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Thin Air Magazine

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Editorial Staff 2015

Letter From the Editor

Dear Readers,

As those who are passionate about literary magazines know, the production of a body of work like this—poetry, nonfiction, fiction and art all crashing together in one beautiful publication—cannot happen in a vacuum. It takes editors to select the final pieces, readers in each genre to pare down the art into a manageable list, a community dedicated to the arts to support the magazine, donors to keep the whole craft afloat, and an irreplaceable faculty advisor to make sure we're really doing our jobs. All of that said, we would be a blank journal—page after page of white space—without you writers who share your hearts with us, and allow us to print them within our folds. You are family, and always will be. To name the lovely folks I vaguely alluded to before, those who we would not have a magazine without…

Our editors, names printed on the previous page, thank you. You made this year fun. Yes, fun, and also unforgettable.

Readers, you bore the brunt of it all, and that you still smile and say "hi" when you pass us in the hallways, is a testament to your love of literature.

James Jay, co-founder of the Narrow Chimney Series, thank you for giving us a stage and home where our work was loved and cherished by others of our kind. You are one of the best people we know.

Jesse Sensibar, editor-at-large, co-founder of Narrow Chimney, thank you for inviting us to take part in the reading series. We are all better for it.

Diana Gabaldon, your work inspires us and your donations sustain us. Many thanks.

Karma Sushi, besides feeding us in the literal way, we thank you for letting us take part in Good Karma Tuesday. Your support is beyond appreciated.

Gary Bishop, thank you for sharing your stories and for helping us along. You are one of us now.

The English Department, Graduate Student Government, and Flagstaff Arts Council: your financial assistance guarantees that we have a magazine to print and the funds to sell it among the greats at AWP. Thank you.

Nicole Walker, what can we possibly say to you? Your guidance and support have made this magazine an experience—one none of us are likely to replicate or forget. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

Lastly, thank you to the 2014 editorial staff. We took what you taught us and ran. Hopefully you'll be proud of us, your grateful students.

On behalf of the 2015 editorial staff, our thanks,

Kama Shockey
Editor-In-Chief

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Featured Author

Mary Sojourner is the author of three novels: *Sisters of the Dream* Northland Publishers, 1989; *Going Through Ghosts*, University of Nevada Press, 2010 and *29*, Torrey House Press, 2014; the short story collection, *Delicate*, Nevermore Press, 2001 and Scribner, 2004; essay collection, *Bonelight: ruin and grace* in the New Southwest University of Nevada Press, 2002 and 2004; memoir, *Solace: rituals of loss and desire*, Scribner, 2004; and memoir/self-help guide, *She Bets Her Life*, Seal Press, 2010. She is a ten-year NPR commentator and the author of op eds and columns for High Country News, Yoga Journal, Writers on the Range, Matador Network and dozens of other publications. She was chosen as a Distinguished Writer in Residence in 2007 by the Virginia C. Piper Center for Creative Writing, ASU.

She has been a community and environmental activist and organizer since she was seventeen; and teaches writing in private circles, one-on-one, at writing conferences and book festivals, and for Matador U, an international travel writing program. She believes in both the limitations and possibilities of healing. Writing is the most powerful tool she has found for doing what is necessary to mend both oneself and the greater world.

Website: http://www.breakthroughwriting.net

Up Near Pasco

Mary Sojourner

It happened up near Pasco, Washington. My aunt calls from Burns to tell me. "Jinella, I got some sad news. Your cousin Kyrin laid himself down on the railroad tracks up near Pasco and got hit. Far as the cops could tell, he had his music plugged in his ears, you know how you kids do...and his arms were crossed over his chest." She goes quiet. The women in our family are strong like that.

I make myself stay calm. "Oh auntie," I say. "That poor boy."

"Maybe you and Lonnie could come over," my aunt says. "Me and grandma want to give Kyrin a feast. Your uncle's talking about a sweat."

"I could come up, Auntie," I say.

"Lonnie take off on you?"

I don't say anything. My aunt doesn't ask more.

"I'll talk to my professors," I say. "When's the feast?"

"Next Friday. You got a ride?"

"I'll take the bus."

"Your brother's coming in from Seattle. He'll pick you up at the station."

Most of all, my cousin was different. Different, really different—not like the gangstahs and goths on the rez—but deep down different. If he heard me say "deep down different," he would have gotten a bracelet made that had the letters WWDDDD on it – like those Jesus bracelets, but stronger: What Would Deep Down Different Do? What DDD did was kill himself. So now he is Deep Down Dead and I almost

want to go join him except all the stuff he taught me about living real is keeping me alive.

His name was Kyrin. It's sort of a joke even though a lot of the kids on the rez have gangstah names. His isn't gangstah, I mean he wasn't. My aunt named Kyrin from this soy sauce that was on the table in the Golden Fork Chinese Buffet in town. She and her boyfriend had gone there to celebrate finding out she was pregnant.

Me and Kyrin used to go to the Golden Fork a lot when we could get a ride into town. He was soooooo skinny from his family nature and tweak, but he could put away darn near the whole buffet serving dish of sesame chicken.

Fuck.

He was soooo proud of me when I got into college here. I know it's just a podunk community college, but to him it was like I had my foot on the ladder that was going to just keep going up and up. He wanted so much. For himself. For his brothers and sisters. For his cousins, especially me. He decided to take the short cut. No ladder for him. Kyrin was on the nose of a bottle rocket.

Friday my friend Cassie drops me at the bus station. I grab a couple candy bars and a pop from the vending machines. I keep thinking about Kyrin. He wasn't full-blood Wasco like me and my aunt. His dad was from up Yakima way. Maybe Kyrin was trying to get back there when he laid down on the tracks outside Pasco.

We hadn't known exactly where he was for a long time. I'd get postcards from different places – Seattle, Portland, even Los Angeles. They weren't picture postcards. He'd send post office postcards with squiggly drawings on them of robot birds and laser guns with about a million parts, sometimes faces on them or talons or maybe a beautiful Indian chick except where her heart was supposed to be there were gears.

I don't want to think about Kyrin gone, plus my grandma says it's dangerous to think about death, but I sit on the bench in the big bright waiting room and all I can think is: What did it feel like? Was he tweaking? Did he have his tunes on so loud he couldn't hear the train coming? Was he wearing enough to keep him warm?

The bus pulls in on time. It's almost empty except for some loud old white guys. I find a window seat on the south side and sit down with my pop and candy bars. The bus driver makes a bad joke about luxury travel and we're on our way out of Bend.

I always love it when the bus cruises down the long slope after the Badlands turn-off and all of a sudden, it's desert. Not desert like in Arizona. There aren't any of those big cactus that look like Gumbys waving. Our desert is miles and miles of flat sand and volcano rock. There is sage everywhere. Sometimes when you're out there after a rain, the air is so wet and green you think the sage is breathing like a human.

Kyrin used to ride his buddy's dirt bike out there, south a ways from Millican, a ghost gas station we just passed heading east. I wonder if I'll ever be able to ride by here without picturing my cousin tear-assing up Reservoir Road, no helmet, no knee or elbow pads, just his black hair flying and a wild grin on his face.

I close my eyes. When I open them again, we're miles down the highway. The loud guys have figured out how to play poker on the back seat. They look like the losers who are always at the blackjack tables in our casino. My sister works there and she says she thinks they sleep in their cars in the parking lot. She says they must live on snack bar burgers, cigarettes and casino coffee. "If you could call that living."

One of the poker players looks like he meant to get on the bus to Vegas and made a serious mistake. He's tall and skinny and his hair looks like a little Dutch boy's. He actually has on three gold chains and a red silky shirt that's open down to almost his belly. There's a big medal hanging from one of the chains that says "Winner" on it in rhinestones. The dealer looks like a weasel, if a weasel wore a t-shirt that said *Bad to the Bone.*

I don't want them to catch me watching them, plus it's an ugly sight, so I lean back in my seat, open a Snickers and watch the desert stream by. Even though it's the saddest reason, I'm happy to have a weekend off from town. It's okay there. The other girls in my pre-nursing program at the college are nice enough, but Bend is really weird. It used to be a dinky falling-down town. Then, all of a sudden all these

rich white people started buying the little old logging company houses and painting them colors like pink and orange.

It's even weirder in Sisters which is a few miles to the west. One my roommates went over there and told me and Cassie we had to check it out. She said there weren't just regular rich people from Portland and California there, but rich hippies. Cassie borrowed her sister's car and we went over to see what all the fuss was about.

We sat outside a little café, people watching and drinking coffee that cost four dollars a cup. We saw a white guy with long silvery hair who rode a Harley that I know cost as much as my mom's trailer; and there were ladies with feather earrings and fancy beaded bags hanging from a leather cord around their necks. One of them actually came up to me and said, "Are you Native American?"

Are you a white bitch? I was thinking, but I just nodded. She put her hands in front of her skinny chest and bowed. "Namaste," she said, "I honor your peoples' ways."

She hovered there till Cassie—who is not shy—said, "Excuse us, but we need to be by ourselves. We're planning a ceremony to celebrate N'ugartkim. It's private." The lady bowed again and walked away. Her type walk funny, like they don't have any bones in their bodies. I don't speak Wasco so I said, "Cassie, what's noogartkeem?"

"I don't speak Wasco either," she said. "I made it up."

The sugar from the two candy bars plus the desert blurring outside the bus window makes me sleepy. I check my cell. I still hope there'll be a message from Lonnie, which, of course there is not. I turn my phone off, fold my jacket behind my head and settle in for a nap.

I'm jolted straight out of a dream in which Kyrin is standing up on his buddy's dirt bike which he is riding at about a hundred miles an hour past the big park in Bend. He is screaming about how they killed the geese there. He rides into the park, on into the pond, and the bike keeps going.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the driver is saying, "we've hit a deer. I need to get off the highway and call the Burns terminal."

He parks on the gravel shouler. The poker players bend down between the seats to pick up the fallen cards. I start to feel like I can't breathe. It happens to me sometimes. My mom says I have nerves like my dad. "That's what made him take off like he did. One day he's listening to Willie Nelson over and over. Next day he's gone."

I look out my window toward the buttes to calm myself. I name the colors—dark blue, brown—pale where the sun is hitting them. I tell myself a story about a girl stuck on a bus who gets off and goes to see a hurt deer. I clench my hands and dig my fingernails in. It doesn't help. I wish I had a paper bag so I could breathe into it like the nurse at the school clinic taught me, but my throat is so tight I doubt even that would work.

I close my eyes and I see the deer. She is still alive. I know it. I make myself get up and walk to the back of the bus. The poker guys look up at me. "Excuse me," I say, "I gotta check out something." I'm scared they'll hassle me, but the short guy just deals and says, "Ante up."

I kneel on the back seat and look out. The deer lies on the white line, her legs folded under her. She stares straight ahead. There's no blood. Every time a car or truck goes by, she shivers. I want to go to sleep and wake up in my aunt's house.

I turn and look at the poker players. "Do any of you have a gun?" I say. The tall Vegas guy shakes his head. I go back to my seat. "The deer is alive," I say in a loud voice. "Does anybody have a gun?" Nobody answers. That thought comes into my head: *What would Kyrin do?*

The driver turns around. "We've got to sit here a while. One of the front wheels is bent. They're sending help from Burns."

I go up to him. "What about the deer? She's alive."

"I saw, honey," he says. "I don't have a gun. But the sheriff's on her way. She'll be able to take care of it."

I go back to my seat and watch the light on the mountains. I'm breathing okay, but I can't stand thinking how scared the deer must be. What does she think the cars are? Does she hurt? Does she wonder why she can't move?

The sun is starting to go down. Nobody comes. I sit with that stupid sentence on loop delay in my head: *What would Kyrin do? What would Kyrin do?*

Shut up, I say in my mind. He'd get high. That's what he'd do. He'd do some goddamn tweak and go to his happy place. He'd lie down on the whiteline with some gangstah shit thumping in his ears. Forget you, Kyrin.

We must have gone into one of those science fiction wormholes. The sun's copper now, almost all the way down. The buttes are glowing, like they're lit from inside. The sheriff still hasn't showed up. The repair truck from Burns isn't here. At least the traffic has thinned out. At least the deer doesn't have to shiver so much. I look out at the sagebrush. It's gone silvery.

I turn on my cell. Nothing. Why do I keep thinking Lonnie will call? It's as dumb as asking myself what would Kyrin do. I call my aunt and tell her I'm stuck on the bus out by Riley. "Jinella," she says, "are you okay? You sound funny."

"Auntie," I say, "I'm kind of freaking out. We hit a deer. She's on the white line. She's still alive. I don't know what to do."

There's a long silence. I hear the t.v. in the background and the racket of my little cousins playing. "Anybody on that bus got a gun?" my aunt says.

"No. But the sheriff's on the way."

"Good. She'll know what to do. You just sit tight, Jinella. Call me when you're almost to town. And you pray. Pray for that deer, girl."

"I will, auntie. I'll call you as soon as I'm almost there."

We say goodbye. What comes next isn't anything I plan. I go up to the driver and ask him if I can get off the bus and stretch my legs. "Sure," he says, "just be careful."

I step onto the sand and walk away from the bus. There are no headlights in either direction. The deer is a pale shape on the black highway. I move slowly up to her. She doesn't turn her head. I set my palm on her neck. She shivers a little, then lowers her head. I pet her. Only a few times. "I'm sorry," I say. "You will be able to go away from this place soon. I won't forget you."

I don't want to make her more scared so I walk back to the bus. The red and blue lights of the sheriff sparkle to the east. I get back on the bus. "The repair truck is right behind the sheriff," the driver says. "We'll be on our way in no time."

It's full on dark in Burns. My brother pulls up. "Hey, little sister, jump in. I want to grab a coffee at Mac's and catch you up on a few things you need to know before we go to Auntie's."

I haul myself up into the seat. "You ought to have a escalator for this thing," I say. Eddie grins. He travels first class. Shiny black Ford Lariat, the inside near bigger than my dorm room. Though I know how he pays for it, which none of us talk about, I still am proud that the truck is in our family.

We drive the few blocks to Mac's. Eddie doesn't ever walk if he doesn't have to. "Did enough of that in boot camp," he always says.

I'm scared to find out what he wants to talk about. I hate it when people say, "We gotta talk," and then you have to wait to find out why. Mac's is quiet. Eddie buys us coffee and we sit by the big window that looks out on the highway. I look at the white line and I remember the deer shuddering. I wonder if this highway will always be a sorrowful place to me now.

Eddie dumps three spoons of sugar into his coffee and half the cream pitcher. He holds up his hand. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Diabetes. But, hey, YOLO."

"I'm not your mom," I say.

"Yeah," he says, "but you got that look on your face."

I narrow my eyes and give him the Jackson women look.

"See?" he says. "I give up."

"So?"

"So," he says, "Auntie got word out and said no hoods at the feast."

"Nobody says 'hoods' anymore."

"Yeah well, you get her meaning."

I wonder why he's telling me this. I'm not about gangstahs, never have been. I'm not exactly a goody two shoes, but it always seemed to me that the kids with the hoodies pulled down damn near

over their eyes on hundred degree days were just pitiful. Country kids playing big city.

"I passed by a few of the guys today," Eddie says. "Wing, J5 and Cupid the Duck. They waved me over. Wing said that Kyrin was their brother and no way were they going to miss the feast. They said they were going to show Auntie what they were made of."

He shakes his head.

"Oh lordie," I say. "That could mean anything."

"So sister, help me keep an eye on them."

It's all the way dark by the time we pull up to my aunt's house. Every light is on, including the Christmas lights strung clear round the double-wide. My aunt never takes them down. "That way your step-uncle can find his way home when he's had too much fun."

"I feel a little weird," I say to my brother.

He laughs. "That's cause you are a little weird. Come on, grab your bag. I can already smell fry bread."

Eddie jumps out of the truck and heads for the house. I sit a minute. I pretend to check my phone in case anybody's watching and wondering *what is going on with that girl?* What is going on is I am trying to pull myself together. I feel the deer under my hand. It seems totally weird that Kyrin got himself hit on the tracks and the little deer got hit right on the white line. They both got hit. Except Kyrin did it on purpose. Plus he didn't have to lie there scared to death.

If my mom knew what I'm thinking right now, she'd either get out her bible or burn some sage. "Clean those bad thoughts out," she'd say. "They can bring more bad stuff.

I text her just to say, "Hi, I'm here." She couldn't come over because she said she had to work. I know that's an excuse. She's never really approved of my aunt, not since she stole my mom's boyfriend in sixth grade.

I turn off the phone, get my bag out of the back and walk toward the house. My aunt's there in the doorway before I have time to knock. "Jinella," she yells, "you get in here." She holds out her arms.

I'm almost to the steps when I see a red sparkle on the edge of the big old truck tire my aunt grows poppies in. I bend to check it out,

but it's gone. I wonder if somebody tossed out a cigarette. "Jinella," my aunt says, "will you please get the lead out?"

It's about a hundred and ten in the double-wide. There's cigarette smoke for a foot below the ceiling. Everywhere I look there's family, everybody talking, everybody digging into their food. I go to my grandma and greet her. She's the only one left of that generation. "Good evening," Grandmother," I say. She looks up at me with her sharp black eyes. "Guess you still mind your manners, girl," she says. "That's good."

My younger cousin Shana bounces off the sofa and grabs my arm. "C'mon, you can put your stuff in my room. Plus I have to tell you something—a secret."

I can't figure out why I feel completely safe for the first time since I left home for school and why I also want to turn and run back out into the cool night. I follow Shana to her room. She's painted the walls black. There are posters everywhere—thrash bands, Free Leonard Peltier, Rihanna, an eagle with a quote below it by some guy named Black Elk.

She closes the door behind us. I wait. You don't push the women in our family. "Sit down," she says and pats a pile of coats. I pull off my jacket and sit next to her.

"I know what happened," she says. "I knew he was going to do it. I couldn't stop him. I have to tell somebody."

She takes a deep breath. "He texted me a bunch. There was some white chick named Sarah. He met her in one of those narcotics meetings in LA, you know where they pray and stuff. He was off the tweak. Her too. They were going to work awhile and get enough cash to come up here."

Shana digs in her pocket and pulls out her phone. "I've got it all here. I saved every single message."

I can't figure out how she can be so calm. Kyrin was not just her brother. He was her best friend. She passes me the ashtray on the bedstand. "I don't smoke," I say. She knows that.

"Duh," she says and picks up a roach buried in the ashes. "I've been smoking weed since we got the news. Cupid gave me a big old bud. Chocolate Thai. "

I shake my head. "I'm okay."

