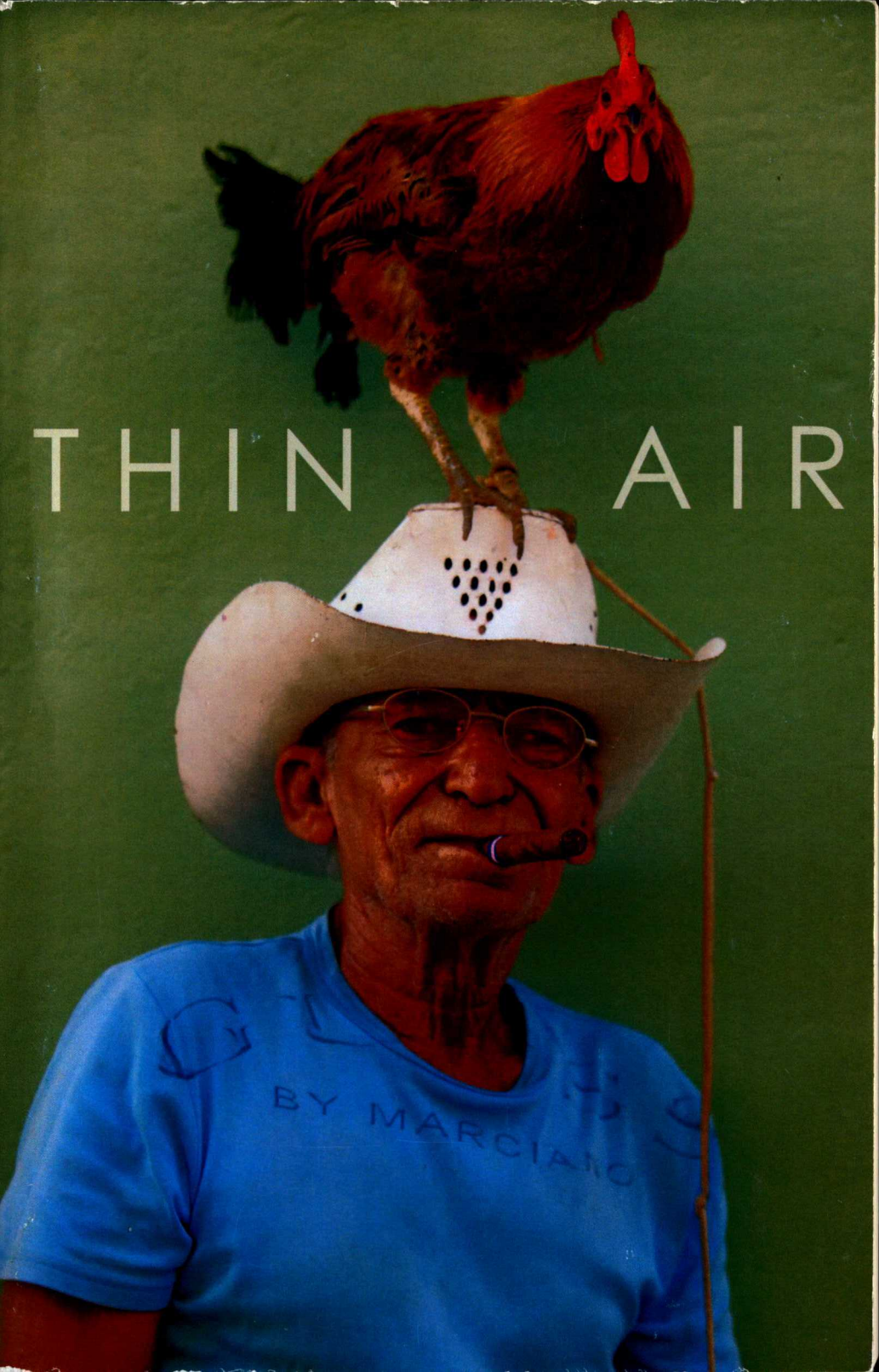
THIN AIR
BY MARCIANO

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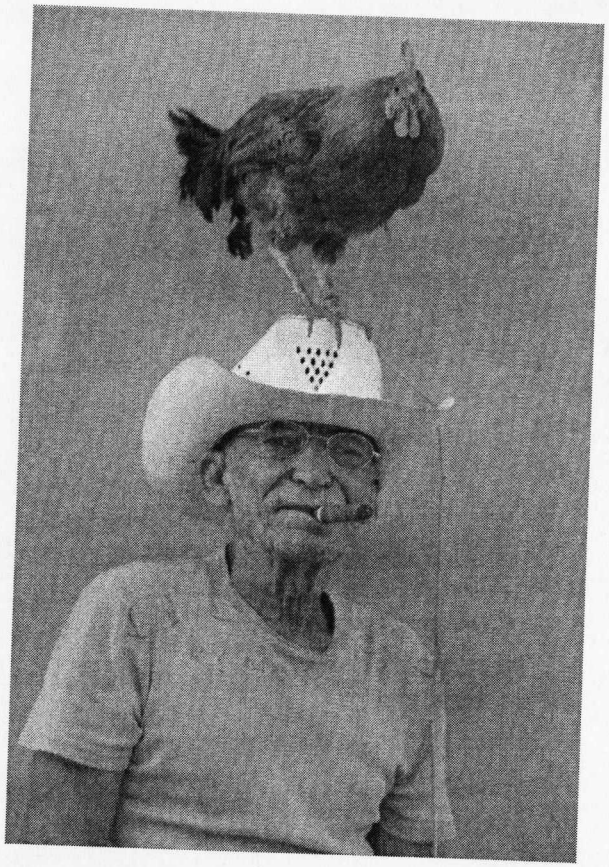

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Dear Readers,

The last twelve months have been very good to our little magazine. Student involvement has increased. Our events in the Flagstaff community and on the NAU campus have continued to grow. We (well, mostly our excellent webmaster Jason Slater) built the magazine a first-rate website. Check it out at www.thinairmagazine.com. Flagstaff Cultural Partners, who recognize local excellence in the arts and sciences, honored us with a Viola Award nomination. And, perhaps most importantly, we continued to attract talent we are excited to work with, and whose work we are eager to share with you, our valued readers. This year's magazine features work from artists around the world delivered in a variety of styles, and addressing a vast array of subjects, from the invention of skywriting, to the Randy Johnson's infamous encounter with a dove, to the havoc that throwing a game of Mario Kart can inflict upon a relationship. We hope you have as much fun reading this issue as we did putting it together.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the support of the following individuals and groups, who we wish to offer our most sincere and heartfelt thanks:

- The Thin Air 2012 staff, especially Matt Larrimore, Ben McClendon, and Robert Keegan, for leaving the magazine better than you found it. We hope, and believe, we have been able to do the same.
- Dr. Nicole Walker, for always lending your support, expertise, and ears.
- James Jay, the Patron Saint of Thin Air, for your generous support in all its many forms.
- Steve Scully, Darcy Falk, and the folks at Karma Sushi, for selecting Thin Air as the proud recipient of Good Karma Tuesday in October 2012.
- Michael Martone, for sharing your beautiful work, and for appearing at the High Altitude Writing Institute this spring.
- Diana Gabaldon for your continued support.
- Jamie D'Agostino, for judging this year's Thin Air Poetry Contest.
- Flagstaff Cultural Partners for your support, and for acknowledging our hard work (and that of previous Thin Air staffs).
- The faculty and staff of NAU's English Department and, especially, the MFA Program.
- All of our friends and family in Flagstaff and elsewhere.

Sincerely on behalf of the editorial staff,
Jeff Huizinga
Editor-in-Chief

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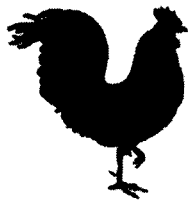

M O M

Michael Martone

In 1925, flying over North Highlands, with his mother, Ida, on board, Art Smith, The Bird Boy of Fort Wayne, negotiated a crash landing after the motor driving his DeHaviland choked. Descending from two thousand feet, he expertly voplaned his craft to earth. Neither was injured. It was the second such emergency landing he survived with his mother who later said: "I looked at Art and touched his shoulder. When he smiled at me, I knew I was with my boy and I was safe." Days later, his airplane repaired, Smith took to the sky again to commemorate the event. His mother, safely on the ground this time, blew kisses into the air from her gloved hands.

W O W

Michael Martone

Observed that day from further west, Art Smith's homage to his mother read as an exclamation. A farmer harrowing a field off Bass Road, his attention drawn by the pesky buzz of the airplane overhead, called for his wife to come see as the letters appeared there, punctuated by the blotting clouds. A year later, after the crash he would not survive, Art Smith would be laid to rest at the nearby Lindenwood Cemetery. During the internment there, a flight of DeHaviland airships would bomb the gravesite with a dusting of flower petals. Ida, it is said, held up her hand as if to receive a homing pigeon. Or a hawk.

Michael A. Martone (b. 1955, Fort Wayne, Indiana) is a professor at the creative writing program at the University of Alabama, where he has been teaching since 1996. He is the author of more than a dozen books. His 2005 work, Michael Martone, *is an investigation of form and autobiography. It was originally written as a series of contributor's notes for various publications. His literary forte is "false biographies." Martone attended Butler University and graduated from Indiana University. He holds a MA from the Writing Seminars of Johns Hopkins University. He has been a faculty member of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, and has taught at Iowa State University, Harvard University and Syracuse University. He lives in Tuscaloosa with his wife, the poet Theresa Pappas. The couple has two sons.*

Modern Warfare

Kate Rosenberg

There are two cars abandoned in a field. One is on fire. Our veins are on fire; the northern lights set our veins on fire; our veins are burning; lit bits of clothing, hems of jackets, the tips of your collar, until the car is slathered in flames; my hair is the way you've always wanted: cinnabar, with sparks all in it; your profile is inclement weather. Silent bombs. A sky decorated with flags so we've washed up in a sandstorm. There are two cars abandoned in a snow squall; in one, the engine is still cooling. The other car is ours. Silent bombs, the brief absence of air crushes our eardrums. Our car hasn't been driven since the late 1960's. We're too young. We were never even born; we've stayed in vivo. Our mothers are free from naming us, from knowing what makes us cry. This is no longer a field in Wisconsin. The tiniest drill bit shaves a hole into an egg, the shimmering uterus of desire, the unapologetic light of December, somewhere the city sidewalks slither; I am a flickering photo, mouthing *the digital age, a psychotropic rage, turn the goddamn page,* my hair, the way you always liked it then, being lifted by pigeons off my shoulders, layers of burnt tulle picked up by the wind. Two planes cross each other, white X. From the movies, planes eject bombs like eggs from the bowel. Someone must have turned the sound off just then.

Kate Rosenberg is a writer, teacher, mother, procrastinator, and creator of glittery crafts living in rural Central Pennsylvania. She received her MFA in creative writing from the University of Arizona and her Ph.D. in English from the University of Utah.

14 Ways of Watching Randy Johnson Kill a Dove with a Fastball

Kirk Schlueter

I.

Through a television's eye
a dove is a cloud of feathers
that glues itself together and flies.

II.

A fastball from a 6'10" man
is harder than the smell of leather
and crackerjack rising like prayers.

III.

The ball flying home was dreaming
of its peaceful nest, to be safe and sound.
It was thinking of thin things, ballerinas
and rivers, how they come together.

IV.

Johnson let go of the ball
like autumn, felt something rush
by him and knew its name,
knew that by the time he closed
his eyes, it would know his too.

V.

Baseballs dream of soaring,
of falling into blue
and coming out green,
lost in a deep August sky
that burns so bright it sings.

VI.

The shadow of the dove
across the infield was
a slowly burning filmscreen
on which was playing
a whole story of darkened water
running backward into the ground.

VII.

The white ball still like dawn after an icestorm.
The dove's fragile heart is beating.

VIII.

The scratched seaglass eye
was a man's roaring fist
and there was a yo-yo
starting to come back.

IX.

The dove was a frightened
acrobat climbing to heaven
in a circus of knives.

X.

In the front row
was a boy eating a hot
dog wearing a shirt
made of bones and light,
that, when painted in soda,
displayed strips of broken wing.

XI.

When the dove saw the ball
it opened its mouth and sang
one long trembling note
and the whole stadium

stood like they would
for the national anthem
and sang a short, brisk song back.

XII.

When the sunlight was falling
through the holes in the stadium
roof, the whole city was
a silhouette, except for the dove.

XIII.

A baseball is dreams and apple pie
packed in so tight it wants to crack
like an egg and pour an armada
of humming lampshade dragons
out into the smoky Midwestern night,
and a dove is a hot memory
pressed straight into my brain
like the image you see when you
close your eyes hard in the dark,
and the dove is holding a key
to a door it knows will never unlock.

XIV.

Sometimes all there is
is a baseball
rising on a sudden wind into
a heady crowd dreaming confusedly of
a 100 MPH fastball, only to wind up
shaking hands with a dove instead.

Kirk Schlueter is a junior English major at Truman State University in Kirksville, MO. His work is forthcoming in the Spring 2013 editions of Glass Mountain *and* Catfish Creek.

Frida Kahlo, My Sister

Robin Silbergleid

She dreams of the accident, my sister says
the way the car turned over and over
like a child rolling down a hill
until it stopped and all she could hear
was the sound of her breaking bones
and the rushing wind—in the film it would be slow motion—
until the tear of metal and the EMTs pulled her out.
But in the dream there is only rolling and the tug
bringing her back to this world, to the stretcher
and the sirens screeching through February cold
and the doctors began to put Humpty together again,
a tube down her throat, a piece of pelvis in her heel,
the bliss of anesthesia and a handful of pills
until her eyes glaze and the edges blur and soften.
Sometimes she imagines they just left her there
on the side of the road, her phone flung into darkness,
wondering if she could try to crawl out or if she should
go to sleep, just for a little while, just for a little while.

A poet and nonfiction writer, Robin Silbergleid is the author of the chapbook Pas de Deux: Prose and Other Poems *(Basilisk Press). Her recent work appears in* Hospital Drive, The Citron Review, The Prose-Poem Project *and elsewhere. She teaches at Michigan State University, where she serves as faculty adviser to* The Red Cedar Review.

Goodnight

Martin Ott

The cry of the rifle
cannot be ignored:
you hold it tight
until silence looms.
Goodnight light
and the red balloon.
The shoulder sling
keeps your loved one
close and you burp
it on the night range.
Goodnight little house
and goodnight mouse.
You swaddle it in rain,
clean with soft swabs,
and name your precious
one after the departed.
Goodnight nobody,
goodnight mush.
Separation brings joy
and hands tingling
from the weight
of holding on tight.
Goodnight noises
everywhere.

Italic text from *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown.

A former U.S Army interrogator, Martin Ott currently lives in Los Angles. His book Captive *won the De Novo prize, C&R Press. He is coauthor of* Poets' Guide to America, *Brooklyn Arts Press. Find out more at* www.martinottwriter.com.

FOR TANZANITE

William Snyder

Mbugumi mine, Arusha District, Tanzania

We're here to see the mine—wazungu
come in a four-wheel. We see dust—
on sapling leaf, on plastic sack, on canvas shoe.
On dark brown skin—gray blanched everything.
And smoke—after punching report,
a plume on the valley-side beyond. Blasting,
they say, chuckling at our shoulder-starts.
We see boys and men waiting for shifts—
squatting, lying on the dry ground, standing.
No shade but the mine shaft roof and a strip
beneath the diesel huffing air
down a thin, gray hose. Three-hundred meters,
they tell us, and out in every direction—tunnels
meeting tunnels, over and under—the mine's
deep snarl. Thirty-seven miners, they say,
crushed last month, crushed deep
in child-sized shafts—the buckle
of bamboo pole, the snap of
sapling strut, the crush of slack, red earth.

We don't see the dynamite, red-rolled sticks
twisted into fissures, pressed into holes
drilled by boys on knees and backs. Or detonations—
hands-over-ears, duck-away, crouch. But now,
new timber holds the mine mouth open
as two boys climb down, disappear
around the switchback stair, lamps
on foreheads flaring beams, once this way,
once that, then gone into black.

We leave the mine—tour done—pass again
through corrugated gates, swung again
by guards strapping carbines, shotguns. Beside
the road, on gray-earth mounds

and in shallow scoops between, on stomachs
and haunches, children, women, men—gray—
sift dirt through fingertips for fragment,
for flicker, for fleck. Of blue, even
the lightest blue. They will pinch
the flecks and flickers into little cloth pouches,
then dust them onto plywood counters—to be
funneled into scales—tender for a scoop of rice,
a cup of kerosene, a candle and wick.

William Snyder Jr has published poems in The Southern Review, Louisiana Literature, *and* Cottonwood *among others. He was the co-winner of the 2001 Grolier Poetry Prize and winner of the 2002 Kinloch Rivers Chapbook competition. He teaches writing and literature at Concordia College, Moorhead, MN.*

THE CENSOR

Brian DiNuzzo

You wouldn't think that I'd be the kind of guy to keep people from seeing the videos they want to see. Put me in a line up of ten and no one would choose me as the porn censor for the most popular video-sharing site on the 'Net. It is I with the glasses, the chewed sneakers, the same black hoodie everyday; I with the earrings and the beard thick enough to bury Catherine's hand almost to the wrist.

I watch about 35 hours of porn per week. How many hours is that per year?

The censors' office for this huge Internet company is a rented space behind a strip mall in New Jersey. To see our sign, you would have to be looking for it.

My workday goes like this: I swing into the parking lot and pass the deli and liquor store. There is a discrete clinic at the end—it's marquee made of soft blues and pinks on a pure white background.

Todd is always in the office first because he's the only guy with the key. He spends his whole day nervously going in to and coming out of his office. He rubs his chin a lot and tugs on the end of a tie his children gave him for Father's Day. He chokes himself he pulls so hard.

Todd is an example of what I don't want to be: middle-aged, neither happily nor unhappily married, neither a good nor bad dad, a guy whose entire mind is invested in work. Todd is all tasks and responsibilities, rules and policies. He makes small issues big issues and big issues Defcon-5-biohazard-red-lights-flashing emergencies. Offhand, Todd can tell you how many people visit the site for how-to videos or how many new channels were created in the last week. Todd is a numbers guy.

The rest of us get a cubicle: three half-walls crammed with a computer desk and chair. I can sit at the desk and reach the walls with my fingertips.

I fill my bottle at the water fountain. Sixteen ounces keeps my eyes from drying out.

I consider hanging pictures around my cubicle like the others do, to give it that lived-in, homey feel. But I don't want 4 x 6 Catherines glaring at me while I watch a girl get done by a guy with a jackhammer coming out of his fly.

