Billy’s room was dark.
The house was quiet.
Something was in the closet, thumping. It sounded big.
Billy got out of bed and pushed his dresser against the closet door. It was heavy and hard to move.
It wasn’t heavy enough, though. At about midnight the dresser began to slide. The closet door creaked open.
Billy hid under the covers, but the ant knew where to find him. It was as big as a man. It had a sharp snout and huge pincers. It had long hairy
legs. It climbed up onto the bed and pulled at the covers with its pincers.
It pulled them off.
Billy swung the hatchet. He chopped off two legs but the ant kept coming. Billy swung again and the ant grabbed the hatchet with its sharp snout and snapped it in half.
Then it snapped Billy in half.

“Where’s Billy?” asked Billy’s father, the next day, when he got home.
“The ants ate him,” said Billy’s mother.
“Those little devils,” said Billy’s father. “That Billy was a nice boy.
Look. I even brought him a present.”
He took it out of the bag.
It was an ant farm.
Billy’s mother held it up to the light.
“Billy wouldn’t have liked it anyway,” she said. “They’re all dead.”

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Karen Heath

Mikey

A little boy
who found out too soon
Confused
Repressed
Guilty
He fears the dark
Wishes for the monsters under his bed
or a ghost in his closet
instead of the man that enters his room
Him
Each night
Awaiting Pestilence at the End of The 20th Century

Thus the world was made to appear... as a successful solution to God's own tensions.

F. Nietzsche

I am awaiting Pestilence,
waiting, clipping coupons, trying to buy a little more time to troll the aisles of Wal-Mart. Waiting and clipping,
picking and choosing through consumption piled up floor to ceiling, the unforbidden fruit of a Corrugated Eden where tourist money burns to own the pieces of its pie.

I am awaiting Pestilence,
navigating my metal ship with its inevitable one wheel out-of-whack, the illogical pinkity-pink of its flap-time rhythm plucking musical backdrop for Rubbermaid, electric bread machines and pantyliners.

I am awaiting Plague,
 gnashing my teeth in a drive-thru, spy God’s face shaded by the bill of a burger logo’d cap. Watch as He performs The Miracle To End Hunger, divides a single chicken into nuggets for the masses. Watch as he turns Coca-Cola into wine, calculates the correct change then admonishes us with a dazzling smile to “Have a nice day.”

I am awaiting Plague and Pestilence,
 optimistic as Job believing luck—bad as well as good—eventually runs out. patient as Job praying God would tire of rolling him like dice. Job rising from each blow like a dazed prizefighter, retiring, finally, a slap-happy clown, butt end of a one-line joke.

I am awaiting Pestilence,
 waiting for that promised pale-eyed horse to stampede the temple, shut this sucker down. I am waiting for one stone cold pony mounted by a Tonto-Face-War-Painted-Christ to shake down the money changers, cancel all bets. I am waiting for the long arm of His Law to drop the other shoe, slip us into something...a little less comfortable.

I am waiting for Pestilence,
 awaiting the ungentling realignment of God’s one planet out of whack.
Joe Survant

_Dream of the Consuming Man_

TV’s one loud voice
is finally quiet.
Having bought it all,
he moves backward
into sleep
and comes
to the land
of tweedledum.
No black-lipped warrior
rises to greet him
with battle-calloused hands,
only the clamorous shill.
What promises fall
from perfect lips
each night,
_Imagine what I’ll do_
_for you,
toothpaste_
car
_and shampoo!

And so he dreams
not of the dark lady
rising from the lake
but of her
photon double,
the sunlit blonde
of Bud
and Coke
who sits astride
his sleepless nights
and rides
and rides.
Percy Natorri held his puppy dog softie and watched Titania float in the crescent of Uranus that night, ignoring his mother’s pronouncement that five was too young to stay up all night looking out windows. He ducked low in his covers, showing only his eyes and trying to keep his breath quiet so as not to attract the attention of the others still awake in the next room—his grandfather, all grumble and drone; his mother, icon of strength; his sister, fake sweetness and obedience. From his bed, Percy could see their shadows through the translucent bedroom door as they watched the transmitted images repeat in endless loop.

Mother and sister were silent now as Grandfather rumbled through his stories, make-believe tales of distant times and places. “Nightfall is a special place,” he said. “The Legends tell us so. Nightfall is a refuge.”

From his bed and through the door, Percy could see blurry flashes of the screen images, the same images he’d seen hours earlier when they’d first come over the network: The famous reporter stood on a balcony overlooking Nightfall’s crowded streets, her long hair moving by itself like magic. The same magic moved leaves in trees behind her.

“The Legends tell us that in his final days, Cordova came to Nightfall to rest before he fought through the rings of Uranus,” Grandfather said. “He drank Titania’s sacred waters, and the waters filled his body and gave him strength. Nightfall is a sanctuary.”

On the screen, the crowds rushed through Nightfall’s streets carrying clothing and children. Though they ran in all directions, their eyes stayed focused on the sky. The famous reporter looked to the sky as she talked over the growing roar of moving air. Her voice shook in a way you never hear from reporters.

“They say the gods themselves built Nightfall,” Grandfather said. “The Legends tell us that before he went Beyond, Apollo the Voyager stopped at Titania and touched Nightfall Crater with hands of gold. They say he melted the ice in the crater’s shadow and created the life-giving spring. Nightfall is a hope.”

On the screen, the picture shifted skyward as the famous reporter’s words were lost in a screeching rush. The screen captured an image of the dome over Nightfall that should have been clear; Percy knew this because he’d seen it himself while visiting his father. But this image showed the dome covered with mist along an open seam. This image showed the seam suddenly widen. It showed the air turn to swirling cloud illuminated by city lights so that it looked like a ghost. And then the screen showed the famous reporter, still talking only now without sound as her chest caved inward and her eyes bulged from her head.

Grandfather closed his own eyes, shook his own head. “Nightfall is a hope,” he said again. “This should not have happened to Nightfall.”

Ophelia Natorri spent much of that night curled on her grandfather’s lap, watching the distant city shatter over and over again and not bothering to ask whether eight was too old to sit on a grandfather’s lap. She knew the answer to that question, knew what Liana and Matt and the other children...
would say through chitters and chatters at school the next day if they found out. She also knew that these children were probably huddled on laps right now, too. Ophelia had learned the word “hypocrite” early.

Grandfather told no stories just now. Ophelia’s mother had taken over the study with tense, bounding stomps, her arms clenched tightly across her chest, her face a kind of crumpled stone. She stormed along the shelves lined with crystal trinkets and printed books, turning quickly, her gaze never straying to the window and the view of Uranus and Titania through the dome above. This is what it means to be a daughter of Natorri, Lord of Oberon, Ophelia thought somewhere in her head. You have to be like the great Lydia Natorri. You have to be made of stone. Ophelia curled tighter.

Grandfather gently rubbed Ophelia’s arms. He smiled at Lydia in her pacing, but his eyes said something other than smile. “Wearing trenches in the marble won’t change anything,” he said. “You should rest while you can. The reporters will be hard enough to handle.”

Lydia spat as if she spoke a language that tasted of chalk. “I think we’ve rested long enough. Titania’s been resting for a decade, but nobody’s resting there tonight.”

Always smiling, Grandfather glanced quickly to Ophelia, then back to his daughter. “Nobody’s running off their legs orbiting a five-meter room, either. There are other things to consider.”

“That’s right,” Lydia said. “It’s not like this is anything new, after all. How many settlements have died in the last century? How many cities have ended? How many children have had their last breaths ripped from their lungs?”

Grandfather chuckled his raspy laugh, though this didn’t seem a good time for laughing to Ophelia. “Very poetic,” Grandfather said. “You’re doing the reporters’ jobs for them. You should let them ask the questions.”

“It’s Soraya’s Alliance all over again,” Lydia said. “You remember the Neptune settlements. You know how these things work. It’s a cascade of escalating failure. It starts with Nightfall, and then it will be New Damascus or Cryton’s Landing, and then it will be all of Titania, and then it will be here, and there’s not a damned thing we can do about it.” Lydia stopped her pacing at the shelves. She grabbed a crystal holograph, some tourist trinket of the capitol tower, threw it across the room. All other sound was lost in the slow tinkle of shards tippling down the wall.

Ophelia stared through the curtains, over the black dome houses to the tiny disk of Titania floating high above. Grandfather breathed deeply for a long time. His smile had vanished. Finally, he said, “Luminara, I think it’s probably past your bed time.”

Ophelia hated being called by her true name just as she knew Percy hated being called Perseus Tate. Still, she knew better than to argue when her grandfather used that name. She leaned upward, kissed Grandfather’s cheek, then climbed from his lap. She looked to her mother briefly, but Lydia turned her eyes to the ceiling, wiped moisture from her cheek with her left hand as her right arm stayed folded tightly across her chest. Lydia said nothing, and Ophelia stared for only a moment, then left the room. She thought, This is what it means to be ceramic.

She left the room, but she did not go to bed. She shut her bedroom door from the outside then hunkered down in the hall as she heard Grandfather

Open 24 Hours

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say, “That’s enough of this, Lydia. I won’t have you roaming this house throwing things like a gorilla monster. You’ve got to control yourself, or the reporters will destroy you.”

Lydia sighed loudly, and something in her voice broke. It sounded almost as if she were pleading for something, begging for something. “I just...I just know what’s coming, and I don’t want it to come. I mean, there’s so much around us, and it’s all so big. And...and Aaron’s somewhere up there.”

“I know Aaron’s up there,” Grandfather said, his voice now soft, gentle. “We all know about Aaron, but there’s no reason to talk about him just yet because we also know the screens mean nothing right now, not until we’ve heard something. Maybe it was a localized failure. Maybe he was underground. Maybe they had time to get out or find shelter. We just don’t know.”

“But it’s so damned random,” Lydia said. “So pointless. I mean, it’s just like Neptune. People lived there happily for a thousand years, and then in three weeks’ time a half million of them shriveled and died in the streets. We’ve been on Titania longer than history remembers. Hell, even Cordova came to Nightfall in the legends, and now in an instant Nightfall’s gone. And there’s nothing we can do about it. No way to stop it.”

Somehow, the lightness returned to Grandfather’s words. Ophelia could hear the sly smile even if she couldn’t see it as Grandfather whispered, “We can pray.”

Lydia sighed. Ophelia imagined her mother’s words falling to the ground and sinking slowly into Oberon’s black dust. “Pray to what?” Lydia said. “Even your legends say the gods have left us. It’s up to us to fix this, but we don’t know how. It’s too big for us. We have to face it, Dad. Our civilization is dying.”

Again, the quiet laugh. “So even you admit we have to depend on a savior now. Deus ex machina, the Greeks of Earth would say. It’s a machine of the gods. We have to have trust. We have to have faith.”

Ophelia kept her room dark, letting the pale blue glow from Uranus through the window show her desk in shadow. She looked to the posters of mythical creatures dancing even in darkness across her wall—the unicorns, the dragons, the lions and bears and dogs. She thought of Percy asleep in the next room, probably dreaming sweet dreams of dog fables.

She thought of her father, Aaron Tate, child of Titanian kings and Oberon’s ambassador to Titania’s Nightfall Kingdom. Her father had been gone for six months, helping to work out the final touches of some economic pact or another. Ophelia didn’t care. She only knew that he was gone. On this night as on all others, she lay in her bed wrapped in her covers, Aaron Tate’s holograph clenched in her hands. On this night as on all others, a miniature Aaron Tate smiled from the holo and said, “There will be a break in the conference soon, so just hang in there. I’ll come home to Oberon and we’ll go climb the Voyager Peak and see the fairies just like we’ve been talking about. I promise.”

Unlike all those other nights before, though, those holo words were a lie. Despite what she’d heard her grandfather say, Ophelia knew there would be no more messages. “I miss you, Ophie,” the little Aaron Tate whispered
in the dark. “I love you more than chocolate fidos.”

Ophelia did not cry as she realized the lie of those words, too.

The house had grown silent. The soft sound of her padded pajama feet echoed off the black ceramic walls as she moved quietly toward Percy’s room. She opened his door, saw his open eyes staring out the window, where blue Uranus filled the sky. His eyes pointed to Titania. To Daddy.

She scrunched her face in consternation. “Percy!” she snapped in stage whisper. “You’re supposed to be asleep.”

Percy jumped, hid his face quickly beneath the covers. “Be quiet, Ophelia,” he said. “You’ll wake up Mommy.”

Ophelia jumped into the room. “I’m going to go wake Mommy up and tell her you’re staring out the window, scooch bug.”

Percy’s face reappeared, his tongue sticking out. “I’m no scooch bug,” he said. “You’re a scooch bug. You’ll just get yourself in trouble, anyway. You’re supposed to be asleep, too.”

Ophelia knew this to be true. She’d known as much when she’d opened the door. On this night, she didn’t care. She sat on Percy’s bed and glanced out the window. “Are you scared?” she asked.

Percy shook his head in exaggerated motions. “No way,” he said. “You’re lying.”

“You’re a scooch bug.”

“Yeah, we’ve been through this already.” She looked around Percy’s room at the pictures of space ships hanging on the walls, and then to his desk. His own holo of Aaron Tate sat out, too. Ophelia guessed that if she reached out and touched it, the receptors would still feel warm.

In the silence, Percy whispered, “I am scared, Ophelia.”

“What are you scared of?”

“I’m scared of the wind.”

Ophelia laughed at this, though the sound of whoosh from the screen images still filled her ears. “That’s silly. The wind’s not anything. The wind’s just air.”

“I’m scared of the air,” Percy said. “What if it comes here?”

Ophelia thought of her grandfather’s voice as he had spoken in the other room. “It’s not going to come here,” she said. “Grandfather said so. We’re going to have a savior.”

Percy’s voice was a thin line, a string. “How do you know?”

“Because Grandfather said so. He told me a story about it.”

Percy pulled his covers tight. “I want to hear a story,” he said. “Tell me a story, Ophelia.”

Ophelia took a deep breath and looked around the room, looked to the window. She felt something hard in her throat. She ignored it.

“Grandfather told me about how in ancient days, people lived on only one planet and walked in open air with no shields and no domes and nothing between them and space.”

“That sounds scary.”

“No. It was okay,” Ophelia said. “They liked it, and they went out into giant parks of grass and trees and danced and sang, because this was where they were supposed to be. This is where God had put them.

“The people were stupid, though, and they did bad things, so God
sent his voyager Apollo to throw them out into space. Apollo found the man called Armstrong and lifted him to the One Moon, and from there he plucked people from all the nations of the world and threw them to all the moons everywhere.

“Apollo had a secret, though, that he never told God. Apollo secretly loved people, and he always tried to help them whenever they were in trouble. Like when the Martians came and blew up the world, Apollo gave Cordova the secret ships and led him to the promised moons. And even now, Apollo is watching us from Beyond. He’s protecting us until the day when he sends Cordova back to save us. So we don’t have to worry about the wind or anything else. Someday soon, Apollo will send Cordova to take us away to a new promised land, and we’ll all be saved.”

Percy kept his eyes to the window, and Ophelia looked, too. She watched the pinpricks of light from the ships heading to Titania or to the other moon Kingdoms or even away from the Kingdoms and into deep space. She watched the half disk of Titania and the deep blue methane clouds of Uranus. She looked deep into those clouds, searching for Apollo, searching for a savior.

“I don’t want you to go back to bed,” Percy said. “I want you to stay here with me.”


The winds stalked Percy through his dreams that night, chasing him to distant worlds where there were no shields and no domes and nothing between him and space. In his dreams, he fought to get to the dogs because he knew the dogs were good, but screaming people fell from the sky with eyes bulging from their heads. They grabbed his legs and arms and held him down, pulled him into the black dust so that he couldn’t move and couldn’t breathe.

And then, in his dreams, warm arms lifted him up and carried him through stars until he was home again, in his own room and his own bed with Ophelia snoring next to him. He still felt the hold of the people keeping him still, but the glow of Uranus through the window showed no people. The world had grown silent.

Except for a voice, a whisper: “Percy. I’ve missed you.”

Percy said nothing. The people covered his mouth now and kept him from talking, but he wasn’t afraid. He knew that he was safe, that he was watched over and protected.

“I can’t stay long,” the voice said. “I didn’t want to go without saying goodbye. I’m going to be gone a long time, but I want you to remember you’re not alone. I’m with you. I’ll always be with you.”

Slowly, the people pulled away. The voice and the warm arms drove the people away.

“I love you, Percy,” the voice said. “I didn’t mean to go like this. Please tell your sister. Tell Ophelia. I love you both more than chocolate fidos.”

The people were gone. Percy’s eyes were open, but he saw only the light of Uranus. “Where are you going?” he whispered.
The voice was faint now, fading. “You’re going to have to come find me. You’re going to have to come home.” And then the voice was gone. The arms were gone. Percy sat up in bed, but he knew it was too late. The room was empty.

Ophelia wiggled beneath her covers. She murmured. “Lay down, Percy. It’s late.”

“But Daddy was here,” Percy said, his eyes wide. Ophelia only wiggled. “You were dreaming,” she said. “Go to sleep.”

Brett Ralph

Real Numbers

How long the night to the watchman,
How long the road to the weary traveler,
How long the wandering of many lives
To the fool who misses the way.

The Dhammapada

Because my hunger was visible, because it traveled tortuous avenues laid out in my eyes,

I was singled out among the grave exaggerations, the caramel-colored infinities held at arm’s length, swirling and melting, that ocean of tumblers and teeth.

A knowing eyebrow, a nod, and soon enough I was beneath all that, not to mention pipes resurrected by duct tape, an ancient latticework of webs.

A dull thing fluttered close and I jerked, jostling my companion, who muttered, Fucking watch it, who knelt at the bottom stair.

I squatted, a hunter wondering just what my buddy’d bagged in that Bardo of deep freeze and cinder blocks, Bardo of numberless conduits of a spectral mechanism.
In other words, we snorted crystal meth right off the concrete steps. God knows the slivers, how much grit, which inscrutable organism I invited in. Anything wears off, I realize, given time— anything cooked up in a bathtub at a farm house no one owns. But what about the glittering, living things?

Hunkered down like monks who copy a manuscript over and over until the words are random scratches made by a razor, any meaning absorbed in the act, we remained that way until we rose into a room unrecognizable, emptied of everyone save ourselves.

But before we did, before we fumbled past coagulated platters, while laughter in some familiar register sifted through the floor, I glanced at the filthy light where countless tiny lives had ended and knew I’d stay awake to see the sun spill its sickly syrup across the convenience mart parking lot, knew I’d taste the blade on my tongue as I dumped the last few granules on a cross-hatched Motorhead cassette.

Before a five dollar bill could disappear into my face, and this faint vagabond started circling ever closer, pushing a bike, heaped and shoe-stringed with all manner of earthly possession, somehow I knew that stranger would fix me with a stare.

