Thin Air

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Thin Air

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About Thin Air

Thin Air is an annual literary journal produced by graduate students in the English Department of **Northern Arizona University**.

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While *Thin Air* receives support from the department and the university, the staff maintains autonomy over the content of the publication that's released at the end of the spring semester each year.

As a university-based literary journal, *Thin Air* provides both a learning environment for graduate students and an opportunity for writers from around the world to have their work considered for publication. We look forward to your submissions and will give every manuscript we receive careful consideration.

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The Autobiography of Rand Nicholson

by Elizabeth Hunter

My name is Rand Nicholson. I am ten years old, and the most interesting thing I've ever done is try to kill myself. The most boring thing I've ever done is this stupid paper.

We have to answer ten questions about ourselves. The first two I answered just now, but I think my name and age should count as two different questions. Then the most interesting thing could be three.

4. My family is 1/3 dead people. Xavier Nicholson is my dad, and he's been dead for nine years. Then there is me and my mom, who is named Teresa.
5. Pizza with extra cheese is my favorite dinner, but I only get that when I go to my friend Petey's house because Teresa is crazy and won't eat cheese. She thinks it is like using drugs. If you get mad and show my mom this paper, she will laugh.
6. We don't have any pets, but my friend Petey has a mongrel dog named Wily. I want a cat. They don't stink or eat peanut butter sandwiches right after you make them.
7. My favorite game is baseball, but it should be soccer because that is what my dad would have liked. Teresa hates sports, and she wants my favorite game to be grocery store.
8. My dad doesn't do anything for a job because he is dead. My mom runs a health food store called Hippie Foods, the Alternative Place to Shop.
9. Ohio History is my favorite subject in school because Ian Nelson and I have to share a book, and Ian always takes it home with him at night.

10. The thing I like best about myself is that I'm not afraid of anything. Once I even crawled up inside a chimney just to see if I could get out on the roof. It didn't work, but I did get really dirty.
11. My life goal is to be an explorer in Alaska because then I could camp in a different place every night.

* * *

It was inevitable that he would start telling people, but Teresa hadn't expected it to show up in a school paper. She hadn't expected herself to sound so controlled and calm either, but she had. It was impressive enough that they let her take her son to the grocery store—a place she preferred to home.

When they walked into Hippie Foods, Jaycee—the ex-roadie, current cashier, and Teresa's favorite female employee—was standing at the only open cash register, explaining the benefits of wheat grass infusion to a deaf man in his seventies.

"Wheat, yes, I want some plain wheat flour. White and soft. Pillsbury would be good," he shouted.

Teresa and Rand managed to slide past them and through the Employees Only door without getting drawn into the discussion. Fluorescent lights flickered on the ceiling, and bulk-sized sacks of spelt flour sat in a corner of the room. She hoisted herself onto the stack and held her arms wide.

Rand climbed into her lap, and her arms pressed in around him. Her breath ran hot over the top of his head and onto his ears. "You're still mine," she said.

"I wish I could go play with Petey."

"Petey's dad found you with a loaded gun; they're afraid of you now."

"Yesterday at recess Petey said he wasn't, but he didn't pick me for his team in kickball," Rand said. "My team won—by a lot."

She laughed and pressed her cheek down on top of his head. Even on the day he tried to kill himself, he'd been full of himself.

As usual, Rand's first words that morning were, "I'm not going to school next week."

"It's hot today. Make yourself a bowl of granola and let me shower."

A minute later she was lost in the white noise of the water. When she pulled the shower curtain back, silence flowed up the stairs; first her ears strained and then her nose, searching for something unusual, something like fire. Nothing. She pulled into a blue shirt and a pair of hemp pants and pounded down the steps, giving him a fair chance to stop in the midst of whatever crime he was committing.

"Let me see," the boy said to himself.

He was lying on his back with his feet sticking out from under the sink. She'd only been in the shower for twenty minutes. Her eyes ran the length of the kitchen and there was something white spilled on the table. Corn starch mixed with water. Another telltale glob of semi-liquid sat quivering on the edge of the counter.

"Rand, what have I told you about doing science right before I have to go to work?"

"Mom, I had to see what would happen."

"What do you mean? You've made Oobleck a million times. You know it gets hard if you squeeze it or throw it against the wall and that it oozes otherwise."

"You know how you can't stir it very fast or it turns hard? I wanted to know what would happen if you found a way to stir it real fast."

"So you put it in the garbage disposal?"

"Well, yeah. You're always saying you hope it breaks before one of us loses a finger down there."

She almost grinned.

Rand tapped the side of the disposal a time or two. "Maybe if we just ran a bunch of water down here, it would be all right."

"Try that. I have to make a phone call." She walked into the living room, punched in a familiar number and listened to her friend's phone ringing.

"Hey, Bonnie, I'll trade you a month's worth of organic honey for a day of baby-sitting," she said.

"Terri, you already promised me that you would watch Petey today. Harvey and I did have Rand all weekend, you know."

Bonnie had her. "Try to have him ready at eight. The store opens at nine, and I need some time to check the stock."

The garbage disposal roared to life as she was hanging up the phone. "Hey, Mom, there's a reset button down here."

"Petey's coming to the store with us today. You better eat if you want to be on time to pick him up," she said over the noise of the disposal, which she turned off before Rand could pour anything else down it.

The boys spent the day in the back room, stacking boxes into forts and longing for permission to walk to the ice cream shop. Teresa offered them frozen soy pops until they retreated into their forts again. About that time, two carts collided, tearing a bag of cat litter open and starting an argument in aisle seven. Vaguely, Teresa heard the word "rafters," but Rand watched her trot off across the store before they started climbing.

Once they were settled into a comfortable corner of the ceiling, Petey started.

"I bet you a dollar you can't get to the middle of the middle rafter," he said.

"You're the one who gets scared, Petey. Not me."

"I bet you a dollar you can't do it."

"Let me see the dollar."

Petey scrounged in his pocket and produced four quarters. Instead of handing them to Rand, he held them up in his left hand and dropped them one by one into the outstretched palm of his right.

Rand counted the quarters and saw how they shimmered when they caught a little light. He said, "I get all four if I get out to the center rafter."

"You have to jump from rafter to rafter, and you can't stop."

"Anything else? You don't get to add rules after I start."

Petey shook his head. So Rand edged along the wall, resting his hands on the low part of the roof for balance until Petey called, "That's the middle, now start across."

There was a little flutter in his chest, but Rand didn't hesitate. He jumped and felt one foot and then the other land square on the beam. He swayed, and the quarters clinked together. Again and again he jumped. More than once he wobbled on his landing, but he made it to the center of the warehouse.

"You scared?" Petey yelled.

"Nope." No one ever talked about Xavier Nicholson being afraid either. Over and over people said he had been curious and brave.

Petey threw a quarter down to the ground. It flew in a long arc to the cement floor and clanged when it hit.

"You are too scared."

"Stop throwing my quarters," Rand said.

"What would your mom say if you fell?"

"She'd say she knew I'd break my neck someday. Then she'd say she wasn't surprised at all."

"You think she'd cry?"

"Yeah, but I wouldn't know about it. I'd be dead."

"You wouldn't die. Kids don't die," Petey said. His flesh seemed to be turning lighter.

"Sure they do. Someday I'm going to die."

"You're only saying that 'cause your dad is dead."

"So? Everyone says my dad was awesome. Besides, you owe me a dollar."

When they talked about it, Teresa always said that his dad thought of death as the universe's greatest mystery. Everyone had a different idea about what happened after death, but Rand only knew one way to find out who was right. He guessed he had an advantage over all those other people too, since his dad would be waiting for him on the other side. He didn't have to be afraid, not while he was alive and not when he died, either.

Instead of reaching up to the roof and walking along his beam to the wall, Rand jumped the rest of the way across the building. On the last jump, his back foot slipped, and he banged against the beam as he fell. He almost shouted for his dad as he fell, but his breath caught in his chest. Some jumbo bags of spelt flour saved him from hitting the cement floor, but the thud he made was impressive enough to make both boys look toward the stockroom door. No adult appeared, and they both sighed.

Before he peeled himself off the bag of flour, Rand's quick eyes saw the quarter Petey had thrown, and he had it in his hand by the time he said, "Hey, come on down and pay up, scaredy-cat."

Petey's descent was long and slow, and it ended with his dropping to the floor from a stack of boxes just a few feet off the ground. When he stood, he thrust the remaining three quarters into Rand's chest. Flour

puffed out of the boy's shirt. Giggling, Petey pounded his friend gently, karate chopping his back while Rand made a tuneless sound that turned staccato when Petey's hands hit him. Stiff and rickety from his fall, even gentle taps hurt, but if he'd told Petey that, he would have just hit harder.

A fine cloud of flour surrounded them when the door to the rest of the store popped open, and Teresa stuck her head in. "Rand, stay away from the flour. Stock is for customers, not for kids."

"Okay."

"And stay out of the rafters. You'll break your neck up there."

"Okay."

"Come on out into the juice bar and have some lunch."

"Okay."

Much, much later, when Bonnie came in, she waved to Teresa and then stood in line, waiting to talk to her. Jaycee's shift was over, and the new teller had just called in sick, so it was the best Teresa could do for her.

"Our boys are sitting here so quietly," Bonnie said.

"Hmm. Don't ask me a thing about flying tampons, and I'll tell you they were good all day," Teresa said. A few people in line snickered, and she grinned herself. Rand sat up a little straighter, and Petey watched his mother's face.

"It's dinner time. How about me taking them home for supper and you can come by at closing time?" Bonnie said.

"Rand could use a meal," she said.

So off he went to a house with a father. At the end of the night, Teresa followed Rand's preferred path from the grocery to his best buddy's house, complete with the shortcut across two back yards and a big hop over the Stikes' back fence.

When she neared their garage, she heard Harvey Stikes say, "Rand, put that down." His voice sounded oddly gentle. "It's going to be okay. Mrs. Stikes is calling your mother right now."

"Stay away from me," Rand said. She could hear him crying.

"It's okay. I'm here," she said from the corner of the garage. She stepped into the yellow light and found Rand pointing a rifle at Harvey's feet.

She clenched her jaw and forced her throat to close. "Rand."

The child shifted his eyes. Since when was his body so bony and tiny, curled around the stock of a gun?

She stepped in front of Harvey. He breathed ragged bursts of air down on her neck, but she didn't have the energy to tell him to get out.

"Rand," she said, stepping slowly toward him with her hand outstretched. Just as her fingers started tingling for the touch of cold metal, he dropped the gun. It thudded softly on the pile of quarter paneling he was crouched on. She touched his face and brought him close.

A police siren wailed.

"A minute ago, he was pointing it at himself. I never saw a thing like it in my life," Harvey said. His eyes watered and he touched Teresa's shoulder.

"The barrel was in his mouth."

She carried her boy toward the siren, putting him down only to vomit in the bushes.

Bonnie stepped out of the shadows and clung to her. "Oh, Terri, I didn't call the police. They aren't coming. You can just take him home. It can be a secret."

Teresa nodded and fitted her hands under Rand's limp armpits. She hoisted him up, grateful for his weight straining against her muscles.

"Harvey, can you drive them?" Bonnie said. "She

needs you to do this for her. It will help." Bonnie laid her hand on Rand's head.

The boy flinched, and Teresa found that her T-shirt was wet, soaked. When she shifted, he pushed the bridge of his nose deeper into her shoulder.

"It would help us, Harvey," she said.

He nodded, and his keys rattled in his hand, banging together louder and longer than they should have.

"Terri," he started, when he was settled into the driver's seat and the car was pointed toward her little house. "I don't think… I… I'm sorry. Twice tonight, Bonnie heard Petey say he would take the dare if he really wasn't afraid. I think he was egging him on. Bonnie can't get him to stop crying, but it seems like that's what happened."

Rand shifted in her lap, but she made no move to let him go.

"Teresa," Rand said. "Let me go, Mom."

Teresa shook her head, and the stockroom popped into view. It wasn't Tuesday and it wasn't before Rand tried to kill himself anymore. It was after. She was right back in the present, where she didn't want to be.

"I think we fell asleep," Rand said.

"Maybe you did," Jaycee said, coming into focus in front of Teresa. "Come on, Terri, look at me. Good, good girl. It's past closing time. I sent everyone home a few minutes ago. You awake back here, you okay?"

"I think I have post-traumatic stress syndrome," she said. Rand struggled against the iron will of her arms, and Jaycee used her roadie's muscles to pry him out.

"I knew a man who had that once. The guys used to drop stuff when he wasn't looking. They thought it was hilarious how it freaked him out until one day he slid a little pickup truck into this idiot roadie named Mike. Pinned him right against the wall and started

talking about building barricades. He was an old guy too, must've been fifty or so. After that, they left him alone. I used to hush him in the night, seemed like that helped him."

