Juked

#6

Winter 2008/2009

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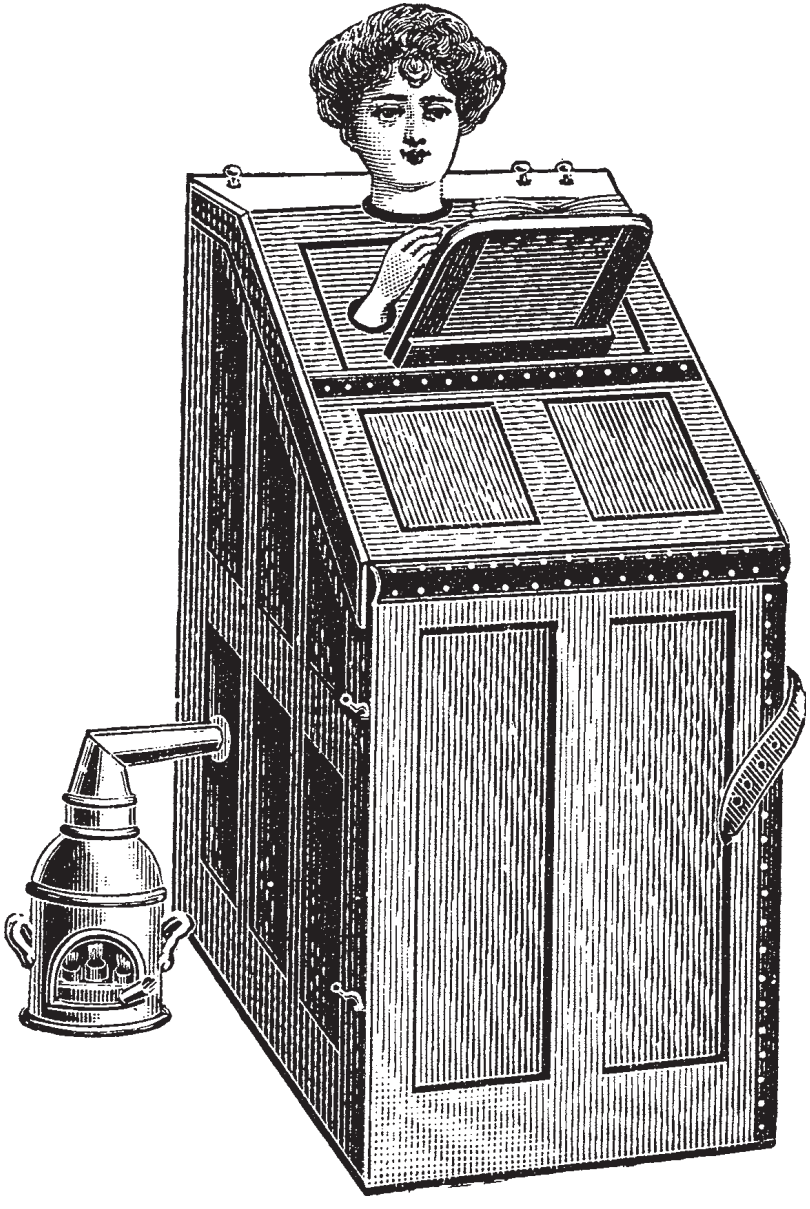

Emma Straub

Abraham's Enchanted Forest

Old rides were easy to come by if you knew where to look. Places went out of business all the time. Abraham drove to Pennsylvania and Ohio to check out people's old Scramblers and Whack-a-Moles and Zip-Dee-Doos. If Greta was out of school, she went with him and gave her opinion on the rusting metal giants. She was sixteen now and could be trusted with important decisions. He rarely bought anything, though. Most of the time he'd come home and say, You know what? I've got an idea! Then he'd vanish into his shop for a few hours or a few days and come out with something strung together with pieces of old tires. All of the attractions at the Forest were homemade except for the lonely Ferris wheel, which poked dramatically over the tree line. There was a guy in Big Sur who carved things with a chainsaw, and he and Abraham had some kind of deal going. It had something to do with weed. Every now and then a truck would pull up and deposit a burl dwarf or wizard or unicorn, and there'd be something else inside, too. Abraham liked it when things looked like they could have occurred organically, like when a tree stump looked enough like a miniature castle to label it as such, but you'd still have to squint and maybe put in some windows and turrets in your head.