Miller escapes into the green valley tacked to his wall. He wants to forget where he is and what he does. Not me. I always want to know exactly who I am and what I'm doing.

Todd comes out of his office, running around in emergency mode, always afraid the corporate gang will show up unannounced. He watches the door and tugs on his tie.

That's how it usually goes.

*

Catherine is home. A pan of cheese lasagna bubbles in the oven. Today her hair—black with strands of cherry—is curly, corkscrew curls like tiny black boa constrictors. Catherine's hair is too thick to run a hand through. Every summer, she threatens to cut it all off.

I kiss her, playfully smack her tush, feel the firm jiggle ripple back. Her cheeks are chubby and covered by a fine and delicate fur, which you can't see unless right up close. Her lips are moist, maroon pillows.

We ask about each other's day.

After I recite the morning drive, the censoring, the evening drive, Catherine recites the wake up and shower, read a novel or memoir about abused women on drugs with eating disorders, head to class. Sometimes she cries while reading. More often, Catherine gets angry. She's been threatening to write her own book since we met. She'll shut a hardcover and say, "What a terrible book. Why did I waste my time?" or "Why don't people know themselves? I'm going to write something that will slap people in the face."

Catherine eases into the day while I charge ahead, trying not to think too much about my station in life and what it all means. Catherine teaches in the afternoons and afterward goes to an exercise class disguised as belly dancing. She gets home before me and makes dinner and washes the dishes.

We sit on the couch with our plates of steaming lasagna. She asks about my day again and I struggle to think of something I haven't said already.

"The traffic," I tell her. "We inched along for miles, almost like someone at the front of the line was trying to keep us from going home."

It feels like I've told Catherine this before.

I say, "I want to get out of here. There's got to be some place that isn't this place."

I've told Catherine this before, too. "Every place is the same," she says, flipping her palms up and down like turning pancakes in the skillet. "We could leave and have different streets and a different apartment, a different driver's license, different jobs, but the problems would follow us."

She's said this before. I've never asked what exactly she thinks our problems are.

I tell Catherine how good dinner is and thank her. She thanks me for taking her plate to the kitchen sink. On the walk back to the couch, I stop at the moody stereo and fight it to a station playing a Clapton ballad. The music makes it seem like we are doing more than sitting on the couch.

My eyes hurt some when I rub them, and when I close my eyes I see my computer screen. It is a good night for a drink but all we have is wine and the feeling fades. The question Why haven't I married Catherine? is always hanging around, the way that censoring hangs around as the only job I'll ever have.

Catherine's neck muscles are tight and my hands disappear under her constrictor curls. Clapton fades out. Catherine sinks back, rests her head against my chest. From this angle, her nose is pointed like a capital A turned on its side, and her eyes are vats of fresh oil. Is this what Catherine looked like when she was young?

When she looks up at me, I flinch. From her angle, she must be seeing an older me—my chin doubled, my teeth crooked, my nostrils like industrial vacuums.

Catherine shoots up, wincing. "Ouch. You hurt." She moves her hair to soothe her inflamed neck. "It felt good for a while, then it just hurt." She is turning and twisting and nodding her head, making sure I haven't damaged her. I apologize and think, *This is why I haven't married you.*

We meet in bed smelling of mint toothpaste.

Catherine says goodnight but is not ready to sleep. Her freshly moisturized hand, smelling of sunburst raspberries, slithers into my boxers. We've been together long enough to know what to do and how to do it. We think we're adventurous and spontaneous, but we are vanilla.

Though she directs me, I can't seem to hit her spot. But we've already spent so much time starting, might as well finish. In the dark bedroom, I can still see my computer screen; it is a white block in an otherwise black background.

"Are you okay?" Catherine wouldn't ask unless something was wrong. If she tells me I'm tired, that means the festivities are over. When I reach between my legs to see what's not okay, the deflated latex slips off. "You're just tired," she says, and I pull up my underwear and drop the wasted baggie into the garbage can. Catherine kisses me to make me feel better. We hold hands only until we retreat to our own side of the bed with our own blanket and pillow. Catherine begins snoring, a feminine sound. When I close my eyes, really trying to fall asleep now, the white computer screen appears, as though burned into my retinas. I wonder, *Is Catherine the right one?*

Everything resets when morning comes. I leave breakfast on the counter for Catherine. On my way out, I peek at her, sitting up in bed, reading, hair all over the place. "Bye," I call and go.

The routine is so routine I don't even know how I get to work. Todd is short-stopping and tie-tugging, telling everybody, "Meeting today. 0930 hours. Big news. Very important." Todd's nervousness makes me nervous and that usually ruins my lunchtime appetite.

We six are crammed in Todd's office at a table that seats four. Everyone balances a pad on the thigh of a crossed leg. The home office

called and told Todd that a "very inappropriate How-to made it onto the site." Mellie and Staniella handle censoring the How-to's.

"Are you awake, Gray?" Todd yells at me. "This concerns every last one of you." I was thinking of condoms, empty and useless, trying to remember the last time I saw a condom in any of the porn videos I monitor and censor. The porn actresses must all be on the pill.

"Get with it, Gray. I don't like the bosses calling me at 0800." He tugs his tie. "The How-to in question was posted by someone with the username Mr874Wardom." Todd waits, taps his foot, until we write down the name. "The fucker how-to'd explosives and I (and the bosses) don't need the FBI implicating us because of some fucker's how-to defuse bombs." How-to *defuse* bombs? The how-to-*make*-bombs videos are usually the problem. "All we need is some shithead sixteen-year-old thinking he can defuse a remotely detonated brick some other shithead sixteen-year-old left in the school cafeteria." Todd shifts his weight to the other leg, becoming an irate, grieving mother. "My son died because the video on your site led him to believe he could be a hero." Todd shifts back. "We'd all be sued out of a job then."

Maybe that wouldn't be so bad.

I go outside to escape and to attempt lunch. It should be cold today, but it's not so bad, so I sit on a low cement wall, the road traffic whooshing behind me, the liquor store and clinic in full view. Inside the liquor store, college guys push dollies loaded with cases of six packs. One guy wearing dirty brown jeans and a loose-fitting flannel shirt exits the store for a smoke break. The smoke hovers beside him.

The clinic is active with people going in. They all keep their heads down and move quickly. The front windows are tinted black. I hadn't noticed the sticker on the door before: Female health is our priority. Aside from the discrete blue and pink marquee, there are no other signs.

A taxicab squeals to a stop and two women get out. One slaps a bill into the cab driver's hand and doesn't wait for change. I wonder what flu is going around. The deli will have the newspaper, but I don't move.

Lunch is a hastily made peanut butter and jelly sandwich with too much peanut butter, not enough jelly. The imbalance annoys me, and it takes a lot of water to wash down the thick peanut butter.

The liquor store is basically empty but another two women enter the clinic; still none come out. How bad is this illness that I don't know about? After thirty minutes, twelve women have entered the clinic while only three have left. Can I catch whatever they have? They look sick as they walk to the door, faces pale, eyes almost colorless. They walk like their backs hurt and pull their coats tightly over their shoulders. They should not be so cold.

The breeze makes my eyes water. The moisture feels good, and I don't want to go back to work.

"It'll be okay," the guy smoking outside the liquor store says. I don't know if he's talking to me or the girls entering the clinic, but I don't respond and don't look at him until he crushes his butt and heads back inside.

I hop off the cement wall and, as I'm heading back to the office, the same taxi rolls to the curb outside the clinic. I wait a few beats, but no one comes out, so I go back to work.

I begin by typing in all the usual terms: hot girl, sexy babe, hot chick, naked teen, horny slut, teen pussy, sexy ass, virgin babe, teen porn, busty babe, sweet ass, young and horny, sexy tease, stripper. Each catches thousands of videos.

Once you've done this for a while, you know what to look for. There are a great number of porn sites that use us to attract customers. We don't do anything about that. The handbook clearly states that my job is "to remove nudity or sexual acts otherwise deemed illegal by established government laws and/or policies of this company." If a female's nipples show, the video gets deleted. Any private parts, the video gets deleted. Bestiality, kiddie porn, snuff videos—automatic delete. But there are always some gray areas. Miller and I talk about it sometimes. It's the only thing we talk about, unless we talk about sports. Miller does what I do only his specialty is guys, mine is girls; and we share the heterosexual and threesome stuff. He'll say, "Gray, you don't actually see cock, but you know the guy's getting it good and painful. I mean, you see him tied up, gagged, and those are real tears squeezed out of the corners of his eyes. I can't feel good about leaving that video untouched. What would you do?"

A lot of these porn dealers have figured out our delete policy. They put the first ten seconds of girl-on-girl or amateurs stripping then cut to a commercial about visiting their website for the full-on stuff. There is always a fee involved. I call the videos teaser-trailers.

As the afternoon rolls into night, I have deleted 124 videos and flagged 77 users I want to keep an eye on. There was a whole series some genius tried to sneak in while I was at lunch called "Clarissa Studying." I've been doing this long enough to trust my hunches. Clarissa, if that is her real name, masturbates with a glass dildo. The kid couldn't be more than thirteen. You know the difference between a woman's body and a girl's body. I found seven Clarissas and deleted them all. It used to please me more, but now I just do it automatically.

There is a rumor that super-intelligent computers will replace us soon. Is that why Todd is always yanking his tie? Well, I don't believe it. Proof number one: Some sneaky bastards want to post porn and know that if they call it what it is I or Miller or one of the others will find it and delete it. So they put regular titles on porn videos, "Janelle's Birthday," for example.

I click on "Janelle's Birthday" but there is no cake, no candles, no celebration. Janelle is handcuffed to a banister—heels, fishnets, thong, pasties. No warrant for deletion yet. The guy holding the camcorder has a

knife and cuts off her thong; it sling shots to the ground like a broken rubber band. Then the guy cuts off chunks of her bleach-blonde hair. Janelle cries for real and make-up runs down her face in black streaks. Delete. Delete! I flag the user, Dyno2106. He goes in the Skunk File. The tricky bastards go in the Skunk File. There are over 200 skunks. Some of them are worse than Dyno2106.

When I tell Miller about Dyno2106, he says, "Remember blasterhash1?" Blasterhash1 is the first president of skunks. He's the first guy to splice a children's cartoon to an S&M video and title it "4 the kids." No super-intelligent computer will detect that. Todd had a fit that day, called a meeting. Blasterhash1 had his entire account deleted. The order came from the home office because angry parents had phoned, threatened legal suits. I'm sure blasterhash1 is still posting videos under alternate names. Why not?

My eyes dry out. When was the last time I blinked? I drink some water. Closing my eyelids is like pulling a rusty gate over a storefront. Feels like I have sand in my eyes. Even closed, my eyes still register a white computer screen; I can't look anywhere without seeing that after-image.

The night air feels good, makes my eyes water, only now the water stings as if my pupils have microscopic cuts and the salty moisture gets in. The clinic is dark. The liquor store is lit up, carnival-style.

*

I am awoken by a hand in my shorts. What has gotten into Catherine? She is touching, exploring, waiting for a response. I wait to see what will happen. She toys. She strokes. It begins to feel good, very good. She knows the speed and pressure. I didn't think anything would happen, but now I want it to happen. Catherine takes her hand back and rolls away. I roll after her and press myself against her. She whispers, "It's okay. You're just tired." I see my computer screen again, full of videos I aim to delete. The next thing I know the alarm clock is buzzing and I have to get out of bed to shut it off. I start breakfast, all the time devising a plan. I lower the flame under the skillet and slip naked into the bedroom. Catherine's asleep on her belly, her head buried under a pillow. I lift the blankets, lower her panties. Her buttocks clench as her head snaps up. "What are you doing, Gray?"

"You know what I'm doing," I say in a throaty whisper.

She groans. "Get off."

The eggs in the skillet are beginning to smoke and burn, and I hurry to save them. After a shower, I find Catherine sitting up in bed, arms folded, a closed book in her lap. She doesn't even notice me in the doorway, holding a plate of slightly over-cooked Eggs Benedict and buttered toast. When I present the plate, Catherine thanks me, but puts the plate on the bedside table.

"Not hungry?"

She swings back the blankets, pulls on sweatpants, and goes to the computer desk. She opens a blank document and begins typing. She is still typing when I leave, her breakfast untouched.

I can't marry someone like this.

*

There is a cop car outside the clinic, but I head to my desk. My eyes hurt already and I urge the weekend on. I begin with coed whores today. There are over 100 videos posted since I left work yesterday. Many of the teaser-trailers are fine, no nudity. A coed performs fillatio in a video titled "Topless Coeds"; the quality is grainy with poor lighting. By the time I delete it, the video has been viewed eight times. Who has seen it?

Miller yells over his cubicle wall. "Look out for TurnWyldeRomp."

He spells it for me. I write it on a note and stick it to the bottom of my screen.

"He's a royal skunk."

It's lunchtime. All of the coed whores that break the rules are gone, so are the naughty sluts, horny hotties, and sweet lolitas. My sixth sense for illicit content is buzzing. Miller catches me as I head out on break.

"Did you run across TurnWyldeRomp? I'm pretty sure it was a real snuff." Miller pauses to calculate. "That's four people in six years I've seen killed on video." He awaits my tally, but adds, "I don't even think it bothers me anymore, you know, to see someone killed. It's not like the movies. You don't fight when you're dying. You kind of go passively. Your face goes slack and you bleed all over the place."

Miller lets me go and, though the fresh air feels good, my appetite is gone. I get comfortable on the cement wall. There is a second cop car outside the clinic and a square of yellow police tape strung up around a patch of grass left of the front door. Two cops talk to every woman before they let her pass. Two other cops wearing latex gloves work inside the square of yellow tape. I force myself to eat some lunch; otherwise, I'll be grumpy all afternoon. One of the cops spots me staring and I pretend my turkey sandwich is the most interesting thing in the world. All of the stock boys are on smoke-break, though only one of them is actually smoking; they're watching the proceedings next door and gossiping.

The cops in latex gloves load a large clear plastic bag with something that looks like the infant doll used to train lifeguards in CPR, only this one has a cord attached to it. The clear plastic bag gets sealed. The cop that closes the trunk catches me watching and marches toward me.

"See anything around here?" He's wearing sunglasses that hide his eyes. The wind kicks up and my eyes threaten to tear. The cop peels off his gloves. "You work around here?"

"Yeah."

"Which place?"

"The office building in back." I point.

"What do you do?"

"Computers." My standard answer.

"Were you here yesterday evening?"

"Yeah."

"Did you see anything?"

Over the cop's shoulder, his buddies pat down two girls trying to enter the clinic. The girls are commanded to open their coats, raise their arms, and turn out their pockets, before they're allowed to pass. The cop in front of me asks to see my ID. I'm glad I left my wallet in my desk.

"I don't have ID on me."

"You didn't see anything?"

My eyes water.

"Are you all right?"

"Allergies."

When I get back to my desk, I take out my calculator and tap out some numbers and write 7,280 on a note and stick it to the screen.

Miller must have done a good job on TurnWyldeRomp because I don't run into him. I write the number two on a note and circle it. Above the number I write "Miller"; below, my initials.

*

When I get home, the place doesn't smell like anything, least of all lasagna. Catherine's at the computer, like she hasn't moved all day.

"Did you go to work today?"

Catherine talks and types without looking at me. "Of course." Her lips move as she reads her newest sentence.

"I'll make dinner," I offer.

Catherine insists she's not hungry, swears she won't be able to do anything else until she finishes her book. "I've written 44 pages today," she brags.

When we meet in bed, Catherine says her book is about anger and all the things that are wrong with the world. "And," she whispers to me in the dark, "it's about revolution, anarchy, knowing yourself."

"Is it fiction?"

She cackles, "No, silly. It's all the things I ever wanted to say and never did." Her voice becomes as dark as the room. "Don't you know I've been afraid most of my life? This book is my battle cry. I won't be afraid anymore."

In seconds, Catherine's asleep and snoring. She's too young for a mid-life crisis. When I wake, she's already at the computer. An ugly energy comes from her and I hurry out of the house.

*

Miller looks with satisfaction at the note I left him. "Only two, huh, Gray?"

"You've seen fakes," I tell him.

"No way, Gray. No way."

"People *do* fight for their lives, even if they're not too happy about living."

He crumples the note.

"Ever seen someone choked to death?" I ask. "It's rotten. When a person's got time to think about what's happening, he'll fight."

I forgot my lunch today, so I stop at the deli. They have remodeled the interior to look like a snazzy café. A petite girl with a ponytail asks what I'll have. "Turkey and Swiss between rye. Nothing else." She makes a face, thinks everything I am and everything I do is as bland as my order. It's easy to imagine her naked through her tight jeans and tank top. The newspaper catches my eye: "Cops blame pranksters for 'baby' left at clinic." The turkey sandwich is as big as a Frizz-bee. I eat on the cement wall and read from the local section. Every day now, cops are outside the clinic, mostly talking amongst themselves. The stock boys from the liquor store do the same. Occasionally, laughter bubbles up from one of the groups. Occasionally, someone gets shoved.

As soon as I return to my desk, my eyes begin stinging. I rub them. I close them. I drink water. I don't want to look at the screen anymore. Horny lesbians are French kissing. That's not against our delete policy. I turn off the screen but it's after-image remains. When I touch my eyes, they tear. It takes delicate work to shutdown my entire computer. The system alerts Todd.

"Did something happen, Gray?" Todd sounds like he's in my head. When I tell him it's my eyes, he says, "Get a drink of water." Todd can't manage things that are not in his plan. "Well, you've got to get back to work. You've got to."

I escape to the bathroom. When I return, my computer is on, ready for me. Before Todd can say anything, I tell him I'm getting back to work. He tries to talk anyway.

"I said I am working, Todd. Go away!"

He goes but slowly, and I finish out the day at half-speed.

Todd catches me on the way out. "Why don't you see an eye doctor?"

I hate that Todd and I are thinking the same thing.

*

I no longer expect to find Catherine anywhere but at the computer, typing furiously. She yells, "Dinner's in the fridge." She doesn't realize I am standing behind her.

I check the fridge. She ordered a pizza that looks like cheesy cardboard. I take a slice and eat it anyway. A bottle of wine stands beside the sink. I wish we had something harder. I kick off my shoes without untying them and sink into the old couch. I try not to blink because I don't want to see my computer screen and be reminded of work.

Catherine comes out of the other room, exhausted, hands on her hips, hair a tangle on her head. "I'm done," she says; the words clink to the floor in front of her, and for a second my skin feels hot and cold at the same time. She's talking about her book, and asks me to join her in the kitchen for a celebratory toast. She fills two flutes half way, hands me one, and says, "Toast me, please."

We raise our glasses but I don't know what to say.

"Say congratulations."

"To personal revolutions," I say.

