Juked #5

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Our deepest gratitude to Frederick Barthelme and Julia Johnson for their gracious participation as judges in our fiction and poetry contests. We would also like to thank Angela Ball, Steven Barthelme and Elizabeth Stuckey-French for their encouragement and instruction. Finally, without the support of our parents and loved ones, it is very likely we would be huddling for warmth under old bridges or in moving boxcars or in the dank and stinking hold of a cargo ship bound for some unknowable and quite unpleasant place, somewhere without hot water or pilates or wi-fi Internet access, filled with curious people speaking in unintelligible tongues. And then what will we do? Watch our makeshift tents crumple under the treads of a roving tank? Wait for our turn to be bombed by the foreign oppressors? We are very grateful that is not the case.

Juked print issues are published almost annually. The online version at www.juked.com is updated two to three times a week. Please visit our website to direct questions, comments, suggestions and outraged remarks.

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Marianne Villanueva

The Hand

She had been married quite a long time, almost 18 years, to a man who, in the last year or two, had begun to spend most of his time watching TV. When they were first married, when they were both in graduate school, they had started out with a small black-and-white. Eventually, after perhaps the 6th year of their marriage, her husband had agreed to buy a small colored TV. Finally, just two years ago, they had gotten another TV so that she could watch her favorite shows without having to wait for her husband to finish watching a football game.

In the last couple of years, time seemed to be moving very fast, seemed almost to be accelerating, and the more she tried to hold on to it, the less of it there was to hold. This was a frightening feeling, a feeling she tried over and over to analyze.

On this particular Monday evening, a light rain was falling. She could hear the gentle sound of the drops against the trees outside her window.

This morning the rain made her happy, since it reminded her of her childhood in the Philippines, when the yellowish glow from the low-watt bulbs made the rooms look unearthly, and everything in them blurred, as though she were looking at her surroundings from underwater. She remembered sitting at the round table in the kitchen, which was her favorite room in the house, where she sat surrounded by the bustling maids, the sound of people entering and leaving.

All day the question had been inside her, waiting.

Her husband was sitting on the couch. She could just make out part of his nose in profile. He'd come home only an hour earlier, his

hair slick with the rain. He had his face turned toward the TV, which this evening was showing an episode of *24*.

When was it that she had noticed the hand? The hand that was just a hand, nothing else, reaching out to tap him on his shoulder.

Now she recalled seeing it for the first time the Friday before. She'd given herself a shake, rubbed her eyes, looked again. Yes, there was most unmistakably a hand, reaching out just above her husband's right shoulder. The index finger was extended, pointing downwards. She anticipated the moment of physical contact and held her breath. But the hand—a woman's hand, she realized suddenly—remained suspended, frozen, as it were, just above and behind her husband.

She tried to circle around it, to observe it more closely. When she got to within a foot, she stopped, fearing she would alarm her husband, who was absorbed, as usual, in some TV show that involved many people running around and shouting.

The hand had a faint tracery of blue veins spreading, fan-like, from a narrow wrist. It was preternaturally white, a white like the bellies of the dead fish piled up in front of the stalls at the wet market back home in Manila. The pearl-colored nails were oval in shape. She mused about who the hand's owner might be: perhaps a young woman, someone 10 or even 15 years younger than herself. What was it being communicated to her husband? Why was she here? Teresa didn't know. The need to know, however, was like an ache. So palpable, she could almost feel it behind her teeth when she went to bed that night.

Later that afternoon, she had the accident. She was making a slow right turn onto El Camino Real when she felt the thud on her rear bumper. Everything in the car went flying: CDs, books, her handbag. Her head hit something—hard. She lay on her side for what seemed like long moments, looking upwards at her feet. A trickle of something wet ran down the right side of her face. From far, far

away, she heard indistinct voices. "An accident," she thought. "Something has happened."

She tried to say something. "Please help me." And, a little later, "Am I dying?" But there was no one to speak to. Her gaze was entirely directed now on a square of cracked window through which she saw—smelled—hot asphalt and, occasionally, a glimpse of running feet in heavy soled boots.

"Wait," she told herself. "Just wait."

She could taste blood in her mouth—salty, not unlike tears. Her face was wet. A hand appeared at the window. Lined and creased, with dirt along the grooves of the palm. It gestured, implored.

"I can't," she said. "Can't." Can't move, was what she wanted to say.

If only she had been able to speak.

The hand continued its pleas. It was moving faster now, up and down, as if trying to communicate a matter of great urgency.

"I—" she said. "I—" She could see her own hand, palm upraised, lying on the street. But she felt nothing, not the asphalt underneath it, which looked rough and hot, or the thing someone—a passer-by?—had placed into her limp fingers, which she recognized as a simple wooden rosary.

Finally, she managed to say, with great effort, "My husband."

"What?" A disembodied voice. A male voice.

She couldn't think anymore. She let her head drop and closed her eyes.

She felt movement now, around her. Someone was lifting. Or *she* was being lifted. A great groaning. How awful that sound was. Metal grinding against metal.

There was a rush of air. She opened her eyes. She saw sky. Blue. Gray. She was free! She tried to wiggle her fingers. She felt nothing. A strange lassitude came over her after the effort.

She was not going to die here, right now, on this street. She wanted to taste—ice cream. Something. Cold. Sweet. Her tongue probed

ineffectually at the roof of her mouth. Impossibly dry. Again she tried to work her fingers.

She found herself looking down at her skirt, which was stained with great swathes of purple dye. Purple dye? Hadn't this been a beige skirt when she'd put it on this morning? What did this mean? What did this all mean?

Was she dying?

Or was she, in fact, living, and was that what the purple dye all over her beige skirt was trying to tell her? That life was living. Was going on. Even though the white hand on her husband's shoulder this morning had seemed to say: Die. Die. I want you to die.

Fate, luck, chance had put her in the way of the car that had so conveniently hit her bumper. Hit her hard enough to kill her. But, unlucky as always, she had survived. She was now alive. This was the unintended consequence. This was life.

And so what to do now? She thought this even as they were putting her on the gurney (which bumped terribly over the uneven asphalt of the street, she nearly cried out but stopped herself just in time, just as the scream was about to escape from between her teeth), even as she felt the straps come down on either of her arms, saw a swaying bottle of fluid on a flexible pole affixed next to her arm.

She wondered what it all meant: the hand over her husband's shoulder, the gray clouds spitting rain, the accident . . .

She recalled her husband's last words to her, spoken only this morning, before he'd left for work: Tell your son we're not going to get him a new car. Their only child was at college in Los Angeles. The weekend before, while driving up for her birthday, he'd had an accident. His car, an old Civic with nearly 200,000 miles, was irreparable. Or so the nearest mechanic, the only one he could tow the wreck to, had said. The car was so old, so decrepit, that she'd secretly been glad at the news. Perhaps now her husband would consent to help their son get a better car. One with a more durable body that would not crumple at the first impact with another vehicle.

But all her husband said at the news was no, no, let him take the train up. We can't afford to get him another car.

Teresa had not anticipated the hurt that arose in her at these words. She herself would have given anything—her right arm—to help her son have what she knew he desired most of all.

But she had been unable to summon the right words. She had kept silent, and eventually her husband had left, toting his heavy briefcase and walking toward his car the way she imagined someone might who was only marking time.

And now this scene was playing over and over in her head, as the ambulance raced through traffic.

"What did you say?" said a young man in white who happened to be sitting next to her.

She stared at him. Shook her head.

He came closer.

No, no! She wanted to yell. Keep away! The smell of him was almost overwhelming—a smell of sweet aftershave and sweat. It brought her back, almost all the way back. To the present moment—*what was she doing lying flat on her back in this crazily swaying vehicle*—where she had no intention of staying, not if she could help it.

"You will—" she said, after a while.

"What?" he said again.

Was he completely stupid?

She shook her head.

"Can you speak up a little, ma'am? What do you want?" he said.

This time she was angry. The anger was pulling her mouth down at the corners, she could feel it. She could also imagine her face, as she stared at this young man, the lines deepening on either side of her jaw. What a sight she must be. What a fright she must look. What—

Now the man reached over and brushed something cool and wet over her face. Ahhh, she thought. *Do it again.*

But he'd sat back. Now he was simply staring at her.

"My fingers?" she asked him.

He looked at her hands.

"They're fine," he said.

"Rub," she requested.

She could see him put his hands below. But she felt nothing. Tears came spilling out of her eyes. Her mouth opened helplessly.

"You will be fine, all right? Ma'am?" he said. He was impatient with her. Because she was old. She knew this in her heart. The old were like residents of another country. Here they were treated like children, to whom everything must be explained.

What she wanted, what she had always wanted, if she'd had the sense to know this, when she was alive, *before*, was to go to that place she knew existed, if only in herself. It was so long ago, but she'd been there. She'd inhabited this magical realm with all of her being. During a time before her son was born, before her marriage, even. Sunlight moved there. And *talahib*. Wild grass. Outside her bedroom window, while she watched, in the late afternoon—birds, snakes, little boys.

The house that was to have been built there had never been built. So a pile of rubble had been left in the vacant lot—a small hill of rubble. Then, the rains had come, and the grass had come, and after that the birds, and still after that the snakes, and last of all were the little boys with their slingshots and their makeshift pellet guns and then the bringing of small animals to her, the daughter of the big house next door.

Once, they brought a downy chick. "Where is the mother?" she asked her *yaya* to ask them. The *yaya* asked. The boys only covered their mouths with their hands and giggled.

And when she was in high school and had to do science projects, when she needed specimens to dissect in the lab, they gladly brought her black snakes which she poured into glass bottles, covering their inert forms with formaldehyde. Once the little boys brought her the carcass of a puppy and she almost screamed. White and still, its

long silky white hair matted with mud. That, too, she eventually put in a bottle and stuck in the freezer, behind the milkfish and the frozen cow innards.

The boys—their soft, whispery voices, their large dark eyes—had looked at her with awe. All because she wore the uniform of the girls' convent school and spoke in perfect English. Because she had a *yaya* and lived in a two-story house with a tiled roof.

The *yaya*, a girl of 16, had come straight from the provinces. She never questioned what Teresa asked her to do. She was supremely patient, and kind, and Teresa had never understood why in the end her mother had fired her. Teresa had seen the *yaya* sobbing as she packed her meager things into a plastic case, so perhaps the girl had committed some great shame.

That was a long time ago. In fact, until this very moment, she'd forgotten all about the *yaya* and the boys who brought her animals. She'd grown old, and had left that sleepy island, that small city — was this why she had grown old? Yes, perhaps —and it had been a long time since anyone had looked at her that way. Maybe not since she had taken up residence in California. But now she suddenly remembered the *yaya's* name: It was Juliet. A smile broke out on her lips. Yes, her name was Juliet.

Why was she thinking of this now, while lying in the madly swaying ambulance, while looking at the profile of the young man who was looking, seemingly bored, out the window? She was a carcass on a gurney. She had known this feeling many times before, and now it had truly happened.

They released her from the hospital after a week. They wheeled her to her husband in a wheelchair. He looked down at her with something like impatience. Slowly, gingerly, she lifter herself into the car. The air was hot; dust speckled her eyelids. She felt as if little

needles were stinging her eyes. She clutched at her husband's arm but after a while she released her fingers.

He drove her home. She looked out the window, at the bare trees of a cold day. It's November already, she thought. Neither of them spoke.

"Can you make it up the stairs by yourself? I'm late for work," her husband said. She nodded, yes. He helped her up to the front step but then turned to go. Slowly, very slowly, she ascended the stairs. Now and then she stopped to rest. She became short of breath. Her weakness frightened her. She stopped halfway up.

In bed at night, sometimes, after her husband was asleep, she would get up on one elbow and look at him. Her husband's eyes were closed, his breathing even, but now and then he would shudder, and this shudder was so deep, so seemingly from somewhere mysterious and hidden, that it made her afraid.

In the morning he would give no indication that he was aware that anything had passed between them in the night.

Since the hand had appeared, it usually lay on her husband's chest when he was sleeping. She hated the sight of it, like a white dead thing, in the moonlight from the window.

Now, where was her husband now? He was far away, in a glass building next to many other glass buildings, so many close together that it was impossible for her to tell them apart. In these buildings, engineers worked, and technicians, and other people associated with industry, and they were all very busy preparing reports.

Even if it was a beautiful day, and there were many, in this part of the country, no one, she was sure, would be able to leave for more than an hour, to have lunch. She thought that it was a great waste, a great pity. She would hate to die after having lived for years in such a life.

And now the thought came to her that her husband would not even know whom to call, on her behalf, if some further mishap befell

her. Unless she told him. There was her son, of course, and her mother in the Philippines, but who else? And what if she were hurt in such a way that she could not speak, could not get the words out? Her husband would have to look in her wallet, or her checkbook, and even these would tell him nothing.

If she needed to be brought again to the hospital, someone might notice her ring and say, "She has a husband." How would they find him? Would he eventually come, looking disheveled and confused, and be angry with her? She could imagine him sitting across from her and asking, "What have you done *now*?" in that familiar, exasperated tone of voice. Even though he could see her lying with tubes affixed to both arms and perhaps her throat. The hand might still be with him, and she knew by now that no one else could see it, only herself.

Hours later, it really did happen the way she had imagined, with only slight differences. That is, her husband did come home, looking fairly disheveled, and he did sit across from her on the bed, and that very same question she had imagined he would ask did come out of his mouth: "What have you done now?" And yes, there it was, hovering behind his shoulder, the hand, the hand which now bore a faint trace of scent, not "White Diamonds" exactly, more like "Charlie" or "Je Reviens," something girlie and cheap.

Her husband's face was guarded, he was wearing a green sweater spotted with rain. His hair was wet.

He was talking about the accident now, asking how did this happen, how did you manage to get yourself into such a situation? Really, it was too funny. She had slipped, she had knocked her head on something sharp, there was a swelling above her right eye. This was the face she presented to her husband when he arrived home, later that night.

She had to keep looking over her husband's shoulder, she couldn't help it. She wanted the hand to go away but it was resting on her

husband's shoulder and playing with the hair at the back of his head.

Can't he feel it pulling? Doesn't it tickle his ear?

She couldn't answer him, of course—there was a tube in her mouth hooked up to a large machine. The tube was stretching her lips apart and flattening them and she imagined she must look ugly. The doctor had held a whispered conversation with her husband—right in front of her! But in a voice so low she couldn't make out the sense of the words. Now something leaked out of the corners of her eyes but her husband didn't seem to notice.

He was rubbing his forehead and saying, "I will have to call the insurance agent. The car—completely totaled . . ."

And yes, she knew this was a terrible thing. The money, the insurance, the higher premiums . . . She couldn't help it, she was so easily distracted. It might have been a movement out of the corner of her eye, some gust of wind shaking the trees by the side of the road. Or a girl's red sweater, flashing brightly as she sailed by on a ten-speed. Something that looked like happiness. Yes, she was so easily distracted.

When she looked up again, the chair where her husband had sat, seemingly just moments before, was empty. The room had a strange light; eventually she recognized it as sunlight streaming weakly in through the drawn curtains. She thought: I must have fallen asleep. A whole night must have passed, therefore, in this strange state. Now it was morning. Her husband had probably gone home. An image flashed through her mind: her husband getting into his white car, impervious to the light rain speckling his graying hair. And now it would be close to the time for his alarm clock to go off. He would be getting up soon, getting his things together to go to the office.

It seemed amazing to her that she had managed to fall asleep, in that state, in that place. Where she knew no one.

She recognized in herself a terrible thirst. But there was nothing within reach—no glass, no water. Mingled with the great thirst was a feeling of abandonment. She knew this feeling; it had been com-

mon enough throughout her marriage. The sight of the empty chair bothered her. She turned her head to avoid looking at it.

And then she saw the little thing. How could she have forgotten—? It was close to her now, snuggled on the sheets by her right hip. It lay quite still.

She looked at it again. So still it could have been a spider, resting there. There was nothing she could do.

She groaned. The sound, so deep, startled her. A machine with blinking red lights began to beep softly. She stifled any further noise.

She determined to get up, right that instant, to undo the tracery of tubes that fed her veins with a colorless liquid, to escape the softly beeping monitor. "All right," she whispered. Manfully she threw her legs over the side of the bed. She positioned her hands, palms downward, on either side of her. As if preparing for a final effort.

A young nurse was standing at the foot of the bed, staring at her.

The nurse's expression was cold, even hostile. She said nothing, however. The nurse might have been made of cardboard, so stiffly did she stand there, a clipboard cradled in her right arm.

The hand beckoned her forward.

James Belflower

Jerome

Doors through the high town
seem farther apart
tonight

perhaps this is like death

visiting plaques as a child
unformed fingers
along them
saguaro ribs gnarled into canes

line of them
with canaries and those
leaving with full cages of silence
and candles

town burnt
everything but the lacquered heart
permanent distance in buildings
even its name
white in soot

no one died
so they are nothing so

I begin to learn my name

Dream for Soon

We steal the river rocks from Safeway
to separate the yard
you can't lift them

ask me
straighten
4

along the flow
of bottle tree shade
of roots in mulch I pick up
you
in pixels of fescue

warm under leaves

and bones
curious curious in private structure

to leave only 3
rocks would invite symmetry
"include the tree"
 you say

through french doors on the news
no one is a bomb

Perspective of Travel

Traffic blots the sun
at street end
like riders
from where I sit

at this bus stop where black slabs in procession
kneel at ends and wires twinkle straight out
and the benches are industrially terra-cotta
we mill

here with transfers
bags of paper wristwatches
without words or arrows some without hands
a gathering of similar magnetic poles

we thin into sunspots

bus

then we stream for that small mouth
in this wide end of the glow

Streetlight Before Home

It's strange that streetlight clicking on
just for you

single light down the long ribbon

as cars open their eyes and run
for someone else
those streetlights clicked on earlier
for someone else
—machines in quiet skin

and you
step from under
that one floated bulb

finding that pain is one shoe for following
solitude another

The Portcullis

Fathers left will be crossed by saws

a portcullis of wounds

Mother will struggle with
the mornings rope away
sneaks the arrows feet

But I've pocketed jujubes
to lure robins spreading
like a cloak
        and hired
absence my boy lain
quartered in a trail of throats

        aimed
roads stop like targets and

I am left a sheet
        flung to compass points

Nathan Oates

Off Center

When Evee didn't show up by two A.M. I wrote a note telling her to move out tomorrow and hung it on the door. At the window I watched an old French guy across the alleyway standing in his room, shirtless. It looked like he was pinching his nipples. Blue television light jumped on his walls, shook in the window, bounced off his round stomach. Evee didn't come home; it got to be three in the morning. I put some clothes on and went out.

A lot of people on the sidewalks down Rue Oberkampf were drunk, spilling out of bars, leaning against the stonewalls that shed layers of political posters. I passed the fromagerie where Evee bought chevre wrapped in orange wax paper every couple days. A wet smell of mold leaked from behind the shop's graffitied metal blinds.

When I turned the corner a homeless guy shouted from beneath a crooked scaffolding. I don't think he was speaking French—it sounded Arabic. His legs bent awkwardly in, knees meeting close to the ground. He held a hand out towards me, the other propped him against the wall. The way the streetlight slanted through the scaffolding I could only see pieces of him, the drooping corner of his mouth, a cigarette he pinched between two fingers. He spat at me. I started thinking Evee's body could be stuffed into a bush somewhere down the sprawling median of Boulevard Richard Lenoir.

Before we left the States Evee's father told me to take good care of her while we were in Paris. I told him I would though I wasn't sure what that really meant. It was late and Evee was out in the city somewhere. She said she'd be back by one. I should have gone with her. This wasn't taking care of her. I started running.

Down by the Bastille kids in baggy pants and ribbed tank tops jumped onto each other's backs and passed around green cans of beer. I found the road, Rue de Faubourg, where Evee had gone for drinks with some Americans from her language class. The street was full of dance clubs Evee could've been in, dancing up against some French guy who'd whisper in her ear between songs, his hand on her hip.

I heard some Americans talking in a window so I went inside. People sat over very low tables or wavered up around the dark wooden bar, sipping from thin glasses. The place was lit by red paper lanterns hung from thick chains. I walked over to where the Americans were sitting and said, "Hey there."

They fell silent and looked up at me. "I was wondering," I said, "if you've seen Evee?"

"What's that?" one of them said. I pulled up a chair and described Evee, but they hadn't seen her. "Are you sure?" I said. A couple of them laughed and rolled their eyes.

When I was a kid I often fantasized on my walk home from school that the world would turn in some way so that when I got home my mom would no longer exist. Some old woman with thinning blue hair would answer the door, looking for my box of cookies or the pledge sheet. I'd be the only thing left in the world I recognized.

I told them this at the bar and everyone seemed to be listening, except a guy in a tight shirt unbuttoned down the front, a large silver medallion against his hairless chest, greasy curls falling down over his eyes. He stared at me with vivid hatred. I knew I shouldn't have been sitting there. I should've been looking for Evee.