"I don't want to be hushed," Teresa said. "Not by you, anyway."

Jaycee grinned, an expression that made Teresa think she might have been a wolf in another life.

"Well, you still have your sense of humor and your boy, Terri," she said. "I think you might be all right if you give it some time."

"It's not me I'm worried about."

"You should be worried," Rand said, rubbing the spot on his upper arm where she'd held him. "You've been acting a little crazy lately."

"Whoa," Jaycee said. "She's not the one who tried to kill herself."

Rand aimed a half-hearted kick at one of the bags of flour. "It was an experiment. Besides, I'm not afraid of dying."

"You were scared," Teresa said.

"Maybe," Rand said. She couldn't remember his ever sounding more ashamed.

"Eventually, you'll die," Jaycee said. "It happens to everyone. You don't have to go around feeling bad because you didn't rush into it."

"My dad wasn't afraid of it," Rand said. "Everyone says how brave and good he was."

"No matter how ridiculous they thought you were when you were alive, people will only say nice things about you after you die," Teresa said.

"Yeah," Jaycee said. "Because you don't have a chance to prove them wrong by doing things like ruining your mom's garbage disposal or telling your teacher her assignments are stupid or stealing water

guns from aisle two."

"So my dad wasn't really any good?" Rand asked.

Teresa took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. "No, no, he was too good. His life would have been longer if he hadn't been so principled," she said.

"So it's good to be bad?" Rand asked.

"Sometimes our very survival depends on it," Teresa said.

The sadness in her voice startled her, but Rand didn't react to her tone. He rested his chin in his right hand, a gesture Teresa recognized as one of the things he'd inherited from his father. When he started grinning, though, she saw herself all over the boy.

"I'm going to get a cheese pizza from aisle eight and a water gun from aisle two," he said. And he ran headlong out of the stockroom.

"Get two water guns!" Teresa shouted. "And no cheese pizza. That stuff is terrible for you!"

"I must ignore my mom," Rand shouted. "My very survival depends on it."

There was silence for a moment and then Jaycee said, "Jesus, Teresa, I think you just created a monster."

"Better a monster than a martyr," Teresa said.

"Huh," Jaycee said. "Maybe so."

photographs by Sal Laughter

Lady Macbeth and I

by Joshua Conklin

I.

We arc between darkness
and explosion.
Pheromones make promises.
Fingertip friction
rushes blood from the head.

We conquer tissue.
Build empires of sweat.
Desire is a king
who dismisses consequence.

II.

Wrist hair swabbed burgundy,
streams in the cracks of skin,
brown thighs
painted red.

Un-cycled blood.

III.

Shadows replace doctors,
amnesia easier than answers.

IV.

Months later, desperate for crimson,
it comes
to a gloved man.

V.

Decades later,
despite the scrub of years,
scarlet scars
remain.

Stimulus Control

by Joshua Conklin

B.F. Skinner sits in the corner of my bedroom
smoking a cigar,
taking notes on my performance,
positively reinforcing desired behavior.

A bite of cake for every thrust,
a pizza for new positions,
a movie for cunnilingus,
tickets to the game for orgasms.

Some call Skinner's methods crude.
Animals you train,
Man is more complex.

Evolved beyond
begging at the table,
pooping on the floor,
and sniffing crotches.

Skinner shrugs. His subjects speak for him.

I'm happy to be trained.
What's better than sex and cake?
My wife's moans
no longer manufactured.

We were fools to seek salvation
between sheets.
The box spring is no altar.
The head board needs notches
not a cross.

Years of counseling and struggle
disappointing nights in the bedroom
and all we needed was a scientist,
a bag of treats at his side.

Bubble Letters (And Other Epic Jr. High Discoveries)

by Joshua Conklin

For years we'd been taught to mark within margins;
understanding followed order.

We toiled over the complexity of cursive.
Strained to make meaning.
Clumsy fingers,
still wet
with language.

But this new script announced to the world that
Katie Loves Joey
within the borders of an arrow-pierced heart.

Mrs. Harris Admires the Perseids

by Carl F. Thompson, Jr.

A week ahead, Jerome phoned and invited the widowed Mrs. Harris, Samantha Harris, for the two-hour afternoon drive on August 12th specifically to view the Perseids, the annual meteor shower expected to peak that night.

Mrs. Harris's first response was a crinkled brow and a question. "What on earth for?" Generally, Mrs. Harris translated most male-female interactions to sex. That had certainly been her experience before marriage and later as she watched so many friends succumb to external temptations once married. Disclosures over lunch taught her to count affairs—at least one, very likely two, three, or four—as common. A considerable age gap also stood between her and Jerome. Mrs. Harris was forty-three, while Jerome was likely ten years younger. Not that Mrs. Harris hadn't retained her auburn hair, her hazel eyes, and her devastatingly persuasive figure. But it was also true that the two didn't really know each other. Yes, Jerome had worked six years as Mrs. Harris's late husband Harry's accountant in his building supply company and had served as a pallbearer at his funeral five months ago. Indeed, Jerome's longtime allegiance to Harry in itself seemed so strong she'd have speculated Jerome to be overpowered by internal feelings of disloyalty if he moved on her. If he really had making a "move" in mind. But what else did she know? Did he have hobbies (beyond, evidently, astronomy)? Was he athletic? Did he have a sense of humor? Was he bull-headed and argumentative or a paragon of

reasonability? To add to the gap in age and acquaintance was another: physical attraction. Where Harry had been bulky and firm, Jerome was nondescript. He was average in every way she could think of. Throw him into any shopping mall and try picking him out. Height and build—the next guy's. Eyes, hair: brown. Hair always trimmed. (Weekly cuts?) A bland face, neither sallow and thin, nor pudgy and round, nor angular and long. Bland. No peaks, valleys, divots, creases, or lines. Yet, for all that, he *did* look pleasant. Even his strange phone call demonstrated the unexpected—a capability for optimism—or possible audacity? And yet, whenever she thought of Jerome (almost never), she irrevocably thought also of Harry. As if the two were locked in step, but now with the leader gone. Was he seeking a substitute friend?

So, when he had suggested the trip, she had responded, "What on earth for?"

"That's catchy, your phrase 'what on earth for?'," Jerome replied, "because we're dealing with something that's really not of this earth."

Strangely, at that point, he hung up.

Mrs. Harris had been sitting in a rocker on the large gray-painted porch of her late Victorian house, peering both at her dead cellphone and at a patch of possibly corrupt thistle in her garden, just as Jerome, on foot, stopped in front. Evidently, he'd been thinking this out. Without a moment's hesitation, simply saying, "Hi," he opened the gate, crossed the walkway, and mounted the porch. There was a second rocker, but Jerome, knowing it must have been Harry's, didn't sit.

"Once upon a time," he started his lecture, "there was a comet that passed this way, and afterwards, never reappeared. Instead, every year we run the gauntlet of

the comet's residue, and that's the Perseid meteor shower. Every year it's either the Perseids or the Leonids—that's in the winter—that turn out to be the gassers."

"Gassers?" Mrs. Harris replied.

"I just mean they put on the best show. I've got a cabin in West Virginia, not a long drive. There are good restaurants. The cabin's got a loft bedroom and a bedroom below. Kitchen, bath, all those things. Long deck on the front. Harry advised me on both planning and construction. I bought materials on discount, worked weekends and vacations, and three years later I had a finished cabin. Harry came out a couple times to check for things building inspectors wouldn't let pass. Overall, he seemed pleased, and I think you'd like it."

"I'm still not sure what you're asking," Mrs. Harris responded. "You're saying you want me to go to your cabin to watch—shooting stars? Overnight?"

"Yes. That's about it. Please remember, two bedrooms. I mentioned it to Harry last September, asking both of you to come, and he thought it might be nice. It's dark sky out there, not all lit up like around D.C., and you sit on the deck just like you're sitting on your porch right now. You train your eyes in the right direction, and the closer you get to midnight the more meteorites appear. After midnight, at one or two a.m., that's the best."

"Two a.m.?" Mrs. Harris stopped rocking. "Two in the morning?"

"Yeah. You don't have to stay up that late. You could always go to bed, but I'd recommend holding out for one a.m. Once these things get going, they can be magical. Better than the Fourth of July. Puts a sense of awe back into things. Look, it's a week away, so you could think about it and I'll check back."

"What if the weather's bad?"

"Then we won't go."

"Harry really approved of this?"

Without comment, the accountant nodded his head.

Mrs. Harris seemed agitated. She began rocking faster but eased as she scanned the reassuringly deeply cloud-covered skies. If weather was the key, it seemed unlikely that in a week conditions would change all that much.

"Harry never mentioned this to me."

"When I raised it, he said he'd never seen a meteor shower but always wanted to. Maybe he wanted to surprise you. Look. I'll check back on the 11th. On the 12th, if the weather's good, I'll come by about two p.m., get a jump on rush hour, and we'll drive out and eat. There's a restaurant with a spectacular view of the mountains, sitting just above the valley with my cabin. Then we'd just sit on the deck, open some wine, and wait for the show. Then sleep, wake, and breakfast someplace. I'd have you back noon the next day."

"How many bathrooms does your place have?"

"Just one, but it's spacious."

Mrs. Harris again regarded the skies.

"Well, possibly," she said. She looked perturbed and uncertain, but Jerome heard her response as an affirmation.

That's the way it was left as he returned to his walk, waving once to Mrs. Harris, who did not acknowledge it.

* * *

For two days, Mrs. Harris watched the clouds darken. An even safer bet she'd never have to worry about taking the trip?

But wasn't that still the problem: Ignorance? Ignorance that might be quelled if she sleuthed and had some luck at it. So she began thumbing Harry's diary,

something she'd never read. Oddly, she wasn't sure she wanted to discover all her husband's secret thoughts. He'd kept diaries the last twelve years. She found them in a cardboard box in the basement, the last, unfinished volume sitting on top. There wouldn't be much in that one—it would end March 14th at the latest. She picked up the book beneath it. A dark blue cover with large, lined pages and block-printed handwritten letters. She scanned the September entries. Midway she found:

> *Jerome mentioned the meteors again. It's still eleven months off, assuming. His mentioning meteor showers made me think of Luna moths, those mammoth, fluffy, wonderful green monsters when I was a kid. Now the honey bees are going, the frogs, and maybe the butterflies, too. Probably haven't seen a shooting star since I last saw a Luna moth, unless you count that animated moth on the Lunesta commercial. I asked Marshall William's kid Arnie why that moth was in those Lunesta commercials and he said he had no idea. A fourteen year old who's never seen or heard of a real Luna moth. And didn't seem to care. Why am I surprised? Still, it's a disappointment.*
>
> *Jerome says the meteor showers are usually well-timed even if some are better than others. So if I haven't seen a shooting star since I last saw a Luna moth, it's like going back in time. I frankly like the idea. But what will Samantha say? I'll have to think on that one.*

Mrs. Harris stared at the page. First she felt anger, a fire in her fingers, the way anger often hit her. He

was so cautious in his actions. "It's still eleven months off, assuming." He didn't mean assuming Jerome didn't change his plans, or the weather was bad, or there was a business emergency. He never *counted* on anything—including being *alive* the following August. Yes, he was right. But if she dug through these diaries, how many other things would she find he'd passed up without ever mentioning? Each morning, he saw the day ahead as nothing stronger than tissue paper. Harry knew he had an uncertain future. His father had died of heart disease at sixty, his grandfather at fifty-seven, an uncle at fifty-five, his mother at fifty-one. He was only fifty-two, but he already had the arterial stent Dr. Berg inserted in December. And, yes, in March, Harry keeled over one day simply walking through the warehouse, a victim of his DNA.

So, what was Mrs. Harris's future? Her garden and her garden club meetings, golf or tennis, furniture dusting, and the close reading of Harry's diaries to check for secrets? But she wasn't sure she wanted to know his secrets, including the trips they might have taken but didn't. Revelations bore inherent dangers. Ignorance perpetuated the status quo. But the status quo meant that, some day, without any real change in the way she lived, it would be *her* funeral, not because of genetic misfortune, but simply because evil courses through well-ordered passive lives and thieves the beautiful. You could nurse and coax, but in the long run death was obstinate.

Harry had always enjoyed the Fourth of July. Maybe he really did want to see a meteor shower. Maybe he wanted them *both* to see the shower. Maybe.