We drink. Catherine's lips come away bleeding red.

"To the death of fear and knowing who you are."

She pours a second glass, then a third. Catherine says she will read her book to me, says the university refuses to publish it, but that doesn't matter because she knows a publisher who is just crazy enough to recognize genius.

In seconds, we are on the bed. Catherine left her laptop on and its blue-white screen casts a wintry glow. The room is frozen, sheeted in blue ice. She is on top of me and I am naked. Her face burns through the frosty dark. She tries and I try, but nothing happens. She rolls off of me, onto her back, working her fingers. She grunts then melts, her fingertips moist.

A moment of recovery passes before Catherine is up and at the computer desk. My eyes won't stop tearing, tripling Catherine's nakedness. She reads as though to a full amphitheater.

*

At times I see the note on which I wrote 7,280 and stare through it until the numbers move and double.

Miller returns from the bathroom and leaves a wad of toilet paper by my elbow. "Keep your problems at home, will you?" he says and continues back to his cubicle. My eyes have been tearing all morning. Miller's hushed voice creeps over the cubicle wall. "You've lost it, man. You've lost it."

According to Catherine's book on revolution, I haven't lost anything. Whatever it is is snatched away from us by force, and the only way to get it back is greater force.

It's not quite lunchtime yet, but I get up, take my wallet with me, and go outside. The stock boys acknowledge me with a collective look. Beyond them, a cop, thumbs hooked into his belt, guards the clinic entrance.

One of the stock boys disagrees with the group consensus. "It was not a noose but the umbilical cord used as a noose. They used six-feet of raw sausage links to do it." The stock boys jostle each other.

The liquor store is freezing inside and its halogen lights sting. I take vodka and a two-liter bottle of soda to the register. Outside again, I pour into the grass a third of perfectly good soda and refill it with vodka as the cop and the stock boys watch. The blend is perfect. The cop tilts toward me, dying to say something.

As I head back to the office, I say to the stock boys, "The sausage links probably came from the deli." They hadn't thought of that before, but now run with it; their hooting sounds like chimps.

The rest of the day disappears.

*

Today, a new cop sits in his car, window down, talking on his cell phone. A young girl with long blonde hair and big eyes, and wrapped in an oversized sweater enters the clinic, swallowed by the tinted plate glass. She's only inside for ten minutes. On her way out, she steps around the spot where the fake hanged baby was found and goes into the liquor store.

The girl, her hood is up now, exits empty-handed. With only the slightest hesitation, she walks straight to me. I pretend I don't see her coming.

"If I give you the money, will you buy for me?" The girl pushes a fold of bills at me. "Will you?"

"What do you want?"

"Something to make me forget." She's serious.

"Oh, then you want some Irish whiskey."

She doesn't laugh.

"I'll meet you around the corner," I instruct her.

I hold the bottle by its neck; the brown paper bag crackles. She reaches for it.

"Be cool," I tell her as the cop car rolls silently around the corner. "You don't touch this bag as long as he's around."

So we talk. She says her name is Leelee, though I don't believe it. It turns out that she goes to Millwood, my old high school.

"Do the potheads still smoke in the rear parking lot?"

Leelee says that there are cameras everywhere, so nobody does shit. She notices my ring. "Do you like being married?"

The ring is from my grandfather, a silver keepsake that I have worn on my right ringfinger since I was twenty.

"Sure, I like being married," I lie.

"I thought I would get married." Leelee looks at the paper bag in my hand. "When someone says he'll marry you, you want to believe it." Leelee looks at the cop, still rolling around the parking lot. "I'll probably never get married."

"I have to go back to work," I say. We can no longer wait for the cop to go away. "I'm out at five. I can meet you after."

Leelee agrees, but when I leave work she's not there.

The bottle rides shotgun as I drive home.

*

Catherine is in bed. She tells me that *she* is my dinner. "Have you been reading my mind?" Catherine says when she sees the bottle in my hand.

I remember a video of a slutty vixen who used an empty longneck bottle as a dildo. The slutty vixen had had her monthly bill too and, as she thrust, trickles of blood collected in the bottle. Work won't stay out of my mind. Is this what Todd is like at home?

Catherine doesn't let me drink myself useless, but I am useless anyway. She stops and asks, "What could possibly be bothering you?"

*

The next week Miller says the job has changed him. "I'm not who I was," he explains, "but I've learned to get by."

"What does that mean?"

"You know what I mean." Miller mopes the rest of the day.

This job has changed me too, I conclude. My eyes begin to burn and tear.

*

Catherine enters the bedroom wearing only a silk robe. Her painted toenails look bruised in the dim light. She wants to have sex; I want to go to sleep. She climbs on me and, when I close my eyes, I see my computer screen. This time the screen is filled with videos I thought I deleted: naked girls bound in leather; girls stripteasing in their bedroom; girls performing sex acts with older men, with women, with themselves, with stuffed animals.

When I come out of my thoughts, Catherine is already asleep.

*

I don't remember Dr. Marlena being so beautiful. Her lips are a glossy peach, which match her stockings. She wears the same dangerously high heels that lipstick lesbians wear to bed. I ignore the fat, winking diamond on her left hand. The world is full of married temptresses showing skin and office sluts posing. She crosses her legs; the sound of rubbing nylon reminds me of the sexy legs videos, where women put on and peel off pantyhose. Most of those videos are permissible.

"How long have your eyes bothered you?" Dr. Marlena asks.

"A few weeks," I tell her, though it's been much longer.

Dr. Marlena is probably a nympho. She has probably had sex in every part of the office—this exam room, this chair even. I smell the air for clues.

I detect a slight and sexy accent—Slovakian, Romanian, Croatian, somewhere in Eastern Europe, for sure. She uses some instruments to look into my eyes. Her eyes are a brown like honey mixed with milk chocolate. Her perfume is potent and will catch in my shirt fibers. Our lips are six inches apart, only an ophthalmometer between us.

She bends over to write in my file. Her skirt lifts some. She's a living teaser-trailer. She gives me a tiny bottle of eye drops. "Three times per day to start, then only before bed."

*

After removing a gang-rape fantasy video, I take the note off my monitor and crush it in my first. I've watched way more than 7,280 hours of porn. Seven thousand two hundred eighty and counting.

My eyes begin burning. I hold each eye open and squeeze out medicated drops. The solution makes my eyes burn even more. I know exactly what Todd's going to say, and I don't want to hear it.

"Then get back to work," he says.

"I am, Todd," I say but run outside with my eyes on fire.

The cops are gone from the clinic, so is the yellow police tape. Pairs of girls hurry in to and out of the clinic, trying not to look at anyone. I look for Leelee to appear demanding her money or her bottle, but never see Leelee again.

*

Catherine's breath smells like rosette, her lips taste of it. She says she wants to talk and makes me sit even before I can take off my jacket.

She slides two sheets of paperboard toward me on which are color copies of the front and back covers of her book. Catherine is most concerned about her author photo. "It's not too late to change it."

We agree that the picture doesn't really look like her—fist under chin, gazing somewhere off-camera, implying deep contemplation, intelligence, even philosophy.

Catherine leans in. "I quit my job today." She knows that such a move ends her chances at tenure, at ever working for that university again. She shows me a check from the publisher equal to a teacher's salary times two. She wants to party, to make love like we used to, and then fall asleep cuddling. She tugs my wrist, coquettishly invites me to the bedroom.

She bought a new bra and matching lace panties. The color is called Midnight Purple. Her breasts, cupped and squeezed, look two sizes bigger. She backs me up, pushes me onto the bed. Candles get lit; the stereo plays. Catherine undresses me from bottom to top; her warm cinnamon-roll belly jiggles some. She tells me in a rasping whisper to close my eyes. When I do, I see hundreds of sluts trying to entice their men by parading and positioning themselves.

Catherine moves fluidly onto the bed. She spills onto me. I open my stinging eyes. Catherine purrs, "Don't even peek." She crab-walks on top of me and eases her panties to the side. My eyes sizzle and tears leak out.

All I hear is quick breathing. Catherine has worn herself out. She says, "I can't do this anymore."

That's when I open my eyes and see, flaccid in candlelight, who I am and what I've become. And now my eyes won't stop tearing no matter how much I wipe them.

Brian DiNuzzo is a writer and teacher, originally from New Jersey.

BIRDWATCHING FOR BEGINNERS

Mark DeCarteret

Though nothing has notched off
at the feeder for weeks now—
except for those freaks from next door
with their fake grass and rakes,
their golf carts and odd humming,
their muddied and doomed owl-dummies
and my weeds all gummed up with dew—
I can still hear a cardinal acting up
in the leftover dark of the forest
exclaiming its life a small miracle
and this line-up of oft-ailing doves
ardently denying their lowliness.
To sit is to lobby one's own thoughts
as if deaf to the world and its air raids,
its laser-fed tumors and its fire sales,
the endless details of our own end
never laid to rest or fully believed in but
to not sit's to opt out and stop it too soon,
put it up too happy-go-luckily in Tupperware.
Once, after a half-fit I'd stirred up enough
spit to work out a few trifling words,
be answerable for at least my own breaths—
but of late, I've been looked-after, tailed,
the same crow the same dash between
shadows, the same coming to ash yet again.
I'm afraid of their lot. But a bit more my own.
The look-a-like who would kill for my bowl,
the teeth-torn dime roll at the tollbooth.
Or worse, the one I keep spotting in the tree,
their nonstop love of overdone symbolism
nailed again and again to some limb.

Mark DeCarteret's work has appeared in the anthologies American Poetry: The Next Generation *(Carnegie Mellon Press),* Thus Spake the Corpse: An Exquisite Corpse Reader *(Black Sparrow Press) and* Under the Legislature of Stars—62 New Hampshire Poets *(Oyster River Press) which he also co-edited.* Flap, *his fifth book, was published in 2010 by Finishing Line Press.*

FRIDA DREAMS OF THE MUSEUM

Robin Silbergleid

Sometimes she imagines her house in Coyoacan
turned into a museum, her life collected
processed, displayed. In her bedroom closet:
an exhibit of corsets, numbered, catalogued,
only the first one white, the rest painted
bright as a queen's gown. They could hang
on dressmakers' mannequins or someone
could make a Frida doll in wax to wear it
or maybe pin them to the wall, immobile
as she was for all those months. And in jars,
in rows, on the kitchen counter where she once
kept rice, lentils, spices, in glass canisters
someone has organized all the pieces of her
that have fallen away, hair from her comb
her fetuses, her amputated foot, her blood.

A SMALL, GRACELESS SOUND

Chloe Warden

There are so many empty rooms
here – that's what always gets me,
the sight of beds made and blinds
clinched shut, sunlight glinting
on the tile in ribbon shapes. We're waiting
for your father to come out of surgery,
and it's hurting me how
your feet don't even reach
the floor.
What does an appendix look like, you
ask, and I'm a jerk, I want to see you squirm
so I say a cherry, plump and so fresh,
your fingers left wet with color
when you touch it. You say something else
but stop, I say. You're too loud, I say,
because I'm listening to the machines
murmuring small, graceless sounds
every few seconds
and a woman saying *those are only words,
do you want me to eat them, do you want
me to use them like damn tape and staples to shut
myself up* and the sounds of doors closing,
the warmth of bodies left behind them
like rain,
not yet dry. This always happens –
This place makes me want to pull bodies
out of a river and dress them in dry
clothes. It makes
me want to find finger bones
that still have memories of flesh
and blood, to want to pluck
them up from beneath trees or behind
a gas-station, the one place that everyone
missed so you won't have to see their parents
on *Unsolved Mysteries* years later, their
faces small, their voices sounding as if coming

from a great distance. I want
to whisper terrible things to the babies
wrapped up in blankets and not knowing their names,
even to the ones cocooned in clear, closed
serving dishes, their toes gleaming, their heartbeats
just like how butterflies sound when they try to escape
from your hands. I want to know
how it feels to love something
to death.

Hospitals always do this to me, I say to you
even though you won't get it, still snuggled
up in the winter coat my brother bought for you,
his only son, the one he wants to see smiling down
at him when he comes to. You're not listening.
And then you ask me
if an appendix is like a heart, if you can find
its pulse in your wrist
with two fingers, if when it's gone, you feel
it, you feel the space inside you that still
remembers.

I say,
no, I don't know,
maybe.
And all the while, I can hear
someone vomiting and you
are kicking your feet under
the rows of shiny chairs
and I am wondering
if you've learned
the difference between the memory
of pain and pain
itself. I'm wondering
if you know
that one day, you will die.

Chloe Warden graduated in May from Stephen F. Austin University with a BFA in Creative Writing, and now works as a copywriter for dental websites. She is currently writing a novel for young adults.

Eventide

William Cordeiro

Mid June, the twilit under-tinted sky
has bathed my head, cloud-washed

with every passing cover. Day drops
between two shafts of dark. I breathe

outlasting blue so lost in its own clarity
it bubbles up above a brim as if champagne.

Its transparency reaches to the errant
gash, horizon where the heaven's given

berth and every name mazes to evaporate.
A brazen gleam walks another eyelash over

the shadow-craze of nettlegrass and heather.
So I shall let myself love this,

my only life,
now

or never. Alone and again
alone, my hat's blown off—an inverse nest

of questions. The eyes swim up;
their spiracles unhinge a bloodmouth salvo

into the skull's cathedral. All
the moon-flames calling out the spall of moths

—a ferment in the firmament—
gold splinters winterburnt in lofts of wibble

as a star
sheds one white tear.

My soul has eaten light . . .
No miracle can redeem me.

Will Cordeiro is a Ph.D. candidate at Cornell completing his dissertation on 18th century British literature. His creative work appears in Crab Orchard Review, Fourteen Hills, Copper Nickel, Harpur Palate, Memoir Journal, *and elsewhere. He currently lives in Tucson, Arizona.*

PHOTOGRAPH

Jonathan McClure

un sueño, un imposible,
vano fantasma de niebla y luz.
–Bécquer

I came close once, in a room
our spilled wine hazed:
pressed the blot on your dress
as you leaned in to whisper
beneath the party's buzz.
Your boy out back, and my girl –
I caught the glass before it broke.

Silhouette of oak on amber sky,
leaves rattling loose in breeze
that tosses curls across your shoulder.
Pencil in pocket, sketchbook on hip,
evening drifting earthward
inevitable as snow.

There's a bruise of sunset
in how you look past the camera,
last wisps of daylight
clinging to your coat,
and I remember
the softness of hands,
the taste of lips
I didn't kiss,
and I remember
I wasn't really there,

I see you in sepia only:
pale burning ghost I love
not having, mist
and light that isn't
you, not you, no.

Jonathan McClure began his writing career at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he graduated with Highest Honors in Creative Writing. He is currently pursuing his Master of Fine Arts at the University of California at Irvine.

AN OBSERVATION AT THE CONJUNCTION OF BLACK HOLES AND CRICKETS

George Korolog

Let's be frank. One day, you may be the person called upon to clarify, to define, to make the tough interpretations, the big calls, to answer the difficult questions that necessitate a tasty bluff and a predilection for confidently using nearly believable words, waiting to be picked and strung sensibly together, even though we all suspect that there will be the inevitable argument with the issues of order and clarity. *Bleu. Blue. Blew.* Some cheeses, domestic and foreign, an irregular verb followed by the very predictable vision of having been swallowed with enthusiasm. Perhaps the second half of a French profanity, everyday melancholy treated with Zoloft and yes, having completely dropped the ball. Name it, but someone is going to have to call it, nail it down.

Now, this observation is being hung directly in front of your face, like a dare, suspended like plump, ripe mulberries gripping the secret stems of the sky, even though the heavens have long forgotten this pitiless clinging and have methodically moved on to choose more exotic objects, new textures of interest, new things moving and brimming, right now, from the mysterious boundary of the very first light all the way back to the top of the troposphere. But we're off point. There is something hard at work here, trying to bring it all to a halt, to fasten it all down, attempting to crucify the whole shebang with new and used bent nails, hammering still into objects that continue pulling away, resisting every effort to force them into a single, unquestionable clarity. But with so many things to pin down, with all this ongoing struggle between progress and interpretation, coupled, say, with the complex nature of motion, such as birds flocking south, balls dropping and anxious clouds refusing to maintain a sustainable pattern, there are few available explanations, except perhaps, creative innovation on a lofty scale, a new framework of thought, such as, let's say, the belief that there are microscopic ball bearings coating the underside of the dark sky, a side-swiping cosmological action, drifting the light back and forth, up and down, on black photographic plates. That's a good explanation.

But let's get grounded. How about the crickets, who can barely make it into this bluest of slipping sky, but through millions of years of methodical trial and error, have found a way to bound into the atmosphere, just feet above the grass, another moving part, creating the illusion of short hops? Keep it in

perspective. They've finally entered the sky, and crickets jumping a foot above the green meadows, loping, grinning, miniature dots, lively on the low horizon, are no less novel than black holes dotting the backdrop of the universe, sucking in galaxies, or simply, trying to pin down even the simplest of meaning: *Blue, Bleu, Blew.* These are ruthless times for perception.

George Korolog is a poet from Woodside, CA, and author of a first book of poetry, Collapsing Outside the Box, *from Aldrich Press. His second book of poems,* Raw String, *is being published by Finishing Line Press in 2013.*

WHEN WE ALL GROW UP

Kevin Tosca

Once upon a time two children, a boy and a girl on the edge of adolescence, sat on a bluff holding hands. The girl, who was named Wilma Evelyn Rose, looked at the sky, then the river, then into her lover's face. Following the rules of their ritual, she spoke first.

"I'll be a prostitute," she said. "When I grow up, that's what I want to be."

The boy, christened Xavier Adam Lee, squeezed her hand, and then he caressed her back the way a father does, transferring confidence and reassurance and encouragement in the caress. They were peers again. They were hungry, equally driven contemporaries plotting their excellence.

"I'll start tomorrow," she said, "and I'll be rich in no time. No way will I piss my money down the drain like those floozies on Nickleback Avenue do."

Mellifluous, the beautiful word, couldn't do justice to her beautiful voice, and she, like many a child before her, longed for independence. That longing added its own gorgeous, tragic note.

"I'll be an addict," the boy said, taking his turn. "When I grow up, that's what I want to be."

The girl flushed with pleasure. "What kind?" she asked softly, too eager not to prompt him. The boy, as he looked out over their slice of infinity, didn't hesitate.

"Coke," he said. "In terms of respectability and romance, it can't be beat. And I'll get a pill habit going too, and alcohol," he added, "is a must."

"Of course it is," the girl said.

"I will never be sober," he said.

"I know you won't," she said.