Across the bar a couple sat close together, heads leaning in, drinks ignored before them, hands all over each other's legs and arms. The woman slid her arm behind the man and pulled him closer. I told the Americans that I was almost always afraid of driving Evee away, because when I saw her walk past a doorway through which I was looking and the way her legs shifted, just simple walking, this made

me happier than I could remember feeling in my life before I met her. They nodded as though they understood and maybe they did. You can never be sure. I left and walked up the street which was full of people pushing past me with lowered shoulders.

I stepped up into the doorway of a shoe shop. The gated window was full of pale, painfully pointed high heel shoes. Dark patches of urine stained the wall. I knew I'd never be able, in that mess of streets and crowds, to find Evee. This was the kind of thing I think my mom needed to learn, with her search for my father back in the States: to just give up, because there are some things that you aren't going to find, because they aren't likely there to begin with.

I stopped for a beer in a place that spilled a sick green light. The place was almost empty, but the tile floor was littered with crushed cigarette butts. An old man at the bar started talking to me about America. That's about all I could understand, that and a word that I think meant responsibility. His voice slurred and I watched a large bumpy mole jump on his neck. I agreed with everything he had to say. He said something about *terroristes*. He pointed at his chest and said, "*Algerian*," loudly. I said, "*Oui, oui*," over and over and stared at his jowls, his mole. There were scars on his cheeks, like wagon ruts on an abandoned path, worn and softened over time.

~

The next morning Evee and I went for coffee. She spoke in French with the waiter. An old man at the counter glared at us, unhappy with our Americanness. To avoid looking at him, I stared at the pinball machine in the corner. The game was called Monster Mash. There was a decal on its side: a female Frankenstein, bright frizzy hair, bowling down a cluster of goblins with a human skull. I'd doodled this image in the margins of my French phrase book several times, while pretending to study. Coming to Europe had been Evee's

idea. It was something she'd always wanted to do, study French in Paris. We'd been there three weeks and I still got around by pointing, nodding, waiting for people to speak English.

We drank our café crèmes and Evee said a friend of hers had emailed and his photography exhibit was going to show in Paris that week. "We should go," she said. I knew without asking who this guy was: Edgar, not just a friend, an ex-boyfriend. I glanced at the old guy at the counter. He was grinding something up with his jaw, like a cow, and staring as though he wanted to tip our table over.

When I got home from the bar the night before, drunk, Evee was in bed. I sat down in a chair and looked out our window. The apartments across the street were dark, curtains down. Eventually, Evee sat up in bed and said, "What are you doing over there?" eyes barely open, hair standing up. I took off my pants and climbed in next to her and fell immediately asleep as though everything was perfectly under control.

While she got dressed the next morning Evee asked if I'd had a good time. "You were out when I got home," she said. I dabbed a bead of water that was rolling down her cheek and said that I'd gone for a walk. "I was restless," I said. When I pulled on my pants I could feel the bulge of the note telling her to move out in my pocket.

In the café, I was also thinking about Edgar. Evee had lived with him for three years before we met. "Did you ever think of marrying him?" I asked a while ago.

"Of course," she said. My stomach curdled. "But it wouldn't have worked out."

"Why's that?" I asked. I looked steady, but it felt like there were mice in my mouth, scraping at my cheeks.

"I wasn't very happy," she said.

We finished our coffees and ordered more while Evee told me about Edgar's photography, how it had hung in a gallery in Chelsea and some rich French guy had loved it and invited Edgar to show at

his gallery in Paris. I interrupted, asked if Edgar was going to be staying with us.

"Here?" she said, looking around the café.

"Our apartment. Did you invite him to stay at our place, because I don't think that's going to work." Evee didn't respond immediately because a caravan of police trucks poured into the intersection, small cars with the lights going and large blue vans, sliding doors open so we could see bored-looking men cradling machine guns, then two low black limousines with flags on the hood and then more vans full of men and eventually the sirens faded.

"Please, Ben," she said. "Don't do that." I was being ridiculous. I stared at the pinball machine. A childish urge welled in my throat, like when I'm driving over a bridge and all I can think about is what it'd be like to plow through the barrier and watch the gray water rush up at me. I controlled myself and didn't respond.

~

That afternoon my mom called and told me that she'd found my father. Her voice was staticy, piling up in the undersea lines, then pouring out in a crumpled rush. We didn't even say hello, she just said, "Ben?" and launched into it. "He's living in Arizona. Some town I've never heard of. Williams, Arizona? Anyway, he lives there." I've never really met my father. He disappeared when I was one.

"What are you doing, Mom?" I said. I went to the window and looked for the nipple-pinching French guy I'd seen the night before, but the curtains were still drawn.

"I'm curious," she said. "Aren't you at least *curious*?"

"No," I told her. I hated the idea of meeting my father.

"Liar," she said.

"Are you going to Arizona?"

"I'm not sure," she said. My mom retired a year ago at the age of fifty-two. Through she raised me alone, she finished her Ph.D. in biochemistry, worked for some large companies and was very successful. She's a brilliant woman. But sad. She should've kept on working, even if she didn't need to. The search for my father started as a pastime, like some people play at genealogy, but it came to dominate her life.

"You should come visit us instead," I said.

"Are you having fun?" she asked. I could tell she just wanted to talk about my father.

"'Where is Williams?"

"In the northern part of the state," she said, happily. "Near Flagstaff, though I'm not sure if it's in the mountains."

"Oh," was all I could think of. After that we got off the phone quickly. Evee was watching me from the couch. A Matisse print that came with the apartment hung slightly askew on the wall behind her. Our apartment was small, sterile, expensive and never felt like home. I sat next to Evee and looked at the purple flowers in the terra cotta pot I'd bought her a few days before. She said she'd plant the flowers somewhere in the city before we left Paris, but when I imagined the scene I saw policemen with their hands tight on Evee's arms, hauling her away. She took my hand and squeezed it, harder and harder until I started laughing.

~

When I first met Evee a friend of mine said, "Wow. She's out of your league, though, isn't she?" Most of me agreed with him. Evee invited me over for dinner three nights in a row and I didn't try to kiss her, because the idea that she wanted me to was absurd. She invited me over for a fourth night. We watched three movies, drank three bottles of wine. The last bottle almost gone, she took my hand

and squeezed the tips of my fingers. I leaned over and kissed her. She pressed right up against me and I tried not to smile or laugh or scrape her with my teeth.

Evee was already planning on quitting her job and moving to Paris when we met. She asked me to come along. I felt like I was closer to her than I'd been to anyone in my life. And still, she was there in our apartment, slicing up bread and cheese, an open bottle of wine on the counter, but she could be, I felt, in what amounted to an entirely different world.

~

The next day I got an email from my mom with a link to the Chamber of Commerce for Williams, Arizona. I wrote back, deleting out the link and telling her about all the armed policemen we'd been seeing. George Bush was coming to Paris in a few days and the security was heightened.

Evee was in class where I was supposed to go that afternoon, but I'd dropped out. She didn't know this and I pretended to study in the mornings. I looked over the colorful book of French phrases. There were pictures of happy young people walking around laughing and aerial shots of Paris, Nice, the cathedral of Mont St. Michel. Evee jotted notes and I doodled in the margins. She was always asking me to speak French, said we should practice. I acted evasive, joked and called her *ma petite canard*.

Instead of going to class I'd been walking around. In the beginning I stuck close to the classy neighborhoods: the Marais, Saint Germaine, the swank sixteenth arrondissement where our school was. I took pictures of streets lined with ornate facades, a rich old man in a beige, tailored suit holding a shiny cane topped with a golden knob. I spent a lot of time around fountains, walking back and forth across the Pont Neuf, visiting all the tourist sights. Then I started branch-

ing out into the peripheral neighborhoods, horrible suburbs slamming up into projects. Large apartment buildings of 1970s style architecture, fading blue and dirty white paint smeared over concrete walls. The buildings seemed on the verge of collapse, stabbing up randomly and individually, rusted railings hung with limp laundry.

In these neighborhoods everyone could tell I was American from my shoes and jacket. The afternoon after writing my mom, I was in the twentieth arrondissement near a chaotic flea market. I passed a black guy and he stuffed a flyer into my hand that announced a protest against George Bush on Thursday. When I looked back the guy was laughing.

Still, I felt more comfortable in the peripheral neighborhoods than I did down in the Place de la Concorde, where heavily armed policemen in bulletproof vests were stationed outside the American embassy. Down there I felt myself looking at the sky, waiting for a plane to come barreling down and plow, a fire ball, into the row of pale stone buildings. In the center of Paris people were too classy, too skinny, smooth skin, nicely arranged hair, unsuspecting of disaster, which could always be right around the corner. But in the fringes of the city people walked hunched, clutching their bags in white knuckled fists.

~

Don't you want to know?" my mom asked many times.

I always said, "He's a stranger."

"To you he is," she'd say. She, after all, had known him. But after so much time, I could've pointed out, he was likely now just as much a stranger to her. At least he and I would have had in common our inability to understand my mom's need to know. "What do you think I want out of this?" she asked me. "I just want to meet him. I'm getting older. I want to meet him, take him out to dinner. We

can talk if he wants. I'm not trying to get answers, Ben, I just want to see him and be nice to him. What's wrong with that?"

Once my mom and I were driving through North Dakota to get to Canada to visit a friend of hers in Calgary. We stopped for lunch in Fargo, the largest town in the state, but which looked to me to be little more than rows of red brick buildings with warehouses on the horizon. Large dirty pickup trucks were parked all along the street, empty lots with drifting plastic bags catching on leaning wire fences.

We went to a diner. I didn't notice, dazed from three days in the car, that my mom wasn't eating until I'd finished. Her face was drawn and pale. I asked what was wrong.

"Shut up," she said. I looked around the restaurant. It was busy. At nearly every table men in suits sat with their jackets hung from pegs on the wall, eating sandwiches.

"Which one is he?" I said.

"Yellow tie, black shoes," she whispered.

In the center of the room a man was eating by himself, in a yellow tie, a faded blue oxford shirt and shiny black shoes. His eyebrows connected across his face in a thick line. There was a book next to his plate. Before my mom could do anything I got up.

"Ben," she hissed, but I hurried away from our table. "Get back," she said, loud. Some people looked at me. I walked over towards the man and when I got behind him, I tripped myself, fell and grabbed his chair as I went to ground. He looked down at me and smiled. One of his front teeth was dull gold, as though it'd been buffed with sandpaper.

"Sorry," I said. I wanted him to speak, but he didn't say anything. He smelled of garlic. I wanted to jump into his lap, to see if, with our bodies touching in such a way, I could remember something, dredge up one memory, because he looked, breathing over me, dark nose hairs trembling, unfamiliar and foreign.

My mom dragged me back to our table and ate her lunch primly. We left and she didn't say anything until the Canadian border. Then

she said, "I guess it wasn't him, huh?" and laughed and turned the radio up loud.

~

Two days after telling me about Edgar's show, Evee brought home something she'd printed off the Internet. I held the page, droopy with ink, in one corner, as though it was contaminated. "It's a stomach," she said, which was clear and she didn't have to tell me whose stomach. I recognized the bracelet on her thin arm. I also didn't need to ask where she'd gotten this, or who'd taken the picture in which she's standing a bit off-center with a gray wall behind her. She's wearing a black tank top that's a little too short and which rides up over her green checked skirt. The skirt is almost transparent. You can see a hint of the line of her underwear. There's a little story next to it that seems to be about Evee, though it calls her a woman of convenience and talks about screen doors slapping shut.

I handed the page back. "Wow," I said, because she was waiting for me to say something. She rolled her eyes. "It's a good picture, Evee, what do you want me to say?"

For a second we stood there and listened to another entourage of sirens crescendo past. "I want you not to be crazy," she said, eventually.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, and she gave up, sat on the couch. I sat too close and flipped through a book, but after a minute I looked at her. She looked sad. I kissed her cheek several times, feeling panicky that I could make her so unhappy so easily, so selfishly. She moved to the chair across the room.

Her family adored – the word they used – Edgar. Her mom called Edgar a genius. "Edgar is going to be huge," her mom had said, throwing her arms out wide. Evee's father asked about Edgar each time we visited.

"So," he said, and I always knew what was coming. "How is Edgar, anyway? I saw the write up of his show in the *New York Times*. Looks interesting." Evee was as good with this towards me as she could be, but she wasn't about to deny a part of her life because it made me uncomfortable. I loved her for this. I loved her for standing up for her past when I acted absurd.

~

When I was a kid my mom and I would occasionally go to New York for vacations to visit her sister, a lawyer who lived on Great Jones Street. During the day we walked around the city, frequently stopping for coffee so that by dinner our hands shook and we spilled water on the table cloths at the fancy restaurants my aunt loved. Sometimes my mom and I, while we walked, would pretend to find my father.

"There he is!" she'd shout.

"Where?" and she'd point him out, a bald guy in a business suit, scalp shaved meticulously and gleaming, as though rubbed with oil. We'd follow him down the street, ducking behind lampposts, or into doorways of shops where the clerks eyed us warily and my mom would whisper, "He always liked bad suits. Maybe he's going to meet his mistress."

"Or his wife," I'd say and my mother would shake her head. She knew better than me. Every once in a while I'd pretend I'd found him.

"Mom, he's over there," I'd say. But the game only functioned when she started it. I'd point to an aging hipster with a guitar case cradled in his arms, hair ruffled, and she'd say, "Stop it, Ben," with a concerned, angry look. She'd start walking faster without looking back so that if I stopped she might have turned the corner and been gone and I'd be left to stand like that with people bumping all around

me until night fell and the sidewalks cleared and yellow glaring cabs bounced wildly up and down the streets.

~

When I helped Evee move her things into storage before Paris I was left alone one afternoon with a box of her photographs. There were dozens of her and Edgar who had, in my opinion, too long a nose and a sour, smart-ass face. Worse than pictures with the two of them were the pictures of Edgar by himself. Edgar opening presents on his birthday, on Christmas, another Christmas, at Thanksgiving laughing with Evee's dad, driving her car with a mattress strapped to the roof, smirking at the camera. I imagined Evee peering through the viewfinder and loving Edgar on the other side.

From the whole pile of photos I kept only three. One of Edgar lying on his back with his glasses askew, eyes shut, grinning, no shirt on and, as far as you can tell, no pants either. A picture of Evee pointing at a seagull. A last shot of the two of them together. I sometimes held this one up to pictures of Evee and me. I'd try and find a way to compare the happiness I saw in her in each.

~

Over the next couple of days I got a string of emails and phone calls from my mom. They built up to, "I'm going to Arizona," which she said two days before Edgar's photography opening. I didn't want her to find my father. I didn't want to know what he was like, because he was probably an asshole. Maybe, down in his heart, he'd want good things from life, for others. But likely he wouldn't know how to show this and so would be frustrated and feel trapped up inside his own mind, which is a sad, pathetic, common way to feel.

~

Though I was determined not to let this happen I feel I've gotten this far and haven't made it nakedly clear why I love Evee. Meeting her was as though you'd spent the first twenty-five years of your life on a shadeless stretch of sand with only a thin hotel towel. Sweat ran forever in small streams down your back. And then, while sweating, the sun baking and little flecks of too-bright light everywhere, you found in front of you the crinkled ocean. When you ran over the scalding sand and waded in the coolness, the release into the way you'd hoped things could be, seemed like the only sensation you'd ever known. As you floated there in the water, just a slight turning of your arms to keep you afloat, you could hear the shuffling of the rocks, drawn up and back down over themselves by the tide.

~

Edgar's gallery was in the Marais, on Rue de Roquet, near the Jewish synagogue. Open vans full of heavily-armed policemen trolled the neighborhood. Evee took my hand while we walked. We stopped to look through the thick iron fence of the Place de Vosges where gravel paths wound between low round trees. "We should come here," she said, "for a picnic on Sunday." I agreed and held onto this idea—what we'd bring, what Evee would look like, chewing a baguette heaped with chevre, crumbs all over our laps.

Well-dressed people milled on the sidewalk outside the gallery and we went past them into the bright white space. The walls were hung with enormous photographs, each with white text dropped out: sometimes just a line at the bottom, sometimes a paragraph. I stopped to read one. The picture was of a woman though her head was cropped off, the middle of her body filling the frame. She was wearing a beige leather jacket with a red scarf hanging down the

middle. The text was a kind of fantasy, talking about the woman in the image in the plural, or maybe it wasn't a reference to her at all.

"It's so good to see you," someone said and when I turned around Evee and Edgar were hugging. Edgar shook my hand. He was more handsome in person than the photos had prepared me for. He seemed nervous, shifting his weight from foot to foot and glancing around.

"Nerve-wracking," he said. Most of the people in the gallery were older and dressed as though this was the Opera. I could hear some American couples, trying their best to speak in low voices so as not to give themselves away, but mostly the crowd was Parisian and they studied the photos with squinted eyes that didn't tell if they were interested, disgusted or bored.

Evee told Edgar about our coming to Paris, how our apartment was only a ten minute walk away. "That's great," he said. "I wish I could do that kind of thing." I wanted to tell Edgar to shut his mouth (wasn't he here, doing that kind of thing, with his own goddamn gallery show?), but didn't, because, strangely, I liked him. He seemed properly afraid of the world and was trying to get through it without disrupting too much. Soon we were laughing. I started thinking I could be Edgar's friend. He could come over for dinner. Edgar said, "I'll get us some wine."

I was watching him walk across the room when Evee touched my arm and said, "Oh, my god, I forgot. Your mom called. She said she's in Arizona." Evee pulled a piece of paper out of her purse. "Here's the number of the hotel. She said for you to call her there as soon as you can."

I took the slip of paper. Evee said she was sorry she'd forgotten. I looked past her at a large picture of a pickup truck parked in a dark green field. *This truck is centered*, was written at the bottom of the image. The piece of paper with my mom's number seemed to weigh a great deal and Evee's forgetting, the fact that I hadn't been thinking about my mom's impulsive, stupid act, burned away all the light-

ness I'd been feeling. Edgar was coming back across the room. "I better call," I said and went out without looking back.

My mom picked up on the second ring and said, "Ben?" We had a crystal clear connection across the Atlantic that made me feel I was back in America. I closed my eyes to block out all the stylish French people, but little cars were honking everywhere.

"So, I made it," my mom said. I heard ice tinkling against glass. "I already drove by his house, but just once, there wasn't a car in the garage. It's a crappy house. I don't think he's married. I think he's living alone. But then I came right back here because I thought you'd call."

She kept on talking, but I lost the thread.

"Why didn't you wait until I got back?" I said. "I could've gone with you."

"Believe it or not, there are some things I can do for myself. I know I'm old and withered, but I can board airplanes, get a hotel room. It's amazing."

"We're at a gallery," I said. I was desperate to distract her. Maybe I could convince her to give up without things getting any further out of control. I knew my father was a bastard and he would, inevitably, make her miserable, again.

"Ben," she said, "I want you to know something." I knew exactly what she was doing. She was looking out the window of her hotel at the parking lot across the street where some kids were sitting in a car, doors open, tinted windows rolled halfway down, loud music pulsing out of the speakers in the trunk, sounding to my mom like static and she thought it was sad how kids spent their time these days. The kids looked, to her, full of violence. "I like Evee. Have I told you that? I think you should stay with her, and not drive her crazy, and then I think you two should get married."

I said, "That's what I want too, Mom." We sat in silence. Across the street a man in worn out jeans and coat was shouting. A white haired woman opened her window, leaned over her box of flowers

and threw a book at the guy. The book thumped open on the sidewalk. The man made an obscene gesture at the window, grabbed the book and took off down the street. I said, "When are you going home?"

"Before any of that," my mom said, "I'm going to go over to your father's house and meet him. This evening. It's early here, you know. I'm going to go and talk to him. I'll tell him how you're doing if you want. He used to love steak, so I'll offer to take him to dinner. If he doesn't want any of that, then I'll leave him alone. My flight is in two days."

"Sounds good," I said.

"Bye," my mom said and hung up. I touched the receiver after I put it back into the hook as if it retained something of our conversation.

I went and looked in the gallery window. Edgar had a hand on Evee's back. In the glass, I could see the people passing on the street behind me, the haze of the sidewalk and the images, inside and out, blurring. Edgar leaned in towards Evee, as though to kiss her and at the same I saw a guy climb out of a car on the curb in the street behind me with something in his hands, something dark gray, like a shotgun, and Evee turned her head, at the last moment, so the kiss landed not on her cheek, but full on her mouth. I turned as quickly as I could, but by the time I did, the man on the street had moved up onto the sidewalk and had hidden the gun inside a black bag. He was handsome, had a goatee, was wearing a short black jacket with a silver zipper and tennis shoes. I looked through the window and saw Evee laughing, and then she lifted her wine glass to her mouth and looked around quickly, for me. This unhinged me from the pavement. I turned to step towards the guy with the shotgun, to get to him before he could get to the gallery, but he'd already stopped and was talking with another man on the street. They spoke close to one another's ears and then the bag exchanged hands and the men moved quickly apart. My breath wasn't coming very clearly as I watched

this. The sidewalk was full of pleasant people. Should I have contacted the police in their vans to tell them about this, a weapon loose in the streets, passed around in a suspicious way? Though I wanted to commit an act of heroism, something with clear intention and flawless rightness, I didn't.