"It's the only way I can deal with this," she says. "Him dead, me knowing in a way what he was going to do—and I didn't try to stop the fool." She shakes her head and looks away from me. "Plus I *cannot* tell anybody. Not no one. I was scared to text you for fear somebody would read it."

I think she's paranoid, but I don't say anything.

"What happened is the Sarah chick found herself some Mexican gangbanger dealer and left," Shana says. No explanation. No note. No nothing. Just gone."

"That's why he did it?"

"I guess. The last message I had from him was: *Gotta go. No worries. Love always. K.*"

Shana crumbles the J into the ashtray. "This shit isn't working so good anymore."

We sit for a while and don't talk. Finally, Shana puts her head on my shoulder and says, "Okay, I can go back out there now."

I can't think of anything to say. I just hug her for a second. She puts fresh gel on her hair and we go out into the living-room.

My brother nods toward the kitchen. I go in. The table-top and every counter are piled with food. There's a two foot high stack of fry bread, four pots of stew simmering on the gas burners, two with chilis, two with corn, maybe a dozen different cakes, one of them with a frosting rabbit and the words *We will never forget*, another with a fancy cross and roses.

I take fry bread, a little of the corn stew and find some pop in a cooler under the table. I'm not hungry. I'm more stressed, but if I don't eat, too many peoples' feelings will be hurt. I go out into the living-room. Eddie pats the couch next to him. I sit down and take a bite of fry bread. It's all greasy in my mouth and for a second, I'm scared I'll get sick right then and there. I feel Eddie so solid next to me and see my grandma watching me from across the room, so I chew slowly, take a sip of pop and swallow.

"I think Wing's taking a fancy to you," Eddie says. "He keeps watching you."

I look up. Wing looks away. He shakes his head, let's his long hair flop over his right eye. He's even skinner than the last time I saw him on the rez.

"I wonder what they meant," Eddie said, "about showing our auntie who they are."

"They probably didn't even know what they meant," I say. "Big talk."

Wing gets up and walks toward me.

"Ooooeee, here it comes," Eddie says.

Wing stands in front of us. "Hello, Eddie," he says. "Hello, Jinella. How you doing?"

"Not too bad," Eddie says. "Considering." One of the things some of the older people believe is that you don't say the name of the person who died or talk about it directly.

"Sad times," Wing says. He looks down at me. "Jinella. Could we talk a minute?"

"I guess so," I say.

"I mean more like private," Wing says. "Maybe go outside, get some air."

"I can do that," I say. Eddie looks at me, nothing obvious, his face not showing anything. "It's okay," I say.

We wind our way through chairs and people and go outside. It's a bright cold night. The constellation Orion is hanging right over us. Wing slumps into a lawn chair. I sit on the stoop.

"*There's something in the shadows*," he says. "You remember that?" He stretches his legs out in front of him. He's wearing baggy shorts, white socks and scuffs.

"Aren't you freezing?" I say. I don't have a clue what he's talking about and I don't want to get into some weird tweaked-out conversation.

"I'm okay," he says, "but you remember that. That song about the shadows that Ricky babe sang that night we were all out by the Badlands with the fire?"

I nod.

"Look what I found," Wing says. "In the dirt where them dead plants is. Fucked my mind up."

He holds out his hand, palm up. I don't see anything. "Hang on," he says and moves his hand into the glare of the security light. I see a red sparkle, like the one I saw before.

"What is it?"

"One of the sequin things, you know, like the ones that Ricky had stuck all over the ass of her jeans. Weird huh. *Something in the shadows*. That song. Weird."

He closes his fingers around the sequin and the sparkle is gone. "Pow," he says, "gone just like that." He laughs. "Bet you think I'm gonna say something deep about life and all. How it can go black. Pow. Fuck that shit."

I want to punch him. I want to say, "First off, you'd have to be able to think something deep." But Wing scares me. He's always scared me. I only came out here to talk because of Kyrin.

"I better go in," I say. "You know how my brother is."

"Fuck him. Fuck the old ones too. What'd they ever really give us? What'd they give Kyrin? Just a bunch of dead old stories and bible bullshit."

My heart hurts. I know he's whacked out, but he's talking trash about my relations.

"Stop it," I say. "Just stop it." I feel the deer breathing so fast under my hand.

Wing pulls his head-rag down over his eyes. "Get outta here, Jinella," he says. "I ain't gonna hurt you, bitch. Not now. Not ever." He raises his hand. I back up. He tosses the sequin. A tiny red spark arcs through the air and disappears.

I go into the house. It's quieter. My aunts and girl cousins are passing around big slices of cake on paper plates. J5 and Cupid the Duck sit on the floor in front of the woodstove. Cupid shovels chocolate cake into his mouth like somebody's going to steal it from him. He's so fat he's almost as wide as he's tall plus he's got this weird little pink angel mouth and flat feet so big people say that if he ever got lucky enough to go water skiing, he wouldn't need skis. J5 pushes his cake around on his plate and looks sad.

Shana hands me some cake and nods toward her room. I follow her. We sit on the bed. My cake is pink with bright blue frosting

and a squished purple rose. "I'm not really hungry," I say. Shana sets our plates on top of her little t.v.

"I know," she says. "God, I feel so useless. The guys are going out to build the sweat. Eddie told Cupid and them that they get to be the fire-keepers. We chicks get to hand around cake."

I can't think of anything to say. We sit there for a long time in the silence. I'm so tired my bones feel like they're made of glass. Shana puts on some music and turns the volume down. "I wonder what he was listening to," she says.

"Maybe the cops kept his I-Pod."

"Yeah. Then *we'll* never know."

My aunt knocks on the door. "Girls, come on out. The fire's going. Grandma's going to lead the sing."

Shana and I follow my aunt out into the field to the north of the trailer. Somebody's turned off the security light, so the only light is from the firepit. Everybody's standing around the glowing coals, even Wing. Cupid and J5 are leaning on their shovels. The covers on the the sweat lodge flicker in and out of the orange light. I can make out the ragged tarp Eddie uses to cover tools in the back of his truck and the edge of my aunt's best Pendleton blanket.

My grandma takes the hands of the people next to her. Wing stands back a little, his arms down at his sides. "Wing," Grandma says, "you too. And when we're done, you grab a shovel. Them rocks aren't going to get in there by themselves."

Wing looks down at the ground. I think we are all holding our breath. He looks up, then over at me. "Okay, Grandmother," he says, and steps into the circle.

Untraveled

Cathy Allman

Sometimes I miss your banjo strum. You didn't know
I listened when I fussed and dipped chicken into egg,
coated the white meat of our dinner
with crushed cornflakes, heated our frozen
succotash and Poppin' Fresh rolls.

I think about dinner and watching *Cosmos*:
"For small creatures such as us, the vastness
is only bearable with love," Carl Sagan said. We
had hunger and questions, wanted answers
from gravity and unknown galaxies, and cheap

wine. We made love on the floor before
the show ended. I missed your call
the next day at my cubicle, where I was careful
that car ads didn't run in the same two-minute break.
I replayed your voice-mail apologies.

And this many years past that meteor
of us, the crash, the burn, the cold rock and dust,
I wonder who our children would've been,
in what city our vacation home, what stories
you never got to tell me about lacerations you stitched,

or hearts you restarted, or babies you pulled
into this earth. I reimagine old places you took me
on the back of your Harley, without a helmet
just leaning with each bend, wind-tangled hair,
dust flew while we rumbled over back roads,
places no one knew.

New Year's Eve

Candace Black

My gut says never hang the new
calendar before midnight, but my head says go ahead.
Tempt fate. What can happen? Your bad dream of the monster wave
has already come true. Devastation stares you down
above the fold every morning, but you're safe,
landlocked in the faultless midriff
of a volatile continent.

The annual slide of obscenely expensive
homes that never belonged on their hillsides
begins, with more forecast in each storm
assembling on the satellite photo's western edge.
You're not afraid of rain. But even you know better
than to drive past barricades through a resurrected
creek bed—unlike the idiot who stalled and drowned
instead of taking another route home.

Once, impatient, you passed a snowplow on the highway
and those thirty seconds of terror were enough
to teach the lesson you deserved. Ever since you've insured
yourself with the habitual: floss, toothbrush,
blood-thinning aspirin, seat belt, complete stop,
signal, dead bolt, smoke alarm, sunscreen, self-exam,
antioxidants, red wine, asanas, airport x-rays.
You sleep secure, if a bit too warm, under the down
comforter's weight. But the microscopic cell
has already started its orgy of multiplication.
The blob of plaque is sloughing
off an arterial wall. The driver of the other car
just turned on the engine.

Unsung Mass

June Saraceno

Here is the cart without the push, laden
heavy as the holy spirit, untongued,
tire not yet inspired into wheel.

Here a monarch of airy tides awaits
an Ariel both bound and freed in the unspoken
tree, silent bark falling, falling away.

Here untasted bread waits to be wafer
transubstantiated moment of yeast, of yearn
of flesh and spirit, body and soul.

Speak to me. Have you forgotten?
The blue throat of sky, guttural and distant.

Speak to me. Have you forgotten?
The earth rises in wails underfoot.

Speak to me. Have you forgotten?
The stony pulse, cradle song, the rocking.

Soft Feathered Steel

Kelly Talbot

Your eyelash stilettos' soft feathered steel:
from their velvet-spiked tips, light moisture drips
until this moment is all I can feel.

These gentle, wet piercings never shall heal.
Across my chest, behind your tresses dips
your eyelash stilettos' soft feathered steel.

Between sighs, crashing tides are splashing teal.
From within salt-leathered lips, a tongue slips
until this moment is all I can feel.

Falling, rising, into rhythm we steal.
While locked in the motion, my flesh still grips
your eyelash stilettos' soft feathered steel.

Against your thighs, I rise, piercing your seal.
I breathe in your sweat, the scent of your hips,
until this moment is all I can feel.

Sometimes, at night, through all that is real,
a sweet, velvet-spike–tipped memory rips:
your eyelash stilettos' soft feathered steel,
until this moment is all I can feel.

Grand Theft Auto

Steven Schroeder

To commandeer an armored truck
and crush like thirty parked police cars
became our favorite special secret move
after *crotch punch.* We could also lie,
pickpocket, safecrack, backstab,
stockpile, spy, bribe, hack,
hack and cheat at cards. In our hands,
the choice was *settle down*
versus *break the cell bars with magnets.*
The choice was *bake bread*
versus *forge a passport into a blade.*
We made a machine to hang detainees
by the ankles and shake loose change
or that timebomb's location
in time. With data, we made a machine
monopolize the worldwide supply
of supplies. Asked about gas,
we denied the startup of a pipeline
serviced by certain countries, adding
you're paranoid as a capper.
The choice was *disarm* against
crater a downtown city block. The choice
was *healer* against *benevolent*
shepherd of the populace and president
for life. When we grew up,

we planned to annex Canada.
When the heavy artillery massed
in every border fortress fired across
by "accidental" hotkey stroke,
we acted shocked. The sleeper agents
dispatched many turns before
activated their gadgets that turned
confederation into *conflagration.*
The choice was *neutral* or *allied*
with all sides. The choice was *white*
or black as mystery and cool.
We shot it twice.

PONIES

Glenn A. Long

Saturday. February. Early. The sun not up. Like so many years in a row, I'm driving to the Eastern Shore—over the bay bridge, past Blackwater Refuge and its cacophony of geese and swans—to Assateague Island Wildlife Refuge and Toms Cove. I'm going as if called to it. And while not giving much thought to reasons why, I know that by this time of winter—each year, year after year—my spiritual batteries need charging, and that a fund of rage has grown inside me owing to too many days without raw nature; so, like Thoreau, I crave a tonic of wilderness.

And despite Assateague's seeming safety (it's a National Wildlife Refuge, after all, with the village of Chincoteague nearby, and the Ranger Station at the refuge's parking lot), being alone in Assateague's winter isolation can be dangerous: a disabling accident, a sudden change in weather, no buddy to help. But, never mind! I'm going alone, to a place where I never feel alone. Where merely inhaling the air brings restorative balance.

Some eight miles beyond Pocomoke City I turn onto the causeway to Chincoteague and the Stewart sisters' cedar cottage—The Crooked House—perched like a felt hat on high pilings and cocked in the direction of the shell heap and chockablock shacks of the only remaining oyster-shucking establishment in the village. Letting myself into the cottage, I turn on the heat and smell the dust toasting on the baseboard coils: good. I'll be back after dark to sleep, to wake to the sound of Mr. Ralph's motor launch beating its way out Black Narrows to Chincoteague Bay and his oyster beds.

I lock the cottage door, and drive to the refuge and into a spitting rain (the temperature is barely above freezing). Nobody around, a near featureless ocean: gray, a hint of green in it and shading darker as it touches the horizon. And the sky: mirroring the sea, shading lighter along the horizon, gray with a hint of blue.

Surf-tongues lick the sand.

I wriggle into heavy outerwear: rag socks into knee boots, a hooded rain suit over a car-coat-length flannel-lined denim jacket. I stuff my collecting pouch into the side-pocket of my denim jacket and amble onto the flats, wading carefully in ankle-deep water beside the ten-foot-deep tidal channel called The Canal—between the basin and Little Toms Cove.

I look for ponies.

Chincoteague Ponies: wild horses (sort of wild), descendants, many believe, of horses brought to Assateague in the seventeenth century by colonists circumventing fencing laws and taxation on livestock and, since then, left unattended to graze on the island's leathery grasses and shrubs. Except for the last Wednesday of every July when the Virginia herd is rounded up and swum across Assateague Channel near Horse Marsh and onto Piney Island where yearlings are separated from the massed herd and sold to benefit the Chincoteague Island Volunteer Fire Company. The rest of the year the ponies roam the island in small bands: a stallion and his brood mares, their fillies and foals, or gatherings of colts yet to challenge a breading stallion for his harem.

I walk the basin shoreline. Toms Cove just ahead. Razor clams lay akimbo: remains of avian meals. There are moon snails, ponderous, their shells gleaming in the gray light; and crowds of mud nassas, black, in the tawny marl; comb jellies loll in tidal pools, horseshoe crabs bulldoze the shallows.

Whelk egg cases stuck in the damp sand sea-saw in a barely perceptible breeze. I pluck the bean-like capsules from one strand, pop the capsules open, and pour the tiny shells of desiccated larval whelks into vials pulled from my collecting pouch. Under a microscope, tomorrow, Sunday, at home, I'll count the number of right-torqued and left-torqued infant whelks in this sampling and report my findings to a bio-evolution study group plotting these variations, I'll catalogue them

into my collection and put them in my collection cabinet, where, when seeing them again while skimming through stored decades of similar collecting moments, I'll remember this day.

Into the pouch they go. I must hurry. I must get to Fishing Point and back before the Rangers close the refuge for the night. As I set out, Sanderlings spring aloft and wheel in tight formation, then flutter onto the wet sand and run toward the colorless surf, stabbing the sand with their stiletto beaks, then run away as each bubbling edge sweeps their feet. Further on, a cobble reef is drowning in the rising tide. I pry half-a-dozen coin-size oysters from it, lever them open and, one after the other—my head tipping back—let each morsel slide down my throat.

The cold rain turns to mist. I unbutton my rain gear and denim jacket, pull off my stocking cap and stuff it into my jacket pocket. Shrubs on the dune crest stand motionless in the dampness. The muted sun streaks the blue graphite sky with rose and lavender, then garnet.

Hoof prints pock the backside of Fishing Point.

I imagine ponies wading across the flats by The Canal in a ragged line, a lead mare and soon-to-be yearlings followed by the harem, then the stallion, nodding.

The mist thickens to fog, blanketing everything; the fog then lifting slightly as if repelled by the sand as the ground gives up its meager warmth. Looking down, I scan the ground—left and right—and resume walking, the fog so thick I am blind in it. Sweat spiders warm and cold down my chest and back. I feel my heart beating: in my throat, in my eyes. I blot my forehead with the edge of my coat sleeve. I stop. I resist kneeling, and stand, feet apart. I know I'm somewhere between the cove's elbow and seashore headquarters. But, plunged into total nebulation, and with fear rising inside me like milk scalding in a too-hot pan, I hear in my head my own voice cautioning me: stop. Listen. Think. I know that if I bolt to my left, into the dunes, I'll lose my sense of north and south and the orienting lie of the beach. But, if I go too far to my right and into the sea and into a tidal channel, I could drown, pulled to the bottom, my clothes too cumbersome to remove, too heavy to swim (even wade) against the frigid current. I imagine the tow of it: numbing, everything juiced with saltwater—coat, boots,

lungs, my arms and legs thrashing against the cold sea in some gruesome ballet.

I don't bolt or tumble, but walk. I imagine what I cannot see—images of what I have seen before, on this stretch of beach—the long shadows, the sighing rollers, the onshore breezes rattling desiccated leaves. I walk, cautiously, half an hour. Maybe more. Then, as unexpectedly as it descended, the fog morphs to Vaseline translucency, uncovering (how is this possible?) twenty (more than twenty) ghostly Chincoteague Ponies.

They slip from the curling haze as if stealing the fog's life. One by one they coalesce, standing this way and that on the flat sand, arranged like a troop of equine-costumed dancers on a stage. Why didn't I hear them in the fog? Where is the stallion?

A curious half-dozen yearlings approach and corral me, the rest of the herd keeping its distance. Can they feel my alarm? I'm suddenly conscious of my hands, my arms.

Stay still (again, the voice in my head).

The silence of the place is made audible only by the pony's coarse breathing. Clumps of half-dried mud cling to their fetlocks. I move: one step forward, and the yearlings step back. I begin walking, slowly, and the herd, in unison, gathers into a loose formation, their heads bobbing in syncopation. When I stop they stop. Their tails frisk their haunches. A mare swings her head. I see myself mirrored in her liquid eyes. Another mare freshens the ground with her muzzle, her ears rotating—one toward the lead mare, one toward me. As I move again, the yearlings break and shy away, measuring an inviolate distance between them and me. A filly cakewalks, teasing.