The two were the children of the most powerful men and women in town. They owned these slopes, this river, this sky, living lives of unimaginable luxury and ease, their every wish and whim not only granted, but intuited. Neither child need ever lift a finger, but both felt the desire to distinguish themselves, to excel in arenas of their own choosing. Both wanted—both needed—to *be* something.

"With your earnings," the boy said, "I'll stay stocked. I'm going to be the best there ever was." He was exhilarated, the way he became when they discussed their futures, but he graciously added, as he never failed to do: "You can get bombed too, if you like."

Wilma shook her head. "I've got to stay lucid," she said. "Addict-whores are bush league want-to-be's. I'm going to be a legend."

"Right," said Xavier, thoroughly satisfied with his beloved's answer. "When?" he asked.

"Now," she said.

Their eyes were open and their road, they knew, lay downward, and so, as if both had heard the same loud and irrevocable shot, they dashed hand in hand down the bluff, running laughing screaming soaring and basking in the difficult and bottomless bliss of anticipation. When they reached the river, they plunged, twined, and were swept away, destined, in their sweeping, to become the legendary unifiers of fate and ambition that they did, indeed, become, dead before their twenty-first birthdays, celebrated, grieved for, and forgotten.

Kevin Tosca's stories have recently been published in Midwestern Gothic, The Linnet's Wings, The Legendary, Thrice Fiction, Atticus Review, *and elsewhere. He lives in France. Visit him and his work at www.kevintosca.com.*

All Night Architecture

Kate Rosenberg

My second death: when the last person who knows me dies. Can I remind
you &
place a peach in too warm a place?

A whisker of bourbon, your indentation. The marionette flowered and crackling; suddenly unclothed, no it has been left behind—a rushed cantina, a purple thread, a nameless wants to be a rocket-ship. You are real enough—shot algorithmically into everywhere.

A static storm; hairs up. A pitcher of green glass and a tin can rolls the street down. By the wheels of the city-cars: hallelujah my savior is here!

What is like a second pillow & hears in the dark? I am never there or there—sitting on the earth's spine being pricked by light.

A squirrel nut, a button, a blender, a faucet. A butter mug, a wrinkle, a swollen vein, a pug. A castle, a yes, a bi-plane, a thumbtack. A cantankerous cat.

A magician is careful and bird's necks well with fruit; you put your hands through the architecture. Thunder is gentle and ribboned. A safe place hums around your skin.

As long as we're here, gentle hymns hover all night. A well of blood rummaging in our hearts. Paste crayon drawings on a kitchen wall.

I have hands & feet & a nose that has freckles. I've got an album & a camera & 3 pairs of glasses. I have my own sink & emergency potato chips. I've a possum & a fire extinguisher & twigs from a dream. I have a blanket I use to cover myself from embarrassment.

We try not to drive past the all night drugstore. Yellow lights leave no halo on parked cars. A bliss of paper cranes flutter from the sky. No, it's snow. At this time of night, nobody knows.

FRIDA KAHLO DREAMS OF DIEGO RIVERA

Robin Silbergleid

I dreamed of you, Diegito
when I was lying there on the pavement
speared through the sex. I dreamed
I was a painting by Diego Rivera,
the greatest Mexican artist of the twentieth century.
I dreamed you stood over me
holding a paintbrush glinting with gold
and said, She will be my masterpiece.
I dreamed I stepped out of the canvas
and into your life. We ate *mole* and *huevos*
for breakfast. We shared a bed.
We had three children together
and then you left me lying there
with my broken back and my one good leg
and said, *There are other things to paint.*

I COULD TELL YOU AGAIN

Caylin Capra-Thomas

I could nail rabbits' feet to my wall
for luck. Paint them in an alternating
color pattern of birth & rot. I could
strive to make everything around me
beautiful while my looks go & body
fails. Art is the human being's most
desperate act. Let me tell you again
how the ghosts wander the Earth
in search of a body to possess, how
some free creatures yearn for cages.
My childhood pet was called Bunny-
Bunny. He ran away & came back.
He lost his ears in the fire. Let me
tell you again how luck's reserved
for prom night & rented like tuxedos.
Top hats. Let me conjure something
for you. Let me stay a little longer
in this body while I saw yours in half.

Caylin Capra-Thomas is the author of a chapbook, The Marilyn Letters, *forthcoming from Dancing Girl Press. Her poems can also be found in* Sixth Finch, Phoebe, *and* The Yes Factory. *She teaches ESL in Boston, MA.*

VIRGIN

Nadra Mabrouk

a.
Imagine us before.
We opened the window and the air met us
as a wild animal set loose would.

It stretched out its cramped legs in front of us
and your sister's arms clung around my neck
as though she wished for me all of her days.
Her cheeks' curves: red and wet.

b.
Under an Australian Pine,
we remember not belonging:
the sick of roots and origins.

c.
Bellybuttons do not swell in response.
Yours does not swell between my large legs.
But we are careful where we touch.
It's the difference between biting and swallowing.

d.
Rubbing, I harass fragility.
Red is reliable.
Don't you itch -- curving around a close-legged religion?

e.
I've never embraced God,
but I imagine how a deer's underbelly would feel.
And isn't this where we stab?

f.
A pillow.
Our knees meet over it as though hunger could save us.
I have dolls near the window.
My childhood's legs split open: free.

g.
If I were a jar.
I'd choose to encase limbless emptiness
not you

h.
You say we are meant to eat animals.
Don't you miss how things tasted when we were younger like your sister?
There is a milkiness to everything now,
orbs of groggy chicken embryos
make our hands move away from the plates in reluctance
and under.

i.
Inside stretches.

Nadra Mabrouk lives in Miami, Florida where she is a junior in Florida International University working with the University newspaper, The Beacon, *as a managing editor and volunteering to read poetry submissions with the graduate staff of* Gulf Stream Magazine.

Real Life

William Snyder

I watched the Red, how it froze, top ice
turning brittle and clear, then white
like wax, then how, with winter this year
so capricious, it warmed to slush,
then froze, then warmed again,
and with light dustings of snow.
Another freeze, and on a morning in November,
I noticed a roundish chunk of something—a log,
probably—snagged near the bank
by the footbridge, snagged by ice.
It was curious then, a morning soon after—
animal tracks led to that log, from it.
Maybe the animal had smelled something—
the log had decayed, had collected
something rotten on its drift. A week passed.
And after wind had blown new snow away,
I saw it, what the log really was: hard, frozen fur.
A deer. During a thaw, that deer must have
cracked through, and in its panic, thrashed
beyond the hole, but toward thicker ice,
its head butting up unable to break it.
And it drowned, its lump
of side or back above the river's plane,
ice setting hard around it. Each morning then,
more tracks, snow tamped down.
Then a missing patch of fur. And day by day,
deeper and wider, a hole bored into that deer—
flesh torn away, a whitish-pink cavity, two
narrow bones arched across like a trellis rail.
By mid-December, the hole sank bucket-sized—
gristle and meat on steep-gorged sides, crimson,
icy shreds—the bones gone. This April or May
spring will break. Deer will feed along the river—
like the herd I saw last June that swam
between the parks, then clambered up
the far side bank whisking shivers from their
necks, their flanks, their timorous legs.

An Open Letter to Frida Kahlo

Robin Silbergleid

When my legs were dumb from the operation
when my feet were heavy, stirruped balls of cotton
and I couldn't tell where they stopped and the blankets began,
I thought of you.
They kept putting more blankets on me—
they were white and everyone else wore green, my doctor
in her scrubs standing between my legs. I'd been there
before, in your painting dear Frida,
and there were wires attached to my chest and there were tubes
run between my legs, and Dr. E sucked it out, him out,
my boy, I mean, and I thought if this scene were a painting
by Frida Kahlo it would be beautiful, and I laughed.
The sound filled the room like a newborn's cry.
Frida, what I wanted to say is that I understand
why you come back to this room, a hospital in Detroit,
why the paintings pin you there to the bed like a bug on a nail,
because you're still there.
You left pieces of yourself behind—
a blot on a sheet, some tissue in a jar—and you want them back.

Air

Kent Leatham

Born early and unfinished, I forgot
or, rather, had not yet grown to know
to breathe by myself; I had to be taught
by an alarm's wail, bright lights, and then the glow
of a nurse's face each time my face turned gray.
Strange, to think of breathing as an art
or skill, acquired like speech, football, or ballet,
a muscle-memory learned by lungs and heart
that lasts a lifetime, or brings it to an end:
Alzheimer's runs in my family, so why not
imagine, once all other skills are spent,
that breathing too will slowly slip away
as first it slowly came: a bright light,
then faces, wailing, birth—and then the gray.

Kent Leatham's poems, translations, and reviews have appeared in such journals as Fence, Zoland, Poetry Quarterly, Poets & Artists, In Translation, *and* The Battered Suitcase. *Kent serves as a poetry editor for* Black Lawrence Press, *and currently lives in San Francisco.*

Mad Libs for Politicians

Martin Ott

He desires digits of all kinds,
hand____ at every stop, _____
beyond count, _____ his dagger
looks, patrons who count on him
to be __ _____ as a desperate
house_____. He believes in _____
Claus, the _____ bunny and nuclear
_____ in his Playgirl _____.
The camera ____ him more than
his tired wife from the _____ family,
bred to hold her tongue and cock____
even as the news breaks of damaging
_____ and _____ scandal. He knows
that you will forget the _____ and ___
of the world because of _____ lips.

CONTEST WINNER

Selected by *Jamie D'Agostino*

"Judson's 'The Dead Dream Us (II)' is delicately strange, with a ghostly sensuality and a bleeding in of several voices. Why wouldn't the dead have a dream life? They're haunted. They, too, take their waking slow; it's because they won't let go. And, thankfully, neither does this quietly urgent poem."

THE DEAD DREAM US (II)

Don Judson

to lie in the arms of

across a wide boulevard of sweet oranges and mint

the first fragment of day and yet still the dead continue
to dream us: unfold their fingers through ours brush them

across tables left unset windows half-shut
they drive the very last of our cream colored cars deep into the ocean

like puppets like broken light there they gently part our legs

tell me they say just one more time again how much you love me, always

Don Judson is a poet and fiction writer whose work has won a Bobst Emerging Writer Award from NYU Press, a MacColl Johnson Fellowship, a 49th Parallel Award and the 2012 Boudreaux Prize in Poetry from Cream City Review. Publications include The Bellingham Review, 580 Split, Alligator Juniper, Witness, *and* New Letters.

Wrack Lines

William Cordeiro

A fish-head littered on the beach
with eyeholes eaten out, it gawps
like some grotesquerie, a mask
from carnival.

Unrolling each
new crash outrides a crush on top,
rash folding back. —Nobody asks
the salt, a sand-grain what time's for
who knows enough to stay alive.

The sun-struck seizures never cease.
An ocean swallows all fair mirrors,
blows out fire, juggles knives . . .
Clouds scrape at margins of the seas;
their far blue marriage's a mirage.

And under this roulette of tides
range polyps; cuttlefish that gush
brain-hives of ink; strange cabbages;
—fins linked and shifted up to glide
one instant on the air's swift rush.

Goldfish

Esteban Rodriguez

The stench got stronger, but I got used to wiping the shit from my mother's ass every morning, from watching her body bend like a shriveled sunflower in the heat of July, deflated, defenseless, her face digging every ounce of embarrassment into my chest, spine stretched to acrobatic proportions, vertebra popping like fresh bubble wrap against my hands. Even my fingers became acquainted with the wrinkles on her back, with the jaundiced skin as rough as crumpled cellophane, tiny rivers of veins flowing along her lumbar, murky green like the shrapnel of shit glued to the rim of the seat. I got used to lifting her up from the ribs like a child, feeling the apple juice piss running down the inner sides of her legs, a steady stream streaming along the seams of my faded blue jeans, down to my socks, down to my heels, down to her fuzzy slippers parting the warm puddle almost biblically. And it was just as hard becoming familiar with the sticky sweat on last night's underwear, with the thin white fabric hanging loosely around her waist, the amount of weight she lost since diagnosis, the amount of memory stranded inside her head, paranoia convincing her tongue every meal I cooked was poisoned, because I wasn't her son anymore but a man who resembled her son, a man who would wipe the shit from her ass like her son would wipe the shit from her ass if only her son were still alive, and all those years I got used to being dead, to hiding the frames around the house, persuading myself that the face of my younger self would only confuse her even more, would only lead to waterworks on the toilet that morning, and every morning her arms were wrapped around my neck while the cotton paper was wrapped around my hand, my fingers reaching through the crevice of her cheeks, knowing this gesture would be forgotten by noon, her mind like the mind of a store-bought goldfish, a goldfish just waiting to be flushed.

Esteban Rodrigues is an elementary reading and writing tutor in the Rio Grande Valley and is currently a second year MFA candidate (poetry concentration) at the University of Texas Pan-American. He lives in Weslaco, Texas.

KENTUCKY FREUD CHICKEN

Shawnte Orion

Do you subconsciously desire
a taste of your Mother's
thigh or breast meat?

Would you like your soda Id
Ego or Super Ego sized?

Original Recipe Transference:
I bear resemblance to your dead Father
so you are only ordering a vanilla milkshake
because you think I want you
to order a vanilla milkshake.

Would you like a side order of cocaine?

Potatoes are mashed and repressed
with Rorschach splatters of gravy.

I assume you meant coleslaw
when you asked if the meal
comes with cold sore. Porn-on-the-cob
was a similar slip of the tongue.

Eleven herbs and childhood traumas:
You only demand to speak to my manager
because of your hatred for your Father.

Greasy buckets of buffalo hot wings
represent your flightless dreams.
Your inability to escape.

I do want you to order a vanilla milkshake
so I can watch your puckered mouth
struggle to suckle sips
through the end of a straw. A tiny
inadequate straw.

Shawnte Orion's poetry has appeared in New York Quarterly, Crab Creek Review, POesias, Juked, Georgetown Review *and other publications. He is often invited as a featured reader at bookstores, bars, universities, hair salons, museums, and laundromats.* BatteredHive.blogspot.com

In the Park with False Ruins

Ray Holmes

settled pool deep and spitting;
the park with the shrine

of composers' heads
horseshoeing a gazebo

of tinsel and balloons,
it was a relief to find

myself away from the party,
amongst trees

with bark gray and fast grayer
in its peely season.

I chose them over handclaps,
over sugar-stuck candles.

The cold slinking
back to its cavern

mottled in shadow,
like the patches so brown

spilled across
the slope of a giraffe.

Ray Holmes is a graduate of the University of MO-St. Louis' MFA program. His work has appeared in Architrave Press, Chariton Review, Fjords, *and other journals.*

Purr

Kevin Carollo

Sonic equivalent of fur. The body traps
its dud bomb and disperses the tender
udder thunder. A chair and a tree are
the same thing. A table has leaves, and
people also leave. Every thing leaves me
questioning: what wall art, which font?
No, tiny lion, I'm even unknowing about
in. In is of itself, uneven. I'm only sure
of purr. I only think in numbers between
one and one. Hurry is just one more thing
other animals do. O my, we is a genuine
broken record. We, perpetually deterred
by the indeterminate half-life of purr.
Take me, for example, not for one second
worried about the many steps in between
our little giggle of minutes, not even
stopping to look at the dog-earing animal
magnets or trying to get my bearings. I'm
only leafing through the lifelong photo
album to get to there's you, there's me.

Kevin Carollo lives in Fargo, North Dakota, and teaches across the Red River at Minnesota State University Moorhead. He has poems in Conduit, Court Green, Cream City Review, The New Guard, *and elsewhere.*

META-FICTIONAL PASTA

Jacqueline Doyle

Walgreeen's is almost empty, the fluorescent light dim and harsh. A fat man carrying a box walks up to a skinny kid in a blue Walgreen's smock. He's wheezing as he sets the box on the counter. "I need some heavy-duty twine, some silly putty, and a meat thermometer."

"Twine's in aisle 6. Kitchen utensils are in aisle 3. I don't know if they make silly putty any more, but play-doh and clay are in aisle 14 with kids' toys." The skinny clerk pauses, then asks, "So what's in the box?"

The fat man's eyes narrow at the question, and he wipes the sweat off his face with the sleeve of his t-shirt before he answers. "What's it to you?"

"Just asking. That's a pretty big box."

"Damn right it is. You can probably guess why I asked for those particular items."

"Not really."

"Well it's none of your beeswax."

*

The how-to book she's reading on the short story calls it "inventory," the list of objects established in the first third of the story, which the writer should make relevant in the second two thirds of the story. The author closes the book and thinks about that. Instead of a plot-based narrative, or a character-driven narrative, could there be an inventory-driven narrative? The inventory could be anything. Pinking shears, a colander, a box tied with twine. The possibilities are endless. She decides to give it a try.

In her object-driven story, two characters, Ted and Emily, are dividing up their possessions after a breakup. They both want the colander. There are pinking shears in the junk drawer that he's never noticed before. There's a box tied with twine in the storage space in the hall closet that doesn't belong to either of them. Earlier, a menacing fat man lugged a large box that may or may not be the one in the closet. There's not much plot. We never learn what's in the box. Do readers have to know what's in the box, the author wonders? And if they don't, does she have to know what's in the box?

She's uneasily aware that what's in the box may be the submerged part of Hemingway's iceberg. "If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about," Hemingway declared in *Death in the Afternoon*, "he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will

have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water." Hemingway added, and this part is quoted less often: "A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing."

*

"Ted! Finally. Where the hell have you been?

"I've been busy. Some of us work for a living."

"I work for a living too," Emily says. "So when are you coming over?"

"I'll be there Friday at eight." Ted sounds like he's in a hurry. There are voices in the background.

"What if I'm going to be out then?"

"Are you going to be out?" Ted asks.

"Well it's possible. You could have asked."

"I just asked. It doesn't matter anyway. I can start packing without you."

"Not a chance. I'll be here. Bring some more boxes. I'm almost out."

*

The author compares a story to a box.

Some readers like an open box, the contents visible and clearly organized. Some readers prefer an open box at the beginning of the story, neatly tied up in a closed package at the end. Others enjoy a closed box at the beginning of the story, its secrets unpacked at the end.

A story that is an empty box will be hollow, content-less. But can a story be a closed box that stays closed, its contents unknown to the reader and only guessed at by the author? Probably not, the author concludes, but she's intrigued nevertheless.

Melville was depressed when he wrote "Bartleby" and conceived of stories as so many dead letters with no forwarding or return addresses. Boxes neatly tied up with twine with no recipients to unpack them. Sitting around in some Dead Letter Office for so long that their senders have died or forgotten them. Consigned to the flames unopened. A melancholy thought for any author, who may take solace from the fact that we're still reading "Bartleby." Or not.