Spots climbed up in the corners of my eyes. Edgar and Evee were talking to an older couple who kept shaking Edgar's hand. Evee had her back to me. I stood outside, trying to catch my breath, waiting for her to turn and find me. Police sirens came from every corner of the city, all of them, I was sure, heading in the wrong direction.

Shawn Fawson

Looking Into a Pond with My Mother

Inching into exile, her mind
has lost its hold. It takes
all evening to name *monkshood*

or *pepperwort*. No words,
either, for the bank swallows
pushing against the broken

edges of water. Spring
has come too early. It wasn't
like this before—the way

she looks for me even when
I'm here, her promise never
to leave me. A sun-struck crocus

studies her lips for its color,
but *white* is gone. The clouds
have given up their places.

The sky's one with the wind
now. One touch and the whole
tree comes apart. On the surface

the apple blossoms are silky
and the sky traces her body, wears
the sun down to my underwater eyes.

Lines of Possible Fracture

Lightning scatters the tree beneath
her eyelids. *Duckweed* she whispers
between flashes, the dark distance
tentative, the blue-greens in bud.

The book says, *Alzheimer's is the closest
thing to being eaten alive slowly.* But it
doesn't tell how to barter with this late
snow, give it a marsh of reeds elsewhere

to settle on. To find her, I make myself
a stranger, come to her like an open cage.
But nothing I try coaxes her inside.
Her life belongs to another story,

the one where rain shudders to snow
and covers every bend of the road
as if in search of something. What
does it matter now—she doesn't feel

strange or cold. Why else does she
wander barefoot into the storm
if not to name what's left of our
world before the next act of erasure?

While She Sleeps

Night One

Words concealed by day name themselves

to the dark.

The sky has thinned
to a line across the bedroom window

where stars repeat their useless infinities.

If I whisper their names to my mother
it isn't because they are the proper names of stars.

Why would she take them in now—
her ears shallow, the air trying to clear
itself of the end of life smells?

No, it's because without memory
there is nothing else to forgive.

Her last word wore thin two weeks ago. And now
there is no dark
                dark enough
for this particular silence.

Now her breathing sounds
as though she inhales the hundreds of tiny stars
snagging the night like knots

I can't undo no matter how hard I try—

polaris, ceti, cygni

among them.

Because any whole sentence
would break
its promise
and find god
opening again
like a pupil adjusting
to the absence of light.

Night Two

From her window
the snow blows over the front path
and erases the way out.
The deer never raise their heads;
the dormant landscape slips
under a tongue locked
in some other narrative—

the red-smoked twilights and my mother's hands knocking things over,
trembling with need, lugging her suitcase on her way
to the hotel room fucks, the pulsings of airline wings
then the 2AM lies to a child,
an ocean away.
If I look closely I can see my mother weeping.

But I don't know how to make her stop.

Only here
I know how to make her eyes flutter
by pressing the delicate spot between her thumb and finger,
how to make her see my love is more than the
slimmest red smoke
at twilight—
a sketch
of blood above her thighs, a certain thirst, a knife, the chilled
swirl of scotch, a supernatural wolf hiding in the pleats of dusk.

But, nothing I named in her world would make her stay with me.
O, a ring of her absence,
a thin syllable in my ear,
high pitched and begging me closer
to let other women show me
how to make a dress eat my waist,

how to palm my body aside from breast to breast
smooth the nipples down,
tongue words around a cock—
the shudder of my body
obsessed by what is lacking.

All I could do was fail, but I know
how to pry a center seed from the sumac
to find the startling white spot underneath.
I can embroider a pillowslip with tight stitches
so the buds rise pale pink to any edge. I have learned
to keep her dead in the soundless fathoms where nothing else
exists.

The red smoke, a frayed jet stream to follow across oceans.
I'd get down on my back
on the roof under my window when the dusk flooded the darkness,
and her thin features would transverse the sky of my fingertips.
With each icy breath I'd hang paper birds
in her mouth
repeating
a name that must be mine.

Night Three

What the breaking sound is
has something to do with the weight
of her watch—too heavy
to hold in midair
while the button she fumbles on her cuff
becomes too large for the thread
it is strung on.

And the tick curves
around this transparent landscape
of bone as I hold her wrist
away from the vase's tiny bits
and the sharp swells of water.
To calm her, my hands
must learn to touch

all over again with words
that smooth cornflowers
over her skin, memory
as light as pollen,
but even that is useless.
By the time the spill's cleaned up,
the pages of *Anna Karenina*
are blued by the wet blossoms
steeping the book's pages.

My mother's inward
gaze does not let go
as she bends forward to abandon
another room to her absence
like the moment a Zen master
leans toward non existence

but has not yet become it,
or the way the palm prints
of the dying
clutch the places of grief
on our bodies and want to put
the single petal
back on the flower.

Night Four

A shuffle of snow
dislodges the sky into an unfamiliar dimension.
How many mornings have I sat next to her like this, my eyes
following the light's smallest movements along the eaves,
while shadows fingerprint
her face? Through a blink, any shaft
sets off a sudden slide.
I wait for small adjustments—the tumblings to still,
drifts to be quiet. But sleep never comes. I try to
understand how many hungers there are.
How many people
are pacing the floors in rooms, their thoughts stalled on bridges,
and how many times do their worlds break apart and start up
again?

The snow
slants into the car window. There is something she says about her lover's hair falling forward when he's inside her. Something about my father's burns and sudden nausea. How near the end even a wolf with a blackened penis slowly goes crazy.
And her words still sting my heart.
Sometimes during early winter mornings the
clouds rearrange the landscape,
and a shaft of light is disguised as
the bridge where my mother stopped thirty five years ago. *The snow was thick and heavy, pouring out of the street lamp as if it wanted to bury that car.*

Night Five

The heaven that goes untended
is the first emptiness, but morphine takes her
wherever she wants: on a road curving
into steady flowers, to dreams spinning free
under waves of snow, or to grasses swaying
into cobwebs like sounds in a mute wind.

The lightest touch on her skin
makes the line to each curve on her body unfinished
as a train might stop in snow—every slowed turn
jerking against the metal track. Pain carries
its weight straight down.

By now, her gown loosens
and a button imprints her wrist without
hurting. Quiet shivers the air. There's nothing
left but a veined transparency of shadows
the moon scrolls over leaves, the bedroom,
her hands the color of camellias.

Gone are the clocks faltering in the hallways,
the tricks of time arranging absence,
our phantom meetings under some
embracing willow in the back of my mind.
All I have left of her is what kept her
from me—that place where there aren't any tracks
after the deepest snow comes
low in the trees as the final exhale.

Sarah Blackman

Communicable

No, I am not precise. There is a certain music
when you get to the end of the street and
turn left. I like to hold it in my ear—like a pearl
or a nit—because it reminds me of secret
illness, sweating through the sheets. Once, when
you keyed yourself in, I was breathing
in the corner like an animal. A mink—rank
odor, baring my teeth. You say your greatest
fears are all diseases, but here I am. Kiss me.

For Horatio Hornblower Who Is Not Yet Named

An emperor's grace, slow
no-space, catalogue of fish turns
sculling shallow depths.
Your mother lays on the couch,
Horatio. There is a laying
of hands. Her brother—
who I love and look over
to on long drives for his shadow,
his hands holding the wheel—
is shy of her body. Your
body where now we feel
the skull, the limpid
reeling curl. What a surprise,
Horatio, when I found
him sitting on my porch
like all days had been this one.
Little thunder, you. You
already pith and sturdy
frond. Your mother lays
on the couch, Horatio,
and one by one we ask
her blessing through our hands.
One day, you realize
all days have fed this one.
This one, right here—
a small crescendo,
the loudest noise we hear.

Kelly Spitzer

Twenty Questions: An Interview with Claudia Smith

In January of 2007, Claudia Smith found out that her manuscript, *The Sky Is a Well and Other Shorts*, won the first annual Rose Metal Press short-short chapbook competition. That same month, W.W. Norton's *New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond* anthology hit bookstore shelves. In it—Claudia's story "My Lawrence." Significant moments in her writing life, for sure, and definite writer's bio toppers. And though these may be the details readers latch on to, Claudia's story didn't start there. It started on the road, traveling cross-country with her family, while her father, an artist, sought work. Her family landed in Houston, Texas, where Claudia attended the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. *"I met children and teachers from different backgrounds, and decided that I wanted, very badly, to go to college and become a writer."*

True to her desire, she did.

Claudia received a B.A. in literature from Bard College, an M.A. from the Writing Seminars program at Johns Hopkins University, and an M.L.I.S. from the University of Texas at Austin. But her path wasn't as straight and serene as it sounds. She never stopped writing, but for a long time, her writing life was "relegated to a personal, private dream." Then, she says, "a series of unfortunate events led to something fortunate." After a car accident and a miscarriage, she began spending a lot of time online, work-shopping stories at Zoetrope Virtual Studios. From there, she found the support and encouragement she needed to achieve her dream.

To date, Claudia's stories have appeared in over fifty literary journals and zines, including *Failbetter, The Mississippi Review* online, *Redivider, elimae, The Salt River Review, 3:AM, SmokeLong Quarterly, Juked*, and *Night Train*. In addition to Norton's *New Sudden Fiction*, her work has been anthologized in So New Media's *Consumed: Women on Excess*, and Cutting Block Press's *Horror Library, Volume 1*. She also has work forthcoming in the anthology *Online Writing: The Best of the First Ten Years* and Social Disease's *The Offbeat Generation*. Her fiction has made *storySouth*'s Million Writers Award notable list, and has received their top ten online stories honor. She has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

If you've read Claudia's work you know the power and insight her stories contain. She's a conscious writer—thoughtful, meticulous, each sentence, each word, measured for weight. If you are just discovering her through this interview, I think you'll find her answers just as mindful, and once you read her work, your perception of what constitutes excellent flash writing will forever be changed.

In January, Rose Metal Press announced that Ron Carlson selected your manuscript, *The Sky Is a Well and Other Shorts*, as the winner of their first annual chapbook competition. How did you find out that you'd won? What was your first reaction?

I found out through an email; I think I still have it. Here it is:

> Dear Claudia Smith~
>
> How are you? I'm writing on behalf of Rose Metal Press to see if your manuscript THE SKY IS A WELL AND OTHER STORIES is still available.
>
> Ron Carlson chose it as the winner of our short short fiction chapbook contest. Both Abby and I loved the ms as well, so

if it is still available, we'd like to publish it.

We look forward to hearing back from you!

Best,

Kathleen Rooney
Editor

I think the first thing I did was tell my husband. I can't remember if I called him or emailed him. Then, I posted the news in Hotpants, a short-shorts online workshop I've been a member of for years. Then, I allowed the news to settle. I received the news about getting into Norton's *New Sudden Fiction* anthology via email as well. That, I didn't quite believe at first. This, I believed.

In the chapbook section of your website (claudiaweb.net) **there is a slideshow on the making of *The Sky Is a Well*, which is the highest quality chapbook I've ever laid eyes on. Did you visit the Museum of Printing and witness the process in person?**

Oh, how I wish I could have been there! But no, I wasn't. I took a class in the history of printing years ago, when I was getting my M.L.I.S. degree, so I can appreciate the process. Abigail Beckel was kind enough to show me lots of pictures of the process. What I have on my site is just a sampling. She also sent me pictures of the collection being saddle-sewn. They had a sewing party; all the chapbooks were hand-sewn. And it is exquisite. Abby sent me a broadside of the front and back covers and I had it framed. It's hanging over my desk as I type this.

Talk a bit about how you selected the stories you entered. Is there any commonality between them? Did you in any way tailor the

stories in your submission to those you thought might fit Ron Carlson's taste?

Certain images repeat throughout the collection; the elements fire and water, colors, shapes and sounds. The stories deal with birth, death, loss, change and longing. These are all things that humans experience as they pass through time. They are also about how the past informs the present, and the present informs the way we see the past. My intention is that the stories build off of one another, walking the reader in and out of childhood and adulthood. I love the way short-shorts can mark the passage of time in years or in moments. What is traditionally small in a novel can loom large in a short-short. I tried for perspective shifts and I think it worked. I was especially pleased with "Angel Wings," with the child's punched out teeth and the looming, punched-out black night. When I read Robert Shapard's collection, *Motel and Other Stories*, I saw this was true of his work as well. I don't think I can measure how much his *Sudden Fiction* anthologies have influenced my work. There's such a strange and wondrous sense of proportion to his short-shorts.

I didn't tailor the stories in my submission to what I thought might fit Carlson's taste. One of the reasons I entered the competition was that he was the judge; I've read and admired his work since I was a teenager. But, when I chose the stories, I looked at what I thought was strong, and what I thought held together thematically. If I thought too hard about what he'd like I'd drive myself crazy. I don't think you can anticipate what someone else will respond to, no matter how well you know his or her work. I know that when I read for *Hobart*, I often go for work I adore but know I could never write myself. I'm not always drawn to people who write what I write.

Childhood is, as you acknowledge, a big part of *The Sky Is a Well*, especially the childhood of girls. Why does this topic persist within your fiction?

"Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand."
- William Butler Yeats, "The Stolen Child"

Like many writers, I write about what haunts me. I do think that as adults, we carry the past with us, within our bodies. What happened to us, and how we perceive that, changes. Children soak up their worlds, and they are so very quick. My own son is constantly showing me the world, and it is beautiful and startling to me. I've learned, as we all do, how to tune a lot of that out, to look at something familiar and dismiss it. As he grows, he will sharpen his focus, and he'll have to shut some of the world out. When I drive to the grocery store now, I don't notice the landmarks. I'm thinking of the milk and butter I have to buy. But he, he sees it all.

I do think that *The Sky Is a Well* is about how we are the past and the present. I'm not sure about my other work, but I know that is something all those stories have in common. I am also interested in identity, how the way the world perceives us can make us see ourselves.

In an above answer, you say: "What is traditionally small in a novel can loom large in a short-short." I think this is a particularly keen observation, and a part of what makes flash fiction so powerful. In your opinion, what are the critical elements to great flash writing?

I've said something before similar to what I'm about to say, when I wrote something on my site about Robert Shapard's *Motel and Other Stories*, so I'm going to repeat myself here. I find the perspective in flash fascinating. Sometimes, reading a short-short is like meeting an old friend and falling into conversation immediately. These shorts

are intimate and familiar; short fiction, like poetry, can make the reader feel the passage of time in years or in moments. I believe flash has as much in common with poetry or long, dense novels, as it does with short stories. I came away from Shapard's collection with a sense of time as non-linear, looping around and around, defining the characters and re-defining them as the years pass.

There is no one way to write a great flash. It's a great form for stylists. Writers can be playful, and artful, experimenting with the limit constraints. I participate in an online workshop called Hotpants, because we write short-shorts, and each writer in the workshop has his/her techniques and styles. So many good flash writers come from different angles. Some shorts are flirty, some sublime. Some play with forms — a fairy tale, perhaps, or pop music. They ask the reader to take short-cuts, working off of what is already familiar. I'm thinking of the writer Kim Chinquee, whose shorts can be like a shot of espresso first thing in the morning; they cut. Utahna Faith wrote a beautiful flash that appears in Norton's *Flash Fiction Forward*, called "All Girl Band." When I first read it, I couldn't get that story out of my head. Short-shorts often invite you to read them again and again. What made that story so wonderful? It haunted me. There's a nervous beauty and mystery to that piece, so I'll always go back to it.

In a short-short, you don't have time to futz around. Maybe that's the key to a great short-short. Words and images must take your reader everywhere.

The writer Matt Briggs said that the stories in *The Sky Is a Well* are sober and deliberate, and I tend to agree with him. I like to think those stories give a sense of the larger world outside.

There is a depth to your stories that make them read like novels in miniature. How do you achieve this richness, this insight, this greatness?

Thank you. I hope my stories convey a sense of the larger world outside them. The stories in *The Sky Is a Well* in particular have a lot to do with memory, with what happens after or before the story. I think I said this once in a *SmokeLong Quarterly* interview, but I'll say it here. Sometimes, when I write, I feel as if I'm on the edge of the shallow end of a swimming pool, being pulled toward the deep end, and I can't swim. If you throw a stone in water, and watch the ripples, I think I'm often writing about those ripples.

Lately, my flash has taken a different direction. I've written some I think border on surreal.

Characters matter to me. Sometimes, I daydream about a person I'm writing about. Things happen to him or her outside of what I've written. Maybe it's a bit like method acting.

I love flash stories that thrust me right into intimacy. Robert Shapard does this particularly well. Have you ever met a stranger on a bus and felt you could show them something you don't show the people you see every day? Some of my flashes are that stranger on the bus.

You have a tendency to use one word titles. In fact, twelve of the eighteen stories in your chapbook begin with one word titles. Is this intentional? Talk about how you approach the titling of your work. In your opinion, can a title make or break a story?

Oh, you are right! I just looked over the list of publications at my web site and they are mostly one-word, or two-word, titles. I think my titles started to shrink when I began writing short-shorts in earnest.

Words and titles are important in any kind of writing, but every word stands out in a short-short. I think a title often informs the way a story is interpreted. The short that originally appeared in *Juked* as "My Robot" was changed to "My Lawrence" for the *New Sudden Fiction* anthology. I do think that was the most dramatic edit of the

piece. I'm not sure which title is the better title, but that edit did change the story. Some students who have written me see it as a kind of *Pygmalion*. I'm not sure they'd see it that way if it were called "My Robot." The story itself is about loss and isolation, so, when I recently wrote a student who wanted to know if he was a robot or a living creature, I thought a long time. I wrote my friend, the writer Jim Whorton, and others. After reading what he said, and thinking about the story, one of the things I told her was that I think it is about a woman who is in mourning, and how the people she most loved are absent. Just like in real life, a person whose child and husband have died might either feel that they are still there in the house even though they aren't, or feel that they are not there, and neither is she anymore.

Sometimes, when a title comes to me, I have the feeling I've placed the last piece of the puzzle on the table. Often, that one word will be part a sentence I've shaved off. Or, in the case of my pop-song stories, I just start with the song. So far, I haven't picked songs that I love for themselves, but songs that are evocative of a certain place and time. "Galveston" began after I'd listened to Glen Campbell sing it for me on the radio. It brought back the beach, and childhood, and my feelings about Vietnam and what it meant to us back then. The story came after the title.

Yes, a title can definitely make or break a story. They can be so hard! I think my best titles are the ones that feel effortless, the ones that come to me unbidden.

"I think a title often informs the way a story is interpreted." **I think you're exactly right, Claudia. What's interesting about this statement is that looking back on a few of your titles, I realize not all of them are immediately obvious as to how they fit into the story. Take "Tempo," for example. While pace does play a role in the story, it would seem, without the title, to be insignificant background. With the title, you're bringing this aspect of the piece to**

the center, telling us, in a sense, to stop, pay attention to the rhythm. Talk about "Tempo," and your decision to title it as you did.

"Tempo" wouldn't be the story it is without its title. I began this story with its title, working around the word itself. I went to my trusty Webster, and looked up the word. Then I thought about the word for a long time, and wrote the story. Here's the dictionary.com definition—I don't have my Webster's with me, I'm in a coffee shop, typing, but I think this definition will suffice.

> tempo
> 1. Music. Relative rapidity or rate of movement, usually indicated by such terms as *adagio, allegro,* etc., or by reference to the metronome.
> 2. Characteristic rate, rhythm, or pattern of work or activity: the tempo of city life.
> 3. *Chess*. The gaining or losing of time and effectiveness relative to one's continued mobility or developing position, esp. with respect to the number of moves required to gain an objective: Black gained a tempo.

When I read about tempo as it relates to chess, the story came together for me. What happens between the two characters is a kind of dance. There is also a play of darkness and light, of movement, throughout their story.

In an above answer, you mention pop-song stories, such as "Galveston." What other pop-song stories do you have? Is music a great love of yours, or what inspired you to write stories driven by song?

"Wildfire" (also in the collection) was sparked by the Michael Martin Murphy song from the 1970s. I also have a few that are unpub-

lished at the moment.

Those are not my favorite songs. They are songs evocative of a time and place in my life, and so I worked off them. I do love music, but, actually, I think those pop-song stories are not about the music. The music becomes part of the landscape. I intended "Galveston" to be a close and personal story, a story about two sisters, their mother, and the absent father. It isn't really about the song, although, what the song represents to the mother is a part of what happens.