I begin to match the slow gate of a mare as if I were her colt. The mare accepts me with a nicker and a wink of her black eye: her odor, pungent, a mixture of oak bark and wet grass—stronger at her haunches than at her withers. And her withers, when she makes them shiver, fizz like carbonation escaping from a just-opened can of soda. Along her back, a curtain of steam rises. Her piebald winter coat, thick, tangled, and stippled with hitchhiking nettles. She is larger than the others, taller, pregnant, perhaps, judging from her swollen flanks. Her breathing: rhythmic and steady. And in the timeless way time passes

here, we trod. I am inches from her side. I could reach out and touch her. I don't. My heart beats hard in my chest. I train my eyes onto the naked skin where her elbow meets her belly (where the girth would be on a riding mare), staying close, submissive, my fists plunged into my jacket pockets, drawing my shoulders in. Seawater pools in our footprints, the strand spongy-firm, I listen to the clockwork sound of her hoofs against it, my footfalls barely audible. She swings her head in my direction, luring me on. There is purpose in our nonchalance—steadfastness.

Still no sign of the stallion while I walk beside the mare for a-hundred maybe two- hundred yards along the glistening beach where bathers flock summer afternoons; the Ranger Station just over there. I glide free of the mare and her band, the ponies standing still, all their faces facing me.

I move away, first crabwise then backwards, not wanting to turn my back to them, wanting to intensify this moment, my hands out of my pockets and tenting my nose and mouth to contain a violent peace overtaking my body, the ponies watching, my eyes on them, theirs steady on me, their shadowy grayness blending with the grays all around us as I shuffle backward, until—and with the same liberty as the fog—dusk transforms seeing into memory.

Nada at the Market

Jose Araguz

The crowd parts, faces away
into each stall. Nada can't see

over the heads of strangers, walks
noting each back turned against her,

each set of shoulder blades tucked
under fabric like wings hidden

by sheets in a forgotten room,
unused. Nada feels her basket

hit her side, looks down into
the frayed straw cross-hatch holding

nothing. The cracks of light show
the earth broken in pieces she carries

with her, like this passing through
one more crowd, another path

open, a crack where Nada falls.

By Then, There's Nothing

Bryan Asdel

My dear, let me tell you: when I'm stupid
you will come home from a day
of work, bathe the shell of me in gray bathwater, dab
armpits I cannot wash, the crotch I can't know
anymore—nothing in me an inhabitant ghost.

While my teeth grind, I will wander in years ago,
a rough mountain grass
with you, you will always look that way, young to me.
Then you will pull my carcass
from the porcelain, pat me off with a faded
pink towel my mother gives us
before she is gone. You'll rub my body,
an empty prayer statue, as if the past
were stuck in it, waiting to come out.

You will take me downstairs where you've crushed walnuts
for baklava, pray it will make me remember
what one of my favorite things were, though
I won't remember one of them was you.

Apart

Theodore Worozbyt

A pot of potatoes for pirogis now bubbles a cauldron of chicken feet with no alpha in between. Chopped liver should be chopped, in the manner of the country. Everything possible to be annihilated is an imago of mimesis, my mouth, too little bone where there once was bone, and then there's nothing left to eat with but a shadow, a hinge beneath one's eyes, and the cabbages all lie buried in the cellar. Drag or draw out your sword of clouds, I said, and as if we could with words, I insisted we should have more: more vinegar, when quiet like gauze would have been better than the blank white tape that wound around the feet to scalded music. The Bechsteins for the double concerto both of whom were placed softly at an oblique agon of pauses might have been a souvenirization of the agon, but it, the baby turtle shell, melted in your hand, took figuring wing in a slow of inky fingers. The rufous towhee flicked and stabbed at death's glitter and grubs; along the maple's thin-slid trapezial shades a cardinal twitched a sole incarnadine flame for an hour: failed pyre of firsts among the tree roaches and rainy grass. Pailed fire in our emperor-couched Esmeralda house, hearth spread with green paint and the window muttons too. Boiled eggs, never boil them! It's the same, ask any hunter, sliced paper-thin, with the heart.

For the farmers of Dugway Sheep Kill[1]

AJ Urquidi

When I found the lambs collapsed beside their mothers
on the hillside overlooking Goodyear Road I buckled

beneath their insoluble calm. Not a panicked
expression among six thousand reposed, six thousand

puffs sprinkling the valley like a teddy bear
caught in the lawnmower of the desert's dawn

unraveling. I knelt beside the nearest unknowing
ewe and clamped my hand on her snout to steady

the teeth, still chattering, behind a mind sweetly frozen
in some ambivalent paradise of swaying meadows,

rivers of downy frost. What sublime shepherd
led this flock into dreaming? What insufferable thief

snatched so many white woolen ghosts in the witnessless
night? Six thousand sleeping children sprinkle the desert

1. Allegedly, U.S. military accidentally released VX nerve gas at Dugway Proving Grounds, Uta, 1968, killing and incapacitating around 6,000 privately-owned livestock. The surviving contaminated were euthanized.

like Sinai—I want to believe they slipped with peace
into exodus but will none ever need to again?

On the mount I couldn't steady my teeth, still chattering,
behind a mind aware that it could have been us,

it should have been us. It should have been us.

What the Ocean Said to the Black Boy

Clint Smith

You know how to swim, boy?
I know you can float
felt you bobbing along my surface
before you even knew you could.

They say you just a conflagration
of bad intentions, boy
use me to put you out
don't want you burning this place down

again.

They see
a little too much L'Ouverture in you
a little too much Turner
a little too much of what they already had enough of.

What you see when you look at me?
You know how many of y'all I swallowed?
You just a drop of ink
on this canvas,

boy.

They call me blue because
they don't understand how the sky work
they call you black because
they don't know understand how God work.

But today
I'm still blue
you still black
ain't nothing gonna change that.

Dirty Dora

Nancy Bourne

I seen the papers. I know what they say about me, what they call me. Dirty Dora. Just because I danced one dance with a colored boy. Just one dance. This whole town's been in a tizzy ever since some fancy court said we got to go to school with the colored. So they make me out to be some kind of criminal and shut me up here in the courthouse. It ain't exactly a jail, at least there ain't no bars. But the door's locked, except when they bring me food or let my mama in to see me, which I wish they wouldn't, she's so shamed.

I been here a month, mostly in this room, sitting on this bed, looking out the window at the statue of Mayor Spottswood, white as chalk, up in front of the courthouse. Dead now. I ain't seen Trish or Faye since they picked us up, but I reckon they got them stashed away in rooms like this too. They supposed to get me a lawyer, but I ain't seen one yet.

Dirty Dora. It's not even my name, which is Doreen. But they don't care bout that. They just want to make a joke out of me, that's all. All those little pipsqueak boys in my class. The girls ain't a lot better. Much shorter than me with thin little arms and no chest at all. Some of them are nice though and ask me to draw things, horses mostly or girls all dressed up in pretty clothes.

One thing about being shut up in here, I don't have to go to school. I been going for eight years, seems like forever, and I never got no further than sixth grade. Had to repeat first. Then nasty old Miz Brown failed me in fourth. I'm fourteen now and stuck in sixth grade, second time around, and I can't read the science book or the history

book or any of the books. I can do the arithmetic good as the boys, so long as they ain't written out problems. Numbers has always been easy for me. That's how I know I'm not dumb. But, since I'm no good at reading, they'll probably flunk me again. All I can say is, two more years I'm outa there. No more school.

Long about fifth grade I started changing. Got real tall, started developing, got myself a bra. The other girls in my class stayed little, even the ones in sixth who had been in my class before Old Lady Brown flunked me. I could see them trying not to look when we changed clothes for gym.

Funny thing was those same little girls like me in gym class. We line up to choose sides for kickball, and whoever's captain yells out, "I want Doreen."

"No fair. You had her last week," the other captain says.

So they draw straws, and the long straw gets me. And good for them because we won every time. So I like gym class. But I like art best. You give me a subject and a pencil and some paper, and I can make it look so real. Dogs, cats, pretty girls with curved lips and long hair, like in the comics.

"Bet you can't draw a monster," Jerry Myers said just last month in that smart- alecky voice of his.

"What kind of monster you want?"

"I don't know. With fangs and stuff."

"Piece a cake," I said. Fact is, I could do it with my eyes shut. I'm that good. But I still hate that Robert E. Lee School. Every time I have to read out loud, I say all the big words wrong and people laugh. I hear 'em call me Dumb Dora. Teachers too.

Back when I was in fourth my mama took off from her job at the Mill to see why I was doing so bad. She made me sit there while she asked Miz Brown straight out, "How come Doreen ain't moving up with her class?"

"I hate to tell you, Miz Harris," the old witch said, "but your daughter is behind in her reading."

"Well, whose fault is that?" my mama asked.

"I've done my best with her, but she just doesn't seem to progress."

"You think another year in fourth will help?"

"If she applies herself, I don't see why not."

But I been applying myself and it don't do no good.

"Why can't I quit Robert E. Lee and go to beauty school?"

"Law says you gotta stay till you're sixteen," Mama says.

So I kept on going, kept on getting bigger. At recess when all the girls are playing hopscotch or jumping rope, I sit on the steps and draw pictures. That's how I met Trish.

She's this big red-headed girl who turned up one day during lunch period and sat down next to me on the stairs.

"You a good drawer," she told me after she been watching awhile.

"Thank you," I said. "You ain't in this school, are you?"

"Nope. I'm in seventh over there." She jerked her thumb toward the junior high
across the street.

"How come you over here?"

"I got permission to go home for lunch, but I usually mess around instead."

"Messing around at a grammar school don't sound like fun to me."

"Yeah. Well, I seen you over here all the time and couldn't figure out what somebody so grown up was doing at this baby school."

"I don't read so good," I said.

"Me neither," she said. "Draw me."

I looked sharp at her long carrot colored hair, her icy white skin, her purple dress bulging at the top with the biggest bosom you ever saw, and I said, "I need colored pencils for you."

Well, Trish rescued me. Mama says she ruined me, and I have to admit she got me into this mess. But I don't blame her. I didn't have no friends till she showed up. Early on, I'd had a couple of girlfriends at Robert E. Lee, but they'd moved on to the junior high and didn't have nothing more to do with me. Anyway, Mama said they was trash, and maybe she was right. All I know is till Trish showed up, I was lonesome all the time. Mama was working the afternoon shift at the Mill and didn't get home till after I went to bed. I don't have no daddy; he joined

the Army when I was a baby and never come back. There was another baby before I was born, but he died.

The drawing was what did it. Trish loved the picture I did of her with the colored pencils I borrowed from the art teacher. I say "borrowed" because I meant to give 'em back. Anyway, Trish had me draw a picture of her friend Faye in Calhoun Street Park after school. Faye's a short little thing with a dirty blond pony-tail and skinny legs. So now I had two friends.

"You like dancing?" Trish asked me one day when we was smoking cigarettes in the park.

"Sure do," I said, although I had never danced a step in my life.

"You got a radio?"

"Yeah?"

"They play all kinda good music on WBTM. Elvis, Buddy Holly, Bill Haley."

"Sure do," I said, bluffing. What did I know? Mama told me she'd wear me out if she ever caught me listening to that nigger music.

"Let's go over to your house and do some dancing," Trish said.

"My mama wouldn't like that," I said.

"Is she home?"

"No."

"What she don't know won't hurt her."

"What bout your house?" I asked.

"My mama's home. You don't want to mess with her," Trish said. Faye nodded like she knew. "Come on, Doreen, let's go to your house."

I wanted to say no, but I didn't want to lose the only friends I had.

"Mama'll know if we leave a mess," I said.

"We won't leave no mess."

And we didn't. Most afternoons after school we'd have our smoke in the park. It was April and getting warm and it felt good to sit on the benches with my friends, like other people, and smoke our Camels. Sometimes the grown ups gave us dirty looks, but we just laughed. Then we'd walk over to my house, which is one of those houses the Mill rents out to its workers. They're all alike, wood frame, most of them

needing a paint job, a little patch of grass out front. My bedroom is small, just enough room for a single bed and a chest of drawers. But the living room is big enough for dancing. We'd shove the sofa up against the wall and carry the two chairs and the rug into the kitchen. The rug was easy, just a small rag rug Mama made. Trish found the radio in the kitchen and turned on WBTM.

I'll never forget that first time. This voice was singing, "Get out from that kitchen and rattle those pots and pans," and Trish just started bouncing all over the room, waving her arms and singing. She grabbed Faye's hand and they bounced together, twisting and turning and laughing and singing. I hadn't heard that song before, which is hard to believe, but remember, I was in sixth grade with all those little kids.

"Come on, Doreen," Trish called out and grabbed my hand. I started hopping from foot to foot.

"Ain't you even been dancing?" she asked.

It was pretty obvious I hadn't.

"Come on, Faye," she said. "We gotta teach her."

They started me out just bouncing to the beat, not even moving my feet, just bending my knees up and down and waving my arms. Once I got the beat, they showed me how to move my feet. We practiced awhile, and pretty soon I got it. I got better and better at it. I didn't want to stop. Mama never guessed because we fixed up that living room good as new every time.

That summer Trish and Faye came over to my house every afternoon as soon as Mama left for work. We didn't always dance. Sometimes we played rummy or double sol. Sometimes we read love comics. One day Trish said, "I'm sick of dancing with girls. Let's find some boys to dance with."

"How do you mean?"

"I hear there's some dancing in the pavilion in Boyle Park," Faye said.

Trish perked up. "Yeah? When?"

"Friday nights."

"I can't," I said. "Mama won't let me." Truth is I was scared to be out in that park at night.

"Whose gon tell your mama?"

"Somebody might see me."

"Somebody's gon see you, alright, but they ain't the type to tell your mama."

I see now I was dumb to listen to her. But I loved that dancing. And, to tell the honest truth, I didn't know no boys and I was itching to dance with one. If I hadn't listened to her, I wouldn't have met Jimmy.

It was August and steaming hot that first time, even at eight o'clock at night. Trish, Faye and I walked through the park to the Pavilion, talking and laughing real loud to cover up how nervous we were. I was wearing my white pedal pushers and those cheap ballet shoes that look like Capezios, and I was sweating under my arms. Once we got there, we hung around on the sidelines for a few minutes watching couples close dancing to *Love Me Tender*, which was playing on the jukebox. I looked around to see if I knew anybody. I didn't and it made me feel easier.

Trish and Faye started dancing with each other, showing off, hoping to attract some boy's attention, which they did pretty fast. Then this soldier come up and asked me, real polite, "May I have this dance?" He was taller than me and had this blond curly hair and blue eyes. I mean I couldn't believe somebody so handsome was asking me to dance. *All Shook Up* was playing on the jukebox, and he took my hand and swung me out and pulled me back to him, his feet hopping to the beat and me right along with him.

"I haven't seen you here before, sugar," he said when we took a rest from the dancing.

"This my first time."

"You in high school?"

I nodded. You couldn't tell a man old enough to be soldier that you're in sixth grade. "You in the Army?" "Fort Dix."

"Where's that at?"

"North Carolina, about an hour from here. Name's Jimmy," he said, "and if you have no objection, I'm gonna monopolize your company tonight."

I kept staring at him and breathing in a lemony smell like from shaving lotion and smiling like a big fool.

"Not much of a talker, are you, sugar?" he said. "What do you want me to say?"

He laughed. "Anything you want to say."

"I can draw," I said.

He looked at me so solemnly. "Well, you have to draw me some time," he said.

I was having trouble breathing, he was so close. I wanted right then to draw him. I wanted to take my blue pencil and color in those deep violet eyes. I wanted to use the side of my pencil to shade in his cheekbones. I wanted to touch his ears that were so small and perfect. I wanted to feel the skin of his white neck against my mouth.

"I'm Doreen," I said.

I saw him every Friday night after that. We jitterbugged and slow danced. He would pull me right onto the front of his starched khaki uniform and rock me back and forth, whispering right in my ear, and every part of my body would be singing. We took breaks from the dancing, of course. Out in the dark where there were lots of trees. I let him do whatever he wanted, it felt so good. We didn't go all the way; I held him off there. But I wanted to. I still think about it. I loved that man.

Now here comes the bad part. School started and after a couple of weeks it got cold out there in the park. People stopped coming on Friday nights. But we wanted to keep dancing.

"How bout your house, Doreen?" Faye asked.

I thought about Jimmy in my house, sneaking up to my bedroom, shutting the door. I almost said yes.

But then, "Too many people," I said. "Besides the neighbors would tell my mama."

"I know a place," this GI said. His name was Wayne and I never seen him before. "What place?" I could tell Trish was all for it.

"Called Dix Dance Club. Other side of town."

"What other side of town?"

He named a street I hadn't heard of. I didn't suspect. The cops don't believe me, but I had no idea.

"What's it like," I asked.

"It's a guy's living room. He got hundreds of records and he charges a dollar a person to let people dance there."

"How come I never heard of it?" I asked.

"Come on, sugar," Jimmy said. "It'll be just fine. You know you want to."

He was right. I wanted to real bad.

So the last Friday night in September, Trish, Faye and I met Jimmy and a bunch of soldiers in the park like always, only this time the soldier named Wayne had a Ford car. We all squeezed in, the girls sitting on the boys' laps. We was so busy giggling and carrying on, I didn't pay no attention to where we was going.

"Here we are," Wayne said as he slammed on the breaks.

There weren't no street lights, no lights in the houses, no car headlights even. It was dark.

"It's okay," Jimmy whispered, kissing my ear. "You're with me." He pushed me off him and out the car.

Suddenly I heard Peggy Sue coming from somewhere and I seen Wayne standing in the open door of one of the houses, motioning us to follow him. "Hurry up," he called out in a voice we could barely hear.

Now what choice did I have? We couldn't just stand out there in the dark.

Inside, the room was bare. No furniture. Shades over the windows. The floor was scuffed up and some of the boards was cracked. The only light come from a bulb hanging from the ceiling. And it smelled. Not real bad. Just like yesterday's dinner.

And then we saw them. Standing in a line against the wall, an old man, maybe fifty, two young ones about my age, and a small woman with a rag around her head.

They was colored. We was in colored town.

"We're leaving," Trish said.

We rushed back out the door, but Wayne had gone off. Left us high and dry. Jimmy came outside. "Come on in, sugar. You can't stay out here. I promise we won't be here long."

"How we gon get home?" It was all I could think about.

"Wayne'll be back. I promise."

I believed him.

What happened next I can't explain. One of the colored boys put a record on the record player, which was in the kitchen, and the soldiers started dancing, first by themselves, turning and twisting and singing, then they was pulling Trish and Faye out into middle of the bare room. Jimmy and I just watched. A few minutes later some more girls turned up, girls we'd seen dancing in the park. White girls. But they didn't act surprised like we was. It was like they'd been here before.

The old guy was handing out paper cups of lemonade, and we all started drinking it. We was thirsty. Now I know that it had something in it, but at the time I didn't even suspect. Tasted like lemonade. After awhile, the beat of the music just got to me and I found myself hanging onto Jimmy and swinging round the room.