*

Boxes line the walls, his and hers. Books and CDs are stacked haphazardly all over the living room. In the kitchen, the empty cupboards yawn, their contents spilled over the counters and chipped linoleum floor.

"Listen," Ted starts, "there's no point in breaking up a set of dishes and taking half each. How about you take the dishes, and I take the pots and pans."

"Right, I take the cheap dishes from Ross, and you take the enamel Dutch oven and the cast iron fry pans and that expensive sauce pan we bought at Macy's. No thanks." She waves her hand dismissively.

"Okay, you take the dishes and we'll divide up the pots and pans." He takes a box off the floor and sets it on the counter, ready to start packing. "It's not worth arguing about."

"You take the dishes. I never liked them."

"Okay, damn it, I'll take the dishes. I'll take the fry pans, you take the Dutch oven."

"I want the Minnie and Mickey Mouse salt and pepper." She puts the Dutch oven into a carton with her name neatly printed on the side.

"My sister gave them to me. They're just like our Aunt Hilda's."

"Yeah but you didn't like them until I said they were cute."

"So what. They're mine."

"So, shit. Keep the salt and pepper shakers. I want the spaghetti pot and colander."

"What am I supposed to do when I want to cook spaghetti?" He wraps the salt and paper shakers in newspaper and jams them into his box, then scrawls a large T on the flap with a magic marker.

"You can make it at Ms. Big Tits' house. That is, if she has any pots and pans. No wait, you can just skip dinner and jump straight into bed."

"I told you, that was nothing. It's over." He pulls dishes and bowls out of the cabinet and stacks them on the counter next to him.

"Did she make you spaghetti?"

"No, she didn't make me spaghetti."

"But you went to her apartment for dinner, didn't you?"

"I'm not going over this again."

"I just want to know what she cooked."

"This is so beside the point."

They both reach for the colander at once.

"The least you can do is give me the colander," she says, her eyes welling up.

"So take the fucking colander!" Ted throws the colander on the floor, where it bounces and clatters. "Just take it. I'll be back tomorrow morning."

*

The author muses on the fictional colander and what we talk about when we talk about things.

It's a fine colander, almost a Platonic Idea of a colander, enameled red on the outside and white on the inside, with a black rim. Ted and Emily bought it in a small, upscale kitchen store one weekend in Half Moon Bay when they were crazy in love and had just moved in together. It cost $14.95, but neither of them remembers that.

Of course when Ted and Emily talk about things, they're not really talking about things. Things are like that. Sometimes we barely notice them, sometimes they're laden with emotions. They have their own stories. A lot of these possessions will outlive Ted and Emily, as our possessions will outlast us.

*

Overheard on the BART from Oakland to San Francisco:

"They stole my pickup."

"No shit. Where from?"

"The parking lot at Home Depot, can you believe it?"

"Did you have anything in it? Tools and shit?"

"No tools, but yeah, some dishes I was returning to my sister-in-law after that birthday party we had. Some CDs. And a bunch of stuff I just bought for my wife's garden."

"Plants?"

"Rose bushes, one of those fountain things, and a three-foot statue of the Virgin Mary. The cops said they're gonna keep their eyes open."

*

Objects can be stolen, as well as purchased, lent, given away, kept, lost, exchanged, and discarded. They can be hidden or displayed. They can be overvalued, undervalued. Or priceless.

Objects can even be worshipped. In some churches people leave things—crutches, photographs, letters, food—at the feet of statues of the Virgin Mary, appealing for a miracle or thanking the Blessed Virgin for fulfilling a prayer. St. Anthony, patron saint of lost objects, is also a popular object of devotion. You can buy a 12" St. Anthony statue for under $20 at one of those Catholic gift stores. They've got them for gardens, too, but those cost more.

*

The author ponders objects circulating in her own past. A figurine of the Virgin of Guadalupe that's mysteriously disappeared from her bookshelf at work. Books she's lent out that were never returned. The deluge of

unwanted objects her elderly mother insists on pressing on her, thinking they are all worth more than they are.

Farther back, well, she divided up objects with her first husband when they parted ways, and even though it was thirty years ago, she's still a little pissed off that his girlfriend walked off with half of their wedding gifts. Her husband was German, mustached and wild-haired. He rode a BMW motorcycle, and looked like a pirate. He went off to Taiwan with the new girlfriend (a droopy blonde who worked at the library with him), and broke up with her a few months after they arrived there. When the author refused to take him back, he stayed in Taiwan and studied Tai Chi and became a Tai Chi instructor, and eventually married a Filipina that the author's never met, and they moved to Germany, where he opened a Tai Chi studio, and he and the Filipina had two sons and then divorced and he's still teaching Tai Chi.

But the author digresses. Wedding presents that she was particularly pissed about losing to the droopy blonde librarian: a Turkish carpet that his mother gave them, an inlaid tray from she-can't-remember-who that was very pretty, a crystal ashtray from her aunt in Ireland. At the time, books were the main item of contention between them, and she's a bit ashamed at her behavior, since she pilfered three from her husband's boxes that she knew were his, but that she wanted. A two-volume set of Hegel's lectures on aesthetics in German (why did she want that? It seemed a grand thing to own at the time). A large, illustrated book that she'd given him as a birthday present on building your own house—New Agey yurts and that sort of thing. They didn't pack together like Ted and Emily in her story. She'd fill and stack up boxes on her own, he'd fill and stack up boxes on his own.

The Hegel kept moving back and forth. One day she'd move it to her boxes. The next day it would reappear in his boxes. She's the one who ended up with it: two beautiful hard covers with creamy white book jackets, "Hegel Ästhetik Band 1" and " Hegel Ästhetik Band 2" stamped in black block letters on the covers, "Mit einer Einführung von Georg Lukács" stamped in maroon underneath. She can still read German, but she's pretty sure her German was never good enough to read Hegel. Maybe she'll build a yurt someday.

Objects circulated among cardboard boxes again when she shared an apartment in Manhattan with her friends Alison and David. They lived in a rundown building called "The Bertha" in a Puerto Rican neighborhood near Columbia. St. John the Divine Cathedral was just down the block, and its bells pealed gloriously on Sunday mornings. The neighborhood hadn't been gentrified yet. Their tiny apartment was what was called a "railroad flat"—a long, narrow corridor with three small rooms off of it, leading to a dingy, high-ceilinged kitchen that looked out onto an airshaft. Spindly avocado plants lined the windowsill. When the three of them ate dinner, crammed around a yellow formica table that couldn't have been more than two feet by three feet, cockroaches streamed up the walls beside them. Finally they

agreed to pretend the bugs weren't there, since whacking cockroaches interrupted enjoyment of their food, and didn't seem to be making a dent in the population anyway. They didn't have a living room. Communal possessions were in the kitchen, some of them dishes from the former tenant, who was a friend of the author's, so she claimed them when they all moved out, perhaps unjustifiably. While they were packing, high stacks of cartons from the corner liquor store lined the long hall, with white powdered boric acid sprinkled around them, since the author had heard it kept cockroaches away, and they were hoping to leave them behind.

It was their spices that circulated from box to box. They divided them up, but the author would move a few to her box, and then Alison would move them back to her box, along with a few of the author's, and then the author would move a few, and then Alison would move a few. David, who was Jewish (Alison had been raised Mormon, the author Catholic), laughed. "I thought Jews were supposed to be the cheap ones." They stayed friends despite this bizarre episode.

The author returned to grad school to finish her Ph.D., and has taught for years. She's become a writer though she never planned on it, and is continually surprised and grateful. It is the spice in her life, which may not sound essential, but is. Think of Cordelia's pinch of salt.

*

Ted arrives at 10:00 a.m. with more boxes and spends twenty minutes constructing them and reinforcing them with tape. Emily leans against the kitchen counter tapping her foot impatiently.

"Let's get the kitchen done at least," she says. "All that's left are the drawers."

"What about the books and CDs?" he asks.

"I typed up an inventory. You can look at it later."

Ted snorts. "Jeez, only you would do that." He surveys the overflowing boxes in the kitchen. "I don't know how we accumulated all this shit. We were only here for three years."

"Two years and eight months, but who's counting."

Ted rummages through the junk drawer and pulls out a heavy pair of scissors with triangular serrations. "What the hell are these?"

"Pinking shears. They're for sewing."

"Since when do you sew, and what are they doing in the kitchen junk drawer?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen them in ages. I used to use them to make jean cutoffs. The material doesn't ravel."

"Back in your hippie days, before you got so uptight?"

"One of us has to pay the bills on time and get things organized, Ted."

"Right, I forgot, you're the organized one. That's how pinking shears ended up in the kitchen."

"Don't forget that big box in the crawl space over the hall closet."

"What box?"

"The one wrapped with twine."

"I've never been in the crawl space over the hall closet. And I don't know anything about a big box."

"I don't either."

"Maybe the last tenant left it. What's in it?"

"I have no fucking idea."

*

Everyone's always talking about things.

The author's plot, such as it is, moves forward through cell phone conversations and voice mails when Ted and Emily aren't face to face. There are faux quotations from newspapers and magazines about collecting and decluttering and also what the author calls "urban static," because she likes to think of the city as buzzing with overheard conversations about objects as well. She likes these sections, but the story is starting to, well, buzz.

*

Four other writers gather around a low glass coffee table to help the author take inventory. They study the colander, the box, and the pinking shears in front of them.

"It's not enough," Olga says. "I mean, where's the tension?"

"You're kidding, right?" Luke runs his hand through his hair, and leans forward to make his point. "I mean it's pretty obvious that we've got a serial killer here. The fat man's scary as shit, but it's Ted we need to be looking at. You don't have to spell it all out, I kind of like the mystery at the end, but make Emily a little more nervous when she's around Ted. She senses something. And those body parts in the box. Wow."

"This is meta-fiction, Luke," chimes in Andy, "not a serial killer story." He happens to be wearing a Wesleyan sweatshirt, but otherwise he's nothing like the author's character Ted. "It's about the rules for writing a story."

"I hope that's not what it's about," Luke says. "I hate that shit. Stories about writing stories. What do you think, Alia?"

"Well if that's what it's about, then say so. Say, fuck Ron Carlson. Quote what he has to say about inventory in his book. Or if it's a story about objects and their stories, leave out that other stuff."

"I crossed out all the meta-fictional parts," Hunter says, "and all the meditations about objects. I think it's better without them. I like it better as a jumble without explanations. Keep the urban static."

"I don't know about that, but I think the story's like the Twilight Zone," Andy says, "That Rod Serling narrator keeps coming in with omniscient commentary. Da dee da da, da dee da da."

"Maybe it could be an essay instead," Olga suggests.

The author stops scribbling notes and snaps a picture with her cell phone. Four writers. Pinking shears. Colander. Box. A fireplace in the background with a mounted Jackalope head above it. A mantel crowded with objects, including Mickey and Minnie Mouse salt and pepper shakers the author never noticed before. A bookcase with a jumble of books. A second-story window onto the dark San Francisco night. A restive pigeon on the windowsill outside.

*

That night the author goes home and trims away the meta-fictional commentary from her story. She leaves the colander, the pinking shears, and the box.

A skillful writer cuts away excess fabric as a seamstress carefully cuts out the pieces of a dress pattern and fits them together. She uses pinking shears so that nothing ravels. Or unravels. The author recognizes that many of the backstories and side stories and peripheral objects (the salt and pepper shakers and the statue of the Virgin Mary, for example) may have to be trimmed away as well. Unless they're all part of a pattern, that is.

She contemplates the pattern for a while, wondering if this garment will ever be wearable. She remembers the difficulties she had making a wraparound skirt in high school Home Economics class. How her pins kept breaking the needles on the sewing machine, and how the skirt looked crooked when she finally finished.

She looks at the heap of scraps in front of her, their edges neatly serrated, and wonders if she could piece them together into an essay, a form she's always preferred to fiction anyway.

*

Could an essay be a colander instead of a box, meanings flowing out in all directions like water through a sieve? Not an empty colander, of course. A colander containing a jumble of spaghetti. Or penne. Rotini. Fettucine. Linguine. Angel hair pasta. Yes, angel hair pasta.

*

"The kitchen's done. I've got the bedroom and the bathroom packed," Emily tells Ted on the phone. "That was all pretty obvious. I've started on the books."

"I need to see the books, and you know it."

"I gave you an inventory, remember? By the way, I want that book I gave you for your birthday. You're never going to build a yurt."

"Screw the inventory. And you're not going to build a yurt either."

"So come back tomorrow if you want to look at the books. Or is Blondie keeping you too busy?"

"I told you, I'm not seeing her."

"Where are you right now?" Emily's casual tone sounds forced.

"I'm at Herb and Janice's. I'm sleeping on their couch."

"Right."

"Ask them."

"Herb will just cover up for you."

"Janice won't."

"Maybe I'll ask her then."

*

It's darker out tonight. The glass table is littered with wine bottles. The writers are eating havarti with dark brown crackers. The author's drinking Perrier.

"The essay's cool, but I don't know if it stands alone. Why not do a mashup with the story?" Alia suggests. "Bring in scenes from the story you're talking about. I'm not sure that you need the scene with the writers' group, but there could be more physicality in the characters." She pushes her thick red hair behind one shoulder. "And Luke would *never* ask me what I think."

"You're right." The author shakes her head and laughs. "I knew that when I was writing it. It's fictional."

Luke breaks in. "The scene's fine with me, but the Twilight Zone was *my* idea. I even have it in my notes."

"I would never wear collegiate apparel," Andy points out. He's wearing a fashionable charcoal-colored shirt with flaps on the pockets, and a charcoal-colored scarf like an ascot, tied in a complicated twist. "Give the Wesleyan sweatshirt to Luke if you want to. I pride myself on my sense of style."

"Just don't give me one of them scarves like Andy's wearing tonight," Luke says.

Carla's back. "What I think is funny," Carla says, "is that every time the author says the story is about objects it's not. It turns out to be about character, or about setting, or the author's emotions. Or the objects become metaphorical."

*

The author thinks about mashups while she drives across the Bay Bridge later. And smashups, and pileups. The collisions of ideas and things. The lights of Oakland are twinkling on the other side of the bridge. Traffic is light.

In the hands of a writer, objects quickly become what T.S. Eliot called "objective correlatives" for emotional states. "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art," he said, "is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."

Leave an object on a table long enough and a writer will turn it into a metaphor. Inevitably.

*

The author feels ready to pack up the box and tie up some loose ends.

Ted and Emily didn't get back together. Ted moved in with the new girlfriend, the blonde, but that didn't last either. He's living alone in Fruitvale now, and most of us his stuff is still in boxes. Emily is living with a lawyer in Piedmont who's even more organized and uptight than she is. All of her stuff is unpacked and neatly arranged in closets and drawers and bookcases and cupboards. She recently got rid of the colander, because it reminded her of Ted. Right now it's sitting in a jumble of kitchenware at the American Cancer Society Discovery Store in North Oakland. At $3.50 it's a little pricey, but still, it's going to be a real find for someone.

As for the author's experiment: she's decided that the object-driven narrative veers uncontrollably toward character or metaphor. While it might be possible to follow the artifactual history of an object such as a colander through successive owners, or mine the emotional subtext of an individual's attachment to an object such as a colander, the life of the narrative would still derive from human emotions and conflicts and not from the object itself.

*

She's drawn some conclusions about her love of the essay as well—arbitrary, metaphorical, and subjective, but nevertheless deeply felt.

The essay is a box packed with ideas that rattles when you shake it. It's the pair of pinking shears in the junk drawer that might come in handy some day. It's the all-desirable colander you can't live without. It's an elephant with wings, a mermaid sunning on a rock, a boulder tumbling down a hillside,

a melting iceberg in Greenland, your secret lover. A good essay can't be boxed and bound up with twine. String. But it can string together ideas. String the reader along. Tantalize a cat.

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THE BROKEN COLUMN

Robin Silbergleid

Days like these she thinks of herself
like a broken column, the last remains
of a great civilization now collapsed.
A woman who's been hit by a bus,
a building in the aftermath of earthquake.
Instead of holding her together, the nails
have come loose, poking and prodding
just beneath the surface of her skin.
She is corseted, muzzled, painting
instead of person. Her tears milky
on the tip of her brush. She's held
together with red ribbons, with wire,
with cracked plaster and paint.

TO THE WOMAN WHO DIED AFTER BEING ELECTROCUTED WHILE CROSSING A LAS VEGAS STREET

Chloe Warden

Your obituary is only a few lines long
but still, I stop there, touching
the towers of text as gently as I can muster,
fingertips sticking in the sliver of space between
stepped on a cast-iron plate
and *hidden by a puddle.*
Thousands of tourists had worn down its insulation with
their open-toed shoes and shimmering heels,
it tells me – *only a matter of time* – and I wonder
if I was one of them, only twelve years old
and caught up in the crowds and dry desert heat, my mother
calling my name as I pulled ahead, not even noticing my
footprint stitching itself into the concrete and metal.
If so, I'm sorry. I didn't know.
Four children left behind, the last line reads.
The youngest almost thirteen months.
I wonder if a bright-colored billboard caught your attention
from across the street, or if a harsh wind sent you running
for the nearest cover, every drip of moisture gone from your mouth,
dust and sand sticking in your hair like little stars. Did the spark
spiral up your leg, or seep in through your open mouth?
You must have seen lights streaking past like comets, violent
and bright, or did darkness tuck around your edges like a blanket?
Maybe the moment before, you were happy – maybe restless,
thinking about how many times you'd thought to call the babysitter
but didn't.

It's strange, but for a moment, I am thinking about you, the threads
that held you together snapped clean in two, your baby, whose life
you touched as a sweep of rain instead of a sea

and me,
who will eventually have to put this paper down,
walk into another room, and continue living
as though it is the simplest thing in the world.

LOVE POEM #7

Kirk Schlueter

When we play Mario-Kart
I throw one race in four,
which is really difficult,
not that you would know.

Sorry. That was a low blow
like a knee to the groin,
kinda like the feeling I get
driving past cemeteries and
remembering my future
anchored underground.

Sometimes, when you're laughing
triumphantly after I've let you win
Koopa Troopa Beach by missing
the shortcut three times, I wonder
if I'm going to regret these scars
on my alltime win-loss record
as they lower my chain, but
who's counting? Not me certainly,

because numbers lie even more
than words, words come from the mouth,
but numbers from the brain.
The Eskimos have 50 words
for snow, but none of them
describe winter light falling
through hair first thing in the
morning on its way to being
anchored underground.

If that's not a lie, then it's no truth
either. I may be lying when
I act disappointed after losing,
but I'm not lying when I smile
because you're smiling, and you

triumphantly cry, "Ha! See?" So I suppose

the only question left is,
if we each have approximately
9.3 sexual partners in our life,
and only love 3.6 of them,
am I lying if I tell you I love you?