* * *

On August 12th, Mrs. Harris woke to a day too fine to refuse. The sky was pristinely blue, with none of the usual D.C. haze; the temperature was seventy and headed to no more than eighty; and the humidity seemed piped in from Arizona. It had to be an omen if not even a commandment. Somewhere, Harry was still commanding, still arranging, still in control of the digital remote for the Sony plasma. But *she* would be the one to see the meteors, not him, and she would do it simply to please herself. That fellow Jerome might appear bland on the surface, but she was intrigued to hear he'd built his own cabin, that they would be heading for mountains with clear, dark evening skies, that they might relax on his deck drinking wine, while the atmosphere, shot by tiny pellets from space, conjured ephemeral, bright, phosphorescent-like streaks. The more she thought about Jerome's bland looks, the more comfortable she became and then, rationally or not, the more wary she grew over her sense of comfort. There could be mystery beneath the most casual appearance of people. But what shape would the mystery take? Surely he was no ax murderer. But mystery didn't mean beauty. She wasn't going to be led about with cow-like passivity. For safety she'd start out conservatively and let her trust work up until she was sure it was justified.

* * *

He arrived in an impossibly small car, a red Mini-Cooper with a white top and a large sunroof. He put her small overnight bag in the slim boot of the car. He asked what music she liked. "Classical," she said, not looking at him. She watched the road as he drove. She

wanted to verify his driving habits. She'd constantly had to snap at Harry to brake, to signal, to use all three rearview mirrors.

"Okay, classical," Jerome replied, asking her to open the glove compartment.

They listened to Charles Martin Loeffler's *Pagan Poem*, a work Mrs. Harris had never heard before.

"Would Gustav Holtz be too corny after that?" he asked.

So Mrs. Harris loaded *The Planets*.

At the start of the drive, Jerome had asked if she minded him lowering his window a bit, and she said "a bit" was okay. He also asked if he might open the sunroof a bit, and yes, once again, "a bit" sounded safe.

But what would happen to this little car, despite the front and side air bags Jerome pointed out, if it encountered an SUV or a pickup?

"We'll just drive and enjoy it," Jerome said. A half-hour later, he opened the sunroof all the way. He glanced at Mrs. Harris who was peering intently ahead, looking uncertain as the air ruffled about them. "Better than air conditioning," said Jerome.

"Pay attention to the road," Mrs. Harris remarked. "I don't mind the air, I just want to be sure this car stays on the asphalt."

The last half mile of the 110-mile drive was on a shale-and-gravel road top, passing through woods and then breaking into a large field with five widely-separated houses visible. Houses with acreage.

His, when he pointed it out to her, was truly nice, she realized. Maybe this trip would indeed suit, possibly in unexpected ways.

* * *

"Okay, just to be sure we put this issue to bed up

front—pardon the pun," Jerome said as soon as they entered the cabin, "the downstairs bedroom is yours. Mine's the loft. I don't want you negotiating that circular staircase in the middle of the night, not really knowing this place like I do, even with two nightlights on. Both beds are queen-size, firm, and comfortable. We're not sleeping in cots, neither of us. Okay?"

Mrs. Harris stood in the indicated bedroom as he spoke. It was a back corner room, medium in size, well-lighted, and had an overhead fan. For that matter, nearly every living space in the cabin had a ceiling fan controlled by a remote. The bedroom had two nightstands, a large wicker trunk on which she could set her bags, a small clothes cabinet, and two ample closets. There were four windows, all with blinds. Despite a woodstove in the adjoining room, there was baseboard heating throughout the house. But it was summer, anyway.

More impressive, however, was the large, perhaps three-by-four foot abstract painting that dominated the room with the woodstove.

"You didn't paint this, did you?"

"No. I paint only walls and ceilings. Don't like it?"

"I like it very much," she said, startled to have said it. The room had a vaulted ceiling, not quite as high as the room with the loft but still very high. She also said she liked the floor-to-ceiling stonework behind the woodstove.

He smiled. "They really do make sharp-looking artificial fieldstone these days, don't they?"

She didn't believe for an instant he was putting her down. She suspected he might be one of those people uncomfortable at accepting compliments. How likely could you call humility bland?

"Oh, a warning," he acknowledged. "The well water has iron in it, so if you want drinking water, head for the fridge."

* * *

They ate a sunset dinner at the Heights Restaurant, which peered over the valley where Jerome's cabin sat. Below them ran the Potomac River, something she would never have guessed. The Heights was an old and popular—though expensive—restaurant about half-full when they arrived. Even so, they got a window table. They didn't talk much. Mrs. Harris did not admire Jerome's way of grasping a fork, plus at times he ate with his elbows on the table. She had to be honest with herself and keep her eyes open. Even if he'd never been taught these things, working in D.C., shouldn't he have noticed simply by example? There was no way she could believe he never ate out.

Soon the sun dropped behind the mountains. Jerome made a gesture to the waiter—raising a hand to "scribble" an airy signature on an imaginary check. That gesture hadn't been born of ignorance, surely. After paying, they drove the three miles back to the cabin, neither saying a word.

* * *

It was after nine p.m. Lightning bugs flittered about almost randomly yet staying within ten or twelve feet of the ground. Mrs. Harris had not seen a lightning bug since … well, a long time.

She would have called Jerome's place a "cottage," not a cabin. It was too big, and had too much glass to be a cabin. From within, the extensive use of glass gave a nearly continuous view of the area and neighboring houses. Some of the homes were large, including a few sizeable log cabins. Jerome's place sat on four acres of mostly open land, and from the long front deck, you

could see mountains in Maryland, invisibly, from this point, overlooking the Potomac. Far off, she heard a train and the Doppler shift of the horn as the train echoed into the distance. An actual train running mountain passes.

"Well, want to sit outside?"

"Isn't it early? Didn't you say the meteors don't start till ten o'clock or even midnight?"

"Or three a.m., sometimes. But I've got a ratty old lounge chair and you can have this leather-backed chair. It's light and comfortable. And we'll put the little table between us and get some wine? Only two choices, I'm afraid: semillon-chardonnay and merlot."

Mrs. Harris drank the semillon-chardonnay since she'd never tried it before, and then simply listened. Crickets. All around them the needle-chirps of crickets. When the lightning bugs finally dispersed, Mrs. Harris heard an owl hooting, and then noted the deep swoops of dark birds, swallows or purple martins.

How long had it been since she'd ventured into nature? She and Harry usually took an autumn day's drive along the Shenandoah's Skyline Drive but really never stepped out of the car, except to find facilities, or information, or a place to eat. They certainly never hiked. Sometimes they picnicked at Great Falls, where the Potomac cascades over enormous rocks and the churn of the water was treacherous. Every year roughly a dozen people drowned, including kayakers practicing white water runs and rock climbers who lost their grip and fell. Once an inverted kayak became caught in a washing-machine whirlpool, not even the strongest escaped. But Mrs. Harris only saw the waterfalls, never the disasters, and only the colored foliage of Skyline Drive. That and Luray Caverns, the underworld of unearthly colors.

Jerome had set a pad and pencil on one end of the small table that separated them. "I count and time

them just for the hell of it," he told her. "Silly, but sort of fun."

They continued to quietly sip wine. The crickets continued their song. Mrs. Harris tried to remember daytrips she'd taken other than to Skyline, Great Falls, or Luray Caverns. Once, she and Harry had taken an hour-long train ride through fall foliage in West Virginia, but it had been a dry year and the colors dull.

Mrs. Harris turned toward Jerome, plainly looking at him. Why had he invited her here? Was she indeed nothing more than a substitute for Harry, or a perceived obligation to the man who had discounted Jerome's building materials and offered him construction advice? In the dark, she noticed Jerome's face more surely. He had a surprisingly striking silhouette, a disciplined look, lost however to the silly act of sitting in the old green lounge chair whose bottom sunk so severely that his tail end nearly touched the deck itself.

"There, did you see that?" Jerome made a single pencil stroke at 10:44 p.m.

"No. Where? Is it gone? *Where* should I be looking again?"

Jerome repeated by pointing at a general area of the sky. "They'll all come from that source. Think of it as a beehive, though you can't see the hive, only the escaping 'bees'."

"Oh. Oh, there! Wasn't that one?" Mrs. Harris excitedly pointed.

"Yeah. I just saw the tail end of it." Jerome recorded 10:53.

They saw nothing the next hour. Both he and Mrs. Harris had closely tended their wines, Jerome saying there was more if needed. Mrs. Harris was beginning to wonder if the meteors were streaking all around them, but the wine had misguided her, making her miss

too many. Once again, she begged reassurance on where to look.

Holding a half full glass of red wine, Jerome stretched an arm out, saying, "There—" at which point the bottom of his cloth lounge chair ripped fully open, dumping him and the contents of the wine glass rudely onto the deck.

"Well, I should have known better," he said. "It's been getting ready to go the better part of two years. I'll have to get another chair. Straight-backed and not very comfortable, unfortunately."

"But your jeans...they're soaked red. You'd better wash them."

"No washing machine, I'm afraid—the iron in the water. But maybe I'll go throw the jeans in the shower for five minutes anyway, and we'll see how that does." When Mrs. Harris absent-mindedly followed him with the intention of offering advice, he said, "No, you're the sky observer. Stay at your post. Enjoy this. What I'm doing now, changing pants, that's the everyday world..."

"Believe me." He disappeared and soon Mrs. Harris could hear the sound of running water. After a while, Jerome turned it off and returned to the deck, wearing a fresh pair of jeans and carrying a plain, upright wooden chair.

"Anything?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so." She wondered if she'd been listening too much to the sound of the shower.

It was 12:15. "Well, you never know," said Jerome, just as Mrs. Harris was diverted by a grand streak of light that rushed across the sky. Jerome missed it.

At 12:55 things began to look up.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Harris. "Oh!" Eight passed within two minutes.

At 1:20 a.m. she said, "Oh! Oh! Oh!" repeatedly.

"God, it's great, isn't it," said Jerome. "Sorry that Harry isn't here to see it."

"Harry?" said Mrs. Harris. "*We* see it, you and I. Isn't that enough?"

She gasped and continued making sounds both smaller and larger as a nearly unending swarm paraded for a quarter hour. She'd set aside her wine and leaned forward in her chair, looking delightedly for more.

"Uh-oh," Jerome suddenly noted, not sounding happy. "I think we've had it."

He pointed toward the river which couldn't be seen because it was too low and far away, but at 1:40 a.m., a curtain of fog was rolling up.

"Well, this happens," he said. "Christ, I'm afraid that's tonight's show."

A fog was slowly rolling straight up across the area of sky where the Perseids originated.

"How can you be sure? Mightn't it go away?"

"Yeah. Some time between eight or nine in the morning, usually. Sorry. Didn't mean for this to be a bust for you."

A "bust" for me? Is that what he thinks?

"I've loved this, every minute," she said. "We may only have had a half hour of good viewing, but it was still … it wasn't the *ordinary*. I haven't seen a shooting star in years and tonight I saw fifty or more, in beautiful long arcs, in those last minutes alone. And though I knew you deeply honored your boss, Harry was prone to mechanics and efficiency rather than the appreciation of beauty." Then she paused. "Except if you read sections of his diaries. It's as if he was one sort of person as a child and then …" She couldn't finish the words.

When they went inside, she asked if she could see the view from the loft. Slowly, somewhat awkwardly from the wine, they ascended the circular staircase leading to

the loft. Seventeen vertical feet of glass covered the face of the original portion of the cabin, the part Jerome had finished first before adding the room with the woodstove and the back bedroom and later a kitchen on the opposite side.

"Well, there's a great view in daytime," Jerome exclaimed. "And if you keep this back window open, the air streams through while you're sleeping, true fresh air, even if that sounds corny. I like just staring at the field behind the house when the sun rises. It's all so golden."

Mrs. Harris took a measured breath. "Are you—" She stopped.

"Am I …?" Her hesitation was obvious.

She couldn't look at him as she said it. "Are you gay?" she suddenly said. "I mean, were you, for Harry?"

Thinking on it, Jerome did not find her question implausible. "Well. Please don't take offense. I could dodge this, but I'm not going to. Frankly, though I learned a lot from Harry, I never *liked* him. To me, he wasn't like*able*. He was … formal to the extent that … he was standoffish. Not as if he didn't like you, but as if he couldn't let himself get too close. He helped you, he had concern, but he didn't act *free*. I know that's impolite to say, but, given your obvious hypothesis, I think I need to say it. And no, I'm not gay."

"I'm forty-three," Mrs. Harris announced.

"I'm thirty-four," said Jerome. "Frankly, half the reason I stayed with Harry so long was to get glimpses of you. I wished you'd come to the office more often."

"We shall pay for this someday," she remarked. The bed felt wonderful.

"You're not too tired for this?" he said. Plainly he could see she wasn't.

"At some point in life," she remarked, "I realized Harry was gay."