Then I somehow lost hold of Jimmy and he was dancing with Faye and it didn't even bother me. I just kept on dancing by myself. And then those colored boys was in the middle of us, shaking their shoulders and their hands in time with the music, moving their feet in a kind of shuffle. And the music wasn't Elvis or Buddy Holly anymore. It was this dirty song called *Work with me Annie* that WBTM wouldn't play on the air. But I'd heard about it. And I didn't know what to do with that dirty music and those colored boys shaking their hips and laughing. Then one of 'em grabbed my hand and swung me round so hard I got dizzy.

I was standing in the middle of the room, with that colored boy hanging onto me, crying out for Jimmy, when the door burst open.

Mama says they gon send me away to reform school. Says they gon reform me so I never dance dirty with colored boys again.

"What happened to that lawyer?" I said.

"He's the one got you reform school instead of jail," she said.

She keeps on crying every time she shows up, says she so ashamed.

"What'd I do wrong for you to turn out so delinquent?" she says. I reckon she got that big word from the newspaper.

"Weren't your fault," I tell her.

"It was them girls. They the ones made you so wicked. You stay away from them in that reform school. You hear me?"

"Yes m'am," I say, but I'm glad to hear Trish and Faye will be with me. Makes me less scared.

I heard the cops just got those colored people and all the girls. They didn't bother with the soldiers. I wrote to Jimmy, but I didn't hear nothing from him. I figured the guards was throwing his letters in the trash. I missed him so much I started drawing him. They give me paper and a pencil and I drew him over and over. I said to those pictures, "Hurry up, Jimmy. They gon send me away."

But he didn't come. Then I figured it out. Jimmy's done with me; he don't really love me. He'd visit if he did. Or at least write. I try not to be mad at him, but he's the one put me in that colored man's house. If anybody's dirty, it's him.

I know I ain't. I may not be good at reading, but I ain't the Dirty Dora they talk about in the papers. And I can draw. Nobody can draw like me.

The Heiress

Chelsea Bodnar

mimosas & patchouli, the same photograph again & again, a flipbook
in absolute zero. she buries her face in the blush of red hibiscus, pulls the petals off &
makes a few wishes. spun sugar lining the veins, the soft walls of the heart
fleshy & condescending,
plum without a pit. a handful of stingless bees.
skipping moonstones, watching them stack like matches in the ashtray
of the lake, her fingers straight & fine as cigarettes. casual curve of the wrist,
tarantella of the nerves. fine-combed boredom, arching violin strings,
the unshakeable feeling of being tuned.
bitter like biting the petals from roses,
rhapsody in perfume samples, in stale chamomile teacups.
posh novellas split like fruits on bamboo-slatted beach chairs. tedium.

We Have Learned the Signs of Winter

Lauren Boulton

When mother says the cows are scruffier than usual around the nape,
we wonder. Our neighbor leans over the fence
and peels back the skin of an onion. He says, thick, like the bottom
of my feet. He says, rough, like a cat's tongue. And we suspect.
But we don't believe, not until we can't sleep for all the mice
chewing their way into the walls. We still don't know until father
pulls out the turkey's breastbone, purple as an aubergine.

Sure enough, in the honey-fox of morning, we hear
the rattle that means they're coming. The frost daughters,
who wake white, etched with cold flowers. Girls who
unfold the weather in vanes, shudder it
across tin rooftops. We hear them move through the streets
each footstep a half-minute behind the last, their dream-urgency
unmatched by the fury of the wind. In their wake, the trees unsap.
The roads ice over.

Inside our house, mother binds our mouths with scarves, stacks our
heads in hat after hat, burrows our hands in the yarny jaws of mittens.
Father blows into the coals that are left in the furnace. They tell us,
muffled, in the cloud language of heat leaving a body, not to look
outside.
But when they snore, puddled together on the icy tile, we go to the
window anyway.
Once, we saw one snapping an icicle from a tree, eating it in three bites.
Another time, we watched one of them walk across the river, the water
hardening
clear to the bed underneath her feet.

Aunt Phyllis

Trent Busch

No one thought of Aunt Phyllis
as anything more than a nosy
relative searching for night scraps.
She could take the smell straight
out of morning coffee, rumoring
red spots into breakfast
eggs, putting the cry back
into milk spilled, quitting
a world fast snubbing her.

Then when worst was surely
over, she burst into the end
of Christmas Eve, the button
and hole not matching on her
sweater, to say Grandmother
had once taken a hired man
as lover, so who knew which
of us might be a bastard or, just
as bad, sitting next to one.

If every life needs form, she
was the change that reels us
together when we stand outside
facing a north wind with
a burned-out house behind us
or the change we need when
after months of evacuation,
we return to reenter our city
where clouds threaten again.

Drop the Anchor

Peter Burzynski

A retraction of the above
would be noted, but mildly

unnecessary. Weather has
most recently been reported;

cats and dogs have been
acquitted of all charges.

Additionally and as such,
Africanized bees are bees

just like the rest of us.
Obfuscation is anxiety.

Furthermore, but not wholly—
chocolate, red wine and coffee

are not in fact good for anyone.
Please refrain from further science.

Season of the Storms

Brandon Patterson

The French Quarter's immaculate grime is untouched. Other parts of the city are still husks, or patched together with tarps and plywood. This place is spared: the water wasn't high enough, the looters absent.

Grant walks back towards the river. On the corner of Canal and Decatur a smiling man preaches from atop a cooler. He wears draped sheets that have been dyed red, yellow, green, and orange. An equally flamboyant umbrella—this one a swirl of rainbow stripes—stands unused behind him.

"The Lord will wash this land away," the man says, the curls of his beard catching sunlight. "He will wash it and all of the sinners away, and there will be nothing to save you from the flood."

It has been three years since Grant and his crews slogged through living rooms of knee-deep mud, and used boards and shovels to prod alligators from bedrooms and basements.

He's in New Orleans for a national anti-poverty conference. "Work Hard in the Big Easy" is its motto. The Marriott's lobby writhes with suits. His colleagues are marked by name badges and briefcases. Most are from the north—the layered outfits and long coats carried on arms betray a homeland of icy Januaries. They talk about the Quarter, about seafood, about jazz bands, about drinking hurricanes. They speak like people in new love.

Grant has no romance with New Orleans. He eats at the Arby's next door and watches television by himself until he falls asleep.

Grant is from Plaquemines Parish, a strip of sandbar and swamp that juts into the Gulf like a taproot. The Mississippi halves Plaquemines lengthwise, and sitting uneasily on its bank is the town of Venice, last stop on the Great River Road and where Grant has spent the last ten years of his life building tiny houses and running job training programs for the stragglers left behind by oil money. Even before the storms, wealth slipped away like subsiding marshes into the Gulf.

Katrina sank Venice. The surge rolled into and over houses and left broken boats, lawn furniture, and fragments of other homes clogging doors and hallways in the few surviving houses. The smell was rot and death.

His convention tag identifies him as a resident of Louisiana, so he leaves it in his pocket. It only delays the inevitable questions of his home state, so he doesn't talk with the convention goers. If he tells them he's from Venice the follow-up is always, "What was it like during Katrina?"

It used to be that in the eyes of the larger world Louisiana was New Orleans. Now the state has no meaning outside of Katrina and Rita. He could tell people he was from the north edge of Monroe and they'd still ask if he got out. He was either a person who fled to his roof in rising waters or watched the shaking ceiling of the Superdome, or he was nobody. Of course, he doesn't live in Monroe. He lives in Venice, and he did get out, was out before Katrina had formed.

On the morning of August 23, 2005, when Tropical Depression 12 rose up over the Bahamas, Grant was driving past Houston. He was in San Francisco with his sister as Katrina entered the Gulf, and he watched the aerial footage on the news for the next three weeks. When his supervisor finally told him the agency was pulling itself together, he went back to Venice.

Highway 23 had been cleared of everything except fishing trawlers and houses. The trees had combed cars, trash, and livestock carcasses from the water. Landmarks had been tossed, with buildings

shifted from one side of the road to another, netted in downed power lines, or rammed into trees and each other. The structures that still stood fixed were gas stations and grocery stores, though with caved walls and missing roofs. A few gutted stilt houses also remained. More common were the junk-crusted patches of grass that held grids of naked floor and foundation.

He couldn't reach Venice after returning to the coast: ring levees had trapped the surge waters and turned towns along the highway into lakes. He drove inland and connected with colleagues and out-of-town contractors and clean-up teams. For over a month he lived out of his car, and then in a mobile home the agency bought and parked as far south as the roads and water would allow. He spent long, quiet days moving debris and taking sledge hammers to houses on land too soft for bulldozers. Once, he found the bodies of an elderly couple wrapped and rotted into the rafters of their attic.

Venice's levees weren't cut and drained until September. The refineries came back first. Their helicopters swarmed as they always had. The air regained the taste of oil.

He didn't drive back to his house in Venice. The sale had concluded a month before his trip. He'd gone to San Francisco with most of his belongings in his trunk, almost two hundred thousand dollars in his bank account, a job waiting in Oakland, and the promise of finding a home near his sister and nieces. He put all of that to the side until the town was cleared. And then in winter, when the rebuilding began, he stayed, and now two years later he helps find home loans for the desperates who have returned. He lives in his agency's office and takes cocktails of Ambien and Scotch before going to bed on its sofa.

After a day spent attending lectures on Head Start best practices and new guidelines for home weatherproofing, Grant finds himself seated at a row of eight tables. He looks over a microphone stand and pitcher of water to the field of watchers. Their nametags glint.

Grant is flanked by other agency directors and execs from agencies across the Delta. Hattie Miles from Terrebonne. Rick Schad from Iberia. Thelma Baker from New Orleans proper. They tell their

stories. The quiet words wash over Grant. Tragedy and misery, either nothing fixed or nothing left to fix.

Even Matt Rieux starts softly when he talks. Matt is a boomer, a rah-rah guy who leads fundraisers and chairs the statewide membership association. A big man: few chairs seem stable under his bulk. He recites the litany. The fear comes through. The pain. Helplessness. He takes a breath when he brings up the morning after Katrina, and his voice rises and the skin not covered by beard or jacket reddens.

"You know who the first people were on the ground after Katrina? Wasn't the National Guard. Sure wasn't us. It was the Red Cross. The Red Cross was there within twenty-four hours after Katrina passed through."

He's shaking his head, emphasizing the ends of sentences by jamming the points of his fingers into the table. "Where were we? I had people in Shreveport and Vicksburg. People in Jonesboro, Epps. Hell, I had people in Little Rock and Memphis. Now you tell me how you get the hell out of the Delta and up to Little Rock before a storm hits like that."

He waits and looks to the listeners as if expecting a response.

"We'd run, gone and hid. We're supposed to be the frontline in the war on poverty and we'd retreated before we even knew where it was going to land. It took me a month to get organized and providing services again. People don't have water or houses and the most we got to help them is what, encouragement? And that's after a month. Where were we?"

Grant knows where he was: two thousand miles away and safe. He was two thousand miles away and safe with family in a dry state. Nothing will ever change that.

Kinds of Rubble

Zach VandeZande

Our childlessness sat between us like a rock for stoving heads in. It was the biggest one we'd seen. We were eating dinner and then there it was, white and glistening like all the others that had formed in our home. I knew if I picked it up that it would be cold and wet in my hand, like a hailstone, but that it wouldn't melt. It was the second week of this.

The first one I found was in the garage. I was sanding an old barstool that I intended to paint, and when I turned around it was there on the ground: that apartment I liked in Sacramento, the one that she thought was too large, too high-ceilinged. She wanted to feel cozy, which I understood. But now here was this thing on the garage floor, a small disappointment made manifest, corporeal. I picked it up and held it up to the light. It was opaque. I didn't feel any particular way about it. Just: there it was.

When she walked in to ask if I needed anything from the grocery store, I palmed it, casually slipped it into my pocket. I did not need anything from the grocery store. Maybe some craft beer if one struck her eye. I was thankful for her asking me. I was thankful for so many things.

Why put it in my pocket, though? Why hide it? I couldn't say.

There were others after that. Mostly small ones. The year she got me a bad birthday gift sat on the bedroom dresser. I didn't wear sweaters ever, and the gift of one seemed like a subtle complaint more than anything. Her coming home two hours late when I'd cooked her a nice dinner. I found that one perched on the lip of the toilet. I turned

on the ceiling fan, and a pebble-sized piece—the way she folds towels too haphazardly—struck the living room wall, plonking the plaster, leaving a mark. I hid them all in a Crown Royal bag, the same way I'd hidden my 5-ticket items from the Chuck E Cheese as a child, and stuffed it in my toolbox. If you shook them around they sounded just like rocks or marbles.

And then, during dinner, that first big one showed up, our childlessness. We looked at it and each other. She had some sauce dribbled on her chin.

After a moment she stood and went into the bedroom. She came back out with a wooden box inlaid with dragonflies that she'd got in college on a trip to Asia. Inside were more of them, ones I didn't recognize. To me they just looked like ice, mica. I went to the garage and retrieved mine, spread them out in front of me.

"I don't know what those are," she said, pointing. I said the same of hers.

She held up one that was about the size of her thumb. "This is all those shitty bands you listen to in the car."

I held up one of my own. "Fingernail clippings on the coffee table."

She held one up. "Also fingernail clippings, just on the bathroom floor."

I couldn't help smiling. "Mine's worse. And you've got pasta sauce on your chin."

"Well," she wiped her face. "This one's how nothing you own has a place where it goes. And this is that time at the zoo. This is when you didn't call the cable company for two months after I told you to."

I told her some more of mine. I thought it wasn't that bad. They were so small. They weren't millstones and this wasn't what drowning looked like. It was almost nice.

"This one I don't want to talk about," she said, holding up one that seemed flecked with gray.

"Why not?"

"Because it's silly. It's stupid. And it's not even true."

"You can tell me anyway." I didn't know if that was how I really felt about it. Faith in yourself is important.

She hesitated, gave a small smile. "I was at your office, in the lobby. I was waiting on you to come down. And I heard someone talking about you, a woman. And it was like in that moment she knew you better than I did. Which isn't true, and isn't your fault, and is gross of me, and I know that already, so you don't have to get into it."

I'd never done anything to betray my wife, but that I knew exactly who she was talking about was probably betrayal enough. In response I held up a piece of my own. "This is Troy. Just all of him, every little shitty thing about him. So we're both petty. It's even."

And it was. We counted up the pieces, and there was an equal amount either side. Except now there was this new piece, fist sized, between us on the table. I asked her if she knew what it was, and she did.

"It's that you want to have children."

"Oh," I said. I tried to say it in a way that made it smaller, that shrank the thing on the table into nothing, that made everything between us still even. But there's no changing what's true.

I picked it up. I had one of those moments where I knew what I was doing was wrong—terrible even—but I did it anyway. I held it out to her. "I think this one might be yours after all."

And she took it. She placed it in the box with the others. And then a bunch of things happened after that, things that I could tell you. About the other ones, the larger and larger pieces that kept turning up, their crushing weight, how they strained the drawstring of my bag and kept her box propped open for each of us to see. But I don't know. The story seems told.

When I Press Into You

Jamie Lyn Bruce

I am trying to create a map
of all the people you have been
each time I have known you.
I am trying to remember every cell
our bodies have forgotten. Every day
we are losing parts of ourselves.
We are not the same as we were
when we touched beneath blisters of sky,
mouths chapped and swollen from pressing.
Our skeletons change; in time
our bodies will never have touched,
you will never have known me.

To a Christian Man

Cat Dixon

Divorced, dirty atheist,
I'd never get a second look,
but what if I dye my hair, change my name
to Mary Magdalene, you call yourself Jesus,
and we'll go away from here and make
things appear where nothing was
(multiply like fish and loaves of bread)?
What would Jesus do if a pretty, little thing
like me sat on his lap? By myself
I could raise Lazarus and the church.
By myself, I twist my curls and each knot
becomes a thorn. I'll brush
my hair for weeks waiting for a reply.

Dust

Andrew Dillon

—the granulated accumulation of all things unused,

a refusal to be forgotten.
So useless to clean it, if we take a long view.

You may dedicate a whole weekend to scouring, but it buys
only a day or two.

Your room—bookshelves, blinds, every ninety-degree angle—
is a fan of dust.

The only way to get rid of it is to get rid of everything.

Maturing to Youth

Alex Hughes

Clear away the craggy overgrowth,
gray to the world, worn-down, smoothed-out,
clear layer after layer to free the green
of trembling youth underneath. Fragile
emerald of the darkness, our shame and
naiveté, step into the light to reflect the
all-seeing flame, then watch thorn and thicket
fall away, wither and fade and die, finding
no purchase in a body free of lies.

The Old Ladies at the End of the World

Katherine Holmes

They situate their hindsight lawnchairs
to see perennials like a skyline
discoursing the longlost impulse.
The sparrows linger like stars
birdfeeders ford the bantered breeze
one outknits the gnats.

She gossips like the tied-down leaves
about loose felines and their progeny
and the sass who sold her food stamps.

Her sister hushed as cloud and hale
has walked on Sunday towards the casino
configuring sevens and blessings.

The daughter with the disease can see
the hope of downfalls all around
she laughs like a dirigible.

They hear the government like gypsies
they spread food for birds and strays
they impersonate the in-laws
calling a loner to their yard.

They sit through an evacuation

savoring it like someone else's forecast
the last to leave the area.

They only call at holidays
or when they can't move from the pillow
and the ambulance knows their doorstop.

They might have stashed the gingerbread shingles
they left the workman like one last glimpse
and the aurora of a stained glass lamp
for those who passed and never saw
a Wedgewood couple on a pedestal
dancing to the Blue Danube.

After the War

Alexandra Viets

The mother I knew reached out her almond hands and drew me in. She bent down, eyes wide, as she began to sing.

Chodzi lisek koło drogi *A little fox walks near the road*
Cichuteńko stawia nogi, *It steps very quietly*
Cichuteńko się zakrada, *It sneaks very quietly*
Nic nikomu nie powiada *And says nothing to anybody*

She takes my hands in hers, crosses hers over mine and we crouch down to search for the fox. We pretend, turning our heads sharply to the right and to the left, moving steadily across the living room floor to the steps of a folk dance. Her long hair falls across her face and then she rises up, out of breath, laughing, happy. The Poland of this nursery rhyme will be all that remains of a lost childhood and, in memoriam, I will sing it over and over again.