If you can't trust my fingers,
and I can't trust your teeth,
how many words are there for that,
or the way light binds us in a net
around sunset, so caught up in it
our arms become chains holding fast
to one another, like an anchor
bobbing in the waves as it slowly sinks
to the black glass of the ocean floor.

Only two of the following three things
are true:

you have the eyes of a drowned mermaid.

I only say I don't love you so I can tell you
that I don't mean it in my next breath.

I don't love you.

While the sun anchors underground,
I'll let you find the words to explain for once.

Xerxes

Andrew Bourelle

When my father opens the door, he looks at me like he doesn't know who is standing in front of him. A salesman. Someone who's lost. A criminal. Then his face changes from confusion to something else. Not happiness. Not excitement. Another sort of confusion.

"Well, son," he says, staring in disbelief. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He doesn't say it to be mean. He's genuinely bewildered. I haven't been home in several years. I haven't been back, unannounced, ever. Two thousand miles is a long way; I always call ahead when I'm going to be in the area.

I shrug. "Taking a road trip," I say. "Thought I'd visit for awhile."

"Okay," he says, still confused.

"If that's all right."

"Of course," he says, seeming to break from a trance. He steps back, gesturing for me to come in. "Of course."

The TV is on loud; I can hear it from across the house as soon as I step in. The walls are painted different colors: bright greens and blues, not the simple white from my childhood. I see new tile on the kitchen floor, new carpet in the hallway leading to the living room.

"Look who it is, hon," Dad calls out to Mom.

I round the corner. My mother sits in a chair I've never seen before, a glass of white wine held loosely in one hand.

"Oh. My. God." Her smile suggests she's happy and confused at the same time.

"Hi, Mom."

She sets her wine down, stands, hugs me.

My parents look old. I wonder how I look to them.

*

We sit on the deck after the sun goes down, the three of us. We eat hamburgers and tater tots for dinner. I have a few tots left on my plate. I toss one into the air and catch it in my mouth. I toss another and it bounces off my cheek onto the deck. I usually average about fifty percent when I do this. I toss another and it hits me in the forehead. Another: bullseye.

My parents stare at me. We've run out of things to say already.

"What are you reading now, Dad?" I ask, trying to kill the silence. He's always reading something and always wanting to talk about it.

"A book about the Greek and Persian wars," he says.

"You mean like ancient Greece?"

"Yeah," he says. "Did you know Alexander the Great was five-foot-eight, but that was really tall back then?"

"Huh," I say.

I always say this when I'm perplexed about what to say. I say "Huh," not like a question, more like an exhalation. Sometimes I'll say "Huh, interesting." In fact, what I usually mean is, "I don't care."

"Yep," my father says. "And did you know that the first great sea battle in history was fought between the Greeks and Persians?"

I shake my head no.

"Yep, the battle of Salamis. The Persians had these great big ships and the Greeks had these tiny little boats. And the Greeks would ram their ships into the Persians, sinking both boats. The Persians wore heavy armor and they sunk in the water; the Greeks swam back to shore and got in new boats."

"Huh," I say. "Interesting."

Silence again.

"So there's these three guys in a bar," Mom says finally, "just minding their own business. An older man walks up to them, points to one of the men and says, 'I fucked your mother!'"

Dad and I watch her silently. My dad likes to talk about what he's reading; my mom likes to tell dirty jokes.

"The three guys shoo him away and go back to talking," Mom says. "Then the guy walks up again and says, 'I fucked your mother good.' They shoo him away again. And then finally he walks up to them a third time. He says, 'I fucked your mother in the ass!'"

I wait.

"Finally, the guy the drunk man's been saying this to says, 'Go home, Dad, you're drunk!'"

My dad bursts out laughing.

"Funny," I say.

That's my standard response to her jokes. I say "Huh, interesting" to my dad; I say "Funny" to my mom.

She smiles, proud of herself.

"A female cop pulls over a drunk driver and tells him, 'Anything you say can and will be held against you.'" Her face is expressionless. "The drunk guy shouts, 'Tits!'"

My dad laughs again and slaps his knee.

"Funny."

Silence returns. The night air is still warm, although tolerable. The moon is fat but not quite full, giving the clouds a strange blue-gray color. We

hear thunder in the distance and see flashes of lightning in the dark clouds toward the horizon. The bursts of light seem strangely reddish.

"Does that lightning look red to you?" Mom asks.

"Yeah," Dad says. "Looks strange."

It looks as if there's a battle going on miles away, and we're glimpsing explosions of red through the storm clouds. But there's no battle over there, just a series of corn and soybean fields and another Illinois town not much different from this one.

"Have you ever seen lightning like that?" I say.

"Nope," Dad says.

We're all quiet for several seconds, watching the pink bursts of light. No bolts streak to the ground, just flashes in the clouds. We watch for a long time.

"Wow," I say. "I can't fucking believe that lightning."

"We should have named you Xerxes," my dad says.

I turn and look at him.

"How do you spell 'Xerxes'?" Mom says.

I look at her. I know my disbelief is palpable. Yet they don't seem to see it.

"You spell it with an X," my dad says. "X-E-R-X-E-S."

"Huh," Mom says without irony. "No Z?"

"Do you two not see this fucking lightning?" I say. "It's *red*."

"It's pretty strange, son," my dad says.

"X marks the spot," my mom says, and I have no idea what she's talking about.

*

The back deck is new, and so is the hot tub sitting on it. After the light show has stopped and my parents are in bed, I strip down to my boxers and walk outside. I leave my clothes in the house but carry the bottle of pills that were in my pocket. I expect to be chilled, but the air is warm. Not hot, but comfortable. The hot tub would be nicer if it was cold out, but I want to get in anyway. I put the pills on the deck railing, and I pull the tub lid back and stare at the control panel for a few seconds. One button turns on a blue light in the water. Another starts the jets. Before climbing in, I walk back in the house, aware that if my mom and dad wake up they'll find me in a pair of Batman boxer shorts. I open the fridge, look around for beer. Mom has wine, but there's no beer. I walk out the front door to my car. I open the cooler in my trunk—although the ice has long since melted—and I pull several cans of Coors Light out and carry them in my arms. I walk around the house instead of going back through. The grass is cold and pokes my bare feet. The neighborhood is silent and still. I see no indication that anyone is in any of

the houses, as if the whole community went on vacation. It's midnight, but I am still wide awake on west coast time.

I set the beers on the deck railing next to my pills. The water is warm around my feet, bubbling. I sink into the water, adjust myself to avoid getting blasted directly by the jets. The water is a frothy blue color, like I'm in a churning tub of Gatorade. Why is the light bulb blue? I wonder. Why not green or red? Because water is bluish, I suppose. Clean water anyway, Water that reflects the color of the sky. And because if the bulb was red it would look like I'm sitting in a bath of bubbling blood.

I crack a beer and it foams, spilling white froth down into the tub. I drink. After fifteen minutes, the jets kick off automatically. It is more relaxing anyway, just sitting in the warm water. My forehead is beaded with sweat. My mouth is dry like I've been jogging in the desert, not sitting in water. I open another beer. I tilt my head back, rest the back of my skull on the edge of the tub. I look at the stars. The clouds have dispersed mostly, except for a few white ones, sailing past the galaxies like big slow barges.

As a child, I used to come outside to stare up at the stars. I snuck out after my parents were in bed and lay in the grass in my pajamas. I remember thinking it was a very adult thing to do. I was just a boy, and my world was no bigger than the house I lived in, the yard I played in, the school I went to. But I looked at the stars and felt humbled. I remember I had a thought, about life and about the world and about growing up. It was a good thought, a thought about the wonders of life and the beauty of the world. An optimistic thought, and it made me happy. Then it was gone, like a dream that disappears after you wake up. I knew it had been good. But I couldn't recall what it was. And life suddenly seemed so scary. I was a boy and I understood the world for the first time the way I would understand it forever after: Life was crying for help but no one could help you. But for a brief moment, I'd had a fleeting glimpse. I might have been happy if I'd been able to hang onto whatever thought I'd had. I'd always hoped that I'd grab a hold of that thought again somehow. That the synapses of my brain would send the thought consciously to me, the secret to living life like everyone else does.

But here I am, twenty years later, still grasping blindly for the thought, looking into the same sky from the same backyard, wishing I could travel back in time and change. Just change and be happy. I look at the bottle of pills my therapist gave me. My therapist never understood why I wouldn't take them.

It's just a freak biological accident, she said. It's just bad luck that your brain doesn't produce the right amount of the chemicals you need to . . .

Be normal? I finished after she trailed off.

That's not what I was going to say.

But what about all the side effects? I would always ask.

Possible side effects, she would clarify. And that's a risk you're going to have to take. It's a gamble. The drugs could make things worse; it's true. Or they could make things better.

It's not fair.

No, it's not, but that's the situation. Why don't you want to take them? she said. Is it possible you want to hurt? That you're not happy being happy?

I don't know, I said at the time. Maybe.

"Maybe," I say aloud, rising up out of the water. "Maybe you should go fuck yourself."

I step out of the tub. My vision goes blurry for a moment; my legs start to buckle. I catch myself on the edge of the tub. I sit, my feet still in the blue water. My airway seems constricted. My body seems to have no power. I throw one leg over the tub onto the deck, then the other. I step out, lean against the railing and tilt my head back, breathing in and out, in and out.

Every star is a sun, I think, with planets like this one orbiting them. People only ever think about the stars above, but underneath me, underneath the hot tub, underneath the earth that I'm sitting on, is space just as limitless as the one above my head. The universe is so vast that I know I am insignificant. Yet sometimes the pain I feel seems like it shouldn't fit inside me.

*

My parents are both at work, and I am alone in the house. I walk around, looking at little details. The bedroom doors look new but aren't. They've just been painted; I can tell by the door handles. Old skeleton-key locks, just like when I was growing up. The kitchen table — the same, only covered by a new tablecloth. The old stove and oven — gone, replaced by a new white one, fancy and digital. How long has the gray carpet in the living room been gone? Was it green the last time I was here?

In the family room, I find a large bookshelf, covered with pictures. I study them. Are these my cousins? Teenagers who vaguely resemble children I once saw running about at family reunions. I look at my own pictures. I see one of me as a child, not more than one or two, grinning and happy. Another of me in fifth grade, hair slicked and glued in place by hairspray, a smile on my face that is happy and genuine, an expression not unlike the one on my baby picture. I wonder how long it's been since I smiled like that. Jesus, the effort they must have put in to raising me. For this?

*

"Hi, Xerxes," my dad says when he gets home.

"My name's Jim. You must be mistaking me for your other son."

"Nope," Dad says, putting his keys and wallet on the kitchen counter and opening the refrigerator to get a Diet Pepsi. "No other sons."

"Boy, what a disappointment that must be," I say, opening the cupboard and looking for a snack. I'm not hungry; I want to play the game where I throw food into the air and try to catch it in my mouth.

"Nah," he says, cracking the can. "You didn't turn out so bad."

"One son, and he isn't even human."

"Alexander's mother believed he was the son of Zeus," Dad says. "A bolt of lightning hit her womb in a dream. He wasn't human either, I guess."

I find a jar of peanuts. I drop one into my hand, a tiny brown oval. It looks like an egg with a line running around it lengthwise.

"Well, I sure as fuck ain't no son of God. I was thinking more along the lines of some mutant alien."

I throw a nut into the air; it bounces off my nose.

"Yeah," Dad says. "Besides, you're Xerxes anyway, not Alexander."

"Who the fuck was Xerxes anyway?"

My dad perks up. I throw another, miss this one too.

"A Persian king," he says. "He tried to conquer Greece but failed. And he's overshadowed in history by the Dariuses—there was more than one Persian leader named Darius—and by all the Greeks too, I guess. But cool name, huh?"

I've got him started now. He leans against the counter and goes on about the Greek and Persian wars. The battles through history and the people: Thermopylae, Marathon, Philip of Macedonia, Alexander the Great.

"When he went off to conquer Persia," Dad says, "Alexander's mother gave him a pouch of dirt and said it was soil from his homeland, because she knew he would never come back. He knelt and kissed the ground, then kissed her, and then he left—never to return."

"Huh," I say, tossing a nut into the air and catching it on my tongue. "Interesting," I add, splitting the egg in two with my teeth.

Mom walks through the door, going straight for the cabinet and grabbing a wine glass. She starts pouring, then says, "What's the best part about fucking twenty-five-year-olds?"

"What?" Dad says.

"There's twenty of them."

*

After dusk, the three of us climb into the hot tub. My dad is thin like me, only flabby with age. Mom's boobs sag in her swimsuit. Her thighs are peppered with the cottage cheese marks of cellulite. As soon as we sink into the bubbles, we hear thunder rumbling in the distance like the sky has indigestion. Red artillery flashes appear in the purple clouds.

"More red lightning," Mom says.

"There wasn't anything about it on the news," Dad says.

A loud crack makes us jump as a jagged red line sears the horizon like a wound.

The storm is closer than last night's, but it's still in the distance. More bolts come down, slicing the sky. Thunder cracks and shakes the ground like weak earthquakes. Chills spread over my body, despite being in the hot water. I feel like we're watching the world ending — with front-row seats in a hot tub — and yet the end of the world hasn't quite reached us yet. The storm is still in the distance. There isn't even a drop of rain here.

"How far away do you think that is?" I ask.

"Couple miles," Dad says.

We watch for a long time, saying nothing. After a while, the thunder starts to soften, the flashes of lightning abate. The clouds slowly disappear, opening the sky to the stars. I want to tell my parents that I think something is really wrong with me. We sit in silence as I try to think of a way to say it.

"Well," Dad says. "I'm going to go to bed."

"Me too," Mom says.

They both stand, swimsuits clinging to them. I see Mom's nipples. I see Dad's penis, small but visible with the suit sucked around it like a vacuum-sealed sack. Mom must see it too because she says, "What do tight pants and cheap motels have in common?"

"What?" Dad says, grabbing a towel.

"No ball room."

"Funny," I say.

"Good night, Xerxes," Dad says.

"Good night," I say.

"Don't let the lightning get you," Mom says.

"That's not funny," I say.

*

In the morning, I drive into town to buy beer. The roads are old and filled with cracks, the blacktop faded to a light gray. Not like I remember them. The grocery store seems small. As a little kid, it was huge, big enough to get lost in, but the place pales in comparison to Super Wal-Marts and WinCo foods I've been to since. It's just a small community grocery.

I buy an eighteen-pack of Coors Light and crack one as soon as I get in the car. I drive around the town. I drive past the schools I went to—elementary, middle, and high all stacked next to each other. At the playground at the elementary, the pavement is gray and cracked like the roads in town, but the equipment is new. No big Lincoln-log-esque contraption with monkey bars, cargo net, and tire to spin around on; it's replaced with a big thing made of plastic, with slides and tunnels. The wood chip planter

around its base is now a black rubber mat. Gone are the straight metal slides, replaced by spiral plastic ones.

I park the car by the football stadium, finish my beer, open a new one, and walk out onto the oval track that rings the field. I walk along the orange surface. It looks new, but I can't be sure. I never came to a football game or track meet. I was only here for graduation, sitting in a metal folding chair on the field, families filling the bleachers. It was a cloudy day, gray but still humid. When everyone threw their caps into the air, cheering, I hurled mine with a sort of anger, a feeling of bitterness that surprised me. My hat flew almost horizontally, and fast, while the others soared vertically, drifting upward almost like balloons. Then I walked away. Some classmates stopped to shake my hand, but I didn't make an effort to hug or smile or laugh with any of my friends. So-called friends. I wanted to leave. I wanted my life to begin. Mom hugged me and told me she was proud of me. Dad shook my hand like I was a man.

Other kids had lived already. This stadium had been filled at times. My classmates playing football or sitting in the stands, sneaking in beer. People lived like life was worth living. But for me, those years had been spent sitting in my room, staring at the ceiling. My parents would sit in the living room, watching TV, reading. I would pass through the house, on my way in or out.

Hey, son, Dad would say. What's going on?

Nothing.

What are you up to?

Nothing.

Everything okay?

Yes.

The first two answers were the truth; the last one was a lie.

Did they know?

I think about this. The sky is blue and clear. The beer is working and I feel numb. I'm in the period where alcohol works. I'll drink more and the feeling will go away, but for now I am glowing. Did they know their kid wasn't normal? Of course they did. Of course. But what could they do? He wasn't a car; they couldn't lift his lid, tighten a few bolts, and make him run smoother. They did the best they could. And they hoped for me. Surely they did. How could they have known that my life would be like walking around this track? A circle. A cycle. And at a certain curve in the track, it would be hard to walk, and it would hurt, and I would think I couldn't make it through. But then I would, and I would come back around and the hard part would be before me again. Harder this time. Each time harder, I fear, until one day it will be so hard that I won't be able to keep walking.

I drop the empty beer can on the track. I wish I had gone to a football game. I wish, on graduation day, that I had cheered along with my

classmates. I wish I had grabbed the girl next to me and hugged her like we would always be friends.

*

I'm drunk when my parents arrive home. I'm sitting in the hot tub. The sun is still high in the sky. They look at me with amused expressions, surveying the empty cans floating in the bubbles next to me.

"Why'd you come home, Son?" my dad says

"I'm on a quest," I say.

"What are you looking for?"

"Myself."

"X marks the spot," Mom says, pointing at me. "There. That was easy."

"I wish it were," I say.

"You sure you're not running from something?" Dad says.

"Yeah, maybe," I say. "Myself."

"X marks—"

"It wasn't funny the first time," I say.

The day is still hot and muggy, so the water is like clear lava. I've never been this hot.

"Don't you have a job?" Dad says.

"Fired."

"Weren't you going back to school?"

"Failed out."

"What about that girl you were seeing?"

"Killed her." I take a drink, spilling Coors Light down my chin. "Then I cooked her and ate her."

My parents pause for a second. My head rolls down, my chin almost touching my chest, my face inches from the frothing water. Sweat runs down my face.

"How did she taste?" Mom says. "Like chicken?"

*

I wake up in the yard, cool grass poking against my skin. I must have passed out and my parents dragged me out of the water. It's dark now; a cold breeze is blowing. My skin—I'm wearing only my wet boxer shorts—breaks out in chill bumps. My head feels like the time I hit it on a rock white-water rafting. A shining oil slick coats the lawn next to me. I don't remember vomiting, but the evidence is undeniable. I hear my parents' voices. They're on the deck, sitting in chairs, talking. The breeze, I realize, is very strong. Then I hear the crack of thunder. I look away from the house. Red flashes

illuminate the clouds. A bolt of lightning comes down, splitting the sky with a bloody scissure.