There was no way to enumerate the hungry ghosts, floods and fires, all the wars and shoreless voyages stored up in those eyes. Yet I felt them hold me as I held my breath, and I knew that many lives would pass before they let me go.
Kendall Epley

*Wellstone*

it rained the day
that they told me
I was crazy
and locked me away
in a prison they said would help

I told them I can only feel
the only way I know how
and all I wanted
was no more pills
and to see my cats again

but I had to paint
the way I felt
just so they could try
to understand something
no one can

and I slept in a room
with a smelly old lady
who was lonesome
and cried when
she introduced herself

a doctor who barely
spoke English and
wore skirts with flowers
told me I overanalyzed
everything and I should
learn to just
be

but it’s hard to remember
a time when it was okay
to make a mistake and
I didn’t get the shakes
every time I tried to smile
Phoebe Athey

One Hundred and One Ways to Please Your Man in Bed!

As an older non-traditional student, missing out on early childhood sex education, I am still trying to acquire, still seeking such knowledge by reading magazines in the Kroger supermarket check out lane.

For example, recently, I stepped out of the “ten items and under” lane because it didn’t allow me enough time to slog through the scholarly “101 Ways” article without paying for the entire magazine. I got behind a mother of four with a cart full of everything her kids had seen advertised on TV in the past 24 hours. Territorial quarrels were breaking out among her horde of pillaging toddler Huns over the non-food pyramid they had assembled. I was therefore content, reading at my leisure in the Big-Grocery-Cart-Family-Shoppers lane, finding out I don’t have the oral sex skills of the average American middle school girl. I am still at that awkward yuck, yuck, yucky, stage of development. Then damn! if all the shoppers in line ahead of me didn’t insist I go ahead of them with my one pint of melting Haagen Das ice cream. Southern women can be unnecessarily polite, in my opinion.

Here’s me putting the magazine back in the rack. Back in the rack! Here am I going to the head of the line, “Thank yiew! Oh, thank yiew! And thank yiew, too!”

There was something wrong with the title of that article: If I do one hundred and one things to a man in bed, I expect a lot more than a “pleased” smile on his face. What is “pleased”? Pretty please? I expect him to be “HAP-PAY!” I expect to have worn him OUT!

Fortunately, I received an opportunity to explore the article further. I had read about all I could stand of such job-related publications as Art and Antiques, Art and Auction, Art News, and Connoisseur while I was sitting doing my job guarding the Owensboro Museum of Fine Art Gift Shop on a slow afternoon and could scarcely wait until Mary and Nan (my two co-workers who are 71 and 64 respectively) finished with the Cosmopolitan multiple choice sex quiz and Glamour magazine’s latest issue featuring an article on “101 Ways to Please Your Man in Bed” or sitting or standing up for that matter. Since I will be 60 in two years, this article will probably fill my head with 101 pieces of useless information. But my co-workers and I like to keep up with youthful trends. We like to keep up with the latest advances in sexual technology.

When my 70 something co-worker was young there was basically
only one way to please your man in bed and that was: Get in it! And: Lie still on your back maintaining a reasonably co-operative attitude while trying to not smear your lipstick. In my generation there were only about ten ways to please your man in bed, give or take, and you had to read Cosmopolitan geared to the older-and-wiser-in-their-late-twenties-still-single working women to find out what those might be. (Unless one lucked upon an un-bathed au naturel hippie boy who had got hold of a copy of the Kama Sutra which recommended every imaginable position except one that might be comfortable. Usually I favored a position that would be the most upwind of the boy—reducing his aromatic intensity.)

Glamour magazine never dealt, back then when I was in college, with sexual specifics. There were no Abu Ghrabe U.S. military prison protocols about where precisely to apply marital aid creams and attach electrodes. I was truly shocked to see how its editorial position has changed: In “my day,” Glamour and its sister publication Mademoiselle were for the sophisticated college girl who was still at the minimum a professional or pseudo virgin, still discreetly undeclared hovering between these altered states. If Glamour has so escalated since I regularly subscribed 35 years ago to 101 intimate secrets, then Cosmopolitan must proportionately in sophistication have 1,001.

101 methods are difficult mentally and painful emotionally and possibly physically for us three women in our 50’s, 60’s and 70’s to cope with. We were thinking, Are you supposed to perform all 101 acts on the same man? And in what time frame? In what sequence? Or, are you supposed to make an even distribution among a dozen or so of the most needy in the general male population?

Not wanting to make a sexual nuisance of myself, I (assuming a sexual leadership role) decided it might be helpful for us to separate Glamour’s suggestions into categories and sort out which to commit to memory; which were redundant; which were anatomically difficult; which required credit card abuse of a Victoria’s Secret charge account; which required a medical degree, or at least paramedic training in CPR resuscitation; which might, at worst, cause a severe allergic reaction or, at best, a mild skin irritation; which were unduly messy, involving globules of spit, honey, Vaseline, marmalade.

Sexual activities involving foodstuffs—whipped cream, zucchini and so forth—hold little appeal for me personally; I have too much respect for food. And I want to respect myself in the morning. True, a food fetish might not risk STD’s, but food foreplay, if it drags out, if left out too long, might cause an outbreak of salmonella.

Opportunities for practical application are exceedingly rare, as I have mentioned, for someone in my age range but I did try out a couple of
Jim McGarrah

Generation Gap Redux

Today, my friend Sarah confesses over coffee she’s a virgin, but I can’t tell from the tone of her voice whether it’s brag or complaint. She and her sister Rose think love is related to lack of sexual activity. They agree that men appreciate this cautionary abstinence, but Sarah’s lover just left her for the priesthood and Rose eats Valium like M&M’s when hers forgets to call.

Neither woman knew Susie, my first religion, the way her auburn hair spilled over her left eye and brushed my bare chest with a cold heat, like snowflakes, while she read *Howl* with Ginsberg propped playfully on my navel. “I don’t think Allen ever blew Jack as well as I do you,” she said. The contrast in her eyes between pet cat and petulant child made me burn like an underwater fuse from inside out. She withheld nothing from our bipolar disorder we called love until it finally exploded with the power to enter each moment at the speed of light, and alone.

_Glamour_ magazine’s suggestions on “my man” before he got away, which seem in retrospect largely unsuccessful. For example, I do not think “my man” really wanted to be plunked into a bubble bath as soon as he set foot in the door that time. He seemed keener on rapid insertion without a lot of busywork beforehand. I would say for “my man” prompt insertion is key, greatly appreciated over prolonged bubble baths. And _Glamour_ did not give instructions on soaking time. When I plucked him out of the tub, the thick hair on his chest and back was all matted. He was damp, white, wrinkled, shriveled and kind of flaccid. I had perhaps left him in too long. He seemed to have caught a chill, was shivering. I thought it best to smear him with Vicks Vapor Rub instead of K-Y Jelly.
Patrick Pace

Drinking the Social Ladder

The Red Chamber was a garage that was converted into a posh, hip nightclub frequented by yuppies and the artists who sold their work to said yuppies. The fact that the owners could convince those fools that turning a garage into an elegant nightclub was ultra hip was funny enough. Basically the building was gutted, painted black, cement floor and all, and lit only by red light bulbs hanging from the ceiling and red neon lights racing around the walls. The bar at the back of the room was black, the stools around the bar were black, and the booths lining the walls were black. The garage doors were still there, but of course the windows were painted black. Since The Red Chamber used to be a gas station/garage, the bathrooms were in a separate building behind the club. How suave.

So what were Jake and I doing in a place so far out of our element? We were playing our favorite drinking game, Drink the Social Ladder. On nights we played this game we’d bar hop, the only rule being that we could never go to the same type of bar twice. You’ve got your uppity swank bars, sports bars, pool halls, redneck bars, biker bars, Irish pubs, seedy drug bars, hippie acoustic open mic night bars…. Really, you’d be surprised how many watering holes you can find if you look for them.

There we were, Jake stirring his whiskey and Coke and me taking the first sip of some import beer. (You couldn’t drink American piss water in a swank place like that.) Jake had asked me a couple of days earlier if I was up for a guys’ night out, which meant he wanted to talk to me about something. He felt most comfortable discussing serious matters over drinks. I’ve never felt comfortable discussing serious matters.

“Man,” he said, scratching his blonde hair just above his ear, “I’ve been meaning to bring this up for a while.”

He looked at me, his eyebrows raised on his expansive forehead, trying his damnedest to look sincere. Then he just blurted, “What do you think about Sara moving in with us?”

I smiled, but not all the way. The left corner of my mouth raised at a slight angle, the way it does when I’m holding back every smart-ass thing that comes to mind. I took another sip of beer, lit a cigarette, and then spun the lighter in tight little circles on the black tabletop.

“Jake,” I said, “she’s been living with us for a month. I’m not an idiot.”

“Yeah, I know. I just thought I should ask you.”

I wanted to bring up the fact that he had waited a month to ask. I wanted to ask him what was the point of asking now. I wanted to know why he didn’t have the common decency to bring it up beforehand. I also wondered what he had told Sara. Had he told her I was cool with
it? Did she even care?
   But the only thing I said was, “Yeah, it’s cool, man.”
   Jake’s eyebrows headed north again and a toothy grin slid across his face.
   “Thanks,” he said. “I figured you wouldn’t mind and all. Hey, man, the drinks are on me tonight.”
   I thought it was a nice gesture, considering he owed me roughly twenty drinks.

Fast forward.
   We’re at Pat’s, an Irish pub on Bardstown Road, but I don’t think Pat was Irish. I rarely do shots, and I don’t understand the point of getting as drunk as you can as quickly as you can, but Jake insisted that we had to shoot Irish whisky in an Irish pub. To shut him up I took the shot. The raw, irritating burn in my throat made me make a mental note not to take another shot that night.

   Jake and I were sitting at a small table up front by the huge plate glass window that looked out onto the busy, drunken street. Louisville’s the kind of town with plenty of bars to keep students from their studies. Most of the students attended the state university, but a few went to the junior college. There were droves of twenty-somethings walking up and down Bardstown Road. There were frats with their backward ball caps. The Goths traveled in a sea of black and pale white. The hippies, with their Grateful Dead tee shirts, dreadlocks and hemp accessories, rambled in jovial clusters.

   At that point I began thinking how I didn’t really fit in with any of those cliques. Funny enough, though, I realized how well I got along with each group. Well, to a point I got along well with them. After a while I just found each group annoying. Take the frats, for instance. Converse with them long enough and eventually the dialogue turns to how much pussy they’ve slammed. Like I care how many girls with low self-esteem they’ve gotten drunk and stuck it to. Then there’s the Goths. Yes, the world is bleak. No, it’s not fair. But I don’t go around dressed up like a cartoon version of Johnny Cash to get my point across. And then there are the hippies, who wouldn’t hurt a fly. But they can get pretty riled up when they find out you don’t tune in and drop out. All they want to talk about is their next high and all these “great” ideas they’ll never carry out. I don’t know, maybe I’m too picky.

   Jake broke my train of thought when he said, “So, I think Sara and I are getting pretty serious. It’s weird. I never saw myself as the serious boyfriend type, but she’s just so totally cool.”

   I could already sense that he was going to seek my opinion on what he was doing with his life, and I certainly didn’t feel like postulating.
   “I mean, I can see where she’s kind of good for me and everything,” he continued, “but at the same time I’m wondering if I’m blinded by
love. Do you know what I’m saying?”

I simply replied, “Yeah,” though I thought it was more likely Jake was blinded by infatuation and not love. A person mistaking infatuation for love disgusts me every time. I don’t know why I let it get under my skin, but I do. I had never been in love, so maybe I wasn’t what you’d call an expert. Hell, I had only been in one serious relationship at the time Jake and I had this conversation, and it ended after three months when the infatuation waned. And people wonder why divorce rates are so high. Impulsive behavior—seems like no matter how much of a rush it gives you in the beginning, it eventually bites you in the ass.

Perceiving that “yeah” was the extent of my response, Jake continued talking. “I can really talk to her. Like we have these really great open and honest discussions at night where we tell each other what’s on our minds. And the only person I feel comfortable discussing this with is you. Not that you would, but don’t go off and tell anybody what we’ve been talking about. Okay?”

I assured him that my lips were sealed. I think that’s the main reason Jake and I were such good friends; we were able to confide in each other without fear of the trust being broken. Granted, Jake divulged more thoughts than I, but the few times I did want to get something personal off my chest I’d turn to Jake.

“So, what do you think?” he asked.

“I hope everything works out for the two of you,” was the only thing I found safe enough to say.

Part of me, well, almost all of me didn’t see the two of them together within a year’s time. Of course, I didn’t have the guts to say that to Jake’s grinning face. But I knew him too well. He always acted like this when he started dating a girl. He’d spend way too much time with her and then get bored within a month. Which is why a slight part of me thought I might be wrong. He and Sara had been dating for nearly four months by that point, and with the previous girls he always knew it was just a fling, nothing serious. I decided to keep my opinions to myself.

By the time we were drunkenly slouched in a booth at The Side Door, we had pretty much climbed every rung of the social ladder. The Side Door was always our last stop, mainly because it was only a block away from our apartment on Eversole Avenue and made for a short journey home. Jake was “gone” for all practical purposes; my rough estimate had him somewhere between twelve and fifteen drinks. His normally bright eyes were cloaked in a dull glaze, and the whisky and Coke was going down much slower than before.

I stared at the scuffed wooden table, checking out the initials and curse words that had been carved into its surface, while Jake occasionally made some slurred statement about how he wondered if Sara was the one. I don’t exactly remember what he said. Hell, he had been repeating
himself ever since he took that shot of tequila at Weafer’s Sports Bar. Oh, she’s such an amazing person. I feel like she really understands me. Man, I never believed in love until I met her. You know, mushy, rote garbage that’s normally found in bad movies. I was about to suggest we pay our tab and head home when Jake caught me off guard with a question.

“Do you ever wish you were dating someone?” he asked.

After a pause to get over the shock of the question, I said, “Sometimes.”

“What do you mean, sometimes?” he asked. “Do you? Or don’t you?”

“Hell, Jake, I don’t know. Sometimes I think it’d be nice, and other times I get caught up thinking about how much trouble it’d be. I’m not going to date someone just for the sake of dating. I’d have to be pretty sure there was even a chance for me to like the girl, much less love her. Besides, I’m such an asshole anyway. I don’t want to be responsible for making someone put up with me.”

As I answered, I realized how loose the night’s drinking had made my tongue, which led me to believe Jake had been waiting to ask the question. Jake knew he wouldn’t get a remotely honest answer out of me until I’d had five or six beers, and just for caution he waited until I was on my tenth.

“That’s a good answer,” he said. “But tell me, Reisz, is there any chick you know, someone at work or a friend of a friend, that you could possibly see yourself dating?”

“No,” I lied. “I can’t seem to find anybody who’s worth a damn.”

Krista Pauquette had a face that could leave me speechless in its presence. Her creamy, unblemished skin looked so incredibly soft that I had the hardest time trying to imagine what it would feel like under the tip of my finger. Every feature was proportioned as close to perfection as possible and needed only one adjective, round. Her forehead, cheeks, nose, and chin were all so spherical that nothing jutted or depressed. Her small mouth and nose complemented her full, warm brown eyes. Her dark brown, shoulder length hair framed her masterpiece of a face. The only thing wrong was that I felt like I was the only one who noticed.

Krista and I waited tables at Gaynor’s, a restaurant that was a step above fast food, though the owners were convinced it was close to fine dining. I got the job through a friend, Brett Shively, who was a veteran of the food service industry and also employed by Gaynor’s.

What led me to believe that I was the only one so awestruck by Krista’s face was that the other male servers focused mainly on her ass. Numerous times throughout a shift you’d hear someone say, God, I need to get a piece of that, or, You don’t even know what I’d do to that, or, Damn, I’ve never done it doggy-style, but with that bitch it’d be the only way to go.

Amazingly, there were even a few that complained, Yeah, she’s got a fine caboose, but damn, those tits are too small.
Granted, she had a heart-shaped ass, and true, she was barely pushing an “A” cup, but I couldn’t understand how these physical traits were of any consequence compared to her face. Yes, I am a man, and normally the first thing I notice about a woman is her figure. But with Krista I rarely stared below the neck. Of course, from time to time I checked out the rest of her, but I always went back to her face.

The only guy that ever said anything to Krista’s face was Brett, but that’s because he was gay and had a boyfriend. Every once in a while he would tell her she looked good or fabulous, but he said that to every female server. If a straight man said half of the things a gay man says to women, he’d be locked up for sexual harassment. I’ve never had the courage to walk up to a woman and tell her a particular shirt made her tits look really nice.

Not caring if I had anything in common with my co-workers, I spoke to them as little as possible. I’d ask them if they needed me to get a drink order for one of their tables, or maybe ask them to help run food to one of mine, but that was the extent of it. Just standing around the bar when business was slow and listening to them carry on about trivial bullshit made me want to make sure they knew as little about me as possible. I didn’t want to be their friend or drinking buddy; being their co-worker was more than enough.

The only person I ever really talked to at work was Brett, but that’s because he had already been my friend. I occasionally conjured up the nerve to say something to Krista but usually only managed a “Hi” or “How’re you doing?” Every once in a while, though, I found myself carrying on a conversation with her that’d last nearly two minutes. But as much as I wanted to talk to her, as much as I wanted her to know that I existed, I was afraid that if I got to know her too well, she’d simply turn out to be as ordinary as any other girl.

(Excerpt from a work in progress)

Ed McClanahan

I Feel a Song Comin’ On

In my long and otherwise unblemished career as a writer, I have inflicted only three songs upon the public weal. “All the Roads in the World” (below) is one of them. The song does have a tune, but my singing leaves a little something to be desired—I believe it’s called “a voice”—and you probably don’t wanna hear it. Feel free, though, to supply a melody of your own devising, if, unlike myself, you’re musically
inclined. It can only be an improvement.

**ALL THE ROADS IN THE WORLD**  
(A Kentucky Derby Lullaby)

Rose came from Porter County,  
Where she worked at Fruit of the Loom;  
Hung out for a while down on Two Street,  
In a place called the Elbow Room.

Took up with a trucker from Fargo,  
Went out west for a while,  
Danced topless in a bar in Chicago;  
Came back showin’ the miles.

*Chorus:*  
All the roads in the world lead to home, sweet home;  
They all lead the other way, too.  
Some have to go, and some have to stay;  
And some are just passin’ through.

Wayne was a drifter from Denver;  
Blew in for the Derby, and stayed.  
Took a job as a back-up bartender  
The day of the Derby Parade.

Rosie was sippin’ Sweet Lucy,  
Watchin’ the parade pass her by;  
She stole Wayne’s heart down on Two Street,  
When he saw the tear in her eye.

*All the roads in the world...etc.*

Wayne took out his pay in Sweet Lucy,  
Right there at the scene of the crime;  
Told his life story to Rosie,  
And they danced till closing time.

They were lost till they found each other;  
Tonight they know where they are.  
For two rocky roads came together,  
In a place called the Elbow Room Bar.

