

# OUTLET 2004

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*Special thanks to Chelsey Cox, Helen Kennedy, and Mary Kay Mueller. And to all our literary contributors—may you continue to pursue the muse!*

*Front cover: “Darly’s & Ed’s Love Nest.” Back cover: “Barbed Wire.” The front and back cover works are by Crystal Kadlec (’04). Crystal is an Integrated Visual Arts major.*

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## **The Irma M. Duwa Award for Poetry**

The Irma M. Duwa Poetry Award is given each year to the author of the best undergraduate poem in *Outlet*. The 2004 recipient of the award is Katherine Bucko, a senior English: Writing major from Dubuque, Iowa. Katherine earns the award for “Breece D’J Pancake,” featured on page 2.

Our poetry contest judge, Valorie Woerdehoff, writes:

Reviewing the student work appearing in *Outlet* is a pleasure. This year’s pieces reflected a great variety, both in subject, tone and style. After much consideration, this year’s winner of the Irma M. Duwa Poetry Award goes to “Breece D’J Pancake,” by Katherine Bucko. The subject of the poem is considered by some to be one of the best American writers of the last century. The first line of the poem, which paraphrases a quote about Pancake by Kurt Vonnegut, pulls us in. Standing on its own, it makes a powerful statement and foreshadows what ultimately becomes of the writer the poem describes. In a world where no one really understands Breece D’J Pancake, where he is telling “his people’s story” to few who seem willing to listen, the poet ends up taking his own life. The author brings in key elements of the writer’s work, and in 13 lines spins a tragedy. From the succinct and compelling beginning, to the last line when “April’s fruit became too rotten to bear,” this poem is controlled, concise and well-paced.

Valorie Broadhurst Woerdehoff, Director of Institutional Marketing at Loras College, is originally from Northern California. She has been writing since she was nine years old, and has been a professional writer for the past 24 years. Woerdehoff earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Loras College in English: Writing in 1982, and is currently pursuing a Master’s degree, also at Loras. She has had a variety of fiction and non-fiction articles published, and over 100 of her poems have appeared in literary magazines across the country. Her work is spotlighted in a collection, and has been included in local, regional, national, and international anthologies. She has earned top awards in competition, including honorable mention, Gerald Brady Memorial Award; first place and second place, Hawaii Education Association International Haiku Contest; first place, Haiku Poets of Northern California’s International Rengay Contest; first place, Pen Women of America, Palomar Branch, Poetry Contest; as well as awards for her feature, commercial and technical writing. The mother of five children, ages 11 through 28, Woerdehoff lives with her husband, Tom, in Dubuque.

### **Breece D’J Pancake<sup>1</sup>**

*Katherine Bucko*

It had to have hurt to be that good.

Who could have understood this child of the hollers,  
geared toward success in the auto industry or perhaps  
a nice technical school, who desired the life of a poet?

The neighbors were illiterate to his rapid-rushing  
prose; though it told his people's story,  
they indicted him for turning his back on his home.

Similarly, the high Virginians never went West enough  
to know about trilobites and horse teeth  
and the brightest angel shale this side of the Mesozoic.

Dispossessed, he surrendered the stress of perfection,  
and he still took the gun to his palate under that apple tree.  
April's fruit became too rotten to bear.

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<sup>1</sup> West Virginian poet who committed suicide in April 1980.

## **Good Deed (after Charles Simic)**

*Bill Cozzie*

A good deed sways from person to person  
Uncaring  
As the spring leaves pass their green to one another

All at once the whole tree is green and serene  
And there is no sign of winter

All the dried husks have fallen  
And have been swallowed up by the ground.

## **Twilight (Crépuscule), by Guillaume Apollinaire**

*trans. Robert Beck*

brushed by shades of the beyond  
along the lawn as daylight goes  
where she is mirrored in the pond  
miss columbine takes off her clothes

a twilight conjurer selects  
a showing of his best effects  
the tall uncolored sky is filled  
with galaxies as pale as milk

milkface harlequin ascends  
the stage to greet the audience  
some sorcerers from bohemia  
some elves and some et cetera

having disengaged a star  
he twirls it in an outstretched hand  
as chimes that dangle from a hanged  
man's ankles measure out the hour

a crone to soothe a baby croons  
a doe deer crosses with her fawns  
a dwarf nursing a felt insult  
prefers large harlequin occult

## **Juvaneelia**

### *Jody Iler*

The key turned slowly in the old lock. Groaning, the cabin door swung ajar as Uncle Bud shouldered his way through the entry. He balanced the grocery bags with one burly arm as he closed the door behind him with the other. Setting the bags on the white metal countertop next to the sink, he turned and gazed around the room.

Late afternoon sun filtered weakly through the dirty windows, cobwebs festooned the corners, and a musty smell permeated the air. The cabin had sat, neglected and unused, for several years now. Uncle Bud unpacked his bags, putting the grocery staples on the dusty shelf above the counter. That done, he set about to light the old Coleman stove he'd found beneath the sink. *Good thing there was still some fuel left in it*, he thought, opening a can of Dinty Moore Beef Stew and emptying the contents into a large saucepan, after wiping it out with paper toweling.

While his stew heated, Uncle Bud headed outside to unload the rest of his gear from the old truck – a few gallon jugs of water, a warm jacket, hunting boots, and his tattered backpack containing a change of clothes. Back inside, he rinsed out the small metal coffeepot, still perched, as though ready to pour, in the middle of the big wooden table. Adding some ground coffee to the pot's basket, he poured water into it and set the little pot on the burner next to his bubbling stew.

Looking around, Uncle Bud surveyed the large room and the small bedrooms partitioned off from it. A threadbare couch sat against one wall, with an old maple coffee table, slightly askew, in front of it. The big oval dining table dominated the room, its gaudy plastic oilcloth a bright spot of color in the dimming light. Chairs were haphazardly strewn around the table, as though the last ones to be here had left hastily. He glanced over at the small end table next to the couch. A stack of games sat underneath it, their names barely discernable under the layers of dust. Kids' games – Monopoly, Scrabble, several decks of cards, and a dice cup.

The smell of perking coffee roused him from his reverie, and he hastened over to the Coleman to lower the flames and stir the stew. He set the table for one, and lit the old oil lamp, carrying it over and placing it on a trivet in the middle of the table.

After he'd eaten, Uncle Bud rinsed his dishes, not bothering to heat the water, and stacked them in the dishrack. He went outside.

"A little fire'd be nice."

He spoke aloud for the first time since arriving, startling himself a bit, as he contemplated the firepit in the clearing. The firewood, stacked along one side of the cabin, had been soaked and dried for several seasons. After the recent dry summer, it fanned up quickly in the glowing nest of twigs and brush that he ignited in the pit. Opening the door to a small shed behind the cabin, Uncle Bud pushed aside the garden utensils, rusting now, and reached past the old lawn mower for one of the canvas back lawn chairs stacked against the far wall. He set his chair near the crackling fire and then, patting his pockets, went into the cabin for his pipe and tobacco.

Back outside, he placed his mug of strong, steaming coffee on a stump next to the chair and sat down heavily. He filled the pipe, then lit it. Dusk was falling. Trees surrounded the clearing where the cabin stood – an array of fall color punctuated by the dark green of the pines – their brilliance fading slowly as twilight settled around them.

This camp was called the *Lost Eighty* – eighty acres of woods with a lake surrounded by a bog, at the end of a winding gravel road in Florence County. Early on, Uncle Bud's family had referred to it as *Wood Tick Inn* – the kids screaming as ticks crawled up their necks, heading for cover. Once they'd cleared the land around the camp, the ticks had receded to the confines of the woods. Over the years, one member of the family or another had contributed their skills and talents to the metamorphosis of the camp – the addition of bedrooms, quilts for the beds, sets of dishes, towels, sheets – and it became, as Uncle Bud's wife Dot liked to say, a place for the "gathering of the clan." His clan – a stubborn, garrulous group tightly knit by the bonds of family pride and Scandinavian origin. The "in-laws" of the family were on the periphery of the group – but were included, albeit critically – for the sake of their spouses. Uncle Bud grinned, remembering.

As night began to envelop him like a dark cloak, he heard the loons calling – an eerie, melancholy sound echoing from the distant bog lake. Then – *Who ooo, Who ooo* – a hoot owl was nearby, above him in one of the tall pines. Finally, he heard it – the little screech owl – and Uncle Bud smiled, thinking back to other nights, other campfires at the *Lost Eighty*. When his nieces and nephews were young, up here at camp, he'd regale them with stories. They'd sit around the fire, eyes wide, as he spun his yarns – with each story he had told, they'd move closer to one another as they glanced over their shoulders at the dark woods beyond.

"Tell us about Juvaneelia!"

A chorus followed.

"Yeah, Juvaneelia, JUVANEELIA!"

*They were gluttons fer punishment*, he'd think, *an' one of 'em, prob'ly Beano, would sure enough have a nightmare and wake up everyone.* Nicknamed for the time that he had stuck a bean seed up his nose, which subsequently sprouted and required medical attention – the freckle-faced, impulsive Beano was his favorite.

“C’mon, Uncle Bud, tell the story!”

“Okay,” he relented, leaning closer to the fire. His face reflected the flames and gave it an unearthly glow as the kids waited, spellbound.

Uncle Bud took a deep breath.

“Over the years up here in these woods, there’s been tales of deer hunters who set out in the morning and never returned home at night. One fella in particular, he goes out at dawn with his buddy to hunt. Somehow or ‘nother they get themselves separated, and the one fella roams around all afternoon out here, lookin’ for his partner, callin’ his name. Night falls, and there he is, still walkin’ in circles, still callin’ his friend’s name. Suddenly, he hears a scream, and he freezes. Then *another* scream. He calls out to his buddy – but no answer. He feels the hair on his neck standing up, he gets the goosebumps all over – he *knows* there’s somethin’ out there. He can jes’ *feel* it. But *what?* And *where’s* his buddy? Damn, he’s *scared*. Anyways, he hears the scream again, but closer this time.”

The kids were so tightly knit together by now that all Uncle Bud could see was the whites of their eyes in the firelight above their dark forms.

“Then out a’ the woods she comes. I say *she* because she’s wearin’ a long flowin’ white robe – kind a’ sheer, like a curtain – and she’s runnin’. Runnin’ right towards him! Well, I don’t have to tell ya that this fella run like he’d never run before, so fast n’ so far that he finds himself right up there on that gravel road before he looks back. When he does, what he sees makes his heart just a’thunder away in his chest. She’s reachin’ out to him with long, skinny, fingers – fingers like *claws*. Her arms reachin’ out – as she opens her mouth and screams again! And her face is like a skull – no eyes, no skin, jes’ a gaping hole for the mouth them screams come out of – she has long flowin’ hair – white, jes’ like her robe.”

“Did he get away, Uncle Bud?” the kids whispered.

“Yes indeed, he did. He turned and run like the devil was after him. When he couldn’t run no more he walked. All the way to town. All night. He said, for years afterwards, he could hear her screams in his sleep. And they never did find his buddy. Now and again, some folks say they’ve seen her, heard her – and she’s still searchin,’ out here in these woods.”

His nephew Beano leaned forward.

“Why’s she searching, Uncle Bud? What’s she looking for?”

Uncle Bud looked at him.

“Folks say she los’ her husband in a tragic accident years ago...after a spell, she los’ her mind and jes’ took off into these woods, never to be seen again – searchin’ for her man. But some say, if you call her jes’ right, she’ll come.”

The silence was thick, palpable.

Uncle Bud cupped his mouth and in a low, mournful voice, called, “Juvaneelia! Jooooo-va-*neeeel*-ya! Can you hear me?”

Just then, the little screech owl shrieked. Kids exploded in all directions, screaming and falling over one another as they sprinted to the cabin, nearly knocking its door off the hinges in their panic. Chuckling, Uncle Bud rose and tapped out his pipe. He looked around the clearing, still smiling. Suddenly, he felt a chill in the night air, and turned to follow the squealing kids inside.

He didn't see the figure standing in the trees, just beyond. A white ethereal figure, arms outstretched toward him.

Sitting in front of the fire, these many years later, Uncle Bud smiled at the memory. Dot had gently scolded him for scaring the kids with his ghost stories. He and Dot were the only ones in his family who didn't have kids of their own. Times at the camp with his nieces and nephews helped to fill the gap – she knew they loved his stories so she went easy on him. And when he'd finished scaring them, she'd been waiting inside to encircle them in the protective warmth of her arms and ample lap, scoffing at the notion of ghosts, stilling their fear.

He sighed.

Dot had been gone a couple of years now. He was alone – unless you wanted to count Moe, the malevolent tabby cat at home. Moe had been Dot's cat, of indeterminate age, but Uncle Bud supposed he must be ancient by now. His only living link with Dot – a testy old cat that glared and growled at him even when he fed the darn thing. Only for the sake of her memory did the old bugger still live.

Most of the relatives were gone now too – older ones dead, younger ones scattered to different places away from this north country. He had one sister left up here, Millie, living on the edge of town with her son, his nephew Beano. He was a good boy. Checked up on his Uncle Bud every week. Sometimes he and Beano would spend time up here at camp together, hunting – though Lord knows it had been quite a spell since they'd done that. Maybe it was time to put the old place up for sale.

*Yup, he thought, chuckling wryly, mebbe this'll be Juvaneelia's las' chance to get me...*

He heaved his bulk out of the canvas chair and tapped his pipe into the dying embers of the fire. Time for bed. Out here, it could be as black as pitch when night fell, but tonight the moon was nearing its full cycle and cast a glow across the unkempt camp. Far off, echoing gently across the clarity of the night air, he fancied he heard the tinkle of piano keys. He stood there for a moment, looking out over the treeline, and inexplicably, he felt a chill.

*Ma used to say whenever you shiver like that someone's just walked over your grave,* he thought. Uncle Bud kicked some dirt over the fire and went inside.

Hesitating for just a moment in front of the bed he planned to sleep in, he wondered what other critters might be sharing it with him. Then, shrugging, he shucked his outer clothes and slipped under the quilt, forgetting to extinguish the oil lamp on the table. It burned slowly; dimming perceptibly as Uncle Bud began to snore.

The room was dark when he opened his eyes. Not sure what he'd heard, but something had been loud enough to wake him. What?

Then he heard it again. The screech owl.

No, not quite.

This was different, he thought. Louder.

More...humanlike.

*Naw, he laughed to himself. Thinking about those stories is what it is. Givin' me the heebie-jeebies.*

It came again.

Louder, this time, and closer.

Uncle Bud felt a prickle along his scalp, raising what little hair he had left on his head. He sat up in bed, waiting expectantly. The full moon hung, heavily, just outside the window – its round face smiling genially at him through the dirty glass, illuminating the clearing outside. A shaft of moonlight spilled over into the cabin interior. An irresistible urge to get up and go outside swept over him, and throwing back the quilt, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. Pulling on his pants, he reached down for his hunting boots. His steps shuffled loudly across the wooden floor as he donned his plaid flannel shirt, slowing buttoning it as he headed for the door.

Creaking loudly in protest, the door swung open as Uncle Bud pushed through it out into the night air, crisp and clear. He could see his breath as he exhaled. Walking over to the charred remains of the fire, he stood, uncertain.

*What's this*, he thought, nervously glancing around – *a ghost story of my own?*

The scream came again – loud, mournful – piercing his very soul.

Uncle Bud felt a stab of fear, deep inside.

He looked around the clearing slowly, turning in a measured clockwise movement, his back to the dead fire.

A glimpse of something caught his eye.

A flash of white, drifting slowly through the trees, to the north of him. But heading his way. Another scream filled the air – a scream not unlike an animal, but with the resonance of that particular emotion of the human animal when it feels pain, or rage, or...*need*.

The flash of white came closer. He could make out a form, a human form – tall, slender, almost *flowing* between the trunks of the tall trees – disappearing for moments behind the full skirts of the dark pines, then reappearing, nearer each time.

The fear twisted sharply within him, giving rise to panic.

Uncle Bud turned on the heel of one of his tough Redwing boots, and started to run – his gait more of a fast shuffle, gaining in speed and momentum as he headed down the inclined path south of the cabin clearing. The path was several feet wide, lined with soft pine needles and easy to navigate. Dimly, he realized that he was heading for the bog lake – an area with no easy outlet to escape the shrieking form behind him.

He looked over his shoulder. She was – how did he know it was *she*? – gaining on him. He could *see* the bony face, the hollow eyes, the gaping mouth. He saw her reach out one long arm toward him – the claw-like fingers outstretched.

Uncle Bud's chest clutched in terror and disbelief as he ran on. He was breathing heavily now, making rasping noises as thoughts flashed through his mind in unison with his gasps. Like a mantra, one thought emerged above the others – *I mus' be dreamin', I MUS' be dreamin'* – and he chanted rhythmically, as if in prayer.

In the moonlight, the bog lake loomed ahead – its serene, glassy surface mirrored the surrounding trees and the heavy globe hanging above it in the night sky. Uncle Bud remembered that there was one safe place to approach the lake – an area that his family had carved out – a floating dock where they tied the rowboat, used for fishing and duck hunting. As he neared the lake, the path curved to the east, toward the access opening. Uncle Bud swerved and headed for the dock.

She shrieked, behind him, so close that he nearly fell, face forward, onto the path. He felt his bladder give way, and struggled to make the dock, but somehow she had passed

him on the left side and swung around now, in front of him, to block his way. He stopped, paralyzed by fear, his chest pounding painfully.

She approached, arms outstretched, mouth twisted into an obscene smile.

Still convinced that he'd found himself in the throes of a nightmare and would soon wake up, Uncle Bud nevertheless screamed aloud and leaped to the right. He landed solidly in the bog's quivering body – a mass of weedy grass and mud. With a sinking heart, he felt the Redwing boots start to submerge – the bog giving off the satisfying, sucking sound of a diner soon to be satiated. Struggling was futile, he knew, but he struggled anyway, slowly sinking deeper as she neared him.

He looked up at her. She opened her cavernous mouth and emitted one last triumphant shriek, arms clawing toward him in the night shadows. Just as he closed his eyes, Uncle Bud reached out and grabbed the sheer white gown descending around him.

The smell of baked pork chops and apple slices filled the air as Millie set the casserole on the kitchen table. Beano hung his jacket on a hook by the back door and washed his hands. It was Saturday afternoon and he'd worked all morning at the lumberyard, glad to get in the overtime hours, and hungry now for dinner.

“Have you heard from Uncle Bud, Ma?” Beano sat down at the table and looked up at Millie as she set a steaming bowl of mashed potatoes down next to the casserole dish.

“I talked to him the other night – he said he was going up to the Lost Eighty for the weekend – says he's thinking about selling it.”

Millie poured them each a cup of coffee and sat down, a worried look on her weatherworn face. She picked up the coffee mug in her callused hands, looking across the table at her son.

“Do you think he'll be okay, Beano? His health's not too good, and he's been like a lost soul since Dot passed on - not the same old Uncle Bud. I hate to think of him up there all by himself, alone with all those memories – like ghosts.”

Beano grinned at her as he filled his plate.

“Don't worry, Ma. Uncle Bud can take care of himself, ghosts and all. But if it makes you feel better, I'll take a ride up there later and check on him. Maybe stay over with him till tomorrow. We can shoot some squirrels or fish a little, like we used to.”

Millie reached over, patting Beano's hand.

“Good,” she smiled. “Then I won't worry.”

The old Ford bounced along the gravel road to camp, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. With one hand atop the wheel, and one arm crooked over the open window, Beano lazily gazed at the darkening countryside as he drove along, thinking. He'd hate to see the old camp sold. Nearing forty himself, no longer a young man, he grinned as he thought how Uncle Bud always called him a “good kid.” Times up at the cabin had etched solid memories of warmth, companionship and family in his mind.

Like Uncle Bud's ghost stories.

He drove past the road that led to the old abandoned Miller farm – a silent place, devoid of life for as long as he could remember. He did recall something about old man Miller – wasn't he found dead in his bed? – years ago, before Beano had been born. Once, after telling one of his famous *Juvaneelia* stories the night before, Uncle Bud had taken all the kids on a hike down that road to the old farm.

As they'd tiptoed cautiously into the dilapidated old house, shoes scuffling the dirty, dusty floor of the entrance hallway, his uncle had put his finger to his lips, and looked around, as though expecting to see someone.

"She comes here, sometimes," Uncle Bud had whispered. "On cold, lonely, rainy nights, this is where she comes, to hide out."

"Nah," Beano's cousin Dan had sneered with disdain. "I don't believe it."

Daylight had filled them all with bravado.

"Don't believe me, huh? Well, jes' look here, then."

Uncle Bud had motioned them over to the big upright piano on one side of the foyer. Its walnut wood was weather cracked and stained – it sat in sad disrepair, looking forlorn against the wall. The keys were uncovered and yellowed with age.

"See this piano? When she comes here, she plays it. Over n' over. On clear nights if the wind is jes' right, you can hear it up at camp. Look at them keys – there's no dust on 'em. Dust on everythin' else, but not them keys. 'Cause she plays here, nights."

The kids had clustered around the piano, looking closely, seeing it to be true.

They'd backed slowly out of the entrance hall, into the sunlight, then all of them turned as one, and ran.

The key turned slowly in the old lock. Groaning, the cabin door swung open. Beano was glad that there was an extra key hanging in the shed – he hadn't expected to need one, but the cabin was locked.

Uncle Bud's weathered truck sat in the clearing, just in front of Beano's old Ford. The remains of last night's fire lay charred in the firepit. No lamp glowed inside.

All was silent in the gathering dusk.

Beano pushed through the door and looked around in the dark room.

"Uncle Bud! You here?"

Beano's voice sounded unnatural, high, in the empty room. He saw the dishes in the sink. The coffeepot, cold now, on the table.

Slowly, Beano advanced across the room to the bedrooms. He glanced into one, seeing it was empty.

He tiptoed now.

Moved, as though with difficulty, to the doorway of the other bedroom. In the darkness, he could see a form on the bed, under the old quilt.

"Uncle Bud?" Beano whispered, a catch in his throat. He forced himself forward and reached the bedside.

The figure on the bed was Uncle Bud. His form was still as a stone, his eyes were closed, his mouth set. Beano reached out, touching the familiar face, and drew his hand back quickly, as if burned. Uncle Bud's face was cold, cold as the icy water of the bog lake. And – *funny, it kind of smelled like the bog lake in here* – the thought came to Beano as though from far away.

Something caught his eye.

Uncle Bud's arms were folded over the top of the quilt, neatly. Something was tightly clenched in one of his hands. Beano leaned over, looking closely. It was a white cloth, woven between the bent, mud-stained fingers.

Beano straightened and took a deep, shaky breath.

Far off, in the twilight, he heard the shriek of the little hoot owl.

## Haiku

*Peggy Lucas*

in the closet  
a dozen towels folded-  
I use yours  
    still damp

## This Just In

*Nicole Edwards*

I couldn't sleep very well last night. I know I shouldn't watch those late movies but I just can't help myself. The movie last night was a true story about a woman who went on vacation to Mexico and got mugged and probably raped and couldn't get home because her passport was stolen. And some people just let their children go on spring break down in Mexico. That is insane. My husband Joe woke me up about ten minutes ago; I can hear him in the shower as I lie in bed staring at the ceiling. Last month's *Cosmo* said that surprising him in the shower would be a good way to spice up our sex life, but I've got to go wake Sam up for school.

I roll out of bed and go into the bathroom. Joe's blurry brown outline ignores me through the steamy shower door as I sit peeing. Everyone has heard stories about kids flushing pet reptiles down the toilet, and about alligators in the sewers of New York; but just recently I heard that even in the Midwest the sewers are not safe. A woman in my book club told me that when we have a lot of rain, rats will sometimes crawl out of the toilets. I think I can buy some type of special filter or trap to prevent it though. I forget not to flush.

"Ahh Jesus Christ, Sharon!" Joe screams. I laugh, and toothpaste sprays in little spots on the fogged mirror, as he gets out of the shower. After drying off and wrapping a towel around his waist, Joe comes up and puts his arms around me. "What did I ever do to you?" he asks, kissing me on the neck, and walks out of the bathroom.

I rinse the sink and wipe the mirror. The morning news report sounds from the bedroom as I walk down the hall towards Sammy's room. I don't wake him up right away. Instead I pick up some of the toys that are strewn about his room. He still seems so tiny to me. He is sleeping on his back with his pink mouth wide open, his skinny limbs sprawled out around him. He stopped wearing pajama's earlier this year, around his eighth birthday. I think he saw a commercial or some show about college guys. Big boys do not wear pajamas, he had told me. So now he sleeps in just his tiny white underwear. I pick up his cloths from yesterday and find a rock, some of Joe's old keys, and an old plastic gun.

Oh I am irritated. I look at the gun in my hand. It's light, with a silver gray barrel, and a black plastic handle. This gun could look real; I might think it was real. Sam is not allowed to have guns and I'm not sure what to do with it now. I can't have him take it back to his friend. What if someone finds it in his backpack or God forbid saw him

carrying it? Someone could think it's real; I don't even want to think about what could happen then. He could be shot by the police; things like that happen all the time. I will just have to return it to the child's parents. Putting the gun in the pocket of my robe I put my hand on Sam's shoulder and give him a little shake.