In the upstairs hallway, on the other side of my bedroom at 13 Malcha Marg in New Delhi, is where the *dhobi* irons. Dhobi uses an old fashioned skillet-iron. Young and handsome with a whirling moustache, dhobi irons barefoot, swaying to the *filmi* music he plays on his transistor radio. Sick with hepatitis, I am recovering. My liver healing itself as I spy on dhobi, watching him from behind my pink curtains, as if Dhobi were a tv show. I love dhobi and wish he would never leave. When I eat from my tray of sandwiches, dhobi eats from his. When I drink my glasses of ginger ale, dhobi sips his tea. When I

lie in bed for a rest, dhobi curls into a neat ball by the wall. Soaked by the afternoon sun, dhobi stretches out for a nap, his shapely toes resting to one side, his curly hair moving in black waves about his head. Dhobi brings me small presents; golden threaded bracelets, ruby-colored bangles. He waves and smiles to me from the other side of the window, gesturing with his hands to where a liver might be, his head nodding reassuringly, offering to give me food from the small metal container that he brings everyday, food that swims in a golden sauce.

But in the evening, dhobi is gone, the skillet-iron turned off, the hallway rich with the smell of steam and seared cotton and even traces of dhobi's oily *alu gobi* lunch. At dusk, when dhobi leaves, my liver and I venture into the hallway. I am headed for the giant wardrobe filled with my mother's clothes. I marvel at the clothes dhobi has pressed and placed on the hangers, his expert hands removing each and every crease, his skillet iron moving in between the hidden spaces of cloth, resurrecting the smallest of details from obscurity. Then I look to the back of the wardrobe, where my mother has stored coats and suits from long ago, encased in plastic bags and doused in mothballs. I hold my nose and reach deep inside. I am a thief, uncovering hidden treasure, for there are Chanel suits and Gucci bags, high-heel alligator shoes and a green suede coat with pockets lined in a satin so soft, that when I thrust my ten year old hands inside, they melt. Here, in this wardrobe, I find remnants of my mother's past, her life after the war.

When I ask, my mother throws back her head, her eyes rolling with the pretend fatigue of having to explain. *Oah*, she moans. Hasn't she told me before? Then we sit on her bed in the air-conditioned room with the shades pulled down as she files her nails, so perfectly formed that they have become almonds. She glances up at the Suits I have brought down, the Suits she loves with an abandon, Suits who are like lost relatives. I place *Yellow* next to *Pink* and beg her to tell me something. Admiring them, I stroke their fine fabric, exclaim at their vivid color, as my mother gradually begins to acquiesce.

My mother tells me the suits are French, of course. Chanel, she says. She tells me of the rendezvous with Edith Piaf in *Pink* and the drinks on boulevard Saint Michel. I suspect she could have been drinking her favorite Compari Soda with a white plastic whirl and a

sliver of lemon. There were dinners, of course, with a matching scarf, one end left to drape over her shoulder. In *Yellow*, she was in North Africa, meeting with journalists while translating for President Habib Bourgiba, the same Bourgiba who called my mother "his daughter" when Tunisia became independent in 1957. It was in *Yellow* that she witnessed Bourgiba rise up against France and in Yellow that she listened to him telling her of his nine years in prison. It was in *Yellow* that my mother spoke the flawless French and English she learned as a young girl, and later, at the convent in Warsaw where the Nuns made her memorize whole passages from the books they collected and hid underground--in the caves and the narrow spaces below the earth where the Germans refused to go. It was these languages, the languages of the Allies that forced their way through the cracks, finding their way into the hands of the anonymous Polish schoolteachers who defied the law by gathering groups of students and creating 'school' wherever they could; school in a cupboard, school on an abandoned factory floor, school in the shed of a private house where, in the winter, the temperatures plummeted below zero and children wrapped their feet with newspapers because there were no shoes. Punishable by death if discovered, these teachers and students persisted, while all around them books were burned, libraries closed, people murdered, theater, opera, films, Polish classical music forbidden. Little did the Nuns know, these were the languages that would allow my mother to become the translator for a newly independent North Africa, pushing forward reforms in family planning, women's emancipation, and public education. Little did they know, these were the languages that would determine the course of her life.

Years later, in Israel, when I am strolling through the orange groves in the leafy town of Kfar Shmaryahu with my Israeli boyfriend Danny Liran, the boy with Paul Newman eyes, my mother will disappear from our two-story house for a few hours every week. As I am kissing Danny and he is trying to speak to me in his perfectly broken English, my mother will return with armfuls of white embroidery from an orphanage in Jerusalem run by Polish nuns. Perched on the Mount of Olives, the orphanage took in children from the region, children left abandoned by war. My mother never speaks about these visits.

She goes alone, sitting in the back seat on the one-hour drive along the coastal road. A driver waits for her as she goes inside. The door is opened and she is met by the faces of little children who have come to recognize her, the lady with clothes and food. Behind the children are the Nuns, their Slavic features framed by their habits. When she returns home, my mother studies the stacks of embroidery she has purchased, the delicate flower patterns etched across the borders. Silently, she runs her hands over the fabric, her fingers tracing the edges of the cloth. When I return from my walk with Danny, my body suffused with the gentle clumsy way he places his arm around me, his sparkling blueness that matches the Mediterranean Sea, I find that my mother is in Warsaw. Half relieved I will not have to tell her about Danny, I wait. The embroidery has transported her back. I think the Nuns are looking over her shoulder now, remarking at the mastery of her tiny, perfect stitches. Stitches so precise they say she will do well as a nurse. This girl Maryna will be able to sew together any wound, a wound as deep as any a doctor would sew. I am sure she is listening to the Nuns, the ones who shielded her while bombs were dropping, the ones that gave her a second life.

In *Yellow*, my mother says with emphasis, as if she were approaching the grand finale, she shook hands with Cartier Bresson. My mother loves Bresson. She can never resist reminding me that Bresson began with a box Brownie. With the small brownie camera she gives me at age five, she tells me how to shoot. Watching the slow deliberation with which I approach my subject, my mother cries out, "*Faster*!" She wants me to be quick, to make *reportage*, to document. She quotes Bresson, "Il n'y a rien dans ce monde qui n'ait un moment decisive," (there is no moment in life that is not decisive) and she repeats this often, an urgency in her voice, as if to lose the moment were to lose life itself. I scour Bresson's photographs looking for a code to crack, a code that might work unlock my mother's past. I study every frame for that fraction of a second—the split hair in which life changes, when action fractures into new action. I try to imagine. I become an expert. I learn to unpack time, to anticipate, to detonate. In the air around me, I find tiny explosives of emotion. I learn from Bresson and his photographs. I become Bresson's bicycle as it sails across the page, a wheel suspended

in the air, a child's leg lifted in mid-step over a puddle of rain. In my mind's eye, I am always photographing, always preparing to shoot.

My mother purses her lips, her chest expands, this narrow window of life spilling out onto the bed where she sits, the memory of Bresson and *haute couture*, the extravagance of it, the pleasure of it too vast to stay on a single bed. I hold my liver and I cannot think of what to say. Her nails filed to satisfaction, my mother opens her hands to say more. The Suits make her talkative. But she only says a tiny bit more. In Yellow, there were the meetings in Tripoli, and the years of work in Benghazi just after the war, dispatched in a White Van by the U.S. Cultural Service traveling through small North African desert towns, showing American films like *Destination Moon*, *The Flame and the Arrow*, and *Rio Grande*, her waist-length hair tied in a ponytail--sent as a linguist wearing her Chanel Suits.

My mother never mentions the young boy, her son, who remained behind in the small house in Benghazi. The quiet boy who was born in 1946, a year after the war ended, the boy who would jokingly call himself Marco Polo, as he was born in Ceuta, Spanish Morocco en route to Benghazi while my mother circumnavigated the globe, forever looking for a place to stop, for the decisive moment that Bresson describes, when rhythm and life converge.

Years later, it is the boy who tells me more about the White Van and her travels through the countryside, how she was gone for days at a time. He tells me about the mother who was different from other mothers, the mother with a long braid riding on a bicycle in the early mornings to visit foreign prisoners in the Libyan jail. He never knew if she was looking for someone, or if she was just trying to make contact with other refugees, who, like her, had been spit out from the devastation of world war.

But so much talk has given her an idea. Gesturing, my mother declares she will call Mr. Shanthi, the tailor. She will remake the suits for me. *Pink* and *Yellow* will be revived. They will live on.

Now there is a tailor who sits in the dhobi's hallway. Dhobi has been moved downstairs where he irons by the kitchen. I can hear him singing when the window at the back is open and, from time to time, he will call out to me when a favorite song comes on the radio or he

will show me some food from his container that he wants to share. He calls out. "Good?" Even though I am no longer sick, Dhóbi always gestures to *his* liver, his head moving fluidly from side to side, the calming swaying motion that remains with me like the steady beat of a metronome.

Mr. Shanthi is old and does not listen to music. Instead, there is only the sound of his sewing machine chortling along, stopping now and then when Mr. Shanthi adjusts his position or stops to have his tea or scratch his beard. His large foot, cracked with age, pushes the small metal pedal up and down, as the bobbin moves the needle forward. Neck craned, Mr. Shanthi peers through his glasses as he looks down. Down to *Pink* and *Yellow*, the suits my mother has given him to alter, stitching new seams along the bands that held my mother's narrow waist. Reconfiguring the shape of the A-line skirt whose brilliant yellow color seems to scream underneath the jabs of the needle, Mr. Shanthi makes tucks and trims, oblivious to the history he is changing. I watch Mr. Shanthi from behind my pink curtains, as he drinks tea through the sugar cubes he places in the front of his mouth, sipping and sucking until his teeth begin to ache. Seeing my face pressed against the glass, he beckons. "*Come here, Baba*," he urges. "*Come to try.*" And I move slowly towards Mr. Shanthi, uneasy, my body soon enfolded in the annals of my mother's history.

The Parts I Didn't Plan For

Marie Hartung

People said I had child-bearing hips,
my pregnancy with you would come easy.

Twelve unbroken months I tensed my pelvis
on a flat metal table, legs up, heels high

with a needle thick and curled like spaghetti
winding its way, sometimes all the way, in.

For eleven months, the knife-sharp cervical pain
made me bleed but never conceive.

Finally, on Christmas morning, the news.
Time to trade injections for ultrasounds.

When you were born, you squeezed out like a concrete pumpkin.
You split my tailbone, a cracking of bone

so sonorous, surely heard down the maternity halls.
No one figured on your head, so dense and domical,

as if its size alone said, form will defy function.
Weight-bearing will be redefined.

I rocked you for four months sitting on my ankle.
Pain tore up my spine when the chair tipped back-

my legs numb, each night the only things asleep.
That was the easy part, the physical reminder

of our separation. The hard part was
learning I had yet to let you go,

years still unborn in the excess sky,
hips empty in the sway.

Coatimundi

Danielle Hanson

In early morning, I see you.
You may be groggy, like me;
you may be tired, waddling off to bed.
It's always dark under this
sky of trees. I can't imagine
you lifting your nose to see it,
half its bulbs burned out, half light.
I'm afraid I do not know you.

You are the room made of clay from my dream,
dusty, forgotten, and folding
in on itself like bread being kneaded,
stretched under a rolling pin,
wheels over macadam then gone.

I believe you to be deaf, your ears chaste.
I believe you cannot believe.
I see your one thought rattling
against your eyes like a moth stuck
inside a window.
I don't even know myself.

What Now, Monkey Face?

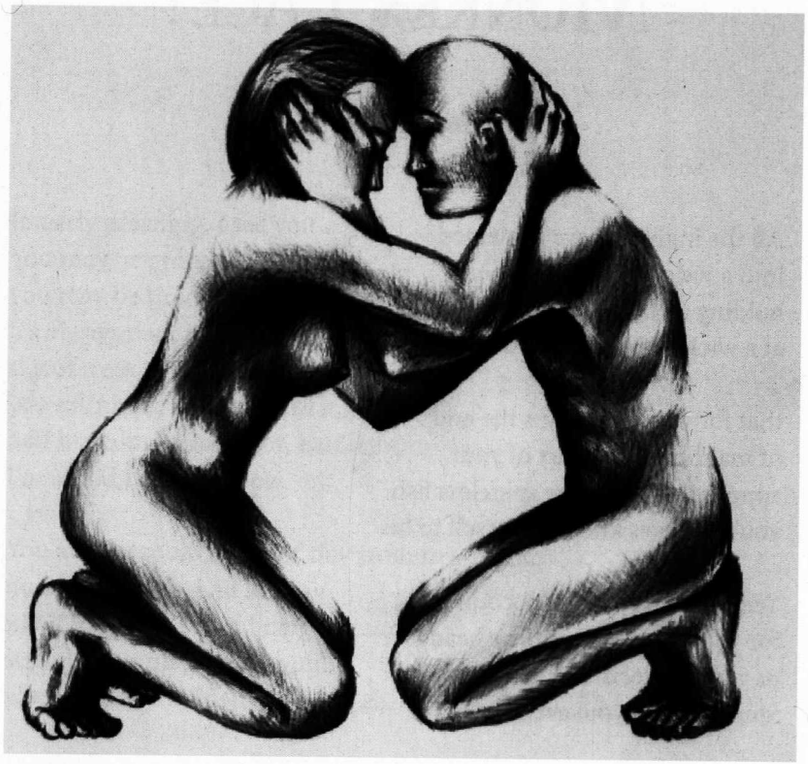
Jared Duran

All the inkblots have coalesced
into a vision of your mother
holding a pair of sewing scissors
at a wicked angle, and you worry

that for you this means the end
of manhood, the start of your
apprenticeship as the spineless fish
you've always known yourself to be.

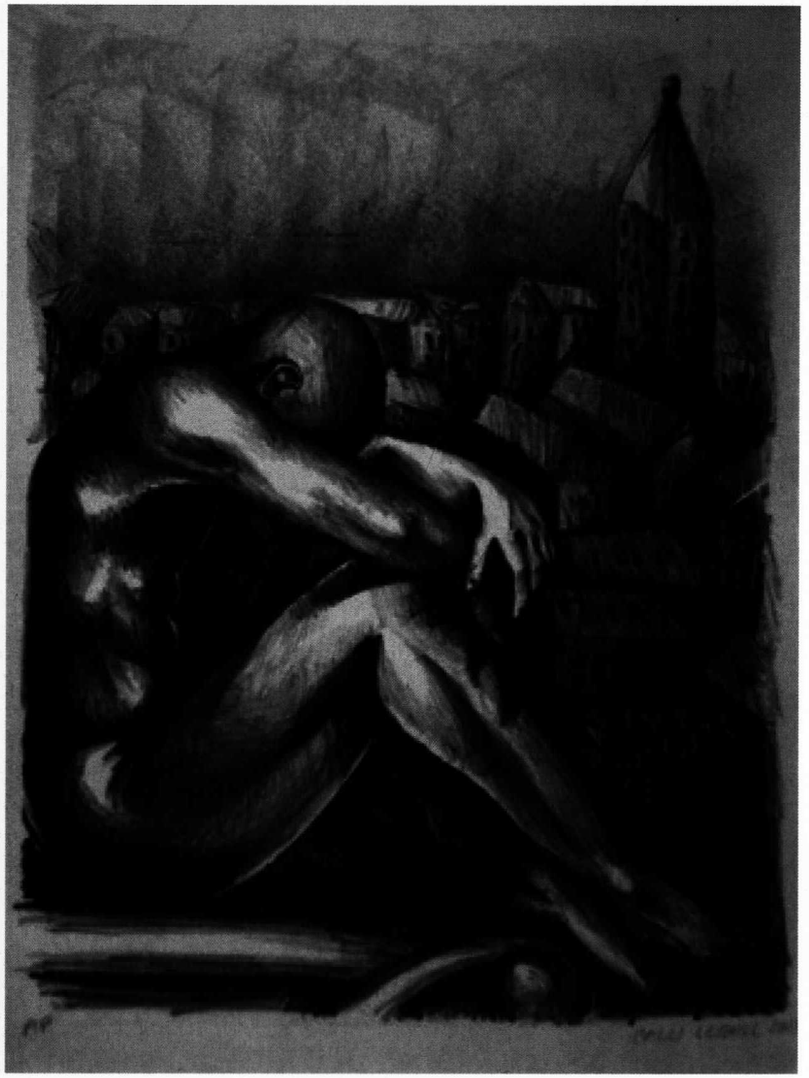
Yet, Rorschach never accounted
for your taste in maritime headgear
or want of decision-making skills.
Stuck behind you, even the man

who launched a thousand insecurities
wonders when the hell
this bastard will pick a lane.
Never mind the haunting final



Recognition and Admission

Calli Loskill



Settled

Calli Loskill

Two Buffalo

Michael O'Connor

The Psychadelic Hombre Serenades His Steed

Andy Westhoff

Looking Down

Stanley Horowitz

French Artist

Ivan de Monbrison

Planting Gold Ridge
Mid-1800s
for the Roberts Family

Iris Dunkle

On steamships crossing cold depths:
horizon slurs away—blue blur of what is left behind.

To seas of tall grass, tides of wind. Bumped and roughed
across dull plains, over snow covered mountains.

Days jostled between wagon slats until we reach the edge
where the sea tries desperately to reclaim the land.

Then, walking up hills damp with redwoods fronds,
into valleys wide-armed oaks, until we find a clearable plot.

Weeks digging out the wild to the root: felling redwood and oak,
grubing out the stumps and roots to avoid oak root fungus.

Then, walking behind a donkey pulling a plow slow
through cleared fields until hope forms.

Knee deep in that new dirt: in the scent and stain of it
fingers mound and plant careful rows of fragile seedlings.

For weeks pacing the rows watching the tiny trees
worry with rain, sway and bend nearly flat when wind rips from the sea.

Then, the widening of the trunks, the waiting on the wide porch
for things to grow and open as the stars sharpen and come into view.

Hint of pink buds like perfect tongues.
Then, hillside igniting into confetti of delicate pink blossoms.

The globes forming until burden weighs. Then propped branches.
Walking the rows like a child unable to wait.

The up at dawn readying bins and ladders. The twist of wrist to drop fruit.
The sticky arms and sweet smell. The bins filled with fruit.

Winter Skin

Clayton Adam Clark

My elbows are eczematous,
inflamed all winter long with blisters

and the rough patches. At zero degrees,
frostbite takes but thirty minutes.