*All the roads...etc.*
Matthew Weafer

*Plastic Train*

I heard the lonesome whistle
of the train
as it screeched into the station.
Faces smiled
and hands covered eyes
to shade the sun
as passengers unloaded onto concrete.
Men cocked eyebrows
and stared at women as they bustled past.
Women flitted from person to person
chittering about who said what about who said what
about who said what about who—
and they tossed their bleached blonde hair
over their artificially tanned shoulders,
retouched their painted plastic faces,
adjusted their bras supporting silicon baggage,
and flashed bleached white teeth
at men with implanted calves,
and chemically induced muscles.
The train steamed
and gssssshhhhed
then whistled another sullen note
and jerked forward
to load the next
shipment of inorganic gods.

Jude Roy

*Fishing for Approval*

From student essay: “What is our life for, our porpoise for being here?”

From the water we appear
and disappear.

We spend our lives
fishing for approval

beseeching god
for a sympathetic nod

and the right to swim
his watery skies.
Chris Tiahrt

Fugue in C#

Skim this Thought from a Box of Loss and call it April

Wring from the Wrong Page a Font of Seraph to display the Ace of Rain

Note how Now always wanes at the Dawn of Here

So say New with an Aramaic Accent escape your Smile

And fly

Michael Battram

Wrong Number, 3:00 A.M.

“Are you ready to be a father yet?” A young man’s voice demanded on the phone. I answered, “This is four-two-five, four-eight-One-five, and I don’t even have a son.” He cursed at me, and then the phone went dead. I briefly thought of trying star-sixty-nine And other, better things I might have said; But, wary of a stranger on my line, And that “Good intentions pave the way to Hell,” I didn’t. Someone in need, or smartass kid? I’ll never know. I fluffed my pillow, fell Asleep again, then woke up wondering, did I do the right thing? Someone needs us all, But I didn’t do anything, as usual.
"I’d already baby oiled my chest to catch his eye, but I really wanted to hold a hostile kitten for effect."

**Beth Kennedy**  p. 70

"In his mirror, Jerry saw a Dodge Ram emblem threatening to head-butt his trunk."

**Joey Goebel**  p. 78
“Okay, folks, this is it! Nobody move!” The man, about thirty and a little overweight, flipped the lock on the door behind him and quickly took up a position by the cash register. From there, he could see everyone in the store. He was not an imposing figure, probably 5’ 8” or 9” and 210. Flabby, but something about him commanded attention. Maybe it was the way his head jerked upward and to the left, as if he had a tic, or was hopped up on drugs. Or his right hand, deep in the pocket of his baggy jeans, moving constantly, clasping and unclasping something that could have been a gun. An elderly lady started to put a small can of cat food back on the shelf.

“I said nobody move. Nobody, fucking, move!” he screamed at her. “What do you think, I’m not talking to you? I’m standing here like an idiot and you can just fucking ignore me? Is that what you think?”

“Oh, no,” she whispered. “No, not at all.” Her entire body shaking, she took back the cat food with both hands and clutched it to her chest. She looked around quickly at the other shoppers, her eyes wide and teary. “Sorry,” she murmured.

“That’s better. You hang on to what you’ve got, everybody just hang on, ’cause you need that stuff. That’s why you’re here. You need that stuff, am I right?”

He focused on a middle-aged woman in tight bermuda shorts and a “Grandmas are Special People” tank top, who was standing near the donut display in front of him. “I’m talking to you, lady! Am I right or am I wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess—I guess so.” She flushed red. Sweat had broken out on her forehead and the back of her neck so they shone under the fluorescent lights.

“You guess so. You’re not sure. You come all the way out here to this godforsaken 7-11, practically in the middle of the goddamn night, and you’re standin’ there with nothing in your goddamn hands and you’re not even sure if you need anything. This makes no sense to me. Does this make sense to you?”

The woman, bright red and sweating now between her breasts, looked down. She wiped her palms down the sides of her shorts.

“I’m talking to you! You goddamn answer me! What the hell are you doing here, anyway?”

“Donuts,” she mumbled. “I just like those glazed fruit crullers, and....”

“Okay,” his head jerked, “now we’re getting somewhere. We got crullers for the fat lady here and tuna for the pussy. Anybody else? Anybody else couldn’t live one more hour without buying some shit? C’mon, who else? Who else, goddammit!”

He surveyed the shoppers over the low shelves. Except for his right hand scrunching and unscrunching in his pocket and his weight shifting
from foot to foot, no one moved. He circled his left arm over the store as if casting a spell, then suddenly pointed and lunged toward a pimple-faced teenager with old-fashioned aviator-style glasses and a white short-sleeved shirt draped on his scrawny arms and chest. “What did you need? What was worth it to you, kid?” he demanded. “What was worth coming out here and risking your sorry life for?”

The kid suddenly went white and collapsed onto the linoleum, dropping a box of Tampax as he fell. Super absorbency. Deodorant, in the pink box.

The man watched his first victim fall with a slight smile. Addressing the unconscious body on the floor, he spoke more quietly. “Never thought it would come to this, did you, kid? Never thought this is how it would turn out, did you?” His head jerked. “Here on a Sunday night punked out on the floor of a 7-11. For a goddamn box of Tampax. What the hell, kid.” He walked over to the body and kicked it in the kidneys a couple of times, keeping his eyes circling at the other customers.

“So who thought it was gonna turn out this way? Anybody? Anybody here think they was gonna end it all in a damn convenience store in the middle of the goddamn night?” His head jerked several times, and his right shoulder began to shudder. The shoppers stared at him. Only Misty, the teenage clerk who was standing behind him at the cash register, rolled her eyes. “I’m talkin’ to you guys! I warned you! I’m not up here talkin’ to my goddamn self!” Again the hand moving in the pocket and the other circling over the room. “Answer me, for Chrissake!”

Finally someone spoke. “No,” a low voice said firmly. All eyes turned to a tall man with graying hair, who straightened himself in front of the soft drink case. “I didn’t think so. I didn’t think my life would end up here.”

“You didn’t think so. You probably thought you were better than this, didn’t you, Asshole? You thought you’d end up someplace with fucking marble on the floor or something, fucking velvet curtains, am I right?”

“No,” the tall man answered quietly, “it’s not that. It’s just....”

“Go ahead, say it! You don’t like the company here, do you? With your goddamn Brooks Brothers shirt, your goddamn faggot loafers. You think you’re better than us! Does anybody else think Asshole here is better than us? Anybody? Go ahead, raise your hand if you think Asshole deserves some kind of goddamn special treatment!”

The tall man scanned the room as if he expected support. As his eyes reached his fellow shoppers, they looked down at their shoes, reluctant to meet his gaze.

“Looks like you’s a company of one, Asshole. C’mon up here and sit with me, so you won’t feel so lonely.” The tall man didn’t move. He, too, looked down at his shoes. “I said come up here. Don’t make me mad, Asshole. Right up here and sit down. Now, for Chrissake!” His right hand pulled toward the top of his pocket. His head jerked. Again. Slowly the tall man walked toward him and, turning, began to sit.

“Not with your fucking back to me! What the hell kind of disrespect
is that?” He kicked the tall man in the back of the knee and crumpled him to the floor. He continued to kick as the man scrambled to turn on the floor and face him. “Better.” He kicked him several more times in the thighs and stomach, and the tall man bent forward, face almost to the floor. “Fucking faggot. You just stay right like that now. Don’t move, I’m telling you.”

“Now,” he said brightly to the rest of the shoppers, “where were we? Right—we were discussing how we all ended up here in this 7-11 store on a hot Sunday night in June in the year of our lord—no, forget that, we’re not getting into no religious shit here. Now, Asshole here thinks he didn’t mean to end up here, but none of you agreed with him, did you? Last chance, did anyone agree?” The shoppers kept their eyes fixed on the tall man, folded prostrate in front of their interrogator. His back heaved in hard breathing, but he did not otherwise move or make a sound. Misty had stopped rolling her eyes. Tears were running down her cheeks now, and her chest moved up and down in short gasps as she tried to keep from sobbing.

“That’s right. You hear that, Asshole?” He kicked the tall man under his chin, just enough to jerk his head back and let it fall forward again. “Everybody else knows they had nothing better to do with their lives at this moment—absolutely nothing! Nothing more important than to come out here to this goddamn godforsaken place and put their lives on the line—to buy shit! Pussy food! Donuts! Goddamn Tampax! Is that the best you can do? In your whole lives, is that the best you can do? Answer me, for Chrissake! Doesn’t anybody have anything better to do?”

The shoppers stared down. They stared at the tall man on the floor, stared in the direction of the pimple-faced kid, who was gagging as he slowly regained consciousness in the personal care aisle. Holding their purchases, no one moved. No one spoke.

He kicked the tall man in the face again. He kicked the donut case hard enough to knock some crullers off their slanted shelves. “Fucking A! No one even answers me! Like I’m some kind of an idiot up here! You maybe didn’t know it, but this was your chance, you assholes! This was your one chance in a lifetime to say what the fuck you’re doing here! And you blew it,” he said, his voice suddenly sad and quiet. “You all blew it big time, man.”

And as quickly as he had entered, he turned, unlocked the door and let himself out into the night. The shoppers didn’t move for a long time.

“Wow,” Misty finally said, letting out one strangled sob, “was that weird.” Slowly, one by one, the shoppers filed out, not speaking or looking at one another, still clutching their purchases, until only the tall man and the pimple-faced kid were left.

“I mean, it would have been better if he just took the money and shut up, you know?” Misty continued. “I mean, that guy was like crazy, you know what I mean? Wasn’t he? Wasn’t he crazy? Somebody answer me, for Chrissake!”
Matthew Weafer

Wave

a ripple was the beginning
the Big Bang
of life and greed
from dust and gas
leapt like vultures
into the desert sky
toward day-old road kill
bloody like the bumper
of the killer ‘85 Chevy—
tumbling ‘round
hills
thief behind the wheel
like the clerk
at the Kwik ‘n’ Stop
gripping the counter
reading etched in metal
Colt .45
the rupture in time and space
cascaded from minuscule
to massive
like the poor man
reading his eviction
to his dead parrot’s
cage
where he’s paralyzed
from fear of the wave
of misfortune
spread from
downsizing
and corporate america
like a virus
infecting a child
The coyotes mourn each night
for their moon-faced mother,
who waxed the sky
until it sparkled, then disappeared.

Or perhaps they grieve
for their children.
A neighboring farmer brags
that he’s found a den,
dug near a drainage ditch
in his field. It’s always best
to kill the young first.

When I was a girl,
hunters swooped low
in their red and white planes,
giant hawks, chasing the coyotes
from their holds,
while pickups with howling
wooden boxes in their beds
raced down the dusty roads.

The men freed whining hounds
and, clutching their rifles,
ran behind, whooping
war cries.

Later, the victors drove past,
slowly now, with corpses
draped over the hoods
of their trucks, the tails
flapping in the wind
like fallen flags.
“Caldwell” is an excerpt from a novel based on the life of Marcellus Jerome “Jarom” Clarke, a.k.a. Sue Mundy, the most notorious guerrilla in Kentucky during the civil war. Detached from the Confederate army after the death of Gen. John Hunt Morgan, Clarke returned to Kentucky during the closing months of 1864 and participated in a number of robbings and killings that ended with his capture and execution in March of 1865, less than a month before the war officially ended. Among the guerrillas with whom he was associated were Samuel O. “One-Armed” Berry, Bill Marion, and Henry C. “Billy” Magruder.

Late in October, Magruder found a tailor and tavern-keeper in Bloomfield named Tinsley, who gladly agreed to make gaudy suits for any of the four of them desiring one. Berry politely but firmly declined the offer, saying he reckoned the clothes he had on suited him well enough. From the same bolt, Magruder and Tom Henry selected black velvet. Jarom picked his from a quantity of red wool, giving instructions to trim it out with a tinsel fringe on the sleeves and breeches. Tinsley tailored jackets in the round-about fashion with gold lace and staff officer buttons or brass buttons stamped with the Kentucky state seal—two men shaking hands, one in coonskin cap, the other, obviously more citified, in a cutaway coat. United we stand, divided we fall. Marion tricked himself out in a gray sack coat with yellow stripes and a low black hat from which protruded the speckled feather of a pheasant, the hat set off with a tassel of yellow and black. Around his neck he wound a red and white comfort, giving him more color than the others. Around his, Magruder wound a victorine, a long ladies’ fur piece that Berry said was properly called a tippet and was named after the Queen of England, who wore them in winter and set the style.

On this first night wearing the new outfits, they even painted their faces in Indian style and added long horse-hair wigs that gave them the look of troglodytes, a term Berry translated for Marion as “cave dwellers.” Though Magruder insisted the outfits effectively cowed and intimidated their enemies, Jarom interpreted his as a combination playsuit and declaration of exuberance and devil-may-care. To Marion, their outfits signified no quarter, no prisoners taken.

They were returning on the Bardstown road from a scout near Pitt’s Point, a village situated at the junction of the Rolling Fork and the main Salt River, nine miles from Shepherdsville in Bullitt County. A little before noon on that overcast morning, the twelve of them had taken what they wanted from the stores. At one of the two merchandising establishments, Magruder picked up an item of gossip. Edward Caldwell, whom both he and Marion had known since childhood, had come home to visit his dying father. The store owner shared this intelligence, Magruder suspected, to get them off his premises and out of Pitt’s Point. No one offered any resistance, so Magruder saw this news as an invitation to proceed on a second adventure and serve up some revenge. Since no one knew the way at night exactly, they pressed a guide, who said he could take them—a farmer named Pastle.

Caldwell had come home on furlough from the 15th Kentucky volun-
teers, and Magruder especially hated Kentuckians of his acquaintance who’d enlisted in the Union cause. So the four of them with their guide formed a squad and broke off from the others at the appropriate sideroad and made their way to the Caldwell farm, arriving near suppertime. They arranged beforehand to catch up with the rest of the party at the abandoned iron furnaces near Belmont, whoever arriving first to set up camp. The five of them rode in a mizzling rain that worked into their new suits, only Tom Henry having thought to bring his poncho. Jarom worried that dampness saturating the material would cause the colors to run and give off a stink of mustiness.

Located about two and half miles below Shepherdsville, the house stood at the end of a wooded lane on top of a rise that sloped down to the Salt River. The house in sight, they dismissed Pastle with a warning not to tell anyone what he’d seen or done. Free to go, Pastle lost little time in getting shed of them. Then they debated whether to tether their horses so as not to announce their coming. Jarom thought it a good idea, but Magruder overrode him, saying those inside the house would never hear them for the rain.

As they approached, lighted windows in the house indicated the family were at home. With no preamble, Magruder walked up the porch steps, pistols drawn. He pushed open the front door and found the family seated solemnly in the darkening parlor, a man about twenty, another in his middle teens, another still younger—all obviously brothers from the stamp of their features, differing only in size and small details of physiognomy. A woman they took to be the boys’ mother sat at one end of the table.

The first to realize their peril, Mrs. Caldwell screamed. Then her three sons, George, Edward, and the younger one whose name Jarom never heard—none of them with weapons at hand—realized they’d been caught helpless.

—Where’s your husband? Magruder demanded.
—He died not an hour ago, said Mrs. Caldwell, of his sickness.
—Just keep your seats, Magruder said, or he’ll have company soon.

Jarom knew she was upset, noting the red around her eyes, a quavering in her voice.

Only Edward and the pinch-faced Mrs. Caldwell had risen from the table on which the dishes held the remains of their supper—plain food, plainly served. The two seated glowered. Mrs. Caldwell, still glaring, took her seat again, but Edward, looking from face to face of his captors, remained standing.

While Magruder kept everyone at bay with his pistols, Marion and Tom Henry explored the house, ransacking the bureau for money, searching the cupboard for silver, ripping and tearing sheets off the beds in sheer joy of destroying what belonged to their enemies. Tom Henry came into the room sporting a nearly new military overcoat. Jarom, curious but not feeling much acquisitive, went along to see what plunder they might find. He heard Tom Henry open a door off the main hallway.

—Hey, he shouted to no one in particular. Come lookee here.

Jarom went over and peered through the open door. Inside on a makeshift trestle table lay a dead man dressed in a suit of Sunday clothes, a white cravat under a beard that half covered his face. He lay on his back,
hands at his sides, the skin pale and waxen. His eyes had been shut as if in repose, his hair slicked and combed over his broad forehead.

Tom Henry came back through the door and spoke to Mrs. Caldwell.
—M’am, what was your husband’s name? he asked.
—Benjamin Franklin Caldwell, she said. He was known to his friends as Frank.
—And what was it that took him? said Tom Henry.
—He came down with a fever, she said. Caught a cold chopping wood in a chill rain a few weeks back. Said he’d chilled himself and got into bed and heaped on the covers. The cold moved to his lungs, and things went from bad to worse. Was the pneumonia that took him, the doctor said. And there was nothing to be done but make him comfortable as we could.

Marion then thought to demand any weapons in the house.
—We’re plain people, farmers, said Mrs. Caldwell, wiping the tears from her eyes with a handkerchief she pulled from her sleeve, blowing her nose. We don’t keep guns here except for the squirrel rifle my husband used to bring in game when his chores let up on him, which wasn’t often. And that’s broke.
—And how about you? Marion said, turning his attention to the elder son. Where do you keep your gun?

With some reluctance Edward, a boy on the verge of manhood wearing a soldier’s blouse and some military pantaloons, gave up his pistol, the only weapon found in the house. Magruder then ordered the three males to turn out their pockets, relieving them of some change and a wad of greenbacks that Edward said was to pay for his father’s coffin. In addition, he confiscated Edward’s penknife, his pipe, and some smoking tobacco. Mrs. Caldwell—a slight woman, her body taxed and depleted from birthing—wore boots and a plain frock covered with an apron on which Jarom saw a spate of cookstains. Though she’d heard no threat or warning, through some inscrutable resource of maternity she somehow divined their purpose.
—Mr. Magruder, she pleaded, please don’t shoot my boy. She knew him from the times when the two of them played as children.
—Shut your trap, Magruder said curtly, or I’ll blow him to blazes right here.

That quieted her, but all of them sensed her desperation, her determination not to lose both a husband and a son on the same day.

Edward, obviously fearing for his life, knew to be silent and accommodating. Not so Mrs. Caldwell.
—Let him be, she said. He’s just come home to bury his father.
—Then bring us his horse, Magruder demanded.

Those around the table exchanged glances, and none but the mother offered any resistance
—George, Mrs. Caldwell said finally, go fetch them the horse. If that’s all these men want, they can have it. Though sobbing, she spoke in a tone that left no margin for debate.
—But she’s not mine, Edward protested. I had to borrow her to get here, and there’ll be the devil to pay if I don’t bring her back.
—There be the devil to pay, Magruder growled, if you don’t give it over. He patted the blue barrel of his colt.
—I’ll get her, said George, the second son, pulling his chair back from the table with a screech that grated across the uncarpeted floor.

—You know where the key is kept, said his mother, sinking low in her seat, a study in dread.

—You must come, too, Magruder said, turning to fix his eyes on Edward, whose shoulders were shuddering, the perplexed expression still imprinted on his face, the eyes still flitting from one to the other as if he knew this might be the last he’d see any of them.