Greta knew that things were confusing on purpose. The Enchanted Forest was an actual place, that's why lots of people stopped. On the map, there was a small triangle of green, labeled *Enchanted National Forest and State Park*, and Abraham's Enchanted Forest roadside attraction was on the highway headed in that direction. Before Greta was born, her parents Abraham and Judy had made enough

signs to divert even the most dedicated of road warriors. *Look out, goblins ahead! Magical pony crossing! Entering Fairy Dust Area! Food! Rides! Unexplainable phenomena! Visit the Enchanted Forest, Five Miles!* His goal was to be the Northeast's answer to Wall Drug and South of the Border, but to actually give people a good reason to stop. Sure, he wanted them to pay admission, but more than that, he wanted to give them a worthwhile experience. He wanted to give them poetry and apple pie, the good kind of Americana. He and Judy had bought the land for nothing and then built the whole Forest from scratch, except for the trees. Greta knew that tourists considered the Forest a rip-off; after all, it was mainly a path through big old trees with some plaques telling you to look out for some imaginary thing, a Ferris wheel, and a place to eat lunch. But she also knew the truth: most people didn't look hard enough.

Apparently, you could see the upper rim of the Enchanted Forest's Ferris wheel all the way from New York City, which was thirty miles south. At least that's what Abraham liked to say. He was big-bellied and big-voiced and liked to say a lot of things. Sometimes Greta made lists in her spiral notebook. *Today, Abraham made a speech about different ways to reuse plastic water-bottles and it lasted for twenty-six minutes. Almost all of the ideas involved using way more plastic. What if no one wants to go inside a Trojan horse made of garbage?* In her sixteen years, she couldn't remember ever calling her father by anything but his first name. Abraham's enormous gray and white speckled beard was reason enough.

Greta's parents met in 1975, back when things were cheap. Her mother, Judy, was driving across the country in an old school bus with her then-boyfriend, who was a candle maker. The boyfriend—Greta could never remember his name, no matter how hard she tried—would set up camp somewhere and make candles long enough to sell them at craft fairs and farmer's markets, and then, when he'd made enough money to last a few hundred miles,

off they'd go. The problem was, one day the bus wouldn't start, and he decided he'd rather keep moving than stick around and make more candles. He gave Judy the bus and the buckets of wax and all the spools of heavy string for the wicks, and he was gone. For the next month, Judy and the bus sat in the parking lot and made candles on the asphalt. That was until she met Abraham. The way he liked to tell it, Abraham fell in love with the bus first, then Judy. It was a win-win situation.

The old, yellow bus now sat on the edge of the Enchanted Forest parking lot, as though a crowd of fifth-graders was on an endless field-trip. They'd had it towed. You couldn't see much of the Forest from the parking lot; that was the point. You had to pay your money before you saw exactly what you were paying for. It was always fun when the lot was full—when she was little, Greta would wander in between the parked cars, weaving in and out, trying to count all the states from the license plates. Every now and then there was something exciting, like California or Colorado or Alaska, but mostly it was New York, New Jersey, Connecticut. All the ones she could spell without writing them in the air with her finger.

Of course, these days if the lot was full enough to have cars from Alaska, it meant that Greta was supposed to be inside, taking tickets or bussing tables or walking around smiling at people. She was supposed to be a fairy. Judy'd sewn her some wings. The costume really wasn't so bad. Greta could wear whatever she wanted as long as she had on the glittery wings, which she could put on and take off like a gossamer backpack. Most of the time, Greta put them on over her t-shirt or sweatshirt, depending on the weather. They were adjustable. Here's what Greta liked to wear: normal clothes. Not the kind that the popular girls wore, the ones whose parents had moved from the city, with brand names glistening off their breast pockets and waistbands, but the kind of clothes you wouldn't think twice about. That was her goal: to blend. The wings made it more diffi-

cult, but when she was at home, what was the point? There was no one to convince.

During the off-season, the long months between September and May, Abraham made money by going into local public schools and libraries and doing readings as Walt Whitman. He wore his cleanest clothes and a hat, though the beard and the voice were the real selling points. People would stand up and applaud, except for the small children, who would cower behind their parents' legs and occasionally burst into tears.