"Rise and shine sweetheart, it's seven thirty."

He opens his eyes and sits up in bed.

"Mom," he whines, as he pulls the *101 Dalmatians* cover up over his little naked body. "I'm in my underwear!" He's gotten shy recently. It's really cute.

"I'm sorry honey. I'm going to make breakfast, get dressed." When I walk into the kitchen, Joe is sitting stooped over the paper eating an English muffin with a paper napkin tucked into the collar of his shirt. He looks up at me as I turn on the radio and pour Sam's cereal.

"*CSI* is on tonight," I remind him. *CSI* is a very realistic crime show we like to watch together every Thursday night. "Are you going to be home?"

"Yep. So is tonight the episode with the heroin sting we've been waiting for?"

"Oh, I think so." I'm pretty excited. I'm always interested to learn about the drug trade, especially with Sam entering junior high soon.

"Anything interesting in the paper?" I ask.

"Yeah, there's an ad for a structural engineer to help with the new highway project," Joe answers.

"You already have a job," I say, hoping this is as far as it goes this morning. Joe has been talking for the past six months about finding a new job. I fill the coffee pot and wonder if it is time to clean the water filter. Even the ice cubes in Joe's diet coke must come through the water filter; I should probably start buying bottled water from the store.

"I know," he sighs, washing his hands and collecting his briefcase.

"Maybe if the economy wasn't so terrible. But we've got a family to worry about."

"We're fine. There's no way I couldn't get another job . . ." He was getting into it.

"You cannot just quit your job, Joe. We need to have health insurance. I was watching a *Dateline* a few weeks ago and they were saying how hard it is to get a job now and there was a thing about people who don't have health insurance . . ."

Sam walks into the room and I let it drop. Joe kisses us both, and walks out the door. Sam sits sleepy eyed flipping through the paper.

"Mom, what's West Nile Virus?" he asks.

"What?" I try to disguise the urgency in my voice. Snatching up the paper from in front of him; I put down his cereal. The front page contains an article about dead birds and bats in the area that might be carrying a deadly new virus. Jesus Christ. What am I supposed to do about this? The article says that the new virus is carried in mosquitoes. Pictures of Sammy's brain swelling forces its way into my brain and I rush to the cupboard and sort through the vitamins, antibiotics, and sunscreen. Sammy should be wearing sunscreen. I used to make him, but then I saw an expose about how children aren't getting enough vitamin K because of too much sun screen. I grab the bug spray and go back into the kitchen. Sam has moved into the living room and is sitting cross-legged in front of the T.V. with his cereal in his lap. A commercial for the cereal Sam is eating is dancing across the screen, which is nice, but he is sitting two feet in front of the T.V.

"Sammy, what did I tell you about sitting that close to the T.V.?"

“It gives me cancer,” he replies, not moving.

“And so you want cancer, is that it?”

“I’m done.” He gets up and starts to collect his bag and jacket. I spray him with bug spray, and spray a little on myself as well; I will have to stop and get more.

“Thanks Mom,” he says as I follow him out the door. I help him climb into the back seat of our Bronco. Driving such a big car makes me a little uncomfortable. We traded in our Honda when I saw a program showing a small passenger car in an accident with an SUV. The cops in the show pointed out how the SUV crushed the small car like a tin can. My family will not be crushed like a tin can. I flip on the radio just in time for the CNN news. Sam is rolling his window up and down and up and down and singing.

“I love the fishes cause they are so delicious.” It is from a commercial for his favorite crackers. The news is listing possible terrorist targets inside the United States. New York, Chicago, Los Angeles. Just this fall the high school took a chorus trip to Washington D.C. I was appalled. We are safe here in the Midwest. Sending a bunch of students into one of the most dangerous cities in our nation, it’s just crazy. Some people do not understand that we are under constant threat of attack. Some people just do not watch the news. My cell phone rings, but there is no way I’d answer it while driving. I drop Sammy off at school and as I watch all the kids running into the building I wonder if I should bring up the new virus I have just learned about at the next P.T.A meeting. If there is a new serious threat to our children, parents need to know about it so they can protect themselves.

## **To The Amateur Poet**

*Olga Possokhova*

You do not see  
What you are doing.  
You are bleeding  
All over the page  
Like some sick old man.  
Your talent is as natural  
As the pattern  
Made by dust  
On a butterfly’s wings.

You’ll learn to think  
And won’t fly  
Anymore,  
Because the love of flight  
Is gone.  
And you will only remember  
When it was effortless.

## The Tower

*Olga Possokhova*

I thought only Princesses live in towers.

You built a Tower where every word is  
A heavier stone than the one before,  
Where walls are impenetrable.

There used to be gates  
And all who care about you  
Could come and go.  
They could see your vulnerable inside.

Then some started to bring in stones  
And throw them through the windows,  
Breaking the crystal labyrinths of your soul.  
And the gates grew smaller,  
They turned into doors with code locks:  
“VIPs only.”  
Once a stone bulleted through the Heart Chamber  
The doors disappeared for everybody.

There are some hidden exhibits by the back wall –  
“Street childhood,” “Drunken parents” –  
Which are closed to the public.  
But once in a while a bat swishes through,  
Bringing some painful memories.  
“I just want some ice and some space” – you said.  
Sentences make even more solid walls than words.

You are Prospero at the top in solitary confinement,  
I cry like Ariel echoing through the wind.  
But you do not hear.

Very seldom a small crack in the wall appears  
And I manage to take out a stone or two,  
But you diligently put them back in.

Professional sprinter, I run to the door  
That is already gone.  
I'm getting tired of knocking on the walls  
Still hoping, one day, to find a scrap iron  
Or become a world-famous lock-picker.

## Haiku

*Nicole Edwards*

smiling back  
she leads me on  
towards the apple tree

lost amongst  
the cypresses  
she lights a cigarette

at dinner noticing  
lint from your blanket  
on my sweater

## Eyes Closed

*Anna Kelley*

I am sitting on the Riverwalk, a stretch of sidewalk bordering the Mississippi River on the Eastern edge of Iowa, eyes closed. It's new to me and most other Dubuquers, built recently to showcase the river that had been ignored by many for years. I listen, smell, touch, and taste. This is how I see. This is how I introduce myself to the esplanade, feeling my observations.

Autumn wafts through the air and across the Mississippi, over the stone walk, and eventually through my hair by way of erratic gusts. The air is icy. Goose bumps materialize on my forearms and shins as the breeze hits, and I have been exposed. It is the first cold day of autumn, and the clouds from the morning rain block the sun. The walkway is devoid of any human sounds except for my breathing; but even this is muffled by the river wind that steadily hums past both ears.

I can't get comfortable on the hard concrete beneath me. I feel like a six-year-old with chalk, restless with energy, not knowing where to lay my masterful first stroke. With no chalk, I only have the gritty, solid walkway under my legs, and it leaves me languid. I finally settle in Indian-style, but in a more meditative pose than patty-cake. The concrete doesn't give a millimeter to naked ankles. At six, my bones were softer and could tolerate kneeling into solid ground, but after years of calcium and growth, I've turned hard inside.

A rippling waterway splashes below me. Liquid mountains rise and fall with the current until they crash into the wall, inches below my feet, which dangle perilously over the water. I hear a disruption in the surface, about ten yards out — a jumping fish. I can only imagine it because it's already out of view, where it broke through to suffocating air. Below the water exists a world settled between sand and sky, where fish, turtles, and grass live in suspended animation. If not propelling themselves through the water, they are manipulated by it. The current's constant motion directs their lives.

I too have been maneuvered by my environment. I didn't come to the river's edge because I had time to enjoy nature, but because I have a task to complete. These instances are pleasant, when I embrace a new direction and swim with the current. It's when I fight the current that life gets harder. Sometimes, when it's too difficult to tolerate, I go way down into the water's depths, point my body straight up, build as much speed as possible, and break the surface with a triumphant leap into the air where, for a few seconds, I am free of the reality below. Sadly, our fates (the jumping fish and I), are destined back into the current, where we can either decide to fight or concede, depending on which way the water runs.

I had an aquarium as a child. It stood in our living room, perched on a three-foot wooden base with a couch positioned a few feet away, facing the tank. I would sit and watch the fish swim happily through their artificial world. Sucker fish attached themselves to the glass, kissy-face fish darted through little plastic castles, and flat fish hid behind the painted green synthetic seaweed, surveying the action. They all seemed content, swimming in my living room — as content as I was watching. If a fish stopped fluttering its fins, it floated. It was so much easier then to let the world tell me where to go. I sat there looking into the tank because I could. I had no other commitments. The fish and I floated along and didn't have to worry about jumping through the surface.

The jarring smell of fuel exhaust pushing through mufflers is heavy, like smoke settling around me. Anywhere else in the city, it's undetectable, but in less polluted air, the smell intrudes. The fleeting sound of sedans, trucks, and semis traveling over the Julien Dubuque Bridge rides the wind into my right ear. I pinpoint and follow the individual, muffled hums on the Iowa side peaking at a low roar and fading off into Illinois. I see faceless drivers on the insides of my eyelids. There's a woman putting on makeup in her rearview mirror, a man on a cell phone, and a teenager pounding his palms against the steering wheel in syncopation with his music. Each motors over the river, unaware of what lies below.

I'm reminded of Dubuque's other great overpass, the Wisconsin Bridge, just upriver and around the bend. I see a familiar face on that bridge. It's my eleven-year-old self peering out of the passenger window of a grey Ford station wagon. The adolescent me is somehow looking at the twenty-one-year-old me, sitting with legs crossed and eyes shut, wondering who that auburn-haired, freckle-faced girl is. I am on my way to my father's beauty salon in Platteville, living for once the daily commute that he makes from Dubuque. I didn't realize the sacrifice then. I got bored after fifteen minutes and asked *Are we there yet?* I can't remember the last time I asked that question. *Are we there yet?* has turned into *Where am I going now?* The young me smiles, turns around in her seat, and watches the road with eagerness until she fades completely out of my mind. The fading is slow and expected, but the memory will remain. Eventually the sound of each passing car blends into the next, creating a constant traffic symphony.

I hear train wheels screeching over tracks across the river. From memory, I conjure the train slithering through the bluff's thick green trees. Like the bridge, I hear individual train cars for a moment before they are absorbed in the trees. There must be an opening in the shoreline where the rattling cars are not captured in leaves and the sound escapes. The train throbs through the foliage and I hear every beat. The motorized pulse replaces my own and, for a moment, I am that train, weaving through the Midwestern landscape on two rails, each as wide as my forearm.

I travel so fast along the river that I only see green, brown and blue streaks. There is a certain pace to my life now, a relatively recent development. I move so quickly from one thing to the next that my life blurs. I know the trees are beautiful, but can't tell from where I am. I know there is a greater purpose beyond my current, hectic lifestyle, but, for the moment, it's hidden in leaves and branches. The last train car passes by and I return to myself. I am happy to hear my steady, slow heartbeat again and feel a pins-and-needles sensation in my compressed left foot. It's time to exit the train and return to my body.

I feel a drop on my forehead and cringe, hoping it's not beginning to rain. More beads fall on my arm and foot, and I embrace them. I hear tiny *ker-plunks* in the mighty, churning river as raindrops settle back into their home, but one misses its source by inches and lands on the back of my hand. It's huge, nearly covering the whole surface, and by the sound of the others striking cement, they are all fat. I tilt my head back and open my mouth to see what I can catch, and right away, I'm bombarded. The rain is cool and wonderfully tasteless, providing only wetness on my tongue. The last time it rained I refused to go outside. I thought I might melt. In this light shower though, I feel cleansed. The rain has no odor, no taste; it's not too hot or too cold, just refreshing.

The rain is picking up and my clothes can't hold more water. It's time to leave. I take a deep breath, stand up, and open my eyes.

## **A Skull Tipped Cane Named Judas**

*Bill Cozzie*

I took the beaten southern road into town at nine, sun up. My black hat was on straight, my jacket floated inches off the dusty trail, in my right hand I carried an old leather case, and on the left my cane tapped the ground lightly. My first stop was the gator swamp. Lizards crawled beneath my boots on the weedy path to the swamp, and I could feel their little bones crunching under every step. While passing, I could feel all the flowers tremble and want to close, but I made them stay open and bloom brightly. I made them look real good.

At twelve I had lunch with the Alligator Man. He was sitting on a log, playing with a cheap fishing rod. He had a line cast out into the scummy swamp, and his frog-leg bait lay motionless on a lily. I sat down next to him, but he didn't pay me any heed. Alligator Man never paid attention to anyone unless they touched him. So I pushed him into the water, and he thrashed around like a pig caught in quicksand. The dirty old man didn't stop until I told him there hadn't been gators in the swamp for nearly a decade. He swore at me like I shot a nail through his foot. The fat bastard's drool flew out of his mouth faster than his curses could reach my ears, until a gator happened to swim up and bite him in the leg. That gator must have been twelve feet long and really old. He wore that trademark lizard grin while the Alligator Man screamed and screamed.

I figured it was time to move on, so I wiped Alligator Man's drool off my suit with a handkerchief and was on my way. I went to pay Annie a visit at her house since she was home all alone. Annie was feeding her hens when I came up her way. She perked her head up from the feed basket when she heard my cane tapping the ground at my side. She was happy to see me because no one had visited her in nearly a year. We chatted

more over some glasses of too-sweet lemonade. I told her it probably tasted like her lips and she let me find out.

After we were done, and Annie was still lying in bed, I started singing. But I got carried away and ended up writing that song all over the walls while she cried and cried. When I was through, the only thing left for her to do was burn the damn house down so Hank wouldn't find out what we'd done. By the time the smoke from Annie's house first curled over the tree tops, I was gone because it was time for me to move on.

Around six I stopped in the barbershop. Old Earl's was a nice little antique. He had three duck-taped red leather chairs and a shop full of sports posters, political memorabilia, and some war stuff. Earl himself was sitting in one of the chairs, reading a girlie magazine. I immersed myself in Earl's collection of war memorabilia. I noticed he even had some of the sick underground stuff, such as buttons emblazoned with "Kraut killer" and "Jap smasher."

I asked him if he fought in the war, but he didn't answer me. I told him that I had fought and remembered it like yesterday. He finally put down the magazine and took a good look at me before he said, "Now son, ya don't have a wrinkle on ya. Now how do ya expect me to believe ya fought in the big one?"

I shrugged and asked him what it was like bayoneting some baby-faced Fritz in the belly, or maybe it was one of those slant eyes that got to kiss the stock of his M1 Garand?

His hands started shaking like he was in a freezer. So I told him what it was like, and I even told him a little extra. How some of the mean boys, with bad parents that drank and whipped them hard, used to get their bayonets real hot and bend them like a fish hook. When those hooks sunk into the enemy's belly everything inside spilled out when the body was kicked off. By now, Earl was sweating, but I was smiling. I asked Earl if he had a nice sharp razor. He took a few moments to snap out of his daze, but he finally said yes, and that's when I figured it was time for me to be on my way.

I saw that it was nine o'clock now and figured it was a good time to see Reverend Bird. His chapel was on the edge of town, and he kept it snow white. I swear it would put an angel's robes to shame. So I went on in and sat in a pew cushioned with foam and purple leather. Though it wasn't the leather Reverend Bird told the congregation about; instead it was cheap leather. Fake crap, no better than plastic that would crack if someone sat on when it was cold. So the good Reverend Bird made a special sermon about how wicked the merchants were these days, and how they even had the nerve to rip off a little chapel and its reverend.

After I had sat there for a while looking up at the sad, sad man on the cross the Reverend came and sat next to me. He asked me if I needed help. I told him no, and asked him if he needed any. He laughed, been in the sacramental wine, and told me as long as he was in White Haven, he'd never need any help. So I asked him if he was sure he didn't need any help. He gave me a very confused look, and I asked him about the dress. His mouth twitched, and he swallowed. I asked how tight his collar felt now, and he asked who I was. I told him and he laughed.

I opened up my case and showed him the dress. I told him how I had it cleaned. I even suggested he could give it back to her. He called me a liar, but I didn't mind. He told me he had gotten rid of that dress months ago. So I called him a liar, and that he better calm down or the man on the cross might cry. Reverend Bird stood up and told me to get out of his chapel, but I told him it wasn't his chapel.

I tried to be nice and give the dress back, but he flat out refused. I told him I'd leave it up on the altar, and he could fetch it whenever he liked. That's when he ran out of the chapel, around back to the shed and grabbed a shovel. He ran around to the side of the chapel and started digging up a storm, tearing up the roses that had been planted in memory of little Manila Antoinette.

It was near midnight, and I figured the Reverend would be digging for awhile so I decided to leave. I went back in the chapel and got my hat, but I never let go of my cane. I said my goodbyes to the man on the cross and was on my way.

I walked up Main Street planning on heading right out of town when I heard a guitar playing. So I walked down the alleys and side streets until I found him. He was a fine young Latino man playing an acoustic guitar under an ivy covered archway next to an old hotel. I listened for a long time, tapping my cane as he hit certain strings. When he was done I asked him what he called the song. He told me it didn't have a name. I laughed and said a song that good must have a name. He stretched out his arms, never letting his grip on the guitar neck slip. He nodded his head a few times and said he'd probably call it "Magdalena's Whisper." I told him it wasn't bad and asked if he played around town in any of the clubs. He told me no, that he never had a professional gig. I asked why not, heard some of the clubs around town paid really well for the night gigs. He shook his head and smiled saying his only audience was the ivy that hung around the hotel's walls.

He took a look at my cane and saw the shiny chrome skull at the top, and then his eyes began to slide down the obsidian-like blackness of the cane's shaft all the way to the chrome tip. "Hey mister, your cane got a name? My grandfather, he always told me a cane is as good as any walking buddy, and so a good cane should have a name."

I laughed suddenly, which spooked him a little, and told him my cane did have a name. It was Judas. He said, "Judas? My grandfather told me about that guy. He was a real sorrow case. I heard he was so messed up over Jesus he killed himself. He hung himself from a tree or something. I'm telling you, anyone that sorry has to be forgiven."

"Yeah, something like that," I told him while I looked up at the moon.

"Looks late now, I should be moving out. See you around, kid." So I left hearing that dreadful song play over and over while I walked out of town with Judas tapping the ground at my side.

## 1935

### *Dennis Schmitz*

Only the dresser mirror watches  
my grandfather, barefoot, & galluses

down, begin his beguine, twisting  
& flicking his head the way birds do

when they drink. As he re-swallows  
the rest-home's first months,

his union suit's buttons ripple.  
He shuffles what Cole

Porter he can, & when he sings,  
it's a Grandma he won't bring back

peevish, not yet in a paean or hymn  
but the introductory throat-clearing

before God enters the music & words  
swerve to correct our feelings

or make Eden. The farm was  
a Depression loss, Adam's bit-open love

offered between the couple.  
In town, he'll live arthritic & long—

a two-job death.

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Dennis Schmitz ('59) came "home" again to Dubuque this fall to visit and to read his poems at the Carnegie-Stout Public Library. And again this year, as in 1991 and 2000, the highly respected, award-winning poet has graciously donated two of his exceptional poems to *Outlet*.

## **Gardening**

*Dennis Schmitz*

I am the sacrifice. Ants freckle  
my wrists. One on each arm, two neighbors work

my hands, loving me but raking my hands  
into the grit until blood fertilizes the dark

parallels my fingers leave.  
I volunteer no song, but the neighbors' low scat

"My Jesus" overlaps the traffic  
sound from Franklyn, the far-off Con

Edison pruning, all the city continuity  
that is part of a sub-plot that feeds us

while the narrative goes on—the dream

of the lapidary glazes on apples shined

against grass, the sun sugaring young  
muscat grapes. As I dig, I bless

Laurence, the third neighbor, who digs too  
at the aches in my back under the flannel shirt,

& bless the way the earth resists  
me—a grid of dried squash runners,

the radishes wilted to thread knots-  
a drought so intense

that even the spade's shadow hardens  
across the dug-up ground

where an earlier digger had stepped  
down the blade.

## **Cherry Go Boom**

*Bill Cozzie*

Cherries are such delicate plump little things  
Nature's rubies resting peacefully in their trees  
Swaying with the caressing breeze  
But there are those boys, those cherry smashers  
Who chant, "Cherry Go Boom"  
Robbing cherry trees, those greedy thugs  
With pudgy cheeks, mocking eyes  
In their wake they leave the cherries  
Crushed, smashed, splattered, demolished  
It's when those boys leave after dusk  
The birds come back, and find the cherry holocaust  
Cherry guts, cherry blood, hungry ants everywhere  
Now those boys, with sticky hands and sticky feet  
Now those boys struggle with sleep  
Now those boys struggle with peace

## **High Rocks**

*Katherine Bucko*

A mangy dog squats in a yard, shaking. Its matted, yellowed fur offers such a vile  
contrast to the looming, but eerily beautiful, mist-blanketed mountains. Scowling, I watch

him sniff his shit and shuffle away. The roller-coaster hills of this drive have been such a thrill to this flatlander that I hated to see the picture postcard scenes interrupted. However, a few miles down the road, the dog seems to fit in perfectly with the decrepit atmosphere of lean-to shacks, cars on cinder blocks, and tar-paper outhouses.

Driving down State Highway 39 toward Pocahontas County, we are watching the stereotypes of rural West Virginia unfold. Jamie, a passenger relatively sheltered from the poverty of the world, comments, "Do people really live like this?" I want to hit her, but I understand her shock. Although our reason for this trip is to volunteer at The High Rocks Academy, an organization for underprivileged girls, many of us have been so isolated in the college town of Morgantown, West Virginia, that we never fully experience just how poverty stricken this state is.

Raped of logging and coal businesses from New York and Pennsylvania since the Civil War, West Virginia has historically been one of the poorest areas of the nation, actually ranking among third-world countries in health and economic statistics. Our destination, Pocahontas County, is physically the largest county in the state, but it has the lowest population. We are not headed to particularly habitable land. This is the southeast corner of the state, where the Appalachian Mountains reach their highest peaks. Most often photographed for tourist books, these mountains hold generations-old families that have never had the privilege to conceive of something so wasteful as vacation. Such consuming poverty, combined with difficult terrain, creates a scarcity in population. West Virginia is fifteen times the size of Rhode Island, but holds about the same number of people. In other words, the density of people in Rhode Island is 1,003 per square mile, while West Virginia's is 75.

Yet the natural resources alone should make it the richest in the country. Ever since moving here, I have caught myself walking on campus, gawking upward at the blue-green patina of the mountains. In actuality, Morgantown is so far north that I'm only seeing the foothills, but coming from Midwestern prairies and having witnessed only the dry, rocky, mountains of the west, I can't believe that these ancient mounds are able to sprout tress. This is the oldest mountain chain in the world, with remnants still in England from the days of Pangaea, and yet they continue to create life.

Everything is alive in West Virginia. The tree canopies in the mountains create a kind of incubator, sealing in every last bit of moisture given to the land, covering the ground with moss, molds, and salamanders. Everything is slick and slimy, humid with life. Tropical looking rhododendrons, the state flower, flourish in the shade, while sassafras blooms from the sun spots through the holes between trees.

But as we go farther south, the enormity of these green-crusteds rocks becomes unsettling. At the site of The High Rocks Academy, the mountain-shadows allow land to see only a few hours of sunlight a day. During the spring rainy season, the steep run-off creates flooding in the valleys; there is no other direction for the water to go but to pool stagnant on the valley floor and inundate these people's homes.

Yet everything still survives. *Montani Semper Liberi*, "Mountaineers are Always Free," and they've become so by living a life of rugged individualism. These are hard people, keeping up the land founded by settlers without the guarantee of homes, identity, or a conceivable future. Italian immigrants found work in the mines along with runaway slaves who were drawn to this newly-free land. Poor Virginians set up home with newly-arrived Irish. Secession from Virginia during the Civil War created a kind of liberalism

in this state which dictated that any person from any background was a good person, as long as they pitched in and helped.

This is what's on my mind as we arrive in Hillsboro, the town of 50 or so that The High Rocks Academy is located in. The land flattens out just enough to make a main street, yet I look behind us and believe that through the mist, we are in Argentina. The main drag is a confusing mish-mash of the attempt at corporate infiltration in an area that can't support it. A tiny Pizza Hut sinks down next to row of homes without electricity. A Rite Aid's parking lot is empty, while the local drug store is lively, filled with shoppers who donate a little gossip to the shopkeeper's tip jar. Children of varied races play together in a mud puddle. And still, everyone believes that the typical West Virginian is a rednecked, gun-toting, isolationist.

It would be impossible in a place like this to fulfill that stereotype. Being so isolated makes your few neighbors infinitely closer. It feels crowded, like people are crawling all over each other, but in a desperately necessary way. There is no time for racism in a town where your African-American neighbor's family has been there longer than yours and your Mexican neighbor donated half his garden to you after last year's flood. Everyone must get along for survival.