"I wondered," Jerome replied. He'd said he hadn't liked Harry, and now he was about to bed the man's widow. Without thinking, he said, "I got the impression that Harry was deep-at-heart unhappy. Do you think if he—" He stopped. Would Harry have lived longer if he'd lived as he wanted? Out of the closet? He knew about Harry's family history of heart disease. Even so, could a fiercely honest change in lifestyle—stepping out—have made a difference? The question had no answer. And really what he cared about was this woman, not conjectures that could turn the evening's adventures into an intellectual exercise, ending anything of meaning or value. As he undressed her, Mrs. Harris stopped him just as he was about to undo the last button of her blouse. Curiously, she took hold of his hand and held it toward the small Art Deco lamp still lit on the nightstand. She saw the veins and roughness and the strength that had come from building this cabin. Then she saw the gash. A recent, not quite healed gash that might have made it difficult for him to hold a fork properly. These weren't accountant's hands at all, she realized. "You have strong hands, Jerome," she said, with a wonder in her eye. With these strong hands, with nothing bland about them, he touched her skin with definite, measured lightness as he bent to her, moving infinitely more patiently than the lights that had so graciously stroked the night sky only an hour ago.

The Gift

by Jim Bainbridge

Mary, Grandpa said, hoping that in time his daughter's body would betray her, make her maternal despite her wishes, what would be wrong with giving the little tyke a chance to be born? Then give it three months to see how things go. Three months isn't that long. If after three months you still feel the same way, then give the baby to Helena and me to raise. We would like a granddaughter to care for and love in our old age.

After making the decision to endure a pregnancy (the gift of a bigger home in Berkeley was part of the deal), my mathematics professor mom immediately stopped smoking, rigorously followed the exercise, diet, and nutritional supplement program prescribed by Grandpa, refrained from even an occasional social drink, and, after I was born, breast-fed and cared for me ideally. But on the ninety-second day after my birth, as I was settling into my new home—Grandpa and Grandma's enchanted world of science and flowers and love—Mom resumed smoking, popped the cork on a bottle of champagne, and danced with Dad on Stinson Beach to celebrate the resumption of her life.

That, at least, is the story I gleaned from hearing Grandpa and Grandma speak about how I came to be and why I was being raised by them, both former professors at UC Berkeley, in the home they had built on the side of a vineyard hill overlooking Sonoma's Russian River valley.

My formal education, which began before I can remember, consisted primarily of Grandpa's tutorials: a multitude of questions presented in logical order, each

building on the previous ones, each waiting for me to search and stumble and finally grasp its solution. To help ensure that my mind wouldn't wander too far or too often from my studies, he insisted that I minimize my exposure to frivolous information. Consequently, until well into my teens I was never permitted to watch or listen to popular media productions or enter into group activity of any kind on the Internet. Unlike what he considered most other humans of our time to be, I was not going to become an imitative assemblage of other imitative assemblages, contaminated with every desire and so-called need festering up out there in the world beyond our house-yard walls.

Grandpa's prohibition extended to all mathematics and most science books—books, he said, which were full of answers that would steal away my rapture in discovery and spoil my capacity for wonder. Like the storybook character, I, too, was a little engine that could—could make significant rediscoveries even at my age—and the pistons that gave me power were question and answer.

Occasionally, if I couldn't solve a problem, I'd become anxious and start to whine for Grandpa to help me. At such times, he would take me to his study, where he would have me sit cross-legged with him on the floor and meditate. For him, meditation wasn't a practice of cultivating the joy of non-doing or the sense that this moment is complete; it was the practice of clearing one's mind for the purpose of preparing a calm consciousness to receive messages, such as solutions to his problems, from one's unconscious. He taught me to be attentive to my breathing and, whenever my attention strayed to the bothersome little pains that sprang up devilishly in my cramped legs or to the chattering thoughts that often invaded the silence of my mind, to

calmly refocus on the in-and-out tides of my breath. When he sensed that my impatience was finally tamed, he would tell me to let my mind go to the problem at hand and, if my attention wandered from the problem, to return to my breath, then back to the problem, and so on. When he was satisfied with my progress, he would terminate the meditation, assure me that the solution I was seeking was easily within my reach, give me a little hint, and send me off chugging along until the problem's solution, like the first wildflowers that pierce the hills in spring, would suddenly blossom in my mind.

One morning about a week before my fifth birthday, Grandpa asked me to come with him to our theater room to help prepare my birthday present. In Grandpa and Grandma's world, gifts were not physical objects such as toys or clothes; they were ideas or experiences intended by the giver to be mentally stimulating to the recipient, such as trips to museums and zoos, which were doubly wonderful because they included, along with the sights, sounds, and smells, interesting commentary by Grandpa and Grandma.

Eager to find out what my birthday present would be, I scurried up into one of the plush crimson front-row seats of our theater room.

"I'm going to show you a short segment from an old movie," Grandpa said, and without hesitation, a train—a black one with a cowcatcher grill and steam seething out its chimney—flashed to life in front of me, its shrill whistle blaring as it roared toward and passed me, then sped away.

"Did you hear anything interesting as the train went by?" Grandpa asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Let me replay the scene. This time, pay close attention to the sound of the whistle."

Again the train roared by, screaming loudly. Grandpa waited for my response.

"It just sounds like a train whistle," I finally said.

Grandpa—intent, gray-blue eyes; white hair and bushy eyebrows; long, pale, creased face—remained silent, the silence of waiting for more.

"It's loud," I offered.

His continuing silence enveloped me like the thick fog that often crept up the valley at night, so I played the video back in my mind, hoping to find the answer he desired.

I was able to visualize past events at will, even more vividly at that age, it seems, than I can now. I'd simply focus on the gray outline of a remembered scene, or on the sound of a word someone had spoken, or on the prick or tingle of a sensation, and then, suddenly, the wispy gossamer of memory would flash into bright realism, and I'd experience the remembered event almost as if it were happening anew.

Grandpa hadn't objected to this talent of mine until one evening when, following a visit to the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park, he, Grandma, and I stopped in Berkeley to have dinner with Mom and Dad at a new restaurant. Though my parents hadn't yet arrived, the maître d' seated us at a table so that we could comfortably wait. I hadn't seen Mom and Dad in months—a long time for a little girl—and was so excited and impatient that tears threatened to break free of my eyes. Finally, after what seemed like another long time, I saw them walking toward our table, and I ran to Mom. She swept me up in her arms and twirled around once. "Whee! What a big girl you've become." Her breath smelled of stale cigarette smoke, but her body smelled like violets after a spring rain, and I loved the way she held me, loved her warm, wet, kisses, loved the

energy she exuded, of an intensity greater than either Grandpa's or Grandma's.

I was passed to Dad. "How's my sweetie?" he said. He hugged and kissed me, too, but gently, softly, softer than either Grandpa or Grandma would have; and he smelled good, too: citrus, mint, sandalwood—all calming like his smile.

I was lowered back to the floor. Mom and Dad shook hands with Grandpa and hugged and kissed Grandma. We sat in our chairs. The adults talked for a while about the remodeling that Mom was having done in her kitchen. I'd never seen her old kitchen.

After we ordered, Grandpa asked Grandma whether she remembered where the chef had been trained. She didn't. I then recited from memory the exact wording of the biographical note on the bottom of the menu's last page.

"Sara, what did you just do?" Mom asked.

"I read what was on the back of the menu."

I hoped that she and Dad would be proud of me, of how well I had learned to read, but they both looked puzzled and glanced at Grandpa. His brow furrowed into a dark expression; then dinner continued quietly, as if nothing unusual had occurred. But when we returned home, Grandpa took me to his study and told me that I was challenged with an overly active internal memory, which locked on to too many trivial details, details best retained by external memory devices, such as printed menus. He explained that, due to the extremely limited internal capacity of humans for memory, as well as for thought, it was crucial that we learn to remember and think by effectively manipulating things in our environment. He said that he and I would have to work hard to ensure that my internal memory was used to assist my thinking, not replace it.

From that day on, he carefully analyzed each of my daily writing assignments and made me rewrite any portion in which he recognized a verbatim repetition of something he'd said. But I liked to remember things, especially all the things that happened during my few times with Mom and Dad—or was it that forgetting disturbed me, stirred up in me even then the fear that if I didn't meet each significant experience with enough intensity to remember it, the dark fog of forgetting would grow and grow and one day swallow up everything I loved?

Again I listened to the train whistle inside my head. "It gets louder as it comes closer," I said, hoping to lift Grandpa's heavy silence.

"Yes. And then what?"

I listened again. "It gets quieter as it goes away."

"Is there anything else about the sound that you can describe?"

I listened again, but failed to become aware of anything more.

"Okay," he said, "I'll play the scene again. This time pay attention to the whistle's sound as the train passes by. Isn't there something you hear other than just louder and softer?"

I listened. Listened again. There was something strange there, just as it passed by. I felt my heart beat harder, and for a moment the world seemed to disappear, leaving only me and my problem alone in the solitude of my mind, the quiet solitude Grandpa had been training me to develop through meditation.

"Solitude is the school of genius," Grandpa had often said, attributing the words to Gibbon. He had also quoted García Lorca on the subject: "To understand poetry, we need four white walls and a silence where the poet's voice can weep and sing." But Grandpa preferred

the silence within four imaginary white walls where, rather than hearing a poet's voice weep and sing, I would feel the resonance of patterns that were the solutions to his problems.

"Can you imitate the sound of the whistle by humming?" Grandpa prodded.

I hummed it as best I could for a few moments before the realization: "That's it! The whistle switches from a higher to a lower note when it passes by."

"Exactly!" Grandpa's face lit up, radiating the approval I so desired from him. He patted my arm. "What patterns do you think are associated with the lowering of the whistle's tone?"

I thought for a moment, searching for a similar phenomenon in prior experience. "I think the conductor pushes a button to change the whistle when he passes by," I said, remembering the button in Grandpa's Mercedes that changed the sound of the horn.

Grandpa frowned. "Why would the conductor do that?"

"Maybe he's saying, 'Hello'."

"Hmm, to signal a greeting. I didn't think of that."

He was silent for a moment, then suggested we go for a drive. About halfway down our long driveway, bordered on each side by a row of sunburst honey locust trees, he stopped the car and asked me to blow the horn. Then he pushed a button on the control panel and asked me to blow the horn again. The second honk sounded at a lower pitch.

More sure now than ever of having solved the changing-tone problem, I smiled and said, "That's what the train conductor does."

"You think so? Well, let's see what you make of another observation. Get out here and stand off to the side. Stay on the grass because I intend to drive the car past you rapidly, blowing the horn all the while. I want

you to listen carefully to the sound of the horn. What I promise you—and I'm serious now, so you can rely on my telling you the truth—is that I will not push the button here to change the horn's sound as I pass by."

I got out and stood in the grass verge. Beyond the locust trees, vines shimmering in the midsummer sun spilled over the sides of hills like rivulets of green water. Grandpa drove on to the end of the driveway, turned around, then sped toward me, blowing the horn continuously. As the car passed, the sound of the horn changed—but why?—just as the sound of the train whistle had. A tingle started at the back of my neck, then flashed across my forehead and down my arms and back.

* * *

It was already midafternoon of my big day when Mom and Dad finally arrived. I'd begun to worry that they weren't coming.

"Happy birthday, honey," Mom said. "Give me a big hug." She appeared thrilled to see me, but as usual her excitement rapidly faded, like applause, and I was passed to Dad.

He hugged and kissed me, too. "How's my darling little birthday girl?"

"I'm getting a wonderful present today," I answered.

"Oh? What is it?"

"A new pattern. There's something in the pool. Come," I said, taking his hand, "I'll show you."

Earlier that day, Grandpa and Grandma had constructed a device on top of our indoor pool. A cork bobber—they called it a detector—was attached to one end of a metal rod cantilevered over the water's surface; the other end of the rod was attached to a wheel that ran along a rail lying on one side of the pool. In the center of

the pool, a red-and-white striped cone, which was attached by a shaft to a motorized device resting on the pool's bottom, moved rhythmically up and down, creating uniform waves that spread out over the water's surface.

Now, with Mom and Dad there to share my present, Grandpa started up the cantilever device. Its height over the pool's surface was adjusted so that the bobber would touch the crest of each wave encountered.

I was instructed to say "ta" each time the bobber touched a wave, and to try to discover a pattern that the train whistle, the car horn, and this system—the pool, the water, and the cantilever device—had in common.

"Taa taa taa," I said when the cantilever came to a rest near the end of the pool after completing one of its cycles. Then, starting a new cycle, the device began rolling quietly along its rail, sending the cork wave detector toward the bobbing cone at constant speed.

"Ta ta ta."

I glanced at Mom. She was sitting on a lounge chair between Grandma and Dad. She smiled at me, one of her rapidly fading smiles. Then she rolled her eyes. She knew the pattern, but I didn't.