When this demand registered, Mrs. Caldwell began screaming. Her knuckles whitened as she sat up again and gripped the edge of the table for support. Jarom himself felt uneasy and wanted to leave the room, leave the house, maybe leave the country. But curiosity to see how things played out held him. Remembering Patterson—his mentor whose eyes were shot out after he’d surrendered—he felt a slow surge of wrath, premeditated and undeniable. Though he knew what was about to happen, he had no energy or will to resist it, no reason if Patterson entered the consideration. He looked on as if fascinated, following Marion and the son named George out to the locked stable, Edward stopping to look back at his mother when he reached the front door.

—Don’t go, Mrs. Caldwell ordered, finding some new source of determination. Don’t go outside with these men. They’ll kill you.

Edward tried to reassure her, reassure himself, putting on a brave front.

—They won’t kill anybody, mother. They just want to be sure they get the right horse.

—Mr. Marion...Billy, she said, rising up to grasp Marion by the arm. She knew him also as one of Edward’s playmates and hoped she could prevail on him to prevent whatever was about to happen.

—Do something to stop this, she pleaded. Please, please, do something.

Marion stared at her indulgently but said nothing.

—Are you just going to stand by and see him shot? He’s never done wrong by you. He’s never done a spiteful thing to anybody.

Marion shook loose from her and grunted something unintelligible and strode out of the house to join the others at the stable.

Jarom made his way across the muddy yard to the barn where he found Magruder, Marion, and the boy-man Edward leading a large bay mare out of one of the stables. When Tom Henry stepped out on the porch, off which a curtain of water was dropping, Magruder shouted for him to unhitch and bring up the horses. Jarom ordered Edward to make the horse ready to ride. Edward, just cinching the saddle, offered the reins to Marion when he’d finished.

—No, no, it’s for you, Magruder said. Git on and go for a ride with us. His drawn pistol left little room for negotiation.

Jarom was surprised that Edward went along with them so complacently. He tried to put himself in Edward’s place. He guessed Edward could not imagine they would actually shoot him. He’d cooperated. Though he fought on the other side, he had no quarrel with Marion, with any of them. He’d known both Marion and Magruder since they were
children skinny-dipping in the creek. So why would they want to take his life?

As he entered the barn, Jarom saw George leading a bay mare from one of the stalls. Saddled, the snaffle bit and headstrap fit over her ears, she stood outside, wagging her head and snorting at the humans that had taken her from the manger and warm stall. Tom Henry shut his played-out stallion, an iron gray, into the emptied stall as a replacement. Outside, George held the reins just under the reddish brown of the bony nose, waiting for his brother to mount. Jarom rose to the back of his own horse, as did the others, including Marion, who’d come out of the house. Mrs. Caldwell stood on the porch wailing, framed in the light of the open door of the house in which her husband lay on the cooling board, her arm around her least son whose name Jarom never heard.

Though he’d come this far obediently, Edward chose this moment to balk. Jarom guessed that finally it dawned on him that the intruders wanted something more than an exchange of horses.

—Git up on that horse, Magruder repeated, his patience thinning.

Again Edward refused, his brother holding the stirrup for him now. Without uttering another word, Magruder raised his pistol and fired.

a single shot. Edward went down with a bullet wound just above his left eye, dead or dying. Then, in some unrehearsed ritual, each of the others, all on horseback, shot down on Edward where he lay, as though to ratify the deed. Jarom fired first, riding over to where Edward lay in the mud and putting a load into his chest. As the bullet struck, Jarom thought he saw the torso twitch, whether reflex of the dead or coup de grace he didn’t know. Henry went next, followed by Marion, the shots dying out in the steady fall of rain.

George stood helplessly by, afraid he was next. Instead, Magruder threatened and warned him not to cross his path again. George stood wordless, his face clenching up, his chest heaving. Jarom saw the boy’s hands knot into fists. Jarom recognized his anguish but would not have undone what had been done even if he were able. He had no doubt that Edward would have been shot if he’d gone off with them. What surprised him was how long Edward chose to believe that death could not touch him, that all he had to do to preserve his life was what he was told to do. Good faith would not shield him from the world. Denial had been his mode when he exited this life, refusing until the last to believe that those whom he’d known not so many years ago could do him harm.

Magruder showed them a bundle of greenbacks he found in the barn as well as a book with the pictures of three comely young women in it. Jarom noticed a pinewood coffin, obviously new, leaning upright against one of the stalls. It must have been bought in anticipation of the father’s death. Now someone would have to order another. As Magruder spurred his horse to leave, Mrs. Caldwell rushed out to meet her living son and mourn her dead one. Jarom followed the others, feeling little satisfaction as the rush of blood coursing through his body began to ebb. Once on the road again, Magruder commented, not in any way as justification so much as statement of fact, that they’d left as good a horse as they took.
Polly Carden

*After The Fishermen*

Often, we do not speak.
We bore our lives in rock and salt
For years,
And wash their clothes by hand.

The canvas trousers, double in the bended knees.
Thick cotton socks worn to grey.
The endless woolen shirts, bare in the elbows.
Every two weeks, a fresh jar of salve, do you know
How the lines wear furrows in their hands,
That they laid their hands worn ragged to our faces,
Like this, even at the beginning.

To them, we married Leviathans,
Water-gods, men who sailed out
Before dawn and returned red-faced at sundown,
Traps heaving with lobster,
Laughing open-mouthed.
Should we say how we knew, even then? Knew
To double-stitch the knees, to mix the salve, knew
There would be no fish in these waters.

You come to these shores now, faces guarded
In a broad pity, presuming to sound these currents,
As though you fathered us from ash and water, and imagine
That the tension in our shoulders is something new.
As though we had not bargained with this horizon daily,
Like a closed book, all our gods silent.

They say old men walk down to water like being born,
But the faces they give back to us are driftwood, rock-weary.

Like this: the lines
Wear furrows in their hands.
Dip two fingers in the jar
Smooth the ointment over the raw palms
Wrap the soft cloth, three times, around.
Jesse Mountjoy

Poem of the Street

I heard her one December on a street
Near the south bank of the Rio Cuale.
She preferred her poems
To have no words, or at least only
Those words that crawl on the ground
(Not the quick and harmless,
But the heavy, lethal ones)
With large empty spaces within,
Or between them, allowing all of us,
The innocent bystanders crossing over
For coffee and fruit, to listen
And thank her for those things missing
From her poems (the thoughts lingering
Just outside of them), this barefoot Indian
Woman with a backpack full of holy
Relics who shouted past the waiters
Between the sidewalk café tables into
The mid-morning dark of the Hotel Aldana,
“Fuck you! Invisible thieves!”
While behind her the stolen images
Nestled and disappeared into the strong purple
Of bougainvillea on the high white walls.

Elizabeth Oakes

Rhinestone Paean

for Tammy Wynette and Roy Orbison

Sometimes when movie stars or singers die,
and they’re your age but look lots older, it’s scary.
Roy Orbison, Tammy Wynette, in my ballpark,
but, my God, surely I look much younger.

What does it come from? Hard drinking? Hard living?
For Tammy, falling asleep in too much make-up too often?
Or, maybe, in Orbison’s case, just being born homely?
In Tammy’s (not her real name) case, was it that voice connected to her heart that wanted and needed and loved? She was born raw and stayed that way, a giant nerve.

This is a rhinestone poem—rhinestone, that stone trying to be a diamond. It’s a sign-in-the-shape-of-a-neon-boot poem.

It’s a big hair, too much make-up poem by someone who knows genuineness lives in the longing, that longing that showed in Tammy’s eyes and that Roy Orbison covered with black.

The rustling of the lost is the sound of the universe. Nothing wrong with being all heart in a world like this.

**Erin Barnhill**

**Winter’s End**

The dishes
crusted with food, empty cans
taking up counter space,
mildewed dishrags,
a trail of coffee grounds
leading to the trash can,
tile sprinkled with cat food
and shriveled earthworms—
and through the rain-spotted window,
the back porch still scattered with sticks
from the winter storm....

Lately, when I sit at this table,
the room swells, I teeter
on everything I’ve accumulated
down to the crust of bread, the empty cup
until the walls return and the waves become simple blessings under my boat.
I am rain-soaked with remembering
the flowers I noticed last spring:
Johnny Jump-ups outside my window,
rows of carmine tulips leading to someone’s door.
The mirror stayed in the barn nestled in old hay for years until Beatrice took it for payment. Beatrice had been helping my mom wallpaper the house for two months, in between cleaning and drinking sessions. It was my summer break from the university. Beatrice was my aunt, my mom’s sister, and severely uptight. The mirror was old, an antique, but in good shape, with a dull gold frame and no age spots or cracks. It was shaped like a teardrop, a nose, an onion. The frame came up in a few little flowery folds at the tip of the teardrop.

The mirror had been relegated to the barn a few years ago when I was still in high school and Mom decided the house was too crowded with junk. Its old place was one of importance, in the hallway opposite the front door, so when you walked in the house you saw yourself, maybe in a coat with snow in your hair, your nose and cheeks red from the wind, with plastic bags from the grocery strung all over your arms like fruit. It was a good size, maybe two feet across at its widest, and gave good reflections. You didn’t look short and fat, or overly tall and wavery. I don’t know where my mother got it.

Mom said that she wanted something different that didn’t immediately call attention to the fact that she looked like a two-dollar whore. Her job in real estate required her to look professional, and to do this she believed she had to drop a hundred dollars a month on cosmetics and tips on how to apply them. Unfortunately she took direction badly and ended up squishing everything on with her fingers, making her look like a panda, or Annie Lennox in the eighties, or that Cracker Barrel waitress who was always sobbing.

“Really, Mom, only one color of eyeliner. Come on. And only on top, it’ll brighten you up, I don’t care what that girl at Macy’s said.” I handed her a tissue, and she dabbed at her eyes.

“Are you sure? Her face was gorgeous.”

“She probably didn’t have an ounce of makeup on. One of those au naturel girls.” I looked at the corners of the bathroom, noticed the cobwebs. The house was becoming an attic.

“Oh, I don’t think so. She had blue eyelids.”

“Mmm.”

So the mirror went to the barn, along with my old child-sized bed which the dogs had been using, a bunch of plastic flower arrangements, a broken aquarium, two rocking chairs, a broken-down secretary with finish problems, three hideous paintings by local art students my mother bought out of pity, and one of our dining room tables. The big one. We ate on one and Mom used the other one as an office. She moved her office to the small table and told me we’d be eating at the bar in the kitchen.

While I was at UK, Mom met an interior designer and fell in love for about two weeks. He knew enough about his profession to realize that our house looked like one of those apartments for people who escaped WW II—stuff crowded together, banquet next to coffee table next to dresser next to
refrigerator, like too many CEOs in an elevator, an auctionhouse with no auction. My mother settled on chucking the guy—Lloyd—and wallpapering the house. She decided to keep all the junk.

Knowing not one thing about wallpaper, she called my aunt Beatrice for help. Beatrice lived in town, in a little perfect house she bought when she married my uncle Greg. The house wasn’t perfect then. It had become so in increments—first the outside, the painting and shingling and gardening, then the carpet, faucets, closets, and fireplace. It was white with black trim, and the garage matched. The driveway gravel had to be changed because the pebbles were too big and rough. They bought tiny gravel that caught in your shoe treads and ended up coming off in the carpet or scratching the vinyl flooring. Beatrice couldn’t abide scratched floors and kitty-litter carpets, so they had a boy come and lay concrete. Eventually Beatrice and Greg had a daughter about four years before I was born. They named her Isobelle. They enmeshed her so seamlessly in their plan of flawlessness that she had to be trained to mow the lawn in a special pattern. If she deviated, she mowed it again. This took its toll on Isobelle. Now married with her own house, she recently spent a Saturday morning shaving down one of her decorative fenceposts because it looked fatter than the rest.

While Beatrice and Mom papered the house, moving furniture back and forth and drinking wine out of mugs, I tried to occupy my summer vacation by catching the two-month-old kittens on the back deck so they wouldn’t grow up entirely wild. This was impossible. They were cute fuzzballs, but they ran like fire. I’d stalk them until the mailman came by and then flirt with him for as long as possible. We lived in the country, but usually Mom’s company mailings were huge catalogues that wouldn’t fit in the mailbox, so the mailman just drove up our driveway and handed us our stuff. Mack was new and young, a little shorter than I preferred but with high, scratchy cheekbones. I baby-oiled my chest to catch his eye, but I really wanted to hold a hostile kitten for effect. I might offer Mack a bite of my cheese sandwich, and when he declined, I’d smile real big at him like I knew his fabulous secret. And I did, I think. The gossip was that Mack was a virgin. I’d heard this from my mother, who thought it was rather like some contagion or disease. I thought it was beautiful. For him, not for me. I had no religious ideas about it. I just wanted to take it. I had daydreams of green bower-like hills and valleys, knights and dragons, corsets and swords. A virgin! Unused, unsullied, white to the world. I was pretty close to one myself, but thought my experience pretty universal and sophisticated.

I talked to Mack usually every day but tended to fall back on generalities about the weather or, even worse, movies playing in town. You’d think I’d use this to ask him on a date, but I was so flummoxed by his bad taste I didn’t know where to start. He liked shoot ‘em ups, blow ‘em ups—The Dukes of Hazard was a recent favorite. This horrid taste was a small flaw, I’d tell myself, eyeing the stubble on his jawline.

I always ended these sessions abruptly in the hope that he’d be crestfallen. I could never tell.

Beatrice and my mother were finished two weeks after they’d begun, and my mother jokingly told Beatrice to go out to the old barn and pick out something nice to add to her collection. Never one to pass up something free,
Beatrice strolled through the yard and back over the field of waving grasses to the barn, picking nutmeg-colored grasshoppers out of her hair. My mother watched her go from the deck, worried, tinkling the ice in her glass like it was a rattle.

“She won’t want anything out there. Why did she take me seriously? She never did before, God knows.”

“She’s a cheapskate.” I stuck my toe in the warming sap oozing out of a knot in the deck. “Maybe she thinks you have something hidden out there.”

“Well, I don’t. Just junk. She knows that, too. I wonder what she wants.”

My mother’s eyes narrowed. Beatrice was slogging through the grass carrying the mirror and a catfish feed bag.

“The goddamn mirror,” said my mother.

“What’s in the bag?”

“No telling,” she said, unconcerned about the feed bag. “Just no telling. My mirror. If she thinks she’s getting my mirror, she has another think coming. Of all the things.” She turned toward me, eyeing me like she didn’t know what to make of me, like she used to do to my dad. “Why didn’t you remind me that the mirror was out there?”

I picked a sweat bee off my arm. “I didn’t know you liked it that much. It was in the barn.”

“For safekeeping!”

Beatrice stepped up across the barrier of yard and field, like someone stepping into another country, and lugged the mirror up toward the deck. It wasn’t that big, but it made Beatrice look puny, a rabbit by comparison.

“I wanted some hay to decorate with this fall,” she said, as if the feed bag of hay was what she really wanted and the mirror was just an afterthought. “At the end of the hallway,” she said to my mother, “there’s a hole. I wanted to fill it with something, and this will do as good as anything.” She set the mirror down and glanced at it in pity. “Marsha, I can’t believe you just threw this in the barn.”

My mother was smiling. “Oh, I didn’t realize it was there. Connie must have put it there. Didn’t you, dear? I wanted it taken down and cleaned, stored in a back closet until I was finished wallpapering. Didn’t I?” She looked at me.

I suddenly thought of going to church when I was a little girl, sliding around in the back seat of the bronze Cadillac. I watched my mother look at my father as he blew smoke out the window and we sped down the backroads. I would lie down in the backseat, my head resting on the armrest, the ashtray a wedge under my skull. We would always listen to the golden oldies on the radio, the Beach Boys and old Rolling Stones, “Under My Thumb.” It was a cold winter night and the sky was deep and black blue, the clouds floating on it like dark dandelion fluff on a lake. I remembered fainting in church once, locking my legs back tight and concentrating on the face of the crucified Christ, the thorns pressing into his forehead, and then the hair of the woman sitting in front of me, all teased out and blond, baby vomit crustily drying on her shoulder. She always wore pink to church.

“Um,” I said. I looked at the mirror, sitting on the lawn in a little nest of overgrown crabgrass. I turned toward Beatrice and raised an eyebrow. “I
don’t think so. You said put it in the old stable part of the barn, in the back stall with the paintings. When I asked you if you wanted me to put a sheet over it, you waved your hand at me. I remember.

My mother cocked her head at Beatrice. She didn’t look at me. “Oh, now. I would never have said that, would I?” She finally looked to me for agreement, then before I could say anything else she turned toward Beatrice. “Now, we can’t let you run off with our good mirror.”

Beatrice laughed, her head falling back and her jaw dropping almost unhinged. I had never seen her laugh like that, a lunatic in an eggshell linen suit. My mother took a deep drink.

“Marsha. Ohh, Marsha,” Beatrice said when she finally stopped laughing. It was unseemly to laugh so long! I didn’t know if I was supposed to say anything else. Beatrice clicked her tongue and ran her hand over the mirror’s frame. “Your wallpaper is done, the mirror is mine,” she said, and my mother said nothing else.

When I was little, my father would spend all day outside, tilling the fields and doing various chores. His overalls and coveralls were big and brown and sat in the garage or on the front porch, stiff with cold or mud or both. After she came home from work, my mother would stay curled up by the fire with a book, or on the phone lying spread out on the couch in the living room with a pizza on her belly. I played Barbies in my parents’ bedroom. Their walk-in closet was the Barbie mansion, loaded with Barbie bedding and Barbie cars. I would fold up a naked red-haired doll in one of my mother’s scarves to sleep while Ken zoomed around town in his Bally Ferrari. Ken slipped into his Hermes bed when he got home, his stiff arm lifting up to embrace Barbie, a Hitleresque motion of love.

The mirror lived at my Aunt Beatrice’s house for four months. My mother did not speak to her the entire time, and Beatrice did not attempt to open a line of communication. I wasn’t really involved, so the taint didn’t spread my way. I imagined my mother might tear down the wallpaper to make some senseless statement, but all she did was not talk to Beatrice and mourn the spot on the wall where the mirror once held court.

At Christmas my mother did not attend the annual get-together at Greg and Beatrice’s perfect suburban grotto. I went and talked to my cousins about classes and professors, the future job market. After supper I slipped down the hallway away from the rest of the family and lifted the mirror off its hanger. I crept down the hall and out the side door, seeing no one, and put the mirror in the back of my car. I threw my backpack and some old umbrellas over it, shut the door as quietly as I could, and went back up to the house.

My aunts and uncles and grandparents and cousins were displayed around the large living room, a card game involving most of my younger cousins and a wartime storytelling session swirling around my grandfather and uncles. Beatrice sat close to the fire with my other aunts. I noticed she looked beat. Her hair was flat, and her eyes looked hooded. They were dark brown, but when she looked at you, you didn’t discern that she had any whites. They looked like they were all dirty, hot-chocolate pupil, a sickly
animal’s eyes. No one mentioned my mother, or my father.

One of my girl cousins saw me looking hard at Beatrice and led me by the arm into one of the pristine back bedrooms of the house. Maddie was in graduate school and had scandalized the family the year before by dumping her fiance, who later hanged himself. Her mother was my mother’s younger, man-eater sister, Annie. Beatrice was the oldest.