So as we pull into town, they stare at us, label us instantly as outsiders, but they wave and smile. We start up the four-mile unpaved driveway that leads to The High Rocks Academy, and the damp gravel quickly turns to slick mud under our tires. We laugh and shrug, welcoming the adventure, and get out to push the car from the ruts. Unable to budge the car, I start to panic. I look around at the walls of mountains, feel the sinking mud and the rain on my face, and I can barely breathe. I can't see anything. There is no panorama but rather, walls, blockades. The foothills that were so charming to stare at in the safety of my college town have multiplied to claustrophobic exponents. Seeing the mountains astounds me. Being in them traps me. I'm afraid that I don't belong and will never make it home.

We hear a sliding crunch and look up to see a big blue truck. A delicately blond and fair woman jumps out, wearing overalls and clogs. It's Sarah, one of the founders of the Academy. She has come expecting our troubles, and we pile into puddles in the back of her truck while she hitches up our car, towing us to the top of the hill. White-knuckled and hovering between anxiousness and excitement, I finally get my first glimpse of The High Rocks Academy. A modest A-frame building, hovered over by pines and crawling with ivy, the home reminds me of an untamed Girl Scout lodge. The primordial land, covered with fleshy, moist, waxiness astounds me and scares me. We have entered complete isolation, but I feel no more comforted than claustrophobic. From our new elevation, I look down to see nothing but mist. I want to scream at my disorientation, but Michelle, one of the High Rocks girls, asks me to help her stain the deck. "I can sand it, but since I'm pregnant, I can't really stain it."

Michelle is 14. The High Rocks Academy was founded because 75% of the girls in Pocahontas County had at least one child by the time they graduated high school. In addition, Oxycontin and Meth were frequently abused by teenage girls, and suicide rates were quite high. All of these factors, in combination with the low income of the area, categorized these girls as "high-risk." The Academy offered counseling, homework help, and meals. Girls could come after school or stay overnight if they needed to. Often, in the summer, there would be week-long camps with the new girls. They worked on

community service projects and tutored grade-school children. They cook their own meals, clean the house, create their own projects—they essentially decide on everything they will do at the academy on their own. Allowing the girls to have control in at least one area of their lives has been successful in combating depression, drug use, and lowering pregnancy rates.

Melissa, a young Native American girl, takes me out back to show me one of her projects—the house garden. It is still raining, which brightens the lacquered red of the tomatoes and turns the varied shades of green neon. I see a plant I can't identify. It has tall, brown-green, pointy stalks that smell vaguely garlicky. "Oh, those are the ramps." Ramps. I had heard about this anomaly, a vegetable truly native to the area. A ramp looks like an onion but tastes like garlic. As garlic does not naturally grow in the area, Italian miners encouraged its cultivation for a taste of the old country, the garlicky flavor the plant lent. I ask her to use some in the spaghetti that night, and she rolls her eyes and shrugs, as if it's stupid to even think that it wouldn't be included.

Her reaction silences me. This girl with skinny, bruised legs and a newly acquired training bra treats *me* as the child. Yet from another angle, this beautiful almond-eyed creature with metallic-black hair morphs into the epitome of woman. She sits in the fudgey dirt with legs folded beneath her, cradling cucumbers as if they were grenades and pruning leaves like they were her future children's toenails. A halo of sun breaks through the clouds and onto her crown, and she becomes the Madonna. I feel so inadequate, wanting so much for her to like me, to not see me as an outsider, to share with me the teachings that this harsh land has implanted in her.

Melissa snaps her head around to find me watching her, and the sun-halo spreads across the land. As the rain lets up, we walk around the grounds some more. I see a duck in the bushes, quacking wildly. It seems very strange to me that a duck would even be here, given the altitude and absence of ponds. The duck stays put but continues to squeak. Squatting down to him, I realize there's another duck, a female, in the bushes. I part the grass, and she hops out. I jump back, horrified. The duck has no beak—just a bloody, cracked stump with her wormy tongue wiggling through the space. The male duck continues his agitation, desperate for a way to help her. I call Sarah over and ask her what to do. "It looks like she got caught in a bear trap. I'll have to put her down." I had never heard of putting down a duck before, but Sarah said the duck would starve, and that it would be much more humane to put her out of her misery.

Shaken more than I would have expected by the incident, I return to the garden. Some other girls have joined Melissa and Michelle, and I tell them the story of the beakless duck. These girls, hardened, abandoned in this nurturing wilderness, don't bat an eye. Instead, they ask me to get my butt in gear and help them out. I dig my hands in the soil, wormy and heavy, and direct my discomfort to the land. The black, moist dirt absorbs my fears and, in return, offers me the type of stoicism that these girls have sprouted from. My initial hope was to come here to help them, to try to be a strong example of independent womanhood. Now my only wish was to be accepted, to learn from these girls, to understand what they have come from without condescending to them. I will have to be patient and learn their language: silence, botany, endurance. Calmed, I inhale the ions of the recent rain and silently observe. The girls dig and plant, lay seeds for future dinners. They survive.

## **Omo Dei (Man is of God)**

*Peggy Lucas*

The sockets of their eyes seemed gemless rings:  
Those who read OMO in the face of man  
Would plainly there have recognized the *M*.  
(*Purgatory XXIII, 31-33*)

At four in the morning, the dewy fog  
lifts his sticky palms from the earth—  
at that moment, I know the Roman arches  
will haunt me every time I close my eyes,  
and the crisp, musky scent of Florence  
will linger on my sweaters—and on my breath.

I wish I could have climbed one of those tall,  
pallid pillars holding up the Uffizi. Would I  
have turned into a perfect cherub with  
stone feathers, sitting amidst the hovering clouds?

Would I now be closer to God? Or would  
I have instinctively become an ashen gargoyle?

The flight attendant's Italian accent seems  
lost in the loud buzz of the airplane engines,  
sounding more and more American as we  
approach Chicago —awaking the  
yearning for what has been taken from me.  
Why couldn't I have seen the humanity in the

russet cheekbones and dark eyes of the Italian faces  
who romanced me on the steps of Duomo—faces like God  
staring out from the backdrop of pink and green marble.  
But now my chance is lost:

I left the paralyzed world of the ordinary for a moment—  
and now I have returned.

## **Mattina Sognare di Pace (Morning Dream of Peace)**

*Peggy Lucas*

On the first morning of my dark night I  
dream of gray hearses pelted by cold rain,  
driving in succession on unending

cement, as wilted leaves soak into the brown,  
muddy earth. I toss and turn, stiff sheets scratch  
my pallid skin as visions of Venetian windows

cloud my recollection. I wish I could get back to the  
rainbowed PACE flags, which hung out each shuttered  
window, with golden sunflowers growing in the sills above

the narrow, cobblestone streets. I would even settle for the  
vision of red, white, and blue graffiti on the walls in Milan:  
“Stop the War—Yankees Go Home.”

*(written approximately two hours before the start of bombing on Iraq on Wednesday,  
March 19, 2003)*

## **For Our Memories' Sake**

*Amber Gille*

We're given a memory for a reason, although I was never really sure what that reason was until recently. My dad has a great memory. As funny as it sounds, he can remember back to a time when he was a little baby lying in his crib. My mom thinks he's crazy that he can remember that far back, but it's true. And I always believed him because he remembers so many details – smells, sounds, dates. He remembers exactly what the weather was like outside and what was going on in the world the day I was born and the days my brothers were born. That's just how he is, and how he's always been.

I've always had one constant article on my dresser. A memory, if I may, that's not my own. One object has remained static, a photograph of my grandfather in a clear, arched frame. I don't know why I've kept that picture for so many years. I never knew the man personally; he died when I was two. But he was important to my father, who is a complete physical replica of him, and that's why it has remained constant all these years. Like his father, my dad had a brown mustache that was highlighted with bits of auburn. His head has begun to grow shiny spots over the years, but he'll never admit he's balding until he has no hair to cover the spots. He was his father's son.

The picture followed me to college and into my first apartment. The only logical explanation I can come up with is the mystery that lies behind him. For twenty-one years, this man's identity has remained empty to me. Over the years, my father has rarely spoken of my grandfather, and I used to think that if I held onto that picture long enough he would finally understand my need to know more about him, to know the man who shaped my father, at least for our memories' sake. I've come to realize over the years, though, that I can't just wait for my father to uncover his past. I have to help him get there.

Sure, there were times when I was younger that I'd ask questions like “What was Grandpa's favorite baseball team?”

He would reply, “The Cubs.” And so for the next ten years I became a follower of the “lovable losers,” mainly because I knew they were “Grandpa’s team” and because who can really resist following them?

But these types of questions were like throwing river rocks in the creek. No matter how many you threw in, you would never push out the water. The rock would just join in the rest of the vast emptiness and become a part of it. I have never understood my father’s silence. Or maybe it was his grief I didn’t understand. Why was it never discussed before, and why couldn’t he talk about it? But how do you ask your father to expose himself?

It was a Thursday evening in the middle of June. The weather was soggy with warmth, and the sun glowed with vigor in the west. It was one of those sweltering nights you hated to be a farm kid because you’d be stuck bailing hay until the sun went down. Thank God I was never a farm girl.

The backyard of my childhood home faces the park. The view from our screened in back porch is incredible, especially in the summer. Not only do we get to see all of the kids running around, but we also get to see the setting sun because the back of our house faces the west. It was a balmy June evening, the kind that tries to push beads of sweat from your brow but never succeeds because a cold brew holds them in. So that’s what we decided to do, have a cold one on the back porch and enjoy the residual bits of the evening.

My father has always been a quiet man, the kind you learned from by watching. He seems so much older to me tonight because the salt and pepper in his whiskers would never lie. Maybe the sunset makes me sentimental as it highlights the fade of the auburn in his mustache. It’s hard to tell, with a bottle of beer and the heat pushing on my temples; it could be a delusional mix. For years, I’ve thought about how I ask him to talk to me, and I always got scared. Not tonight. I couldn’t leave this empty hole in our family history any longer. Someday he wouldn’t be around, and then I’d never have the answers. Something about the mix of the night pushed me to want to know the truth that has been veiled behind his grief like a dark cloud all these years. My father only talks when he’s ready. Tonight, he wasn’t going to have a choice.

My dad was sitting with his feet propped up on the window sill in this old pink chair that we’d had, well, forever. It was so ugly, yet so comfortable, which made it worth its keep for so many years. It seems like everybody has a “pink chair” in their house. The pink chairs are the things you keep hidden from every one else by putting them in the in the back of your mind, or in this case, the back porch. Tonight he was sitting in the pink chair, clutching his memories in his back porch. I can always tell when he’s thinking because he plays with his wedding ring, rubbing off the comfort of the band to ease his mind. The smell of wintergreen oozed in my nose from the dip of tobacco in his mouth. I hated when he did that, but there was no telling him anymore. My mother always said ‘He’s going to do what he’s going to do,’ and she was right. His father smoked cigarettes all his life, and I’m sure many times in his youth my father tried to stop him. But to no avail, the family stubbornness has shown through like a brilliant spotlight for three generations.

“I hate when you do that, you know?”

“I know, I know,” he said. He turned his head to look out the window at my little brother, who was trying to catch crickets in the grass. He was kneeling in the grass with his hands cupped, ever so gently trying to catch one. At six, though, it’s hard to be gentle.

“I was thinking about something tonight.” I plopped down on the dumpy couch that sat across from him, looking out at my brother who was quieter than he’d been all day.

“Oh yeah, what’s that?”

“That I don’t really know anything about Grandpa.”

“Well, what do you want to know?” he asked, taking a cool drink from the icy bottle.

“I don’t know - anything really.” I picked nervously at the label that hugged the bottle. A pit was moving up my stomach into the back of my throat. I tried to swallow it, but it, like him, resisted me.

“He didn’t like potato chips.”

“Daaad. For years, you’ve been skirting me around the edges. Why don’t we ever talk about this? What are you so afraid of?”

“What, that’s important isn’t it? Let me think...he was left-handed.” Why is he avoiding me? It must have been obvious from the look of discontentment that spread across my face that those were not the answers I had been hoping for, because his mouth did that crinkle thing in the corner, like it did when he was apologetic.

“Do you realize we’ve never talked about this, Dad? YOU never talk about it. My entire life is just flashing by and I know nothing! Nothing at all! You keep everything inside, and I’m not sure why. I know you have so many stories to tell. Why can’t you just talk to me?” I could feel my face reddening with emotion. It was the first time I had ever called my father out, and believe me it took a lot of guts. The pit was still there, and my bottom lip was quivering so much I bit the corner of it to hide my flaw. I didn’t want him to see I was nervous. This was serious.

“Whoa, slow down. I never knew that you were so upset by this.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, Grandpa...he’s invisible to me, all except for an outline in a photograph. I know nothing about him.” I had the lines but no one to fill in the gaps.

He closed his eyes for a moment and leaned back in the chair. “You know, when I was your age, I’d be bailing hay on a night like tonight. We’d do it together, him and me, and I hated how hot it was.” He paused for a moment and I looked away because I wasn’t sure what he was going to do. My father’s life story kind of fell into the middle of the Bermuda Triangle somewhere, so when he was ready to talk I listened. I just wasn’t sure if this was one of those moments or not.

“I’d give anything to be bailing hay tonight with the sweat running down the side of my face.” Instead, tonight in the corner of his eye mixed in with the salty sweat that ran down, I could see a salty tear. My lip stopped quivering as the calm in his voice beckoned my own stillness.

“I can’t really tell you why I have a hard time talking about this. It’s kind of hard to have your daughter put you in your place,” he chuckled timidly, but then stopped. “Maybe it’s because if I don’t talk about those days, I can hold them in the one place I have left with him, my mind. It’s just that when Dad had to give up the farm, I just left a big part of me with it. I miss him, but I miss those memories more, and talking makes me sad. Does that make sense?”

“But how do you expect your kids to pass down your stories if we don’t even know them ourselves? There are so many holes to be filled and you’re the only one who can do it.”

He uneasily twisted the gold band on his finger and looked out at my brother, who began to shout. One of his captured crickets had jumped in his shirt.

“Tell you what, tomorrow morning you and I will take a little drive and then we’ll talk. I’m just not ready tonight. Tomorrow will be better.”

The next morning we hopped in my Dad’s ’82 Buick Regal and drove on the twisted back roads until I almost felt nauseated. When we were in high school, we’d drive around on these roads as if my friends and I knew where every curve fell. I had obviously forgotten how they felt as my stomach wrenched from side to side, or it could have been nerves. We rode in the silence, not completely sure what to say to one another, but comfortable with the silence between us. With our windows down and the warm wafts of summer blowing our hair about, we let Buddy Holly serenade the stillness of the morning from the radio speakers.

We pulled up to a small farm that I had vaguely remembered seeing before. We must have driven by it when I was a kid. There was a long gravel lane that led to a small blue house. The colors on the For Sale sign had bled and faded with age. The grass had begun to grow with wild fury. I didn’t have to ask. I knew this was the place that held him quiet all these years. In the back of my mind, I know he’s driven by here many times, just so the sight of it can warm his heart even if only for a moment.

“How long has the house been empty?”

“I’m not really sure. I think a few families lived in it after we moved out, but we were the last ones to farm on it.”

“What happened?”

“Well, your grandpa’s back had begun to hurt more and more and pretty soon, it was obvious that he wasn’t going to be able to farm anymore. So we had the auction and moved into town. We lived in town my last couple years of high school. He worked for a farm machine company for a few years, but it was just never quite the same after we left. I think we all left a little of ourselves behind the day we moved.”

Behind the house was the farm and to the left of that was a large red machine shed. Behind the shed, a decrepit windmill was sandwiched between towering pine trees. Off to the right of the house and down a small knoll, an elliptical pond sat enclosed by two abandoned mine shafts.

“He used to tell me there were witches in there. And it kept me out that’s for sure!” He pointed through the windshield to the shafts at the bottom of the hill. He opened the door and stepped out of the car. The sand-colored gravel crunched like cornflakes below his feet. “I always thought I’d write a book about this place and all the memories I had here.”

“I hope you do someday.”

He pulled the Orioles ball-cap off of his head and wiped his brow, the way he always does when he’s thinking. “I grew up in a totally different lifetime than you did. So many things have changed.”

I looked around, taking in the scenery for the first time, trying to picture a past I’d never known. Things really must have changed because he was being carried through a

watery stream of memory. My creek seemed like it might be beginning to fill its empty holes after all the rocks I'd thrown in all these years. "There's something so distinct about growing up on a farm, something that brings your soul to life early in the morning. The dew, it just oozes coolness in your veins," he said as he put his hat back on his head. My dad has always worn his hat two ways. It seems like when he's quiet and in unfamiliar places, the brim of his hat is straight, almost to a point where it covers his eyes. Other times, like today, his hat is pulled up, with the brim pointing in the air, revealing the crinkle on his forehead, revealing himself.

We began to walk down the road and with each crunch below our feet he began to shed his wall. Little by little, the pieces peeled away like the old blue paint on the house in front of us. The weather had stripped the house of what appeared to be a creamy blue coat, leaving behind flaky patches of dirty white paint.

"I never worked as hard as I did while on this farm, yet it never felt like it, especially in the summer. We'd get up real early to get the chores done and we'd spend the afternoon bailing hay. But at two o'clock every afternoon, no matter what we were doing we'd have to stop. We'd always sit under those big pines over there and have a 7-UP and a Milky Way," pointing to the towering green pines by the windmill. "It sounds silly but every time I have a Milky Way or taste a 7-UP, I remember those times with Dad. Even at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, I'll be at work, and something will push me to remember it's time for a break." I smiled because in the back of my mind it finally made sense why my mom always brought home Milky Ways from the store. When I was a kid, she always used to say it was Dad's treat. Now I know why he smiles when he eats them.

I could smell the sweet syrup of pine that was excreting from the trees, and the closer we got, the stronger it became.

"Can you smell that?"

"Uh huh, it's so strong."

"It's always been that way. You see that windmill over there?" I nodded as I looked over at the dilapidated residue of what used to be a windmill. He sat down underneath the pine and I followed in his lead, thinking about how he probably used to follow Grandpa around listening to his stories. I could see him running across the field toward the windmill where just so he could be next to him.

"When I was a kid, there was an old '37 Plymouth that sat under that tree over there. It was our landlord's, but he left it sit there so long, it started to rust away. It was such a nice car. I could never figure out why he just left it there. One summer day, kind of like today, your grandpa said, 'Let's get that old car started.'"

"Did you do it?"

"We tinkered around with that engine for a couple of hours, and by God, we got the damn thing going!" he said chuckling at the thought. "We pushed it over to the shed and filled the tires up with air and drove it up and down the road laughing harder and harder with each lap. We never laughed so hard! And when we got done, we drove it back over underneath the pine, let the air back out of the tires and walked away as if we'd never touched it."

"Why'd you do that?"

"We couldn't let the landlord know we'd driven that car; it wasn't ours. But Dad was always surprising me with crazy ideas like that."

"Like what?"

“Oh, let’s see. When I was a kid, I never had a sled. One winter, when I was out in the yard dinking around, he came out of the machine shed with a new runner sled. I couldn’t believe it. It was in such good shape, and he said it was his when he was a kid; his dad had bought it for him. I always wondered why he never gave it to me sooner. But I think he was waiting for the right moment, a time when I’d appreciate it. I’ll never forget that. He knew I always wanted one and then gave me the best one I could ever hope for. It was worth the wait.”

The breeze was blowing in from the north, cooling the break between the morning and the afternoon. We got up from the grass near the pines and began to walk towards the pond. “I just never knew what your Grandpa was going to do. Do you know how old I was the first time I drove a tractor? Seven.”

“Seven? Are you kidding me? That’s so young!”

“I know! One day we were out working on the farm and he said, ‘You’re going to drive that load of hay down to the barn today.’ I couldn’t believe he’d said it, and by God I did it. It wasn’t that far, but he still had me do it. He did stuff like that all the time, but he’d always be looking over my shoulder.” His voice grew much quieter. “Still is.”

The pond was so clean, the water, translucent, with waves of blue and green shimmering to the top. I imagined big billowing lily pads and squirmy green frogs. All I saw was my reflection, and the outline of my dad behind me.

“Did you ever go fishing in this pond?”

“Oh all the time, especially in the summer. After dinner, Dad and I would come out here and fish. There were always these huge pond turtles that would come in from the deep ravines that ran, and they would loaf around in the pond. Dad and I would come down here and Spot’d follow us down and jump in the pond and scare the hell out of everything that swam in there. “

“Spot was your dog?”

“Oh yeah. We always had a dog when I was growing up, but I’ll never forget Spot. He wasn’t a particular breed, just a concoction of all sorts. He was all white with one big black spot on the side of his belly. It seems like every dog’s name is Spot, but this dog couldn’t have been named anything else. That big black dot covered the whole side of his stomach. Dad loved that mutt so much; he was always his dog.”

“So what happened to him?”

“Dad used to keep the farm truck in the shed. At night, he’d leave the truck door open because the only place Spot’d sleep was in Dad’s seat of the truck. Old Spot would never want Dad to leave without him, and that way, if he slept in the truck, he would always be along for the ride. One particular summer when I was about 12, he started to sleep in the barn near the hay piles. Dad just knew he wouldn’t be around come winter, and I could never figure out why. Every morning when Dad would go out to the barn, he just hated to open the door because he was afraid he’d find him dead. We buried him beneath those old pines. He loved that old mutt so much; it really jolted him when he was gone.”

“Dad, why didn’t you ever bring me here before? I just don’t understand, after all these years. What makes it so hard?”

“I don’t know, really. When I’m here, I’m with him. When I’m not, it’s hard to talk about it. My memories are all I have left now. I loved that old man so much; I guess it really jolted *me* when he was gone.” He removed his cap and wiped the summer sweat from his brow and looked up to the sky, almost as if in silent conversation, one that

seemed long overdue. The sun was at its peak beaming blonde rays across the sky. It had to be close to lunch.

“You ready to go home? I’m sure your mom’s wondering where we’ve been.” I nodded. That was a lot of memory for one day. It was time to go home.

As we walked down the lane back to the car, I looked back at the farm that lay behind us. *When I’m here, I’m with him.* You’re right, Dad, he is with you, and now he’s with me in my mind. That day we held hands with the memory of the man who stood between us, and we listened to the conversation of the trees. No longer just picture, but now he’s an image, a memory of my own; the one who holds my father’s heart. There’s a fine line between the world of the living and the dead, and that day we walked the thin line with him, for our memories’ sake.

## **For Better or Worse**

*Heather Willison*

The droning alarm awoke Fred from his deep sleep. He slowly opened his eyes to a room that lay shrouded in darkness. He rolled his head to the right and read the digital clock: 6 A.M.; time to get up. Throwing back the covers, he pulled himself out of bed, scratched his bald head and yawned. Snug in his flannel pajamas, he decided there was no use for his robe. He didn’t bother to turn on the light as he felt around with his toes in the shadows for his maroon velvet slippers, ramming his big toe into the oak leg of his bed.

“Ouch.” He did a little shimmy with his foot to shake off the pain. He quickly found his slippers and slid them on. Turning, he wandered over to his dresser and found his bifocals almost immediately and put them on.

Fred opened the door and walked out into the living room of the condo he shared with Judy, his wife. He winced at the loud snoring emanating from her adjacent room. She’d be sleeping for at least another hour or so. He made his way to the front door to retrieve the morning newspaper. The chilly air jolted his senses; the perfect morning for a walk in the retirement village. Then he remembered that Judy didn’t go on walks any longer. Or rather couldn’t. She recently had hip replacement surgery. In fact, she hadn’t gone farther than the couch lately, and Fred had been left in charge of many daunting tasks Judy could no longer perform.

He let the door shut, opened the paper and began scanning through it, then dropped it on the small round kitchen table. He rubbed his fat belly as he shuffled into the kitchen, intending to make the usual eggs and toast. Then, he gingerly sat down to devour his food, surveying each page of the newspaper as he did so. Once he was finished, he went into his own bathroom to shower.

He heard the clang of dishes as he stepped out of the tub a few minutes later. Judy was up. Looking in the mirror, he attempted to comb his remaining white hair over his exposed scalp, to no avail. He set the comb down and quickly dressed himself, brushed his teeth and cleaned his ears. His fuzzy elephant sized ears and yellowing teeth showed signs of aging.

A few minutes later, he headed towards the living room, not acknowledging his wife’s presence until she spoke up.

“You know you could do the dishes once in a while, so I wouldn’t have to do them when I get up,” Judy scolded. She stood leaning against the kitchen sink, her blue silk robe pulled tightly around her, her matching blue slipper tapping against the linoleum flooring. Her hair lay disheveled, a flurry of white strands scattered haphazardly atop her head. She tended to do a lot of tossing and turning at night. She used to dye her hair back to its natural cherry-red color, as if revolting against her advancing age, but she’d given up all hope at sixty.