I thought "Wildfire" was cheesy when I was a girl. But, it was a song that appealed to many a 12 year-old girl in 1982 and my best friend was one of them. She also loved horses. I later read that Michael Martin Murphy first heard the story about a ghost horse from his grandfather. He dreamed of something similar one night as an adult and wrote "Wildfire" the next day. I like the idea of a man growing up in the suburbs and writing down a story heard from his grandfather, turning it into a 70s cowboy ballad. I think I read he grew up in the 'burbs, I could be mistaken. I like the idea of a man waking up and having the wistful desire to return to the cowboys his grandfather knew, or the cowboys he wanted to imagine his grandfather knew.

Memory fascinates me. It interests me because we don't experience it the way we experience the moment. In a way, that moment lives on and on, every time we turn it around in our heads and look at it again. In one of my stories, a Lite Brite and its little pricks of light take on a significance because they are part of a little girl's fear of the dark. I recently wrote a story that appears in the *Mississippi Review* online involving dolls that were popular in the 1970s. The dolls are sort of creepy, not campy, and very important to the child in the story. I think the dolls themselves take on more life than the people in the story, because of their significance to the girl.

My hope is that the stories themselves have a timeless, sometimes fairy-tale feel to them. Pop songs and toy marketing were a big part of my childhood and they shaped the stories I told, the games I

played. When I write about childhood they creep into my stories sometimes and shape them.

You've mentioned Robert Shapard numerous times. Has he had a profound influence over your work? How?

Well, I read the first *Sudden Fiction* anthology when I was in high school and loved it. Everyone in our honors English class had to do a senior project; mine was *Sudden Fiction*. I wrote a few sudden fiction stories; I remember one involved a witch who baked bread without washing her hands. It might have been awful, I'll never know because I've lost the story. But I suspect it was influenced by *100 Years of Solitude*, another book I fell in love with that year.

I read like a fiend in high school, and what I read then probably surfaces in my work all the time. I read Shapard's *Motel and Other Stories* recently; I read them after I wrote the stories in *The Sky Is a Well*, and I was struck by how, structurally, they are similar to my own short-shorts.

You read *Sudden Fiction* in high school? Wow. What I would have given to attend a school where such things were even heard of. Tell us more about your high school—the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. Were creative writing classes taught there? How were you introduced to the short-short?

I was in the media arts department; it was dissolved the year after I left, and that's too bad. I studied photography, poetry, and fiction. The school was located around the Museum District in Houston, close to colleges and universities. Students were bused there from all over the city, and even the outskirts of the city. There was a delicate, beautiful man who taught us poetry; half the girls had crushes on him, and probably some of the boys did too. Some of the teachers were graduate students at the University of Houston. My

two favorites were a burly poet with a red beard, and a fiction teacher named Kathleen White, who wore boots and close-cropped hair. We read Carver and talked about writing, and workshopped our stories.

The first time I really considered short-shorts as a form, was during my senior project. I read the *Sudden Fiction* anthology, wrote a paper, read from the anthology to the class, and wrote my own sudden fictions. I don't have them anymore, but one was the witch story I mentioned above, another was about a lonely waitress, and one about a child alone on the beach. I was smart enough to see that they were sophomoric, so I ended up tearing most of them up. I wrote a lot of poetry then. I think I filled a notebook with villanelles. My English teacher died of an aneurysm before she graded our papers. And, speaking of death—last year, I had the urge to contact my big burly red-bearded poetry teacher. I Googled his name and found a poet, with his name, who looked sort of like him. He taught somewhere—I think I've blocked out the place—in the Midwest. And I read that just a few months before I searched online, he had killed himself. I think it was him; it was the same name. I don't know what happened to Kathleen White. I'd like to know where she is. She was a wonderful teacher.

Much of your fiction has been published online. Is this the medium that you prefer? What are the benefits, and conversely, the downfalls, of publishing on the web?

I've had a few students write to me over the years; the majority of them, though, wrote me after the Norton anthology came out. That's a good example of how print and online can work off one another. This is conjecture on my part, but I think that the Internet has made writers accessible to readers— young readers, in particular—in a way that they weren't when I was young. I loved to read, and I read more when I was in high school than I do now. I'd read anthologies,

and find a story I loved. I didn't recognize authors until I'd read their work a few times. Today, if I were a student, I might find a story I love and see the author's website in her bio. The Norton's bio has my site's URL in it. A student might go to the site, and see a list of forty stories I've published. Most are free, because they are online. So it gives them a chance to see a body of work that, without the online world, they might never have found. Especially from someone obscure, like me. Also, my site has my first name—it's even called claudiaweb. So I can see how that might make it seem more casual than it did way back when. Oh, and my email address is posted right there. If I were super famous, that would be a big pain. But I'm not, so I like getting emails from readers.

I think online magazines are like the journals you find in a bookstore, on a shelf, in that there are great journals, mediocre journals, and bad journals both online and in print. A good online journal has a great editor with a clear vision. Things go out of print and online stories go away, get lost to the ether; I think some of my stories online will stay out there for years to come, and some won't. Some are already gone. Things seem to happen faster online, but I am speaking from my own experience. Also, online journals tend to update their sites frequently, and tend to give me quicker responses than print journals.

My story that began as "My Robot" and ended as "My Lawrence" was originally published online in *Juked*. I think that was the first year Shapard and Thomas considered online publications for the anthology. I am not a teacher, but I know from my friends who teach that more and more colleges are taking online writing seriously when considering tenure. Also, I'm pretty sure that the Pushcart anthologies now consider online publications. They've been around for a while now, and more people take them seriously.

You've been a contributing editor at *Hobart* for a while now. Who are some of the writers you and your co-editors have published?

What skills have you acquired since joining the editing team?

Hobart is a beautiful magazine, and I think that is mostly because Aaron Burch loves *Hobart* and has stuck with *Hobart*, the way John Wang sticks with *Juked*. The magazine has a strong personality—*Hobart* loves baseball, *Hobart* is quirky, *Hobart* loves a good story.

I've learned a lot from working with Jensen, Savannah, and Aaron. We take turns reading for each month, and I believe this gives each online issue its own distinct feel. We are very different writers, and I think this works well for us as editors. Aaron still reads for the baseball issue every year, that's his baby. And Aaron used to do most of the photography and art for the site, but Sean Carman does it now. The last issue I read for, we published a weirdly wonderful story by Shane Jones called "I Will Unfold You With My Hairy Arms" and the picture Sean Carmen chose for it was sublime—it turned out to be a painting on the fuselage of a B-24 bomber Sean saw this summer in Fort Collins, Colorado.

We've published a lot of talented writers; some are writers we've read before, some are lovely surprises. We read everything that comes to us. If I pick one writer, I'll start to think of all the excellent stories and writers I haven't mentioned. We published a short by Jeff Landon a few months ago that lingers, a story I'll never forget, called "Proofreader." I highly recommend that story.

I guest edited an issue for *Hobart* before I signed on as part of the *Hobart* team. I obsessed over that issue, because it was the first time I'd ever edited. I believe I read every piece submitted at least three times. I was very concerned with the theme I chose, and how the stories would fit together. Now, I trust my instincts more. Working as an editor, I've learned that it is an art. You have to be bold in your decisions, and be honest with yourself if you see a piece that you like but don't love. I appreciate editors' suggestions more now that I've done some editing myself. Coop Renner of *elimae*, for example, is a talented editor. He chops up my shorts and shows me something

clean and beautiful. What he does with them, another good editor might not do, but he makes them better and that's what matters. The best magazines have editors with a strong vision and style.

You participated in a flash fiction panel at this year's AWP conference held in Atlanta. What did the panel encompass? Will you attend the 2008 conference?

It was a beautiful time. I presented with the writers Kim Chinquee, Darlin' Neal, Kathy Fish, Girija Tropp, Liesl Jobson, and Jeff Landon. We are all part of Hotpants; we call ourselves hotpanthers. Pia Ehrhardt, Utahna Faith, and Tiff Holland, also members of our little writing collective, were in the audience cheering us on; Utahna brought her baby, Nolan, and held him in his sling. He was wide-eyed the whole time. The room was packed; we talked about the years we'd workshopped with one another, how we found one another. We talked about the short-short form, and read work that originated in the room. We often use word prompts; Kim Chinquee provides us with a list of words, and we write around the words. This exercise works especially well for me when I'm writing short-shorts.

I wasn't prepared for how overwhelming the whole conference was for me. I'd been writing and reading with some of the editors and writers there for years, and it was my first time meeting many of them. It was jolting, and emotional; in the beginning, meeting one another in front of the hotel bar, we hotpanthers all sort of stood there, looking at one another. Some of us cried, some of us were laughing. It was disconcerting, to stand in front of people I'd talked to everyday but never seen up close. After the presentation, I tried to organize a reading for us at a local bookstore. It was raining, and nobody came. But we ended up reading to one another, and that felt just right.

I plan to be at the 2008 conference; I'm not on any panels this year, but I should be reading with Kathy Fish, Elizabeth Ellen, and Amy Clark for Rose Metal Press.

What other appearances have you made? Readings for *The Sky Is a Well*, perhaps?

I had a reading at BookWoman in Austin in September; I read with the poet Tiff Holland. I read from *The Sky Is a Well* and she read from her chapbook, *Bone in a Tin Funnel*. It was very small but lovely. We had wine, cheese, and the faces there were familiar and warm.

Sometimes, I read at coffee shops with Utahna Faith and Tiff Holland. But I'll be leaving Austin soon. We're moving to San Antonio. I'll have to introduce myself to the writers, bookstores, and coffee shops there.

From 1995-1996, you taught composition in China. What moved you to take this position? Tell us about the experience.

I was young, and wanted adventure. One of my best friends was there; she taught, and she was fluent in Chinese. I'd never been to another country. Well, Canada. But, other than that, I'd never been out of the USA.

We lived on campus, in a little concrete building with faded yellow wallpaper. I taught hundreds of students; I think I taught about twenty-five hours a week. My friend was young and newly married, and I was young and newly married, and our lives stretched out in front of us in a way that for me was exciting but a little scary. So this Cyndi Lauper song lyric just popped into my head: "when adventures like cars we would ride, and the years lied ahead still untried." I think I experienced something that a lot of people probably experience when they live in a country foreign to the one they

grew up in; I felt I had a different, clearer perspective of the country I'd left. I found myself writing and dreaming about Texas.

You wrote your first novel at age nine. How long was it? What was it about?

The novel was about a girl living in castle filled with books, on a moor populated by butterflies and bluebirds. The rest of the story involved black plague, lots of fire, burning at the stake, lustful guards, daring knights, and a dramatic rescue. Oh and an old crone and a black cat, and a big journey. Oh, and it was called "Through the Foggy Times." When I read it to my brother, he told me it was the greatest story ever told. Years later, I found the novel, a red folder wrapped in burlap that I'd singed to make it appear old. The last few pages are filled with spelling mistakes and the handwriting is frantic; the girl writing those words couldn't wait to get them out. I stopped numbering the pages at pg. 16, I believe, but I think it's about sixty pages front and back, on blue-lined notebook paper in a nine-year-old's messy cursive.

Any novels lurking on your hard drive right now?

Yes. There's a novel I wrote when I was in my twenties. My other stories eat parts of it, sometimes.

What's next for Claudia Smith?

My small family is moving to San Antonio, Texas. We should be there by the time this interview gets read. We aren't leaving Austin by choice, but I'm thinking San Antonio is okay. It's a beautiful old city, and when I'm there I kind of feel like I stepped into a Bob Wills song. After we're there for awhile I'll know the city, and that feeling

will wear off, but right now when I think about living there, I see sepia-toned roses and chapels and missions.

Also, I'm writing a novel called *Crumb Island*. Wish me luck.

Good luck, Claudia! And thank you for your insight and honesty during this interview. Before we end, however, give us a hint as to what we will find in *Crumb Island*.

The novel springs from a short originally published online in *Juked*; it's about a girl, her mother, and her uncle. I have a lot of research to do on adoptions in the 1940s and 50s. I'm also reading a lot about moon lore and butterflies. Much of the novel concerns the same themes that have preoccupied my stories for years, but it is, right now, mainly character driven. Uncle Trip is the heart of it; he's the main character's sort-of-father, sort-of-brother figure, a man who collects, reads, and instructs my heroine but never quite gets it right. It is about love, how fierce it can be, and what people will do for it. What I like about working on a novel is how I can inhabit the characters for months at a time. I'm in love with Trip right now. Some of the book cannibalizes that book I mentioned to you before, the one I wrote when I was in my twenties. I can't wait to write it all down.

Lynn Veach Sadler

The Fox that Spoils the Vines

I saw the fox
edge into the darkened room.
Fugue state? Dream? Nightmare?
It turned to look at me,
asked me into the darkened room.
I began to remember.

I didn't like for Mr. Rufe, the Preacher Man,
to touch me with
his old, pink cottony hands.
But Momma would be mad
if I insulted him,
so I'd sit there on the couch
in our cold living room,
and he'd stroke
my warm bare foot
and say his mixed-up Bible words over it.

    How beautiful are thy feet with shoes,
    O prince's daughter!
Stroke, stroke.
    Hear me now,
    for I am come into my garden.
Stroke, stroke.
    In that garden is
    the lily among the thorns.
Stroke, stroke.

I hated that stuff.
I'd sooner be a toad,

the thorn among Preacher Rufe's lilies!
And I'd forget about old Mr. Rufe
down there on the floor
mumbo-jumboing over my foot
and imagine all the kinds
of toads and frogs and pretend
I was turned into one
but was not going to stand
for being kissed by anybody.

"Who is this
coming up from the wilderness?"
Mr. Rufe ought to know
the answer to that one.
Stroke, stroke.
"We have a little sister,
and she hath no breasts."
It was not a thing Mr. Rufe
ought to be pointing out.
Stroke, stroke.
"The smell of thy nose
is like apples."
Is that not dumb?
Even if it is in the Bible?
Stroke, stroke.

At first, I'd feel kind of spooky.
Sort of tingly
down the back of my neck and . . .
Then Mr. Rufe's big voice would cut back
until I just about couldn't hear it,
and I'd feel tired and dozey.
"Ah, yes, sleep but let your heart waketh,
little sister, for I have come
leaping down from the mountains,
skipping down from the hills!
Do not be the little fox that spoils the vines
and the pomegranates,

but feed among the lilies with me.
Let me kiss you with the kisses of my mouth,
for they are sweeter than wine."

Mr. Rufe would kiss
the top of my foot then,
but so gently,
like a butterfly landing.
At that moment, I was as close
to liking him as I'd ever be.
I would ponder that
and wonder at it
and think it was a weakness in me.
He could buy me
with his dog Doodlebug.
He could buy me
with Uncle Wiggley books.
He could buy me
with his talk of wine,
his kiss upon my foot.
Or almost.

And then I would rouse up,
thinking about the difference between
grownups saying, "Kiss my foot!"
and Mr. Rufe after me
with "kissing my foot."
And when I thought about the differences,
I knew he couldn't catch me
because thinking about them
was all I needed to break his spell.

I tried to tell Momma,
but she wouldn't listen,
just said that a girl child
must never be the little fox
that spoils the vines.

Well, it's the fox who's
come up from the wilderness now,
and I thank him for it!

Kristen Eliason

The User's Guide to Onomatopoetic Elegies

And should we die before our journey's through,
Happy day! All is well!

William Clayton

it's viewings, not funerals I won't attend anymore
and what bothers me is not the trail of people who
have to touch a clammy hand to satisfy this head knell
    but it is this: my eight-year-old brother still blonde

with finger-length curls started meowing
at me when I should have been terrified of the boxed body
    across the room. (and not in any normal fashion) he mewed
with clarity and volume against shuffling masses
reading the audience card in whispers, "he was a good man,"
and piercing, like god, so only I could hear it, and maybe my
    mother
who only shifted in her floral-print whatever it was.
    my brother, now a small cat padding across the room in full
    march, *come,*
come ye saints, the actual tune equated to meow mix, he
leaned his head on my knee and at my reddening only meowed
softer, approximating a kitten gondolier for the dead, *come,*
    come ye,
    paced a warbling line between the bodied room and a row
of folding chairs, *no toil nor labor fear*, he looked at me coyly
and started verse three, with his back toward my now
    shushing mother, and so quietly again to the chair, to my

legs, to the ground and the underground and the hell under,
he meowed, *happy day, all is well*, the part for parts left to
beetles, cockroaches, companions of crypts is this too much
here too much to say, that i hope they clicked their little
antennae in time, they mulched in the dirge of earth, rhythmically
praising the newly blessed place and company

Jendi Reiter

The Opposite of Pittsburgh

A garden hose fell in love with a footstool.
It said C'mon baby, opposites attract.
We belong together, like fudge and onions.

The footstool wasn't happy in the mud.
It settled down, like it had been settling down
    all its life.
Its tapestry skirts got lopsided and wet,
like a Victorian lady visiting the poor
who sits down where there is no chair.

The hose couldn't stay wound, it was that excited.
Flowers sprouted from the sides of the house
where the water sprayed, and nowhere else.

People whose feet were tired kept coming out to the garden
and poking the cabbages, seeing if they'd bear weight
like a sofa. "Why can't you be more like a sofa?"
the footstool complained.

The garden hose felt love in all its arteries.
Big spurts of love, knocking over small dogs,
drenching every daddy's barbecue.
The neighborhood began to eat their hamburgers raw.

Stories like this always end with a garbageman.
The footstool drove away on the junk truck, headed
    for Pittsburgh
or a field that was the opposite of Pittsburgh,
just one long loop of day and night weather

and no one to keep it awake with love
running out the soles of their shoes.

Confession

I have asked the rain to stop so that I might drive faster.

I have thrown away a seed, that little shut eye inside the plum,
because I had nowhere to plant it.

I have considered sex inefficient.

I have wondered what pleasure produces beyond itself,
whether it is like moonlight that warms no one.

I have hoarded empty rooms, repainting them in possible colors.

I have wasted tinfoil.

I have measured my thighs against those of others.

I have washed my window bright enough for birds to make
mistakes.

I have argued with crows and insulted cats; truth is no defense.

I have spiked my heel through the blacktop and stood on my rage.

I have snapped the highway like a rubber band stinging
a child's neck.

I have seen entire days smoke away into the blue.

I have stared.

I have pressed hearts and tongues like roses in a scrapbook
of honors.

I have asked the rain to stop so that he who is under a
cloud shall praise me.

Frederick Lord

Classic Strip Poker

She anted Isadora Duncan's scarf;
I, Pablo Neruda's socks.
We were playing five-card-advanced-
degree stud. For keeps.

She opened with Dorothy Gale's ruby slippers.
I saw them with Tom Thumb's Seven League Boots.
"And I'll raise you Gogol's overcoat."

—then watched her shrug off
Jacob's coat of many colors
and toss it onto the pile.

I decided to go all in:
Mark Twain's white suit,
Natty Bumppo's leather stockings,
Tarzan's loin cloth.

Smiling, she stepped out of
Miss Havisham's yellowed wedding dress
and Blanche Dubois' slip,
then called.

Liz Prato

He Never Gave It to You Straight

I'm asleep and hung-over when Lincoln calls me on Saturday morning and tells me he's in jail.

"Jail?" I'm suddenly more awake. "What for?"

Marc's still sleeping by my side. Somehow the phone didn't wake him.

"I got arrested," Lincoln says.

"Yeah, I figured," I say. "What for?"

He pauses. "It's kind of a long story. I didn't, like, kill anyone or anything like that. Could you just come bail me out? Please. I can't call Mom or Dad. They'll freak."

It means sunlight. It means making my body vertical. It means going to the ATM or the bank or the bail bondsman, depending on how high his bail is. All annoying things to do when there's a smack down going on inside my skull. When Marc and I still have six more hours until Suzanne gets back from her trip and he has to go home. "How much is the bail?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"Jesus, Linc. What the fuck did you do?"

"Jake, please," he says. "I need you."

It's all Dad's fault. He's the one who wanted a boy so badly. That's what he had hoped I would be, a boy, and it's how I got my name. He wanted to name a child after his grandfather, and since my mother made it abundantly clear that she would endure one, and only one, pregnancy, Jake got pinned on whatever or whoever was coming out of her. So I became the girl named Jake.

Dad wanted someone to follow in his footsteps, and to make footsteps places he had never tread. He wanted his progeny to be an athlete, so he put a mobile over my crib made of four squishy baseballs floating through the air. Mom told me this, of course. It's not like I remember. When I was three he started tossing softballs to me in the backyard. I couldn't even use a knife and fork, so I'm not sure why he thought I could catch a softball three times bigger than my fist. By six he was throwing footballs at me. By eight it was basketballs.

Dad was never any athlete, except for a little boxing when he was in the Navy, so all this athlete-junk was just an unfettered dream. The arena where he truly wanted an heir was in business. He's that guy who looks at a piece of land with trees and groundhogs living on it and sees a strip mall. But I never wanted to build strip malls, and I was never all that good at catching baseballs and footballs and basketballs. After ten years of me failing to catch everything that Dad threw at me, he informed Mom that he wanted to try for a boy. Mom reminded him of her position on one, and only one, child. He said, But I really want a boy. And she said, I really don't. And he said, Fine, I'll go find a younger woman who wants to bear my heir. Okay, he never really said that, but it's what happened. He divorced Mom and met Kathy and got her pregnant and they had a boy, and it all happened so perfectly that you'd swear it was written in some business plan that Dad had bound between two shiny green covers. But his plan failed in one significant way. He never thought to ask Kathy, "Hey, mental illness doesn't happen to run in your family, does it?"