“She looks bad, doesn’t she,” Maddie said.

“Yeah. I’ve never seen her look like that. And Greg’s been acting weird, avoiding her and listening to Grandpap like he’s actually interested.”

“Where’s your mom?”

“At home. Beatrice took her mirror, so they’re not speaking.”

“I heard. I figured she’d be over it by now.”

I shrugged. “Apparently not.”

She took her shoes off and rubbed her feet, her thumbs pressing into the ball of her foot. “Is it a good mirror?”

“I don’t know.”

When we left the back of the house, I kept going through the side door in the kitchen, back out to my car. The mirror was where I’d left it. I stood drinking my spiced cider by my car, blowing the steam into the air. The night was very cold, and I only had a sweater on. My aunt Beatrice came to the door and looked out at me, her dead chocolate eyes remote and sad. She raised one hand to me. I stood looking at the bare trees, a jumble of sticks in the dirt, inverted root systems in the air.

Frederick Smock

Tragedy

There is no such thing as tragedy, Melina Mercouri once said, for, at the end of the play, the actors all get up and go home. So, do not grieve. Unless an actor, arriving home late one night, after a cast party, or dinner with friends, finds his dog has been poisoned, his wife has left him and his children have been turned into swine and are rooting around in the cellar.
Kelly (Thompson) Lee

Come Clean

You are neatly folded into the white porcelain corner of the shower. Seated, arms tightly holding round knees against round breasts. The sparkling hot beads saturate your hair, hold it, dark and heavy on your shoulders. Tiny trails of water stream down the curve of your back and disappear like fingers reaching into the warm puddle beneath you.

Simple wounds washed clean that others might touch the tips of their fingers to a story of scars spread out like a Braille lesson against your papery flesh and learn.

Frank Steele

Ghost-Fern

Snakebitten, I could feel my blue leg swollen for weeks, coiling slowly under the skin before he struck, over and over, my leg still trying to let the snake back out through a mouth and the skin holding him in like an eye too black to open.

It opens now, as yellow light keeps watch through the long night on a birthmark. Whatever enters becomes me—cold-blooded fever diminished, I know what I took in. What he carried off I guess at, imagining ghost-fern spring up near my leg where the snake, leaving his sky on my skin, slid away into his other life.
Katy Yocom

Overpass

I am taking my black sandals to the shoe repair shop. Their chunky stacked heels have started to fray. I am stopped at a red light beneath an overpass. In front of me, the eyes in the rearview mirror look blank. He might be a businessman, a salesman thinking about his next call.

The eye of the red light stares out, flat and blank, a flash-lit retina in a photograph. The overpass rumbles faintly, and I picture how our deaths would happen: The first spray of concrete dust, the crack progressing toward us, the pebbles and fist-sized chunks and then whole sections caving in, the grille of a Buick plummeting through the gap.

The salesman gets it first, a slab of concrete smashing his car though his cell phone survives. I watch and know I am next. I hope it will be fast. I hope I am not trapped, alive and injured. I hope my husband can forgive me for dying on my way to get a pair of black sandals repaired.

The eye of the red light stares flat and blank, then blinks out. The green light glows. We enter the stream of sunlit traffic.

I lose sight of the salesman. I lose sight of the overpass. I hope the shoe repairman can fix my worn black heels.

Jim McGarrah

Peeling Potatoes

Numbness grows in your fingers and crawls up the forearm, a Wandering Jew of monotonous veins, into the neck, over the brain until you don’t remember what you’re doing, or why, only that you must complete the task before your synapses are choked to death and all you can do is scream. This is similar to shopping at Wal-Mart or telemarketing.
You’ve done both in times of great personal crisis. Once, when you thought your prostate had swollen from lack of use, you did them together, careening a metal cart with its right front wheel stuck between rows of mouthwash and calamine lotion, past bags of peat moss and fishing gear, motor oil and paper towels, Timex watches and semi-precious wedding rings, across deserts of ugly shirts and cat litter, talking all the time to a guy named Bill on the cell phone about a free vacation at Disney World.

Sometimes, peelings clog the drain and things get thorny. Your wife yells from the bedroom, “Call the plumber.” You answer, “I’ll do it myself,” then borrow something called a snake from the neighbor, who assures you it will cure the problem in five minutes. Two hours later, covered with rancid sludge and soaked with sewage from the overflowing sink, you grab the cell phone, drive to Wal-Mart and search for Draino plus a set of earplugs, all the while speaking in the phone about wives and meaning in life to a guy from Bombay named Ravi Patel who wants to sell you new tires for a golf cart you don’t own.

When you get back home, your mother-in-law sits in the kitchen, clucking to your wife about the doctor she could have married, if only she would have stayed in nursing school. You return to potatoes, this time over a trash can where the brown peelings spiral down and cover the refuse of your life—coffee grounds, milk cartons, newspapers, beer cans (you don’t recycle), fish wrappers, tin foil, yogurt cups, cereal boxes, a pack of Pall Malls (you quit smoking yesterday, but may dig them out soon), a letter from Publisher’s Clearing House saying you’ve won, and a block of lint from the broken clothes dryer. You remember Simic’s poem about shrimps and wonder why you aren’t smart enough to understand its deeper meaning. Your wife and her mother leave you alone till the knife slips and slides through skin like a sautéed onion slice. “Don’t bleed on the floor. The dog will lick it up,” they both say in unison. Rinsing your thumb, you decide at last these spuds must be your dreams come to life, filled with water, starch, and dirt, fighting not to be stripped of their armor then diced to satisfy someone else’s hunger.
Jerry could hardly wait to let the other drivers know what he thought about them. But first he had to drop off his wife, whose legs were broken because someone had run a red light. Since her accident four months earlier, Jerry had been forced to participate in the daily grind after many years of avoiding it. He now arose at seven rather than eleven, and he and Judy were in the car by seven-thirty to allow more than enough time to get her to work. On the way, they took turns picking radio stations. Judy normally chose the oldies station that played innocent songs of the sixties and seventies, like The Beatles’ “And I Love Her,” while Jerry liked to settle on the pop stations and criticize the latest hit songs that disgusted him, like Pretty Ricky’s “Your Body.” Today they listened to the oldies station, which Jerry didn’t mind since he liked most of their playlist.

“Please don’t use it,” Judy said as her husband pulled up close to her office door while “Sitting on the Dock of the Bay” played.

“I’ll only use it if I have to.”

“But you don’t have to at all.”

Jerry pressed a button to open the trunk. He walked to the back of the car, where he struggled to lift the wheelchair, a chore that still proved difficult despite twelve weeks of practice. He blurted a curse word, wrenched the chair free, set it on the pavement, unfolded it, and pushed it toward Judy, who already had her door open. He locked the wheels in place and held on to the handlebars to make sure she didn’t topple the chair when she plopped into the seat.

“Thank you,” she said with a smile.

Judy had accepted the accident much more easily than Jerry did. He dwelled on it: One guy in a hurry, and all this.

He fished the keys from her backpack so she could unlock the office door. In order for her to roll into the office, he maneuvered himself into an awkward position that allowed him to hold two doors at once. Nearly every time he did this, he wondered why so many public places have two sets of doors up front, one immediately after the other. Isn’t one heavy glass swinging door enough? he thought. And it gives assholes twice the number of chances to not thank me when I hold the door for them.

“Thank you,” said his wife.

“Uh huh.”

Judy rolled over to her desk while Jerry reached up to turn on the “open” sign.

“Anything I can do for you?” he asked.

“No. Thanks for dropping me off.”

“Honey, you don’t have to thank me every day.”

“But I appreciate it.”

“Thank you. So pick you up at four?”

“Yeah.”

“And the doctor’s appointment is at four-fifteen?”

“Right.”

“Okay, then.” Jerry leaned over to kiss his wife goodbye.
“Jerry, don’t use that thing in the car.”
“Okay,” he said with a grin.
“It can only lead to trouble,” she said.
“It could lead to understanding!”
“Yeah, right.”
“Don’t worry about it. I won’t say anything too mean.”
“You’re asking for it.”
“Bye, love you.”
“Bye, love you.”

Jerry’s conscience wouldn’t allow him to turn on his invention until he had left the parking lot. He turned off the radio so he could devote all of his attention to this test drive. At a red light, he anxiously reached into the backseat of his two-door Cougar for a gray keyboard with wires sprouting from the top. He set it on the armrest and pressed the “on” button. To test it, he ran his fingers over the keys.

He checked each of the signs, one mounted at the top of his windshield, one at the top of his back window, and one at the top of each of his side windows. Jerry saw that each sign emanated red light. He then heard a horn honking, apparently to alert him that the traffic light had turned green. As the horn continued to honk, Jerry hit the delete key and typed in “sorry” as fast as he could.

Each of the signs stood eighteen inches long and three inches wide. The words Jerry typed appeared in the form of illuminated red LEDs. The signs were mounted inside the car and connected to the keyboard with wires he had stapled to the upholstery. The sign mounted on the windshield showed the letters backward so that drivers could read Jerry’s statements in their rearview mirrors.

The driver who had honked pulled around the Cougar lit up with “sorry” signs. As he was being passed, Jerry looked over to see the driver’s reaction. The man merely glanced at Jerry before speeding on.

He should have waved or something, Jerry thought. I said I was sorry.

Now thirty-something, Jerry was sixteen when he originally came up with the idea of writing messages to other drivers. In his high school parking lot he first learned of the capricious beasts that people become when placed behind steering wheels. Every day after school, at least one driver would commit a violation or mistreat Jerry personally. In the chaotic parking lot and the long road leading out to the highway, Jerry found himself a constant victim of being cut off, flipped off, honked at, tailgated, and every other driving offense imaginable. Car accidents commonly occurred in the school parking lot, and Jerry had his share of close calls, rarely his fault. Jerry was, in fact, an unusually cautious and considerate driver from age sixteen into adulthood.

One day at school on the road leading out of campus, Jerry got in the position to let a car in the yielding lane into his lane. He gladly waved the driver over, already practicing his lifelong rule of letting one car in front of him. Jerry became infuriated, though, when seven other cars took advantage of his kindness, speeding in front of him as he looked on in dismay.

On that particular day, Jerry had a passenger, a friend to whom he some-
times gave a lift home. After those seven cars cut in front of him, Jerry banged his fist on his dashboard and told his friend to get out a piece of notebook paper.

“Write this down in big, bold letters,” Jerry ordered his passenger. “You are a rude piece of trash for cutting in front of me.”

Jerry’s friend giggled with mischief as he jotted down the statement.

“When we get on the highway, I’m gonna pass them, and you hold up the sign.”

But most of those “rude pieces of trash” had sped so far down the highway that Jerry couldn’t catch up. Jerry’s passenger could show the sign to only one of the offending drivers, a prissy young girl who responded with the default angry driver gesture. Jerry considered the middle finger a clichéd and ineffective way for a driver to show disapproval. Words could express so much more, if people could only use them.

Twelve weeks ago, when his wife returned to work after being hit by a car, Jerry became a part of the morning and afternoon rush hours. Until then, he had been able to work from his computer at home, seldom joining the big-city traffic that so intensely chafed him. He had always been a nervous driver, one who obsessively checked his mirrors to have complete awareness of what the other drivers were or weren’t doing. He didn’t trust them and had little faith that they would handle their potential death machines with the care that they require. With extra caution on his part, Jerry thought he could compensate for their mistakes. So far this watchfulness had paid off; he had never been in a car accident.

Jerry designed his electronic signs after ten weeks of nerve-wracking drives to and from his wife’s work. He applied for a patent and envisioned a freeway full of cars beaming with messages lit up in red. The signs weren’t meant solely as a means to vent frustration. If used properly—and Jerry acknowledged that this was an unlikely if—these signs just might encourage a kinder, more courteous and careful driving community.

According to Jerry’s theory, drivers are rude and aggressive because they can be. Drivers are surrounded by a mighty cage of metal that empowers them, that strengthens their ego while at the same time separating them from everyone else. A petite, five-foot-tall petunia of a man may treat a Goliath of a driver any way he wishes, as long as he is protected within his own vehicular cocoon.

A rude or careless driver normally would expect an offensive finger or dirty look in return for his faults, Jerry reasoned, but what if this driver could be verbally assaulted? What if we could tell him precisely what we thought of him? Most people are naturally inclined to avoid conflict while going through the motions of their public routine. But when they’re in cars, some people feel licensed to treat everyone else in their vicinity as horribly as they want. It is almost as if the cars’ windows form a vacuum in which those church sermons and Bible passages do not exist. Jerry believed that if drivers had the means to tell each other exactly how they felt, everyone would drive better so as not to face a verbal whooping like they’d receive in any other instance when they treated a stranger like toilet trash.

In effect, this invention of Jerry’s could provide the gift of communication to unthinking, unfeeling mechanical transportation devices.
Automobiles would scurry across the paved landscape as they always had, but now they would be capable of expression beyond meaningless honks. And once the cars could talk, perhaps they would consider treating each other better.

And think of the goodness, the politeness that people could show one another with Carthoughts (patent pending). “Hi!” “Like your car.” “Thank you.” “Sorry.” “My bad.” Jerry couldn’t wait for someone to let him in line so his car could quote Shakespeare.

“So shines a good deed in a naughty world!”

On this inaugural trip with his Carthoughts, Jerry made it all the way back to his subdivision without having to type another word besides that first “sorry.” He felt disappointed that he couldn’t test his invention more and considered turning back onto the highway. But careful as ever, he knew that the messages were meant to be typed by a passenger, not the driver, who needed both hands.

As he turned onto the street where he lived, Jerry saw in his rearview mirror a white pick-up truck rapidly approaching. Nothing irked him more than being tailgated, and now it was happening on his own street. The speed limit was twenty. He was already going ten miles over, but that wasn’t fast enough for the woman in the hulking truck behind him. In his mirror, Jerry saw a Dodge Ram emblem threatening to head-butt his trunk.

Livid, Jerry tapped his brake pedal. He saw both the woman and the woman’s passenger in the rearview mirror offering him the tried and true middle finger. The woman’s passenger was a mustached young man.

As the big-haired woman relentlessly tailgated him, Jerry grabbed the keyboard, set it on his lap, and pounded out exactly what he was thinking. Without his hands on the wheel, though, his car veered toward a mailbox. He grabbed the wheel and corrected his path, then he checked his rearview mirror and saw that the truck was gone.

Jerry then felt something creeping up beside him. He turned and saw the furious scowl of the passenger. In his shaky hand, the young man held a revolver. He didn’t want to talk things over.

As Jerry opened his mouth in horror, bits of glass from the electronic sign entered his face. Some of the shards flew into his mouth and cut his tongue. As Jerry spat and grabbed his face, his car drove into a brick mailbox. The big truck sped away, unconcerned.

Arriving at the scene, the paramedics assumed the unconscious, bloody-faced figure slumped over the steering wheel and keyboard was a dead man. Jerry survived, though, and concluded that Carthoughts was a bad idea and that the message that had incensed his assailant might better serve as his epitaph: What’s the hurry, assholes?
Dori Howard

*Hallelujah, By and Bye*

I wasn’t supposed to, but I stood over his bed, his favorite music drifting from the CD player on the bedside table, as my cousins played I-Spy or talked about school or smoked cigarettes on the heated blacktop of the parking lot, as my aunts and uncles milled around the doorway silently wringing their hands with the worry of the meaning of love or discussing

Carol Yanik

*Disconnected*

It's midday as I approach yet another task that demands attention. With cloth and polish I survey the film of dust swirling like snow against smiling grandchildren peeping from picture frames.

My father sits contentedly in his chair wrinkled hands folded firmly like a school child waiting for his teacher’s instruction. Blue eyes stare intently as polish covers a table and is then wiped clean leaving a smooth mirror of mahogany.

He questions: Tell me how you did that, sparkled the table. Pretty neat!

*Take the can, place a finger here on the nozzle, then push.*

Oh! That’s pretty neat!

Stuck in the groove unable to connect the dots he repeats as I wipe... Tell me how you did that sparkled the table. Pretty neat!

The fragrance of polish flung like flowers against a bitter wind overpowers his memory.
Mark Williams

Anger, Justified

Like the time a middle-aged son,
watching a Sunday afternoon football game
with his father in his father’s house,
does not realize his father has been sleeping
or that, upon awakening,
his father assumes it is the following morning
and dutifully rises from the blue, pin-striped recliner,
walks his careful walk through the hallway to the kitchen,
fills a pink cup with water,
opens the little plastic door labeled M AM,
removes two round yellow pills
and a white pill in the shape of an hourglass. Upon return
the father stands before his son and proudly says
I took my morning pills without your help.

After the son punishes the father
with words that have been forming throughout the afternoon,
after the father says he’s sorry and asks
What is happening to me?
the son summoned a time forty years ago when,
backpacking together in mountains above Telluride,
his father attempted to outpace oncoming blue-black clouds
and vanished up the Aspen-lined switchbacks.
In his father’s living room the son recalls
how he sat upon a green and yellow lichen-covered boulder,
exhausted and alone. On a paisley-printed sofa,
the memory of his recent words competing with television commentary,
the son turns toward his sleeping father and manages a smile—
grateful, for that first abandonment.
“Sometimes the actions we don’t take define us.”

Joshua Clary  p. 98

“Even in agony, when holding the world at arm’s length, the view is spectacular.”

Teresa Roy  p. 102
With my back to the door, I couldn’t see her, but I knew she was there, her arms crossed, her black hair trembling just above her shoulders as the anger coursed through her petite brown frame. This was her third appearance of the morning. She stared and huffed, but she wouldn’t talk to me.

“How many sweaters do you think I should pack?” I knew asking a question would send her storming away, and sure enough, her plastic-soled shoes were soon tapping down the hallway.

I did need help deciding on the sweaters. I knew Michigan could be cold, even in the early fall, but I had to consider my dorm room’s limited space.

“Everything okay?” The angry footsteps had alerted my father who’d scurried upstairs to check on me.

“I’m fine,” I said, tossing a navy cable knit into a box. “Mom seems to have been struck dumb, though, so you might want to check on her.”

My father sighed. “She is worried,” he said, rubbing the fuzzy beard he’d grown to offset his balding head. “About you being so far away. About Mayank being without you. She is a mother. These things pain her more than you can understand.”

“Yeah, I know. You told me before.”

“She thought we were going to have you for four more years. Then you surprised us with that letter. She just needs more time to get used to the idea.”

“She’s had three months.”

“Give her until Christmas. By the time you come home for Christmas, we will all have adjusted and she’ll be back to her old self.”

“You know, most people would be thrilled if their son got a full ride to a major university.”

My father placed his hand on my shoulder. “Try to focus on what’s before you, all the exciting experiences you’re going to have. Things here will work themselves out.”

My father left, closing the door behind him. I finished sorting the sweaters and had begun rolling up my socks when Mayank entered with his suitcase.

“Knock, knock. Who’s there? Mayank. Come in,” he said. Mayank had learned social scripts at school, but he hadn’t been able to grasp who needed to say what, so he charged through them by himself.