“Sorry, Jude, just didn’t think about it. Want me to do them?” He advanced to the kitchen, but she abruptly stopped him.

“I’ve already done them.” Dropping the rag she had been holding in her hand, she staggered towards her bedroom. “Besides, they get done properly when I do them.”

Fred rolled his eyes as she closed her bedroom door. He soon heard the distinct sputter of water being pushed through the faucet as Judy got into the shower.

He sat down on the leather couch, grabbed the remote on the side table and turned on the big screen TV. Flipping through the channels, he settled on the morning news. He had finally gotten comfortable, when Judy came rushing out of her bedroom.

“I’m going to be late,” she said and then stopped. She stared blankly at Fred. “What are you doing?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Fred, I have a doctor’s appointment this morning for my hip! Jesus, I’m going to be late! Come on,” she said, ushering him off his seat.

He slowly stood, walked over to the closet and pulled his light jacket off its hanger. Judy watched him, her arms folded.

“Well?”

Fred gave her a dumbfounded expression, but Judy only drummed her fingers against her folded arms. Finally, it struck him. Reaching back into the coat rack, he pulled out her brown parka and turned to face her. She automatically turned around and put out her arms. Without so much as a thank you, she hobbled past him and out the door.

They drove in silence to the doctor’s office. Fred had long since become accustomed to their limited dialogue. They had been married for over fifty years, and nearly half of that time had been spent in silence. It had been nearly ten years since Fred had slept in the same bed as Judy. She claimed that Fred snored too loudly, and Fred argued that Judy did as well. Finally, they just decided that separate bedrooms would solve the problem, although the emptiness Fred felt in bed was almost worse than listening to Judy’s horrendous breathing.

Since they had retired a few years earlier, they’d moved into a pricey retirement community. The only disadvantage, Fred discovered, was that he and Judy were in a smaller space. They got along better when they could stay out of each other’s way.

As he drove, Fred glanced over at Judy. She’d aged quite nicely, he felt, unlike himself, with his sagging chin and wrinkly face, his all but non-existent hair, and his belly that dropped below his belt, making him constantly hoist up his pants. He tried his best to keep his body in shape, and yet he felt as though he was falling apart.

He parked the Oldsmobile in the nearest spot. As he took the key out of the ignition, he watched as Judy carefully unzipped her purse and pulled out a pocket mirror and a tube of lipstick. Spreading her lips wide, she held up the mirror and uncapped the tube.

When she'd finished, she smacked her lips together and wiped off the corners. Fred realized it had been over two years since he'd felt those lips against his.

"What's the lipstick for?" Fred casually asked.

Judy shot him a look, crinkling her eyes and frowning.

"Why not?" She opened the passenger door and stepped out of the car; Fred followed her lead and walked over by her side. "Besides, why would you care anyway?"

Fred shrugged. "It looks nice."

"Humph," she grunted as she slipped her arm around his for support. Her pace was slow, but Fred patiently stayed at her gait and helped her find a seat inside the doctor's office while he went to check her in. He took his seat beside her a few minutes later. Judy was already absorbed in a magazine, so he turned his attention to the overhead television, just as Judy's name was called. She stood up, dropped the magazine and followed the nurse down a narrow hallway.

Surveying the small waiting room, Fred noticed a young couple sitting together directly below the TV. They whispered in excited, hushed tones to each other, with their hands clasped together. The man quickly reached over and gave the woman a kiss on the cheek; her eyes instantly lit up and a wide grin spread across her face. The man seemed to feel Fred's eyes upon them.

"We're having a baby," the man offered in explanation, softly rubbing the woman's stomach.

"Congratulations."

The couple smiled at Fred, then continued to talk in muted voices. Fred watched them with deepening interest. Judy wanted children when they were younger, but after a visit to the doctor's, Fred learned he was sterile. Judy was hurt by this realization and had resented Fred for quite some time. Fred was almost certain that even to this day she still held some lingering feelings of bitterness toward him. He eyed the zealous young couple and realized the happiness he had denied Judy. He didn't even realize Judy stood over him until she cleared her throat.

"Stop gawking!" she commanded. "Come on, I'm ready to go." Judy glanced over at the couple and seemed to be looking at them longingly before she began walking out the door. The couple shot Fred sympathetic looks as he stood up from his seat and gave them a nod before following Judy out the door.

Fred helped Judy into the car before getting in himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed her looking down at her neatly folded hands. He sensed a touch of sadness had suddenly poisoned the air, and he cleared his throat nervously.

"I'm sorry we never had kids." Fred kept his eyes forward. Judy shifted her weight and turned her head away from him.

"What does it matter now?" she mumbled.

"I just wanted you to know I'm sorry."

"Thirty years later you want to apologize to me?"

Fred thought a moment, feeling somewhat foolish. "Jude, it's just, I mean..."

"Why are we even having this discussion, Fred?" she cut in. "I was enjoying the peace and quiet."

Fred fell silent, defeated and humiliated.

He thought back to the couple at the doctor's office, reflecting on how Judy and he had been that much in love once upon a time. They'd met in high school, became fast

friends and started dating in college. Everything about Judy enchanted him. The way she bit her lip when she was nervous, talked fast when she was excited, and the way she had looked at him with a fierce fire in her dark green eyes that often fixated him, and at times even scared him. It was Judy who'd first proposed the idea of marrying and starting a family. He remembered the day clearly in his mind. They had been eating at a local diner, where they often grabbed lunch between classes.

"Let's get married," Judy blurted out.

Fred had been taking a sip of his drink at the time, and almost choked. "What? Did you just say what I think you said?"

"Come on Fred, we've been dating for over two years now. I want to settle down and start a family."

"Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life. I want to grow old with you." Her green eyes had never been brighter than at that moment, and something inside him snapped.

"Ok, let's get married."

He smiled at the memory he could still recall so vividly.

"Fred, the light is green. Would you go already!" Judy yelled at him, bringing him back from his daydream.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly, directing the car forward.

Once they'd arrived home, they went about their separate ways. Judy retreated to her bedroom, and Fred could hear her on the phone periodically, calling various friends. Fred sat down in front of the TV and flipped to whatever sporting event was on, which happened to be golf.

Some time later, Fred glanced up at the grandfather clock stationed in the living room and noticed it was nearly 5 p.m. Judy was still enclosed in her room, but he knew she'd be out soon and would want a drink. It was a nightly ritual for the two, tossing back a few drinks and winding down from the day. He heaved himself up from the couch and made his way to the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of rum and two glasses. As if the clang of glasses on the counter were a calling, Judy instantly emerged from her bedroom.

"I could use a good drink," Judy commented, as if the alcohol were an unexpected treat.

Fred silently handed Judy her glass and watched as she pressed her delicate lips against the smooth rim and gingerly took a sip. Fred took a large gulp of his own drink and commenced to make himself a sandwich.

"Judy, do you want a sandwich?" he offered.

"No, I'm not hungry."

After quickly making his food, he headed back to the couch with his drink, noticing Judy had taken his seat and changed the channel.

"I was watching that," Fred stated, sitting down beside her.

"You've been watching TV all day long. Now it's my turn."

He was about to protest, but Judy's stern look stopped him. They sat in silence for a good two hours or so, with Fred refilling their drinks periodically.

"There's nothing on TV," Judy commented after a while, yawning and flipping from one station to the next.

"Do we have to watch TV?"

“Well, what else would we do?”

“Why don’t we turn off the TV and talk instead?” Fred suggested.

Judy laughed. “Now why would we want to do a thing like that?”

Fred shrugged. “When was the last time you and I really talked?”

Judy stood up, swirling her drink in the process. “I think you’ve had a little too much to drink.” She reached to take his glass and advanced to the kitchen to top off their drinks.

“I’m serious, Judy.” He followed her into the kitchen.

She poured the drinks and handed Fred his glass.

“Serious about what, Fred? We’ve been married for over fifty years. What could we possibly have left to talk about? And don’t even bring up you know what.”

Fred hesitated. “Well maybe we should talk about it. Or if you don’t want to, that’s fine. There has got to be something we can find to say to each other.”

“I think we’re just better off drinking.” Judy took a sip of her drink and headed back to the couch.

“When was the last time we kissed?” Fred asked suddenly.

Judy stopped and turned around. “What?”

“Well, that couple today at the doctor’s office. We used to be like them, you remember?”

“Oh please, Fred,” she moved towards the kitchen again and set down her drink. “You’re drunk, and I’m going to bed.”

“Judy....” He called after her.

“Fred, you and I both know that talking gets us nowhere. Maybe things would have been different if we’d had kids, but that isn’t going to happen. I realize now that if I were a few years younger, I would have wanted a divorce. But this is the way things ended up, so we have to try and make the best of it. Bringing up things like having children isn’t going to help any.” With that, she walked into her bedroom and closed the door behind her.

Fred felt rejected. He had no idea his wife felt such hatred and disregard toward him. Quietly, he turned off the TV and set his glass, along with Judy’s, in the sink. He decided to wash them in the morning and headed towards his own bedroom. He quickly changed into his flannel pajamas and crawled under the cold covers. He pulled the comforter tight around him and stared straight ahead, lost in thought.

Something began building up inside of Fred and he tried desperately to fight it off. He started shivering uncontrollably, unclear if it was the immense cold he felt, or the emotions festering deep inside. He tried to ward off any thoughts, as if thinking them at all would be deadly. Without warning, one slipped out. *I hate her.* And in a flood the rest of his thoughts followed. *How could she do this to me? How dare she say that! I hate her. I want to hurt her like she hurt me. Better yet, why not be rid of her completely?* The last thought caught him off guard, and he shuddered at his own senselessness and cruelty. Of course he didn’t want to harm his wife. He loved her after all, didn’t he?

Fred wasn’t even aware that he was crying until he instinctively reached up to wipe away a tear from his cheek. Only then did he notice a damp spot on his pillow. Thinking himself foolish and obviously drunk, he tried to filter his thoughts in an effort to empty his mind and drift into slumber.

Sometime later he sat up, startled. A thought had occurred to him, yet he wasn't sure if he believed such thoughts were possible. In a haze he stumbled out of bed and stood there in the darkness of his room for a few minutes. Without thinking about it, he picked up his pillow and nestled it underneath his arm.

Silently, he tiptoed out of his bedroom and headed towards Judy's room. He slowly opened her door and peered inside at her figure upon the bed. Advancing into her room, he cautiously made his way to her bedside. She looked so peaceful and rested in her bed. The pillow fell limp at his side. What was he thinking? He couldn't harm this woman he loved so passionately and deeply. What a fool he was. After all, she had stayed with him after all these years. He vowed never to think such evil thoughts again; he wanted to please his wife as she had pleased him. He let the pillow fall to the carpeted floor. He carefully brushed her hair out of her eyes and knelt down to give her a soft kiss on the cheek. He gently pulled down the covers that were tucked neatly around her body and crawled into bed with her. Like a wounded dog that had just been punished, he nestled his cold body up against her warm body, staring into her closed eyes as she slept. Watching the harmonic rising and falling of her chest he drifted to sleep beside his lovely wife.

## **The Tower**

*Nicole Edwards*

I will call you up to the top of my tower  
because I am beautiful and cruel.

And perhaps, before you climb,  
you will pick for me some of the flowers,  
the white ones that grow by the stream,  
planted for someone beautiful  
by someone jealous and vengeful and vain.

Now the stairs are steep and winding  
and they are littered  
with the bones  
and the poems  
of those who came before.  
But do not worry.  
I will tell you their stories,  
which I remember well  
for they built this tower,  
my pathetic prison  
as you build it now  
my silly unknowing mason.  
With each step there is one more.  
And I will sing you a sweet song  
to make you special

to make you brave.  
And when at last you can build no more  
you will reach the top  
where I will love you.

And because I love you  
I will show you all the beautiful things.  
I will throw open the windows wide  
and we can gaze together upon the world below.  
And we can laugh together  
at all the silly  
all the lonely  
all the fools.  
And when that is done  
when you have seen and known  
and have shouted from the tower top  
of your joy  
and my love,  
which was well worth the climb,  
I will take you by the hands  
and you can lean me far far out the window of my prison  
so I am scared of falling  
so I can see outside my almost hell.

And then it is your turn  
And I know you are not afraid.  
Because I am strong.  
And I will lean you far far out the window  
of your almost heaven.  
And I will let you fall.

## **Driving**

*David Fautsch*

I imagine my arm as an airplane  
Gently swooping in the night's air  
Its nose slowly slants toward the sky  
This causes the plane to lift off  
Rushing up like a wave gathering in the ocean  
In a moment it will tilt its nose  
Down to the ground, and descend as a wave  
Gliding toward the shore

Now and then this plane of mine  
Is illuminated by the pale blue

Flickering light of the moon  
That jumps through the trees

I'd like to be a passenger  
On a wild journey through the darkness  
Riding the breath of God

## **Water**

*Nicholas Voss*

I fall.  
You save.  
I trickle.  
You taste.  
I drench.  
You strip.  
I massage.  
You soak.  
I coat.  
You glow.  
I embrace.  
You plunge.  
I drown ...

We take a breather.

I cleanse.  
You bathe.  
I nurture.  
You drink.  
I sing.  
You sleep.

## **The Edge, If Anything**

*Quentin Smith*

I was raised in a protective bubble, and I never fought it. I felt guilty when I forgot to brush my teeth, and felt even worse when I forgot to say my prayers before I went to bed. I did my homework every night, and believed in Santa Claus till sixth grade. I found out what sex was from my little brother's friend in eighth grade; I could not have been more shocked, even if it had actually occurred to me that my parents had actually done that. I listened to the CD's and tapes that my parents kept around the house, like Ingelbert Humperdink and Elvis' *Christmas Songs*. I went to a Catholic grade school where being tough was considered listening to Nirvana, and in my early days of high school sex

before marriage was not even thought of and touching another girl's breast was the ultimate sin. I never went to a PG-13 movie before I was 13, and seeing a rated R movie was beyond any risk that I was willing to take. Smoking cigarettes and drinking beer were for those of the proper age, determined by the law, and anyone who went against this law was a bad person who should be looked down upon. In the bubble, everything was black and white, good and evil. What my parents told me was the absolute law.

Somewhere in my junior year of high school at Munson prep I started to question things in my bubble, and slowly walked out of the bubble. My friends and I experimented with cigars. I touched my girlfriend's breast, and I felt like I had violated her in the worst way even though she had deliberately placed my hand there out of frustration over my lack of experience. I started to drive above the speed limit, and allowed myself to fall asleep in class once in a while, but never too long, for I felt that would hurt my teacher's feelings. I played football through high school, but was never a jock. I didn't think it was "uncool" to be on the chess team or to run cross country.

I completely stepped out of this bubble my senior year. I met two guys that were bad, and I decided I wanted to be just like them. My mother still had insisted on checking my homework. For three years up to that point she was still trying to have the birds and bees talk with me. She still bought me sweaters for Christmas, and most of all I could not help ever disobeying her, and like any teenager, this was my chance to break loose from my mother-created bubble. Jackson and Slew were my ticket out.

Jackson was our stud defensive end that had tattoos of barbed wire on both on his arms, and he drove a maroon Ford Taurus that he shared with his bitch of a sister. Slew was our cornerback that had arms like Vin Diesel and wore cut off flannels and drove a 1987 blue Chrysler Reliant with no muffler and bull horns on the front that he shared with his dick brother who went to State, and we called his car the "Traveling Tavern." Slew had a missing front tooth and refused to wear his dentures. Both of them would speed into our Catholic school parking lot in their respected vehicles and illegally park in the grass or a faculty parking space. Slew and Jackson were like twins; they both listened to AC/DC and Megadeth and loved to quote "The Simpsons". Their favorite movie was "Dazed and Confused," and they both followed their mothers around the grocery store pushing the cart because their mothers made them. Deep down inside they had wild hopes their mothers would buy them beer. Neither of them did their homework, because it was cool to not know what was going on in class, and when the teacher asked them a question, it drove up their bad ass points to just laugh in their faces or to be caught in a deep slumber dreaming of "The Simpsons." They both had dreams of going to college. Slew wanted to be a lawyer, Jackson wanted to be a cop. (He always said SWAT team, because that was more bad ass.)

I'm not sure why they allowed someone who had a contrary character to theirs to hang with them, but they always insisted I come out with them, because I thought they were gods and I fed to their image of being bad ass rock stars. I started driving my car dangerously to prove to them I was cool. I gave up Ingelbert Humperdink for Ozzy Osborne and AC/DC. I started calling girls "sluts" and kids who were not on our football team preppies, even though our fathers made more money than these so-called preppies. I began to wear only jeans and grungy looking t-shirts with no sleeves to show off my muscular physique that I had worked so hard on in order to get better at football. I began to refer to people, including my father, as "dude", and most of all, began to not give a shit

about anything in general. If we blew off a homework assignment, or came home after our 11:30 curfews, we said it was because “we didn’t give a fuck!”

Our football status was what made our peers fear us. We were the three captains of our 14-0 state championship football team, and the girls would swoon at the sound of our names. We knew we were studs, and every day we would add a swagger to our step. The world was ours, we could never be defeated. If we dreamt it, we thought it could be ours. It was in our heads that rules did not apply to championship studs.

After graduation, we decided that our last true summer together would be spent in a drunken stupor. That is when the fun began.

Our normal Friday night was to go to the Highlight 30 in the “Traveling Tavern” with a 24 case of Coors Light. We called it “Brew n’ View”. We’d get to the theater about an hour before show time, park in the back parking lot, and we would slam beers while listening to Rock and Roll CD’s on the CD player Slew installed in his car, and talking each other up about our highlights on our championship football season. Then we would load up our pockets with the remaining beers and walk into the theater. Paying was for preppies, and we usually spent all of our money on beer, so we would walk in like we owned the place. The puny ass ticket takers never said a word, because they *knew* we were bad asses. (The truth is they didn’t give a fuck as much as we did.) As we walked by them, Jackson, who was our unofficial leader, would just say, “Fuckin’ pussy.” In our minds, the ticket takers were quivering with fear. We would giggle as we walked to the movie, knowing that we had just gotten away with breaking the law by being bad asses. We chose movies we would not have to think in, because we were already drunk. We would sit down in the theater, prop up our legs, and simultaneously crack open our beers. This always made us giggle because we knew everyone heard us, and we were sure that the other spectators were thinking, “Man, these guys are tough. Sneaking in beers? I wish I thought of that!” We would always make sure we made fun of the guys with girlfriends, because they were fuckin’ whipped. (Me and Jackson both had girlfriends, but that was neither here nor there; it was the principle that we were free at that moment and those sorry chaps were not.)

It was one night that Brew n’ View was not such a good idea. We got into the theater early, and after finishing our smuggled beers before the previews, we decided that we were not quite drunk enough. So we went out to our reserves in the trunk, and stood in the parking lot slamming beers as fast as we could before the best movie of all time, “Detroit Rock City.” As we were merrily slamming to our toast to “not giving a fuck”, a series of Maple Park squad cars zoomed in from north, south, east and west, leaving us standing there in mid guzzle. We let out a series of “Oh fucks” and wordlessly agreed that throwing our empty beer cans under the Traveling Tavern was the best idea. We were all pretty drunk, and none of the cans quite made it under the car, and mine hit one of the squad cars.

“You better hope that that didn’t leave a dent!” one of sergeants said getting out of his car. We all just stood there, feeling drunk, wondering what our moms would think.

“We got some complaints about you boys. You boys enjoying your evening, I see.” The other cops started circling us like a pack of wolves and all stood with their thumbs in their weapon belts, one was even wearing Top Gun glasses. The sergeant approached me, because I was the obvious dumb ass and he was going to have some fun with me, and

said, "I want you to take the rest of this beer and dump it out over by that tree, and you can take your friend that stinks like shit with you." Jackson usually did smell.

So the two of us took the remaining case of about ten or so with long looks on our faces not because of the trouble, but because that was a perfectly good waste of beer, while Slew was talking to the cops as they searched his car for drugs.

I was pretty drunk, and taking the cop literally, I simply dumped the remaining cans by the tree. "Dude! You fucking idiot," Jackson said with a tone of urgency, looking behind him, "they mean dump the *cans* out."

All I could manage was an "Ohhhhhhhhh", in realization of my bonehead move. So we cracked each of them open and painfully dumped them out. I know Jackson was thinking the same thing, and that was quick, get a few sips in while the cops weren't looking. That would have been the bad ass thing to do, but our hearts were beating out of our chests.

We walked back to the circle of cops and Slew who looked like he was ready was crying because a huge dog was rummaging through his Traveling Tavern looking for drugs, and he handed them the empty case. Then the sergeant faced us and said, "This is what I'm going to do. I didn't find any drugs, so I'm gonna let you boys off easy. I'm not gonna give you guys tickets or arrest you. I have one problem though, and that is after your movie I understand you were going to drive drunk. I have no problem with you guys drinking, but driving drunk I hate. I'm gonna take your keys, and you can pick them up at the station tomorrow." We were all feeling a little giddy because we were going to get off scot free. Then there was a "but."

"Buuuut, I'm going to have each of you boys call your parents and tell them what happened here." Any of us would have preferred a night in jail or a ticket. But not our parents.

"Dude, Sir," Jackson said, "My mom is a bitch, and she is sleeping. Do you think you can give us a ticket instead?" Slew and I nodded our heads in agreement.

"I'm sorry. I should be arresting you boys. I hope you boys learned your lesson."

The worse part about this was that I had told my mom that night that I was with another friend, because I knew she hated Jackson and Slew. She knew that they were trouble. The sergeant got on the horn with Slew's mom as he reluctantly told him her number, and very sweetly told her that her son was in no danger, and he handed the phone over to Slew.

He never said a word. He listened to his mom ream him out, as he was used to, and Jackson and I waited in fretful anxiety because we knew we were next. Jackson's mom told him he was grounded for a week, and could not fathom where he got the beer from. (The truth is he had the fake ID.)

I called my mom and told her, and the worse part of it was her disappointed voice. She said she would talk to me in the morning. I vowed I would never hurt my mother again.

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The next few days, in reflection, we decided that this penalty was not so bad after all. Our parents got over it, said boys would be boys, and believed what we told them, that we would never do it again. So we decided the next weekend we would get drunk again.

Now that we were deathly afraid of movie theater parking lots, we decided it was in our best interest to go somewhere remote to get blasted. I knew of this great place that

was very secluded where I liked to take my girlfriend. It was the Sheldon County forest preserve, and so we hopped in the Traveling Tavern and parked in the lot. This time we had *two cases* of Coors Light, because we were going to be tough and pass out in the forest that night.

We started slamming beers, toasting to our football season, our luck with getting free last weekend with no ticket or prison time, and to letting the good times rock and roll. We called up this one girl in our class, Ren I think her name was, and she was what we called a slut. We passed the phone around to talk to her, each of us trying to get her to come to the forest preserve so we could treat her like a slut. Jackson decided that we should forget our girlfriends that night, because someday we would not be able to do fun shit with sluts. I agreed, but deep down I guess I really didn't.

I was drunkenly talking to Ren like anyone would to a slut, when in my haze I noticed that a car pulled into the far end of the lot. I was praying it was not the cops. It sure was.

"Fuck, it's the fucking pigs!" I yelled to my comrades.

"Fuck this shit!" Slew screeched, and he bolted out of the car into the night, leaving Jackson and me to fend for ourselves.

I pulled a Sheldon County deputy sheriff squad car, and the sight of it made me want to vomit.

"Fuck, dude!" Jackson said racing out of the car like we were attacked by a swarm of bees. "We need to get rid of these fucking cans!" So with a sense of urgency, a matter of life and death, we started tossing the silver beer cans out of the car into the tall bushes before the cop reached us, each one bouncing off the bushes and making a distinct "clank" on the concrete.

The car slowly pulled up, and the African-American deputy rolled down his window. "You boys know you are in the preserve after dark? What the hell you boys doing out here anyways?"

We looked at each other, realizing what it looked like: two boys in the forest preserve alone, and me with no shirt on because I get hot when I am drunk.

The deputy, just realizing the scattered beer cans were on the ground, got out of his car.

"Boys doin' a little drinkin', huh?" It was obvious that he was pissed, and what scared us even more was the fact that Sheldon County cops were Hitlers compared to Maple Park cops. "You boys are gonna clean up these beer cans, and while you are doing that, you are gonna tell me whose car this is and what your names are."

Me and Jackson, with a sense of *déjà vu*, began to undo our work by placing the beer cans in the beer box in frustration. Then he asked us again whose car it was. Jackson was the first to speak. "Well, sir, you see, this is our friend Slew's car."

"And where is this Slew fellow?"

"He isn't here. Ummm, he let us borrow the car for the night."

"An does he know that you are planning to drive this car drunk?"

"We were gonna sleep here tonight, sir."

I thought it was a pretty good lie, and the deputy bought into it, and he relaxed for a while, seeing our intentions were harmless, and told us to have someone come and pick us up.

All of a sudden, like the second coming of Jesus Christ, Slew, in his cut-off flannel and his hands in the air, stepped out from somewhere in bushes, looking like he was going to cry.