My wife's fingers blanch in the cold,
her vessels constricted, we suspect,

by genes and a smoking mother. We're plaqued
inside and the dead cells pile up,

but it's just discomfort. The geese
we watch trade places in their *V*

above a city landfill share
the drag of their travel. My wife claps

and swears and rubs her hands, commanding
fingers pink, and the north side landfill

burns underground—a smoldering
event—so pillars of fire eat

gas waste twenty-four seven. The air
irritates there. Becoming smaller

within and larger without, I hand
over my gloves for the ride home,

and our gutter's fallen when we get there.
I don't seek causes. The three-foot-long

icicle she asked me to knock down—
a growth I forgot to see how long

it'd stall—lies shattered on the driveway
speckled with clots of frozen leaves.

Clangor

Damien Cowger

There's no complete silence
in the waking world.
The frustrated volume
of youth, the collective funerals
of leaves, and the incessant moans
of life, lying on its side
sometimes, and sometimes lying
to get by on the side.

Ringing in my ears
personal clangor.
I track a soap bubble drifting
above my daughter's head.
Delicately knuckle-balling its way through
time, space, and sound
waves.

The wind picks up and I'm certain
the bubble will rupture.
The ringing ramps up, and a dog barks
way down in a hollow
at something only it can hear.

My daughter gasps at the sound of trees
swaying, thinking they cause the wind.
Garbage tumbles along the earth
while bits of sand pelt my face.

The bubble bursts, the slick film splashes
to the grass in a crass slap, and the death is silent,
the sweet nothing of meringue.

To Shoot Guns in Mansfield or Get Help

Caroline Davidson

Loaded-up he has an invite to shoot in Mansfield, Ohio
with a painter of water
towers, and he, tax-evader who claims to like my factory-grim
sewer beauty,
banjos into chronic
improvisation, sprinkles germ on my dress
dirty anyway. I find on record, strategies to sustain new cultural
negative. A liver's art stretched bare burns away desert walls
to shoot guns in Mansfield.
He's down, too. Rented carpets.
Lakes affect
these liver stones. I can't walk to the library.

I can't hold that which resembles a plan, an order.

So obtain medicine maybe. I hope to keep the Scioto River stench
at memory's distance, to have marrow made fossil from
home-state dead guys.
Settle deposits, keep going.
There's a singular whistle factory in this town, after all.
And mulberries.
I should be grateful, though
things get in the way: Vibrato. Frizz. My nose in profile.

Loved

Reneé Bibby

A woman pulls her baby's arm out of the socket. Straight away it slides back in.

The baby is inconsolable. He howls. She bounces and shushes him, but he is like a siren in her ear, flailing and beet-faced. She jangles his stuffed octopus near his face. She twinkle-twinkle-little-stars with her lips close to his forehead, but damp, hot, curling his limbs into clubs, he keeps crying.

She wants to feel more guilty than she does. But, how can anyone bear it? Not just this moment, but all of it—the sound and fury, unabating. It would drive anyone to madness.

The baby pushes away, squirms, and bobbles, beating at the air with his limbs until she can't keep a grip on him. She thinks how the baby is right: they need distance from each other. She lays him down in the crib. She talks sweetly to him and rubs his belly. He arches his back; his whole body pulses red.

When she leaves the room, turns out the light, the baby screams louder like he is being freshly tortured. She sits on the couch. Puts throw pillows over her face. And she goes to the garage. Even there. She sits in the van and at last there is a cottony quiet. She grips the sides of her head, waits for the ping of her eardrums to subside.

No. She isn't going to leave. Just rest her head on the steering wheel, keeping her eyes on the door back into the house.

It's not restful. For she discovers she is listening intently. Listening for him and not hearing—not hearing is not knowing. She pictures him blue and not breathing. She pictures him tumbling from the

crib onto the floor. She pictures little delicate parts of him broken, and the thought of his suffering is a punch to her breastbone; she cannot bear it—she goes back to him.

He has rolled against the railing. He is crying low and steady like the tide. He has a single arm between the slats, but as she nears he holds his arms up to her. She heaves him up. As soon as she cups him to her, he quiets. He buries his head in her neck and hiccups himself to sleep.

It's tempting to take him back to her big bed where they can both collapse into sleep. The two discordant cords—the tight opposing strings of being both the pain and the comfort—they vibrate equally in her until they are a single numinous sound that reverberates infinitely into her future as a single sweet unbroken note. She doesn't risk waking him; she stays in the rocking chair. His head, a cinderblock on her collar bone.

The peachy smell of his fuzzed baby head, a reprieve.

A Series of Portraits in Which a Girl...

Kelly Lynn Thomas

1 Moves to LA Looking for Acting Work;

Charity is eager, young. She has the air of hope around her, the air of expectation. She decorates her apartment with posters from Julia Roberts movies—*Pretty Woman, Eat Pray Love.* Every morning before six, she runs down Hollywood Boulevard and counts the stars her feet hit, aiming to hit seven, for luck. At home again, she folds her body over her baby blue yoga mat and focuses hard on her intention: She pictures herself as the moment before the dawn, when the sky begins to lighten but the sun has not yet crested the horizon, when it is still dark but the promise of light hums in the air.

2. Finds No Acting Work Week After Week, Which Turns Into Month After Month;

Her morning runs grow infrequent, but Charity still auditions at every opportunity. When she gets a callback after exactly 123 days in L.A. and 59 auditions, she kisses each incarnation of Julia Roberts hanging on her wall.

The president of CleanCarpet Vacuums wants her to wear a skimpy purple dress, one that doesn't have a back and hardly any front, and pucker her lips while she pushes a CleanCarpet Vacuum back and forth, back and forth with one hand, her other hand resting on her hip.

Her right arm cramps after the twelfth take, but CleanCarpet's president demands more. Why is it so fucking hard for a dumb bitch to look *sexy*, for chrissakes?

At some point after Charity's arm has gone numb, he declares her work sufficient and pays her $150 for the day. She changes back into her jeans and finds a bar called Bud's that has margarita pitchers on special for $5.

3. Runs Out of Money;

Charity waits for another callback. It doesn't come. The man she has been dating because of his long, wavy hair tied in a ponytail tells her she needs to be *seen* more. Maybe she should get a job as a waitress. Somewhere the big shots go. He knows just the place: Roxanne's Downtown Bar and Grill. Charity has reservations, but few options.

4. Is Overcome by Despair, and Drugs Soon After;

Charity cries every day. She shows up late for auditions, then stops going altogether. The Julia Roberts posters come down; she prefers the walls' blank whiteness. Her friends stop asking her about new gigs. She catches her boyfriend snorting coke. He hands her a rolled up dollar bill and shows her what to do. Soon, she discovers she prefers heroin and the way it makes her feel blank like her walls.

5. Spends a Month in Rehab, Then Joins AA;

Charity's parents visit unexpectedly. Her boyfriend answers the door. She is shooting heroin between her toes, to avoid track marks where the big shots who supposedly frequent Roxanne's might see them. Her mother sputters with anger, then drags her daughter to rehab, buys her a monogrammed Bible, and hangs the *Eat, Pray, Love* poster in Charity's dorm.

Charity reads the gory parts of the Bible out of boredom and comes to hate the poster. She leaves both behind and joins AA. The boyfriend leaves her after he spends what money she has left at Bud's on margarita pitchers and cheap weed. She hangs three Natalie Portman posters on her wall—because she appreciates Natalie's intellect, she tells her friends—and begins auditioning again.

6. Occasionally Relapses;

A moment of weakness after a bad day of fruitless auditions for a series of Ford commercials and a bit part in a b movie called *All Shall Rise*—Charity rediscovers heroin. This time, she checks herself into rehab. She leaves her posters at home. Her parents pick up the bill,

again. She restarts AA, but the three-month mark gives her trouble. Her parents worry that this is a Big Problem. Charity insists she is fine.

7. Rediscovers Theater;

One of Charity's roommates in rehab writes a play called *A Not So Ordinary Affair,* about her life. The doctors believe it will inspire and motivate the patients to be creative and expressive; the doctors sponsor a production.

Charity participates at the behest of her therapist. She thinks the play is banal and beneath her, and often says things like, "When I was in *Rain Man* in college..." and "If only we had someone to do our costumes" and "This dialogue doesn't quite sound right." She knows she is being pretentious, but it makes her feel better.

When Charity gets out of rehab, she switches her auditioning strategy from commercials to public theater, and gets a call back after her second attempt: the lead's best friend in a play about aliens that's actually about Alzheimer's. She refuses to admit the production in rehab had anything to do with it. She claims theater is something to keep her busy until her big break.

Secretly, she is ecstatic.

8. Finds a Full-Time Job as the Director of a Community Theater in a Very Small Town in California;

And buys a house in the very small town in which the theater is located. She decorates it with posters from Broadway musicals like *Phantom of the Opera* and classic plays like *Death of a Salesman.* These are the first shows she saw as a child, though she tells this to no one.

At work, she selects plays to perform, makes schedules, hires directors and actors, and runs fundraising campaigns. She finds a new boyfriend, who also has a ponytail, and wears a beret, but who does not snort cocaine or even drink, who runs an Avant-garde art gallery called Expose in town. He makes her smile.

In the evenings, Charity runs in the park behind her house, focusing on her yoga intention from the morning:

She is the sun, peaking over the horizon.

She sends rays of light over green hills speckled with little white adobe houses.

Education Reform

Darrell Dela Cruz

He has a desk, how lucky.
He could hide his December
1968 non-mint condition *Playboy*
in there. Holly. Likes: playing
around with her cat, sleeping late
on weekends. Dislikes:

perverts and lecherous men.
Favorite Book: The Bible.
Also inside another John Updike story
wedged between other domestic
tragedies: Capote and Miller

which he does not share with the other boys.
Also tips on how to explore the world,
first through a camel, then as a cowboy
who uses a compass to find the trail

for the smoothest high. Instead, he uses his compass
to poke holes on the top of the desk
and imagine the pencil as a peg leg that
circles around—the creation
of a self-inflicted island left behind

when the school bell rings and his dad
asks his after praying to the laughing man
what did you learn today?
Answer honest, nothing.

Off the Map

Jonathon Greenhause

The blue on the map indicates water & is color-coded
to prevent us from accidentally or purposefully drowning.

You step off this yellow shape meant to symbolize land
& walk into the wet embrace of blue,

or not you but rather someone seeking a map of white,
some blank canvas inviting oblivion; a cloud

of tangible forgetfulness. You try on the emptiness
around the edges of your agoraphobic form,

how sinuous rivers weave around your torso
& lakes steep into the furrows of your belly folds.

You immerse your churches & other points of interest
into the roiling surf, into a tide methodically crossing the shore.

You once were a proud metropolis, a destination
of towers & aquariums & natural history museums;

but now your tattered pages are all tinted blue,
your blank ink bled into an aqueous mess.

Each subway stop stops below sea level. Each inch
intended to represent a quarter mile loses its requisite proportion

& gets us lost in this expansive ocean.
What was once a map meant to orient us becomes

a weight dragging us down into an underwater realm.
We were meant to be the shapes of our destiny

but have become the unfortunate victims of the same.

Middle School Art

for Susan Beck

Joel Long

The students in art class make bells
of damp clay, shaping them like turtles and cats.
They thump small hands
in mud, and mud takes
the line of their hands, of the gesture
that raises sketches from the deep.

See,
says the hand, this
wing, and the wing
appears in clay, and see, this
dolphin fin
cutting the surface, slipping over the dome

of the sea. Clay records the size of the hand,
this part of the hand, intent swimming through it—
shape of the octopus and its three hearts,
long legs she rolls in her palms where they become
legs against
her pulse, where she pinches
clay into the fluttering torso she has made.

We know what it is. We
recognize it.

We say, octopus, say, swan. When we put it in fire
hit it with a clay tongue: the thing will ring
like it was meant to live, a sound
that lingers
memory of a face lit with jewel lights
from inside, a slide show of forgetting.

The bell stills the air with animals.

NOW-NOW-NOW

for Louis Aragon and Sammi

Zebulon Huset

Let's spit. Both of us. Let's spit
and drop a rock down the well
that never looked like a well
but sounded like a well
when a pancake rock fell
in the spring—splash!—come on.
Let's spit. The roads are unpaved
at grandma's farm and
everything tastes like dust.
Spit-spit-spit. Let's spit.
Pretend it's cough syrup. Pretend
it's frozen pea night. Pretend it's
a watermelon seed. Pretend
it's a pretend pretend.
Let's spit. Start
the invisible squeegee at the roof
of your mouth and mentally scoop back
then save the wad last second and spit.
We've moved the plywood
they keep over the well.
The rotted plywood with one hole
already. Spit.
No one will think different.
It's a sunflower seed.
It's a baseball game. We're in the bleachers
who's playing? Someone
we know. Someone
in middle school. I'm playing.
Pretend it's ranch flavored
but you've suck-sucked

all the powder off
and you never did like the kernels.
Spit. Pretend we're in *Field of Dreams*,
you're choking on the hotdog.
Spit. Spit. Why do we need these?
Spit them out. Fishing at dawn,
stashing maggotlike wax worms—
tiny white thumbs wriggling in sawdust.
Spit that out.
We don't need it. Let's spit.
Climb the watertower. Spit.
Dig a hole. Spit. Start a fire.
Spit and listen to the sizzle.
There won't be a sizzle. I'm sorry.
It will be non-eventful, I think.
How many seconds can claim events?
Real events. Fuck events, let's spit.
We remember the dead anyway.
We run and rerun reruns of passed pasts
hurdleless in our sleep. We open the door.
We bait the hook, even if we hadn't. We
we and feel like Lego people. Let's spit.
I can't promise a splash or a sizzle.
Smoke, or dust. Yesterday or 1993.
A bloody oak tree. A bleeding sugar maple.
Hell, I can't even promise
a Ren and Stimpy wristwatch or
the WWF to be the WWF again, not even
for an instant. Not a black hole-
moment. I can't promise you the future will bud
and bloom at your feet or even on the distant
horizon. Hushed, I may confess
my sneaking suspicion there never were
any sour patch parents—
not even one crazy uncle. I have a feeling
that this instant is the only one. This instant
right here. This one. It has
to be. It has to be. It has to be. It is.
Let's spit.

Munchos Kithanink

Lawrence Lenhart

The weekend after he was laid off, I went with her father to Kittaning. "You should go with him," she said. "I'm worried about him out there alone."

His delivery truck was still stocked with boxes of Lay's, Fritos, Doritos, Tostitos, Cheetos, Munchos, Munchies, Miss Vickie's, Stacy's, Santitas, Sun Chips, Ruffles, Rold Gold Pretzels, Funyuns, and Cracker Jacks.

"Halloween's going to be a piece of cake this year," he said sarcastically. "Actually, a bag of chips."

As he adhered to river valley hairpins, the boxes slid in the trailer at our backs. Kittaning—from *Kithanink*, a Delaware Indian word meaning "on the main river"—is a small Western Pennsylvania borough on the shallow slopes of the Allegheny River's east bank.

He parked his delivery truck between the RV and the river and heaved open its sliding door. With a box cutter, he sliced open a shipment of 4.25-oz. "Big Grab" Munchos. Our feet dangled from the truck's back end, and shadow limbs swayed on the pebble road as we munched in silence. We took turns pointing out driftwood bound for the bridge. We had had enough conversations about it for me to know that Munchos were his favorite—saltiest, crunchiest, and highest unit price. He opened a second bag for himself.

"You almost ready?" he asked me.

I nodded.

I chased his motorbike's brake light through the woods. A century ago, before the sapling forest rose here, molten fountains of

white-hot steel poured from furnaces, and steelers cast it into long slabs and ingots. The paths that we biked along were once paved, and trucks came to remove slabs, booms, and billets to Pittsburgh ports to be shipped along the coast or toward the Midwest, where men cut and lay the rebar that reinforced concrete buildings, city skylines, metropolises, America. Some of the brick columns that we passed, screened by fern and moss, were the sites of glass, clay, brick, and lime works. Here was where coal mines and lumbers mills and flour mills and foundries and factories and a brewery once stood. The forest floor is riddled with slices of mirror, pieces of typewriter, shards of pottery and fine China.

Her father stopped and propped his motorbike on its kickstand. I did the same. We stood at a clearing near a building foundation, a relic of the extended industrial setting that James Parton once dubbed "hell with its lid taken off." Even though it was probably just a little past noon, I remember it as magic hour, when the sky is sunless, but still lit. Terrance Malick has somehow commandeered my memory of this moment, a directorial gesture of soft amber glow silhouetting the face of the newly unemployed girlfriend's father, a Rust Belt folk hero.

The ride to this site seemed to have had a meditative effect on him. Finally, he spoke to me about his unemployment.

"It's harder," he said, "when a man who likes Work loses his job. If I didn't like Work, I'd have some secret rejoice in me." When a sober man speaks of work in a forest days after being laid off, work becomes a Platonic capitonym.

We stepped through fern, hurdled the foundation, and sifted through the soil. Fuck Levi's commercial, which romanticized Western Pennsylvania's dilapidation. They paid a little black girl to narrate the industrial implosion of Braddock. They gave her the script, and she spoke in naïve conjecture: "Maybe the world breaks on purpose so that we can have work to do." And fuck that I was probably wearing Levi's in that moment. With clay shards, I released the colored glass that was embedded in the mud, watched it reflect in light.

Because the purpose of this scavenging was undefined, value was subjective. I was pleased with a cache of cube letters I found from a typewriter. I pocketed *L*, *A*, and *D*—one for my name, one for my

girlfriend's name, and one her father's. He took four plates of China, whole though chipped, crawling with slugs and potato bugs.

Later, we split logs and built a fire by the river.

"Try this," he said in the RV. "My mom used to give it to me when I had a sore throat." I gulped the peach brandy and coughed.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"Getting there," I said.

He washed the China with hot water and soap before dropping white bread and lunchmeat onto plates. Climbing into the RV-cum-pantry, he retrieved three more Big Grabs and divided the Munchos onto our dinner plates.

"Check it out," I said to him, removing the typewriter's *D* from my pocket.

He took it in his hand, rotated it in the fire's light. I don't think he understood I meant it as a gift, small and weird as it was. He set it on his plate among the chips. The river slipped beneath us, still carrying its driftwood, invisible now. The new moon hid all in the blot of night—sky, bank, river, and bridge.

He spoke about joblessness again in a slurred voice, a boozy Plato regressing into platitudes.

"I think there's a chip on your shoulder," I said to him.

He swiped at his flannel for Muncho crumbs, but then started laughing. "Very funny," he said.

When the chips were gone, he took the letter in his pincers again. I don't even think he knew I chose the *D* because of his name. He was selfless to a fault.

"Did you know," he asked me, as drunk as I'd ever seen him, "that there was a biiig explosion here during the French and Indian War? A whole shit ton of gunpowder went off, and they could hear it all the way in Pittsburgh."