Before I can arrange for Lincoln's bail, I have to get Marc out of my bed and out of my apartment. It's not that I don't trust him alone in here. It's just my play for parity. After all, I can never be alone in his place, so he should never be alone in mine.

"You've gotta get up." I shake his shoulder. "Linc's been arrested, and I've got to go post bail."

"Linc?" Marc squeezes his eyes tight. "Jesus, what now?"

"It's apparently a long story," I say. "Now up and at 'em."

"Babe, no." Marc pulls me down next to him. "I'm not ready for this to end." His chest is hot against my back, radiating all the way through to my breasts.

"I've got to go." I kind of hide my voice. Maybe he won't hear it.

Marc sits up, and the sheets falls away from his chest. He's got a weird sunburn pattern, bright red around a white patch the shape of my head. We'd lain on the roof of my building yesterday afternoon. The sun was hot on my hair. I kept my ear to his heart, thinking if I listened closely enough, I could make it mine. I should mention it to him, that weird sunburn. That's the sort of thing that'll get a guy in trouble.

"Come on." I stand up. "Get dressed."

There's nothing Marc can do about that sunburn. Not now, anyway.

Misdemeanor assault, the clerk at the police station tells me. "He attacked a protester outside an abortion clinic." I like this. Linc's out there throwing punches for a woman's right to choose. He's always carrying signs and signing petitions to make the world a better place. Drink fair-trade, shade-grown coffee. Ride your bike, ride a bus, but don't drive a car. Keep Wal-Mart from building in your neighborhood. Dad wasn't real pleased about that one. But today even Dad might be proud. After all, there was boxing involved.

Linc looks like he spent the whole night in jail, not just two hours. His dirty blonde hair is going as many different directions as a Chihuly sculpture, and his eyes are bloodshot red. He hugs me fast, and releases fast. "Thank you so much," he says. "I totally owe you. How much do I owe you? Five hundred, right? Well, I might have to owe you for a while. I've got my money tied up in some other

stuff right now." This is the sort of thing our dad would say, and for him it's probably true. He's never liquid. All his money's tied up in investments. But for a twenty-four year old record store clerk, this talk is a little grandiose. "Listen, we've got to bolt. We've got to go pick up Brittney. She's probably waiting and is totally freaking out by now."

Brittney's his girlfriend. She's nineteen and they've been together for two years. She makes conceptual art pieces out of retro toys. For Christmas she gave me a Lite-Brite that said "He Never Gave it to You Straight" in orange and pink plastic pegs. Marc asked, What's that supposed to mean? and I said, You have to ask Brittney.

"Okay," I say to Linc. "Where is she?"

"The abortion clinic," Linc says. "And she was probably done over an hour ago. We've gotta go."

A few years ago I went to visit Linc in Berkeley. He was living off campus in this big house with eight other students. His room was called The Cube. It had been awkwardly tacked onto the second story, over the driveway, and was a perfect square. There was just enough room for a futon to fold out with about one foot around each side. There are ugly appendages like this all around Berkeley, since space is so limited. People are always trying to figure out a way to charge more rent to more people. Fortunately, one of his roommates was out of town, so I didn't have to sleep in The Cube with Linc. It's not that I have any incestuous concerns, it's just that he snores. If you wake him to get him to turn over, he jumps up with his eyes painted open wide and stands over you in fighting stance. It's truly weird.

We took BART into San Francisco and drank cappuccinos in North Beach. Linc chatted up some prostitutes, tried to get them to unionize. Then we spent a couple of hours in City Lights Bookstore. Even though there are all these hard covers and best sellers, you're not really thinking about John Irving or Alice Munro or Michael Chabon

when you're in there. The whole place is dusted with the ghosts of guys like Kerouac and Ginsberg. Well, maybe it's not their ghosts as much as their essence. You know.

Linc had this really pathetic fake I.D. that made him the same age I was, and the only way you'd believe Linc was thirty-two was if you were about a hundred, and everyone under a certain age looked the same to you. The I.D. never worked in Berkeley, but there were certain places in The City where they just didn't care. Vesuvio's was one of those places. We pushed to the back of the narrow bar and ordered whiskey sours. Linc drank a lot of them, and if I was a really good big sister, the kind you're supposed to be when you're so much older than your brother, when you're supposed to be more like a mom than a sister, I wouldn't have let him get so drunk. But I was getting drunk too, because of the guy I was trying to forget when I landed at my little brother's Cube in Berkeley.

Linc pulled *On the Road* out of his bag—it was an early edition, unsigned, but still cost considerably more than if he'd just bought the Penguin paperback for ten bucks—and he stood on top of his chair. He started reading out loud with the book in one hand. With his other, he gestured like he was conducting the philharmonic with his whiskey sour. Linc's long, blonde hair hung in his eyes, and his voice slid over John Coltrane air. The bartenders and waitresses ignored him. I guess this sort of thing happened often enough. But the tourists all watched and smiled and laughed. That's the thing about Linc. You can't help but want to watch him. He read the end, that part when Kerouac went on about the immensity of America and the children crying and the darkness over the rivers and God being Pooh Bear—before Pooh had been pimped by Disney—and I listened to his every word, every fucking word, and hugged my arms to my chest. My brother was such a beautiful exploding star.

Brittney's on enough painkillers and is generally stunned enough that she's not mad when we finally arrive. She's sitting in the wait-

ing room wearing sweatpants and Linc's black Coldplay T-shirt. I've never seen her without make-up before. Usually she has on a thick base of foundation and lots of black eyeliner that matches her dyed black hair. Today her skin looks gray.

"Baby, are you okay?" Linc asks. She wraps her arms around him, the sleeves of the Coldplay T-shirt bunching up around his neck. It exposes her tattoo of a heart with a flaming crucifix rising out of it.

"I just stepped out for a smoke," Linc said. "And those motherfuckers, those goddamn minions of the religious right who are pulling the damn puppet strings in this whole country, they were yelling at me and saying shit about you, and how we were going to hell, like yeah, they're never gonna see the inside of hell, and I fucking lost it. I just lost it, and hauled off on this guy, and can you believe it's okay for them to stand out there with those horrible pictures and to be screaming that shit at us, but it's not okay for me to do something about it? I got out of there as soon as I could. Jake saved my ass. I'm so sorry you had to be here by yourself."

He was talking fast like this in the car, too, talking about the protesters outside the clinic, and that seemed reasonable, under the circumstances, to be ranting about them, but then he was talking about Donald Rumsfeld and the CIA and Iran and the death of some dictator in South America, and then he seemed to be saying that it was China's fault that he ended up in jail while his girlfriend was having an abortion. Or, at least, it was America's dependence on cheaply-made products. I used to think this sort of ranting was about being young and a Poli-Sci major at Berkeley. That's the problem with college. Everyone acts manic, so it's hard to pick out the ones who are truly messed up.

Linc asks me to drive them back to his place.

"What's wrong with your car?" I ask.

"Oh, you know," he says. "There're some issues with it. Some issues with Dad. The insurance and stuff, and I'm only supposed to

drive it to and from work, and the whole thing seemed unreliable, so we took a bus."

"Wait," I say. "You took a bus to bring your girlfriend *here*?" I can't bring myself to say the word "abortion" in front of Brittney. Her eyes are wide and her mouth's frozen in a little grin, like one of those kids who takes the short bus to school. Like she doesn't know what's just happened, and maybe I shouldn't be the one to tell her.

"We couldn't afford a cab," Linc says. "We had all our money tied up in this. Jesus, Jake, can't you just give us a ride home? It's not like it's out of your way, or something."

It's true. Linc's apartment is on my way home, and it's my day off, so I really don't have anything better to do. Unless you count being with Marc. But if I brought this up, Linc might start talking fast and yelling about how Brittney's been through something really traumatic and for godskae, Jake, I was just in jail and don't you think all that's a little more important than sneaking off with *Marc*? And the thing is, he'd be right. But he'd be wrong, too.

They sit in my back seat huddled in close together. She whispers to him, and he responds in a gentle tone. This is how they are all the time, not just after Brittney's had an abortion. She'll whisper, and he'll say, "Yeah, fried chicken would be good." Brittney whispers and Linc tells me, "Britt likes your sweater." She whispers and Linc says, "Ahhh, Bunnycake. I wuv you, too."

The first time Marc said he loved me I was on the verge on ending things. It all seemed so pointless, like a bad made-for-TV movie. We had met when he started coming to clinic where I give massages. He swears I'm the reason he finished the marathon in three hours.

We have to stop at the pharmacy. Linc and Brittney stay in the car while I get her prescription filled. While I'm waiting, I pick up a quart of cookie dough ice-cream for her. It's what I bought after mine, when the cab driver was sitting outside waiting for me to fill my prescription. Shit, twelve years ago. How can I be old enough that anything in my life happened twelve years ago, much less some-

thing like that? I guess I didn't feel that much different than Brittney looks, all shell-shocked and meek. It's funny how little it makes you feel. Like you're not capable of taking care of yourself, and you just want your teddy bear and cold apple juice.

Linc and Brittney have turned my radio to a college station playing the Butthole Surfers, and have my air conditioner cranked on high and the windows down low. I hand them the plastic bag: Brittney's pain killers, a quart of ice-cream and the DVD of *Dirty Dancing*.

Brittney whispers into Linc's ear. He smiles. "She loves Patrick Swayze."

Linc had been out of college and back in town for only two months when I came home to the seven messages on my voice mail. "Yo, sis, whassup? You up? Let's go grab some breakfast. Dim sum, or pancakes, or some of that vile breakfast meat they eat in Pennsylvania. What's that shit called? I'll meet you at the Egg Cup in ten."

"Jake, whassup? You never showed for breakfast. Fuck, at least call me if you're not going to show. Man, we gotta talk about this job stuff. Dad's really on my ass. He thinks I should already be running GM or something. Those evils mothers, man, it's their fault all those people died. I mean, Bush planned the whole thing, everyone knows that, or not him so much because he's not that smart, but it was his idea and he had people plan it."

The first six messages were pretty much all like that, some of them longer, and some really short, and most of them louder, and all of them fast, until the seventh one, which was fucked-up slow. So slow that everything inside of me got speeded up fast. Some people who are no longer my friends called it "nothing more than a pathetic cry for help," like they would have had more respect for Linc if he'd taken more pills and drank more whiskey and had never left me that last message that sent me speeding to his place and calling 911.

He said he just didn't know what else to do. He couldn't figure out any other way to stop all the racing in his brain and his blood and his heart and his nerves and his skin and his teeth and his toes and his dick. That was the other thing. One of those messages, the longest one, was a confessional about all this weird sex stuff he'd been into lately, the kind of things you don't need to know about anyone on this planet, much less your younger brother. I try not to think about it too much, but let me tell you, even if that last drugged-out message had never crawled across my answering machine, the sexual confessional would have been enough. That was a real cry for help.

By the time I get home from dropping off Linc and Brittney, Dad's number is on my caller I.D. three times, but he's only left me one message. "Jake, I'm trying to get in touch with your brother," he says. "He was supposed to meet me at the clubhouse for lunch to discuss his career options, but he never showed up and never called. If you see him, get him to call his old man."

Dad's got this idea that Linc would make a primo real estate developer. It's what he had hoped I would be. When I was six, he tried to teach me what a joint venture was. I malapropped it into a Johnny Bencher. Dad still hasn't given up on Linc. It's a cyclical business, he says. Sometimes there's no work and no money for months, and then you work eighty-hour weeks and make millions of dollars. It's like he was built for it, Dad said.

I call Mom. I tell her that Lincoln was arrested. I tell her about Brittney's abortion. I tell her about the five-hundred dollars bail.

"Where in the world did he get enough money for an abortion?" Mom asks. She's a clinical social worker. I never know if her concern for Linc is professional, or if she just feels sorry for him because his own mother isn't much of a mother.

"He probably got a cash advance on his credit cards."

"And where did you get five hundred dollars for bail?"

"I borrowed it from a friend," I say.

"What kind of friend?"

"The kind who can get five hundred dollars on a Saturday morning." I wish I was talking to Marc instead of Mom. I wanted to call him as soon as I walked in the door, but Suzanne is probably back by now. Her trip was only two nights. For me and Marc, her two nights were like a trip around the world. And the thing is, late last night I think he said he wanted out. He's not the kind of guy who goes around promising me that, either. It's complicated, he's always said. Money, obligations to his family, guilt. But late last night, something was different. Or maybe it was just the tequila talking.

"You know, Sweetie," Mom says. "You don't have to go running every time Lincoln has a crisis."

"I know, Mom."

"It's not like they're isolated events. This is just who he is. This is who he'll always be."

"I know."

I know, I know, I know. There was a time when I thought all the ecstatic dreams and paranoid conspiracy theories and fast talking and sudden despair was because Linc was so young. I had gone through some of that too, fueled by low self-esteem and drugs and sleeping with the wrong guys. I figured he'd grow out of it. But after the Cry For Help, when Linc was hospitalized and Kathy mentioned that her oldest brother was bipolar, I figured the meds would take care of it all. The valproate would smooth out the rough edges in Linc's psyche and he would be forever calm. That's what being stabilized meant, right? But Linc's meds have to constantly be adjusted. Add lithium. Add olanzapine. Increase Depakote. Oops, reduce olanzapine. Add Ativan.

His moods seem to stay steady for about nine months at a time. Summer's the worst. Then he ramps up, working overtime, planning some shady deal on the side that'll make him a load of dough, staying up until one in the morning, waking at five and riding his

bike for thirty miles then coming home and napping for twenty minutes, then placing or answering one of his personal ads, the ones you find under headings like "Casual Encounters" that say things like "Me: Controlling disciplinarian. You: Into humiliation and light pain. Let's meet 2 nite and push the boundaries," and then going to work, drinking a fifth of whiskey hoping to calm it all down before hooking up with someone from those ads.

He either ramps up toward all that, or so, so, slowly goes the other way. He stops returning calls. Stops eating. Stops showering. Stops working. Stops paying his bills. Stops getting out of bed. Stops seeing sun. He gets so damn thin that it's like he's trying to make himself just go away, away, away.

It's not what was supposed to happen. He was supposed to fall in love with someone strong and mature. She'd see it all start before it gets bad. She'd tell him he needs to get his meds adjusted, and he wouldn't argue with her, not like he argues with me. Not like he disputes all the reasons why I think he's cycling on a point-by-point basis. See, that's part of the problem. Lincoln's smart, and it's like his disease knows that. It's like the disease figured out how to use Lincoln's smarts to keep it alive.

I watch *Dirty Dancing* on DVD. A friend gave it to me a few years back for my birthday, and I think it was supposed to be a gag gift. "Oh my God, that's hilarious," I said when I unwrapped it. "Nobody puts Baby in a corner!" At the end where Johnny lifts Baby up in the air, I get a little teary-eyed. I'm not saying it's a great movie. I'm just saying that it's really something that Baby didn't need to be saved by the hunky guy. I'm saying that it was nice that, in their own ways, they saved each other.

After the movie, I call Linc.

"Hey," he whispers. "Hold on, okay?"

My T.V. and the DVD player are still on. The screen is blue, and the word "DVD" is bouncing from side-to-side, like the ball in Pong.

It hits one side, bounces with seeming randomness to the other side, then back. It never lands right in the corner.

"Okay," Linc says, his voice normal volume. "Britt's asleep on the couch. I didn't want to wake her."

"How's she doing?"

"I don't know. Okay, I guess. I mean, what's okay, under the circumstances?"

I shrug, even though Linc can't see it. I guess the shrug is just for me. "I suppose okay means she doesn't regret it."

"She doesn't," Linc says, and I'm pretty sure he's shaking his head, even though I can't see it. I'm pretty sure he's shaking his head for him. "Thanks for everything today. I don't know what I would have done without you."

Linc thanks me a lot. For all the money, and the rides, and advice, and the calls to 911. He thanks me so fucking much that it's the same as not thanking me at all.

"I'm concerned about you." I use my calm and measured voice. "You're having money problems and getting in fights and talking fast. I think you're starting to cycle into a manic episode, and I want you to call your psychiatrist on Monday morning."

"No, Jake," he says. "I'm fine. Really."

"I realize you think you're fine," I say. "But you have to remember that's part of the disease. I'm on the outside, and I see things more clearly."

"Jake, listen . . ." he says.

Here we go. This is the part where he quickly and precisely destroys my reasoning. We'll go back and forth for several minutes until I have no choice but to give up, and in three weeks we'll be making some trip to see some doctor. It's about the hundredth time that I want to say Fuck it, you're on your own, and just hang up the phone.

He speaks slowly. "I can see why you think that. I really do. But, well, my girlfriend had an abortion this morning, and it kind of

upset me. I mean, I was in the waiting room while she was in there, and I couldn't sit still. I was so worried. I've never been through this before, but it seemed pretty normal to be anxious. Even to me."

"Well," I say. "Sure."

"And so I went outside to calm down and . . . man, Jake. I mean, you saw those pictures when we went back. All those bloody babies. And they called us sinners, and said Britt was going to hell, and it just made me mad. Wouldn't it make you mad?"

See, I was lucky. There weren't any protesters at the private clinic where I went.

"I've never been arrested before," Linc says. "And that was kind of scary, but it was hard to be too worried about being in jail when Britt was back there, by herself, 'cuz that had to be ten times worse than me being in jail. I mean, it was just a fucked-up day, Jake. But I really don't think the fucked-upness was about me."

It makes a lot of sense. His arguments always make sense, even when I still know I'm right. He's just a better debater than I am. He just knows how to neutralize me. But tonight I'm not so sure I'm right. There's a big difference between Linc neutralizing me, and gently inviting me to where he is.

"I'm going to keep an eye on you," I say.

"I know," he says. "That's the way it should be. Jake . . ." He shifts the phone to his other ear, and I know something, like I'm there with him. I know that he's sitting on the side of his bed, and his elbows are resting on his knees, and one hand holds the phone to his ear, and the other falls limp to his side, and his blonde hair all drops down, down down, toward his shag carpet. "I couldn't have done this without you today," he says. "Thank you. Really."

And for the first time in a long time, I say, "You're welcome."

My sheets are still tossed aside in a cold and disorganized heap. I pull them up, fold them over, smooth them out. I put on my pajamas, and I floss. My doorbell rings.

Marc is wearing sweatpants cut off into shorts, and a gray Notre Dame T-shirt. A black duffle bag hangs from his shoulder. His running shoes are untied.

"You getting ready for bed?" He points his chin to the cinnamon dental floss limp in my hand.

I nod.

"I suddenly don't have a place to sleep," he says.

I push my door the rest of the way open. "You do now."

Marc walks in and drops his duffle bag next to the couch. It's a pretty loud thump, at least two pairs of shoes and a shaving kit in there. "I'm tired." He walks toward my bedroom. "I'm going to bed."

I close the door behind me and secure all the locks, the little one on the doorknob that wouldn't keep out a basset hound, the deadbolt in the middle, and the latch at the top. I finish flossing my teeth over the kitchen sink then throw my dental floss out under the kitchen sink. I turn off my lights and go to bed. Marc's already lying down in the dark.

I get under the sheets next to him. He's so still that I can't even hear him breathing. I'd be the worst kind of mother, the kind who shakes her baby awake because she's afraid he's not breathing anymore.

"You know," Marc says, in this off-handed way, like it's something he just thought of mentioning. Like last night it wasn't just the tequila talking. "You could've told me about the sunburn."

"I know." I scrunch the pillow under my head. "I could have."

Lisa Bower

Documentary

I. Credit

Light breaks on the acute angle
of a tipped chair and arches across
smeared tile, pounding into the black
board; soft residue pours to the ground.

II. Time-Lapse

The eyes of a doll click shut against plastic,
cloth body waiting with its thick stuffing.
Maybe when those eyes close, the window
will shut. We all hope for the blinds.

III. Plot

What we want is a star as it falls,
the ash dotting a baby's nose,
the contact shivering your spine,
the fire hosing down a world.

IV. Dialogue

We only think about what others may understand;
the grilled cheese too greasy, the bread soaked
through. The plated spine of your moon hovers
with the blink of a sick light.

V. Credits

are sure enough the only thing we leave.
You are bare foot, toe stuck in the icy gook
of a candy thrown down. The can-can rush
of sound makes you turn again, in search of breath.

Marcus Wicker

Eternal Ruminations

This is what I want: to be forever
twenty-two driving down the busiest intersection
half a barrel deep, belting Stevie Wonder
at the top of my lungs, shouting down yard signs
and hermetically-sealed lawns.

I need to be almost immortal
like every dead/broke jazz musician
who ever hawked a horn for mouthfuls of freedom.
Or alive enough to feel the weight of gravity,
ancestry, anything worth a second thought.