The deputy turned his flashlight on Slew in apparent surprise. “Who the fuck is this? Stop, mother fucker!”

Slew got down on his knees with his hands still in the air. “Sir, this is my car,” Slew wailed.

The deputy turned his flashlight on me and Jackson, who wanted to shoot Slew in the head. “You lyin’ mother fuckers! You dumb shits think you were gonna get away with this? Why did you lie to me? Why would you fuckin lie to a cop?”

I was pretty drunk, and when I am drunk, like most people, I am blatant. “Sir, we just didn’t want to get caught. We got scared.” The deputy looked at me like I was the dumbest person on earth. I thought he was going to club me over the head with his Mag light. Then his look relaxed and he looked at me a little closer.

“Maxuel Samuels you said your name was?”

“Yes sir.”

“Shiiiiiiiiit. Dog, I saw you in that semi-final game against Norman, and that was one fuckin’ run you had at the end. You trucked them mother fuckers!”

With Slew still on the ground and me and Jackson with our hands on the car and legs spread, he began to tell us of his football days, and that he was stud. “Shit, I had bitches comin’ at me from all over. But I wasn’t as dumb as you mother fuckers. I didn’t come drink in no parking lot with no shirt like a god damn faggot.”

I winced at this and I thought that he was going to revert to old form. But he didn’t. “Listen. I can give you guys a ticket for littering, being in the preserve after hours, under age drinking, a DUI, and a ticket for god damn being dumb and lookin’ like faggots when you boys is football players. But all I’m gonna do is ask you to put that other case of Coors Light in my trunk for me and the boys to enjoy later, and have you have a friend come pick you up.”

We did as we were told, and had my brother come pick us up. We could not have been more ecstatic. There is no feeling in the world better than getting caught red handed and getting off scot free because you are a god damn bad ass.

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An hour later we had my brother drop us off at the preserve to pick up the Traveling Tavern. We drove in celebration to Taco Bell with another 24 pack to celebrate being bad asses. We got the cheapest tacos we could find, in result of spending most of our money on beer. We were driving along a dark road, with Slew driving, Jackson in his usual seat at shotgun, and me, the king of bitch, guarding the beer. I had taken a bite out of my taco, and deciding that it sucked because it did not taste like beer (which was a very cool and witty thing to say to my fellow bad asses), I chucked the taco out of my window, and that was that.

What I didn’t realize in my drunkenness was that there was a silver Cougar behind us, and I pegged his shiny car perfectly on the hood. “Holy Shit! You just hit that guy!” Jackson said.

The car tailed us in anger, flashing his lights. After I had scored more bad ass points, I decided to score some more by telling my fellow bad asses that we should fight the mother fucker (very courageous of me, a three on one battle). So we pulled into the

neighborhood with the Cougar still on our tail, and stopped on a random driveway that had its lights out.

We got out of the car with a swagger, to intimidate the fellow, to give him a chance to see that we were bad and that we meant harm. I took the lead, for this was my fight. I was thinking over what bad ass thing I was going to say, something like, “You got a problem, hombre?” Or maybe I would just smile at him. Maybe I would walk up and punch his window in like Vin Diesel.

The driver of the formerly perfectly clean car rolled down his window, and was showing us his wallet. He was fucking huge, with a bald head, and had arms like a guerilla. He smiled like a lion or some huge cat and said, “Police, you stupid fuck.”

It was then that I realized he was not showing us his wallet, but rather a badge. “What, you tough sons of bitches gonna beat me up? I’ve been workin’ all day, and I’m going home to my wife and kids, and some fucking punk kids decide to throw a burrito at my ride! Who hit my ride?”

Realizing my mistake, immediately very scared, and most of all embarrassed over losing bad ass points for picking a fight with an undercover cop, I said, “Officer, I seriously, seriously did not mean to hit your car. I just threw it out, I had no idea you were there!” Jackson and Slew were behind me confirming my words, “Seriously” and “We are so sorry.”

He didn’t buy it. “You two dumbshits get the fuck out of here.” He pointed at me and said, “You stay here. I’m gonna call for someone on duty and have them come and take care of you.”

He got on his radio and called for back up while Jackson and Slew drove away. I was shitting my pants. “Sir, I am soooooo sorry. I seriously did not see you. Why would I try and hit someone’s car? Sir, you have to understand that I am not that smart. I just wasn’t thinking. Sir, my friends were yelling at me for throwing it out the window in the first place. I did not mean to do this.”

He looked at me for a few seconds, and let out a sigh. “Dude, I don’t feel like staying here all night, so I’m gonna believe you. You’re lucky I love my wife and she made me a good dinner tonight. I’ll call off back up, and you call your friends to come and pick you up. And stop littering. I hate that shit.”

He drove away, and minutes later, Jackson and Slew drove up. “Dude, you are so dumb! He drove by us while we were getting the beer out of the trunk! We thought we were fucked! He told us you were an idiot, and drove away,” Jackson said from the front seat. “Holy fuck! That guy was huge!”

We were not done yet. We all felt in our hearts that we had not closed out our night with a bang. Something was unfinished. We needed a finale. By this time we were fairly wasted, and I was driving while those two sat in the back doing beer bongs on our beer bong “Billy Squire”. I am not sure why it was called that. I was not going to be the loser I had been in my former days, so I decided it was necessary I make the bad ass step and drink while I drove. All I had to do was concentrate really hard, and I was pretty sure I was doing a good job of that. I am not sure I can remember the exact altercations that went on in this time period, but I remember we were laughing at all of the bad ass things we did. The funniest to Jackson and Slew was blowing stop signs. I did the first one by accident, but they thought it was funny, so I had to keep doing it keep up my renewed bad ass status. I also remember yelling at houses that had political signs in front

that said, "Save The Braeburn Marsh". "The marsh", as we called it, was supposed to be a neighborhood, but when the five mile plot was excavated it somehow flooded. For a year they tried to drain it, but it never worked, so it turned into a natural habitat for many of the Maple Park vermin. At that time they were trying to get the city to redrain it. We thought it was funny that people were such geeks to actually care about that swamp, so every time I blew through a stop sign, we would yell out our windows, "Save the fucking marsh!!!!!!!!!" Then we would proceed to chuck our empty beer cans at the stop sign like it was the one that was threatening the Braeburn Marsh. Slew even got out of the car to take a piss on one of the lawns, and when he was done he stole one of the signs. We put it in the back window because that was pretty funny. Then Jackson had a great idea. "Dudes.....let's go to the fucking marsh!"

Slew and I agreed that this extremely random idea was going to be the finale of our adventurous night.

As we neared the marsh, I decided that blowing stop signs was just not bad ass enough anymore, so I decided that I would scare my comrades. The next stop sign on my route was at the part where the road split into a "Y". So I sped down the hill as fast I could, approaching the "Y", with the stop sign in the middle. Jackson and Slew let out yelps and war calls as we picked up speed, but they shut up when they saw that I was not stopping. I was waiting for the time to veer right, and I missed it. All I could hear was "Fuck, Dude!" over and over as I created a middle fork in the road. I pulverized the stop sign in the middle of the "Y" like Lawrence Taylor mowing over a poor running back. All I saw was our car pass right between two trees like a football between a field goal post, and then the most humongous splash I had ever heard. We had landed smack dab in the middle of the Braeburn Marsh.

"Oh my god, I can't fucking swim! I can't swim!" Slew kept screaming.

"Dude, Max, I can't fucking swim either. You gotta swim us to shore, man!"

Slew gave two whimpers and cried, "But you can't take two us! Which one of us are you going to choose?!"

"Dude, Slew, we'll fucking do paper, scissors, rock for it. Best out of two."

"You can't do best out of two!"

"I meant first to fucking two! We don't have much fucking time! And dude, who ever wins has to take the Braeburn Marsh sign."

"God damint, Jackson, I'm not going to drown in the fucking Braeburn Marsh! I refuse to go down like this, man!" He whimpered twice, dropping his bad ass tone he had flashed all night, and he screamed again, "And fuck your stupid sign!" Slew turned and punched the sign, a clear indication he was losing it.

Though it had just come to my already sobering senses that I was in deep trouble, I could not keep from laughing. "Dudes, we're not sinking. It's three fucking feet here. All we have to do is get out and walk to shore."

"Ohhhhhhh. Shit man," Jackson said, and turned to Slew. "Dude, you still want to do paper, scissors, rock?"

"Fuck you, man. My car is gone, man. My mom is gonna kill me."

We all got out of the car, and in 30 minutes we had covered twenty feet of space and had reached shore. The bottom was so soft we had to double back for our empty beer cans to crush and mold to our shoes so we didn't sink, and Slew brought Billy Squire the beer bong to use as a snorkel just in case he went under. We were silent on our trek to

shore. Occasionally Slew would let out a whimper, but I knew we were all thinking what kind of trouble this would be. In retrospect, I can tell that I had to get a job at Burger King to pay for Slew's car, but ironically enough the judge made each of us pay the "Save The Braeburn Marsh" Committee \$500 each. He was a staunch advocate of the Marsh.

We knew our drinking days were over, but Jackson and I were not taking it as badly as Slew. We were practicing what we would say to our mothers. Slew started crying because he was drunk and because his mom would be so mad because she had just washed his new Metallica shirt.

As we trudged toward shore, each step pounded our new lesson into our heads even harder than the last step. We did not look like football studs. We did not look like rock stars, we did not look like outlaws, we did not look like AC/DC. We just looked like pussies, and we knew it. We had shamed the bad ass name. Most of all, we were dreading the look of disappointment in our mothers' eyes.

I looked at Jackson who still had a look on his face that this whole incident had not hit him yet, and he looked at me, and he said, "And dude, it is not called a shore. That is not the proper nomenclature. Shores have sand. It must be called the edge, if anything."

## **Drinks after Dinner**

*Alison Brogan*

He stood in the doorway, waving goodbye as the other two pulled away in their Pontiac. She was already picking up their empty glasses and dessert plates off of the marble coffee table. He closed the door, then peered into the large crystal framed mirror at the reflection of his wife busily collecting napkins and piling them on top of the plates. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Leave that mess till tomorrow," he said to her. "Let's have another drink." He kissed her on the cheek and moved towards the bar.

"All right, give me a cosmopolitan," she replied, raising her eyebrows flirtatiously.

He laughed. "Someone's on a mission tonight." She sat down on a stool in front of him, as he mixed the drinks. He handed her the shaker, and she shook it herself like she had the night they met. They smiled at each other, remembering. He poured himself a vodka tonic, then they clinked their glasses together.

"Cheers."

After they both sipped their drinks, her fourth and his sixth, she shook her head, smiling, feeling the warmth of the alcohol. He pushed her light brown bangs out of her eyes. "Tonight was fun," he said.

"Yeah, it was." She smiled and took another swallow from her martini.

"It's so good to see them. It seems like forever since they had the twins."

"I know! Linda told me I was a genius for not wanting children," she replied, laughing. He laughed too. They both took another drink from their glasses.

"The card games were fun. I felt like we were in college again, only we were drinking much more expensive alcohol," he laughed, indicating the glass in his hand.

"And the food was of far better quality than pizza and McDonald's," she said triumphantly, raising her drink.

“Definitely. Thanks to you and your kitchen magic. The pesto was perfect!” They laughed again, and she said thank you as they clanged their glasses together once more for the toast. He paused before taking his drink, listening to the ice cubes swirl around the bottom of the glass, clinking against the sides. “Almost gone,” he said, raising the glass to his lips. He gulped. “Gone.” He pulled the bottles up and poured another.

She looked at her own glass, still three quarters full, and exclaimed, “God, your mouth must be a drain!” She hopped off her stool and pretended to search around behind the bar. “You couldn’t have downed that so fast. Where did you dump it, hmm?”

He smacked her bottom playfully. “Well I did ‘down it’, and it’s time for another. So catch up, Babe.” She laughed and dutifully chugged the rest of her cosmopolitan. His eyes widened, and some of his vodka tonic rushed down his chin as he laughed. “Jesus I was joking! Are you gonna puke, now?”

She stood with her hands bracing herself over the sink, while her eyes watered and her throat swallowed at nothing. She finally raised her head. “Why did I do that?” she asked the air around her, while reaching for a glass to fill with water.

“Because you were drunk and being you,” he said, placing his tumbler down on the counter behind the bar. “Now don’t drink that, yet. I’ll get you some bread.” He helped his wife out from behind the bar, and sat her down on one of the white leather couches. With her thin body dressed all in expensive designer pink, she looked like a doll up against the enormous sofa.

“I’m fine. I don’t need anything. Just a break. I’ll be back on track in a minute.”

“My champion,” he said laughing. She rolled her hazel, mascara fringed eyes. He went to the bar to grab the vodka tonic he had just poured, and came back dancing, even though there was no music to dance to. He was trying to make her laugh. She was trying to ignore him. He danced towards the light switch and pushed the lever down, diminishing the rainbow rays coming from the massive chandelier. He kept dancing his way around the coffee table a few times, and she just watched him. When he was across from her, on the other side of the long marble coffee table, she stood up. She pushed the remains of the dinner party to his end of the coffee table, plopped back down and began lining up cards for a game of solitaire.

“Stop dancing.”

He slowed his shimmying down to a sway, and came back to join her on that big leather couch. “I’ll watch you play,” he said sitting down hard. She went through the deck a few times, slowly and deliberately, because of the alcohol. He watched her. Red eights on black nines. Queens on kings that started new rows. Aces to the top. After a few runs through the deck, she stopped and said aloud, “Nothing can go on anything.”

He laughed. She looked at him defensively, “What?” He kept laughing and she stared at him, clenching the remaining deck in her hands. “What? I’m not missing anything am I?” He just kept laughing, and she fumed. Finally, he calmed himself down and took a sip from his glass.

“No. It’s what you said. ‘Nothing can go on anything.’ You said it like nothing was a substance. Do you get it?”

“No, not at all.”

“Well, ok. Replace nothing with... how about cheese. ‘Cheese can go on anything.’ Get it? Like nothing is an actual *thing*. When in all actuality it is *no* thing.” He sat

giggling to himself and sipping his drink, and she just glared at him shaking her head. "You don't get it?" he finally asked.

"I get it. But it's stupid, not funny." She said this sharply as she collected some of the cards. He stopped giggling, and looked back at her with his head lowered a bit. "You are drunk," she said.

"Yeah, you too. I'm gonna put that in my book. The thing about nothing being no thing," he declared, nodding his blond highlighted head at his decision.

"Oh, the book idea again. Five years of talk, and not a word has been written."

"I'll write it. I will. When I finally have enough ideas for it, I'll write it." He stood up fast from his seat and turned his hips, falling back down on the couch next to hers. He adjusted his Armani jeans, and gave her an indignant look.

"You won't sit next to me now?" she asked him, making her annoyed face. "I'm just speaking from what I know. Since we got all the money, you haven't done a thing. We quit our jobs. We've just shopped for seven years. I doubt you'll start writing a book." They sat on their separate couches quiet but restless, until he finally spoke.

"You're drunk."

He got up and moved to another large white leather couch, this one directly across from her, with the long marble coffee table filling the space between them. They held an impromptu staring contest. He won.

"She got drunk too," she said after she blinked.

"What?"

"Tonight. Linda. She got drunk too. Real drunk actually."

"Real drunk?"

"Yeah."

"I think we all got a bit drunk," he said while picking at his belly button.

She watched him for a moment, picking his belly button, looking at his fingers, picking it again. Finally she said, "Well she really was. When we were in the kitchen, she told me she and Richard were having problems."

"Problems?" He looked up.

"Yeah. Problems."

"Like what?"

"Sexual." She said this word louder. She sat across from him, her eyes searching his face. There was a long silence.

Finally he spoke. "Sexual... why would she tell you that?"

"We are friends, you know. But I told you... she was drunk."

His face scrunched up, and he stared at the wall, occasionally taking in more of his drink. "Sexual," he mumbled to himself. He held the glass out, resting his hand on the arm of the couch. He tapped his clean fingernails on it, and she watched his hand closely.

"Want another drink?" she asked him.

"Yes."

"I'll get it," she told him.

Without looking at him, she got up, took the glass from his hand, and walked towards the bar. Standing behind it, she reached for the vodka, but his voice stopped her. "Whiskey," he said. "Straight." Surprised, she tried to catch his eyes, but he kept on looking at the wall.

"Whiskey it is," she said quietly to herself.

“So... what did she say?” He called from across the room, as she poured his drink. He was still looking away.

“Linda?” she asked, glancing his way and filling the cup. She spilled a little on the bar.

“Yeah.”

She quickly poured herself a glass of Chardonnay, too. Walking with the drinks in her hands, she said, “It’s just not the same, I guess.”

He took the drink from her, keeping his eyes on her painted and jeweled fingers. She sat on the same large white couch she occupied before, directly across from his. He looked at her, waiting.

“It’s just that they don’t excite each other anymore. She thinks they are falling out of love.” She paused, raising her wineglass to her face, almost hiding behind it. “They are talking about going for counseling.”

“Counseling?” he asked as she drank.

“Yeah.” She set her wine on the coffee table. She smoothed her hair and straightened the top of her pink Dolce & Gabbana skirt. She watched him. He sat sipping his drink. The clock chimed another hour. One.

“Well it’s probably normal. They just had the twins,” he said, his voice sounding hopeful.

“The kids are four years old.”

He started slowly shaking his head. “Counseling,” he finally said, laughing a little. “You would think they’d just have affairs.”

“You’d think that?”

“Well, I just don’t see Richard trying that hard. He isn’t known for his patience.”

“Neither are you.” She said this looking at him hard. He looked right back. “And you wouldn’t have an affair.”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t do that. I’m glad we’ve got it together.” He smiled. She smiled back. Then they looked away. Silence. They both drank their drinks, alternating their gazes from each other and anywhere else in the room.

“Did you ever?” she finally asked him.

“What?”

“Have an affair. Did you ever?” She was leaning forward now.

“No,” he said. He finished his drink fast and hoisted his body up. “Are you tired?” he asked standing across from her.

“No.”

He stood quietly, fidgeting a little. “Well, do you want another drink?”

She rolled her eyes. “Just because I am not tired doesn’t mean I want another drink. And I’m obviously already drunk.”

“Well, I’m sorry.” He stood there a while longer, looking a bit uncomfortable, watching his wife. She sat there staring at him, slouched a little on the enormous white couch. Her arms lay limply at her sides. She had her feet spread far apart in her pointed Prada shoes, but her lean thighs stuck together until the knees. She kept her eyes on him, as he moved his right hand to his hairline to wipe away the sweat, and in doing so, the tiny remains of his drink jumped out and ran down his tan neck onto the open collar of his button-down shirt. “So, no drink?”

“Make it an Alexander Nevsky,” she finally said, standing up and wobbling a bit. “No raspberries.” Unsteady on her heels, she sat back down on the enormous couch, and removed her beautiful, yet impractical shoes. She followed him to the bar, colliding with a decorative sculpture before reaching a stool. She placed her shoes on the bar, and sat with her eyes fixed on the overturned structure sprawled across the mink-colored carpet. “I’m not picking that up,” she said quietly to herself. He shook his head and shook the shaker, mixing enough for two. She heard this and looked back at him. He did not give the shaker to her. He poured the mixture into two martini glasses, spilling some just as she did. He wiped it away with the bottom of his shirt, rather than the towel lying right next to him. He threw the shaker in the sink. He began to sip his own martini, leaving hers on the bar for her to grab. She didn’t.

“Do you remember,” she asked, “when I used to wake you up from your nap after I got home from work?” She paused for a minute to see the recognition on his face. “For a year, we only saw each other during that one hour, when I’d come home and you’d have to leave to work at the bar. Do you remember?”

He sat down on the step stool behind the bar, and passed her the martini that was waiting for her. “Yes.” He kept sipping his own, and watched his wife’s face across the bar. She took a drink.

“Everyday... the same thing,” she said and he nodded. “I’d kiss your back and sit you up, and start to dress you. I’d kiss your back, and we’d make love.” She paused remembering. “Everyday I’d dress you a little bit and kiss your back, and then we’d make love. Everyday you let me dress you, like we didn’t know what we were about to do. And I’d kiss you on your back and your neck, and every time it seemed like a surprise.”

He nodded his head looking down, then took a large swallow of his drink. “I do remember that,” he said still nodding his head and looking down.

“We never do that anymore.”

“Well, I don’t work nights anymore.” He tried to smile a little, awkwardly, and her glazed eyes just looked right through him. He touched her hand.

“But we still don’t do it.” They both sat with their drinks in one hand, the other ones holding on. They searched each other’s eyes looking confused, and a little scared.

“Richard is having an affair,” she said.

“I know.”

## **Haiku**

*Donna Bauerly*

dead trees everywhere  
white sentinels  
to the fire

## **What I can tell you**

*Alison Brogan*

At your place we watch CNN and compete  
to care or know the most,  
while we lip-tip drinks  
with no hands.

We drink good wine and you tell me stories about being young-  
fights or funny things, but always exciting things-  
and I never have anything to say.

At my house you sneak snacks from my roommates-  
oatmeal cookies-  
and we sit in the dark  
and laugh at the static sparks in my sheets.

Then before we go to sleep I rub your back  
and tell you about being sad,  
about before you, or the dream I had  
where my dad is sledding  
down a highway into traffic,  
laughing,  
and I finally grab his shoulder  
and hang on.

## **Light Rail Coyote**

*Katherine Bucko*

*Out at the edge of town/ airfield runs water down  
Coyote crosses the tracks/ and hops on the Light Rail Max  
- "Light Rail Coyote," Sleater-Kinney*

My first view of Portland was from above. From the Columbus airport, Ohio fields morphed first into Midwestern farms, then Pollock-splattered rocks in Wyoming, and eventually dried out to the arid mountains of the west. Then suddenly everything erupted into green. The plane seemed to nearly graze the tips of the steep peaks, bobbing violently through mist and uncooperative jet streams. Oregon could have been Ireland, Argentina, or another planet all together. As we coasted between Mt. Hood and Mt. St. Helens to plummet toward the valley landing strip, I knew that the Pacific Northwest would be as foreign to me as any land outside of the U.S. could be.

This unfamiliarity was what attracted me to Portland in the first place. In high school, when my brother, Bob, and I began to receive slews of information from college admissions departments, we discovered Portland's Reed College. Their pamphlet showed students reading under pine trees with Mt. Hood, blurry in the distance, peeking over their shoulders. These undergrads looked hip as hell, with their nose rings and requisite early 1990s striped shirts, and we just knew that going to bars with profs for intellectual discussion was encouraged. Over cereal in the morning, Bob and I would

pass the colorful brochure back and forth, wishing that our parents made enough money to afford the \$24,000 per year tuition.

But education was a minor part of the attraction. Our favorite bands were from the Northwest, and we knew that Portland housed a music scene that we would die for. We also were developing our own radical politics, and Portland was an exceedingly liberal, socially progressive city. Still, more than anything, we were attracted to the land. Bob and I were sick of the Midwest, and longed for perfect weather, mountains, and ocean. We were naïve, both politically and about the reality of rain in the Northwest, but we knew that Portland had something special: its residents cared about the city, and did everything in their efforts to keep it as natural, green, and livable as an urban area could be.

Now at the airport, years later, I hadn't had a chance to see this in person yet. The airport, located on the outskirts of the city in one of the few flat pastures in the area, did not give me any sort of view of Portland, the city. However, it was far enough away that I could remark on the beauty of the non-urban natural aspects of Oregon. More than anything, I was struck by how close I felt to the sky. The sun had burned away any humidity, and the cloudless blue complemented the surrounding piney green. I wanted to take the time to take it all in, but I needed to find my way to the hostel. It was hard to believe that it was already 7 p.m.—being summer, the sun was out much longer; plus, the zenith of the sun this far west hit at 5:00 p.m. Even though it seemed incredibly early, I knew that I needed to get a start on finding my way around this city.

I followed the airport signs for the Light Rail Max train into town. I had heard that I would have no problem navigating Portland via public transportation, so I put my faith in my map and city planning, and boarded the train. Looking over the map, I could see why Portland is dubbed “the city that works.” The city is divided into four quadrants; the river divides West and East, and Burnside Street divides North from South. Each section has its own series of streets ascending to the North and descending to the South alphabetically from Burnside—Alder, Burnside, Couch, Davis, Everett, etc. These streets are crossed vertically by numbered streets that are respective to their own area of town. For example, there is a NW 23<sup>rd</sup> and a SE 23<sup>rd</sup>, but they never intersect. This change to the street plans was implemented in the early 1900s, but since the West is so relatively new, the streets have essentially always run this way. Although I am a first time visitor, I don't think that I'll have a problem getting around.

As the train leaves the airport, I am mildly disappointed. What looked so astounding from the air now flattened out into scraggly brush and ditch weeds, not unlike the roadsides of Indiana. Train tracks and rusting metal mingle with now-decaying homes that once were the epitome of 1950s suburbia. But as we get away from the valley, the terrain wakes up. I can see Mt. Hood in the distance, a ghostly, almost transparent white on the horizon. In comparison to Eastern mountains, which are so solid and close you can feel their reality, Mt. Hood seems untouchable. The mere fact that it can even be seen this far away, an hour or so into town, is astonishing. Yet I am still disturbed that it seems like a backdrop, unreal.