"Taaaa, taaaa, taaaa," I now said, for the cantilever had passed the bobbing cone.

The device moved back and forth, and I repeated, "ta, ta, ta... taaaa, taaaa, taaaa..." until Grandpa, probably sensing my growing impatience, announced, "All right. I, for one, am ready for tea. Maybe Grandma will let us have some birthday cake, too, one with five candles on it."

Teatime for Grandpa, Grandma, and me came every midafternoon. With their tea, Grandpa and Grandma usually had something light, such as fruit; for me, there were milk and cookies. Then, unless we had guests, we listened to about twenty minutes of

music in the living room. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were the most frequently chosen composers. Grandpa was our music guide.

Grandma usually lay on the sofa and often fell asleep, but I always snuggled into Grandpa's lap and waited for his fingers—which moved as if possessed by the music—to rhythmically stroke my hair, and for his deep voice to explain how composers hold our attention with melodic and harmonic anticipation, how they heighten that anticipation with such devices as chromatic tones and false cadences, and how they bring people to ecstasy through resolutions that expose deeply structured beauty and order.

On this day, however, there would be no musical interlude; there was a birthday to celebrate. My birthday.

Back at the pool after cake and ice cream—and applause when I blew out all the candles in one breath—Grandpa again started up his apparatus. The cork detector approached, then passed, the bobbing cone. "Ta ta ta taaaa taaaa taaaa," I tongued, reporting my observations. As minutes passed I became increasingly puzzled as to what all this had to do with the train whistle and the car horn. I felt an urge to ask Mom, but I knew that Grandpa wouldn't let her tell me.

"Sara," Grandpa finally said when the cantilever stopped at the end of one of its cycles, "rather than saying 'ta' aloud each time the detector strikes the crest of a wave, try humming your detection of the crests quietly to yourself."

I did as Grandpa asked: hummed as the cork detector again approached, then passed the bobbing cone. And I became the humming, just as, during meditation, I became my breathing. Suddenly, moving rapidly from right to left—not exactly out in the world, but not altogether inside my head, either—a train with

its bright cyclopic eye and loud whistle steamed toward me with Mom and Dad aboard. I felt a trembling, accelerating excitement as they neared; but then their smiles flashed, their arms waved, and the whistle shrieked as the train sped by. The loudness, the tone of the whistle, the brightness of their smiles, my excitement, the frequency of the waves passing the detector—all fell, as did I onto the deck of the pool, screaming, my hands clasped over my ears.

When Grandpa picked me up, I was trembling and crying. He rocked slowly, side to side. "Shhh...shhh," he whispered, stirring up in me images and sounds of the ocean breathing on the shore. "Shhh... Everything is all right. Tell me what happened."

Grandma, Mom, and Dad gathered around, looking concerned, their hands patting my back.

"What's wrong, honey?" Grandma asked.

I raised my head from Grandpa's shoulder and whispered—not that Mom and Dad occasionally flashed into my life then disappeared—but what I felt they wanted to hear: "The train whistle—it's like the waves in the water."

photographs by Eric Coates

Flagstaff

by Adam Deutsch

At seven thousand feet, hands
are dry, cracked and peeling,

and at the depot in town,
out in the sun,
a girl, barely four, dances
and Mom says,
Stop it.
You're dancing around like a maniac!

and the little girl
has no idea
what a maniac is
or that it could dance,
or that she
could be anything like it.

His Singing Voice is Gone

by Adam Deutsch

Passing a hydro-electric plant
off the 74, a little west of Indianapolis
he belts out, with way too much gusto,
Damn! Just can't help it—
as if someone were in the car
next to him to hear, as if anyone

would find it nearly as funny
as he does, how that gag gets
to his bones every time.

Laughter volcanic, especially while
driving alone, more fun than Harpo
cutting a cigar,

more than teams of NYPD on Vespas
circling the statue of Washington
on a horse with gigantic balls
in Union Square,

or that one Far Side comic
where the pilots are on the back
of an infant in a diaper
when they say
Let's get this baby off the ground.

It's one of those
had-to-be-there
things. And nobody was.

After Clipping a New Throw-out Bearing in the Transmission of the '72 MGB

by Adam Deutsch

It's impossible to reunite
the block and transmission,
even with a good back,
even with three grown men
and a ten-year-old boy
if you've gotten a clutch disc
that hasn't been machined
all the way through.

The new part arrives
in a priority mail envelope
four whole days later.

Call neighbor, Dr. Jim,
who works in a lab
growing, assembling, manipulating,
massspectrometering
proteins and other compounds
in small dishes and tubes
spotted near his desk
which I want to spit in.

He loves this shit. We stripped
and rebuilt his motorcycle
just last summer.

Dr. Jim cups the hole
of the shifter housing
to keep the drive shaft level.
I'm bent in half, arms lashed
around the bell housing,
thrusting so the drive-shaft teeth
fit into the clutch disc splines.

Dr. Jim wiggles the flange
until everything slips together
perfectly, finger-tight bolts in place,
while, we straighten out, respire.

photographs by Eric Coates

Wake

by Teresa Burns Gunther

They're all watching to see how I'm bearing up. But I keep my eyes straight ahead, stare past their faces painted with false grief. Faces that were quick to avert their eyes from the black and blue face I wore to town too many times. Only Molly Greer who cleans the church ever really looked at me and she never asked why I stayed.

She's part of the busyness of women managing the cakes and casseroles—gifts to sustain me. But I have no appetite. The women's voices drift complaints about the weather as if today should be anything but hot. They keep shooing the striped cat I've been feeding on the sly. I want to tell them to let her be, but I can't form the words. I'm too practiced in silence. Elsie Barnes puts her out and I sit in the rocking chair I'd intended for holding children and watch the women, their low-heeled pumps tick-tapping across the scratched wooden floor. I look beyond their lacquered hairdo's, out the window to the flat horizon. The gravel track leads from the house to the main road, where my mailbox tilts south from its own run-ins with his drunkenness. How I hated the sun's fall to suppertime and the sound of those tires coming home. No more.

His friends from the plant crowd the dining room, smoking and lifting glasses, inventing sloppy eulogies for a man I cannot recognize. After Paul died, they were all quick to offer their condolences for my loss. But my loss isn't him.

Father Thomas, flushed from the heat and sherry, pats his belly pushing at the front of his black cassock

and shouts protests as Trudy Johnson hands him a slice of her cake. She smoothes her bouffant and tells him the service was "Lovely. Just right." As if he feels me watching, he turns; his black eyes hooded by ragged brows catch mine and widen. He looks away and tugs at the Roman collar around his neck When he looks back at me he's wearing his made-for-mourning face.

I'd whispered to him in the confessional that I wanted to leave, had nowhere to go, and I feared Paul would kill me, too. "Now, now," the priest had clucked. "Emotions are clouding your thinking. The baby's death was an accident." He'd waited a moment before adding, "These things happen to test our faith." He'd called it God's Will and reminded me of my duty to be subject in everything to my husband, to achieve a state of grace. The very thing my mother taught me from her own knowledge of a living hell. Be a silent one in the flock, fixed, like a church pew for sitting on. I never went to Confession again, though we went to Mass every Sunday. Paul passed the plate, head bowed, his face a mask for town. I wonder if Paul ever confessed, his hands throbbing from the work of ensuring my salvation. What did Father ask of him?

I occupy myself with counting the people coming and going in their black dresses and suits. Every time someone new arrives under Jesus resigned on the cross, I lose my place and begin again. My heart beats its dull panic and the counting helps keep the sound cornered in my lungs.

Why won't they go, take their simpering smiles with them? They just came to sniff around. Free coffee and cake. Paul's friend Jake is the sheriff, he puts his coffee cup down on my best tablecloth, the one my grandmother made long ago for my "hope chest." I can feel the stain his cup burns into the now-yellowed lace. Like a hatred. Perhaps it's all he's left me.

Through the window, I see the cat stretching under the hot sun. She rolls in the gravel, wrestling with unseen demons, then a passing moth. My hands ache and I realize I'm clutching them tight in my lap, twisting the wedding band that grips my finger. I wonder if I'll have to cut it off. It's hard to breathe in this house, with these people, his people, whom I've lived beside, an outsider, all my married life. The screen door bangs shut as someone leaves. Footsteps thunder down the porch's steps, and the cat jumps up, arching her back. I feel pride for the way she ruffles her fur and leaves.

Molly crouches her willow-thin body beside my chair, her fingers soft on my wrist. "Is there anything you need?" Her eyes hold mine.

"Yes. Open a window," I say. "Please."

She nods. "Don't worry," she whispers, "they'll soon be gone." My throat tightens at this unexpected kindness. Why have we never spoken? For a moment, I just hold her hand.

She has to pound her gnarled fist against the jamb before it swings wide. It makes me laugh and we share a crooked smile. A breath of air fills the room, lifting up all my history that dusts the surface of this narrow place. His house.

"I need some air," I say. My voice is strained and their chatter quiets. They watch with open pity, glasses poised. Hands seize my arms to help me up, as if I'm ancient, as if I'm broken. I shudder out of their grip and hurry through the gap they make in the smoke-stale room, slip out the door, ease it closed behind me and hurry down the stairs where a brown moth flutters a labored spiral into the sky, my white sky, and my shoes crunch as I follow the cat's path over my sun-warmed gravel.

Womb

by Jane Zimbaldi

Delicate as blown glass
inside the fleshy nook,

she could feel
their love's vibration
rising from a playing turntable
the rhythm and blues
of Motown on a Friday night;

their kitchen dance.

The cracking linoleum under tapping bare feet,
summer's heat upon them—

they are rapt in Wonder's beat
with a piano throbbing
Isn't She Lovely
and a harmonica pulsing
Isn't She Lovely.

As she drives now,
car radio tuned and blaring
the city's soul station,
she sees them then

their passion swelling.

Sorry

by Louis Sylvester

Married fifteen years. No interest in discussing the issue further with her husband. They climb into bed at 1:32 a.m. but she doesn't close her eyes. No point really in trying to fall asleep. He declared their argument finished—bedtime!—but fifteen years with this man is enough for her to know he's spoken in haste. He's not finished tonight, oh no, not yet.

His back to her as if settled down for sleep. He shifts, shifts again. He huffs.

She wonders about the time, if twenty minutes have passed, perhaps thirty. She will not lift her head to check the digital clock. She becomes stone, still on her back, her arms at her sides, her feet together, toes pointed down under the solemn blanket. She listens. When he sleeps his breath is deep, almost savage, like an animal hiding underneath the porch. He grew up in a large family, shared a bed for an entire year with two brothers, so when he sleeps he hardly moves. But now he's restless, his breathing shallow, through his nose. He isn't talking, but his behavior next to her tells her everything.

She knows he's waiting for her to speak first. To notice that he can't sleep, to ask what is wrong. She imagines his anger creeping under his skin, causing him to itch. His discomfort is almost erotic, a wash of frustration that pelts her repeatedly. She can almost read his mind. Her first, her first. She imagines the words form a mantra for him.

She knows he needs her to apologize first.

The thought of never saying sorry tastes delicious to her. Perhaps he'd never fall asleep, lose his mind from

fatigue, maybe break down and say it first. But they have fifteen years of marriage and she knows this man. He'll apologize, he'll admit his mistakes and swear to improve—and by God he'll actually work on mending his ways—but only after. She must apologize first. Because in his mind, she is always wrong first. In his mind, he never does anything without provocation. If he messes up, you can bet some previous trespass pushed him.

After fifteen years she's sick of this game. Goddammit. She's the first to apologize every time they've argued.

And tonight she will again. Just not yet. She'll let him stew for a while more. Wait, not moving a muscle, and listen to him toss and breathe through his nose and grind his fucking teeth down to porcelain nubs. Only when he finally surrenders—she'll know because he'll stop fidgeting, his breathing will slow, and he will start to fall asleep—only then will she move. Reach across the one foot gulf that lies between them in bed and touch him with no more than the tip of a finger and then she'll whisper those poisonous words that keep him hers.

photographs by Sal Laughter

Driving in Traffic

by Richard Dinges, Jr.

Cars plow slush.
Muck grimes windshields,
thrown up in thick mist.
My daughter grows
from baby fat, emerges
mascara-coated,
eyes lined darkly.
Red pursed lips form
a little girl's voice,
words dredged from
middle school cabal chatter,
embroiled by dyspepsia.
Radio mutters disemboweled,
facts of a world buried
under a welter of rules
carved on continents
with shifting plates.
I can stare ahead
through grimed windshield.
I can steady steering wheel
through traffic, preserve
what's left of our lives,
watch for signs to tell me
when I am close to home.

Essay

by Richard Dinges, Jr.