Late Saturday evening, raindrops sizzling across
the bullet shaped bay window, my pops and I sit
starring into the dark, crystal ball.
A late model record player leaves electrified music
drizzling from the cracks of our vaulted living room ceiling.

Across the hollow corridor, where my mother is glued
to the evening news, a woman talks about the public
school system and a village in Guam
where settlers compete to solve math problems
for the ultimate prize.

My dad looks up from his tilted glass of cognac, claims,
that'll never happen here; not for a million years, 'cause
we've got hamburgers, baseball, apple pie, and Chevy.
I remind him not to forget religion and ecommerce.
He agrees with this statement, nods like it's standard.

It is at this instant that we begin to understand
the strange plane between us; Father and son,
stuck at the root of this sticky slope wishing
to be nothing more than what we always were—
Father and son, content, aware, here.

The (Third) Tier-any of Two

For Matthew Dagger-Margosian

"This place is driving me mad" he says. It is
a familiar mantra that should embody

a prison more than a university. But not for Matt,
my radical friend who has grown accustomed to peering

down the shirts of women, through Johnny Cash-esque
shades, while hurling feminist thought

like a garter belt.
Tomorrow is my last day in Kalamazoo; but tonight—

tonight we will knot the tight rope of conformity,
that has blurred the line between us and "them"

with some semblance of security. Tonight we will delve
in the business of contradiction, toasting Thoreau

and living Bukowski, because there must be existence
somewhere, amid the realms of the intellectual snob

and popped-collar-polo shirt, alcoholics. It can't be
wrong; this teetering on the cusp of the brain-

trust is so basic that even Ivy League professors cut
rap records and read *People Magazine*.

We sit in the center of a two story fraternity

house, where the dj is scratching glass. The sound barrier

is broken: "I don't want to change the world,
but I need to be that *seed*." The blunt

and Oberon (which resemble assimilation
but taste like freedom), they are leaving him now.

We grab the two closest girls, crush
a break-beat into fine specks of dust,

and when the music stops, the four of us discuss reality
television and Orwell for hours.

On the way out the door,
my date for the evening asks for a pen. I catch her

scribbling series of words on a piece of receipt paper.
She says, "I'm writing a thought; not my phone number."

I look at Matt and nod—
fertilization.

Catherine Brown

Two Sisters

just the facts

On Easter Sunday, Maude Calloway, 55, and her sister Emmy Schmidt, 53, were killed in a head-on automobile collision on an empty stretch of road just outside of Eunice, Louisiana. The sisters were traveling alone, in separate cars, and actually ran *into each other*. They lived more than 70 miles apart, were not traveling to visit each other, and in fact had not spoken in several months. The cause of the crash remains uncertain; road conditions that Sunday were good, and that particular section of Highway 41 is wide and straight. Although there were no witnesses, the Louisiana Highway Patrol reported that, based upon the complex pattern of tread marks at the scene, one of the cars accelerated less than 200 yards from the other.

what they were thinking

Emmy isn't thinking about anything in particular except the white clouds stretching across the sky in every direction, and how peaceful they look. They remind her of the sweet billowy top of the lemon meringue pie that her mother used to make. Emmy tried for years to get her mother to write the recipe down, but now it's too late. When she sees Maude's car rushing toward her, she honks her horn and swerves wildly to the right, but the blue Camry keeps coming straight at her. "Maude?" She has enough time to say it twice. "Maude?"

Maude is doing what she always does when she has a moment to herself: making lists. Some of the lists are practical, like what she needs to pack for her trip to Pensacola to see her cousin Gem the following weekend, and others are pointless, like which families—

the Reillys, the Murdochs, and the Chases, for starters—weren't in their pews for the 9am Easter Sunday service. There is nothing to do with this information, except maybe allow herself some gossip about it with one or two members of the Altar Guild, but Maude just likes cataloguing things.

Only a few of her lists ever get written down, but tucked into one of the drawers of her desk, in the kitchen alcove that she thinks of as her office, is a List of Lists, a reminder of all the hard work she's put in over the years, keeping track of everything.

Suddenly, Emmy's old white Escort looms up, in the fat middle of Maude's field of vision. Emmy's hogging the road, straddling the white stripe like she always does. She drives like the road was laid down especially for her, and will evaporate after she's through with it. She's always taken her happiness from the strangest things, things that normal people don't even think about, and it drives Maude crazy.

Maude remembers then the first list she ever kept, the one that got her started on her lifetime's work: *Things I Hate About My Sister*.

their bodies

Emmy is skinny, always been as skinny as a pullet. False teeth. Short thinning reddish hair, long rabbity feet. A slumped rounded belly on a bony frame, an ache in her right shoulder from working the line at the Singer Sewing Machine factory all these years, ever since her husband Dex took off.

Maude is doughier, all over. Left breast gone, for ten years. She told no one except her mother and her husband Alton, and now only Alton remembers. She's kept her body a secret for so long that hiding is now ingrained. Even her daughter Johanna knows she can't come into the room when her mother is changing or taking a shower. The scar is no longer reddened but still rough, a knot she can feel through her clothes. She had radiation, and then for six months Alton drove her to Baton Rouge every other week for chemo.

To the few who asked, she said that she and Alton were taking a gardening class together. Now too much time has passed to tell anyone the truth.

It is a great point of pride with her that although she is older, she still has most of her teeth, unlike Emmy, who was profligate and lost hers. Wasted them, like she did so many things in life. Maude's hair is dyed matte black and is much thicker than Emmy's, another point of pride.

perhaps

Maude Calloway and Emmy Schmidt are not speaking to each other, haven't spoken since just after Christmas, because of Katie, their mother. Katie lives in a nursing home in Eunice and is in fine health except for incontinence and no memory of anything except TV sitcoms and game shows.

She'll celebrate her 80th birthday on May 1st. Family from all over the state will gather to honor the tiny woman. Maude and Emmy just can't agree about where to have the party.

their next-to-last conversation

The day after Christmas. Even though Alton had a terrible cold, Maude bailed Katie out of the nursing home for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, driving her back to Eunice early on the morning of the 26th. She unpacked Katie's few gifts—a soft pink bathrobe and matching slippers from her and Alton, a Walkman from Emmy (pointless, Maude thought)—in her mother's spartan room and helped her back downstairs to the lounge. It was slow going, because Katie brought her walker to a halt every few yards, turning to ask Maude sweetly, "What's on, do you know?"

Finally her mother was hunkered close to the set in front of Regis and Kathy. Maude went to her car and dialed her sister on the cell phone that her daughter Johanna had given her for Christmas:

"I wish you'd driven over this morning; Mama was hoping to see you." She'd started speaking the instant the ringing stopped.

"Who's this?" Emmy yawned.

"I said, Mama missed you. You should have spent the—"

"Mama *missed* me?" Emmy giggled. "C'mon, Maude, she hasn't missed anyone except Alex Trebec in about three years."

"If you'd stayed here like I asked, we could have sat up late and talked." Maude's left palm pushed against the steering wheel, locking her elbow, and the car swerved toward the shoulder. "We don't talk that much any more. And then you could have told her goodbye this morning."

"Goodbye, hello, have a cigar, right?" Emmy giggled again. "What difference does it make to her, Maude? And besides, I'll see her later this week. I'm taking her some of my black-eyed peas for New Year's."

what they think is funny

Emmy: all the usual things: babies just learning to walk, old Bugs Bunny Cartoons, Johnny Carson before he quit, knock-knock jokes, the way the bank manager walks down the street as though something was stuck in his rear end, anything her son Josh says.

Maude: Jerry Springer, people getting tongue-tied or making Freudian slips or having temper tantrums, people rendered speechless by surprise.

the town

In the absence of any real information, people make things up:

"Emmy had that old terrible car. Maybe the brakes failed."

"It was broad daylight, I know, but I heard that Maude fell asleep. She pushes herself so hard, always over there at the church, and then driving all that way to visit her mother twice a week."

"Not to speak ill, but Emmy wasn't the brightest candle in the bunch, was she? Maude did more for her over the years than most

people'll ever know."

"Alton's just broken, a broken man now. He was always so good to Emmy, too."

long ago

"Emmy, you are going to fail 10th grade." Maude pushed her glasses up her nose. "They'll put you in the "Specials" room with Tommy Hughes and Grace Crenshaw. Grace eats her own boogers. Would you like that?"

"I'm not reading it, Maudie." Emmy bit into an apple and propped her elbow on the crooked spine of the book that lay, spread-eagled and face down, on the kitchen table: *Wuthering Heights.* "It has a sad ending, and I don't like sad endings. Mama won't let them keep me back."

"Mama will not always be here to pick up every little thing that falls in your path, Emmy!" Maude straightened the notebooks and papers in front of her into a neat stack.

"I know that," Emmy said. "But she's here *now*, isn't she?"

before the funeral, Emmy's children in her kitchen

Two Dunkin Donuts coffees, Betsy's black and Josh's with lots of milk and sugar. Without their mother inside it the house is shabby. The furniture is old and drooping, and every room needs paint or wallpaper or some new thing to enliven it. Under her single bed, in a yellow plastic storage box, is her will, along with all of her other important papers (marriage license, notification of divorce, the deeds to the house and the land and the insurance and and and. The leavings of a person who had no intention of leaving any time soon).

"You could live here," Betsy says. The house is out in the country and not convenient for either of them, but Josh has lots of college debt and could use the money he'd save on rent.

"No, this place is Mama's." He rubs his hand over the red oilcloth on the kitchen table. Josh and Betsy have never lived in this

house; Emmy moved into it only after her mother became too confused to live on her own.

The children move softly from room to room, picking out only a few of their mother's personal things to take away. Painted china plates from the hutch in the dining room, a silver plate pitcher, some costume jewelry.

Emmy has lived here as she always lived—lightly—and her own things are now so mingled with her mother's that it's impossible for her children to tell what belonged to whom.

For her cousin Johanna, Maude's daughter, Betsy takes a cameo brooch. "I think I'm supposed to say, 'Mama would have wanted her to have it,'" Betsy says, knowing it isn't quite true. Johanna will have all of her mother's things, a houseful of cut crystal and antique rugs, soon enough. More importantly, their mother wasn't the kind of person to plan that far ahead, especially about something so solemn.

their best memories

Maude: the November day that Johanna was born. Her swollen feet, wet leaves sticking to her handsome new pumps while she waits for Alton to park the car. Even going to the hospital to have her baby, she had taken the time to put on panty hose.

A difficult labor and delivery, rain squalling against the windows. Alton smoking and cowering like a dog at the edge of the hospital parking lot, too squeamish to come up to the waiting room. When Johanna at last arrived, red and wrinkled and screaming, Maude realized that she finally had something that was hers alone.

Emmy: her children, her mother when she was still herself, sunset, fried perch.

their last conversation

Five days after the earlier one, and also by phone.

"Are you eating supper?" Maude's voice was hoarse. "What's all that noise?"

"Sorry, Maudie." More crunching sounds . "Do you want me to call you back when I'm done?"

"No, that's okay. This won't take too long." She tapped her pencil on the list in her lap. "Listen, this spring is Mama's 80th, and I want us to throw a party for her—"

"Oh, Maudie, she'll love it!" The chewing stopped. "I mean, she won't know who anyone is, but she'll for sure know it's for *her,* all those people gathered around just for her. And, if we have it here, the kids can—"

"Emily, don't you think your house is—"

"My house is what?"

"This house is bigger, that's all." Her pencil tapped in short frantic bursts. "And Alton and I would love to have everyone."

"Maude, please." Emmy held the receiver in her right hand and rubbed her arthritic shoulder with her left. The winter light revealed the frayed seams and yellowing stains on the kitchen's magnolia-patterned wallpaper. "Alton hates company. And if it's here, the kids can swim in the creek. Mama might remember that this was her house, once."

"You're not using your head, Em." Maude's eyes were squeezed shut, a little moisture at the outside corners. "How in the world would you make food for fifty people in that kitchen?"

"People would bring stuff, we'd manage. We all had parties here when this was *Mama's* house," she said, and hung up.

their hopes

Emmy: to get Katie out of the nursing home. Emmy didn't have enough pension to retire and take care of her, and private nursing care was too expensive. Working full-time and living in her mother's house, Emmy was able to save more than half her salary each month.

But at the time of the accident she still had nowhere near enough to bail her mother out for good.

Maude: that her mother might regain her senses long enough to recognize her oldest daughter *just one time* before she died. That during that moment of clarity she would promise Maude that she had loved her daughters equally, always.

at the funeral

Betsy and Josh help Johanna guide her father into a pew. After the crash, Alton brought the heavy, three-footed cane he'd bought after his knee surgery up from the basement, and he hasn't let go of it since. The organist switches from Bach prelude to *The Saints of God,* and the older man's shoulders hump up and down. Josh puts a clean handkerchief into his uncle's spotted, trembling hand, and pats his sister's arm.

The three children had agreed on the joint funeral; Johanna didn't consult her father. When she'd taken him out to lunch the day the ashes came back from the crematorium, he stood at the deli counter for ten minutes, unable to decide between turkey and ham.

The wobbly pews are lined with all of the people who would have been invited to Katie's birthday party: lanky backwoods nephews in unironed shirts and suits from Goodwill, stern and silent uncles. Katie's twin sisters, three years older but without any mental impairments whatsoever, sit frail and angry in the front row, alone except for the cousin who drove them over from Beaumont.

Only Katie herself is missing, spared one last chance to say goodbye to her two daughters, of whom she never speaks. Everyone agreed it was the right choice. Katie can't sit still for very long, unless she's in front of a TV and one of her favorite programs is on.

And Katie loves music—when it began, she would have sung along, whether it was a hymn or something instrumental. Katie sings all songs the same way now: "La, la, la la la," very loud.

then, finally

Emmy is headed into Eunice to see her mother. Maude's on her way home after being at the nursing home for less than half an hour. Visiting hours began at noon; Maude was knocking on the home's locked front doors at 12:02.

She brushed past the aide who'd unlocked the door and took the elevator to the second floor. When the doors opened there was Katie, wearing a bright red scarf that Maude didn't recognize, and the headset to the Walkman around her neck like a necklace. The body of the Walkman sat snugly on the arm of Katie's walker, secured by its Velcro strap.

"Oh, hi," Katie said. "Do you know what's on?"

"It's Easter, Mama, no game shows right now." She took her mother's soft upper arm and tried gently to turn her around. "Can we go sit in your room for a little while?"

"Isn't it time for *Bewitched*?" Katie eyed her suspiciously. But Maude didn't let go, and Katie eventually allowed herself to be herded back to Room 224.

Sunlight streamed into the room through the dusty green miniblinds. Katie's bed was neatly made, the corners tucked in hospital-style; the sun made a hot puddle in the center of the tan chenille bedspread. Katie's roommate Noreen was still asleep, her back to the room. Her two hearing aids sat on the night stand next to the bed; Maude didn't bother to lower her voice.

Maude pulled the only armchair to her mother's side of the room and settled her mother into it. She leaned back against the bed. "Mama, Emmy and I want to have a party for you. A birthday party."

"How nice!" her mother said. "Who's Emmy?"

"Emmy and I are your daughters, Mama." Maude flattened her palm against the empty left side of her chest and touched the secret that her mother no longer shared with her. "It's your 80th birthday, and we want to have a party for you."

"I'll be 74 on the first of May. May Day!" Katie squinted up at her daughter through her thick glasses, and pawed the air beside the chair, her bony hand in an absent-minded search for the walker. "And besides, you're not Maude. I don't know who you are, but you're too awful sad to be my Maudie."

what happens next

There is no one left to host a party for Katie. The grandchildren bring balloons and flowers and bottles of sparkling apple cider to the nursing home, and put pink crepe paper streamers around the windows in the TV lounge, but nobody comes. The uncles and nephews don't want to make another long drive so soon after the funeral, and the cousin who drove Katie's twin sisters from Texas is not available. One of the aides has made her a chocolate cake, but Katie forgets again and again that it's her birthday. She falls asleep that evening with dry crumbles of icing at the corners of her mouth.

their fears

Emmy: That her husband might show up and want something from her, after twenty years' absence. Centipedes. That when the time comes her son and daughter won't know how to be happily married, since they never saw it done. That Mr. Kramer, who's in her Adult Bible Study group, will try to ask her on a date. That someone will serve olive loaf at Bible Study. That her mother will suffer a long slow painful death. And sometimes, when her dream self runs young and strong through a sun-studded hay field, that her sister will catch her.

Maude: That Alton will die. That Emmy will have been right, about everything.

it could even be that

It went the other way. Emmy is a deeply kind person and Maude has been miserable for as long as Emmy can remember. Emmy re-

ally wants to have the party but in the end she would have given in just to make Maude happy. But perhaps before she got to that point she saw how frayed and desperate Maude looked behind the wheel and decided to put her out of her misery. As always, Emmy was profligate. With everything. She never gave a thought to what would happen to her.

Terita Heath-Wlaz

Vesalius

The wax woman is half voluptuous, other half viscera.
Her only breast shimmers, unsure whether to decay.
At least the rippling canvas is comforting.
And the film projector, and the stadium seating
where I can eat pistachio muffins in peace each morning.
Sometimes there are tulips laid in the halls like lasagna
in memory of mental patients.
An irritant, so young.

Painting pottery farm boys with fishing poles wearing overalls.
Placing them gently into the kiln.
Shiny and sealed against decay, like a scoop of chocolates.

Even the math kids appreciate the greenery,
lily pads arrowing skyward out of the mud.
The young intellectuals remove unborn sharks from the cavity
and sever the liver like a cold chicken leg.
Into a teaspoon, scraps of a last meal. A tuna? A seal skin?
This is the sickness of seeing something a second time,
tasting the pickled crop.
The bullfrogs glide underwater charting territory using nose
bubbles.
They harbor an ancient tolerance for smells
and I am only static. A shiver.
I take it to the public square and it is a bolt of cloth.

Infinity Kid

Time skates away in tributaries;
one day I will perish like old tofu in a warm bath
shedding layers into my atmosphere like an upset jellyfish.
I have a mind like a briar patch.
Think about the young man stepping out of torn pants.
My vaseline soul moves surreptitiously through the postal system,
vinyl stickers inert and a mysterious navy heart like a connector toy.

I used to wear linen headbands and eat carrots out of special wrappers.
The Batesian inner carrot waited for the right moment.
The color palette was primarily that of animals with dramatic tails
climbing the burnt cigar trunks of baobabs.
And whirlpools factored in, relentlessly.
I smelled their antiseptic perfume and fell asleep,
aging all along in miniature strokes.

Everything repeats, after many billions.
A folder in the pharmacy showed a string of earths mirrored like pearls.
I spent a whole day thinking about the folder.
I stored unimportant papers in its sleeves.
Then a numbing arctic version of birth played out
where a snowflake had twins and a life span like a fruit fly,
terrifically short, and albino.

After a Death

A telephone wrenched from the wall
is crouched in the middle of the floor
its roots still intact, but frayed at the ends.

It vibrates when it rings.
Someone from the milky underground
is calling with loam in his mouth:

death has herded him off to the forest,
endlessly pulling him up by the arms
and draping his body over the branches.

Trees everywhere are tearing through
the moon with astronomical speed.
Refugee stars float in the earth's perimeters—

how it is when too many are breathing
into the phone, into the rooms
of those that call for them in dreams.

Death Sonnet

It's time to be quiet again—
to listen to my bones settle on their last frail pillars,
to listen to the wind rustle up every fragment of silted letters
dredged out from the organs of my body, abandoned now
where someone pokes and prods about as if they were no longer
    my stage.
But this is not about surrender.
This is not about the empty seats of my ribcage.

No one fills in the dark of spare time
with preoccupation of a battle no one is ever winning.
Only one kind of beauty: the transition that is not a transition,
the stasis of a corporal permanence and the space that surrounds
    us.
I've never so badly not wanted it, never so badly not wanted
the rusty construct of my veins, a single, wrought iron staircase,
or a railroad stapled to the sky.

Craig Snyder

Rise of the Mentards & Flower Boy

On Planet Earth chemicals are invading food and water, affecting people. Some people say Earth is dying now. Women are giving birth to Mentards, and there are more Mentards than before. Why so many Mentards? Scientists investigate this. They write a report saying chemicals in the food and water are poison. No one listens to them.

Meanwhile Flower Boy.

Business Man sits next to Flower Boy on the park bench. Flower Boy reads novels. He has a stack of novels on the bench beside him, and he is reading a novel. Business Man just sits and watches the ducks swimming in the pond. They are very small brown ducks.

"What novel are you reading, Flower Boy?" Business Man says.

"I am reading *The Razor's Edge*," Flower Boy says. He points to the book and smiles at Business Man. "It is a novel about a man who likes to read." Flower Boy keeps reading. He has good concentration.

"Flower Boy, why?" Business Man says. The question mark hangs in the air. The question mark dies and falls to the ground. Business Man doesn't ask any more questions.