The train crosses the Willamette River and slows to deposit us downtown, in Southwest Portland. This is where I will transfer to a bus to take me to my hostel in Southeast Portland. The train stops at Pioneer Square, a transport stop that does double duty as an urban park. Although I am surrounded by concrete and the skyscrapers of the

business district, this park has several water fountains and ponds, countless trees, and absurd vegetation unlike anything I'd ever seen before. Tropical-looking flowers sprout, unnamable, out of concrete and brick. Their stems are thick and sturdy; they appear that they could survive anywhere. Though I had never seen any plant life like this anywhere else in the country, I didn't feel like they were forcibly planted. They seemed too natural, so distinctly indigenous to this unique town, that they seemed more organic than a pine growing in Yosemite.

I look at the bus map and quickly figure out the system I will be using. The buses with the picture of the deer go to North Portland. The buses with the salmon go to Northeast; the leaf, Southwest; the raindrops, Northwest. I find the beaver, which takes me to Southeast. I chuckle to myself about this series of pictures, but it definitely shows Portlanders' pride in their natural gifts, as well as their thrust toward successful public planning. After the horrendous logging of the late 1800s that left Portland so decimated that its original name was Stumptown, this city has always strived to maintain its natural resources. Though it is the largest city in Oregon, there is not a single block without green space. Trees line the downtown streets, gardens thrive between businesses and apartment buildings, and streets are more populated with bikes than with cars.

Cars are unnecessary in a town with such great public transportation and such a logical layout. Each city block is the same size, and walking 20 blocks really does not take a great deal of time. I find this out after panicking over missing my bus at a stop which was on SW 12<sup>th</sup> to reach my hostel on SE 32<sup>nd</sup>. I start walking toward the bridge, thinking that I will be walking until dark, and realize that I am already face to face with the Hawthorne Bridge. One of the eight bridges within the city of Portland, it is a behemoth of six lanes, two of which are for bikers. There are sidewalks on each side, bus lanes, and hinges for the bridge to open when a too-tall boat comes through. This bridge is floored with a steel grate, which gives me a clear view into the river below, although I don't want to take much advantage of it. On the bridge itself is a bus stop, and although I'm well on my way, I still have my transfer ticket, so I hop on the beaver bus when it passes my way.

Sitting in the bus, I am free to take in the city. Centered on the Willamette River, Portland is framed by foothills crusted with buildings and homes. The city is unbelievably green from the absurd amount of rain it receives, but in the summer, when the clouds dry up long enough to allow an enjoyable summer, the sky is a clearer blue than any water. I can see Mt. Hood to the East, and can pick out all of the bridges along the river: The Fremont, Broadway, Steel, Burnside, and Morrison Bridges to my North, and the Marquam and Ross Island Bridges to the South. These steel monsters have become so much a part of the landscape that it seems that the river crosses them, not the other way around.

SE 32<sup>nd</sup> comes into view, and I pull the buzzer to be let off. I see the hostel, a jungle of sunflowers, ferns, and the dozens of tropical-esque flowers I still cannot name. A man on the roof welcomes me, then returns to watering the plants. I do a double-take—watering? On the roof? A poster board in the entry way of the hostel explains that the man is working on the hostel's ecoroof:

An ecoroof is a term used to describe a green living roof of vegetation and soil. It is a light weight roof system consisting of a synthetic waterproof membrane, a drainage

layer, a thin soil layer, and is covered with specific plant species adapted to the extremes of a rooftop environment. The ecoroof is a low maintenance, self-sustaining plant/soil community without need of irrigation, fertilizers, or pesticides. Ecoroofs are a proven technology and have been used in Europe for over 40 years.

Interesting. Although this clears up what an ecoroof is, I still don't really understand *why*.

A hostel worker sees me looking at the board and asks if she can offer any help. I explain my situation, and as we get my lodging taking care of, she elaborates on the ecoroof. She, along with all of the workers at the hostel, is a volunteer. The volunteers serve on committees outside of their work hours to offer suggestions for how to improve the hostel. One volunteer who had long manned the hostel garden had come across information about the city of Portland encouraging the use of ecoroofs as part of its efforts to clean and protect the streams and rivers. In urban areas, stormwater runs off of hard surfaces like roofs, roads, parking lots, and sidewalks, and is then flushed to a network of underground pipes that eventually dump it all in the urban streams. This affects local wildlife habitats, and especially hurts fish. Ecoroof gardens prevent this process by soaking up the water and allowing the excess to evaporate. The city of Portland agreed to subsidize the hostel's ecoroof project because they have found it to be a successful stormwater management approach that could help return a natural healthy watershed to the community.

I find this all a lot to take in, partly because I am not very science-minded and can barely understand how this process works, but more so because I am not used to local government putting so much energy and money into preserving its natural resources. This city has actually put its money where its mouth is, and it can be seen in every part of town. Portland has successfully integrated the natural and the urban to create a uniquely livable city. I don't know if this is due to city planning, progressive politics, or just the will of a very ecologically-oriented community, but whatever caused it, I am amazed to see it in action.

I settle down in the hostel's communal space to check out the local publications in order to get more familiar with the city and its offerings. After going through some of the independent press offerings, I turn to the local paper. Leafing through the *Portland Tribune*, I am drawn to a picture of a coyote, captioned: *A coyote at rest on the Light-Rail Max*. Apparently, when the doors opened for passengers at the airport, this coyote decided he'd like a lift into the city, and jumped in. I let this sink in. I could have sat next to the critter on the way into town, and how appropriate! That would have been an accurate first impression of the way Portland works. This Light-Rail coyote would have been a harbinger of the integration of the natural and the urban I was to experience during my time here. Still, even though I didn't meet that coyote on the train into town, I know he was there. He has still not left my mind, and the Light-Rail coyote will always be my token of what Portland has to offer.

## **The Hitchhikers**

*Jody Iler*

Emily leaned across the desk and looked at the man facing her. His tired eyes gazed steadily back, his shoulders straightening under his shabby denim jacket. Only his hands, twisting the cap held in his lap, gave away his nervousness.

“You think that you’re the right person for this job?”

The man cleared his throat.

“Guess that’d be for you to decide – what with my past history and all.”

Emily glanced down at his job application, nodding. Looking up, she met his eyes and waited for him to speak. “I been workin’ hard for a long time now, tryin’ to set things right. I got a baby on the way, a family dependin’ on me. All I need is a chance to show you. Christmas is comin’ up soon, too.”

“Yes...yes it is.” Emily smiled. “That’s why we need the extra help in the store’s warehouse.”

She gathered the stack of papers in front of her into a neat pile and rising from behind the desk, walked around and reached out her hand to the man. He stood, awkwardly, and thrust his rough hand out to meet hers.

“We’ll let you know by the end of the week, Mr. Kingsley.” She walked to her office door and held it open. He seemed unwilling to leave. Emily raised her eyebrows and looked at him.

“Uh, Miz Walker – Ma’am,” he coughed, clearing his throat again. “We don’ have no phone. Kin I call you? On Friday?”

“Well...I guess that would be all right.” She smiled again as he walked through the doorway.

*But I won’t be available.*

She had already written him off. As human resources manager of the large discount store, her credibility and performance were at stake – she’d worked hard to rise this far in her career. No down and out fellow with a previous record and a pregnant wife would cause her to risk it. Even if he did need a job and was a hard worker. Even if it was Christmas time.

She glanced through the floor-to-ceiling window adjacent to the heavy door of her office, watching as the man walked across the entrance lobby. A woman sat in a chair next to the far wall. She rose slowly at his approach, gathering her worn, gray winter coat around her. Emily saw that the woman was visibly pregnant. The man reached around and placed his hand in the small of the woman’s back. She leaned slightly against him as they made their way out the door.

Something nudged at the back of Emily’s memory. She couldn’t put her finger on it. Something about the two of them was elusively familiar...

She strode over to the window overlooking the parking lot outside and stood, lost in thought. In her reflection, the dark arms of the trees reached upward in the leaden winter sky. Cars dotted the expanse of the parking lot, covered in dried salt and crusted dirty snow. A winter afternoon – cloaked in shades of lifeless gray – much like the pall that had begun to settle over her.

Soon, though, the store’s Christmas lights would twinkle on and dispel the gloom outside. Shrugging, she began to turn away when something caught her eye. There they were...that couple again...walking across the parking lot. The man’s hand was still lightly touching the woman’s back.

Emily felt the recollection struggling to rise from deep within her.

They reached a battered old Chevrolet sedan. The man walked his wife around to the passenger side and helped her into the car. As they drove away, Emily sighed and walked back to her desk, sinking into her office chair. She leaned back, deep in thought.

The memory surfaced.

Another gray Christmas, some twenty years ago, came sharply into focus – one that, for a young Emmy, had lost its magic promise. It was the year that she realized that Santa Claus could not possibly visit all the houses in the world during the course of one night...that the small assortment of gifts under the tree came from Dad and Mom – her father, who worked hard at the plant earning the money to buy the gifts, and her mother, who stayed up late to wrap them. The fact that they lived in a rented lower flat on Main Street instead of a new, sprawling ranch on the outskirts of the small river town – like many of Emmy's friends – suddenly took on new meaning to her. Where you lived, as well as what gifts you got at Christmas, depended on your dad's job. Her parents were young, struggling to make it on their own – trying to save for a small house, maybe up on the hill behind Main Street – in a row of other small houses.

Just now, the delicious anticipation of Christmas had dimmed for Emmy – reality had replaced fantasy. When she'd questioned her mother about Santa, Mom had replied evasively.

"The real meaning of Christmas, Em, is that it's the Baby Jesus' birthday."

Throughout their small flat, there were several pictures of Jesus – none of them resembling a baby. Emmy was confused. *How could He stay a baby and have a birthday every Christmas, yet be a man for the rest of the year?* One picture in particular showed the adult Jesus standing at a closed door, knocking. "What about that picture, Mom? Is Jesus all grown up, visiting someone – knocking at their door?"

"Lots of people find different meanings in that picture." Her mother smiled.

Emmy pondered this for a moment. "What does it mean to *you*?"

"I think it means that sometimes Jesus, or even God the Father Himself, will show up somewhere in your life, offering you a choice. Kind of a test. You may not recognize Him at first, or maybe not at all, until later, but then you'll realize that you made the right choice."

*A choice about what?* Emily wondered, but didn't ask. She had lost interest in the whole mystery of the baby Jesus, the grown-up Jesus, and His father, God. The issue of Santa's non-existence loomed over all else.

Her father arrived home from work, and the three of them ate supper. It was nearing dusk, early this time of year, and the streetlights outside would soon cast their glow over the dirty snow on the street in front of their flat. After they ate, Dad walked out on the front porch to smoke a cigarette. He seemed to be watching something – down the street – some distance away. He put out his cigarette in the snow on the porch railing and came inside.

"Liz," he called to her mother. "Come here for a minute!"

Her mother walked into the living room, holding the dish towel she'd been drying the supper dishes with, and went over to the window where her father was peering out.

"See that couple, that couple walking down the road, coming this way? When I was driving home from the city today after work, I saw them – I passed them – walking along the highway, just like they are now."

Emmy squeezed between her parents at the window and the three of them looked out.

A man and a woman were walking down Main Street. The man wore tattered blue jeans and a Levi jacket, shiny with age. His cap was pulled down low over his eyes. The woman pulled her gray, knee-length coat close around her, clutching it in front over her protruding stomach. She was obviously expecting a baby. They walked slowly through the dirty, salt-encrusted snow, the man's arm behind the woman's back.

"I can't believe they've walked all this way, in her condition." Emmy's mother looked at her father.

He shook his head. "And no one offering them a ride, either. I would've stopped if I'd thought they were heading this far."

"Well, then," her mother started briskly back to the kitchen. "*We're* going to offer them a ride. It's getting cold out there. We'll find out where they're going, see if we can help them along. Come on, Doug. Emmy, you too – get your jackets."

They dressed for the chill of the winter evening and went outside – the three of them piling into the rusty green Ford parked behind the house. Firing the engine, Emmy's father held his foot on the gas pedal to keep the engine running so that it wouldn't stall, as it often did in cold weather. The old Ford chugged fitfully out of the driveway and into the street.

The couple had nearly reached the outskirts of town. They had passed the small Steinville Public Library, Ellison's Lumberyard, Mauston's Music Studio, Eleanor's Beauty Shop – all closed now – and several taverns with cheerful, blinking signs of welcome – always open.

They were trudging along in front of Gantner's Dry Goods Store as the green Ford slowly passed them by and pulled over on the shoulder of the road, which had changed now from Main Street to the county highway.

Her father got out and walked over to them. Emmy, craning her neck, watched from the rear window. The young couple's faces broke into tentative smiles as Dad motioned them toward the Ford.

Mom got out of the car and pulled the back of her seat forward.

"Emmy, you scoot over so they can sit back there with you."

Dad and the young man with the cap helped the woman into the backseat, next to her. She settled heavily into the middle of the soft seat with an audible groan. Glancing at Emmy, she smiled shyly and looked over at the man, who had squeezed into the backseat next to her. He leaned forward and tipped his cap at her mother.

"Thanks, ma'am. We sure do appreciate the ride." His voice had a reassuring resonance to it that pleased Emmy.

"Well, we couldn't just watch you two go on down the road without asking if we could help." Her mother turned to smile at the couple.

Dad started up the engine and the old Ford, snorting, bounced back onto the highway.

"They'd like a ride up to the interstate," he told Mom. "Said they'll be OK if they can get that far. Right?" He glanced back at the man, who nodded.

"But where are you headed? And why now, this time of year, in your...condition?" Mom's voice was genuinely concerned.

Emmy watched the couple, who looked at each other before answering.

"Well, it's a long story," the woman began softly. "Things haven't gone the way we'd planned. But we're going home now. That's where we're headed...home."

She looked over at the man in the cap. He put his rough hand over her small one resting on the worn, gray coat.

“Well, what better time to go home than Christmas?” Mom’s voice was bright, cheery. Emmy wondered why she didn’t ask the woman where home was.

Night had fallen and the highway was dark – few lights dotted the lonely stretch of road. In the back seat, the woman and the man murmured quietly to each other. Now and then they talked with her mother and father, speaking of small things – the weather, road conditions, the troubled economy. Once the man leaned across the seat, past the woman, and addressed himself to Emmy.

“Bet you’re excited about Santa Claus coming.” The sound of his voice struck a chord within her...almost made her believe that Santa *would* come, after all. But no, she knew better, now.

“I don’t believe in Santa anymore,” she told him, trying to act nonchalant, but feeling near tears.

The young couple exchanged a smiling glance. The woman reached over and patted Emmy’s hand. In the front seat, Mom and Dad looked at each other. No one spoke...no one said – *Oh yes, he really does exist*. Emmy slumped back in the seat, swallowing the lump in her throat.

The interstate truck stop loomed in the distance, its glowing lights a welcoming oasis in the deserted December night. Her father took the highway exit to the right and pulled into the truck stop parking lot, empty except for several smaller vehicles parked in the back.

He stopped the Ford next to the sidewalk that ran the length of the station front. Again, he and the man with the cap helped the woman from the backseat, while Emmy’s mother waited on the sidewalk. Mom put her arm around the woman’s shoulder and gave her a quick squeeze. Dad shook hands with the young man, who assured him that they would be all right from this point on. Together, the couple turned and looked at Emmy, still in the backseat. They lifted their hands in farewell.

“Bye!” Emmy called, struggling to smile. “Merry Christmas!”

Her parents got back into the Ford. Dad pulled out onto the intersection, driving slowly in the direction of the exit ramp.

“Wait! Doug!” Mom cried out, nearly causing her father to swerve off the highway.

“What’s the matter? What is it?” He slowed the car.

“We didn’t give them any money! They’ll need some money to get something to eat, before they go on. Go back, quick, and we’ll give them what we have in our wallets.”

Mom pored through the few bills in Dad’s wallet, then rummaged through her purse.

“Well, it’s not much, but it’s something,” she said, as Dad drove back into the truck stop.

They looked around.

There was no sign of the young couple.

“Where are they?” Emmy spoke from the back seat.

No one answered.

Her father drove slowly around the building as they checked the parking lot.

Empty.

“I’ll go in and see. Maybe they’re inside.” Parking the Ford in front of the entrance, Dad opened the door and got out.

Emmy and her mother watched as he walked around inside the brightly lit, deserted truck stop. He stopped to speak with the cashier behind the counter, who shrugged in response, lifting both hands – palms up – into the air. They watched as her father returned to the car.

He got in. No one spoke.

Dad looked over at her mother.

“The cashier said there hasn’t been any young couple in the station. I told him that we’d just dropped them off – they couldn’t have up and disappeared. He looked at me like I had too much to drink tonight.”

Perplexed, her mother gazed out the window.

“Well, maybe a semi came along and the driver gave them a ride.”

“Yeah, I thought of that, too. The clerk said that no trucks have pulled in here for the past half-hour or so. And we were gone five, maybe ten minutes at the most, before we came back.”

Her father started the engine.

They drove in silence. Dad fiddled with the old car radio. Scratchy Christmas music began to play as Emmy watched the dark countryside through the back window.

Her mother leaned over and turned the radio volume down.

“Doug, that was our test.”

“Our *what?*”

“Tonight...this was a choice that we were offered...to help someone that needed our help, or to look the other way.”

Dad kept his eyes on the dark highway.

“Do you mean to say that they never really were *here*, Liz? That we imagined this whole thing?”

“No... I’m not saying that. But maybe, maybe we were the only ones to see them. Or maybe other people saw them, too...and had the choice offered to them, but they didn’t stop to help.”

Emmy, listening in the back seat, thought of the picture, at home. This long drive on a cold December night had something to do with that picture, she realized vaguely. Sighing, she forgot then about the young couple – and she remembered again, with renewed intensity – that Santa didn’t exist.

The office manager peeked in the door, startling Emily.

“I’m closing up shop, boss. You coming?”

She looked up at Jeanie, then glanced outside, disoriented. The parking lot was nearly deserted – twinkling store lights danced across its broad expanse.

Time to go home.

Emily rose from her chair, stretching.

“I’m coming too, Jeanie...I’ll walk out with you.”

Bundling up for the cold night air outside, the two women walked around the office, doing a last minute check as they pulled on their coats.

“Say, Jeanie, there was a guy in here this afternoon. A Mr. Kingsley. Do you remember him?”

“Nope, can’t say as I do,” Jeanie reached down and removed her heels, one at a time, slipping her feet into her boots. She looked at Emily.

“This afternoon?”

“Yes. He looked...well...down on his luck and all. There was a woman with him, waiting in the lobby, over there on a chair.”

Jeanie thought for a moment, then shook her head.

“No, I don’t remember him. Or a woman waiting. I’m sure. And I was here all afternoon.”

“Well, no matter. What I wanted to tell you was, he plans on calling the office on Friday. About one of the warehouse jobs. When he does – if I’m busy – you can tell him to report here on Monday morning at eight, and we’ll fill out some work papers so he can get started. I’ll get his application for you now, so I don’t forget.”

Emily buttoned her coat as she walked back to her desk. She picked up the stack of job applications, flipping through them quickly. *It should be right here, near the top*, she mused. She went through the stack a second time, more slowly.

Then a third time.

No Mr. Kingsley.

She walked out of her office into the lobby where Jeanie stood, trying to conceal her impatience to leave.

“I can’t seem to find it, Jeanie. I *know* I had it – I just interviewed him less than two hours ago.”

“You’ve probably misplaced it – you’ll find it tomorrow, you can give it to me then.”

Outside, their boots crunched as they hurried, shivering, to their cars.

“Won’t be long, Santa’ll be here,” Jeanie laughed, as she waved an arm at the store’s decorations. “Do you remember, Em, when you first found out that there was no Santa Claus?”

Emily slowed her steps and stopped. The gray pall within her had lifted.

“Yes...yes...I do. It was on a cold December night...just like this one.”

She smiled.

Her mother would have been proud of her.

## **Photograph of my mother in her twentieth year**

### ***Amber Gille***

I wonder if she thought where she’d be  
twenty years from now,  
as the white satin bodice clinched her waist  
and dangled to her feet like a bell.

In the picture she’s laughing,  
holding her arms out to the camera  
probably held by *her* mother.  
The curls of her long brown hair  
frame her face alongside  
the lacy veil that drapes down the small of her back.

I wonder if she remembers the days  
when those russet curls blew lightheartedly in the wind

from the passenger seat of the yellow mustang,  
laughing childishly at my father as she flicks  
the finished cigarette butt of her youth out the window.

I imagine you now upstairs in your bedroom  
when no one else is home,  
trying on your old wedding gown  
just to listen to the rustle that it used to make  
when you swayed side to side  
like the old church bells the day you got married.

## **1904, by Guillaume Apollinaire**

*trans. Robert Beck*

to Strasbourg in 1904  
I came Lent's antecedent week  
to sit before the hotel door  
beside a singer who could speak  
of theater but little more

the redhead barmaid had appended  
to that mop a crimson hat  
Hebe whom the gods attended  
scarcely could have outdone that  
carnival crown so redly splendid

in Rome in Nice and in Cologne  
amid confetti among the flowers  
again o carnival I've known  
how richer gentler are your powers  
than Croesus or a Rothschild own

I sampled there some liver paste  
tried a tender venison compote  
found a fruit tart to my taste  
along with a drop of kirsch for comfort  
as you weren't there to be embraced

## **Bitter Again**

*Abbey Wallig*

The bird droppings on the situation upset me.  
You drop notes of ugliness like bubblegum on sidewalks.  
Your song has no identity other than an obsession with my bubble.

I fly freely with my light vision, while your sight sinks through the spectrum.

Like the yellow-belly sap-sucker you extract syrup from the sugar maple.  
In the winter the streams of sweetness make molasses like popsicles that you  
suck and digest.

The seasons cycle, while I generate a mosaic identity.  
Your jealousy collides with my embodied art like glass.  
The ripe mango artifacts that I seep into my tea,  
collect bags under your eyes.

I want you to embrace your core, but the fruit has already rotted.

Like bread-shaped butterfly wings, you slice at the air around you.  
In the spring time this gives birth to insignificant ripples in the fresh air.  
Instead of buttering up your life you  
slip and plunder.

## **Sister and Brother Take a Ride**

*Erin O'Brien*

11:34 P.M.

“Let me drive,” he slurs.

“No. Get in the car,” she snaps. They glare at one another, and he realizes he isn’t going to win this particular battle.

“You’re a bitch,” he half-heartedly retorts, and climbs into the rust-riddled Acura.

This year’s winter had been mild and without snow. Christmas came and went, dull and gray, spirits slightly dampened from the lack of white. New Year’s Day held a record temperature of sixty-two degrees. Tonight seemed to be different, as the temperature currently held at thirty-four degrees.

“Where are we going tonight, darling sister?” He lights up a cigarette. It’s a Newport 100, of course. Smoke fills the air, and she gives him an icy glance. He sees this and quickly cracks his window.

“You’re going to crystallize your lungs with those, you know you are,” she lectures, and puts the car in drive. “We’re going to Taco Bell.”

“Taco, taco,” he chirps, imitating some line out of a movie she can’t remember.

“Yeah,” the sister mutters, and pulls away from the curb.

11:57 P.M.

“How’s Mom?” he asks while pouring hot sauce on his tacos.

“Sick. She’s got a cold,” the sister replies, and nervously sips her Diet Pepsi. They are sitting in the parking lot, watching the traffic go by on the main highway.

“Fuck her. She ruined my New Year.” He takes a bite out his taco and stares out the window.

“Don’t say that.” She begins to pick at her cuticles.

“Well, she did,” he mutters. He finishes his three tacos, literally inhales them, and lights up another cigarette.

“I’m eating,” the sister says, reproachfully, but the brother doesn’t take notice. He stares out the window, and the sister in turn stares at the cigarette which is burning lower and lower. After a few minutes she can’t take it any longer. The sister nudges her brother, and points at the cigarette. He glances at it and becomes angry.

“There!” he growls, and throws it out the window. “You and Mom always think I’m so smacked out, but I’m not! I’m not on anything!” He pauses. “Mom shouldn’t care what I do with my life, anyway. It’s not like she loves me or anything.” He falls silent and resumes staring.

“You shouldn’t say things like that. You know Mom loves you,” the sister says, nonplused. She finishes her taco and joins her brother in staring. Few people are out; possibly the new cold is keeping them away. After a few minutes she grows tired of the monotony. She leans her head on the driver’s side window and takes to reading signs local businesses have put out.

“I’m going to rehab on Monday,” the brother says, helplessly. The sister continues to stare out the window.

“That’s nice,” the sister replies, then shakes her head. “I don’t believe you.” The brother turns to his sister, clearly hurt.