The tenth grade had read *Leaves of Grass* in English class that spring. Greta knew what was coming. The school wasn't big; everyone else knew, too. The teacher probably assigned the book because she'd seen Abraham do his shtick at the Enchanted Forest Public Library. High schools were always a joke in May, no matter where you were. The seniors were already into their colleges or technical schools or had jobs at the mall, and the juniors could see the light at the end of the tunnel. For everyone else, it was just the looming summer, and the sunlight, and the tanning lotion. During the year, it was easy to pretend that she had dreamed up the Forest and her parents and that, really, she had a normal house and a sister or two and a neutered dog, but once the summer was underway, it wasn't so bad. Abraham was funny when she had no one to compare him to.

Lincoln High School sat in the middle of the town proper, which was a fifteen minute bus ride down Route 17 from the Enchanted Forest. People had started getting their learner's permits, and riders were dropping like flies, but Greta didn't mind. She couldn't imagine what kind of car Abraham would help her buy. The school bus, at least, was neutral.

He'd beat her to school somehow, despite the bus's head start. When Greta pulled open the heavy door to the main corridor, people

were already giggling in a way that was impossible to misunderstand.

"Ahoy, matey," a boy from her geometry class called out. There was a portrait of Herman Melville in the mall's Barnes and Noble, and the beard was similar. She nodded and kept walking, holding her book bag tight against her chest.

Abraham's voice reached her first. It was "O Captain, My Captain," and it was coming from the direction of the cafeteria. Greta knew most of the big hits by heart, not on purpose, just because the house wasn't that big and Abraham liked to practice. Greta took a minute to picture Abraham in his Walt Whitman outfit, standing in front of the hot food trays. There were three bays for food—gross, grosser, and grossest. She usually ate from the first one, the salad bar. Greta imagined Abraham sticking his chubby finger into the plastic bucket of Italian dressing, and picking up a handful of cherry tomatoes without using the tongs. He loved cafeteria food. She knew that Abraham would stick around to eat, either before or after he spoke to her class, still wearing the Whitman outfit, and undoubtedly still in character. Greta could picture all the nerdy, bookish kids loving him, and crowding around his table. They would all look make-believe and pale next to him, imaginary. They would slop up their applesauce and macaroni and cheese and not believe their luck. Abraham could do that to people, make them feel important, like they had something interesting to say. She took a breath and rounded the corner, her sneakers squeaking on the glossy red tiles. She looked through the glass-paned door at her father.

Abraham, or rather Walt, wasn't just standing in front of the lunch trays. One of his hands held aloft a slotted metal spoon, and the other was clamped over his heart. His eyes were closed. It was only the middle stanza. Greta closed her eyes, too, and waited for it to be over. The room was quiet aside from her father's voice and the clinking of cheap, school-issue flatware. There was going to be applause, and laughter. The ratio seemed unimportant.

Judy was in charge of the restaurant, which had a lunch counter and five tables, too small for the busloads of Japanese tourists. In season, there was always a line out the door. Everyone paid cash and bussed their own tables—it was part of the appeal. Greta's favorite part of the entire Forest was her mother's apple pie. Some writer had mentioned it in a guidebook once—*You've Got to Eat This!*—and now people drove out of their way just to order a piece. In July and August, Judy baked fifteen pies a day. She'd been almost forty when Greta was born; Abraham was a decade older. It was some kind of miracle, Judy liked to say. "My tubes were all going the wrong way," she told Greta. "You were the only one who knew where to go."

The restaurant was painted green both inside and out, with fake vines winding their way up the walls in between the tables. Judy had drawn each of the leaves individually, so they were all slightly different, like snowflakes or the wooden creatures lining the path to the door.

"What do you think about a strawberry pie today, honey? Or maybe something with only red ingredients? So you were never sure what you were eating?" Judy set a fork and a knife at each place setting. It was still early enough in the season to experiment. Later in the summer, people would complain. Greta watched her mother bend over the tables, stretching her small back. She didn't wear any theme-clothing, only stuff you could order from the L.L. Bean catalog. When her hair was loose, it hung down to the middle of her spine, but it was never loose during the daytime. Every day, Judy twisted her hair into two long braids and fastened them to the top of her head with bobby-pins. Her hair was beginning to be more gray than brown. The effect was something like an aging Swedish milkmaid. It was her only concession to the fairytales happening around her, in her pies, on the walls.