Words written by children
reflect open minds
where little stays very long,
syntax based on fragments,
snacks in torn wrappers
reduced by a single bite,
soda can pop tops broken
a narrow crack for all
fizz to leak out, and
maybe once a stark image
that follows a scream
when lips spread
open and all breath
has escaped, when they know
to do what was taught,
plant a period between
the last word and the end.

Striking the Colors

by Richard Dinges, Jr.

Behind my neighbor's privacy
fence, a silver flag pole rises,
half-yellowed by the setting sun.
Red and white stripes slip
down the pole, a limp flutter
on dying breeze. Each jerk
of rope by unseen hands
responds by fabric glitter,
fragments of blue field and
white stars setting before
tiny shimmers of distant
fires in the universe can blur
this icon through sheer volume.
The flag sinks into night's shadows.
I wonder how it will look
when it rises again with sun's
return, of another day,
after a night hidden in the private
closet of the patriot next door.

Death Recalled

by Richard Dinges, Jr.

I never killed a human being.
Long after I moved away,
a water pipe broke above
a crib and drenched a baby
who soon died of pneumonia.
Then I watch evening news
about a man on death row
who killed two women
years before on my front porch.
He is still alive,
counting his last breaths,
waiting for us to shock
him silent for robbing others
of their right to breathe.
When that baby slept
where I had slept
wet and chilled.
I dreamed of them, each
slipping across a threshold
while I pass as a shadow
through their lives, unaware
of how I touch their lips
with a ghost's fingertips,
stilling their breaths,
searching for a way to switch
on a light and discover
what cries out for balance.

Wild Horses

by Sonia Ellis

I used to play football in high school. These days, when the wind turns chill and the leaves are red and crisp, I can feel the grind of earth and leather and my arms long to snap a pass. I take Chris—my son, he is seven—into the backyard to throw a football.

Kate hates these sessions and this leads her to exaggeration: "It's dangerous. He'll end up breaking his ribs." Ribs, not neck, this time, so I know what she's thinking. Perversely, I tell the story again, timing its cadence and climax to our toss and catch.

"It's fall, Chris, back when I was fifteen. The coach has us out on the field, lined up for the drill." I have Chris's attention, completely, with my first words. He catches the ball neatly in his hands, not even looking at it.

"The second stringers—that means the no-good players like me—one by one we run out to catch a pass. The only point of this drill is to give the starters a workout, so they can practice tackling. When we jump up to catch the ball, we're stretched straight out." I act it out, rising on my toes and reaching my arms up to the sky.

"Think about it: we're totally vulnerable. Nothing between us and the tackle. We're going to get hammered, and we know it. So at the last second each guy hunches up to protect himself…and lets the ball go."

"Then what happens?" asks Chris, as if he couldn't tell the story himself.

"What happens? The coach gets mad. He gets raging mad. He's yelling, damn sophomore prima donnas, catch the damn ball. So now it's my turn. I run out for the ball. I catch it. And I hold on." I stop the

story, the football in my hands, breaking our rhythm. Chris's arms reach out, a supplication for my next words as much as for my next toss.

"Next thing I know, the linebacker is on me. Two hundred pounds driving me into the ground. The wind's knocked out of me, and I can't breathe. Someone holds out a hand to help me up, but the coach shoves him away. I've made him proud, I can tell. He says, let that man get up on his own—that's the way he'd want it."

Chris listens open-mouthed. I watch Kate. Her lips are pressed tight together, but I think behind them there's a grin because I've made myself the hero.

* * *

I met Kate when I was in graduate school. I studied derivations in my bed, with a plate of unshelled peanuts on the nightstand and Benny the hamster whirring his wheel in his cage on the floor. The sights and senses of that time linger. Even now when I open a textbook I smell cedar chips.

The rotation of Benny's exercise wheel, powered by his creased bare paws, merged one day with the spin of Kate's bicycle outside my window. She wore a red T-shirt and jeans, and her dark hair was damp and curled on her forehead. She rode slowly, gathering strength, gearing her bike and her body for an upcoming hill. Her struggle up the steep incline drew me. After that I watched for her often, standing at the window until she passed out of sight, imagining my finger running down the profile of her face. Finally, weeks later, I met her at the top of the hill.

I must have said something right, because she spent a day with me at the Jersey shore. We drove through Philadelphia, a homecoming for Kate. She read out the

names on the traffic signs: Conshohocken, Wissahicken, Passyunk, the syllables almost a chant of passion from her lips. She grew up, she told me, on a road called Delsea, a name derived from on-the-Delaware-by-the-sea. Her voice, unabashed in her delight at the music of words, carried us all the way to Avalon.

We jogged along the beach, our feet smacking the low tide waters. Kate took each step exactly in front of the last. The trail she left behind was straight Indian file. As we talked, I created a portrait of myself for Kate: I played football, I told her, and was taking up golf. I had a sort of talent with oil paints and listened to jazz. It was a composition of reality that I thought would interest her, and I thought she would do the same for me. But she gave me nothing. When she broke into a run I chased her all the way to the pier, where we watched the sails of the sweeping sunfish.

At dusk we went to the amusement park.

Wildwood at night had the aura of a circus: people jostling by, lights flashing in crazy patterns. Teenagers bunched at the entry gates to the roller coasters. Later we watched them spill out, viridescent and weaving. Each ride was a monster that swallowed and disgorged. All-consuming fire at Wildwood, we decided, would be a tragedy but not a surprise.

I shot three-for-three at the basketball hoops and won Kate an orange tiger. I wanted to top that, to show her I could conquer anything, so I guided her toward the wildest roller coaster. Kate stopped me with a hand on my chest. She didn't want to go with me. I didn't push for a reason—was it the heights, the speed?—but the answer came, achingly, of its own accord. As we leaned on the salt-gummed rail and watched the moon glimmer, she told me that her worst nightmare was to be

in a plane that exploded in midair, left conscious and limbs intact and floating free in space. After that came drowning. The exposure, her first and only, left her bare, so that I drew closer and clutched her hand too tightly.

I gave in easily, and we rode the merry-go-round twice in a row. So often when I watch her face I can see her again on that painted wild horse. Its forelegs box the air and its muzzle points skyward, but she reins it into tight circles while the music plays.

* * *

Chris loves to practice breaking tackles. He runs across the yard with the ball tucked tight to his chest. As I come at him he thrusts his left arm straight out, ramming his hand against my chest, and I fall back into the grass, feigning pain and anger that he agreeably accepts as real. Sometimes he can really fake me out, drawing me to the right and then reversing to the left, gracefully spinning out and loping his way to the end zone.

But today Chris wants to play quarterback. "I'm the mad bomber," he screams, and he pumps the ball over and over across the lawn. That was my nickname in tenth grade. I was never fast; I was tall but not bulky. My claim to the football field was a good long pass. I had a strong arm that I see now in Chris.

When finally I sink into a lawn chair, he collapses dramatically beside me, face down and arms splayed out, catching his breath. I reach down to brush the russet bits of leaf and twig from his sweatshirt, then run my fingers through his hair, feeling the dampness of his scalp.

"Dad, tell me the story about how lightning strikes twice," he says, his words muffled by the grass. That story is his favorite so I've told it endless times. But

even without looking at me Chris knows my mood, knows that at this moment he only had to open the gate and I'd pass through it again.

"It began with a varsity game early in the week," I tell him. "We were down by three points in the last quarter, and then we won on a last-minute play. Now you have to understand, we had a pretty strong team that year, and these games were a big deal. The whole town showed up and the stands were packed. So when we pulled off that win, everyone went wild, and we were the lead story on the sports page, with mile-high headlines.

"The next game," I go on, "was on a Saturday night, under the lights. Everything seemed to be repeating itself. We were losing; we were down three points again. We had the ball midfield with ten seconds left to play. We had to score a touchdown."

Beneath my fingertips Chris's body is still. He is an intense listener. By now I know that he has closed his eyes and submerged. He won't move again until the story is over.

"What we needed was a long pass, a really long pass into the end zone. So the coach put me in. On my first play I was hit right as I threw the ball. No one caught it—it just fluttered down to the ground. The coach was yelling at me in front of about a thousand people, and the pressure was on. On the last play I threw another pass. I remember it was a windy day, and I was throwing into the wind, so the ball didn't spiral well. It looked like a wounded duck. But someone caught it in the back of the end zone, and we took the lead. For the second time we came from behind to win the game. The next day, the headline in the paper was—"

"Lightning strikes twice!" Chris has resurfaced with a shriek, and he pulls me to my feet to play again.

* * *

One summer when Chris was still very young, we visited my parents in Lancaster. The house, the same one where I grew up, lies pocketed in a stand of silver maples. The lawn is boxed neatly by the road and three sculptured hedges of spruce.

A mile away is the rock-bedded stream that I dammed up most weekends when I was small. Now the access road is barred, and a sign states what has become obvious to the eyes and nose: that the county dump beyond the stream has grown since the years of my childhood to a mountain, hunched and emitting small puffs of debris behind a chain-link fence. When Chris was born I remember how anxiously I examined his limbs, as if some chemical, absorbed through my wading feet, lay vengeful for over twenty years to claim one of my son's toes.

That summer was very hot. We spent most days in the pool, Kate floating Chris on his belly in the warm surface currents. My parents' German shepherd, at the end of her chain, threw her paws up on the metal pool rim, snapping and gulping at the water I splashed toward her face. We had barbecue for our dinners, burgers gleaming with grease, then swam again in the twilight.

At night, as the household slept and a shifting breeze lifted the curtains on each screened window, I led Kate into the attic. It was a surreptitious journey up six steps, to sit cross-legged under a naked light bulb by an open cardboard box, to become a child again and this time to take Kate with me.

I lifted papers from the box and laid them in piles: to keep or to throw away. The first was a group shot of

the Lancaster County Midget Football League, Western Division Champions. Kate picked me out at once in the middle row, looking, she said, like a strong-jawed American angel, my shoulders winged unnaturally with molded pads. Below the photo I found a stack of blue-lined notebook paper bound with string. On each page I had drawn a battleship to scale, the keel sinking out of sight off the edge of the paper. My own book of fighting ships. What power I had, when drawing one more gun on a paper cruiser let me blast away a day's worth of harbored insecurities.

Kate held the book on her lap and smoothed out the dog-eared corners. The light from the rafters threw a black triangular shadow beneath her lower lip. I watched it angle and slide as she turned her head to face me. No words, but she smiled, and I thought we had never been closer.

My mother staged a family gathering, the night before we left. My cousin Kevin came with his wife and their two sons. We reassembled in the den after dinner, settling on rockers, footstools, and sofa cushions dragged onto the floor. The mood in the room seemed blurry with content, our smiles and movements slow from too much food, our conversation gentle and occasional. Then Chris, teething and tired, turned suddenly miserable. In my memory his small sharp cries coincide with a shift in focus. It's as if I see what followed from twenty feet away, looking down from a ceiling corner, viewing things through binoculars turned backwards, so that each image is sharply tightened and condensed.

Kevin drew Chris onto his knees, leaning him into the curl of one arm. He lifted the beer bottle in his other hand to Chris's lips and let him gum the rounded rim. In one swift movement Kate was off the floor, pulling

Chris into her arms, grabbing the bottle from his baby grip and flinging it away. I heard the crack of its impact again and again—glass meeting hardwood, how weird that it didn't shatter—but in fact the room was silent and Kate was gone.

Kevin caught my gaze, held it warily, then shrugged. "I forgot, she doesn't drink."

I had no answer for him, nor for Kate, when I found her bent later bent over Chris's crib. Her hair was damp at her temples and shielding her face.

"What were you doing? What was the point?"

"You don't understand," she whispered through her tears, and I didn't. Now, from my distance, I see the rope that binds her, as tight and as necessary as a rock climber's line. She is afraid of losing control, of falling with no one to catch her. I will always catch you, I want to tell her. I imagine her, miniature and spiraling like a leaf, falling into my cupped upturned palms, where I hold her gently until she recovers.

* * *

In the evening we go to a hockey game, at the university where I teach mathematics. I wanted season tickets, but Kate did not. Let's not get Chris interested in this sport, she says—people just go for the fights. So I never take Chris. When I do manage to bring Kate with me, once we're at the rink her reluctance falls off like shedding skin, with pain and with relief. We watch the players, shapeless in the bulk of their uniforms, scattering ice and puck. Kate's eyes turn bright and her teeth—clenched on her lower lip—leave a line of neat white imprints.

That night, as we lie in bed, I stare at the long curve of her back and at her arm curled over the pillow in front

of her face. Her beauty seems to me like the players on the ice, so full of passions and patterns. But she guards it so tightly and with such control—the goalie in the crease—that I have to fight to see her behind the mask. Sometimes I tire of the fight.