“Hey, buddy,” I said. “Did you bring another suitcase full?”

Mayank nodded and sat down on the bed.

“Great, I’ve got two more empty drawers you can fill.”

To distract Mayank while I was packing, I’d suggested that he move his stuff into my room. My mother objected, saying that new surroundings would make him all the more anxious after I left, but my father thought it was a good way to involve him, and Mayank loved the idea.

He’d hung his clothes in my closet the day before and was now bringing over items from his chest of drawers using my father’s old
green suitcase.

“How old will you be when you come home?” he asked as he popped the suitcase latches one at a time.

“When I come home for Christmas, I’ll still be 18. Remember, our birthday isn’t until February.”

“So you won’t be gone that long then?”

“I’ll be gone the rest of August and then three more months, September, October, and November, and I’ll get back on December 12. I circled the date on that calendar I gave you.”

“But you’ll still be the same age?”

“I’ll still be 18, but I’ll be four months older.”

“But we’ll still just be 18?”

I realized Mayank was taking comfort in this technicality so I agreed with him.

“Yeah, we’ll still be 18.”

What you have to understand about my family is that I’m the good twin. Not that my brother is evil. He lacks the capacity.

We were equals at birth. Twin brothers who were closer than any siblings should be. Conjoined, connected at the head. Our parents named us Martand and Mayank, which means sun and moon in India, where they lived before coming to the United States to attend medical school.

As conjoined twins go, we were fortunate. We each had a complete set of organs, which meant we could survive independently, but our brains were merged by a myriad of nerves and blood vessels.

The separation surgery went well, but shortly after leaving post-op, Mayank’s brain began to swell. By the time they had inserted a shunt to remove the pressure, he’d suffered permanent brain damage. I, on the other hand, emerged perfectly healthy. The only remnant of our early struggle was a slight indentation on the top left side of my skull, which my thick dark hair easily covered.

Even though she’d agreed to let the doctors separate us, my mother was determined to keep us together. She dressed us alike even though we never looked identical. Mayank’s face was slightly more slack, the result of a small stroke he’d suffered just after they removed the shunt, and he was always thinner than me.

She made me include Mayank whenever I had friends over to play until a bad tumble on a slip-n-slide made her realize how dangerous that could be. When I was cast as Santa Claus for the third-grade Christmas pageant, my mother insisted Mayank be given a part as a reindeer. When I joined the marching band in middle school, my mother bought us both uniforms and instruments. In high school, if I wanted to go out on Saturday night, I had to spend the day with Mayank.

When I began applying to colleges, my mother did everything she could think of—including offering me a new car—to persuade me to live at home and attend a college in Cincinnati, a short drive from our Kentucky suburb. The car was tempting, but I wanted to go away to college like my friends, to see what life was like on my own. I applied to the University of Michigan without telling either of my parents and got a full scholarship, which made it almost impossible for them to say no.
When I showed my mother the letter from the school, I thought she was going to tear it in two, not by gripping the top and ripping it vertically, but by stretching it between her hands like a canvas until the woven fibers succumbed to the strain and separated.

She’d barely spoken to me since, and she’d told my father she wasn’t going to ride with us to Michigan. Still, she wasn’t able to completely ignore what was happening, as her silent visits to my room proved, and when I returned from having lunch with Dad and Mayank, I found she’d finally managed to cross the threshold.

“What are these?” she asked, staring at the pile of sweaters I’d decided not to pack.

“I can’t take all my clothes. There won’t be enough room.”

She looked into a box I had filled to the top.

“Not if you wad everything up instead of folding it properly.”

She picked up the box, which was half as tall as she was, and dumped the contents on the bed. Then she snatched up one of the sweaters, folded it in a sharp rectangle, pushed out any excess air with a sweep of her hand, and dropped it back in the box.

“Don’t go,” she said, folding a second sweater.

I hung my head. “I’m sorry this has upset you so much, Mom, but I’m going no matter what you say.”

“Don’t leave him,” she said.

“You act like I’m abandoning him out in the woods or something. That’s not what’s happening.”

“Not now,” she said. “But what about 10 years from now, or 20.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“You’re father and I will not always be around. What will happen to your brother then?”

“Mom, you’re 49. You and Dad have never eaten red meat or smoked a cigarette in your entire lives. You’ve still got some time left.”

“What if we were killed in a car accident?”

“I don’t know,” I stammered. “I guess I’d get an apartment in Michigan and move Mayank up there with me.”

“You say that now, but what about a year from now, after you’ve been gone, forgotten what it’s like to be with him.”

“I am not going to forget about my brother,” I said.

Her folding pace slowed. “A few months ago a man joined our group,” she said. “His mother had died and left him to care for his brother, who was like Mayank, only slightly more functional. The man had children and a wife and a demanding job. He couldn’t figure out how he was going to fit his brother into his life. He kept hinting that his brother might be better off in a group home. He wanted us to give him permission, to say it was all right, that his burdens were great enough already. We wouldn’t do that, so of course he quit coming.”

Even though I thought she was being irrational, I couldn’t stop myself from envisioning Mayank living in a drab facility, surrounded by strangers. A cold panic gripped the back of my neck, and I shook my head to clear the image. “I’m not going to be like him. You raised me better than that. If Mayank ever needs me, I’ll make room for him.”

“I’m sure that man would have said the same thing when he was your
age, but once he got out into the world and had a life all his own...."
I could see her mouth quivering like she was going to cry. She placed one more expertly folded sweater into the box and left.

I woke the next morning to find my mother, dressed in beige slacks and a rose-print shirt, sitting on the end of my bed, staring at the wall.
"Mom?" I said, half thinking she was a mirage. She’d agreed not to enter my room without knocking years ago.
She said, "Do you remember when you were 10 years old and my father died and I had to go to India to help my mother?"
I sat up and stretched my arms. "Yeah, I remember," I said. "Look, could we talk about this after I brush my teeth?"
She ignored me. "At first when I got there," she said, her words slow and uncertain, "I missed you and Mayank so much. I worried, especially about him. He had that awful teacher then, the one who thought he could learn arithmetic using a computer."
"Uh-huh," I murmured.
"But after a couple of weeks, I worried less. I felt lighter, freer, relaxed. It was the first time since you two were born that I didn’t have to think about getting him to the physical therapist or the speech pathologist or the neurologist. I knew the school wasn’t going to call me to tell me he’d hit another student with a dump truck or soiled himself because he didn’t make it to the bathroom in time. I could read a book without having to look out the window every few minutes to see if he’d hurt himself."
She took a long, ragged breath and I realized she was crying. "And I didn’t have to look at you," she said, "to see your frustration at having a brother who absorbed so much of your parents’ attention."
"Mom, you know I always understood about Mayank."
"That is not what I’m talking about." Her head snapped around to face me. "I’m trying to explain how this kind of selfishness can strike anyone, even a mother. I stayed in India a week longer than I had to. When you’re far away, you can rationalize things that you’d never do if you were looking in the eyes of the person you love."
"But you came back, Mom, and I will too," I said.
"You’ll be away for so long. By the time Mayank needs you, he’ll barely seem like your brother. He’ll just be some helpless relative."
"That won’t happen," I said, climbing out of bed. "Mayank and I will always be connected."
I pulled my robe over my pajamas, slipped on my bedroom shoes, and headed for the hallway.
"It’s not too late," she yelled. "Your father and I don’t mind paying the tuition for the other school."
I shut the bathroom door without answering.

My mother had gotten up early that morning because she’d decided to travel with us to Michigan. The five-hour drive passed in silence except for the beeps and buzzers of Mayank’s Gameboy and a few questions from my father about whether I’d remembered to pack various items.
When we pulled up in front of the red brick dormitory, several students in primary colored t-shirts introduced themselves as orientation leaders and offered to help carry my boxes and suitcases to my room.
My roommate, Daniel, a soccer player from Indiana with whom I’d exchanged e-mails, had already arrived with his parents, a plump white-haired couple who looked ready for a retirement home. He was a skinny redhead with a brushed silver barbell through his right eyebrow.

“How’s it going?” he asked, shaking my hand. Our parents greeted each other, and my mother introduced Mayank.

I saw the familiar questioning squint on each of their faces as they tried to determine if Mayank was mentally impaired or just a sloppy dresser.

Finally, Daniel’s mother asked a probing but polite question. “Mayank, what are you going to do while your brother’s at college?”

Mayank’s eyes darted between the door and the window. Strangers intimidated him.

“He attends life skills classes three days a week and spends the other two at an adult care facility,” my mother explained.

“I set out the milk for morning snacks,” Mayank added.

“Oh, that sounds nice,” Daniel’s mother said. She nodded and offered a pity-filled smile of understanding—a typical reaction I’d seen many times. None of it bothered or embarrassed me anymore. In fact, I didn’t feel the least bit awkward until my mother began unpacking my belongings with an angry efficiency that I could tell made Daniel’s family uncomfortable. She ripped open boxes, jerked drawers open then slammed them closed, and tossed shoes into the bottom of the built-in wardrobe.

Daniel and his family excused themselves to go have lunch. Mayank, my father, and I took the empty boxes and suitcases down to our minivan while my mother finished her rapid fire arrangement. She left the posters for me to hang, but placed several framed photos of Mayank and me—some that I didn’t remember packing—on the top shelf of my desk.

“Why don’t we go get something to eat now?” my father suggested.

“No, you should get back on the road so you can get out of the city before rush hour,” I said, eager for them to leave before Daniel returned. “Besides, I’d really like to go check out the dining hall.”

“All right,” my father said. He hugged me tightly for several seconds. “Mayank, say goodbye to your brother.”

“Goodbye, Martand,” Mayank said shuffling over to hug me. After our embrace, the two of them headed downstairs. My mother remained, searching for something in her purse.

“Here.” She handed me a shiny silver cell phone. “I bought one for Mayank, too.”

“You’re giving Mayank a cell phone?”

“The number pad will be locked so all he can do is answer incoming calls—calls from you. It has unlimited minutes and it takes pictures.”

She snatched the phone back from me, flipped it open, and snapped a photo right in front of my face, blinding me with the flash. “Send him photos. Let him know what you are doing.”

“Okay.”

“Keep him in the front of your mind,” she said, pressing her index finger into the center of my forehead. She hugged me, then hurried to catch up with my father and Mayank.

I called Mayank every day for the first two weeks. Then it changed to every two or three days. By the time mid-terms came around, I was down to
once every two weeks. I felt a mixture of guilt and dread, expecting my mother to call and scold at any moment, but I was too busy with classes and studying to correct the situation. Besides, even when I called Mayank, I had nothing new to tell him.

My mother never phoned, but I received a business envelope lined with a strip of cardboard to protect the photo inside. All the pictures she’d placed on my desk shelf were recent, showing Mayank and me at a band competition, my graduation, an amusement park, and the city pool. In the one she mailed, we were infants, just old enough to sit up by ourselves. Or at least I was old enough to sit up. Mayank was slumped over with his head on my shoulder, and I was scowling at him.

The sickening fear that swept through me when I’d imagined Mayank in the group home returned. I fished my cell phone from my backpack and began to dial, but I realized it was only 2 p.m. and Mayank was still at school. I kept the phone in my hand while I studied for the next three hours so I wouldn’t forget to call him before dinner.

Jessica Gentry

Only Her—Sylvia

Her voice resonates in my mind:
perfectly executed syllables
that clink like bells,

then the cackle in her throat crunches like snow
as she clears her airway.

Mesmerized by her enunciation of t’s and z’s,
I stare into the red taillight
shining in my tired eyes,
imagining a kitchen filled with gas.
Jessica Gentry

**Love for a Madman**

If Allen Ginsberg were alive, I would marry him, despite that he is gay.

We would be happy and in love—strictly platonic—and sit around bitching about America and supermarkets in California.

I would read him Plath and he would tell me she was whiny and she couldn’t write and I would tell him she was one of the best minds of her generation who wasn’t destroyed by madness.

Every summer we would ride up the coast to wine country, I in the passenger seat and he with his queer shoulder to the wheel.

---

Edmund August

**Fatherhood**

Drops of water
hit my face every five seconds,
I’ve barked the knuckles of both hands,

and my frustration
at not having a third or fourth hand
has almost reached a point where I yell

at my wife
to get down here and hold this wrench,
like I yelled last April for her equal

ass to get down
in the splattering rain and help me
change that goddamn tire,

but the six year old
daughter who matured perhaps a decade
in just the last two years looks at me

expecting a miracle.
Betty Friedan (1921-2006) is best known as the author of The Feminine Mystique, published in the mid 60’s, and for her prominent role in the Women’s Movement. In 1970 she organized a massive “Women’s Strike” demonstration in New York City, coining the motto: “Don’t iron while the strike is hot.” She continued to be active as an acclaimed speaker and writer until her death this February.

I rang the doorbell at West 93rd Street and waited. And waited. A dog growled and barked behind the door, and I began thinking I should forget the whole thing. I was a little afraid of meeting this particular West Sider, Ms. Betty Friedan, anyway. What if I, staunch and vocal supporter of the Women’s Movement, became tongue-tied in the presence of our Founder? What if I revealed my unliberated self that still can render me inept in the male world of Action? But then the door opened. I looked down first. It was just a little gray terrier that lost interest in me immediately. Ms. Friedan was also smaller than I expected, with salt and pepper hair comfortably disarranged, wearing a loose cotton print pants suit. She might have been anyone at home.

“I was on the phone,” she said. “Wait for me upstairs. That’s where the living room is. I must make another urgent call. I should have said ‘No!’” She scampered off, waving her arms. Though I think she had on thong sandals, the effect was barefoot.

I trotted up the wooden riser stairs and settled in for a pleasurable time waiting. Space is one of the rarer experiences in a New York apartment, and I enjoyed that first, the high, high ceiling skylighted on one half, the other half sloping to meet a wall of glass opening out onto a small terrace. The view was unaffected New York: chimney pots and water towers jumbled in illogical tiers, flat brownstone roofs, and a soaring expanse of sky. The space gave the life put into the room plenty of chance to breathe—and powerful life it was: A fireplace in a brick wall, a marble-topped bar with ornately carved legs, high-backed chairs around a heavy table bearing brass candlesticks. Tom Jones might have dined here. Lamps everywhere, some that might be Tiffany, a wall of books. The chairs might have been Victorian, except that they were upholstered pyschedelic in wild patterns, arranged around a stunning oriental rug.

Before long, Ms. Friedan padded up the stairs, sank into a sofa, gestured to a nearby chair, and cocked her head, waiting for me to begin my questions. This was my first interview assignment ever, and I was, in fact,
tongue tied, though I had on my lap some notes and, of course, a pad to write on. I simply stared at her, unable to begin. Quickly, graciously, she took this in, shrugged a little, and began to speak.

She sketched out her life after graduation from Smith College when she lived in New York and worked as a journalist, until marriage and three children brought her to the “pursuit of the suburban dream” in Rockland County, for eight years. She wanted this life for her children, took motherhood very seriously, but heartily disliked the life that went along with it. Despite freelance assignments and some local political involvement, she felt removed from real life. She began the studies on housewives sharing this dream life and came to identify “the problem that has no name” that resulted in her famous book, *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963 by W. W. Norton. To remain in the suburbs any longer was out of the question. She was now deeply committed to her work and could not carry it on outside the city. Until their divorce two and one half years ago, she and her husband lived in the famous Dakota hotel on 72nd Street.

“And now I’m here,” she concluded. She led me to the terrace and pointed to a garden area below that stretched the length of several brownstones. “That’s our garden. Thirty families bought nine brownstones and have created a kind of community. We share the garden, share our interests. I just love it!” She resumed her position on the sofa, legs curled beneath her with bare toes available for her restless hands. “In the summer I share a place in East Hampton. No group sex or shared incomes or anything like that, but you could call us a commune of non-dropouts.”

I asked her what sort of response she receives from the people she meets, and she really began to warm up. Apparent now was the style that makes her such a popular speaker—the occasional break in her voice, the husky undertone, the key words underlined, the emphatic gestures—but up close it was different. I could see the warmth of her smile and a touch of wistfulness that softened the effect and brought across her personal attractiveness. I found myself smiling and nodding vigorously along with her.

“How do people react?” she said. “It’s been overwhelming, really. It kind of moves me sometimes, and at first I couldn’t handle it. When I was boarding the plane from Mississippi, a young mother, carrying a baby in a pouch slung around her neck, you know, came over to me and said the usual stuff about how much it’s changed her life, but then she pointed to the baby and said, ‘and for her . . . for her it will be so different.’ You know, it’s true. That means so much! The other day in Bloomingdale’s I was shopping with my daughter and the sales clerks—those poor sixty-year-old women in those terrible jobs—anyhow, they said, ‘We’re with you!’ This isn’t just a middle class thing, you know. All women are starting to respond. A black woman once came up to me and gave me a hug and kiss.”

Her voice dropped for a moment and she gazed down at her toes. “Not that I kid myself that there won’t be a lot of resistance, especially when women really get into action and the men see how serious we are. It’s just
that the traditional roles force us to use each other as scapegoats, make men feel inadequate because they can’t always live up to the ideal of being tough and strong, and women feel that same way, because they are barred from so much. It’s so hard for men and women to love each other this way. There’s so much bitterness and frustration.

“But you know, the majority of women are working now, even in this time of economic turmoil when women are usually the last hired and first fired. But now they don’t really have a kitchen to go back to, a separate role in life. No one today can even say always whose paycheck is the first and whose is the second. And there are plenty of men who get furious at discrimination against women, and lots of them are encouraging their wives to go out into the world. It really is changing.”

Her arms swept out so that she banged her hands against the wall behind her. “The impact of the movement is much broader than membership in women’s liberation. It’s affecting everyone. As women are sharing more in the outside world, men are sharing in the house, and this is good for everyone”

I wasn’t saying much, didn’t need to. Whether or not I was living up to some new forceful image I wanted to have of myself didn’t matter in the least. I was enjoying myself far too much. But I did want to hear a bit about how women out in the world might temper the whole value system, humanize it.

“Oh, I don’t go for the sob-sister bit that women are sweeter. There’s plenty of impotent rage in women that has to be gotten to beneath the masks. Women must liberate themselves from self-denigration, passive dependency, be more angry at the things that oppress them, and channel their energies creatively.” Ms. Friedan is in full swing now, eyes alight, arm chopping down to accentuate the beat of her words. “But women do have the advantage of not having been brought up with the whole machismo thing—power, violence. We have no inferior feelings at not fighting, don’t have anything to prove that way. It simply isn’t ingrained in us the way it is in men. The life experience of women is not divorced from concrete life the way it is for men, who cop out and deal with life in abstract terms. We’ve specialized in sensitiveness about the concrete world. The abstract view can overlook the actual fact of killing, whereas a woman would just say about Vietnam: “Out! Out! Out!”

“You see, women’s liberation was a way-station for human liberation. First we had to have consciousness-raising so that women could realize they weren’t isolated in how they felt about their lives, and the focus had to be away from individual hang-ups and into confronting the conditions that kept things as they were. The stage we’re into now is changing those conditions in the system, getting women into politics and business, into a 50% share in the important decision-making areas. The goal is liberation for everyone—men and women. I believe that once women have equal voice in society, the trend will be toward humanizing life. The values that are now
considered feminine and personal, such as compassion and sensitivity, will begin to reach everyone in all areas of life.