"Sure, Mom." Greta had Abraham's body and Judy's face. She was taller than her mother by eight inches, and sometimes Judy still

seemed surprised to have given birth to something so big and patted her daughter on the shoulder, shaking her head. Their faces were the same, though. Small ovals with tight brown eyes, and plump, pale lips. Greta liked that they looked similar—it was proof that there were some things in the world more powerful than Abraham. "Red pie sounds good."

"It could be 'Rose Red Rumble'!" Judy said, excited. It was good to give things theme names; that made people feel like it was worth three dollars a slice. The apple pie was called 'Sleeping Beauty's Revenge.' Judy and Greta wrote most of the fables that appeared on plaques around the property. They retold fairytales, sometimes with two different versions, Disney or Grimm. Greta had always preferred the Disney versions, which appalled her parents. Abraham would rail for hours against the dumbing-down of Cinderella. It was nothing without the bloody toe stubs, he said, nothing at all. When Greta was little, she'd let her father dip her feet in red paint and then run, screaming, through the crowd.

In June, when people started to pile into their cars and RVs and station wagons, Greta came up with an attraction of her own: Who Wants to Kiss a Fairy? It was located behind the dining room or a little ways into the woods or wherever else no one usually went. She didn't charge; that would be gross. Instead, she kept an eye out for interested parties, and gave them The Look when it was time. Here were all the boys who ever came to the Enchanted Forest and looked like they deserved a vacation fairy: the blond from Massachusetts with all those sisters; the tall, tan one from Florida who was alone with his mother; the funny one with the red hair who was soft all over. Most of the boys who came to the Forest just glanced at her boobs in the fairy costume and didn't even say hello.

It was only kissing, nothing gross. The blond one was the first. He was reading about Jack and the Beanstalk underneath Beanstalk's

Ladder, the tallest tree in the Forest. Greta sidled up next to him and plucked at her wings, which she put on backwards, so that they were growing out of her chest, a concession to the boredom of the endless summer days. The blond blushed and didn't say hello, but she could tell that he was interested. It was a silent flirtation. They both looked around the corner, where his mother and three sisters had already scurried. A blond head soared above on the Ferris wheel. They had at least five minutes.

If the Enchanted Forest were in a movie, they'd always be playing Bob Dylan or Van Morrison or maybe even Leonard Cohen in the background. Greta thought about that a lot. Sometimes when she was taking a shower or helping her mom in the restaurant, she'd imagine what kind of scene it would be, and what would be playing to set the mood. Most of the day would end up in a montage; very rarely were things important enough for a whole scene. Her favorite movies were the ones where people just did normal stuff: go to school dances, eat dinner with their parents, take walks and talk to each other about their problems. The point was, no one in the movies ever seemed to realize how good they had it. No one ever lived on the side of the highway with Walt Whitman and a bunch of wooden dwarves.

Abraham was trying to fix the Hall of Mirrors. It was the gardening shed until he took it over. It was too close to everything else not to be a part of the tour, he said. Then you tell me where I'm going to put my shovels, Judy said back. The shed was too small to fit more than five or six people at once, four if one of them was Abraham.

"Don't you think you should come up with something different to call it? Like, if you're calling it a hall, don't you think it should have a hall?" Greta sat on the ground next to her father's toolbox, which wasn't a box at all, but a stained canvas bag.

"People come for the attractions, babygirl. It's all how you present your case." Abraham had briefly considered going to law school, several times. His voice boomed from inside the shed. It was missing a roof, so it wasn't even a shed anymore, it was just a bunch of walls.

"I see," she said, lying down in the grass. The cool, flat flagstone path crossed under the backs of her knees. Greta looked straight up at the sun and imagined that she was tied to railroad tracks. If she stayed put long enough, someone was sure to come along to rescue her.

"Hand me the hammer, will you." Abraham stuck his hand out of the hole where the ceiling should have been.