“Well, believe it, little sister,” he says, and pulls out his cell phone. “You can check my call log if you want.”

“If you really mean it, I mean really mean it, then I’m proud of you,” she says, slowly, then smiles. The brother beams at her, and rubs his hands together.

“All I have to do is sell off the rest of this stuff...” The brother begins, but the sister cuts him off.

“I don’t want you selling anything.” She glares at him, and the brother shrinks back in his seat. “You are too good to be doing this to yourself,” she says, and then grows quiet.

“But, I need to be able to pay for rehab, and the only way I’ll be able to get the money is to sell the rest of my stash off,” the brother replies remorsefully. “I really want to get better, you know.”

The sister sighs. “Yeah, I know.”

### 1:00 A.M.

The local fast food restaurants begin to shut off their lights. Soon the whole strip is dark, save for the street lights which are glowing eerily against the pavement. A presumably old man is walking his dog, which appears to be a Cocker Spaniel. As they pass in front of the old Acura the dog begins to bark. The old man, frustrated, tries to walk faster, and only succeeds in dragging the dog by the neck down the street.

The sister and brother are watching this. When the dog finally ceases his barking, the sister turns to her brother.

“Time to go already?” he asks, saddened. She nods.

“I’ve got a lot to do tomorrow,” she says, “and I told Mom I wouldn’t be out too late.”

“Yeah,” he says, and grins. “But there’s always tomorrow, darling sister.” Something in his tone makes the sister laugh. It is a clear, resonating sound which fills the automobile. The brother is clearly pleased with himself.

“Off we go, then,” he says. “Wouldn’t want your carriage to turn into a pumpkin.”

“Something like that,” the sister replies. “Something like that.”

### 1:10 A.M.

The sister pulls up to the curb just as two men leave the house her brother intends on going into. The house is much like the current winter: gray. Some of the shutters are falling off, and the shed which undoubtedly contains a lawn mower of sorts looks as if it will blow over at the touch of a strong wind.

“Why do you choose to live here?” the sister asks, disgusted. “Why don’t you just come home?” The brother looks down at his hands.

“I’ll come home when I’m better,” he says, ashamed. “I can’t before then.” The sister begins to reply, then thinks better of it.

“You really mean to go to rehab?” she asks, and her brother looks at her.

“I’m going to try,” he says, and then shakes his head. “Let’s not talk about this anymore. Are you coming tomorrow night?”

“You know I am,” she says. He nods, then climbs out of the car. He begins to walk up to the dilapidated house, then turns back and taps on the passenger side window. The sister turns on the car, then rolls down the window.

“I really do mean it, about rehab,” he says, then turns and quickly walks up to the house.

“I know,” she mutters to herself. The sister rolls up the window, puts the car in drive, and pulls away from the curb. Outside, it begins to snow thick white flakes which will eventually turn into mounds of powder white. The sister sees this and looks to the heavens for a star to wish upon, but there aren’t any out tonight. There aren’t any at all.

## **Song and Talk: After Robert Frost**

*Robert Beck*

Some poetry begins in song  
And some in talk.  
Because the need to dance is strong  
Our longing will require song.  
But frequently we need to walk  
In measured steps attuned to thought  
When dance is awkward, song a squawk  
That says we ought  
To have a talk.

## **A Tapestry That Covers the Door**

*Abbey Wallig*

Work is over, and you appear.  
Blue free spirit bicycle,  
rockin' your Dead threads.  
I sport a dress that looks like antique curtains.  
Wobbling on my skateboard,  
you saw my lips from afar.

You laugh. My mouth seals around a cigar.  
Fumes circulated through my body are exhaled from my mouth.  
Jamaicans wail over dub beats.  
Oils of vetiver and blue tansy on our skin.  
Valor is my Jitterbug Perfume.

We rest and caress at the peace pad.  
Our bodies rotate to the vinyl tunes.  
Sage and curry dishes feed our passions.  
The evening simmers down as we slowly finish eating  
warm blueberry herb muffins.

My door closes.

Lee Scratch Perry blazes from the mix tape  
you place in my car.  
The music an attempt to reach me.  
I prefer to be solo, and let the smoke fill my brain.  
Opening the strange old doors.

## **Two Guys in Fishnets**

*Anna Kelley*

Clouds of cigarette smoke rise from the audience like dialogue bubbles above their heads before dissolving under the low ceiling of the club. The stage is empty, the lights are low, and the sagging, discolored maroon tarp of a curtain vibrates with pre-show activity. Anxiously waiting behind the canvas is a row of twelve costumed, made-up, and big-boned women nervously gulping down revealing adams apples.

Louise, a lean, smooth-skinned and baby-faced beauty is perhaps the most nervous of the bunch. Sweat is beginning to bead up on her forehead as her size 12 bedazzled ballet shoe twitches manically in a rhythmic pulse against the floor, mirroring the flickering of the neon light outside that reads *Rainbow Trout*. Her first full-drag performance is seconds away, and she desperately wants to get it over with. *Just one night*, she thinks. *This is the beginning of the new me, in just one night.*

Being raised on a hog farm in Pendooskea, Missouri, was not an easy way to grow up for little Louis. Like most children, he always put up a fuss about waking up early to do his chores. However, his refusal was not because he didn't like waking up before the sun was out, but because he was concerned that too many slop-bucket lifts or hay bail throws

would disfigure his slight body into a bulging, muscular anomaly. Louis' father and mother (visualize American Gothic, pitchfork and all) started to notice that something was awry when their third son started tying swatches of cloth to his fingertips when he had worn through his last pair of gloves.

"Whatcha got on yo fingers thar?" his father asked.

"I cut up Mama's ol' apron," he replied.

"Them ain't gonna work like gloves ya know. Yo hands'l still git rough."

"I don't need 'em fer gloves. I need 'em fer my fingernails." He displayed them proudly. "They're growing nice an' I gotta keep 'em clean."

At the time of the fingernail incident, Louis was eleven. This was about the age that he began to realize why he wanted to stop wearing the overalls like his two older brothers wore and, more importantly, why he wanted so badly to dress in the beautiful, flowing floral print dresses that his two younger sisters had. His mother, bless her heart, was most likely oblivious to the fact that Louis was growing into a young woman. She encouraged his new recipes in the kitchen and brought back an extra doll from the store for him and his sisters instead of a cap gun the two older boys received. She even got a kick out of it when Louis insisted on playing a woman in the shows the kids would put on in the living room. He came out in full makeup, stunning outfits, and perfect posture, pulling off a better woman than his mother ever did. The get-up Louise has on tonight is far more elaborate and convincing than anything she could scrounge up in mother's closet, but it's not decorative enough to cover the fear coursing through her body as the start of the show grows closer.

Trembling like a cold, wet, pathetic dog behind the curtain on the biggest night of her life, Louise feels the unmistakable crawl of vomit in her throat. To her left stands Joedi, the veteran of the bunch. Her gag reflex is quelled for the moment.

"Psst...Joedi...hey," she says, nudging Joedi with an elbow.

"What?"

"I'm scared."

Joedi has seen this many times before in the new kids. "Good."

"What do you mean *good*? I'm either going to pass out or puke right here on the floor!"

"You're right. That's not good," Joedi says as she notices Louise's peaked complexion and realizes she's not kidding. "But if you weren't scared then you'd really be in trouble."

"Huh?"

Joedi begins to lay it on thick. She only has moments before the curtain goes up to save the rookie. "If you weren't scared it would mean that you didn't care and you'd go out there on that stage and make a fool of yourself. I've seen you in rehearsal" (she hadn't) "and you've got it, girl. Once you get out there and the lights shine down on you, all those fears are going to disappear and you are going to rule that stage. So that's why I'm glad that you're scared. I know that I'm going to be dancing alongside a talented, confident woman who performs a flawless routine. Take a deep breath and go get 'em...uh..."

"Louise."

"Right. Go get 'em, Louise!"

Confident in the effectiveness of the speech, Joedi puffs out her chest and lifts her head ready for that curtain to whip open and reveal her to the hundreds of eyes waiting to be entertained. All she has to do is get through one more show of leg kicks, pirouettes and borderline raunchy pole dancing and this small time circuit showcase is over. She yearns for the professional life. She's willing to put in the money for business school and the time it will take to be a corporate woman, er, a corporate man in women's clothes. The dream is merely a gleam in her eye at this point, but so was her dream to become a club dancer, and look at her now. *Just one more night*, she thinks. *One last night of this and I'm on to the new me.*

Joseph Bechen's experience as the only child of a middle class family living in a pleasant big city suburb was idyllic. His parents were artsy, peaceful, intelligent, free spirits who wore their hair long and participated in an in-home nudist lifestyle from time to time (visualize John Lennon and Yoko Ono without the accents). When Joe announced at age seven that he wanted to be called Joedi, there were no objections. In fact, they embraced the name change and introduced him to distant family and friends as such. By age nine, his hair was long and often barreted with his mother's vintage tortoise clips and although he wasn't quite wearing dresses and heels, his clothing consisted of drapery-like tops over slacks and boots with big heels.

Joedi's home was the perfect environment for a budding boy-to-be-woman, but school life was much different. The girls in his class were not amused but repulsed when he asked to use their lip gloss, and the boys provided him with relentless teasing about his lack of dodge ball skills and overall feminine appearance, both traumatic to an eleven-year-old. Joedi was always a natural with makeup, probably due in some part to the artist sensibilities passed down to him through his parents. At a time when most boys' bedrooms were covered in baseball cards and model airplane kits, Joedi's room looked like backstage at a fashion show. Lipstick, eye shadow, and blush lined his antique vanity in perfect rows assorted by color and hue. His knack for matching foundation to complexion was unmatched in the fourth grade.

Back to the show. Every light in the little square room fades into blackness leaving only the orange glow of the exit sign emanating from above the door. The charismatic and booming voice of Lawrence, the club owner, echoes through the speakers: "And now...ladies and gentle-ladies...if there is any alcohol left on the table drink it now...I present to you...Twelve Guys in Fishnets!" A steady but not extraordinary applause seeps through the maroon curtain to the performers' ears. Louise swallows hard, trying to kill the butterflies with sheer anxiety. Joedi pushes out her already enhanced chest. What follows is a well rehearsed sequence of lights, legs, and low key lewdness as all twelve women throw their bodies around the stage in feats of endurance and flexibility. Intricately choreographed tap numbers play out on one side of the theater while unabashed butt shaking occurs on the opposite. The show is a perfect blend of dance and debauchery.

Obviously it's Louise's first time on stage. She executes the steps and hits her marks, but the motions lack pizzazz. The other girls heave, shimmy and sparkle with experience where Louise just dances. The skinny, scared little boy in women's clothing up on stage is a close replica of what she was when she arrived in the city as a skinny, scared little boy in men's clothing standing on a bus platform with a one way ticket still clutched in one hand and a bag in the other. Around her nineteenth birthday, Louise realized that

Pendooskea just didn't offer what she needed. Although she was loved and accepted by her family and had a pleasant life there, she knew that that was all it could ever be: pleasant. She wanted more and being the only gay transvestite in her town, in the entire *history* of her town, she knew she was unlikely to find it there. So the family saved up money to buy her ticket to the only big city in the Midwest. She made it there, albeit reluctantly, but in the back of her mind she knew it was the only way. Now, here she is a few months later transformed in full regalia as a small time dancer in a small time show. Her headdress, an inspired concoction of three-foot feathers and plastic rhinestones, keeps tipping from one side of her head to the other, so whenever she has a free hand she uses it to adjust the damned thing. This is not what she pictured on the bus ride from Pendooskea.

Joedi, on the other hand, is having one of the best nights of her career because she knows it is her last. She is a dazzling picture of grace and athleticism, weaving her way through her fellow performers with shuffle-steps and grand plea's. She engages with the audience, and not grudgingly this time, but happily, knowing that this will be her last ensemble routine. The trek from suburbia to city life was almost a natural evolution to Joedi. She left her cozy home at the age of sixteen, already dressing in full drag on a regular basis, and determined to become a star on the club scene. She had never been an extremely talented dancer, singer, or overall entertainer, but she had the will to get herself on the stage and put on a pretty good act. She killed them with charm instead of talent. Case in point: upon recognizing some of the men in the first few rows from past affairs, she stares them in the eye, dips her head, raises a painted eyebrow, and runs the tip of her tongue along the bottom of her top lip. It's classic Joedi, all the while counting down in her head to her last step.

The end of the show has arrived and six of the girls, including Joedi and Louise, high-kick with their fishnet legs off the stage in a chorus line for their costume change while the other half amuses the crowd with a number worthy of the Vegas stage. Once backstage, the girls run to their respective "changing areas", a.k.a. the chair they laid their outfits on and the area within about a two-foot perimeter. Louise is in a state of uncoordinated frenzy, ripping her headdress off her head so violently that her wig nearly falls off. Joedi slips into her glittered, black short shorts and v-neck tuxedo top before she notices the sad scene and decides to give the newbie a hand.

"Having a little trouble, darling?" she asks as she unbuttons the back of Louise's corset.

"Yes, thanks," Louise replies.

"You're doing great. Just like rehearsal, okay?"

"Okay...it's almost over," Louise says in a moment of relief.

Louise's second shoe is buckled around her ankle just as the chorus line reforms backstage. She and Joedi jump onto the back and lock themselves in with arms over shoulders. It is time for the grand finale—a seductive chair and top hat routine in which six girls play men and six girls play women. The girls in the tuxedos maneuver on and around the chairs to lure the girls in the feather headdresses to them, and it works. After a brief but intense tango-style courting dance, the tuxedoed ladies start to notice the other tuxedoed ladies and the girls in feathers start to notice the other girls in feathers. Joedi and Louise are partners in this exchange and begin their much rehearsed and mapped out

route towards one another as one of the six couples that end the show in a final, passionate embrace before the curtain drops and the audience roars.

Their eyes meet. Joedi sits stage left and leans forward in her chair while Louise stands stage right with her top hat in her hand. Joedi stands up and Louise steps forward. Soon, it is an all out run in perfect timing with the other same-sex couples on the stage. Joedi's arms are raised out in front of her and she can see Louise's tall, impending figure through her fingertips. As Louise bounds across the stage, something goes wrong. Her wig flies off behind her, an extremely embarrassing event for a man in drag, and in a moment of panic, she spins her head around to helplessly watch it fall to the ground. Her balance is thrown completely off kilter as her eyes get temporarily burned by the lights and she misplaces her next step toward Joedi's open arms. Louise drops chin first into the wooden floor about three centimeters shy of Joedi's burly hands. Out of sheer automatic reflex, Joedi lunges forward to try to catch Louise, but the momentum of the falling body drags her down too. They lie on the stage, in a rather indistinguishable ball of fishnet stockings, fringe and body glitter, a mockery of the entire show and an embarrassment. The curtain falls, the lights fade out and there is a dead silence in the room followed by a few snickers and eventually a few pathetic hand claps.

An hour has passed since the "finale incident" as it has been dubbed by chuckling audience members and ten livid dancers. The club is vacated except for Joedi who sits on the edge of the stage with a bag full of costumes, makeup, wigs and razors, leisurely smoking a cigarette. She hears footsteps behind her, cautious and timid as they creep closer.

"Darling, you should get home. It's got to be past your bed time," she says.

"Oh, Joedi, I didn't see you there."

"Yeah, okay." She rolls her eyes.

Louise is standing over Joedi's shoulder now, twisting the hem of her jacket through her fingers. "Hey, I just wanted to say that I'm sorry about what happened. I just...well, I'm just really really sorry."

"It's okay, sweet pea. Bound to happen some time." Joedi blows a huge puff of smoke into the air, over her shoulder.

Louise coughs. "No hard feelings, okay? It was an accident. This was my first show...ever."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really. I guess I just panicked." Louise settles next to Joedi now, sitting down on the stage. "You wanna go get some dinner or something? I'll buy."

"No thanks. I think you're going to have to start spending a little more frugally now."

"Fruga – what?"

Joedi faces Louise, and speaks a little louder, "Frugally. We got fired. I just talked to Lawrence and we're both out."

"Fired? Both? Out?" Louise drops her head into her hands and begins to whimper and mumble through her fingers. "What am I gonna do now? It was an accident – it was my first time, for goodness sake. How can I be fired? What will I do now?"

Feeling vaguely compassionate, Joedi puts out her cigarette on the speaker box in front of her and strokes Louise's back. "Shh. Shh. Lawrence is always a dick to rookies and has-beens." After some more whimpering from Louise, Joedi says, "Shut up already."

Look at me. You'll be fine. There are a lot of clubs around here looking for fresh meat. You're young, you'll be picked up in no time."

Louise wipes the moisture from her eyes and nose, "Thanks. That means a lot. But what about you? What'll you do? I've ruined your life. You're too old to get new work!"

"Watch your mouth, little one."

"I'm sorry, I just mean that..."

"I knew this was my last night. I'm on to bigger and better things." Joedi leans back with her palms on the floor and her elbows locked out. "Come to think of it, I never even liked being a show girl. I mean *Twevle Guys in Fishnets* – give me a break. I never had the passion or the ability. When I started it was just gonna be my ticket into the good stuff. But the good stuff never came."

"Don't say that, Joedi. You're great out there."

"No, I'm not."

The girls sit in a few seconds of quiet reflection until Louise speaks. "Despite what happened tonight, I really am good."

"I'm sure you are."

"I am."

There is another sustained pause. "Funny," Joedi says with a smirk.

"What's so funny about it? I really can dance!"

"No, not funny ha-ha, funny interesting." Joedi sits up and smiles. "Between you and me, Louise, we would have made a great dancer," she sighs, "but we were just too worried about the show."

Sounding defeated Louise says, "Yeah, and what did it get us?"

"Nothing. We're just two guys in fishnets."

## **Human Sacrifice**

*Sara Elliott*

The human sacrifice;  
Who will it be?  
Who are you to judge me?  
You who oppress  
for your own success.  
How can you punish those  
who only chose  
to go the other way  
than to obey  
the unspoken laws  
of the human race,  
and set their own pace?  
Hypocritical world,  
How do we live,  
knowing the pain we give?

## **Fear**

*Alicia LeGrand*

Dear friend, I realize I did not paint  
You in the best of lights in my last poem.  
I portrayed you as a ruthless killer,  
Unhurt by sympathy for others.  
You shot that bird down with no regret  
And I'm sure they will all remember you that way.  
But I did not tell them of the other you,  
The one I will never forget.

I was standing on the lake  
The day my fear of water began.  
It was winter and the gleaming ice  
Enclosed our play place and shimmered in the sun.  
It was getting late and our friends suggested  
We return to our warm homes.  
I was in the middle of the lake  
Throwing rocks at the frozen fish.

I often wondered what it would be like to be them.  
I never thought I would find out.  
Our friends left and I slowly headed for shore.  
The ice started to moan at my movement  
And soon cracks shot from where I stood.  
I gave one scream and then sank into black.  
The icy cold filled my body,  
I twisted violently trying to escape.

I reached up my hand to find the hole was gone  
And had been replaced with a solid steel mirror.  
If only my finger tips were diamonds  
Then I could have broken that impenetrable glass.  
Instead my numb fingers rubbed against it uselessly.  
My heartbeat drummed in my ears.  
I wished my friends could hear me  
But the floating ice shards shattered my screams.

There was nothing to reach for, except death's unfriendly hand.  
So I stopped my clawing and immersed myself in darkness.  
Suddenly the hand of an angel reached for me,  
Its warm grip soothed my frozen hand.  
I was being lifted up towards heaven:  
The bright sun was in my eyes again.

I had been saved from my watery prison.  
My friends gathered around me  
As I shivered in the cold winter air  
You lay next to me, half-drenched.

When Moses came down from the mountain of Sinai  
He carried God's law that said "Thou shalt not kill."  
But when Jesus came and his disciple asked  
"Which commandment is the best?"  
He replied, "To lay down your life for a friend."

## **The Letter**

*Barbara Simon*

I saw my sister, Julie, walking up the driveway on her way back from the mailbox. She was reading a letter as she made her way slowly toward the house, absorbed in the white sheets of paper she was holding, her brown-framed glasses sliding to the edge of her nose. I ran across the yard and down the bank to the driveway in my bare feet, barely noticing when I reached the gravel.

"Who's it from?" I asked.

Engrossed in the letter, she didn't reply. She almost never did when she was reading. It was practically impossible to get her attention when she was engrossed in a book or doing homework. Julie could block out the entire world when she wanted to.

My eyes followed Julie to the dilapidated house my family rented for a measly thirty-five dollars a month. The enclosed side porch she entered had broken windows and a screen door that refused to fit its frame. The siding was in desperate need of paint, and there were places where the wooden slats were loose and hung tiredly. The windows leaked so badly that in the winter they would frost thickly on the inside, looking like huge sheets of blank paper hanging on the walls. My sisters and I would carve our names on the windows with our fingertips until we had to put them in our mouths to warm them from the stinging cold. Our breath would hang in the air in our bedrooms upstairs, the wood burning furnace barely large enough to compete with the cold on the main floor.

"Who's it from?" I asked, louder this time.

"LaVern," she said, and went inside. The screen door hit the cement foundation behind her with a thud.

Her name was LaVern Jackson. She was a year ahead of my Aunt Donna at St. Louis University when we had met her four years before. She had come to my grandparents' farm with Donna for a short visit before going home to Chicago at the end of the spring semester. Julie was drawn to her and asked if she could write to her. They had been corresponding ever since. She kept all of her letters and her picture bundled together and hidden in a box in her bottom dresser drawer. I knew that letter was joining the rest the second she finished reading it.

I remembered very clearly the night that Dad found out about Julie's secret pen pal. Almost as clearly, I remember the day we met her.

She was the first black person I had ever seen. That is not necessarily saying a lot, since I was only three years old, and living in rural Iowa in 1969. My dad didn't allow us to watch television shows with black people in them because he was prejudiced. The few glimpses caught through a black and white television did not prepare me for this woman's stunning appearance to my very small eyes.

On a Sunday visit to my grandparents' house with my mom, brother, and sisters, I walked into their kitchen, with its welcoming smell from forty years of Grandma's bread baking. I froze in surprise as I stared up at this unexpected stranger standing across the room, my feet cemented to the floor. Her hair was black and very frizzy, worn in an afro with a brightly colored scarf tied in it. She wore bell-bottom hip huggers and a sleeveless shirt. Her dark skin was deep brown and very smooth. She was watching us come in the house and say our hellos..

Grandma startled me with a hug and kiss, and releasing my fixed gaze as she said, "Hello, sweetie,." Still aware of the stranger in the room, I walked over to my grandpa, sitting at the kitchen table, to give him a hug and kiss. "Hello, my chickadee,." he said in his usual greeting. I then gave my Aunt Donna, dressed in a halter top and shorts, a hug and kiss. She introduced me to her friend.

"This is Barbie,." she said with her hand on my head.

"Hi, Barbie,." the tall black woman said. "My name is LaVern. How old are you?"

Not sure what to say and being bashful, I turned my face into my aunt's very Irish-white leg.

I sat at the dining room table with the two-quart ice cream tub full of crayons – mostly broken and some just nubs that would fit only between very small fingers. The container's lid displayed several large and plump strawberries. I drew on the back of used paper that Grandma kept in the drawer of an accent table near the door to the large front porch.

The full-glass porch door was open, leaving the screen door to separate the warm, sunny, summer day from the cool dimness inside. I could see Aunt Donna and LaVern through the large window next to the table. My oldest sister, Julie, who was almost nine, was outside with them. Their laughter floated into the house on a light breeze.

I watched LaVern whenever I could. Her dark skin fascinated me and caused me to examine my own hands and arms which were pinkish-white with blue veins darting here and there. I wanted to touch her to see how she felt. She saw me watching her and she smiled at me, a great white smile. She walked over to the door and called, "All you kids come outside – we're going on a Bear Hunt!"

My five-year-old sister, Kathy, who was also coloring, dropped her crayons and headed for the door. My brother, Jeff, who was eight, ran out of the kitchen and followed Kathy. Not wanting to be left behind, I jumped off my chair joined them on the porch.

"Have you ever been on a Bear Hunt?" LaVern asked in an excited voice.

"No!" we all shouted, laughing.

"Well, then let's go!" she said.

She led us to the middle of the large front yard, underneath the giant pine tree.

"Sit in a circle Indian-style. Now,." she said, leaning into the circle, looking at each of us, "we're going on a Bear Hunt. Just do what I do and repeat after me."

"We're going on a bear hunt!" she said, her hands hitting her thighs in a steady beat.

“We’re going on a bear hunt!” we echoed, with hands hitting our thighs in unison.

“I’m not afraid! Are you afraid?” she asked.

“No!” we yelled back.

“What’s that up ahead? It’s a great big tree!”

“Can we go under it?” she asked. “No!” we yelled back.

“Can we go through it?” she asked. “No!” we yelled back again.

“I guess we will have to climb over it!” she said, and we motioned our arms to climb that tree with all of our might.