Hours later, I wake up to the sound of thunder. It's a storm, and I know that Chris will be afraid. I have seen his body, at other times, grow taut and expectant as he stands at a window and watches the darkening clouds. So I go to his room, sit on the bed beside him, and stroke the hair back from his widened eyes. I've brought my flashlight and I make a game of it for Chris: I challenge him to match each pulse of lightning with a simultaneous flash of his own. He complains, soon, that his thumb is tired from working the switch. He's ready to sleep.

I lean back against the headboard and count out the miles to thunder in the dark. "One-thousand-one, one-thousand-two, one-thousand-three…there, listen, it's moving away."

I stay beside him, watching images pass before me on the dark wall: of me in high school, of my day together with Chris, an edited reel of my life unwinding.

I used to play football; now I tell football stories, and I can always make the endings please me. When morning comes I am still in Chris's room, and the only clear thought I have is that I will teach my son to throw a tight spiral before the day ends.

Drop

by John M. Anderson

A brick of heroin, somebody's life
savings, dropped—pow!—from the pickup's
bed that sped away, all four tires

in the air. (*Like delivering
the Sunday paper*.) Wrapped in a red plaid
flannel it lay there in the white dust

of the Wyoming road that floated
six inches above it like a cloud road
a while then settled on the brick's

banged shoulders. Not a foundling
hospital in five hundred miles. Size
of a Kleenex box and somebody's

weeping by now for its loss, somebody
staggering the backroads from here to Laramie, jeans
going ghost white at the calves, big black

bug eyes staring the horizon and the heavy
machinery of hardscrabble finance—threshers,
backhoes, the familiar monsters behind

barbed wire—begin to stir at first light,
to shift in their caterpillar tracks, to grind.

After a Wild Night in Juarez

by John M. Anderson

Paul Bunyan planted his blue plastic
disposable razors idly in a line
across the desert and strung
the copper wire of his dental floss to mark

what might have been a garden but lost track
and lightning struck
and they were the power grid to L.A., faucet
he left running arcing blue

to Las Vegas, too, where he napped a moment
and before he woke the surge zapped,
paralyzed, electroplated his troubled dreams of
Paris, the pyramids, waterfalls, sands.

He left them there, twitching neon, and hitchhiked
north. Standing all day like a sandstone arch
'til at dusk a pair of Greyhound buses stopped
in his shade that the old hockey player rode

like rollerblades to Seattle. The drivers turned off
the engines and surfed the shift, shift
of his great momentum alone—as passengers drifted
to sleep on the long trip—but the speed, the mileage

those buses achieved with that cruise control
were legendary. In a Seatac fog Paul stopped
for coffee, checked his email, hitched eight tiny
747s to his sleigh and split for China.

Five Rust Calder Wasps, Installed

by John M. Anderson

in the conceptual space above
the rest area picnic waste bins drone
on a twelve-pound line. Trout skin

sky after a tomato-half sun. Burn
in a butter pan twenty-eight thin

slices of okra moon, stirring just
a dash of cayenne in, for sting.

Chiasmus

by John M. Anderson

A cameraman squats
to get the title frame:
a classic Western climax,

the showdown at the draw, shot
from the triumphal arch
between Matt Dillon's legs. Extreme

foreshortening—the rival's
image straw-doll size,
a cigar dropped, smoking

to the street. I remember that
looking at its opposite, the sweep
of the Grand Canyon seen

between the ears of a jenny mule
named Trinity. Ears that scratch
the sky for a footing they can't find,

and the canyon's so wide its smolder-
red stone is blurred
in an atmosphere of mule fear

I can almost taste. Grey
clouds of distance like gunsmoke.

I've Fallen into a Midnight Marlboro Ad

by John M. Anderson

Christmas double-page spread:
blue snow Wyoming Bethlehem,
1973 flight into Egypt, the golden light
in the wilderness the match-lit

stone face. A National Geographic
panorama of the good shepherd/cattleman,
his stray on the saddlehorn,
working all night the darkest evening

of the year to bring the little one home.
A single French horn plays its sweet
tune across the silent page: Adeste!
Come to Where the Flavor Is

and I inhale it again, unfiltered:
the frosty breath of my lost youth.

Souria

by Jacinda Townsend

After forty days and nights, the desert spit her out at Foum-Zguid. Forty days of the sun's baking and forty nights of the moon's frosting, and the skin on her arms had become hardened and dark, like the shell of a scorpion. Time had been easy enough to mark in the desert, where Earth turned itself along a horizon innocent of all but the stars and planets, but she'd not been able to count all the noisily landscaped days before then. She'd ridden one afternoon on the hot backside of a pineapple truck she hid under at Minignan, and she'd lent her body for nearly a week to the driver of a white minivan full of tire treads. He took her, rather slowly and indirectly she thought, from Koulikoro to the southern edge of the Sahara, all the while smelling of the oil-covered tires he'd pressed into his chest hair while loading his van. When on top of her, he dribbled palm wine from his moustache onto her lips. She was spicy sweet like *tkaout*, he said, and he wanted to keep her. She ran from him in the night while he dreamt amidst the smell of aging rubber.

The next dawn she stopped, instinctually, at a camp on a small lake east of Boû Ctaïla, but it was a mistake—because she was three shades darker than they, the people there thought they, too, owned her, and though she was not asked to give her body to a man, the tribe asked her to do its most brutal work. The wash water she used to sweep away cooking ashes roughened her knuckles, and the slops she galloped over to herd goats hardened her calves. At night, Mina Tahore, a woman from the chief's family, gave her scraps of bread

and dried camel ears. In a paper cup she'd stolen from the tire seller, Souria saved milk from the nanny goats.

Three months she counted, using a sawed-off pipe to groove the days into her dirt floor, and on the morning beginning the fourth month, the ground shook beneath the *khaima* where she slept with seven younger slaves. Even in their sleep the girls knew it was Saturday, and so the others slept while Souria peeped out to find the tribe enjoying their weekly holiday. Under the camp's lone mature palm tree sat a group of men arguing with arms jabbing the air over their steaming tea kettle, and the brightly colored women with their folds of young children had already begun to crisscross the camp, navigating the intricate flight paths of Saturday visitation. A rare morning wind blew, and Souria wrapped her blue scarf around her forehead and pressed its tail against her nose to block sand that blew at her in drifts.

Peaceful enough, until she felt the second tremor, a clip clip clip under her feet as though the desert itself were waking. Through the blue frame of her scarf, she watched the tribe watch its precious turquoise lake churn purple. A baby fussed; a chicken barked; an old woman began reciting al Fatihah. Souria began to walk backward, away from her own *khaima*, away from the camp. This lake, this lake so pure and blue it had called out invitation to her even the night she first found it, this beloved lake now tossed out its glammy-eyed fish. It turned periwinkle and then vermillion, and roiled a blood-red cloud from its depths. The tribe raised their heads and pointed. Souria stepped up her backward canter.

To help her sandstung cheeks, she pressed her scarf all the way over her eyes, but a young woman's scream made her drop the free edge in time to watch the people fall in shifts, their arms and heads loosening as though suddenly stuffed with feathers. It made a vision so

powerful that she knew she'd retain it in every cell of her body, this wave of sudden death: it would reemerge years later, as a tremor that made her nick her hand while slicing carrots, or as a constriction of arteries that made her cough up a bit of dust in the souq. Men, chicken, women, goats, camels—all the living things of the camp—felled to the ground without so much as a chance to protest.

The clicking under her feet stopped, the wind hushed to a rumor, and a lone figure struggled toward her. He'd been emptying his bowels at the camp's edge, she could see, for he still held the palm leaf he'd taken to clean his ass. "An-najda!" he called, as he hobbled forward on the goldening sand. He shook his palm leaf at her. "An-najda!"

His tagelmust hung in blue strips from his head, unraveling until she could no longer see his eyes. But the walk—tight like a bird's, with a barely perceptible limp crimping the longer leg—she knew even in struggle: it was Tissim Sidi the knife sharpener, who'd slapped her across the face on Eid-al-Adha because she hadn't hauled enough water for all six of his goats. "Dark girls have no sense," he'd said, hitting her with such force she actually fell backward. Now he came to her, on his hands and knees, and she leaned over to unravel his tagelmust completely. "An-najda'arju," he begged, though it was now a whisper, and he dropped the leaf and tugged at the hem of her djellaba. The deep creases at the corners of his eyes crinkled to tell the great pain he was in. "An-najda," he repeated.

"Let the devil help you," she answered, and she spit into the middle of his face.

"Arju," he coughed, before entering a clearing of language as broken and nonsensical as an infant's. He died with his eyes open.

She watched for a long time, until it seemed that in death Tissim Sidi was looking not at her but through her, to her future, to her husband and her children and her children's children and her own eventual demise, until the wind died completely and she ran back to the camp. Hundreds of people, and she the only one left. Thousands of francs, perhaps, and knives. Food. She searched the bodies of the dead, patting down jackets, roving through pockets, lifting bosoms. She found that the well-dressed actually had little money on their person, but those in rags had carried every franc they owned with them through the day. Still, the tribe had been prosperous, and the dead women offered so many choices that she could take only the best and still have eight necklaces weighing on her chest. A stone on each finger, gold bands on both joints of her left pinkie. She searched the men under the palm tree and found, in the shortest one's sandal, two thousand francs. She restored his shoe so he could walk about freely in the world to come, but she left his kettle whistling steam into the hot noon sun.

She entered the chief's *khaima* and found Mina Tahore lying face down beside a chest with six bricks of gold in it. When Mina had fallen, her hair had dropped free of her headscarf, and now Souria could witness the two waist-long braids the woman had hidden in life. Souria bent and raised one of the braids, feeling its heft. She stroked its split ends, looked around and made decisions. The chief had a battery-powered television set but she'd have to leave it. She'd have to leave all but two of the heavy gold bricks. On a rich cream carpet in the middle of the room were platters of apricots and bread, but she wouldn't take the food, either, as she couldn't be sure it wasn't tainted. She lay down toe-to-toe beside the chief's dead daughter and discovered, by

measuring the distance from the girl's open eyes down to her own, that she was but an inch or two shorter. Souria removed her own djellaba and ripped it to rags; she stripped the dead girl down and suited herself up in the fine purple silk. Searching from tent to tent she worked quickly, for she feared the dead. Pots still boiled on fires and water ran slowly from cracks in wooden bath pails, as though the inanimate objects were simply props waiting for another cast of characters. A lone buzzard circled high above the camp, plaguing her as she rummaged, but no flies lighted on the bodies. They'd been killed, too.

The sun moved, the shadows grew, and what had been the wind became the heavy communal noise of the dead becoming deader—final breaths expelled as gases played inside bodies, the susurration of final shits taken. In one tent, a dead man sat straight up, his nerve endings responding to the hour's drop in temperature. Souria hadn't heard him move behind her, and almost dropped all his money as she ran past him out of the tent. All around her the joints of the dead stiffened, and she heard them as the creaking of so many masts. Her own fingers knit the afternoon as she searched, and with the bills, the coins, the new pair of sandals, time wove itself into one long ribbon of overdue fortune.

Finished, she wrapped everything in her old blue scarf, secured it under the dead girl's djellaba, and ran back the way she'd come, aiming to leave the camp. When she happened upon Tissim Sidi already half-covered with sand, she kicked his body supine and searched his pockets, finding only scraps of paper decorated with the beautiful loops and dots she could pronounce but not read. She shoved one scrap in her pocket in order to remember the look of cruel people's handwriting, and she reached into the bulge at the

waistband of his pants, where she found a small cloth wrapped around thirty francs. "Bastard," she whispered, "trying to hide so little." She spit on him twice more and ran. Past the camp's perimeter, into the desert, and away from Venus, which had just appeared on the afternoon sky. She'd always be running, she felt, and she'd always be running, since the beginning, until the end. As the sun fell behind the high dunes, lizards scattered out of her path, dragging their long green tails into holes in the sand.

The desert was quiet enough that she could hear the disturbance of an engine struggling noisily against its own disrepair, its giant wheels displacing roofs. "Allahu akbar!" she shouted. "Let it come!" She ran faster and faster toward the sound, faster than she'd run even in games as a small child, so fast that her thighs and stomach burned and her heart ached in her rib cage. Between herself and the engine rose a row of dunes burning orange with the day's departure, and arranged by the wind in such an orderly fashion that they looked as though they'd been shaped by giant buckets. She dug herself up the lowest dune and heard a clink as her scarf began to come undone: a thick silver chain strung down from under her djellaba, catching itself in her feet and disappearing into the sand even as she reached to retrieve it. She kept climbing and screamed again at the approaching vehicle, but when she felt one of the two gold bricks become involved with her legs for an instant and thud into the sand behind her, she began to cry. "In sh'allah," she prayed. She looked back at the brick even as she reached the top of the dune, but the jeep had turned into the curve of trail closest to her, and, despite the long knife she'd collected from the chief's house and plunged through the pocket of his daughter's djellaba, it wouldn't do to have the jeep's driver see her

retrieve something heavy and shining from the sand. He'd need to think she was stranded, alone, penniless.