Greta rolled onto her side and blinked enough times to have the world make sense again. The clouds were solid masses of marshmallow fluff, the kind that Judy would never let her eat. If she lived inside a television commercial, she would be able to reach up and take a pinch. Greta extended two fingers and tried, squeezing nothing but dumb, blue air. "I'll be right on it, Chief," she said.

Every year, during the high season, Abraham hired Joe from the library circulation desk to come and work the Ferris wheel. Joe was seventy and had fought in a war—Greta wasn't sure which one. He wore an army green cap with a short bill to keep the sun out of his eyes, although his freckled and sagging skin suggested decades of reckless summers and melanoma.

Joe stood by the gate to the Ferris wheel. He took his job very, very seriously. There were safety issues, he knew, and he was in charge. Abraham liked him because he never smiled, which Abraham thought was hilarious.

"Afternoon, Joe," Greta said. She plucked at her left wing. It was sticky outside, and the straps adhered to her bare skin.

"Greta." Joe nodded, and continued to stare straight ahead.

People were milling around the Forest, as much as one could mill around. There was a single path, and arrows pointed you in the right direction. Unless you hopped a fence or consciously disobeyed Abraham's 'Trespassing is for trolls' signs, there was only one way to go. But people seemed to like it anyway, at least most of the time. Women usually took pictures of their children standing next to the wooden dwarves outside the Snow White cottage. Sometimes they even climbed onto the tiny wooden beds, even though they weren't supposed to. Greta never stopped them. Teenaged siblings shoved one another into trees. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Greta's room was in the back of the house, and looked out into the trees. They were big and natural and Abraham wasn't allowed to cut them down. The Forest and the highway were on the other side. Looking out her bedroom window, the house could have been anywhere in town, in any town in the county.

Judy knocked, and then opened the door without waiting for a response. She was carrying a hamper full of clean laundry, and dumped it out unceremoniously onto Greta's twin bed. She'd unpinned her braids, and they swung around her shoulders.

"Thanks, Judy," Greta said. The lumps of clothes on the bed made faces: this sleeve was a mouth, that sock an eye. There were highlights of living at home: when Judy washed her clothes, they were always softer and better than Greta remembered them. Abraham's beef stew that cooked in red wine all day long and made the house smell like it was somewhere in France. Knowing that the keys to the school bus were hanging on a hook in the kitchen, as though anyone could take them and drive it off into the sunset. Sometimes Greta took the keys and sat in the driver's seat and pretended she was on the highway—a different highway, one that went somewhere.

"Sure, love." Judy came over with the empty hamper hiked against her hip and stood on her tippy-toes to kiss Greta's forehead. She smelled like caramelized butter and soap. They stood next to

each other and stared out the window into the night, though Greta looked mostly at their reflection in the glass. The fairytales Greta had always liked most were the ones from Judy's childhood—the banker father, the homemaker mother, the tidy house in the suburbs of Long Island. Her grandfather had worn a suit every day of his adult life. He'd had a tie rack. Her grandmother wore pearls. It was almost too much to bear, the thousands of choices that led up to Greta's existence. It just all seemed so unlikely. How could you know which parking lot to sleep in, which wax to use, which tie to wear? The choices went back farther than the trees, back so far they became myth. Greta had never met her grandparents. There was something about Abraham they didn't agree with.

In August, cars pulled in and out all day long. Women had yappy little dogs on leashes and sometimes even in their purses. Two boys, older than her, but still not grown-ups, came into the ticket booth on their own.

"Want tickets for the Forest, for the Ferris wheel, or both?" Greta's pointer finger hovered over the cash register.

The boys looked at each other, which gave Greta the opportunity to do the same. The one on the left was shorter, darker. His hair was so dark brown that it was almost black, like in comic books. The sun was directly overhead, and Greta almost expected to see little illustrated windowpanes when he turned his cheek towards his friend.

The other one spoke first. He was taller and thinner. Judy would have called him a stringbean. "Uh, I don't know. Which would you recommend?" he said.

Greta stroked the tips of her wings. "I'd do both. I mean, are you in a hurry?"

They were not.