I rise and stagger toward the deck.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," my dad says.

I hear rain coming down behind me, getting closer.

"Let's go in," Mom says.

I lean against the deck. A few drops land around us. Lightning flashes behind me, and red illuminates my parents' faces like the glow of brake lights.

I must look pathetic to them, standing here in my boxers, groggy, pale, feeling sorry for myself.

"How can you two love me?" I say.

"It's easier than you think," Dad says. "Come on inside."

They stand.

"Look at me," I say.

"You're not so bad," Mom says.

"I failed out of college," I say. "Twice."

"Neither of us went to college."

"I can't hold a job."

"Job's are overrated."

"Can't keep a girlfriend. I'll never be married."

"So," Mom says. "Marriage is overrated." She grins and winks at Dad when she says this.

"You can say that again," Dad says. He winks back at her.

I pause and look at them. Rain starts to fall hard now. It's cold, running down my face. My parents are starting to get wet.

"I'm a drug addict," I say.

"You might drink too much," Dad says, "but you're no drug addict."

"What kind of drugs?" Mom says.

"I catch cats and dogs, and torture them," I say.

"No you don't," Dad says.

"They probably deserved it," Mom says. "Furry fuckers."

"I had sex with a five-year-old," I say.

"No you didn't," Dad says.

"How was she?" Mom says. "Or he?"

"I've killed people for fun," I say.

"No you didn't."

"How many?"

"I fuck their corpses, and I eat their brains."

"No you don't."

"Oh," Mom says excitedly. "Do brains taste like chicken?"

"I tried to conquer Greece and failed."

"Huh," Dad says. "Interesting."

"Funny," Mom says.

"I've fallen into the sea," I say, "but I haven't drowned."

"None of those things are true," Dad says.

"Oh, but what if they were?" I say. "That would be something, wouldn't it?"

"It's all something," Dad says. "Even you are. Even this life is, even if you don't think it is."

I wait for a long time, letting the rain hit me. I hold my hands against the railing and put my head down, standing like a man being flogged with a cat-of-nine-tails.

Thunder cracks so loudly that we all jump. A bolt of lightning comes down next to the house. It's so close the red looks four feet thick. Then the bolt is gone; its afterimage burned on my vision like it was always there and never there.

"What did one goose say to the other goose?" Mom says. "Let's get the flock out of here." She turns toward the house. "Good luck, son. When you're done searching for yourself, you can find myself and your dad's self staying dry in the house."

"You're going to have to finish your quest on your own," Dad says. "But remember: life's not so bad, son. People have been doing it for thousands of years."

"How can you love me?" I say again. I'm crying.

Their expressions are different now. They are scared, confused. It hangs on their faces like age, like grief. I can read their expressions like an ancient text that I've just realized how to translate.

"I hear what you're saying, son," Dad says. "But I . . ." He trails off.

I stare at them. Something moves inside of me, inside my chest. It's only blood, I know, changing speeds, but it feels like sinking. My mother and father are soaked now. Standing here in the rain, lightning flashing around them, for me. What did I expect them to do? They know about me. They've always known. But they can't do anything but love me in their own ways.

"It's okay," I say. "Go on inside."

They wait. A gust blows us, causing them to take a step back. Another bolt of lightning flashes. The rain is coming down harder, a downpour.

"We'll leave a towel at the back door," Mom says.

I nod, and they turn and walk inside. I turn around and face the storm. I walk out into the yard, my head tilted back. Lightning flashes, and I can see the drops falling in the red glow. The wind pushes against me. My flesh is covered in bumps, but I don't feel cold. I'm on fire. I raise my arms to the sky.

"X marks the spot," I say. "X marks the fucking spot!"

A bolt hits the field behind the house. Another strikes just inside the property line. The clouds are purple and black and dark gray. They look like folds of a giant brain suspended above the earth. The red lightning sparking

between the clouds are synapses, misfiring and aberrant like the synapses in my brain. A chemical imbalance, the therapist said. Not my fault, she said. Just something I was born with. The medication would help. Probably, she said. Almost certainly, she said. But this is the body I was born with, the mind, the thoughts; am I wrong to want it the way it is? Am I wrong to be afraid of drugs that will change me? Is it selfish of me to want to find a way to be happy without the simple miracle fix of popping a pill into my mouth?

That's what I've always hoped for, but the pain is too much. I want lightning to crash all around me. I want the ground to shake. I want the earth to split and lava to erupt. I want explosions that will destroy the landscape. I want winds that will lift me up and carry me away, so I can see the rest of the world as it dies. Carry me through the sky so I can see rivers burning, cities melting, crevasses opening up like hungry red mouths to devour people by the hundreds. I want to watch the end of the world.

But the storm, in all its magnificence, in all its blood-red lightning and bruise-purple clouds, isn't the end of the world. Zeus, God of gods, does not stand above the clouds, hurling down lightning bolts. Living has no purpose and no point and no explanation, and yet I still stand here breathing. I'm breathing. I'm living. Whether I want to or not. The pain is big. Big as the universe. Big as history. But not big enough to kill me, not big enough to rend the world into pieces. Life is little.

My arms get tired and I lower them. The breeze dies down, and the lightning begins to abate. I sink to my knees. I lie back on the wet grass, my face pointed toward the sky, my arms and legs aimed in different directions, my body an X.

I look at the sky, the clearing clouds, the lightning now just pretty pulses in the folds of the sky's gray matter. I can see glimpses of stars. The sky opens up as the storm dissipates. It's a lovely portrait of wisps of white clouds, floating like white foam on a black, spotted sea. The moon isn't quite full, an oblong yellow egg sitting up in the sky. I imagine it's me in that egg. That I'm waiting to be reborn. But there is no rebirth. I just lie in the grass, looking at the sky. I vow to stay here all night, thinking about my life, and envision myself in the morning, at dawn, having gained some new perspective. But it only takes minutes before I become chilled. I'm uncomfortable. I realize I will not find that thing that I lost as a child. I can't just sit out here in the wet grass, staring up at the stars and the moon forever.

I stand and I walk slowly to the house, and as I do this, I think about what the therapist said. I was born with low levels of serotonin in my brain, so the lightning doesn't flash in there quite like it does in most people. That's it. Chance — a defect at birth. Luck, she said. Bad luck. So, as I open the back door and walk in the house, wet with soaked underwear clinging to me, I know what I'm going to do. It may not be the answer I'm looking for, but it's something at least.

My parents sit in their chairs. They look up. I take the towel they left for me and dry at least the worst of the water off, and then wrap it around my waist. I look at my parents but say nothing, and walk down the hall to the spare room, what used to be my bedroom. I dig through my things and find the bottle of pills. I walk back out into the living room.

"Did you find yourself?" Dad says.

"Not quite," I say. "I was close, though. So close I could taste it."

"What did yourself taste like?" Mom asks.

"Chicken," I say.

I open the bottle, tap one pill out into my palm. I look at it. It is yellow and oblong, a tiny moon in my hand, an egg that might hold my rebirth, a new universe packed into a pebble, ready for a Big Bang-sized explosion. Just add stomach acid. I toss the pill into the air, near the ceiling, and cock my head back. If it lands in my mouth, I'll swallow it. And keep swallowing them. If I don't catch it, I won't take the pills. I'll continue on my own.

The pill is falling; my mouth is open. O marks the spot. O marks the fucking spot.

Andrew Bourelle's fiction has appeared in Hobart, Jabberwock Review, Red Rock Review, *and other publications. He has won Rosebud Magazine's Mary Shelley Award for Imaginative Fiction. He lives in New Mexico with his wife Tiffany.*

YOU WHO ARE GETTING OBLITERATED IN THE DANCING SWARM OF FIREFLIES

Jia Oak-Baker

had best not feel too much. The night train rushes
through the meadow, and its two-step rumbling reminds you

you are alone. When the room begins to spin, it forms
a union with the light. One unceasing streak turned circle.

And you, surrounded by mirrors, go vertigo
in the immense empty between one minute

and the next. Fireflies expand into stars. Who are we
to find in infinite spaces but ourselves? Call it an ostinato,

a vamp. The unchanging refrain of beginnings and endings,
starts and stops, resonates in time like steel on steel,

and we know it. Somewhere, deep in the tall grass,
my hands are still fastened to his, holding fast.

You Who are Getting Obliterated in the Dancing Swarm of Fireflies, 2005
by Yayoi Kusama
Mixed media installation with LED lights
Phoenix Art Museum, Permanent Collection

Over her career, Kusama has used a variety of media to create seemingly infinite spaces that explore themes of self-loss. Here, she uses computer-controlled lights in a mirrored room.

Jia Oak Baker lives in Phoenix, Arizona. She is currently pursuing a MFA in Writing and Literature at Bennington College where she is a recipient of a Liam Rector Scholarship. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Inscape, Likewise Folio, drafthorse, *and* Arizona Literary Magazine.

DO YOU SEE?

Sean-Patrick Kinneen

—For Carleigh

You see the mountain moving in the rain?
We made this movie even in the rain. The cars
all climbed the land to see redwoods, lakes
and leaves. We took our cameras with us. See?
We planted them firmly among the stone and trees
and made movies of that man climbing crags, that speck of man.

You see that speck of black, that miniature man,
so small it's hard to tell his staunch hand from rain
slick rocky ledges? He moves beyond the trees
to where no man has moved a stone, to where no car
has turned its wheel. Tell me, can you see
the solid thigh above the lime-green lake?

Others stood around the stony shore and heard lake
water stagger up with loud sounds while this man
climbed until he could not hear, until he could not see.
See? He's nearly there, quelling the wind and rain
and enervating the mountain. Still others sat in cars
and smoked and threw their ends at stodgy trees.

It is not as if he ignored those trees.
No. He'd made amends with them and with the lake
moving slowly though these high green scenic lands like a car.
And though I'd never met him, I felt I knew this man
who moves alone in a tattered shirt in the rain,
who moves in the rain and among the rocks. Do you see?

Do you see? I know he's too small, too small to see
any sweat, but he is sweating like a tree,
and he is climbing, climbing, climbing like the rain
filled shore, like the rising and widening lake.
His muscles bulge and crack. He is not expanding. He's a man
like those men right there drinking beer in cars.

For I've seen him on Saturdays driving a kid-packed car
and looking like a broken television. I've seen
him in stores shuffling deliberately like a man
holding a beer glass. I've seen him away from trees
where the flooded gutters represent the only lakes
and the only connection with the mountain is the windward rain.

Though we stayed among the trees, and our cars
dotted the grassy fields along the lakes,
this man moved on the mountains smoothly in the rain.
Because I Am No Good At Love

> "Better to walk forth in the frozen air
> And wash my wound in the snows; that would be healing"
> —John Crowe Ransom

Because I am no good at love, it would be best
to stand there on the porch in the cold, let the snow
collect on your shoulders, feel your body stiffen and freeze.

I'll come again when winter is over. I'll wipe away
the ice clinging to your hair. I'll scrape it from your cheeks
and from your eyes. I'll warm you. I'll thaw you out.

Since sixteen, Sean-Patrick Kinneen has been trying to write poems about three years and is currently a senior at California State University Fresno. His poem "To My Mother" has been awarded the Larry Levis Prize for Poetry from the Academy of American Poets.

I KNEW

Ross Losapio

after Malcolm Browne's photograph "Burning Monk"

In the moments before, I knew
the quiet sigh of a cushion on asphalt,
which is no comfort,
& the smell of gasoline,
evaporating almost as quickly
as it is poured. I knew the rush
of air into a vacuum & that
I was the vacuum, a sudden absence
in the world to be violently filled.
Then, only fire, a thick leopard-bloom
dying and reviving itself
a hundred times. I knew all
at once persecution's antidote,
that the seventh wave travels farthest
inland, why ants march
toward pregnant women,
the fine distinction
between pain & suffering. In the end
I collapsed in a shadow of wind-
whipped ash & I could not tell
anyone what I had come to know.
The language did not exist.

Ross Losapio attends the MFA program at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he serves on the editorial staff for the literary journal Blackbird. *His poems appear in* Copper Nickel, The Minnesota Review, Milk Money, *and* The Emerson Review, *among others.*

THE BATH PARTY PHOTOGRAPHS

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan

You wanted to party with bath salts and you said you wanted to party with bath salts. You are hearing double? Skin and tile sparkle and dim with so much class in black and white. Feel the snort and drive of Mexican Resort while the lamps pole dance and blow bright kisses. Dark lace bras shake mid-flight like bats and bats slip to the floor like dark lace bras. Tears sneak out of curfew and caress eyeliner aching to get lost.

Let me ink a door on your neck and let your neck open a door. On the other side is a room carpeted with pillows. Jeweled nargiles offer rum honey and white grape shisha. Fight the audible strikes of the pulse with the expanding and deflating of complacent lungs. Shut the door and return to bath salts now that your nose can't sting. You want to blurt two things at once. Now would be time to turn to the lens while your face still has time.

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan has forthcoming work in Southern California Review, Clockhouse Review, Compass Rose, *and* Anubium. *He can be followed on Twitter* @jeffmack.

THE LOCKETS OF JESÚS MALVERDE

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan

For my birthday I received lockets
of cocaine. Powder lines on my tan

skin twisted into a galaxy as it rose
to my face. The sharp sky grated stardust

and the moon was nothing but a blood smear.
Saints formed storm clouds

that howled acid rain
detonating dusty avenues

littered with scurrying junkies.
At night, they stagger

towards the reassuring smells
of corn flour factories

where abandoned lockets
burrow underground.

The lockets' chains undulate
like tadpoles. They seek

the planet's core
because Jesús Malverde resides there.

He reclines on a shag butterfly
chair with vials of blow

to feed each of their hollow spaces
before erupting to the surface.

Last Words

Ellen Birkett Morris

Peter Orlovsky is me.
Not bad as last words go.
Both dropouts, draftees, writers.
Transformed by impending death,
You went from stern formalist
To mellow beat poet.
Noticed the sun on the wall.
Held my hand for hours.
Rode the morphine swells.
At the end, did a rainbow
Come pouring through your window?
Was your bed covered yellow?
Your labored meditation --
Slowed breath, long pause,
Followed by your final exhalation.
There you lay a waxen Christ
With sunken cheeks, and the
Peace of those who've passed.
Unbound you trip
Through the universe.
In the streets they cry
Peter Orlovsky is dead.

Ellen Birkett Morris is the author of Surrender, *a poetry chapbook forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. Her poetry has been published in* Clackamas Literary Review, Juked, The Pedestal Magazine Political Anthology, Alimentum, Gastronomica, *and* Inscape. *Her work won the top poetry prize from* The Binnacle *in 2008 and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.*

Elegy for the Stem

Derek Palacio

I brought her a band of Angels' Trumpets
thinking for a week they would bloom at dusk
and scent the air vanilla. Yet twelve days

passed and still their blushing crowns regarded
the waxing moon. I wanted to watch her
watch them die, to see her bright irises

dissolve into minor sorrow for wilted stalks,
but each night she smiled at their slow rising
and they smelled of ripe lemon. In bed with her

I remembered the gardening shears rusting
futile in the shed. With the flaking blades I cut
a dozen drooping stems. The pink heads

cried *no* like Peter, and I left them on the stoop
for the crows to gather into nests. The morning
was still dark when she awoke, and I feared

anger and tears, but could not predict how wildly
her eyes would burn and with how much joy
as they watched brown bats swoop across

our front door licking the citrus air.

Derek Palacio's work has appeared in The Kenyon Review, Puerto del Sol *and elsewhere. His novella,* How to Shake the Other Man, *is forthcoming from Nouvella Books in spring 2013. He lives and teaches in Lewisburg, PA, where he is working on his first novel.*

BIG BITCH MATERIAL

John Haggerty

Tyler and Brunswick were playing Big Bitch Material, as they always did on the way to the horse track.

"Neil Diamond," Brunswick said.

"Material. Definitely material."

Brunswick snorted.

"He's not?" Tyler asked.

"Tyler, let me tell you something about your Mr. Diamond." Brunswick said. He muscled the Lincoln around a turn. The power steering had been coming and going for him lately, and there were times when driving felt like he was wrestling with an angry fat woman. "I knew a guy, he was a painter. Not the house kind. He did pictures, you know."

"I never got that. Like, why you would spend a lot of time painting something, when you could just take a picture of it," Tyler said.

"Shut up. The point is that he paints pictures of people. And he's famous, you know. Like, painter to the stars or something. Anyway, he gets hired by Neil Diamond. He's supposed to paint some big fucking portrait, Neil's going to hang it on his wall."

"See, that's class, having a painting of yourself."

"You just said you thought paintings were stupid," Brunswick said.

"Well, not if they're of you, I guess. There's exceptions to every rule."

"Jesus." They were getting close to the track, and Brunswick started pushing the car a little bit harder. It was important to get good parking. He didn't plan on walking in from three states over like some chump.

"Try to stay with me. So this guy paints Neil. Takes him weeks, but in the end, he's ready to show it. Neil comes over to his studio, you know, and there's this big, fruity unveiling ceremony. Guy's got the thing covered in a red velvet sheet or some such shit, and he pulls it off, like 'Ta-dah!'."

"Nice."

"Pay attention. Here's the punch line. So Neil just stands there looking at it. Doesn't say a thing. This painter guy, he knows that's not good. 'Is there a problem, Mr. Diamond?' he asks. So Neil says, 'It's the hair. I don't think you've captured the hair.' And he goes on and on about how that's one of the big symbols of his career, how people are always comparing his hair to a lion's mane. And he actually says that, people tell him his hair is like a lion's mane."

"He does have very good hair."

"So the painter's listening to all of this, and suddenly it hits him. Neil, he's thinning a little bit on top, you know, and he painted him that way, trying to be as accurate as possible. And Neil's telling him, without actually telling him, that he wants more hair painted up there. He wants a picture of himself not going bald, even though everybody with eyes can see that he is. So that's my point. He's a fucking loser."

"Yeah," Tyler said uncertainly. "Not Big Bitch Material at all."

"No."

"She would chew his nuts off."

"Chew 'em up and spit 'em out."

"Leave him curled up and crying on the floor like a little girl, nothing but his bald spot peeking out. No-balls Neil." Brunswick paused to fight with the car before continuing. Sometimes it felt like everything was falling apart around him. Like it took all of his strength just to keep things together. "So you know why they call me Brunswick?"

"Yeah, I do." Tyler relaxed into the old story, happy to be back on familiar ground.

"It's from grade school. I was always a roly-poly little kid. Not like I ate a lot or anything. It just hangs on me. Genetics. Anyway one day at school, Bradley Trent, that annoying little shit, he starts saying that I look like a bowling ball. He's dancing around me singing 'Brunswick, Brunswick.' Like the bowling ball maker, you know? So you know what I did?"