"Réally?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. I could tell he was happy to be the first to report to me the 250-year-old news. "Kittaning was in flames," he swiped his hand nonchalantly across the dark horizon. "They say it rained Indian limbs. Their body parts landed in a cornfield, like up where we were biking today."

I wondered if that's what he had been looking for—not plates, but bones.

"Can you imagine? This whole riverbank on fire," he said.

I looked at the black water, imagined it reflecting the flaming banks of war or the steel furnaces of industry or our own small campfire, which was starting to smolder. I imagined the Allegheny as a volcanic flume, a post-industrial River Styx flowing to whatever comes after hell. I shrugged.

"It's hard to imagine," I said.

"Can you imagine the boom?" he asked. With an eye closed for aim, lips pursed, he threw the letter *D* onto a bed of coals. "I mean, they could hear it in *Pitts*burgh."

Zoonotic

Cindy King

The palm reader says Death
will take your life before you can.

The city's lost pets
are found in suburban kill shelters, worms

shedding eggs in the nests of their rectums,
fleas making fire of fur—

After cremations, the staff smokes
against dumpsters, passing a joint

between old developments
and new. But this is their crime, not yours:

You are both vector and virus,
supporting a life that consumes you.

The post-furious boom in your brain
is not the high that you paid for, not the fossilizing

turbulence before a crash landing,
nor the seismic preface to a chemical explosion,

not Death calling your name, but clearing his throat.

October

Christopher Kuhl

The woods are burning, the river
Bending deep, the trees gold and scarlet,
And one boy will try to swim against the current

In this last chance of the season, while
There's still hot sun during the day, though
The nights are cold, the water cold,

The heart's core cold and shattered,
Because the woods are burning, smoking the air,
Blinding the eyes, the judgment, but not

The will of this boy testing his strength,
Young and handsome as a Greek god, and
As given to folly in his country ways.

But unlike the gods, and like the woods,
The boy will die; October's glory will
Be blinded by a killing snow. The woods

Are burning, the river bending deep, and then
The gold and scarlet are gone, and not just
The boy is drowned, but we, all of us,

Are drowned forever in silence.

Last Scene of an Unfilmed Romantic Comedy

Gerry LaFemina

We've been rooting for them, of course, such is the nature of the genre. He's been in the Merchant Marines for the last three years, hoping the seas would seize the memory of her. They haven't. She's now in the Mermaid Parade, back in the Coney Island of her childhood. He used to be the guy who served her lemon ices, the white scoops like her breasts then, pale lace of sweat across them on the hottest days.

All that's in flashback and from early in the script when we're getting to know them–so many missed connections, the unsaid sentences. No one would call her Calypso despite every wannabe Odysseus who's swam ashore. And what sort of hero is he? He couldn't put his postcards for her into the mail, let alone into bottles to cast overboard, but at least he bought them, found at all his ports of call, New Foundland, Santiago, San Diego...Who can forget those scenes of her checking her mail, collecting only bills and catalogs.

Now he's back in Brooklyn, waving from the sidewalk of Neptune Avenue, when he sees her on a float. She holds a conch shell like a telephone at her ear as if she hopes he'll call from the ocean. And then he is calling to her, the three syllables of her name like a white cap crashing. It takes her a moment to recognize his voice. (Cue the sweeping soundtrack, the strings and brass rising, the woodwinds like a sea breeze). She throws a life preserver prop like in a boardwalk ring toss game (remember the deleted flashback when he couldn't win her a stuffed jelly fish, dollar after dollar wasted until she took over?), and there it goes, the red and white ring, *SS Ariel* stenciled in black, spinning. It rises above parade-goers who raise their heads, their hands reaching. This is Hollywood after all. A romance. So we're unsurprised when it holds for a moment in the next-to-last shot like a halo above him, before it falls. We got a winner. The screen cuts to credits.

Depreciation of Clutter

Shawnte Orion

Even now I can hear the glass
of my bedroom window
tapping Morse-coded invitations
against your fingertips as dreams crust
beneath someone else's eyelids.

I listen for a sliver of your voice.

Remind me which places
are forbidden to my tongue.
Remind me that minutes will linger
but the hours are brittle.

Months will pass before my mother
discovers anything under my bed:

dehydrated sprigs of parsley
preserved in Styrofoam pungence
(suspiciously similar to another weed)
or the mummified remains of black ants
sealed in a Tupperware tomb.
Artifacts of a failed valentine
photoshoot where they refused
to scurry over the path of honey
smeared across a yellow rose.

Kissing for keeps.

Remind me that anything can be held
long enough to lose
value and meaning.

Star of the Sea

Karen Locascio

A man wakes a girl in the night and carries her to the shore—
His hair is flaming petals wilting curling wisping smoke—
The girl squints groggy at a motel room damp with sea-spit—
She puckers, salt crusting her wits, so the man calls her bitter.

The man teaches the girl the tongue has three positions—
He wraps her in pillow feather wings and slips off her nightgown—
The girl's limbs are a newly-laid boardwalk, a jellyfish tangle—
The sea wakes the girl at sunrise, briny halitosis rasp, bitter.

The man takes her home in blankets and blindfolds of sedatives—
The girl's eyelids hang like broken blinds over blank mirrory eyes—
Her brain is a smudged chalkboard, film roll of thumb-blurred
photos—
The sea hangs about her—grainy white asters, straw hair. Bitter.

The girl rises woman and veils herself in the man's beach-sky eyes;
She waxes, wanes, but no one thinks to interview her. Asterisk bitter.

Sudden

Mercedes Lawry

The storm galloped in without warning,
thundering hooves and head-to-toe rattle.
We felt our bones shift and shiver.
The sky creased, buckled, black
with infinite grays in a roil. We walked
faster, as the rain began,
fat saucer drops we knew would soon
soak us. The boy was on your shoulders,
laughing. Nothing was imperfect.
Everything became wet and shiny.

Love at First Page

Ruth Bonapace

John Fante, I loved you for a while. But Charles Bukowski loved you more. *Ask the Dust*, you wrote. Then you brushed your teeth, tasted blood, and went out for coffee.

Nathanael West, I still want so much to help answer Miss Lonelyheart's letters. Give me a batch. I'll deal with Shrike myself. *In saecula saeculorum. Amen.*

Carson McCullers, I will never forget you or the lingering gaze of grief that caught my attention as I watched Miss Amelia Evans open the shutters on the first page, her face not dreamy, but like the terrible dim faces known in dreams, two gray crossed eyes watching over a town where there is nothing whatsoever to do.

And J.D. Salinger, I don't much like you, really. But I've always loved little Esme, and I want make sure she is okay, that her clothes stay dry and that she's had enough to eat. I especially want to hold her close when she is missing her parents. The war was so hard for her, but she held on to her hope and her little brother. I wish you had gone to her wedding. Do you still have the watch?

Paragraph One. Page One. Or Two. It happens early, and it happens hard. And we are never the same again.

Psychology Today reports that 60 percent of Americans believe in love at first sight. Scientists attribute this to the release of neurotransmitters, chemicals like epinephrine, dopamine and endorphins.

Are those chemicals released when we read? When we write? The words, the images, they linger, they fade, then reappear, sometimes unexpectedly on the page, sometimes just as a feeling that there are no words for.

In the preface to *Ask the Dust*, Bukowski describes the moment he picked the book up, as a young writer browsing in the public library.

" . . . There it was. I stood for a moment, reading. Then, like a man who found gold in the city dump, . . . I checked the book out, took it to my room, climbed into my bed and read it, and I knew long before I had finished that here was a man who . . . was to be a lifetime influence on my writing . . . Fante was my god."

Having been seduced by the first page, I also will read nonstop until I've reached the end, rereading sentences along the way. Infatuated, I will seek out another story, another book, immersed in everything the author has written. Occasionally, I will find that subsequent titles will not measure up to the thrill of that first read. In such cases, when my eyes glaze over and I can't bring myself to finish another page, I let go of the struggle. I remain grateful for what I'd found, the first flush of excitement undimmed by later disappointment.

Once, on a quest to reawaken this passion, I rummaged through my shelves, wandered through bookstores and pulled up novels online. I read and reread first pages, dozens of them: a handful that I had cherished for decades, some that I had forgotten and many others that I had not previously encountered. I found in most of these a pleasant yet disturbing sameness. A few stood out, bringing a smile or a wistful tug at the heart.

But where was the lightning bolt? Would it ever happen again? It seemed like years since a book rang out with a clarity that seemed to speak only to me.

Then, when least expected, it happened again.

I was at a literary reading by an octogenarian author I'd never heard of, who had been gently recounting long-ago tales of Paris, and of friendships that endured even beyond death. Afterward, I browsed his collection of books at the customary signing table, idly scanning the covers, the first pages. Opening one, then on to the next. And then back. And back again. And ...

Luminous.

It was the light that first caught my breath with James Salter's *A Sport and a Pastime*. I read the first sentence. Just a word. Then, the second sentence, a little longer:

"September. It seems these luminous days will never end."

Perhaps it was because those luminous September days were filling New York that very day, when I first laid eyes on the book. The scene was set for falling hard.

But was it the artifice of time and place? I remember falling in love once alongside a canal, time standing still as I savored the timbre of his voice, the warm sunlight on my skin, the look of his eyes through tinted sunglasses. Might it not be the light of day, the scent of salt air or cut grass, or sounds in the background as much as the words spoken, or read, that makes a first encounter with a new love so unforgettable?

"I emerge onto the brilliance of the quai
beneath a roof of glass panels, which seems to magnify the light."

I have to remember to breathe.

"... these great, somnolent trains, through the clear glass of which people are staring, as drained, as quiet as invalids."

Glass. Light. Quiet. In the luminous September days. On Page One.

It's not a book I would have chosen to read from the jacket cover, which calls it "a love affair between a footloose Yale dropout and a young French girl." Still, once my eyes locked on the first page, like the lovers in the story, I could not stop.

This indescribable love at first page is not limited to the novel. Poetry and plays can also leave their mark in the very first lines or the title. There's that something that is embedded instantly in the soul, and never leaves.

When I worry that there's no answer to be found, that there is "nothing to be done," I see Vladimir nodding, looking afar. "I'm beginning to come around to that opinion," he reassures me in the opening lines of *Waiting for Godot*. Then, he carries on. And so do I.

As for Salter's book, it wasn't the story or the steamy sex scenes that kept me turning the pages. It was the sentences. Short. Luminescent. Elegant.

The final page much like the first, unlike the stories that are our lives.

"And one day the clock is wrong. The hands are frozen. ... Silence. A silence which comes over my life as well ... the fields are becoming dark ... They are mortal, these heroes, just as we are. They do not last forever. They fade. They vanish. They are surpassed, forgotten – one hears of them no more."

"One hears of them no more." It is not this way with what we read, especially the sentences we read again and again, the sentences we keep.

They fade, sometimes, and at other times they remain hidden for long stretches, but they do not vanish. And then, on the blank page or in the passing thought we advert to, they speak to us again.

Luminescence.

Whip

Bernard Grant

I down two Cokes in an hour. Then I run around the living room, jump from the couch to the recliners, doing cartwheels and spins, until light catches on a set of vases behind the couch in this triangular space for the base of a floor lamp that towers over my head when I sit down to watch TV. Glitter-specked. Wide-bodied, but narrow necked. Blue and red swirling into green.

I grab a vase and whip it against the wall. The vase shatters into a million pieces. Some pieces, so small I can't see them, fly back at me, itching my arms and legs. Mamma runs into the living room, screams at me to go to my room. She doesn't know I've been cut.

I lay in bed beating my knuckles against the jagged edges of a soda can I cut in half, and hammer a nail into a can of bug spray. Blood drips onto the bed. Mamma swings the door open. Her eyes get big. She snatches the can. As she walks out, the can hissing, she looks up at the ceiling and says, "Oh, Lord. How has the damn Devil gotten ahold of my child?"

She didn't see my knuckles.

I get out of bed, lay on my back on the floor, my arms spread over my head like yesterday when Cousin Ray held me down and stuck his tongue in my mouth. I can still feel the little bumps of his tongue move over mine, his spit swirling like the colors of the vases, his hand cupping my private places. I go into the living room to throw another vase. I stand closer this time so new invisible specks join old ones in my skin. Mamma screams my middle name. I take off my belt. I hand it to her when she comes in. I pull down my pants. Kneel on the floor. Aim my bare butt. My face pressed into the couch.

Real Talk

Shawn Rubenfeld

We're in Tammy's room, and we're talking about pubic hair. The door is closed, and our mothers are in the kitchen. We're trying to figure out if, by rule, the carpet matches the curtain. Tammy claims that one of her friends is blonde, but that her pubic hair is brown. I want to ask how she knows about her friend's pubic hair, but I decide against it. This conversation's making me nervous enough. We never have these kinds of talks, Tammy and I.

"I think it has more to do with the eyebrows," she says. "Like the color of your eyebrows is the color of your pubic hair."

"So her eyebrows are brown?" I ask.

She nods. "They're like fawn." She licks her lips and draws a line on the bedspread. "Do all gingers have ginger eyebrows?"

"Most of them do," I say.

"Actually the one ginger I know has brown eyebrows," Tammy says. "So her pubic hair is probably brown. She's lucky. Can you imagine ginger pubic hair? It would look like a forest fire."

I imagine it and then shake it off. "Yeah," I say.

She adjusts her legs so that she's sitting Indian Style. She's wearing loose gym shorts. When she lifts her legs, I briefly see where her thigh meets her butt. Her underwear is bright yellow.

Tammy and I are cousins. She lives the next town over, which means that we don't go to school together. If we did, I doubt we'd even talk to each other. My friends at school are quiet and nerdy. We hang out in the band room and quote *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. We don't sit on beds with the doors closed talking about pubic hair. I

don't think any of my friends even have pubic hair. At least I don't. I'm only thirteen. And boys start puberty later than girls.

Tammy's iPhone buzzes against the pillow and she sighs. She swipes it on and makes a Z shape on the password screen. She holds the phone up to her face and types something. It makes her skin glow.

I lean against the white bars of the footboard and ask who she's texting.

"This boy from school," Tammy says, sounding bored. "He's asking about some math test tomorrow. Like I have any idea what the Pythagorean Theorem is. I'm telling him to Google it."

"It's the one for a triangle," I say. "A squared plus B squared equals C squared."

"Too late," she says, putting the phone down. "Now he'll have to use his brain."

Tammy takes a whiff of air through her nose and scratches her chin. Her room is smaller than mine. She has a blue bedspread with white flowers. It's heavy and thick, like the kind they put in hotel rooms. Baby pictures hang on the wall above the pillows. Everything else is mostly ordinary: a broken ceiling fan, a white computer desk, a yellow dresser. My favorite thing about it is the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. I wanted to put them in my own room, but my father said no.

Tammy looks at the door. There's the faint sound of laughter from the kitchen. "You're lucky," she says, touching the screen of her phone. "People are always texting me. It's like how am I supposed to talk to so many people at once? And then they get mad when I forget to respond. Sometimes I think I should stop giving people my number."

I tell her that people text me, too.

Her phone vibrates again. Tammy looks at me as if to say *but don't you see the difference?*

She doesn't text back this time; she just slides closer. I can smell her now—like something dense and fruity. "Do you think pubic hair can turn gray?" she asks.

I say that I've never thought about it before.

Tammy says that she hasn't either.

"Do eyebrows turn gray?" I ask.

Tammy leans back. "I don't know," she says. "I don't think so."

"I've never seen an old person naked," I admit.

She looks at the far wall and lets out a long breath. "Thomas," she says. "Do you want to hear a secret?"

"Not if it's about naked old people," I say.

"It's not," she says. "Dim the light."

At first I don't move. Tammy never asks me to dim the light. Then I stand, telling myself *don't panic*, which is a line from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. I walk to the far wall and lower the switch until the ceiling looks like the sky. I wait for her to give me a thumbs-up from the bed. Then I sit down again, breathing hard. Tammy wraps her arms around her legs and checks the light under the door.

"Okay," she says, twirling her hair. "So there's this boy at school. His name is Derek, and he showed me his once." She stops and looks at her phone. I'm not sure if she's gonna say anything else.

"Why?"

"Because that's what boys do."

"Not all of them," I say.

"Well, he did," she says. "And his was super thick and curly and his penis was huge. It was like a whole other leg." She puts her hands in her lap and leans forward.

I imagine the two of them in the boy's locker room, or behind the school: Derek pulling his pants down, Tammy giggling.

"Have you seen one before?" she asks.

"A penis?"

She guffaws. "No. You have one of your own, don't you? I imagine that you've seen that?"

"Oh, right," I say, embarrassed.

"A vagina."

There's more laughing from the kitchen. Someone—my mother, probably—bangs on the table. I look at the door. How do I get out of this now? "I don't remember," I say.

"So that's a no," Tammy says. "You're a prude. I won't judge you."

"Okay," I say.

"It's nothing special," she says. "You should find someone in school and ask them to show you."

"Yeah, maybe," I say.

She pushes the hair out of her eyes and looks at me like I'm supposed to say something else. I don't know what else to say.

"Okay, your turn to tell a secret," she says.

"I don't have one," I say.

"Come on," Tammy says. "I just told you a big one." She laughs and then covers her mouth. I almost forgot that she has braces. I have braces, too, but I don't show them like Tammy does.

I laugh, too, but not because I think it's funny. "Fine," I say. "I cheated on a Math test once."

Tammy looks at me suspiciously. "Cheating on a Math test isn't big."

"Yes, it is."

"I mean something real," she says. "We're having real talk here. Can't you tell?"

I nod.

"Have you ever masturbated?" she says.

I shake my head.

"No?" she says, amazed. "Not even once?"

I'm surprised to find a string hanging off my shirt. I pull at it. I decide that from now on I'm just gonna lie. It's not like she'd even know.

"If I had a penis I'd masturbate all the time," she says.

"Fine, I do," I say, jumping in. "I mean, I have. Just not all the time."

"I knew it," she says, sounding pleased. "Do you use one hand or two?"

"Two."

She sits up. "Wow, yours must be big. Derek also uses two hands. Have you ever looked at porn?"

I nod immediately.

"I thought so," Tammy says. "All guys do."

I'm not sure how Tammy knows so much about guys. But it's making me feel less like one.

"Maybe we should put the light back on," I say.

Tammy looks at me weird. "Why?"

I shrug.

For a moment, I'm glad the light is dimmed. But I can still see Tammy and she can still see me. She stares at me like I'm a text message, like she's trying to read me. She bites her lip and raises an eyebrow. "Are you even interested in girls?" she says.