Business Man takes a sandwich out of a paper bag. He eats the sandwich, which is a tuna fish sandwich. Business Man eats Mentos when the sandwich is gone. Then he goes back to his office and starts writing sales reports. He thinks about Flower Boy just sitting on the bench, reading novels. Everything about Flower Boy is very mysterious, he thinks.

Flower Boy keeps reading. He reads for 25 minutes. He lifts the book up to his nose and smells it. The book is an old paperback and has a nice smell that Flower Boy likes. Ducks are quacking in the pond. He watches the ducks swim around. He watches one duck swim in circles. It is a crazy duck. Flower Boy taught it how to read. Now the duck is crazy.

"Are you happy, being crazy like that?" Flower Boy asks.

"Quack," the duck says.

The duck is wearing a little waterproof backpack. It is stuffed with novels and dictionaries and is made from orange Styrofoam. The other ducks are scared of it. The other ducks are scared of the future, and of the crazy duck. They are stupid ignorant ducks. Flower Boy feels sorry for them and feeds them bread sometimes.

~

Flower Boy goes into the city of Seattle and walks around and looks at things, at coffee shops and book stores, at people waiting at bus stops. At delivery trucks and things. There are lots of Mentards walking around. When Flower Boy goes into the city he usually sees about 10 or 12 Mentards. Now he sees about 300 Mentards in only one hour.

Flower Boy buys a flower at a flower stall. It is white and fragile and Flower Boy stares at it for a long time. He loves the flower. He sticks the stem of the flower through a buttonhole. He wonders how flowers came to be. He gets tired and bored. He sits down on a bench and starts watching the Mentards.

Some Mentards are walking around and mumbling stupidly. Some are standing on corners holding white Styrofoam coffee cups and asking people for money. People are supposed to put money in the Styrofoam cups. But people aren't giving the Mentards much money.

Some Mentards are writing novels. Flower Boy is startled by this. He realizes he has made a serious mistake. Two years ago he met some Mentards and tried to help them. He gave them some novels but the Mentards tore them up, and some Mentards tried to eat the novels.

"That is wrong," Flower Boy told them. He was very stern with them. He told them novels are for reading but the Mentards laughed at him and ran away. Now they are writing novels on notebook computers. Flower Boy thinks this is bad. He wonders what will happen next.

~

Flower Boy has to summon up willpower to not write a novel. He wants to write one, after watching the Mentards. But he knows it would be wrong to do it.

~

Night has fallen. The sky is black and awesome stars are winking at Flower Boy.

He is walking home. He bought a new novel at the used bookstore and is carrying it in a plastic bag that says "Osco Drug." He is happy about owning the novel and thinks about all the words in it and how they will make him feel when he reads them.

He is at his apartment now. It is one big room. He goes inside. The walls are cracked and decorated with pressed flowers sealed in wax paper. There are stacks of novels climbing the walls. The apartment smells like old paper and flowers, and macaroni & cheese.

Flower Boy is glad to be home.

"Oooohhh, Flower Boy," a mysterious voice says. Flower Boy recognizes the voice.

"Mrs. Rooney," Flower Boy says. "Stop doing that."

"I am sorry, Flower Boy," Mrs. Rooney says. "But I am lonely." She is talking to Flower Boy through the thin wall of his apartment. She lives next door.

"That's okay, Mrs. Rooney." Flower Boy forgives her.

Flower Boy puts his new novel on the coffee table. He makes some macaroni & cheese and toast, and eats it. He washes the dishes and dries them. He hears Mrs. Rooney crying next door and turns on the radio. It is late and Flower Boy is sleepy. He gets ready for bed, and crawls under his bed. There is an old cigar box and a flashlight hidden there.

He turns on the flashlight and opens the cigar box. It has treasure in it.

He takes out a picture of Flower Girl and looks at it. Every time he does this he feels sad. But Flower Boy loves the sadness because he loves Flower Girl. He looks at the picture for a long time. He wonders if Flower Girl ever thinks about him. He doesn't know.

"Flower Girl," Flower Boy says. He puts the picture back in the box and turns off the flashlight. He goes to sleep under the bed, curled around the cigar box.

~

Flower Boy is dreaming his dream again. In the dream Flower Boy is a little baby again. He is Flower Baby. Everything is beautiful. He is warm and has a tiny pink erection. He is wrapped in a soft blanket that smells like flowers. Someone is singing a song, and the song never ends, and the song is awesome.

The dream goes on and on while Flower Boy sleeps.

Flower Boy has a secret wish. It is so secret that not even Flower Boy knows about it. The secret wish is that he would like to dream the dream always, and keep it, and never wake up from it, not ever again. When Flower Boy wakes up he feels great. He doesn't remember too much about the dream. He crawls out from under the bed and makes some Folger's coffee.

He takes the new novel out of the plastic bag and looks at it.

~

Media Executive sneaks up behind Flower Boy in the park.

She has green hair and bulgy green eyes. She is beautiful and strong and carries a black briefcase. Flower Boy cannot look at her. He has epilepsy. When he looks at her he goes into convulsions. He wishes he had never met Media Executive.

"Hello," Flower Boy says. He sips his raspberry juicebox. He is nervous.

"Flower Boy," Media Executive says. "I will get you an advance so you can write a novel."

Media Executive has been hunting Flower Boy. He wrote an essay for *Salon* magazine.

"We will totally promote it," Media Executive says. "You will totally be famous."

Flower Boy runs away screaming.

~

Flower Boy buys some binoculars at Army Surplus. Flower Boy buys a green canvas backpack and puts the binoculars in it. He goes into the city of Seattle. He goes into Huge Corporation Building and takes the elevator to the roof. He lies down on the roof and looks over the edge. He takes out the binoculars and looks through the binoculars at the Mentards. He is spying on the Mentards who are writing novels. About half of the Mentards are writing novels now. Flower Boy has a bad feeling about it. He feels responsible.

He decides to oppose the Mentards.

"I will need a plan," Flower Boy thinks. He cannot think of a plan.

Flower Boy takes the elevator down to Huge Corporation bookstore. He buys one of the Mentard novels. He goes into Huge Corporation cafeteria and eats square pizza and chocolate pudding. He reads the Mentard novel. It is terrible. Flower Boy gets very upset.

~

Flower Boy meets Ajax, the famous dog who is a literary critic and editor, who wears glasses and walks on his hind legs. Flower Boy tries to convince Ajax not to edit Mentards novels because bad things might happen if more Mentards novels get published.

"No," Ajax says. "You are wrong about this thing."

Flower Boy tries harder. He uses all his convincing powers on Ajax.

"Flower Boy," Ajax says. "You cannot stop this thing."

Flower Boy has failed.

~

The Rain of Flowers has come. Flower Boy is walking through it laughing. Flowers are falling all around him like hushed snowflakes. The breeze plays with Flower Boy's hair. It smells like a million flowers, and perfume. The trees sway and drop their blossoms. Flower Boy walks through clouds of swirling flowers and forgets his troubles.

He climbs a hill crowned with yellow daffodils. He sits on mint green grass and writes a novel. The novel is full of love and flowers, of innocence and children. The children are wise and achieve mighty things. Flower Boy writes and writes. He cannot stop himself.

Hour after hour he presses his thoughts onto paper. Flower Boy is intoxicated by the Rain of Flowers and does not know what he is doing. At dusk he walks slowly down the hill. The flowers are rotting and stinking, and Flower Boy chokes. All the flowers are black and dead.

Flower Boy has written a novel.

~

Flower Boy takes his secret map from the cigar box full of treasure. He uses the map to find the hidden tunnel where Flower Girl lives. The tunnel is under the abandoned amusement park, which is haunted by the ghosts of freaks. Flower Boy goes there. He is not scared of ghosts. Flower Girl is not there so he waits for her. He waits two hours and then she comes in. She is barefoot and wears a pink dress and has a flower in her hair. She smiles at him nervously.

"Hello, Flower Boy," she says.

"Flower Girl," Flower Boy says. "You smell like flowers."

Flower Boy gives Flower Girl the novel he wrote. She stares at it and says, "You wrote a novel?" and Flower Boy says, "Yes, but I couldn't help it." He explains about the Rain of Flowers. She starts to read the novel but Flower Boy stops her and says, "Never read that novel."

"It's too late," Flower Girl says. "Your novel has affected me already."

"What happened to our love?" Flower Boy says.

"We loved too much," Flower Girl says. "Our love was destroying the world, so we had to stop loving. Love is like that sometimes. Love is always like that, Flower Boy."

"I couldn't stop loving you, Flower Girl," Flower Boy says.

"I know," Flower Girl says. She looks sad.

~

Flower Boy sits on his couch drinking green tea. He listens to thunder and is blinded by lightning bolts. Hailstones are smashing into his windows. He is trying to think of a plan to stop the Mentards but he still cannot think of one. He hears Mrs. Rooney sobbing and stumbling around next door. He wishes she would stop. He hears the mailman downstairs.

Flower Boy goes and gets his mail. There is a letter from the Guild of Unicorns. They demand to know why he has written a novel. The letter says he must go on trial. Flower Boy never thought it would come to this. He gets very serious.

He goes to Unicorn Island.

Now he is on trial. Dharma Woman is the judge. She asks Flower Boy to explain his actions. Flower Boy tells about the Rain of Flowers and how he couldn't help himself.

Dharma Woman nods. "Now I understand," she says.

Business Man is called to the stand. "Flower Boy is always very polite to me," he says. "He loves to read novels and would never harm literature. But he is very mysterious."

Flower Boy is acquitted by the Guild of Unicorns.

~

There is a circle of golden light. Flower Boy stands in it with his eyes closed and his arms raised to the sky. The golden light is coming from a street lamp. It is midnight and smoke-colored moths are flying around the street lamp and smacking into it, and moth dust flies off their bodies. Flower Boy is crying very quietly. He doesn't want to disturb anybody.

"I have read too many novels," Flower Boy thinks.

All the stories of all the people in all the novels he has read are hurting Flower Boy. They all have serious problems. They are all hungry or crazy or dying from rare diseases. Flower Boy can't stand to think of them anymore, and is sad because of Flower Girl.

Patrolman sneaks up behind him on cat feet. He is on night patrol.

"Man up, Flower Boy," Patrolman says.

He knows why Flower Boy is crying and is sick of always consoling Flower Boy. He thinks Flower Boy is crazy or something. Flower Boy stops crying. He is not mad at Patrolman. He has just thought

of the perfect plan to stop the Mentards, so he stops being sad. He is almost happy again.

Patrolman starts lecturing him. "This world is a horrible place," he says. "There is nothing you can do about it, Flower Boy. Just stop reading so many damned novels."

"Thank you, Patrolman," Flower Boy says. The plan is taking shape in his head. He is not really listening to what Patrolman is saying.

Patrolman nods and walks away. He casts black shadows that bounce and shatter as he walks. He is in a state of heightened alertness. He might have to shoot somebody at any time.

Flower Boy goes home and takes out some sheets of 99% recycled paper and begins writing down his plan for stopping the Mentards. He writes in cursive script. He uses three sheets of paper and writes thoughtfully. The sun comes up. Flower Boy falls asleep in his clothes.

~

The crazy duck waddles down the street looking for Flower Boy. He is used to seeing Flower Boy and is comfortable around him, but Flower Boy has not been to the park for a long time. The crazy duck misses him and has run out of novels to read.

The crazy duck has duck cancer. He starts screaming.

He cannot find Flower Boy anywhere. The orange Styrofoam backpack is much heavier when it is not floating in water, and he keeps tipping over sideways. A taxi driver honks his horn. The crazy duck

flaps his wings. He doesn't see the 1986 Ford Bronco. He feels pain. He sees bright red blood leaking from his body. He closes his eyes. There are strange vibrations and sudden coldness. He hopes someone will write a novel about him when he is dead.

The crazy duck dies. No one writes a novel about him.

~

Flower Boy gets on a plane and flies to New York. He reads a novel on the plane.

It is all about a man who likes balloons. It is called The 21 Balloons. The man goes to an island full of diamonds and rich people. No one knows about the island except for the rich people. It is a secret. The man has a lot of fun there, and makes good friends. Then the island blows up.

It is a very short novel so Flower Boy reads it over and over again.

The plane lands and Flower Boy gets off and goes to the New York Times Building. Lots of people are walking around on sidewalks. They all look irritated about something. They are all drinking specialty coffees. Nobody smells like flowers. Nobody pays any attention to Flower Boy. He asks directions from a security guard. He gets into an elevator and goes to see the editor of the New York Times. "Please hire Mentards to write for the New York Times," Flower Boy says.

"That is a strange idea," the editor says. He frowns at Flower Boy. "It may be the stupidest idea I have ever heard. I will have to check on that. Tell me more about your idea, Flower Boy."

"They could write op/ed pieces for you," Flower Boy says. "They could write movie reviews."

The editor frowns again. Flower Boy is very persuasive. He talks for a long time and gets a nosebleed. The editor gives him some Kleenex. He tells Flower Boy to lie down and the nosebleed stops. Flower Boy is exhausted from using so much persuasion. He is not feeling too good. The editor is quiet for a while. He is considering Flower Boy's plan.

"It's a deal, Flower Boy," the editor says.

Flower Boy experiences satisfaction. He has made the world a better place.

~

It is a warm day and there are huge mashed potato clouds floating around, and Flower Boy is lying on the roof of Huge Corporation Building again. He feels strangely weak. He is not himself. He has not read a novel recently.

He looks through his binoculars. On the street below, 3 or 4 Mentards are slouched against buildings, begging for money. None of the Mentards are writing novels. He sees one Mentard coming out of a coffee shop. The Mentard wears a blue suit and is drinking a specialty coffee. He looks irritated. Flower Boy puts his binoculars away and rolls over and sighs.

A shimmery copper sun burns through mashed potato clouds and stares down at him like a single deadly eye. Flower Boy stares up at

the sun. He feels floaty. He wishes he could talk to Flower Girl again. He wants it to be the Rain of Flowers again.

The light turns gray. A single flower floats down and lands on Flower Boy's cheek. It is a pink flower but looks gray to Flower Boy. He smiles and closes his eyes.

He doesn't move for a long time. He never moves again.

~

Flower Girl wakes up in the middle of the night. She is covered with flowers.

Ben Kopel

Sweethearts

::
I dyed my hair in the bathroom
of a YWCA

and I've been thinking about you
almost all the time

::
beneath your swimsuit
there's an all night diner

every waitress is a genius

::
outside your swimsuit is the big country

seatbelts and student riots

::
sweetheart, gal Friday,
the architect's beautiful daughter

I love you, but I hate your friends

Clayton Allynn

To bless his brain,
To stop that heart

From taking the time
To dip the car in kudzu.

There isn't a single windshield,
Just screened in stars.

Farm winds blanket churches
And it kills him

::
How kids can be so cruel.

The director doesn't want to know
Himself any better.

From what stone
The producers found inside his brain,

He fashioned us a prairie populated
With wild dogs and missing children.

Michele N. Harmeling

If We Hadn't Been Laughing

as we stepped onto the bus, perhaps those boys wouldn't have
followed.
If the bus had been a bright shade of blue,
we might not have been the last ones to board.
If we had walked faster, and hadn't looked back
on the way to the bus stop
those boys might not have seen us, yet
if not, who would have sat behind us and said,
See those girls in the plaid uniforms? Ugly, aren't they?
If we had gotten off one stop sooner, with the old
woman hugging her butcher-paper bundle of fish and chips,
while the bus rattled on between gum trees;
if those plaid uniforms had been stained and our hair
unwashed; if we had been even uglier,
then perhaps those boys would have changed their minds.

We weren't, and they followed us
down the lavender-scented street, and
if we hadn't turned to face them,
we might have ended up like that girl in the newspaper.
If we hadn't finally sloughed off the illusion
that they just wanted a quick snog, or a number to call,
if she hadn't been the one whose fortune we had borrowed
without knowing it, it might have been us
curled up behind a row of bins
as if we were sick and asleep.

Where the Separation Begins

Chena Hot Springs, Winter 2005

The night we drove to our rented cabin,
the aurora did not dance

outside the tiny window, and we
were not dancing behind it,

and the only one left with some joy
in this is the bull moose

beside the road that we swerved
so sharply to avoid.

Toni Jensen

Quillwork, Artifact #949494

Porcupines yap like terriers, sharp and hard and loud. That's what I say when she walks in and takes my hand like it's hers, like it's always been, only I just forgot. If this were the Western it would like to be, I'd say she sidled, but this is the Midwest, and the *she* in question is limping. If this were the Western it would like to be, we'd start with horses, with galloping. But this story starts with porcupines, who are not horses, and a nun, who is not a dance hall girl. I'm no cowboy. There are no barstools, no swinging saloon doors, only tired linoleum and folding chairs with their prison-issue numbers. I'm Blackfoot; she's a nun, Sister Mary Alice of the Sacred Heart, and this is my last chance at allocution.

Before the porcupines, the car that hit them, the quills flying out, useless, the robbery attempt, there was my name. Leland Jesus LaRue. It's not HEY-SEUS like you might imagine but is Jesus, as in Jesus on the cross. It's okay, though, if you say it wrong—everybody does. I address this remark to the row of three men and one woman in suits, who call themselves the parole board. I'm trying to try to make them feel at ease. It's important to make the audience feel at ease, and these four, though they were in the room before I was, seem to have just arrived, to feel out of place. Are they the audience for this Western? The townspeople? The sheriff's family? Overdressed extras of some sort?

Sister Mary Alice says to start with my name, the date. She says the porcupines don't matter, but that just shows how little she knows about me, the story, even after all these years. She scratches a mole on the back of her hand and looks at the table in front of us. She is

trying for optimism and failing. She wears black and white, but not penguin gear, just black pants and a white turtleneck that looks scratchy. Her small eyes plead with mine to begin, to tell it right. "Tell the story like it really happened this time, Leland," she says. "Tell it and go home. "

I have been here thirteen years, and I've been telling it like it really happened, so I know it's not truth they want but a story that's familiar, a story they can believe in. I've been taking correspondence courses from the university—I've been reading up on their stories—and I know they want a Western.

In their Western, I am drunk when I pick up Katherine from behind the school. In this version, she is my girlfriend; I love her desperately. In the Midwestern, the story that I say really happened, I love her desperately, and she is not my girlfriend, is something else. In both, we are seventeen, and I have a gun tucked down the front of my Levis. I tried putting it down the back of my jeans, but I was worried I'd lean back too far into the car's seat and shoot off my ass somehow.

I'm driving the car of my dead brother Frank, also seventeen, my twin, and newly dead, the car newly resurrected by Fat Steve at Fat Steve's Auto and Tire. But no one wants to hear about Fat Steve. And no one wants to hear about Frank, certainly not Sister Mary Alice. Frank is extraneous. Frank is beside the point—there is no place for a dead sidekick brother in this Western.

I am picking up Katherine behind the high school. She's tall with long brown hair she never remembers to tie back. In the Western, Katherine would be blond, if white, or raven-haired, if Indian. Either way, her hair would be braided, denoting innocence (if blond and white), ethnic authenticity (if raven-haired, if Indian). In the Midwestern, Katherine is neither, is both. She's métis, an in-between, with green eyes and fine, medium-brown hair.

Sister Mary Alice clears her throat. "The date," she says, "and the place?" She taps her fingers near the tape recorder.

It's 1989, the year I go to jail, the year Katherine graduates high school. We're in south-central South Dakota, in Talbot, so the wind keeps Katherine's hair in a perpetual swirl, which sounds romantic, but really only makes it all knotted-up. She's in the car now, irritated with her hair, wetting her fingers and pulling apart a snarl.

"Your ends will split," I say. My mother owns our small town's only beauty shop though in the Western, we live on a reservation, of course, not seventy-eight miles from the closest one, and in the Western, there are no mothers in sight, only distant fathers on horseback.

Katherine shrugs. "So? No one here to look at my hair, anyway." She sighs, big and dramatic, her feet up on the dash, and looks out the window.

We are skipping first period, aiming for the closest liquor store. I have a new fake ID that I found, which belongs to some guy from some small West River town I think is over by Rapid City. Katherine thinks he looks enough like me to fake out the new clerk. She's been on me for a week to try it out. She's been on me for a month to quit drinking, though, too—since Frank—and it's just like her not to see the contradiction.

I steer the El Camino up Main Street, out of Talbot, population 987. The liquor store lingers in an almost deserted strip mall on the northwest edge of town. Snow drifts against the low brick buildings—the library and hardware store, the café and post office—and the wind licks the snow's top layer, fanning it out through the air. It is early morning, the sky not yet blue, and the streetlights click and hum, waiting for first light, which comes late this time of year. Beyond the streetlights are the streets, the Midwestern streets, and because they are Midwestern, this version of the story is freed of its need for mountains, rising up, symbolic, majestic, bright even in darkness. Where there would be mountains are, instead, sandhills and plains—snow-covered plains with yucca and bluestem sticking up like antennae in the depressions between tall, white drifts.