“I’ll be leaving soon for Italy to do a series of lectures in a different city every night. It will be so exciting. In those countries it is so much more difficult—that Latin machismo thing—where there is so much more violence, more alienation between the sexes. I’ve been to Brazil, Colombia...I’ll be a wreck if I don’t get off these airplanes, but it’s too exciting not to go! Oh that reminds me, I must make a call right away. They want me to come to Pittsburgh.” She looked at her watch for emphasis. “Sorry! You know where the door is.” And off she went in a flurry of waving arms.

Jesse Mountjoy

*Shooting the Moon*

My thumb in her face I shoot
The moon from my back porch
Thinking how strange
For the Naval Observatory
To even try to define
“The end of civil twilight.”
It is enough that in early
Evening the moon is Vermeer’s
Young Woman with a Water Jug
As she reaches for light, or later
As she descends, all sullen
And tired, stumbling over things
And thus giving them form
Once again, including
The lunula tattooed
Eternally on my thumbnail.
Elizabeth Drake-Boyt

**Where Angels Drown**

What wings pound at risk when the small boy is told; when alone of all others he runs, light-pulled to throw arms around the edges of the basin prairie, none but he can tell.

“Oh, don’t you know...?” he says, voice drifting silent before the curious attention of his elders when he returns. Only a child’s legs voice grass to learn it, thumping fear into running lungs when he finds he cannot, even in a lifetime of dreams of running, approach the rim where sky presses ground. There, throwing himself into finite arcs across the ancient sea bed now vanished, the boy, between lift and fall, between muscle’s surging desire and weight’s settled love, finds of himself the angel to failed chance, accident of celestial wing; divine cry of mortal end. That when running from having run to the end of endurance before the edge of that vast bowl, all he can say is, “Don’t you know? Don’t you....”

Until what the angel whispers out of a breath drenched with so much air no sweep of wing could encompass it is known, “Don’t you know, Don’t you know this is....”

Where the boy falls alone, dropped from flight into endless grass bending dry before thick sky fathoms so deep that even wings of light risk to bow by grave demand. And he is there, even as the soul between leaps ever le beau le beau, Andy le beau, there to find beauty’s fine rage between body’s plunge and heart’s ineffable song the arrow fletched by the sun. “Don’t you know, oh, don’t you know?”

Oh, you so old, and far wise that you must shed useless wings before descending into the sea of no mercy, oh, don’t you know this prairie, this place of all the world, as the boy tells, eyes wide with risk, “Don’t you know that this is where angels drown?”

Kelly Moffett

**Woman with Flowers**

(Paula Modersohn-Becker)

A morning with gold in its teeth, a bare comforter, a flat chest. I’m trying to listen to the child inside of me. She moves swiftly. Dodging buildings hurricane-like and smooth. She doesn’t want a mother. A new friend. A philosophy. She eats what she likes. Then runs. Then winces. Still, I listen. I hear a brook bubbling. Boats at the dock. There is a corner and a bed covering it. A motor—or is it a man? All of my toes curl. My hands un-cup. This memory is a kind of bad cooking. Fluff and clouds. A mist and a girl running through it.
Dori Howard

Your Eyes Return Me to the Orient

The sky was frothy paint, the color of your eyes, with foamy, bubbled clouds. It poured down the wall of the heavens and bled into the sea, stopping only at the stony shore—one color, solid and surreal. The warm wind, charging over the cliff, caressed my hair like a hand, both demanding in its gentleness and gentle in its demand: *Jump*. I stepped forward and looked down. Imagined the intensity of belonging to beauty so momentous and breathtaking: time, emotions, and nature all blending until, like the sea and sky, it was unclear where nature’s grace ended and I began. It wasn’t enough to only look. A warm, lacy rain prickled the ocean and spotted the ground around my feet as I stared at their rootedness, considering.

When you look at me, I’m there again. Your wind whips my hair. My foot ponders your craggy, uneven ledges. And your eyes—your atmospheric oceans, your liquid skies—pledge: *Jump*.

Katherine Shipp

A Diligent Work of the Soul

As an old lake
busy in spring
with mountain refreshment
so is my love for you
As a heavy bee
doubtful of flowers
follows a known course
so is my heart
As a drop of blood
shed at the piercing
of hope’s broad sword
so will be my life.

Un trabajo diligente del alma

Como un lago viejo
que en la primavera
está muy ocupado
con las frescas aquas
de las montañas
así será mi amor.
Como la abeja que, pesada, vuela
y duda de las flores
pero sigue una ruta conocida
así será mi corazón.
Y será mi vida
una sangría dulce y
regalada por la espada
de la esperanza.
Thursday Mornings

Thursday mornings were library mornings. Breakfast was always the same on Thursdays. A crusty bagel smothered in butter and garnished with grape jelly. A cool bowl of generic raisin bran; the raisins tasting like old shoe, but supposedly healthy. One glass of apple juice followed by an equivalent glass of milk. And a cup of cheap coffee, black.

Nourished, I would head for the library. It didn’t matter if I had work to do or not. That’s not why I went to the library on Thursdays. Sara was the reason I went.

On a cold, rainy, March Thursday, I lumbered up the arching staircase. My heart beat faster as I reached the lobby. Sweaty palmed, I opened the door and quickly surveyed the room. The search came up empty. I took off my bright blue coat and woolen cap but still felt warm.

I examined the new books, varied as always: *Hegelian Metaphysics, Enron and the New Testament, Management for Dummies, Terrorism in the 21st Century*. I didn’t care about the books but I had to kill time somehow. I couldn’t rush to my destination; I couldn’t draw attention to myself. Pretending to look interested, I examined a volume of Richard Rorty. Time crept by as I read the dust jacket, the words blurred by disinterest. Finally, I bounded downstairs.

On Thursdays, Sara had to dust books. She would pull each from its home, dust it with a dingy rag, and place it back. Knowing what she would be doing, I had only to find where she was. I strolled through the basement, my eyes crisscrossing the aisles. Row by row passed with no sign of her. My heart beat faster in anticipation. As I closed in on the last aisle, the beating became pounding. What if she wasn’t there? She had to be; it was Thursday. Surely she couldn’t have forgotten about me?

And there she was, sitting crosslegged on the floor between stacks about economics. Her dishwater blonde hair was pulled behind her head and held together with a yellow pencil. She wore a prune colored sweater, the same sweater she wore to the Christmas party a few months earlier.

“Hey there, darlin,” she said in a smooth Southern drawl. I got goose bumps every time she said that. Her chestnut eyes danced when she spoke. She flashed a toothy grin and chuckled as I responded with a hearty, “Yo.”

I plopped down on the grimy floor. The tile was cool to touch, but I was warm. Rolling up my sleeves, I picked up a book about British economics in 1848 and began to read aloud. “You’re a dork,” she chided, throwing her dusty rag at me. Undeterred, I read louder. “SHHH!!” she cautioned. “Quiet. Do you want someone to find us?” She knew the answer.

“Some people just don’t appreciate good writing when they hear it,” I teased. I was growing warmer still. We sat on the floor, the dust rag forgotten, and talked like we did every Thursday. Gossip melted into the state of our lives. Excitedly I rambled about the upcoming campaign and election.
Sara was distracted, though. When our eyes met, hers darted away.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she lied. Her eyes never let her lie; they gave away too much. I told her this, and she conceded, “I’m thinking about going home next semester.” My heart fell into my stomach. I was hot now, smoldering with grief. I took off my long-sleeve shirt.

Sara smiled slyly at me and said, “It is hot down here, isn’t it,” and she slowly took off her sweater, exposing a black KISS t-shirt. My heart began to pound as I stared at her breasts, veiled with a shirt two sizes too small.

“What about Thursdays?” I asked turning away, my voice shaking.

“You’re such a dork,” she said, smiling and leaning closer. “I’m gonna miss Thursdays. You’re so fun to be with.” Her eyes danced again and she moved closer. Our eyes locked, and we were centimeters from kissing when I made a decision.

As I walked away from the library, I thought, sometimes the actions we don’t take define us. I did not kiss Sara in the library stacks that cold, rainy, March Thursday. Dreams never die, I learned, and neither do decisions that cost us once in a lifetime opportunities.

Tonya Northenor

*Unsung*

I want to tell a story, though it requires a voice broader than mine, than a river with one weighted barge breaking/not breaking the surface. Tell of people: women whose hands are rivers as they run over bodies of tempted men who mend broken children, plates,

gold moons over harvest fields which seem big as faith. Do you hear, it already has a song, sidewalks slapped by sandals, workboots, a teen’s bare feet twisting towards home and away. Cicadas beg midwest clouds to go or stay; hang over sightless ponds

so deep...we reflect six feet of earth and town streets refusing to tire; sinking slowly. We spend long days in front of bullet-proof glass or run a fence that gallops at its own speed. Clocks grandparents brought cluck off all the tediously beautiful, unbelievable hours.
Cheston Hoover

_Selling the Sheep in Fall_

Penned, they shift their oily bodies anxiously as one by one we rope, drag and push them onto the Donahue trailer, their hanging heads baahing sadly like children.

My father’s Southern drawl floats into the air, and his wide, calloused palm folds around the cash and tucks it in a pocket of his patched, beige pants.

Autumn sits inside his blue eyes, and like snow, streaks of silver spread across his black hair, almost as if for twenty-six years he has been exactly the same until this morning, this moment as he sells something away, a part of him, like a memory of breaking the surface of ice during winter, delivering a lamb during the blizzard of December, harvesting a ram for fall, mending rusted wire in solitude.

His heavy, long a’s and i’s sing into the air, and a whippoorwill responds. Father’s handshake seals the deal, final and sure.
Fall turns around us.
Burnt leaves cling to
thin branches, wrestling
against the inevitable.

As the trailer descends
the hill, I struggle to fathom that
next year there will be
no sheep to shear,
no fences to mend,
only an open
stall in this
aged and sagging barn.

Chris Tiahrt

Crossings

According to the signs,
deer have been crossing this road
for the past eleven miles.
If so, these deer must be invisible,
fleet, of amazing agility,
able, me unaware, to dodge
and leap my racing odyssey.

But this is a wonderland
where bridges may be icy
even in July.

A herd so wide must number thousands.
I imagine them tall, proud, omnipresent —
racks held high,
of more points than the eye can tell.
But then the world turns,
or else the road, and I proceed, marveling
at cloven hoof prints on my rearview mirror.
(The mind is up to tricks.)

Leashed to a tether, I’m shown rope enough to hang myself or lift above magnolia—still green in my yard—
on this, the hardest night of winter. Even

disembodied, riding high on the short-sheet model
of the Out-of-Body Experience, I remember that old joke:

Christ on the cross cries wildly for Peter to
come to His side, and when he arrives, Christ
tells the saint, “I can see your house from here.”

Even in agony, when holding the world at arm’s length,
the view is spectacular. But tonight’s panorama

is gift from the mind’s sleight of hand.
I float on dreamed breath of magnolia, breath
I can’t see in the cold as I do my own. Here,
I am weight, finally

brave,
noosed in a heady cloud of pure oxygen. How fine

to slip free—a loose balloon gliding in current briefly
before bursting. But I kneel, graze tether,
scramble to clutch the solid hook of a child’s kiss,

remembered flesh,
coil of hair still pressed
inside a locket; the sturdy trappings of personal gravity.

Look,
there is my house; anchored only by shadow, set
so small, so thin
against the cold back of this world. Here,
I’m transparent,
dancing on air! Grasping at straw,
trying merely to maintain my balance.
Michael Battram

Paintball Loser

Whatever age he was, he looked too small for it, but I figured age of ten. A paintball gun swung limply from his hand as he trudged down the street. His hair and face were soaked with lurid colors—I thought, man, they must have ganged up big-time on this kid,

his so-called “friends,” no doubt. Were they just kidding around at first, they told themselves, these smaller versions of the shits they’ll be as men someday? And I wondered, has this happened often? How many times has he had to face some double-cross, then watched those boys’ glad-handing and high-fives? Does he rise from sleep with hands balled up in fists and swinging at those kids, bloodying their stupid laughing faces in his dreams, for making him feel small and weak? It’s tough—a boy, by the age of ten is too old to cry, too young for any woman but his mother; does he know that women hold our entire world in their hands, they carry the sky upon their backs, too often feeling burdened as any picked-on kid? I hoped his mom could comfort him, in small sweet ways, at least: fix lunch or wash his face, anything to give him courage facing one more day. So many boys, and men, without this courage, someday become just small and petty tyrants, who never raise their hands except at home, against their wives, or kids—my God, you’d have to have a heart of tin to feel no pity. I think of that boy often, hoping he will see some lovely face each day he lives, someone who’ll say, “Don’t kid yourself, it isn’t easy, being a man, and in this world, life will never hand you much,” who’ll make him more than just some small and bullied, defeated kid with a paint-smeared face, who’ll give his hands and heart the strength of ten; this small boy, waiting to become a man.
The Light in the Distant Room

In the cool fall, red and gold, when the walnuts were dropping to roll in the pale grass, when they hit with a thump against the smokehouse roof, he was there in the blue light. He wanted to know, and he was willing to strive to learn it all. Why should he not think of wisdom? He felt like the wind. Red leaves flying from the trees. A solitary bird was speaking. To himself he said, I can be just like the wind.

He thought of Mary. He thought of Mack. Then he could not think.

"Uncle Jones, where are you? Are you down near the arbor with a lattice and a sharp saw? Not there. Where?"

Joey thought for a moment—a lion—and gracefully searched with his eyes for Uncle Jones. Out in the pasture near the white sycamore he saw his silver, long legged mare running the curve, her mane flashing high in the breeze. Joey ran too—kicking and jumping. They sailed on by: charmed particles—one this way, one that—the race begun and won in a breath.

Near the greenhouse, where the light fluttered in the glass, by the steaming flowers he found Uncle Jones. He was repairing the door with a plank of yellow wood. He sat on the stone walk by his leather grip sack. The old tools shone in the sun like silver. With a plane he was shaving the edge of the board to make it true. With an ease of concentration he pushed the plane, and the yellow shaving curled out like a ringlet of sun blonde hair.

Like Mary’s golden curls, Joey thought. For her, I’ll get one.

“How old are you getting to be?” Uncle Jones asked, with that light he could bring to his eyes.

Joey thought, He always asks that, every few days at least. “Nine, seven, eleven to come, the next one better than the last of ’em,” he said. That’s what he always says to me, he thought, but he must be a hundred.

“You right about that,” Uncle Jones said. He took the pipe from his mouth and tapped it on the stone walk. “The next one should always be better than the last one. You know why?”

“No,” Joey said, surprised at the new twist. “Why?”

“Cause that’s the one you got.”

When Uncle Jones eats a ripe paw paw from our tall tree in the lavender garden, he says that too, Joey thought. Lavender was the garden’s name, with silver fruit branches and wild red roses, often all rain and sunlight.

Uncle Jones’s mustache was curved and gray. His skin was black. He was tall and slender. He wore high boots, a dark flannel shirt and a vest. His old hat had a broad brim darkened from wear. There was a hole in the point of the crown. Joey thought, I won’t ever say, “Uncle Jones, there’s a hole in your hat.” “You’re right about that, Joey,” he would say.
At sunset that same day the snow began to float down, a storm of white narcissus. It was a strange sky, for the sun was making colors in the west and for a moment all the flakes were wild red roses. Joey was waiting for one to fall in his hand when Mack slipped under the fence. Mack lived on the farm down the road at the horseshoe curve.

“The bull chased me,” Mack said. “But I got away. I hit him with a clod right between the eyes.” Mack spit over one shoulder and hiked his pants up with both hands. He walked up to Joey and looked him straight in the eye. “Let’s do something.”

“The snow is red,” Joey said.
“Snow’s white,” Mack said. “Got any gum?”
“Nope,” Joey said. “Let’s go find Uncle Jones.” Joey still held out his hand, and it was wet from the red snow flakes that were falling.

“I’d rather go start the tractor,” Mack said.
“We promised we wouldn’t.”
“I don’t care,” Mack said.
“Besides it’s boring. I’d rather do something different,” Joey said.
“We could back it up.”
“We’ve done it,” Joey said. “Maybe Uncle Jones will tell us a story.”
“He’s boring,” Mack said.

She ducked under the low limb of the golden rain tree by the garden gate. A branch hooked her soft, white cap, and her blonde curls cascaded to the shoulders of her coat. She stood there surprised, as slender and graceful as the limb which lifted her cap. And the snowflakes, falling large and white again, began melting in her hair. Mary! Joey took an extra breath and with bright eyes sank his hands into his pockets. Mack took off running.

At Mary’s side Mack told her, Joey said we should go start the tractor, and Joey said he would go in the house and get some cookies and bring them down, and Joey said we should run on fast before his mother came out and not to wait for him.

When Mary ran away with Mack, tears tried to flow in Joey’s eyes, and in his pockets he clenched his fists. Why didn’t she wait for me? He brushed his eye with the edge of his hand and tried to look into the falling snow for comfort. But the flakes appeared small and sharp and seemed no longer beautiful.

The trees had lost their edges in the sheets of nightfall. Through the damp window Joey watched the two of them, Mary and Mack, fade and come again, coming along the gravel walk. Shadows fell across the cold. They came making footprints. She wasn’t holding his hand. Mack was talking. He kicked the snow as he talked, probably telling her lies about the bull, Joey thought.
“Hi, Joey,” Mary said. At the kitchen door—the bright lights. He wished he were damp and cool like her.
“Where have you been?” Joey’s mother smiled.
“Riding the pony,” Mack said.
“Next time go with them and help them, Joey. Take off your coats and have dinner with us if you like.”
“Thank you, Mrs. Williams,” Mary said. She jiggled her arms out of the sleeves of her coat.
“What are you having?” Mack asked.
“I’ll call your parents, and I’ll take you home when I take Uncle Jones home,” Joey’s mother said. At the big stove she lifted the lid of a rich, steaming soup.

Down the long hall, over Mary’s shoulder, Joey saw the glow of red fire. Mary looked at Joey with the edges of her eyes. Mack pulled at her arm.

“Race you down the hall,” Mack said. He pushed her ahead and she ran, and he passed her, and Mary laughed near the marble statue of the gentle woman with the blue urn, and she felt the warmth of the statue’s elegant smile and the freshness of the stone dress when she brushed on by with her hand.

Mack and Mary skidded on an ancient rug from Asia. And there by the fire was Uncle Jones. They had forgotten about him. Mack’s eyes widened. Uncle Jones made him nervous. He didn’t know why. So he sauntered up to the fire and turned his back to it for a moment as if that warmth was what he had come for all along. Mary said, “Hi, Uncle Jones.”

“Race you. Let’s go,” Mack said to Mary.

Uncle Jones sat with his long legs crossed. His hands were resting, and the light from the fire shone softly over him. His old felt hat rested on the floor beside him. His eyes widened when Mack twirled on one foot in discontent.