The wind returned, and for the first time since she'd been kidnapped and sold to Ousmane, she remembered her mother, seven years dead. Souria thought of the lonely time of evening during her mother's last summer, the first that she'd trusted Souria to walk the half mile to their garden plot and collect yellow peppers. "Be back before I miss you," her mother would say, having sent her five other children off with errands and cousins. "Even in the garden, it will become cold and dark. Night sand is not kind."

Souria's mother had been carrying her ninth pregnancy, the late child, the one who would pass into life only through his mother's death. Souria felt the tears come again: tears for a mother who had lived only to cook and birth; tears for a quiet, sweet-smelling baby brother who died after three months for lack of mother's milk. Tears for a father unable to tend to all six of his living sons and daughters; tears for herself, lost in town on market day. Left there. Perhaps purposely. The tears came, but they soon ran upon that hard place in Souria, that place packed down and made firm by soreness after rapes and hunger after beatings. The hard place kept the tears and made her keep climbing with one hand held ahead of her for balance, made her scramble down the other side of the dune into the jeep's headlights. The hard place made her wave and keep waving even after the jeep slowed to a stop, made her stand spraddle-legged against the jeep's grille, as she had seen angry men do in her village before a fight. She frowned at the driver even as he said his salaams to her, because she couldn't believe that after three years Allah was finally answering a single solitary prayer.

"Can I ride?" she asked. Through the bugstained windshield, she could see that the driver's eyes were moist and white, not like the eyes of the people she'd been with in the three years past. She was so close to him she could see his eyes dart behind her as he searched for a solution to the puzzle of this lone, overdressed girl running out of the dunes.

"Are you real or jinniyah?"

She laughed, though the tears rose again. "I'm a real girl. With real money. I'll pay you for the ride."

He nodded, and she edged around the hood to the passenger side, finally noticing a cigarette placed in the jeep's grille, butt end out, a joke suggesting that the jeep itself was smoking. "Assalaamu'alaikum," she said as she fastened herself in, taking care not to stab herself with the knife that lay against her thigh. The driver groaned at how hard she slammed his door, but she found she didn't have the words to apologize to someone to whom she was so grateful. It was only the second time in her life someone had saved her.

She was asleep by the time they met asphalt, and the man didn't wake her until the middle of the night, at Kiffa, when he touched her arm gently and asked if she needed to relieve herself.

She shook her head. She felt that if she spoke, something in her would burst open, drowning them both.

"Hard road coming up, from here to the Algerian border. If you need to make water you can get out and do it in front of the jeep just like me—I won't think anything of it. I'm a modern man," he said, tapping his heart. "From the biggest city in Algeria." He got out and himself made water, and Souria watched the crown of his head, where the headlights created a halo. By the time the man returned, she was back in her dreams.

The next day, at Tijiqjah, he taught her how to drive the jeep, though he winced every time she missed the clutch. Through the windows the sun roasted them both to chestnut, and the desert left an inch-thick coating of dust on the dash. The sand turned Souria's jet black hair into a goaty brown, and the dead girl's djellaba was still purple only in its creases. Souria's right hand, the one she'd used to grip the back of the truck at Minignan, ached terribly when she shifted gears. But she was relieved to be able to let the man have a turn at sleep. He was as kind as his eyes suggested, though he had told her over a dinner of spiced fish and rice that he acted as a villain in a running show in his city. For three days, over dunes whose summits made the engine smoke and whose slopes made Souria's stomach flutter, they failed to ask each other's names. Through sand seas and customs posts and a deep road rut they took four hours to dig out of, he asked her nothing of her past. Only as they approached Oum el Assel did he ask her whether she intended to ride with him all the way to the coast.

"No," she said without thinking, for the fearful little scarab in her head told her to. "I think you're going east now. I need to go north." She had awakened that morning to the sight of more gorges than she thought possible, and she knew that she no longer knew this desert. Running away from Venus should have led her home, but she'd gone too far north, and now she was 1300 kilometers from Tamassoumit, the last place her tribe had settled before her father left it. Fifteen hundred kilometers from Ouad Naga, where she'd disappeared into the busy market while her father sammied leather for her uncle.

"Where will you go?" he asked. "And who will you go to?"

Souria stared at him, took in the kind eyes and the dusty curls. She turned to the windshield.

"You have nowhere to go, do you," he said, not asking. She knew that he thought she was looking at the road ahead, when really she was only studying a beetle whose back half had gotten smeared across the windshield. "You running from the police?" he asked. "Like an animal? But you seem like a good girl."

She thought he would debate with himself like this forever, with each word burning a pinhole in her mind where the rays of disquiet could shine through. She took his hand and placed it on her silken lap.

"I'll help you," he continued, as though to himself. "I can take you to Algiers and find you a new life."

"I don't want to be in Algiers," she said, though it was again the frightened little animal speaking for her: she knew nothing about Algiers save that the man had recommended it. She said, "I have money enough to feed myself anywhere. I'll be out at the next town."

The man blinked a long beat and tucked his lips into his mouth. When he opened them, the kind eyes shone. She hadn't meant to sound harsh, but she didn't have the words to say such a thing as thank you. When he took his hand away from hers to shift gears, she took it back. She trapped it like a bird and held it to her chest. She slid it down the front of her djellaba and shoved it into the space between her legs. The dusty purple silk puckered in her lap, and she helped the man along by gathering the hem up with her free hand. She let his hand go finger by finger, until she had only the index one, which she began to direct.

"You're just a girl," he said, though he didn't take his hand back until he needed it to shift gears. Savagely, she took his hand again, but he pulled away from her with equal force. She took his hand a third time, he

again pulled back, and Souria began weeping softly. "Poor thing," said the driver, "but I understand you. You don't need to thank me that way." And again, just as softly as she was weeping, he said, "You're just a girl." Though she saw, through tear-fogged eyes, that he was breathing heavily.

She wept the rest of the way to Oum el Assel but rallied when they lucked upon the center of town and a patisserie that served pain au chocolat, which no one had ever given her. While she sipped mint tea and looked across at the white mosque with its red lettering speaking the way to God, the man asked around and found a salt caravan headed north. Souria took another round of tea with him and they waited an incomprehensibly long time, until the buildings had ceased throwing shadows and she could no longer make out the distinct shapes of the mosque's lettering. The sky lost its purples and oranges and the trail of a passing jetliner gleamed moonlit against the cobalt ceiling.

In time, camels began to complain as they were kicked to standing, and drivers pitched blankets to one another. "Li'yadhhab!" yelled the caravan leader, and Souria stood up at her table.

"What is your name?" she asked the kind man who had driven her so, so far.

"Hassan."

"I'll always remember." It was as close as she could come to thank you. She found herself unable to walk, and it wasn't the scared little animal who nailed her down to the spot in the little café on the edge of the mountains. It was Souria herself who could not move, Souria who was so afraid and so tired.

"You can still ride with me if you want," said Hassan. He offered her two shirts he'd taken out of his

jeep. "For the night. The cold. You'll need to wear both of them."

And the shirts, their distinct colors blending into one dark mass in the growing evening, told her what she needed to do. She bowed to Hassan, took his shirts, and ran off into the middle of the caravan, where she mounted one of the last sitting camels. She dug her sore right hand into his fur and gripped the harness with her left hand just as the leader, wrapped against the cold with a striped hendira, yelled for the pack to begin. Her own camel smelled as foul as a latrine. He groaned and bayed at the humps and hooves of his brethren marching all around him, but he refused to rise. Souria looked with terror at Hassan, who was waving goodbye. She kicked the side of her camel, and he stretched his neck back to try and bite her. He hissed, he spit thorns. Only when the very last camel passed when she realized the stub of that last one's tail and the waste falling out of his hindquarters, did her own camel rise and begin the long journey. She tried to look back at Hassan, but her camel was moving fast and unsteadily on his stalky legs to catch up with the herd, and Souria's memory never got its fill of Hassan. She'd remember him only in parts—the sand-ridden hair, the thin arms.

Venus shone behind her and the North Star shone overhead. The cold air sunk its teeth right through her clothes and into her lungs. She was farther north than she even knew existed. It was Muharram the 21st, and though she'd long since lost track, it was the night of her twelfth birthday.

Author Information

John M. Anderson teaches creative writing at the Emily Dickinson Seminar at Boston College and divides his time between Boston and Cripple Creek, Colorado. He has new poems in *South Dakota Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Rosebud*, and *Fugue*. His chapbook, *Dictionary Quilt* (Pudding House Press, 2007), explores the shadow-haunted canyonland of the American Southwest. He is currently finishing a book-length manuscript called Old Masters: Iraq War Edition, a collection of poems about imaginary classic paintings of contemporary subjects.

Jim Bainbridge is a graduate of Harvard Law School and a recipient of a National Science Foundation fellowship for graduate studies at UC Berkeley. His story "The Blooming" has been awarded Second Place Prize in the *Red Cedar Review* Flash Fiction Contest and will appear in their Spring 2008 issue. He has recently completed a literary speculative fiction novel for which he hopes to find a home in the coming year.

Joshua Conklin, a teacher by trade, is currently a stay-at-home writer-dad. Between diaper changes he tries to work on poetry, short fiction, and a family memoir. His poetry has been featured at *Inkwell*, *Foliate Oak*, *Ocean*, A Generation Defining Itself: In Our Own Words, and *The Anthology of New England Writers 2008*.

Adam Deutsch has a few degrees from a couple of places. He's taught writing since 2005 at UIUC while working on his car and motorcycle and will be moving in the summer.

Richard Dinges, Jr. has an MA in literary studies from University of Iowa, and he manages business systems at an insurance company. *Homestead Review*, *Nebo*, *Mainchannel Voices*, *Free Verse,* and *Icon* have most recently accepted his poems for their publications.

Sonia K. Ellis never played football in high school, but she did spend many summer nights dodging the tram cars on the Wildwood boardwalk. These days, Sonia is writing a young-adult novel that has been supported by grants from the Ford Motor Company and the GE Foundation. She also writes e-learning courseware for clients ranging from fraud fighters to golf referees. Sonia's fiction and nonfiction work has appeared in publications including the *Tampa Tribune Fiction Quarterly*, *The Pennsylvania Gazette,* and *Cornell Engineering Magazine*. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband, two sons, and a German shepherd.

Teresa Burns Gunther's fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Peregrine Journal*, *flashquake* (Spring 2008 Editor's Choice story), *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *SoMa Literary Review*, *Lynx Eye Journal*, *Literary Mama*, *Mary Journal*, and *The Mag*, where she was a featured writer in August Highland's Apprentice Guild. She holds an MFA from Saint Mary's College of California and is currently completing her first novel. She leads creative writing workshops through Lakeshore Writers, an AWA Affiliate in Oakland, California, where she lives with her husband and two teenaged sons.

Elizabeth Hunter is an expert Oobleck maker, an experienced destroyer of garbage disposals and a graduate of Ohio University's Scripps School of Journalism. Although she has published several

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Louis Sylvester is a Ph.D. candidate at Oklahoma State University and assistant fiction editor for the *Cimarron Review*. This is his first publication.

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Carl F. Thompson, Jr. is a retired federal employee and a graduate of the University of North Carolina. He and his wife live in Annandale, Virginia. His fiction has appeared in *Potomac Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *The William & Mary Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Iconoclast*, and *Phantasmagoria*; another story is scheduled for future publication in *All Hallows*.

Jane Zimbaldi received a BA in English from the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. As a workshop participant at Houston's Inprint, Inc. she was instructed by several talented poets. Currently, Jane is

enrolled in the MFA Creative Writing program at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. Her poetry has appeared in *The Spiky Palm*, *TimeSlice*, and *Farfelu*. She has worked for a variety of organizations, including a community blood bank, a corporate accounting firm, and an elementary school.

Artist Information

Eric Coates lives in Wyoming where he works as a geologist and geochemist for a minerals exploration company. This work often takes him far afield, so he started photographing the places he saw, capturing the west and its unique scenes on film. Eric's work is available online at **www.qccimages.com**. QCC is the abbreviation for Quarter Circle C, the family's brand, which his grandfather, a western landscape and figure painter, used as his artistic signature, a tradition that Eric continues.

Sal Laughter shoots pictures of people and their stuff. He prefers cleanliness to metaphor and strives for narrative. "Ursula, that means bears, I think," he says.

Stacy Savickas (cover artist) is currently working and teaching in Northern California. Her work is inspired by the contradiction between isolation and interconnectedness in the human experience.

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