In the Western, I'm wearing a giant cowboy hat, or braids that dangle their way down my back, snakelike against denim or sheepskin, maybe, depending on the temperature, the degree of romance expected. In the Midwestern, I'm wearing my hair chin-length because my mother is working to perfect her version of a bob. I've got on a flannel shirt with the sleeves unbuttoned but am cold and think about buttoning them; I won't, though, because to do so might make me look weak, uncool. Katherine wears red and black sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt two sizes too big. She is skipping first-period gym for at least the sixth time this year, is expert at slipping out the locker room door, slipping back in just before the bell.

Since this is not a Western, no one needs to die. Though Frank, of course, is dead already. Since this is not a Western, I could keep the gun next to my belly.

I steer the car into the parking lot. Big Sammy's Liquor Mart and the Casey's General Store are sandwiched in between dark, empty storefronts. The lights go on in Big Sammy's as I turn my headlights off. It is not quite 8 a.m. The El Camino idles loud like maybe a smallish helicopter has taken up residence in the back. It was a loud car before the accident—if you can call what Frank did an accident—but now it's almost impossible to have a conversation while it's idling. The front bumper curls up like a snarl; the back, left side is absent of paint and trim; and below, the muffler bounces where it should be tight, the tailpipe curving down like a question mark.

Katherine is saying something, pointing off behind the stores. I smile and nod, trying for cool, and her frown becomes more firm, her gestures larger. I shrug, swing the door open, and am in the store, my hand under my shirt, on the handle of the .22, when I see what all her pointing is about.

In the Western, the bad guy—me, at this point—wears a mask that shows only his eyes. We all pretend his identity is disguised. I don't know why I didn't think of a mask; I thought of the gun. I am thinking of Frank, always of Frank. How he gunned his engine. How

the back of the school bus must have looked as he accelerated up to it, under it. How he left no skid marks.

Sheriff Jeff Richards stands in the back of the liquor store next to Big Sammy and a dolly stacked waist-high with cases of Coors. Even in the Midwestern there is trouble in the form of a sheriff, but he's not tall and dark, sneering yet romantic, though he is all these things, of course, in the version for Sister Mary Alice, who sighs and flushes and fans herself. In the Midwestern, Sheriff Jeff is short and starting to bald on top. In the Midwestern, the sheriff once went to high school with my parents.

"Hey," says the sheriff.

Big Sammy nods my way, too, leaning onto the handle of the dolly, draping his arms over it like he's tired, like he's sorry to have customers so early. I wonder where the new guy is, but this is how the day is going so far.

I look over my shoulder, out the glass door to the El Camino. Katherine has scrunched herself down in the seat, so all I can see are the tops of her shoes on the dash, the static-filled edges of her hair. I take my hand off the gun and pull down on my flannel shirt in the middle, below where the last button meets and closes. I do it slow, trying for casual, but I see Big Sammy's eyes go wide.

It is fair to mention here that I've been in some trouble before, though strictly smalltime—a neighbor's broken window or two, a trashed hotel room once in Rapid City, some minor defacement of a teacher's garage and pet pig. Frank was the good one—everyone says so—the one who never got into trouble, who studied hard and played ball harder. There is also the time when I beat up Big Sammy's son, Little Sammy, though it is also fair to point out that fight was the only one I've ever won, before or since.

"Hey," says the sheriff, "you not in school?"

He says it even and friendly, but I break out into a sweat, anyway. Big Sammy's eyes have gone from wide to narrow, and he's

white-knuckling the very full cart, positioning it in front of himself like a shield, or so I think.

It is my fault that I think this way. Even I have seen too many Westerns. The sheriff becomes the enemy, Big Sammy the poor sucker caught in the middle.

I'm ambling over to the glass doors, the ones with Coke behind them, trying to look like a Coke is all I've come for. I'm trying to regulate my walk, to stop my knees from doing anything crazy, and I'm looking at the sheriff. And I'm smiling. I'm still smiling when the full cart—not at all a shield but, in fact, a very fine weapon—comes hurtling toward my knees and connects, and Big Sammy yells, "Gun!"

And so the sheriff becomes the enemy again though he isn't, still. The cart takes me out at the knees, tips me sideways. The cases of Coors flop and bounce, landing on my legs and stomach, glancing off my head.

Later, Big Sammy will say, "All that beer and he still managed to get off a shot." But that's for the Western, the version where I'm a villain, a dead shot, someone with a plan.

In the Midwestern, I land hard, my bony hip meeting the tile, my hand still around the gun, my fingers on the trigger. In the Midwestern, I reach down to break my fall with my right hand, only it's got the gun in it, my finger around the trigger, and then I hear it—*pop, pop, pop*—like a bunch of beer cans being opened extra loud, extra fast.

I hear screams, moans, then heavy footfalls, and it takes me a minute to connect these sounds with the ones that came before. I lift the case of Coors from my stomach and hold it up in front of my eyes like a pillow during a scary movie. When I open my eyes, look around it, I see Sheriff Jeff holding his left shoulder with both hands. He's slumped in the corner, under a Coors' display—a waterfall tumbling from tall mountains, a winding, rushing stream at the bottom of stiff cardboard.

My hand is still around the gun. I think about dropping it but tuck it back into my Levis again. I think twice about *Front or back?* this time, but I put it back where it was, in the front. I'm not sure why I do this, except that consistency seems important, and I'm even less sure why I do what comes next. I walk over to Sheriff Jeff, whose gun remains in its holster, and I lean down. Blood runs in a thin line from the corner of his mouth, consistent with what happens in the movies—with what happens in the movies when the guy is not going to make it. I move my hand forward as if to touch him, then move it back. It hangs there, above Sheriff Jeff, near the waterfall.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He's saying something that sounds like "Why?" but he's having a hard time getting it out, what with all the blood. Big Sammy is in the back. I hear him telling someone to hurry. So I do, gun against my belly, burning now.

In the Western, the official version for Sister Mary Alice, none of what follows is said. In the Western, the damsel flees the car while I'm in the store; she searches the streets for help, crying "Murder, murder!" or whatever it is damsels say.

But Katherine is no damsel. When I come out, she's behind the wheel, the window rolled down, her face calm like we're heading back to second period. But we both know there'll be no heading back.

"Move over," I say.

"No," she says, "I'm a better driver."

"Move," I say. I open the door and lean down, giving her legs a shove.

"Fine," she says, "but it's your fault if we get caught."

"Fine," I say. I say it as mean as I can, trying to be tough, but I'm probably a little in shock and, also, I'm touched she said *we*. My voice wavers, and she smiles, moves over, and lets me in.

We head north, away from Talbot on Highway 86, with me driving. We both know this is the right direction if we're going to do

this, that there is not another town for twenty-two miles, only a nature reserve, snowdrifts and animal tracks and sky, miles and miles of grey-blue sky.

What happens next is not at all like a Western. There is no immediate chase, no crescendoing clacketty-clack of horse hooves as the sheriff's trusty men pull closer and closer still. Instead, the sandhills rise up and fall away beyond the two-lane, and as our speed increases, the helicopter noise from the back of the El Camino levels out, almost disappears.

Katherine is quiet, too, and when I sneak a look her way, she is rolling the window down, leaning into the wind, her hair flying, lips parted, eyes bright. I think of swinging the car onto the soft shoulder, danger be damned. I think of pulling her to me, kissing her—her letting me—but then she catches me looking, and her eyes come back to normal.

"You should have told me," she says.

"Told you what?"

"About the gun," she says. "You should have."

"Sorry," I say. "I should have." I'm not sure if I agree with her, but I'm still thinking of kissing her, of what it would feel like. But agreeing with her only seems to make her mad. She turns away from me, to the window, her shoulders hunched up around her ears. She is rolling the window back up, smoothing her hair. Clearly, Katherine wants a Western, too, complete with a take-charge man on a horse who gives orders and never, ever apologizes.

It is quiet like that for a few minutes more, the snow and sandhills clicking by, and I'm trying to decide what to say—whether to fake some anger to get her attention or to stay quiet and calm, to try for the strong, silent type. We are about six miles north of Talbot when we come to the first steep hill, followed by the first sharp turn. The road is clear as we crest the hill, and then, as we hit the curve, it no longer is.

There's a flurry of short, brown bodies, followed by a thud and that barking—sharp and hard and loud. Spike-like objects fly out, some hitting the tires and bumper, some landing, useless, on the asphalt. Porcupines, a family of them, maybe, crossing the road in tandem.

Frank used to like to drive out here to take walks or something. That's what I'm thinking as we hit the first porcupine. Hiking, Frank called it. We used to make fun of him, me and the other guys in our class. "Sir Frank, the Gentleman, going for his hike, " or "Sir Frank, is it time to take a hike?" And this is what I'm thinking as I swerve to miss the next porcupine, as we head for the soft, sandy shoulder, the ditch—that we shouldn't have said those things to Frank, that I, in particular, should have been better.

In the Western, I wreck the car because that's what the villain, or Indian, does—he self-destructs, makes some crucial, stupid mistake, and the heroes gain advantage. He does not swerve to miss a family of porcupines; he does not swerve because his brother is dead, a suicide. He does not swerve because no matter how smart you are, the story can end badly.

I am in the ditch, semi-conscious for a minute, maybe two, and then there are sirens.

"Leland."

It's Katherine, who still doesn't look like a dance hall girl or a damsel. She's standing over me, her hand stopping the blood that wants to run from my forehead down my face.

"Leland," she says again, and I'm beginning to worry she's not all right.

"I'm fine," she says, as if answering the question, and I wonder if I've asked it, if I didn't hear or can't remember.

"Go," I say.

The sirens' complaint grows louder. Katherine pulls away from my forehead and takes my hands in hers. She puts my right hand on my head, and I feel the blood, warm against my fingers, and the

complaint turns to a wail, and the noise and lights are making the last turn.

"Go," I say, and she does, this time without arguing.

Later, I will think about this moment more than all the others. How I lie there, the sirens coming on. How I watch her cross the road and disappear.

I am not conscious for the rest of it—Deputy Carl Simpson and his cousin Richard arriving to arrest me, the Life Flight to the hospital in Sioux Falls, where I stay until trial, until I come here.

Sister Mary Alice's eyes are wet. I take this as a good sign. The extras sit still in their chairs, awaiting a big finale. In the Western, the Indian always dies. But, even at my trial, there could be no dead-Indian talk, because it wasn't murder, because Sheriff Jeff, in the end, does not die. In this finale, since I'm not planning to die, either, I do the next best thing for the story. Sister Mary Alice is urging it; she's got her bony hand back on mine. "Leland," she says in a stage whisper, "this is the part where it's best to show remorse, to show how much you've changed."

And so I do. I play the reformed Indian, the civilized Indian—as if prison ever civilizes anyone. I say that I am so, so sorry—true, in both versions. I say I have learned a lot in prison. I say if released, I will not make the same mistakes again, which may be true or false but probably is somewhere in between.

The extras beam, shuffle their papers. I think for a moment Sister Mary Alice might weep. They file out, and I wait to be taken back to my cell. In the Western, they jump on their horses and ride off into the sunset, justice served. In the Midwestern, Extra Number Four jumps Extra Number Two's station wagon in the parking lot, and they drive off, batteries charged, but they're late getting home for dinner.

In both versions, I wait for the man to come and take me to my cell. I play back the rest of the story, the part I missed out on but

have been told, on the phone and in letters—the best part of the Midwestern, the part I keep safe.

It is the night of the "gun fight," the porcupines, the wreck. Katherine has made it back to town and withstood questioning, making Deputy Simpson sorry he bothered to ask her any questions at all.

Hours later, all of Talbot asleep, Katherine "borrows" the keys to her sister's truck. She heads north on Highway 86, driving slow to avoid deer. She's jerking and jumping at every shadow, every noise, real or imagined, but she makes it to the scene of the wreck and pulls her sister's truck in behind the El Camino. She will say that when she arrives, she does not feel alone, keeps looking over her shoulder for an interloper, a deer at least, but there is no one. We will both think *Frank*, but neither will say it. There is bright yellow police tape around the car, but Katherine is not here for it. The porcupines have been moved off to the side of the road opposite the car. She tries not to look at them; she is not here for them, either.

In between, on the asphalt lie their spent quills. The way of decorating before beads was to use porcupine quills. Women took the quills into their mouths, softening, then flattening them with their teeth before threading them onto birchbark or into cloth.

Later, Katherine will make something for me out of the quills, though she won't tell me what it is, of course. But that night, she is down on her knees in the middle of the two-lane, underneath the waxing moon, and it is enough for me to imagine her there, kneeling on the dotted line, her hands spread out, searching, palms down—like upside-down prayer—which may be the very kind a story like this needs.

Contributors' Notes

James Belflower's awards include two Jovanavich prizes and recognition in the *Banyan Review* and Milton Dorfman poetry contests. His work appears or is forthcoming in: *Jacket*, *Octopus*, *LIT*, *Denver Quarterly*, *First Intensity*, *New Review of Literature*, and *Barrow Street*, among others. He runs PotLatchPoetry.org, a site dedicated to the free exchange of poetry books, journals, chapbooks and ephemera.

Sarah Blackman received her MFA from the University of Alabama in 2007, where she now teaches literature and creative writing. Her most recent poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Laurel Review*, *Third Coast*, *The American Poetry Journal* and *The National Poetry Review*.

Lisa Bower's work has appeared or is forthcoming from such places as *The Southern Review, Subtropics, Boxcar Poetry Review, Mid-American Review, The Florida Review,* and *The Mississippi Review.* She is allergic to many things, including tuna (chicken of the sea) and chicken (yes, really). Lisa currently lives in Roanoke, Virginia.

Catherine Brown holds an MFA from Warren Wilson College. Her fiction has appeared in *Meridian*. She is the last writer in America without her own website. She lives and works in Chicago, pining for her Texas homeland during the long winter nights.

Kristen Eliason is currently pursuing an MFA at the University of Notre Dame. She hails from Utah, where she graduated with a BA in English from Brigham Young University and worked for the Deseret Morning News. In 2006 she moved

to Japan where she ate one of everything and placed in the Nojiriko Issa Haiku Contest. Kristen is published in *thepaperbagwriter, The Bend, Liquid Magazine,* and *Inscape,* and has edited several literary journals. Her favorite things, in no particular order, are traveling, writing, singing and playing with her dog.

Shawn Fawson is a current resident of Salt Lake City, UT where she works part time as a bereavement counselor and full time as mother of three. Recently, her poems have appeared in *Natural Bridge*, *Vallum, The Bitter Oleander,* and *Mid-American Review.* She is currently pursuing an MFA at Vermont College.

Michele N. Harmeling is an MFA student studying poetry at Eastern Washington University. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Alaska Quarterly Review* and *The Adirondack Review*. When not writing, she can be found training with the amateur boxing team at Howard Street Boxing Club in Spokane, WA. She is a Writer-in-Residence for the Get Lit! Young Writers Program, and teaches creative writing in elementary schools.

Terita Heath-Wlaz lives and works in San Diego with her boyfriend Scott and their two cats, Happy and Buddy Cianci. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Cream City Review*, *Court Green*, *Coconut*, *Sonora Review* and others. She hopes to begin pursuing an MFA in the near future.

Toni Jensen is métis and is from the Midwest. Her short story "At the Powwow Hotel" won the 2006 Katherine Anne Porter Prize for fiction from *Nimrod International Literary Journal* and is forthcoming in the anthologies *Stories from the South: The*

Year's Best, 2007 and *Best New Stories from the Southwest, 2007*. She has published fiction in *Fiction International*, *Passages North*, and *Tusculum Review*, among others. She teaches creative writing at Texas Tech University.

Ben Kopel's poems have previously appeared in *Diagram*, *Forklift-Ohio*, and *The Agriculture Reader*. He is originally from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and is currently working on his MFA at the Iowa Writer's Workshop. He still loves his parents and he still loves the old world.

Frederick Lord (Rick) is the Assistant Dean of Liberal Arts at Southern New Hampshire University, where he also teaches English and serves as poetry editor for *Amoskeag*, SNHU's literary magazine. A finalist in this year's Dogwood Poetry Prize, Lord has recently appeared in *Blueline, Switched-on Gutenberg, kaleidowhirl, Bent Pin Quarterly* and *caesura.* He and his wife Heather, a painter, live in Bow, N. H.

Nathan Oates has published fiction and essays in the *Antioch Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Fugue*, *Mississippi Review* and elsewhere. His stories have twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and his collection of stories was a finalist for the 2007 Iowa Short Fiction Award. He earned his M.A. from the Writing Seminars at The Johns Hopkins University and is currently a Creative Writing Fellow at the University of Missouri-Columbia, where he is working on his Ph.D. in English. He lives with his wife, Amy Day Wilkinson, and their two dogs.

Liz Prato is a massage therapist in Portland, Oregon. Her fiction and essays have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Subtropics*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Gertrude Press*, *Contrary*, and *ZYZZYVA*. She's currently working on a novel about grief, art, sexual identity, and the cosmos.

Jendi Reiter's first book, *A Talent for Sadness*, was published in 2003 by Turning Point Books. Her work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The New Criterion*, *Mudfish*, *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Alligator Juniper*, *MARGIE: The American Journal of Poetry*, *Best American Poetry 1990* and many other publications. Awards include first prize for poetry in *Alligator Juniper*'s 2006 National Writing Contest, first prize in the 2007 Elizabeth Simpson Smith Award for a Short Story (Charlotte Writers' Club), second prize in the 2007 *Literal Latte* Fiction Awards, second prize in the 2007 Utmost Christian Writers Poetry Contest, a $2,500 third prize in the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg 2005 Poetry Prize contest, two awards from the Poetry Society of America, the 2004 Olay Total Effects Fine Lines Poetry Prize, and the 2002 Mildred Werba Award from the Baltimore Writers' Alliance. She was also a finalist for the 2006 Anhinga Prize, the 2005 *Black Warrior Review* Poetry Contest and the 1998 Yale Series of Younger Poets. She is the editor of *Poetry Contest Insider*, an online guide to over 750 literary contests, published by www.winningwriters.com.

Lynn Veach Sadler, a former college president, has published widely in academics and creative writing. Editor, poet, fiction/creative nonfiction writer, and playwright, she has a poetry collection forthcoming (RockWay Press). One story appears in Del Sol's *Best of 2004 Butler Prize Anthology*; another won the 2006 Abroad Writers Contest/Fellowship (France). *Not Your Average Poet* (on Robert Frost) was a *Pinter Review* Prize for Drama Silver Medalist in 2005. Her creative non-fiction publications include two Bernard Ashton Raborg Essay Awards from *Amelia*.

Jennifer Shepard is an MFA student in the Creative Writing Program at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington. Her poetry has appeared in the online journal, *Prick of the Spindle*.

Craig Snyder is an amateur writer and web designer from Michigan. He has had a number of micro and flash fiction stories published at places like *elimae* and *Zygote in My Coffee*. He runs the micro fiction web magazine *Rumble* and the Micro Fiction mini site. You can find more of his works at his personal site The Empty Head (emptyhead.rumble.sy2.com).

Kelly Spitzer lives in the Pacific Northwest. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Binnacle*, *Redivider*, *Cream City Review*, *3:AM Magazine*, *Cezanne's Carrot*, *flashquake*, *Vestal Review*, *NOÖ Journal*, and other publications. She is a recipient of a 2008 Pushcart Prize nomination, and an editor with the flash fiction publication *SmokeLong Quarterly*. Visit her at www.kellyspitzer.com.

Marianne Villanueva grew up in the Philippines and now lives and teaches in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is the author of the short story collections *Ginseng and Other Tales from Manila* and *Mayor of the Roses: Stories*, as well as co-editor of the Filipino women's anthology, *Going Home to a Landscape*.

Marcus Wicker lives and teaches in Bloomington, where he is a Yusef Komunyakaa Fellow at Indiana University's Graduate Creative Writing Program. The recipient of the 2007 Hughes, Diop, Knight Poetry Award at Chicago State University, Marcus has work forthcoming in *WarpLand*.

About the Judges

Frederick Barthelme is author of 14 books, including *Moon Deluxe*, *Second Marriage*, *Tracer*, *Two Against One*, *Natural Selection*, *The Brothers*, *Painted Desert*, and *Bob the Gambler*. He is an occasional contributor to *The New Yorker* and has published in *GQ*, *Epoch*, *Playboy*, *Esquire*, *TriQuarterly*, and elsewhere. A retrospective collection of stories, *The Law of Averages*, was published by Counterpoint Press in November 2000 and released in paperback in August 2001. A new novel titled *Waveland* is forthcoming from Doubleday in January of 2009.

Julia Johnson, a native of New Orleans, was a Henry Hoyns Fellow at the University of Virginia, where she took her MFA. in 1995. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *Third Coast*, *Poetry International*, *64*, and *New Orleans Review*. Her first book of poems, *Naming the Afternoon*, was published by the Louisiana State University Press in 2002. She has been awarded an Academy of American Poets Prize three times and is the winner of the Fellowship of Southern Writers' 2003 New Writing Award.