"You beat the shit out of him."

Brunswick sighed. "That's not how it goes. The way it goes is, I started calling *myself* Brunswick. Even back then, I was all about the big 'fuck you.' Fuck you, Bradley Trent, with your acid-washed jeans and your JanSport fucking backpack. I don't give a shit what you think. I'll call myself Brunswick before *you* call me Brunswick. Because I'm comfortable with being me. See, that's what makes a winner. Not Neil fucking Diamond, with his bullshit portrait and his lion's mane hair."

"And then you beat the shit out of him."

"Bradley? Yeah. Knocked him up against the jungle gym and broke his little rich-boy jaw. He drank his food out of a blender for three months."

Brunswick's eased the car into his favorite spot, a place just outside the fenced lot where he wouldn't have to pay for parking. "There's nothing more important than having the material," Brunswick said as they got out of the car, "and there's hardly anybody that's got it."

"What about me, Brunswick?" Tyler asked.

"You?" he didn't even bother to look. "No way. But we're working on that."

They started toward the track, nodding to Carl, the lot attendant who always seemed to have some new disaster happening with his skin. Today it was a raw, red patch on his left temple. Carl nodded back, looking as if the

thing he hated most in the world was being the parking lot attendant at a horse track.

When they got to the stands, Tyler hung back to watch his friend make his entrance. Brunswick was dressed for a day at the track: a powder blue sateen tracksuit that hugged tight to his round body. A small, round head perched on top of that, pointing straight ahead. Tyler gave a little smile of admiration, watching the way people just seemed to move aside for him. Nobody ever got in his way. Tyler bounced up and down on his toes a little bit. The air felt electric, like a bolt of lightning might wrap itself around the track, illuminating the world like an X-ray.

Tyler caught up with Brunswick in the concourse as he was fishing a racing form out of the garbage. "How's it look, Brunswick?" he asked.

"You should know how it goes by now, Tyler. There's no way to tell until it's done." He shook a banana peel off the form and opened it to the first race. "Leave me alone. I have to think."

Brunswick should have been figuring out the early bets, but his mind was all over the place, jumping around like a flea. For the first time in a long while he thought back to the day the Big Bitch appeared to him. He was watching the third race at Hialeah on a slow afternoon in a filthy Brooklyn OTB. Even the track announcer sounded bored, and Brunswick, who had no money on the race, was tuning out until, with the Hialeah horses on the home stretch, he got an enormous flash of clarity. He sat up straight in the hard plastic OTB chair, and let the revelation flow into him. What he saw was a huge, unified system of wagers that stretched before him in time as far as he could see. Not just one day, or two, or even a month, but years of it. It was a combination of handicapping, numerology and progressive bets that, if he stuck with it, would lead inexorably to what he was already calling the Big Bitch: a perfect day of racing, every horse a winner. His life would change forever on that day, and he still believed that.

The smells of cigarette smoke and fried food brought Brunswick back to the present. He had been working the Bitch now for over eight years. Every Saturday, he was at the track, and every Saturday he would, at best, break even. On bad days, she would clean him out and he would end up eating canned baked beans for an entire week. But that was what the Bitch demanded: loyalty and integrity and courage and endurance.

Brunswick sighed. Everything felt old and tired. Nobody was playing the horses anymore. The whole place felt rough and gritty, covered with decades of secondhand soot. He wanted to quit, he realized. He wanted to be done with the whole thing. It wasn't a thought that could be entertained for long, because the Bitch could smell weakness, so he pushed it away. But before he did, there was another little flash of something—just an image that had been popping up out of nowhere for the last couple of months, this picture of a pine forest. Like in a postcard—quiet, peaceful, covered in snow. He was a city guy. Never felt much of anything about nature, and here he is

thinking about pine trees. How beautiful it must be, living in a place like that, getting up in the morning, walking outdoors and smelling the day like Christmas morning. Wouldn't that be a kick in the ass, he thought to himself, every day just like Christmas morning.

He forced himself back to the present again. He had more pressing issues. Tyler, for example: short and skinny, with his long, thin face and raggedy blond hair that sat limply on his head as if it was depressed to be seen with him. Like Brunswick, he was dressed in a sateen tracksuit, but his was lime green. He had wanted a matching blue one, but Brunswick had rejected the idea as too fruity. Brunswick closed his eyes for a moment. He had no idea what he was going to do with Tyler.

The two of them had met at work three or four years before, a loading dock gig where the forklift was always breaking down, so they busted their asses hauling boxes out of the warehouse and onto the trucks by hand. When Tyler got hired, all of the other guys pegged him as an easy mark, playing mean little tricks on him, stealing from his locker, occasionally strong-arming him for a little extra cash. Tyler took it all with a sheepish little smile until Zbniewski, a hard-drinking guy with a shaved head and a couple of prison stories that he told over and over, spit into Tyler's coffee. Brunswick ended up breaking Zbniewski's nose with the mug. People stopped messing with Tyler after that, and Tyler stuck to Brunswick like he was bolted on.

One day, between loads, the two of them sitting with their legs dangling off the loading dock, Brunswick had confided the secret of the Bitch to him.

"So you have to bet this system every Saturday, no matter what?" Tyler asked, at the end of the story.

"Yeah."

"And if you do, eventually you'll get a big payoff?"

"Yep."

"What if it never pays off? What if you're wrong?"

Brunswick stared the kid straight in the eye. "It's going to pay off. But there's no shortcuts. You got to go in there and take your lumps. You've got to bet every race, exactly the way she wants you to. The Bitch is going to know if you cheated, and then the deal is off. That's why she's the Bitch. Most men, they've got no belly for the Bitch. Most men, she's gonna crush them under her spiked heel."

Tyler sat there for a second, absorbing this. "Would you teach me?" he finally asked, and the two of them had been going to the track together ever since.

Brunswick rubbed his jaw absent-mindedly and then sniffed his fingers. Tyler had managed to stick it out at the warehouse, but Brunswick's temper and low tolerance for crap meant that he had been at a couple of different jobs since then. At the moment, he was freelancing, buying meat that had failed inspection and bootlegging it to cheap ethnic restaurants

where the sauce could be counted on to cover any problems. The money was lousy, and it seemed like his hands always smelled just a little bit off, but at least he didn't have to eat anybody's shit. He pulled out a handiwipe and scrubbed his hands with it. "OK, Tyler. Let's go."

"I've got a good feeling, Brunswick. I've got a good feeling about today."

"Shut up," he said, "and get me a beer."

"Sure thing, Brunswick," Tyler said, trotting off to the concession.

Brunswick walked to his regular spot up in the stands and sat down. Boots was already there, smoking a thin cigar and reading the racing form. Boots was a regular like Brunswick. He could have been forty or sixty-five, a short man with an aggressive nose and a mouth that worked constantly, as though he were trying to swallow something bitter.

"Well, it's my favorite loser," Boots said.

"Not in the mood today, Boots," Brunswick told him.

"Come on, Brunswick. Does anybody in the world love you more than me? You're my favorite guy in the whole goddamn world. You lose and you lose and you keep coming back. Most guys, they would admit it, say, 'Yeah, I'm a loser,' and stay home. But not you. You've got a real commitment to loserdom, and I admire that. Just sitting next to you makes me feel like the luckiest son of a bitch alive."

Brunswick didn't say anything. Boots eyed him for a few seconds. "Awful quiet today, Brunswick. Seems like you're off your game." Brunswick looked out at the track, where the trainers were warming the horses up for the first race.

Tyler appeared with the beer, and Brunswick drank it in one long swallow.

"Hey Boots," Tyler said.

"Something's wrong with your boyfriend," Boots said. "We've been sitting here for a full minute, and he hasn't threatened me once."

"Oh, he's just getting ready, figuring things out," Tyler said. "It's going to be a good day today. I can feel it."

Boots slapped his racing form on his thigh and laughed. "Sure. Power of positive thinking. It's working great so far. You keep that shit up." He lit another cigar and looked out at the track, chuckling to himself.

Brunswick and Tyler won in the first two races. It wasn't unusual for the Bitch to do that, get their hopes up right before a long string of losers. But they were still winning at the fifth race, and after the sixth, Tyler leaned over to Brunswick. "We're winning, Brunswick," he said tensely. "We're winning."

"Shut up," Brunswick said. "Don't you start talking about it."

Tyler sat back in his chair but his legs bounced up and down, and he twisted his racing form until his hands were gray with ink. He leaned back over.

"Brunswick," he whispered, "this might be it. It might be the..."

"That's enough," Brunswick said. "That's enough."

"Looks like you're working up a big head of sucker luck there, Brunswick," Boots said. He had been pretending that he wasn't paying attention, but Brunswick knew he had been watching everything. "This is the best I've ever seen your sorry ass do. My advice? Go home now. Go crazy. Buy yourself a pizza. Maybe put an extra topping on it. Thing is, you keep going like this, it's just going to be that much worse when you get fucked."

Brunswick leaned over and grabbed Boots by the front of his shirt, pulling him close to his big, round face. "Today," he said slowly, "today is not the day to fuck with me, Boots." He shoved him back in his seat and looked down at his racing form again. Boots gave a weak chuckle. "Just a matter of time, Brunswick. Just a matter of time."

Tyler had been staring at the track, oblivious to the exchange. His legs were jerking involuntarily with tension. "What's the bet for this race?"

Brunswick took out a pencil stub and made a few calculations. "All of it," he said.

"All of it?"

"All of it."

After they won in the seventh, Tyler did jumping jacks in front of his seat until some of the guys behind them started throwing hot dog wrappers and empty beer cups at him. After the eighth, he was doing sprints up and down the tunnel. Sometimes, he sat back down, breathing hard and trying to collect himself, but in a few seconds, he would start tugging on Brunswick's sleeve, or tapping him on the shoulder. "Brunswick..."

"Leave me alone," Brunswick would say angrily, and Tyler would stand up and pace anxiously back and forth.

They won again in the ninth, a nail-biter that had Tyler rocking back and forth in his seat, clutching at his hair. When their horse finally pulled it out, he gave a low moan and said, "This is it. This is it, Brunswick. The Bitch is coming in. What do we do now? What does she say to do now?"

Brunswick took out his pencil and added up the numbers for the tenth race. Looking at the form, he let out an involuntary, "Jesus."

"What is it?"

"Dogwood Bottom."

Boots gave a little cackling laugh. "Dogfood Bottom, more like. Dogshit Bottom. That worthless piece of crap has never finished higher than fifth. I knew it. I knew you would find some way to fuck this up." He looked at the two of them triumphantly. "Now a normal guy, a smart guy would put it on Southland Zephyr. They're warming that one up for the Derby. Easy win. But not you two. You're going to stick with your chump system and go home the chumps that you are."

Dogwood paid fifty to one, and the Bitch said to put it all down.

"All of it?" Tyler asked. "What if, you know..."

"Look, I'm not going to tell you how to bet."

Tyler jumped up again and paced back and forth. "I mean, we've won a lot already. I didn't tell you, but I started with two dollars. Minimum bet. Couldn't afford more. I'm up eight hundred now. I could use that money. My teeth have been hurting lately. I thought maybe I could go see a dentist. What do you think, Brunswick?"

Brunswick closed his eyes. "Sure, kid," he finally said. "Lay off this one. Or bet the sure thing. That's probably the way to go."

"What are you going to do?"

Brunswick took out another handiwipe and ran it over his hands. He was up nine grand. With that kind of money, he could take some time off. Get the car fixed. Find a real place to live instead of the crackhead motel he was in now.

The future, which had started to feel depressing and gray—exhausting nights carting around coolers of rancid meat, Saturdays losing at the track—seemed to open up to him, gleaming with new promise. Nine grand. You could do a lot with nine grand. He imagined taking a trip, driving out of the city, up along some winding road, surrounded by pine trees standing straight and tall, like his best friends. He shook his head. "The Bitch wants what the Bitch wants." He looked at Tyler. "Tell you what, we'll bet separately on this one. Go to different windows. I don't ever have to know what you did."

Tyler stared at his feet. "I just don't know, Brunswick. I just don't know."

Brunswick stood up. "Last race," he said.

The tenth started like everybody thought it would. Southland Zephyr got a big jump and was cruising along in front. Boots laughed his little laugh and elbowed Brunswick. "Uh oh," he said. "Looks like the loser express is coming down the line."

"The Bitch," Tyler said, watching the race through his fingers, "she's not going to give it to us." Brunswick sat still, saying nothing.

After the first quarter mile, Zephyr was in front by a couple of lengths, the pack behind already looking beaten. But then Zephyr started to lose a little ground, and Dogwood Bottom, which had been in the back looking dispirited, picked it up, inching around on the outside. Coming around the near turn, it was a close second.

Tyler started to talk to himself, whispering first, and then louder and louder. "It's happening. It's happening."

On the track, the lights came on and the evening faded to a gray chill. To Tyler, it looked like Dogwood Bottom began to glow, as if filled with some sort of supernatural presence.

"She's coming in," Tyler started to shout. He jumped to his feet. "Brunswick, the Bitch is coming in." Dogwood inched forward, closer and closer to Zephyr. Tyler started to scream, no words, just one long note.

Everybody else was standing now too, all shouting at once, and the din grew to a painful level. The two horses ran abreast down the home stretch. Tyler jumped up and down, waving his hands wildly in the air like a castaway signaling a distant ship. Finally, even Brunswick stood up, and everybody in the place was screaming as Dogwood Bottom pushed ahead of Zephyr at the wire for the win.

*

In the car on the way home, Tyler couldn't sit still. "The Bitch came in. I can't believe it. The Bitch came in," he kept repeating.

"Jesus, would you shut the fuck up?" Brunswick said, and Tyler gave him a big smile.

"Yeah, I figured you'd be just like this. The Bitch comes in, you're a rich man, and you're still old Brunswick. Cool as a cucumber."

"I said shut up. I'm sick of it. I don't want to talk about racing, or the Bitch or any of it."

Tyler stared at him for a long moment, and then started smiling again. "Yeah, I know you're not going to change, but I'm going crazy here. I've got to blow off some steam. Hey, check this out." He rolled his window down, letting in the cold night air.

"What are you doing?"

Tyler stuck his head out the window and started screaming at the other cars. "Big Bitch! Big Bitch!" They were on the expressway, doing about sixty, and the wind whipped through the car, blowing fast food wrappers and old racing forms around.

"Tyler, close that fucking window."

Tyler inched his body outward until he was sitting on the sill of the car window. "Big Bitch! Big Bitch!" he yelled, waving his arms frantically. The car hit a pothole and fishtailed violently for a second before Brunswick could get it back under control, Tyler clinging desperately to the door frame.

Brunswick reached over and pulled Tyler in by the waist of his track suit and then wrestled the car over, hitting the brakes hard and bringing the car to a skidding, shuddery stop on the gravel and trash of the shoulder. He jumped out and started pacing up and down, cars roaring past just a few feet from him, sending out blasts of cold air that hit him like tidal waves.

"Jesus, Tyler," Brunswick shouted. "You could have fucking died, you stupid son of a bitch. What would I do if you had died?"

Tyler got out and stood watching Brunswick with a worried expression on his face. "I'm sorry," he said tentatively. "I wish I could play it cool like you. I just can't. It's the material. I'm just not Big Bitch material."

"Jesus." Brunswick stopped and stared at Tyler for a few seconds. "Shut up about the Bitch. Stop talking about the fucking Bitch." He started pacing again, and when he turned back to Tyler he looked old and tired. "I couldn't do it." He finally said.

"Do what?"

"I didn't make the last bet. I couldn't. I couldn't do it. I was up nine thousand, and I got to the window, and I tried. I tried to put it on Dogwood Bottom, but it was so much money. Do you know how long it's been since I've seen that much money?"

"You didn't bet?"

"I just heard my mouth saying it, saying, 'Southland Zephyr'. It was like I wasn't there at all. 'Southland Zephyr,' it said. Somebody else's voice. Somebody else's bet. I couldn't finish the Bitch. I lost it all on Southland Zephyr. Derby horse," he whispered. "It was a fucking Derby horse."

Tyler stared at him wide-eyed. It couldn't be true. When he got up in the morning, there were two things he understood: the Bitch, and Brunswick's strength in battling her. And now it was all gone. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, and then felt his face curve into a strange smile. He walked over to the car and pressed his hands against its mottled surface. The metal was very cold, and he felt empty, as if the constant wind from the traffic could pick him up and blow him away. And then he realized the truth. "It's the Bitch," he said. "The Bitch did it." He felt the old certainty and strength return. "It was a test. That's the thing." He walked over to Brunswick, who watched him wordlessly. "You were *supposed* to lose. It's all part of the plan. We've just got to go back next Saturday and start working it again. There's going to be something bigger. Something bigger coming. God," he said, contemplating it with awe, "it's going to be the huge." He grabbed at his hair with both hands and waved his elbows back and forth. "I messed up. I understand now. I bet the wrong horse. But you're still working it, Brunswick. You always know what the Bitch wants. We'll go back and do it again. We'll do it. I don't care how long it takes." He took the envelope out of the pocket of his jacket. "I screwed up, Brunswick. I screwed up. I let the Bitch fool me into winning that last race. But I'll fix it. I'll fix it for us." He reached into the envelope and pulled out the cash inside. "I'm going to fix it, Brunswick. I'm going to fix it." He ran over to the edge of the expressway, where the cars roared by in a sixty mile an hour wall of metal. He pulled back his arm and flung the money as hard as he could into the air. The turbulence of the traffic caught it, the dozens of bills fluttering up and out, swirling and drifting, pitching and rising and falling in the cold air of the night.

Brunswick dashed to where Tyler was standing, almost ran out into the traffic to snatch at the bills, but stopped at the last moment. The two of them stood, wide-eyed, staring and the cash as it danced and twirled above the cars. Tyler began to sob, and Brunswick put his arms around him. Some of the drivers, realizing what was borne on the wind, slammed on their brakes, skidding and colliding with other cars, making a terrific crashing and clashing sound. Brunswick took a deep breath, and he thought about all of the horses he had seen in his life, the winners and losers, every one of them plunging across the finish line as if it that line were the most important thing in the world. And he wondered if the Derby horse was secretly glad to have

been beaten, if he loved the long shot for allowing him to finally lay his burdens down. The money shook and soared joyously in the air. Brunswick squeezed Tyler tighter, imagining the green of the money to be the boughs of a pine forest, rocking in the wind. "Christmas," he said softly in his ear. "Christmas every day."

John Haggerty's fiction has appeared in Confrontation, Santa Monica Review, Los Angeles Review *and* War, Literature and the Arts, *among others. He is an MFA candidate at San Francisco State University and is currently at work on a novel.*

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