“How do you do, Mary,” Uncle Jones said gently. “Have you all been out in the snow?”
“Yes, sir, we have.”

“Race you. Let’s go,” Mack said. He swung Mary by the arm.

“Wait,” Mary said without looking at Mack. She pulled her arm away with a quick turn of her shoulder, her open hand cutting downward, a deadly move from a darker place. Again she softened. Her eyes remained on Uncle Jones. Uncle Jones had the look of a Captain resting from the sea. He leaned back. He began to sharpen a small knife, slowly against a stone. Mary’s long curls were red with the fire. “Would you tell us a story, Uncle Jones?” she asked.

“Joey?” she called. She turned to search for him, but when she met his eyes in the doorway, she looked down.

Joey looked down, too. He wondered if Uncle Jones could see him; the room seemed so full of people. Did Uncle Jones know that he had
almost cried? No, he couldn’t know. “I’d like a story too, Uncle Jones,” he said.

Uncle Jones smiled at them with that light in his eye. He put away the knife. Mary sat down on the rug, and Joey sat down, not too close. Quickly Mack was on the rug between them, but then, with a flourish of his arms, he jumped up again.

“I want to hear a story from a book, not another made up one,” Mack said. “I know where a book is.”

“You don’t know any books here,” Joey said.

“Yes I do. I saw it. It has an Indian on the front.” Mack ran down the hall, and they could hear his feet on the long, wooden stairway.

Joey looked out of the corner of his eye at Mary. Uncle Jones, who had been about to speak, saw Joey’s look and quietly began to busy himself with the poker and the hot coals of the fire.

“What didn’t you come down to the barn?” Mary asked in a soft voice that she was sure Uncle Jones was too busy to hear.

“I don’t know,” Joey said.

“I never said I didn’t like you,” Joey said. But it was too late. He was almost sure she didn’t hear him, because at that moment Mack burst in with the book, dropped it in Uncle Jones’s lap, and sat between them.

Uncle Jones crossed his long legs and sat a little straighter in the fire-light. He held the book as he might have held a piece of wood that he was eyeing for its beauty and its use, or as he might have held a precious stone. He touched the cover with his finger tips and brushed them across it, exploring the surface for smoothness. He held it up for the children to see the front of it.

On the cover was a painting of a magnificent man, an Indian. Across his back was a dark green bow and a quiver of yellow arrows. His skin was as red as the blazing fire. His expression held great determination and strength. The eyes painted there were kind. Behind him spread a scene of waters and woodlands; a sunrise was blazing. Bright feathers hung from his hair. He was as beautiful and wild as nature herself. The fire of the children’s eyes shown upon it. Joey took an extra breath. Mack tucked his legs under himself. Mary spoke softly: “Who is that?”

Uncle Jones hesitated, and they looked anew. Then Uncle Jones studied the Indian as if what was painted was real. He put his finger on a word and pronounced the syllables slowly, “Te...cum...seh,” he said. Mack bit his lip, now a little embarrassed at what he had done, but puzzled too that Uncle Jones had read the word. His mother had told him
one time that the old man who worked for Joey’s parents wasn’t as smart as Joey said he was, that obviously he wasn’t Joey’s uncle, and the old feller couldn’t even read. But Mack had never been sure about the old man. Could he read Indian?

Joey’s mother looked into the fire lit room from the high, white doorway. She smiled. “Dinner soon,” she said. “Don’t go away.” Her face, her form held the youth of one who cares, and in her movement was grace, and her soft dress was flowing, red. She had auburn hair, soft hair like Mary. One hand drifted easy to brush her cheek.

“Uncle Jones is going to read us a story,” Joey said.

“Oh,” his Mother said. “He knows all the good stories.” She knew Uncle Jones couldn’t read. She stepped over near him. “What story is this, let me see.” She took the book and smiled. “Yes, this is my book, I’ve read it so many times. It’s my favorite, it really is. My grandmother gave it to me. You didn’t know her. She was strong and happy. Since I know this book so well, why don’t I read for us something from it.”

“Please do,” said Mary. And the fire seemed to glow more brightly.

Near Uncle Jones, Joey’s mother stood tall on the wide stones of the hearth. She read the title: “A Tribute to Tecumseh.”

Uncle Jones reads Indian, thought Mack.

And they stared at Joey’s mother, so striking in the firelight, so at ease in the firelight, and mysterious like Uncle Jones—beautiful, like the princess in a story, and truthful like the queen. Joey glanced at Mary and was held within her burning curls. Uncle Jones leaned back, easy, alert, interested in what he might hear.

The woman’s voice came softly, strong and true, like the storytellers of old. Her eyes, clear and sure, told the children that this story was her own, that what it was—its depth—she was.

Her red dress lay like water against her skin. She read, “Tecumseh was a strong man, clear of eye, born under a special star, when a meteor sailed across the heavens. As a youth he learned to ride and speak and play games, and he listened to the wisdom of his elders with an eye that was creative and humane.”

“What’s a creative eye?” Mack broke in. “How could he hear with his eye?”

“That means that he listened very carefully, that he saw deeply into what he was told,” Joey’s mother said. “Creative means that he could make something out of what he learned that was true and helpful within himself and for the life around him.”

“Oh,” Mack said.

“Tecumseh not only learned the ways of his own tribe, but he learned the ways of all the tribes. He visited them; he listened; he asked questions. He not only learned the crafts and the ways of nature, but he spent time with the medicine men and the holy men to learn what was known by them. He fasted and spent time alone.”

“What’s fasting?” Mack asked.
“Not eating,” said Mary.

“Why?” asked Mack.

“To clear his mind, wouldn’t you think?” Joey’s mother said.

“Tecumseh became a natural leader,” she read. “Natural because he had energy to spare, and because something began to develop deep within him that gave him understanding and the force to express it, even when it went against the traditions of the tribe. It was the Indians’ custom and habit, as long as any of them could remember, to torture their enemies when they captured them. After a fierce battle, when Tecumseh was only twenty, he stood between his tribesmen and a captured enemy and eloquently spoke against the practice of torture. He called his fellows cowards to torment a helpless man. From that day the custom of torture was abandoned by his tribe.”

“What did they do?” Mack asked.

“They put ants on them,” Joey said. “I saw it in a movie.”

Mary put her hand over her eyes and made a face.

“I saw on TV where they were torturing people somewhere else, the other day, in some country,” Mack said. “How come?”

The logs fell; bright sparks, orange and red, rained upward.

Uncle Jones watched the faces of the children, but they thought he only watched the burning logs. Joey’s mother remained standing in the firelight. Any true man alone and capable of love would have loved her, for her, for what she was. Any child would have looked, and in that presence found comfort. In an older time it would have been understood that she too had listened to the stories of the wise. Riveted to their place at her feet, the children waited.

She read, “Tecumseh saw as a hope for his people that they not forget the lore of the woods, and that they keep their relationship with nature, a relationship which was at the very heart of truth and the spirit and force of the universe—as a lifestyle and as the inward state of their being.”

“I don’t get that,” Mack said.

“I do, sort of,” said Mary.

“Yeah, sort of,” Joey said.

“It’s to know what is at the heart of things,” Joey’s mother said. “To find the truth of life, no matter in what time you live. In the heart, what was true for Tecumseh is true for us. What do you think, Uncle Jones?”

“Yes, ma’am, that’s exactly right.” His voice was low and clear, and his answer told the children, “Uncle Jones, he’s like her!” They felt the sameness between this old man and young woman, as if the two of them were parallel movements of light—just that. Uncle Jones said no more. He knew the alchemy of her being. She read on.

“Tecumseh, when he became a powerful leader, spoke often to his people with great eloquence. And if they were not always strong enough to follow his wisdom, nor clear enough to see its truth, still they loved him. And they did what they could. He warned them against alcohol
and the weed that weakens. He spoke of ways to bring clarity to their vision.”

Mack lifted up on his knees. “What is the weed that weakens?”

“It was a drug they took,” Joey’s mother said.

“They had drugs way back then?” Joey asked.

“Even then,” she said.

“Gosh,” Mary said. “That’s strange. Why would they want them way back then?”

“They say he was a prophet,” Joey’s mother said, “that not only did he bring messages of truth to his people, but that he foresaw events before they happened. He predicted an earthquake that was so great the rivers and streams ran backward, and he told of the time when a meteor of great brilliancy would flash across the sky. Tecumseh said, ‘Would that the red people could be as great as the conceptions of my mind when I think of the Great Spirit who rules over all.’”

Joey’s mother slowly closed the book. She waited to see if Uncle Jones would like to speak. The children were silent. Uncle Jones had only one eye on the fire. There was a hush over the room, a hush as deep and as truly beautiful as in any forest or lodge or painted tent of long ago—at night when there was firelight—entwined among the dreams of those gathered to tell stories of the rain, or of the ruins, or of the waves that carried them on.

“I’ll get dinner,” Joey’s mother said. Her voice was soft. “Tell them about Tecumseh, Uncle Jones.” She lifted her head and seemed to breathe the firelight. She then turned and like the shadow of a gazelle was gone from the room.

Joey felt his eyes want to fill with tears because of everything: his mother, the fire, the Indian, the old hat by the chair—Mary’s curls; he breathed her. He looked down at her hands, and he could not think. But finally the firelight on her hands made him remember by the green tree the red snow when it fell. Mack had his arms around his knees and was staring upward to the ceiling.

Uncle Jones let them be for a few moments, and then he leaned forward as if to tell a secret, a secret that could not be forgotten. It was almost as if they could see Tecumseh’s quiver of yellow arrows and the wood of his long, green bow.

“You know, children, if old Tecumseh were here now, right here with us, he’d be a good friend of mine.”

“You know about Tecumseh, Uncle Jones?” Mary asked.

“Of course I do. More than you know, child. Why, I know people right now, on this earth, that follow in his footsteps.”

“Who is that?” Mack asked.

“Why, you were just looking at her. The very woman who was reading to us from that book.”

Mack looked toward the kitchen light where she had disappeared. His eyes kept searching there.
“My mom?” Joey was incredulous. “You mean my mom?”

“That’s who for sure,” said Uncle Jones in a tender voice to impart that great truth. “And there are others, too. And it could be that the three of you will grow up in that same mold, and you will be brave and the world will be happier because of you. But you have to work at it some.”

And the firelight shown on the wonder in the faces of three young warriors, faces transformed, clear, finer than before, intent.

“I would like to be like Tecumseh,” Joey said.

“I will be a lady Tecumseh,” Mary said. “I will grow up beautiful like your mom, Joey, and I will learn all about everything.”

Mack pulled his knees closer into his chest and tried to make himself small. He didn’t want to be seen. He looked at the logs by the fire to try to quiet his heart from beating so fast. And he struggled to keep the tears from his eyes.

Uncle Jones waited, but he didn’t wait too long. “How about you, Mack?”

Mack’s voice came out very faint. “I don’t think I could,” Mack said. He looked down at the floor, his long brown lashes rising and falling over his eyes.

“Could Joey?” Uncle Jones asked softly.

“Yeah, Joey could,” Mack said. He didn’t raise his eyes.

“Could Mary?”

“Yeah, she could.”

“You could,” Uncle Jones said.

“I could?” Mack said in a voice filled with hope. He lifted his eyes.

“Do you really think so?”

“I know so,” Uncle Jones said.

Brightness returned to Mack’s face, but tears welled up in his eyes. He crossed his legs under him. “How do you know?”

“How old am I?” Uncle Jones asked.

“Almost a hundred. I’ve been around a long time, and I know the type. And you’re just it. Why, I imagine you could be just like Tecumseh and help the world coming and going.”

“Sure you could,” Joey said.

“Uncle Jones knows,” Mary said.

Mack smiled an inward smile; his eyes slowly closed. His expression was generous, calm, final in that time. As surely as they had closed, his eyes snapped open. He rocked forward and backward, bursting to find something to do with his hands.

“I smell cooking,” Uncle Jones said. He lightly slapped his knees with his hands and then lifted his broad hat from the hearth.

All three children bounded to their feet, but hesitated...uncertain, tentative, as if they had awakened from another world into an unfamiliar room. Joey felt the yellow shaving in his pocket as a vision, as Mary’s golden curls. She lifted her eyes, but only as shining windows inward; she noticed nothing. Mack stared into the fire for a long moment as if
stunned by the light then turned slowly to Mary and whispered, “I think Joey likes you.” For another long moment Mack seemed struck by his thoughts; he then bolted to the doorway, leaving Joey and Mary behind, and he knew, together.

“Race you,” Mack said. And down the long hall toward Joey’s mother he ran, thoughtless of who might follow, on his own journey, alone, toward the light in the distant room.

Annette Allen

Appeal

Isn’t there something in us that hungers for fierce transcendence, some pagan holdover that delivered nature to life by creating gods: god of the wind, Aoelus, and Triton, old ruler of the sea?

Yearning for nature’s purity is suspect now. There’s not much place for ideals written over the real. Human gesture—that cradle of arms intimate and erotic—enraps us. The world is legible on the skin, grounding each domestic bliss.

Yet mixed with this—the appeal to hold another’s face to lips, eyes—isn’t there a residue of desire to be the rain as it touches down, to feel the shape that love takes for all creation. For the way that morning sunlight cracks along ancient river beds and a mist lifts off the trembling trees, tall green steeples, the wind loosening their tongues until the air rings the world into an awakening hue.
CONTRIBUTORS

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Nancy Roberts teaches fiction writing at WKU. Her second story collection, *Crossing the Great Divide*, was released in 2005. Before she was able to attend college, she worked 10 years in New York City—a secretary-wannabe writer. Her interview with Friedan is her first published work. She reads at 3rd Tuesday, and this is his fourth appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Jude Roy, from Louisiana, teaches at Madisonville C. C. His writing has appeared in numerous resources, including *The Southern Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Sound of Writing*, and NPR. He has read at 3rd Tuesday, and this is his second appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Teresa Roy, a native of Southern Illinois, lives and works in Evansville but buys her cars and reads poetry in Kentucky at 3rd Tuesday Coffeehouse. This is her tenth appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Bernd Sauermann teaches composition, film, and literature at Hopkinsville C. C. and lives in Cadiz with his wife and magnificent horde of children and animals, where he also brews his own beer. He reads at 3rd Tuesday, and this is his sixth appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Katherine Shipp is a 2004 Brescia graduate with a degree in Spanish. She lives in Madisonville with her husband and their one year old son, Harry. This is her third appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Steven Skaggz lives in Louisville and is a calligrapher, semiotician, and graphic designer. He reads at 3rd Tuesday, and this is his third appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Frederick Smock is poet-in-residence at Bellarmine U. His new books are *Poetry and Compassion: Essays on Art and Craft* (Wind Publications) and *Sonnets* (Finishing Line Press). He reads at 3rd Tuesday, and this is his third appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Frank Steele edited *Plainsong* for many years. He has published three chapbooks of his work, and more than 100 of his poems have appeared in literary journals. He retired from WKU and lives in Bowling Green. He has read at 3rd Tuesday, and this is his third appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Pamela Steele lives on an Umatilla Indian Reservation in Pendleton, Oregon. She earned an MFA from Spalding and has published in such journals as *Arable*, *Rattapallax*, and *Rosebud*. She has read at 3rd Tuesday, and this is her second appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Joe Suvant served as Kentucky Poet Laureate from 2002-2004 and is the author of four collections of poems. A native of Owensboro, he is slowly phasing himself out of teaching at WKU. He reads at 3rd Tuesday, and this is his ninth appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Richard Taylor, Kentucky’s Poet Laureate from 1999-2001, teaches English at KSU and lives in Frankfort where he and his wife run Poor Richard’s Books. This fall, University Press of Kentucky is publishing his book *Sue Mundy, a Novel of the Civil War* in its Kentucky Voices series. He has read at 3rd Tuesday, and this is his sixth appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Chris Tiahrt has taught mathematics at Brescia since 1992, has appeared in *Open 24 Hours* since 1993, is married with 0.888 children (as of March), and can be recognized by the imaginary giraffe nibbling at his hair.

Matthew Weafer is a 2006 Brescia graduate with a major in English with emphasis in professional writing, and he is the recipient of Brescia’s 2005-2006 award for Achievement in Poetry Writing. He hopes to replace capitalism by the year 2008 with Confucianism. This is his third appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Mary Welp is a 1979 graduate of Brescia. Her novel *The Triangle Pose* was published last fall, and her second novel, *Pilot Light*, is soon to be published. She lives in Louisville where she is a columnist for *Louisville Magazine*. Her writing appears regularly in *Open 24 Hours*.

Mark Williams is in the real estate business in Evansville. His writing has appeared in *Hudson Review*, *Indiana Review*, and *Southern Review*, and online at *Able Muse*. He reads at 3rd Tuesday, and this is his third appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Carol Yanik studied creative writing at Brescia before moving to St. Charles, Illinois. She has a master’s degree in reading and is an adjunct reading instructor at Harper Community College. She said she is presently pet-less and kid-less but not mindless. This is her fifth appearance in *Open 24 Hours*.

Katy Yokom recently traveled to India to research her current project, a novel set on a tiger reserve. She has an MFA in writing from Spalding and has received several grants for her fiction writing. She has been published in *The Louisville Review* and is a free-lance journalist. She has read at 3rd Tuesday.
Creative Writing at Brescia

Creative Writing at Brescia is much more than classes; it is a far-reaching program that includes a regional writers group, a monthly coffeehouse, visiting writers, opportunities for publication, workshops, scholarships, and more.

Creative Writing has been a part of the English program at Brescia since 1968. The University uses writing talent scholarships to recruit promising high school writers, but all facets of the program are open to any interested student or non-student. The result is a rich mix of active writers.

The Brescia Writers Group, which includes anyone who is in any way affiliated with the Creative Writing program, is a multi-purpose organization that offers a variety of activities and opportunities. Some members of the Writers Group meet to critique each other’s writing. Other members produce the monthly Third Tuesday Writers Coffeehouse at a downtown Owensboro cafe. Still others present creative writing workshops in the schools and for community groups as well as on the Brescia campus. The Brescia Writers Group also publishes the annual edition of *Open 24 Hours*, and it produces “After Hours,” the creative writing page of Brescia’s weekly student newspaper, *The Broadcast*.

Over the years, numerous nationally known writers have visited Brescia and worked with the creative writing students. The list includes Robert Bly, Stephen Mooney, William Stafford, Ruth Whitman, Sandra McPherson, Mark Harris, Sena Naslund, X.J. Kennedy, William Matthews, Jim Wayne Miller, Gurney Norman, Ed McClanahan, Terry Bisson, Joe Survant, Kathleen Driskell, and Brescia graduate Mary Welp.

In addition to Creative Writing, Brescia offers an English major and minor with an emphasis in professional writing. The curriculum includes journalism, professional and technical writing, creative writing, and practicums. The major prepares students for careers in journalism, public relations, and communications. The minor is designed to prepare students for graduate school and to complement other career emphases, from business to science.

For more information, contact Dr. Craig Barrette, Coordinator of the English program, or David Bartholomy, Director of Creative Writing.