We continued on that bear hunt, clomping in the mud, swimming through the river, and tip toeing into the cave until we found that bear and frantically retraced our steps home, declaring that we still were not afraid. It seemed that we went on a thousand bear hunts that afternoon, laughing and falling over when we would get the words wrong, only to start over again. By supper time, we knew every inch of that Bear Hunt backward and forward and inside and out.

Late into the evening, we went home after long good-byes. The adults seemed to find a million more things to say while standing in the driveway with car doors open, the car’s interior light attracting moths. I gave LaVern a huge hug and kiss and hoped that I would see her again.

We piled into the car. Julie and Jeff sat in the front seat with Mom, and Kathy and I sat in the back seat with our baby sister, Donna, lying between us. We pulled out of the driveway in our 1960 Mercury and drove the thirty miles home.

“Don’t mention LaVern to your dad,” Mom said without explanation. That was all she needed to say.

Dad did find out, somehow. Just as he always found out what we did, where we went, and who we saw. Partly, I chalk it up to rural and small town living. Everyone seems to know everyone’s business and shares it freely. Mostly, I chalk it up to my dad’s possessiveness and controlling behavior, which intensified with alcohol. That was a night of hell-to-pay because we had visited with a black person. That was his reason to raise hell that night, anyway. He found other reasons other nights.

The night that Dad came home after learning of the letter Julie had recently received, I woke up to the sound of gravel flying as he drove into the driveway. I heard the car skid when he braked hard enough to stop before hitting the garage. My stomach knotted and I curled up tightly in my blankets, putting the pillow over my head. “Here we go again,” I thought.

“Julie Ann!” he yelled as the door flew open. “Get down here now!”

I lifted the pillow enough to see Julie getting out of bed to get dressed. She mumbled inaudibly as she did so. My sister, Kathy, with whom I shared a bed, was curled up just as tightly as me, her head buried under her pillow too.

Julie went downstairs. By then, Mom was up. This was the routine for these frequent late-night tirades. Dad drank a lot and would come home and raise hell about once a week. Some nights would be worse than others, but all involved yelling and repeated questioning of events that happened in the past, mostly with Mom’s family, whom he disliked. After years of this, Mom often stood up to Dad but would also know when to back down, most of the time. Sometimes she was just so tired of the madness that she

said exactly what she thought. This often resulted in a beating. Sometimes he would beat her no matter how she responded to him. There were no guarantees.

Through my pillow I heard Dad yelling about how someone ‘uptown’ asked about who was writing Julie from Chicago? “I told him it was none of his goddamn business!” Then to Julie, “Who is the letter from?”

No response.

“Julie, I asked you a question!”

I clamped the pillow tighter to my ears, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t keep his voice out.

Silence.

“Come on now, little girl – you answer me before I take this belt off. Don’t think you’re too big to go over my knee!”

“Answer him, Julie, answer him,” I cried into my pillow, lifting it away from my ears, not wanting to hear, yet needing to know, what happened next.

Julie answered softly, “LaVern.”

I could hear the tears in her trembling voice.

“LaVern, who?”

“LaVern Jackson.”

“Who the hell is LaVern Jackson?”

“A friend of Donna’s. She was out at Grandma and Grandpa’s a long time ago...” her voice trailed off.

I don’t think Dad ever forgot anything that had pissed him off. Stillness hung in the air while he searched his memory, the house holding its breath.

“That nigger? Are you trying to make a fool of me? My daughter – writing to a goddamn nigger! Therese, did you know about this?” His anger was steadily mounting.

“Yes, for God’s sake. There’s nothing wrong with Julie writing to her,” said Mom in Julie’s defense.

“Don’t push it, woman, or I’ll get up off of this chair!” Now to Julie, “Get me the letter!”

“No,” Julie cried angrily.

“Don’t you tell me ‘no’, little girl. Get me the letter!”

No response.

Dad stood up, the metal legs of the chair skidding across the well-worn linoleum.

“Where is the letter?” Dad said in a dead-even tone that sent chills up my spine.

“Upstairs,” Julie was crying hard now.

“Let’s go get it,” Dad ordered.

“Nnooooooo,” Julie begged. Before any more could be said, I heard her running up the stairs and Dad’s boots pounding loudly behind her. Mom followed saying, “For God’s sake, Tony. Why do you have to wake up the whole house?”

“You shut up!” he snapped, stomping into our room. I heard the tinny clinking of the beaded chain switch hitting against the light bulb as Dad waved his arm back and forth under the fixture in the center of the room, looking for the piece of yarn tied to it, knocking it back and forth in the process. Finding it, he pulled, which flooded the room with light.

Kathy and I sat up in bed, hugging our knees to our chests. From past experience, we knew that pretending to sleep wouldn’t be tolerated. I blinked over and over until my

eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness in the room. Julie was leaning on her dresser, trembling, her shoulder length curly brown hair still messy from bed. Donna, now four years old, lay in the bed she shared with Julie, silently watching. Dad's six-foot frame towered in our room, his shadow enveloped Mom's five-foot, one hundred pound body, as she stood in the doorway. The smell of beer and cigarettes permeated the air.

"Give me the letter and give it to me now," he threatened, fists clenched.

"Get it, Julie," Mom said, knowing full well that he would tear the room apart to find it.

Angry and afraid, Julie knelt down on the rag braided rug that covered most of the unpainted wood-planked floor. She yanked open the bottom dresser drawer and rummaged under her clothes. I knew she didn't want Dad to see the box she kept there. Since she bound her letters in a rubber band, she couldn't get only the most recent letter, so she pulled out all of LaVern's letters, slammed her drawer, and stood up.

"What the hell is this?" he screamed. "How many letters do you have?" He grabbed the letters from her hand and ripped the rubber band off the neat stack of envelopes, dropping most of them on the floor. Out of one of the envelopes in his hand he pulled a letter and a photograph of LaVern. He looked at that picture for an eternity, seemingly to commit it to memory.

"Pick up those letters," he yelled at Julie. She did so and he grabbed them out of her hand. She jumped away from him as he did so.

"You are to never write to her again, do you hear me? Do you?" We all winced at the strength of his threatening voice.

Holding the letters and photograph in his left hand, he pulled his cigarette lighter from his pocket. We had given that lighter to him the previous Father's Day. The Zippo's clear body displayed a fishing lure, floating in the lighter fluid. Julie cried harder, pleading, "Nnoooo, please don't!"

He flung back the lid of the lighter – click. Flicking the roller with his thumb, flame sprung from the lighter. He held it to the stack of letters.

"You're going to burn this place down!" Mom yelled.

Watching those letters burn, I remembered that glorious summer day years before when we all went on a Bear Hunt – climbing the tree, clomping in the mud, swimming through the river, tip-toeing in the cave, and swearing we weren't afraid.

## **Redemption**

*Anna Kelley*

Paula is sitting in her hot tub. Her body is submerged, weightless and invisible, but her head rests above the waterline as if it were detached, floating, balancing on the very tip of her chin. About two inches above her forehead is the tub's lid. Between the surface of the water and the ceiling ten inches away, Paula is suffering a thick, steamy atmosphere where breathing has become a task. The haze all around is heavy and the chlorinated water below becomes nearly unbearable.

Sweat has been streaming down her angular face, into her eyes and off her nose for the past several minutes, but now there is one particular bead that threatens to break her tolerance. She started feeling it somewhere between the beginning of her eyebrow and

the tear duct in her left eye. It has made an annoying path below her nose to where it currently rests in the little dip right in the middle of her upper lip. Now Paula is the type of person who can't stand tiny drops of water hanging desperately from shower heads or faucets or upper lips. She thinks it's pathetic and she scoops them up with her finger whenever she can.

Paula does this with people too. She scoops them up from the fringes of life and she doesn't let them fall. She puts them at the tip of her finger so they'll be with her always. One example: a little over a year ago, she saw a man in a bar. He was fragile looking and alone, staring at three empty shot glasses and tracing the small round mouth of the beer bottle in front of him with his finger. She was a little drunk, too, after a rare night out with the girls. She approached the man and noticed some very attractive qualities. He had perfectly untamed brown hair and eyes that were so empty now but had the potential to be beautiful with the right inspiration. She sat down next to him and began to talk to him about her life, her ambition and successes and how she didn't achieve them through self-loathing. She wanted to straighten this young man out, without even knowing the source of his trouble. He didn't say much, but instead listened intently and didn't look away once. She found this endearing and cute. She felt the connection that he was obviously expressing to her. They became close soon after this random night at the bar and began a relationship. His name was Charles.

The bead of sweat is growing slowly with a mixture of perspiration and steam and as she feels it get bigger, she also feels it start to dangle over her lip a little more. It tickles painfully. But this time Paula is going to fight the urge to absorb it into her fingertip and wait it out. She will let it fall on its own. If after thirty seconds the lip drop has not swollen and fallen into the water below she can give up, open the lid, and return to the air to breathe.

One Mississippi...two Mississippi...three Mississippi...Can she really control herself for twenty-seven more Mississippi's? Her eyes are shut hard as if she's trying to will the drop to drop. Eight Mississippi...nine Mississippi...she can do it, she knows she can. There's nothing better than beating a challenge. Twelve Mississippi...Thir... "God dammit!"

The number thirteen going through her head is met with a sudden jolt as she sees the lid of the hot tub being pulled away from her, up into the sky. The steam that has been her blanket is released into the air and separates like doves flying from a cage, and the soft light of dusk invades her dark world leaving her exposed. But exposed to what, to whom? As Paula's eyes struggle to adjust and focus on the world around her, she begins to recognize a figure in the dark.

Tall, from where she crouches at the center of the tub, but with a small frame, the figure stands directly in front of her. As her pupils shrink, she is able to see details. Dark brown hair feathered around a face, a hand wrapped around a body and resting in the back pocket, and the asymmetrical shift of weight onto one leg which pushes the left hip up and the left shoulder down.

"Charles, you bastard," Paula squeaks.

"You scared me half to death, Pauli!" Charles says as Paula's vision clears and she watches each movement of his lips glide over the row of perfect, familiar teeth. "What are you *doing*?"

“Relaxing. Can’t you see that?” Then under her breath, “Obviously not.”

“Relaxing? And no, I didn’t see that. I had no idea you were under there. How could I have seen it? The lid was closed and in my experience that generally means that the hot tub is not in use.”

Paula stands up slowly, trying to salvage some dignity. “Well, this is how I relax, and next time you’ll be a little more cautious when invading people’s private spaces.” She feels that familiar fold of skin forming between her eyes, “Who goes around tearing the tops off hot tubs, anyway?”

“I guess I was feeling nostalgic. There was no answer at the door so I figured you weren’t home...”

Paula interrupts sarcastically, “And then the next logical step would be to walk into my backyard.”

Charles lets out a little laugh. “I just wanted to come back and run my fingers through the water. I probably won’t get the chance again and it brings back a lot of great memories.”

Paula rolls her eyes, “Oh yeah? Like what?”

“You were there. I *know* you haven’t forgotten so don’t even play that game.”

“Yeah, well you still scared the shit out of me for a second.”

“Sorry.” With a sly look on his face, “I’m scared almost every second I’m with you. We’re even.”

Charles! Charles Andrews. Why is he standing here in front of her, cracking charming little personal jokes, letting the breeze finger through his brown hair, squinting his eyes when he listens to her speak, just like he always used to do? It was unmistakably the exact same Charles that she had known five months earlier. It was the same man who stood with shifted weight in front of her with his hand in his back pocket as she lay down on an old blanket and yelled at him to get out of the way.

It was the end of August and Charles had convinced her to look at the stars with him, something she had never done. The night was perfect, not a cloud in the sky, and cool enough to cover the grass in a light dew. The blanket under her was rough, probably something that he dug up from under the couch in the corner of his dirty basement, and had the distinct smell of campfire. She spent the night on her back, looking up at clumps of stars that Charles identified as Orion and the Big Dipper. She was not still, though; she spent the time battling the woolly scratch of the blanket and the cold wetness of the grass by moving her leg from one to the next in regular intervals.

Charles was next to her, on his back, with a huge grin on his face, his arms crossed behind his head and his feet crossed at the ankles. She remembers thinking how funny he looked, like a child waiting to be entertained and ready to take it all in. She loved this about him. He was always ready for what was next. He wasn’t pinned to the past or to the future, but he was in the moment. When she was with him she felt young and ready because he made her feel that way. He gave her the ability to let go by giving her something to hold on to.

The stars that pinned them there in awe were unending. She was disappointed because she could only see one small patch at a time, to see more meant moving her eyes and her head but then the rest would escape her view. They were the only thing that didn’t end. Her day was ending, her summer was ending, at 27 she felt like her young life was ending, and she sensed the ending of her and Charles.

“Charlie, darling,” she sighed, “put your arms around me. I’m cold.”

“It’s Charles.” He took one arm out from under his head and wrapped it around Paula’s shoulder. “You know I hate that. It makes me sound like I’m five.”

“So sorry. Touchy.” She leaned into him and kissed his neck.

“I’m not touchy,” he said and then smirked. “I’m just sensitive.”

Paula sat up so her face was over his, eclipsing the stars, and her eyebrow bent upwards in the middle, revealing a mischievous look. “I bet you can be touchy. I’ll even let you practice on me.”

He smiled back. “Not now, Pauli. Let’s enjoy the sky.”

*Jerk.* “Okay.” She slid back down on the blanket and moved out from under his arm. “Oh, and have fun at your sister’s wedding. My friend Amy would be a great date. She knows your sister.”

Now he moved his face above hers, grabbed the back of her neck, and kissed her with the frown still on her face.

“Thanks, Charlie. I knew you’d come to your senses.”

Paula watched as he rolled his eyes and laid back down beside her on the blanket, intent on enjoying the rest of his star gazing. She rolled over and pressed her back against his side so that he would know exactly where she was. She shut her eyes and smiled.

Paula rises out of the water slowly, not taking her eyes off of the man in front of her and consciously sucks in her belly because she hadn’t been to the gym at all this week. Although the bubbling, chlorinated water has to be clean, she always feels a viscous film over her body when she gets out, as if she had grown a second skin. After straddling the side of the tub as gracefully as she can pull off and descending the two mini-steps, she grabs the towel that Charles has ready and waiting for her. She wipes away the film, the outer Paula, and is left standing in front of the man who broke her open, exposed.

“So, you’re back?” she says, her eyes still fixed intently on him, trying to figure him out.

“Surprise!” He opens his arms wide and invites her in with his smile. She cautiously accepts.

“It’s been a long time. Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

They separate, awkwardly. “That would have probably ruined the surprise. I just had some time off....well...time in-between I guess is a better way to put it.”

“Time in-between what and what?”

“Well, work and play I guess. The company has given me a three-week vacation instead of a bonus this year and I’ve decided to take a trip to Wyoming.”

Paula can’t control herself, “Ha!”

“What?”

“Wyoming? A city-boy like you in Wyoming! What on earth would you want to go there for?” She is thoroughly amused by his vacation choice. “I suppose you could make friends with *the* local or learn how to spit into a can or something.”

Not interested in starting a fight, Charles reacts calmly. “Yeah, well, it’s different. I’m leaving the day after tomorrow.”

“And of all places, you came here, to my backyard.”

“Well, yes. I don’t really know why I came. Just wanted to drop by. Surprise.”

All that she can manage to get out is an indifferent “Hmph.”

The last time, five months ago, that Charles surprised Paula, she left him. Until that point she thought she was in love. Paula was dragging herself down her street as she came home from work with her gym bag slung over her shoulder and her briefcase in the opposite hand. She was especially tired because the new temp at work was incompetent and she forgot to pack her sandwich so she was forced to endure the rigors of social lunch in the cafeteria. As the red on her apartment building door made itself visible through the tree branches on the other side of the street, she felt relieved and anxious to get upstairs, take some aspirin, and lie down.

Once she got in the building, rose four floors up in the elevator, and reached her door, she threw her bags on the floor and turned the key in the lock. Upon opening the door, she nearly fainted. There was nothing inside. No desk to put her briefcase on, no couch to crash on, and certainly no cupboard with an aspirin bottle sitting in the middle of the second shelf from the top.

There was, however, a phone on the floor in the corner of her kitchen. It rang. Paula took a deep breath, clenched her fists, and walked slowly over to the noise.

“Hello?”

“Surprise!” It was Charles’ voice.

“What have you done?”

“You’re all moved in! I know we just began discussing it the other night, but I couldn’t wait! I’m on my way over to pick you up. Give me three minutes.”

Silence.

“Pauli...honey...are you there?”

Finally she spoke. “Don’t come. If I see you, I might hurt you, and I love you too much to risk it.”

“What...but I...”

“Charles, listen to me: when you get on my street, drive right past my house and onto the highway. Go to your sister’s place and spend the night with her. Go to work tomorrow and when you get back tomorrow night my things will be out of your apartment.”

“Pauli,” she heard and then hung up the phone.

Paula followed through on what she had said. She got all her things, moved them back into her apartment, and never saw Charles again. Until now.

“Hmph.” Charles seems confused. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Please, it’s been awhile, but I still know your sounds.”

She looks away from him for the first time. “I was just thinking about the last surprise you gave me.”

Charles walks away, covering so much ground in such little time with his long strides, and sits in a patio chair. “That was a long time ago. We’re past that now, right?”

“Past it? Sure, I was *past* it the day it happened,” Paula says unconvincingly.

“There’s no need to take that attitude. You know, you just couldn’t handle that I was taking charge for once. You’ve always been like that, since the day I met you. Always had to be in control,” says Charles defensively.

“No, Charlie. It just hurts when the person you love goes behind your back.”

“Love? It wasn’t really love. You loved me the way a puppeteer loves his dolls.”

She crosses her arms and turns up her nose. “Grow up.”

An uncomfortable silence hangs in the air between her and Charles as they feebly avoid eye contact. The night has grown considerably darker since the interruption in the hot tub and Paula is sitting across the patio table from Charles, leaning back, trying to look indifferent to the situation, but really plagued with questions. Was she unreasonable, too harsh, too unfeeling when she walked away from him? Was she afraid of giving him more of herself? Did she make a horrible mistake?

Charles is rocking in his chair, trying to fill the time with anything he can. Then, on a particularly aggressive rock backwards, the rusty bottom of the chair lets out a piercing squeal that cuts through the air. Paula feels herself on the verge of succumbing to the trembling in the corners of her mouth and as she finally looks up to Charles and sees him in the same plight, they simultaneously let out a roar of laughter. Their bodies collapse inward, their heads both dip into their laps, and when the bout is over, they each sigh. Paula lets out a small, almost noiseless release of air and Charles sucks in a huge gulp then blows it upward, to the sky. Not much has changed.

But Paula finds this one difficult to brush aside. “Did you really mean what you said, Charles?” Paula asks as she wipes away moisture from the corner of her eye.

“About what?”

“About how you didn’t think I loved you. About how I just...controlled you?”

“I was just, I guess I was just venting. What a stupid thing to do after I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“But that’s what you thought...then?” she asks, concerned.

Charles pauses and his face becomes wrinkled and apologetic, “No, no, you misunderstood me.”

“No, I didn’t. That’s what you said. ‘It wasn’t love. I always had to be in control.’” She is leaning forward now, closing the space between them.

He takes her hands in his. His blue eyes penetrate her as he speaks the words, “I’m sorry,” and the slant of his eyebrows makes her weak. “Let’s just forget about it, okay?”

After a deep breath she says, “Yeah, well, that’s a hard thing to forget.”

Charles pulls Paula close to him and now they are sharing the same air. She smells his cologne. He never used to wear cologne, but she realizes that she likes the smell of this one. He kisses her innocently on the cheek.

“Charles, what...”

“I’m sorry. I should have known.”

She leans back in, confused, “Should have known?”

“Sorry. Let’s forget it.” He leans back into his chair, releasing her hands.

“No, what?”

“Oh, just the same old Pauli, I guess. You know, you haven’t changed at all.”

“Thank you,” she says, making his remark into a compliment.

“You always wanted it when *you* were in the mood, and it didn’t matter what *I* wanted. Not that I want anything now, but...” He locks his hands behind his head, with his elbows pointing in the air and sighs, “...but, that was then.”

Paula runs her fingers over her wet hair, leans back into her chair, and mimics his relaxed position. She looks up into the summer sky and notices the Big Dipper sprawled out above her. There is Charles, sitting a few feet away from her, the man that made her

palms sweat and toes curl just a few months before. She had never felt that with any other man and doubted that she could ever again. But could she? *He's* the one that came into *her* backyard after all.

After a few moments of taking in the air, she glances back into Charles' familiar face and sees the man that could possibly set her free. She gets out of her chair, walks a step toward him and stands with her naked leg between his knees. His eyes widen as she leans into him. Her lips reach his in a kiss more sensual than any other they had shared.

"What's this?" he asks with a stunned expression.

"This is now," she replies as she tugs at his shirt to stand up.

He resists. He does not follow her. "And what's so different about now?" he asks, sitting in the chair, looking up at her with defiant eyes.

Avoiding the question, she kisses him lightly on the neck and feels the scratch of tiny whiskers on her lips. "I think I might like Wyoming," she whispers as she makes her way up to his ear.

Charles stands up, leaving her bent over in front of him. She straightens out with a look of dismay and meets Charles' nose with hers before backing away.

"I'm going to Wyoming," he says, pointing at his chest. "Me."

Enraged at the rejection, she shouts, "Why the hell did you come here for then? Trying to entice me to that hole of a state just so that you could deny me?"

"Whoa, wait, I never said anything about..."

"Whatever! Leave."

"But you don't...I didn't...I just wanted to catch up before I left," he frantically tries to explain. "If you wanted something more, you could have told me. I mean, it's been five months, for Christ's sake."

"Stupid, I didn't want anything more and I don't want anything more. I was happy the day I decided to leave you."

"Then what just happened here?"

"Nothing *happened*, your uptight self made sure of that."

"Okay, Pauli. You know what, I'm just going to leave. I think that's best."

"I don't know why you're still here."

As Charles walks away, the unconvincing look of pride on Paula's face quickly fades away and turns into a mixture of defeat and embarrassment. His last few steps around the corner of the house aren't fast enough as Paula fights to hold back tears. He is gone now and with him went Paula's chance for redemption, salvation even. But she didn't deserve it; she knew she didn't deserve it. She can't go through life sacrificing everything for a moment. She just isn't built that way. She wipes her tear-streaked face with the backs of her hands, shakes the remaining hanging drops of water from her hair, walks inside the patio door, locks it and turns off the lights.

## **The Sadness of Eating Alone Vs. The Romance of the Post**

*Katherine Bucko*

Under a flickering 60-watt  
    deeply in need of dusting,  
        he shuffled his quarters

and flipped through his papers. A full cup  
of coffee steamed and soaked through the classifieds,  
inking away the chance for a new job, a used car,

a free pet. Personals filled the page, embarrassing  
the solo diner who humped his back over the ads  
and hung his gray-shocked head to hide the distasteful

columns. Single white females squealed  
their turn-ons as he averted his eyes, focusing  
instead on an ad for potting soil, a column

about geraniums, an article about sod. Gardening  
was simpler, easier to consider than the eager  
gay divorcees, widows who wanted to cuddle,

depressives who “just wanted a friend.” He felt dirty touching  
the charcoaly page, sleazy and stewing with insincerity and frivolity.  
The skulking waitress plopped down his sandwich.

Dripping with grease and smeared by newsprint, his fingers reached  
to his lips with every bite of his sloppy, stinking reuben. With no one  
to point out the sauce on his cheek, he ate like an invalid, staring

alternately into the distance and down to his papers. Promptly finishing  
his meal without the hesitation of conversation, he pushed his plate,  
silverware, and papers away. A sigh overtook his torso, shuddering

the well-fed belly into a slump. The pen that he took from his pocket,  
an old-fashioned fountain, was silver and appeared to be engraved.  
It was the pen of an important man, or perhaps a pen for signing

important, immutable documents. Producing a hotel pad and folded  
envelope from his other front pocket, he proceeded to envelop  
himself in an impenetrable gaze, an unbreakable bond between

himself and his letter. He smiled at the page while he stabbed it  
with the silver pen. Completed, he folded it up and exchanged it to his  
back pocket, walking saucily away from the truck stop parking lot to

the post office across the street.

## Planes

*Katherine Bucko*

Geology gave me panic attacks:  
The violence of tectonic plates forcing  
volcanic eruptions from boiling earth;  
then the subsequent cool downs and birthing  
of early impossible tropicals,  
crawly and bulbous, circular and green.  
A godsend, that they had the decency  
to sleep among the primordial ooze,  
only leaving behind their crusted spines,  
digging their tentacles deeper inside  
metamorphic rock of the highland hills.  
The current era concerns my body  
with jet streams propelling a plane along  
with the force of 600 miles of  
power per hour, oh Lord, nothing else.  
I long for something sedimentary  
to land on, any solid ground will do.  
That geode, San Francisco, would work well.  
As long as my body does not shatter  
to ashes, my volcanic stomach pit  
should be fine. I worship Kitty Hawk,  
I'm tight with Ohio, I need a guide.  
Those ghostly brothers must be on my side.

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