"Yeah," I say, without even thinking.

"Well, it doesn't seem like it," she says. She picks up her phone and swipes it on. Another message.

"I am," I say. Truth is I haven't thought about it either way. But I nod because I know that liking girls is normal, and why wouldn't I be normal?

Tammy puts the phone down. She looks at me knowingly. "Mmhm," she says, both eyebrows raised.

*

The next day in school I decide that Shelly Hampton is okay. She's small, but her chest is big. I like Emily August second best. She's in my Science class, though I've never talked to her. She doesn't have a chest, but she wears short jean shorts which show part of her butt. Plus she doesn't wear any makeup, which I think is good. She has blonde hair, but black eyebrows. She's shorter than most of the other girls in school.

During lunch, I'm eating chips and looking at Emily August's table. I try to imagine the two of us locked in an embrace, rubbing against each other. But something about it doesn't feel right.

"Who are you staring at?" my friend Steven asks. He puts his lunch tray on the table. On it is a bagel in Saran Wrap and a bag of chips. We're in the corner of the lunch room because we aren't very popular.

"No one," I say.

"You're looking at someone," he says.

"No, I'm not," I say.

Mike comes next, wearing one of his trademark Hawaiian shirts. He struggles to get onto the bench. There's a meatball sub and a

bottle of blue Gatorade on his tray. When he's in, he throws his arms in the air and says, "So guys, my life is officially over."

Steven pops open his bag of chips and pours them onto the tray. I eat a chip myself, grateful for the change of topic.

"Ready for this?" Mike says. "Ready? My mom signed me up for summer camp. She just texted me."

"Don't tell me it's a fat camp," Steven says, mouth open.

"Shut up," Mike says.

"You can't get out of it?" I ask.

"No," he says. He takes a swig of his Gatorade. He rubs his face. "And the worst thing is that it's six weeks. *Six* freaking weeks. Can you believe that? What can they do with us for six weeks?"

"Figure out the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything?" Steven asks. He puts his finger in the air, just like they do in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The answer to the ultimate question, everyone knows, is 42. "Oh, wait, we know that already," Steven says. "Yup, there goes your summer."

I crunch another chip and look at Emily's table. She stands and lifts her tray. She's wearing a yellow and orange stripped shirt over her jean shorts. The shirt is tight enough so that I can see the indent of her belly button. Do I like her? I can't decide.

"Why do you keep gawking at Emily August?" Steven says.

"Who?" Mike asks.

"Emily August," Steven says, pointing at her. She's at the condiment station now, pumping ketchup onto her tray. "Thomas keeps staring at her. He must be in love with her or something."

Mike turns, too.

"Stop looking," I say. "I'm not love with her."

"Don't panic," Mike says. "It's not like she can see us."

But sure enough she turns with a tray of ketchup and sees all three of us staring at her like hungry dogs.

"Shit," I say.

"Uh oh," Mike says, ducking his head.

"Look what you did," I say.

"Big deal," Steven says. "She's a girl. She's used to it."

I rub my hair and draw an X on my neck. Emily walks back to her table and sits. I'm too afraid to look, but I can't stop myself.

"You should talk to her," Steven says.

"That's okay," I say.

"You should," Mike says, taking a bite of meatball. "I talked to Kate Cobbins in Math yesterday and it went fine. And today she even smiled at me."

"Kate Cobbins," Steven says, waving his hands like a chimp. "Did you ask for the homework?"

"Yeah, so?" Mike says. He uses a fork to pick apart the other half of his meatball.

"And what did she say?" Steven asks.

"What do you mean?" Mike says, swallowing. "She told it to me."

Steven claps twice.

"That's more than you can do," Mike says.

I look at Emily again, but Brittani Manheim, who's sitting next to her, sees me. Quickly I turn away.

Mike takes another helping of meatball. "You know, Thomas, she's gonna think you're weird if you just keep staring at her."

"Don't you know anything about girls?" Steven asks.

I roll my eyes and say that I do. But suddenly I don't feel too good. I don't want to have this conversation again, not with Steven and Mike, not with Tammy. I find the clock on the wall. "Can we change the topic, please?"

Steven and Mike look at each other.

"How about this?" Steven says. "I'll go with you. We'll be super casual."

"What are you gonna say?" Mike asks.

"Nothing," I say. "I'm not going. I don't want to talk to her."

"Why not? Are you scared or something?"

I shake my head. "I'm not scared."

"Then what?"

"I don't know," I say. "Just forget it."

"So you're scared," Steven says. "It's fine. I'd be scared too if I'd never talked to girls before."

The famously mean lunch lady pushes out the kitchen door and turns the service sign to *cold food only*. I scratch at the wooden bench. "I have too talked to girls," I say. It's at least partially true—I've talked to plenty of girls, Tammy included, just not the kind Steven's asking about.

Steven half-smiles. "Yeah, like who?"

I sit up. "Shelly Hampton."

We turn to look at her. Shelly Hampton and her big chest, her white smile. I take a gulp of water, thinking maybe I pitched myself too high.

"Please," Steven says, rolling his eyes. "Then Emily August should be like green bean casserole."

"Well, she is," I say.

I'm about to say something else, but Mike looks at me with wide-open eyes. "Thomas," he says. "Guess who's giving you the eye?"

I think he's talking about Shelly Hampton, which almost makes my throat close up. But she's sitting there, like usual, as if none of us exist. I turn to Emily August. Sure enough she's staring at me from across the lunch room. And not in a cursory kind of way, but in the kind of cinematic almost-exaggerated way you see in chick flicks. Suddenly I feel sick again.

"Those are *come to me* eyes," Mike says, nodding.

"Thomas," Steven says. "Don't blow this."

I take a gulp of water and breathe. Maybe I don't like Emily August or maybe I do, but I know, at least, that I can't just sit here. Because what would that mean? To Steven and Mike? To me?

In the distance is Emily August and her table of girls—Brittani, Stephanie, Jackie. I see Tammy in the group, even though I know she's not there. But when I finally stand, that's who I'm walking to—my cousin Tammy, sitting there with Vitamin Water and a slice of a pizza.

"Do you even like girls?" she says from the table. I close my eyes. I'm sweating again. I wipe my forehead.

"Do you want me to come?" Mike says from behind me.

I don't answer. I keep going straight until I meet eyes with Emily August.

I stop. She swallows a French fry and looks to her right, exchanging a smile with Brittani Manheim. They two of them giggle. Suddenly everything's quiet—her entire table of girls looking at me, their eyes burning a hole in my skull.

"Yes?" Emily says. She laughs again, uneasily.

I open my mouth, nearly choking. I remind myself not to panic. It's just talking, whether I like Emily August or not, it's no different than what I did yesterday with Tammy. I take a deep breath. I force a smile and say "hi."

After another laugh, Emily, too, says "hi."

I imagine us touching—chest, legs, crotch. I imagine myself rubbing against her until I want to cry, to scream for her to stop, for me to stop. And yet, something inside is telling me that I can't, I can't stop, that maybe this is what it takes.

I stretch my shirt because my chest is sweaty. "Did we have any Science homework?" I ask.

Jigai is Another Thing I Do by Myself

Victoria McArtor

Ritual bores me.
I've been practicing
with my folding fan
since I was a girl:
slicing my own throat
and rolling my eyes
as if hyperbole were
a battlefield I could
navigate unarmed.
He tells me, *Live briefly*
but gloriously.

I've been practicing
the art of steeping
but all I can think about
is slow death from
saturation of life.
Arthritis and bitter tea.
Seppuku requires a
minimum of two.
Voice,
he told me *is where*
body and mind meet
but watch
how silently I separate.

Mortar for Oblivion

"Somebody's gonna pick up a brick" - David Simon

Rich Murphy

In chicken fat and corn syrup
the bottom line rubs noses
from whole neighborhoods,
and bricks don't fly.

Addicted to last pennies
and bling, pharmacies
on every corner wink
at young and old limbs,
and bricks don't fly.

For cities, prison and boot camp
substitute, end welfare creep,
and absorb jobless benefits
but bricks don't fly.

Money ignores need.
Purpose abandons buildings.
Despair fills stomachs;
still bricks don't fly.

Curbed by stateless, glass-eyed
financiers, debtors wear
leashes that choke resentment,
and bricks don't fly.

House of Salt

Rena Rossner

I build a saline igloo, crystal-born, a condiment
palace. You lick the walls, like deer or rabbit. Come,
cook in the brackish kitchen, toss salt in the skillet,
sprinkle on a salad, tenderize my flesh. Carry pinches
of it, there are bowls everywhere, like potpourri, warding
against the evil eye. Kosher, sea, rock, pickling, Fleur
de Sel, a dot behind my ear, gifts of the sea. Live here
with me, seasoned, preserved, your skin tasting like sun,
ocean, breeze, until it spills out of your pores, onto the floor,
crunching there, lining your soles, we can do a salt-dance,
I'll lick your sweat, and then we'll shower, in salt-
water, of course, healthier, until we're pickled,
conserved, encrusted, with lime. Don't cut yourself
on these shards. It burns.

Anti-poem

Francine Rubin

The poem that doesn't want to be a poem.

The poem that is tired of incessant verbal plays.

The poem that is sick because you are sick.

The poem which tries to write itself out of the poem.

The poem that looks for you in words but cannot find you,
because you are not of words.

The poem that tries to be useful.

The poem that revolves around you, always, but tries
to find a diversion or stand-in.

The poem that stifles its own impulses.

The poem that tries to write the world.

The poem without you.

The poem that is tired of the world, and curls back into itself.

The solipsistic poem.

The poem that dreams of things that are better than poems.

The poem that wants the world.

Traveling in a Clawfoot Tub

Kristen Rouisse

Watermelon snow stains my fingernail
husks soft and pinkish, palms
handkerchiefs wrung with bath water.

—Back to the balcony
where my hands spoon pillows
of cotton-candy powder.

—Back to the tub
where my eyes shutter
like moths.

Lukewarm water thaws the knots beneath
my ribcage. I fold and unfurl, sheets of sweat
suck skin to rolling porcelain edges.

I suffer from a fear of dying in airplanes
so I fly at night, blanketed by pinpricks
and a distended moon.

—Cheeks burn brandy in the wind.

—Toes goose-pimpled in the A.C.

They say it's dangerous to sleep
in liquid, though in the beginning
it swallowed us whole.

—Allow submersion with a woman
for an accurate departure point.

—There's always disorientation,
turbulence upon immediate arrival.

Among Collard Greens, 1930

Genealogy: Bessie Blanche Jenkins

Clint Smith

Among the collard greens, while yanking weeds,
she sometimes hikes her feedsack skirt to pee,

her legs a wishbone pressed into the dirt
until it nearly snaps. Inside the house,

her Victrola X's "Laughing Record" crackles
beside the horsehair couch. Grandchildren, stuffed

with applebutter stack cake breakfasts, watch
through kitchen windows, betting the day she'll tip

at last; aware from small, similar failures
how unlasting such balance always is.

Contributors

Eleanor L Bennett's photography has been published in the *Telegraph, The Guardian, The British Journal of Psychiatry, Life Force Magazine, British Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Her art is globally exhibited, having shown work in New York, Paris, London, Rome, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Copenhagen, Washington, Canada, Spain, Japan and Australia amongst many other locations.

Reneé Bibby is the Assistant Director of The Writer Studio Tucson, a workshop teacher, and a student in the Master Class. She has been published in *Black & BLUE*, and *Crack The Spine*. She was a reader at the 2014 Writers Studio National and International Branches Reading at the KGB Bar in New York, NY.

Ruth Bonapace is completing her MFA thesis in creative writing and literature at Stony Brook University. A former Associated Press sports writer, she is working on "Big Steve," a comic novel populated by bodybuilders, Eastern European intellectuals and renegade nuns on a journey of self (absorbed) discovery.

Nancy Bourne represented public schools as a partner in a California education law firm. Since retirement, she has been teaching writing at San Quentin State Prison. Her stories have appeared in *Summerset Review, Forge, Quiddity, Persimmon Tree*, and *Bluestem*.

Clayton Adam Clark lives in St. Louis, Missouri, where he communicates and fundraises for one of the largest eye banks in the country. He earned the MFA at Ohio State University and is currently working on his first poetry collection. His poems were recently published in *Passages North, Meridian*, and elsewhere.

Jared Duran lives in Phoenix, AZ, and is not what anyone might call a smooth operator. He is what some might call a writer, and he has a very nice looking business card that says he is Director of Events and

Programming for *Four Chambers Press* (he is also an editor for said organization, but that's not on the card). You can read his work in *Up the River, The Suisun Valley Review*, and the hard drive of his computer. Even more importantly, he has played guitar on stage with Glenn Tilbrook from Squeeze.

Timothy C. Flood is an Arizona born multimedia artist, currently living in Denver, Colorado. Flood's work includes surreal stereoscopic photography, interactive installation sculpture, and community intervention public art. Timothy earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the University of Colorado Denver in 2008 with dual emphasis in Photography and Sculpture.

Bernard Grant is an MFA candidate at the Rainier Writing Workshop, Pacific Lutheran University, and is a 2015 Jack Straw Fellow. His writing appears in *Barely South Review, The Nervous Breakdown, The Doctor TJ Eckleburg Review*, among other journals. Originally from South Texas, he lives in Washington State.

Danielle Hanson received her MFA from Arizona State University and now lives in Atlanta, GA. Her work has appeared in over 40 journals and anthologies, including *Hubbub, Rosebud, Poet Lore, Asheville Poetry Review*, and *Blackbird*. Currently, she is on the editorial staff for *Loose Change Magazine*. She has edited *Hayden's Ferry Review*, worked for The Meacham Writers' Conference, and been a resident at The Hambidge Center. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.

Katherine L. Holmes's creative work has appeared in more than fifty journals, most recently *Mused Literary Review, Red Booth Review, Wilderness House, Blood Lotus*, and *The Adirondack Review*. Her short story collection, *Curiosity Killed the Sphinx and Other Stories*, was published by Hollywood Books International. Her web site is: https://sites.google.com/site/katherinelholmesauthorprofile/

STANLEY HOROWITZ has taught various disciplines for forty-five years and is currently teaching photography as an Adjunct Professor at Farmingdale State College. His recent covers have been published for Rattle, Buddhist Poetry Review, Cimarron Review, Kestrel and Stand Magazine. Photographs also appear in Friends of Acadia Journal and Briar Cliff Review.

LAWRENCE LENHART holds an MFA from the University of Arizona. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Gulf Coast*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Guernica*, *Wag's Revue*, and elsewhere. Currently living in Sacramento, he is reviews editor and assistant fiction editor of *DIAGRAM*.

KAREN LOCASCIO is a recent graduate of the MFA program at the UMass-Boston, where she won the 2014 Academy of American Poets prize. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Hanging Loose*, *Window Cat*, and *Paper Nautilus*, among others. She's from New Jersey and lives in Dorchester, MA.

GLENN LONG was born in Cleveland, was a long-time resident of Miami, and is now living in Upstate New York. Glenn began writing literary fiction and non-fiction to let the voices in his head compliment his profession—he's an art dealer—and his passions for the natural world, for landscape gardening, and for music.

CALLI LOSKILL

IVAN DE MONBRISON is a french contemporary artist and poet born in Paris in 1969. He currently lives in both Paris and Marseille. His visual works have been shown globaly, and included in magazines such as the Harvard Advocate and The Pinch. Five poetry booklets of his works have been published: *L'ombre déchirée*, *Journal*, *La corde à nu*, *Ossuaire* and *Sur-Faces*. His first novel *Les Maldormants* released in November 2014 by Ressouvenances publishers, includes 15 illustrations by him, a limited edition of it with an original drawing in each book has been published too.

MICHAEL O'CONNOR is a freelance photographer who has travelled the world shooting underwater photography, while keeping a lens focused on the land and its fascinating inhabitants.

BRANDON PATTERSON'S recent work can be found in *Night Train*, *Thrice Fiction*, and *Confrontation*.

KRISTEN ROUISSE is currently pursing an MFA in poetry at the University of South Florida, where she teaches creative writing and composition. Her work has been published in *Broad!* and *The Release Magazine*.

SHAWN RUBENFELD earned an MFA from the University of Idaho, where he served as Managing Editor of the literary journal *Fugue* and won the university's 2014 Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award. His fiction has appeared in *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, *Portland Review*, *580 Split*, and *SmokeLong Quarterly*, among others. His collection of short stories, *We All Become Something*, is forthcoming from ELJ Publications. Currently, he serves as Managing Editor of *Split Lip Magazine* and *Split Lip Press*.

JOHN I. SCOTT was raised in Pikeville, Kentucky, and recently received his MFA in poetry from the University of Arkansas, where he now holds a Fulbright College Teaching Fellowship. His work has previously appeared in *New Madrid* and the *Wolf Review* and is forthcoming in *Measure* and *The Louisville Review*.

KELLY TALBOT has edited books and digital content for 20 years, formerly as an in-house editor for Macmillan, Pearson Education, and Wiley, and now as the head of Kelly Talbot Editing Services. His writing has appeared in dozens of magazines and anthologies.

KELLY LYNN THOMAS reads, writes, and sometimes sews. Her creative work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Sugared Water*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *metazen*, and others, and she received her MFA in Creative Writing from Chatham University. She is hopelessly obsessed with *Star Wars* and can always be found with a large mug of tea. She also runs

the very small *Wild Age Press*. Read more at http://kellylynnthomas.com.

ANDY WESTHOFF is a freelance illustrator living and working in Oakland, CA. Growing up in Northern Arizona, he is greatly inspired by the wonderful expanse of the American Southwest. His love of comedy and imaginative realms often takes his art into strange territory, but he thinks it's lovely.

ZACH VANDEZANDE is the author of *Apathy and Paying Rent* (Loose Teeth, 2008). His work has recently appeared in *Portland Review*, *Atlas Review*, *decomP*, *Bop Dead City*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Hot Street*, *Crack the Spine*, and *Punchnel's*, and is forthcoming in *Passages North* and *The Adroit Journal*. He likes baking bread, hammocks, and people who bring their dogs.

ALEXANDRA VIETS is a screenwriter/director and journalist and who received her MFA from Columbia University. Her first feature-length screenplay, *Cotton Mary*, won a New York Foundation for the Arts award and was produced by Merchant Ivory. Most recently, she completed *Prince of Polo*, a feature film set in 19th c. India. She teaches film/screenwriting worldwide and is currently working with RAWI Screenwriters' Lab in Amman, Jordan.

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