Boys from school were out of the question. If they were interested, it invariably had more to do with wanting to get a blow job on the Ferris wheel and then tell everyone at school. It didn't matter

that she hadn't done that, wouldn't do that. When people heard that you lived in an amusement park, they'd believe anything. When boys came from other places, though, it was like the opening scenes from *Grease*. No one from home was there to watch, so you could say whatever you wanted. No one would ever know how nice you'd been, how sweet. Everyone always promised to write and to call. It almost didn't matter that they never did.

The stringbean's name was Jeff; the other one was Nathan. They were from somewhere in Ohio where they had the biggest roller coasters in the country. They were driving home from a trip to New York. Stringbean thought he remembered the Forest from a trip he'd taken with his parents as a kid. They liked the Ferris wheel, and Nathan said he liked her wings.

After selling them tickets, Greta took the boys on a private tour of the property. It was the end of a slow day. If someone really needed to get in, they could buy a ticket from Judy at the restaurant. Greta left a sign.

The first stop was the other side of the old barn, where the imaginary unicorns lived. "Don't bother looking," Greta said. "There aren't any." Nathan whinnied, and pawed the ground with his sneaker.

The second stop was the path up the hill. Greta knew better than to take them to the house; they didn't want to see that she really lived there. They wanted her to be a magical tree fairy, who only wore wings and flip-flops and never went to the bathroom. A few feet up the trail, the path veered to the right. Greta hopped the fence and led them to the left.

They sat in the still-roofless Hall of Mirrors, which had still yet to acquire either a hall or a mirror. They each picked a wall and leaned against it, their feet all touching in the middle. It was just starting to get dark, and overhead flocks of birds settled onto branches and told each other what was for dinner.

"So what do you do for fun around here?" The Stringbean waved his feet back and forth, sending his Converse All-Stars into Greta, then Nathan, then Greta again.

"Oh, you know, stuff. Gets pretty wild, as you can imagine," Greta said. They were maybe twenty. Greta did the math and mentally bumped herself up to eighteen. There was no reason not to. Nobody wanted to feel creepy.

There were things Greta could tell in the Forest that she couldn't at school, like which boy wanted to kiss her. The Stringbean was the chattier of the two, but Nathan looked at her in a way that she recognized, like he was trying to put together a stereo without having read the instructions. Every now and then there was a breakthrough, but mostly his brow stayed tight with concentration. He kept his eyes on Greta's mouth. She could see it, even in the dark.

"Do you get out of here much?" Nathan asked. He had small hands, almost feminine, and he rubbed them together, making a swooshing sound. "You should come to Ohio. There's all kinds of crazy stuff there."

He was handsome, but didn't really seem to know it. That was the best kind of boy, Greta knew. If they'd gone to the same school, he might still have talked to her in the halls, might still have looked at her that way. His eyes were a better brown than hers, richer. There was so much to see in the dark, if you really looked.

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Greta thought about the part in the movie where she would just decide to go somewhere, with boys she'd just met. They would stop at the same trucker diners that Abraham liked, but the food would taste completely different. Sometimes, when she was in the right mood, Judy would talk about her life before Abraham, all the places she'd been, where she'd eaten the best pieces of pie in the whole country. Greta liked to think that someday she would have those stories, too. She and Nathan would drink coffee all day long, just so they could talk more. They would wish that Ohio were farther away. Maybe when they hit Ohio they'd just keep

going. Eventually Stringbean would understand, and he'd buy a bus ticket home.

"There's the Boy with the Boot. In the middle of this fountain, there's like this little boy. A statue. I don't know." Nathan shrugged. "In Cleveland, there's the world's largest rubber stamp."

Greta nodded. "What about movie theaters? Or places where the waitresses wear rollerskates?" Maybe in some states, it was still 1975, or even earlier.

Stringbean pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and they all took one. Soon the glowing red tips were the only things they could see. Greta started writing words in the air, and the boys had to guess. She wrote *Ohio*, with all those loop-de-loops. She wrote *Hello*. She wrote her name.

The Forest was closed. Greta could hear Abraham pulling down shutters and flipping switches. Nathan and the reluctant Stringbean drove to the campgrounds in the Enchanted Forest State Park for the night, so that they could come back the next day. Everyone agreed that they hadn't gotten their money's worth.

At night, Abraham liked to drink wine and smoke a few joints. Judy valiantly tried to keep up, but her body just wasn't big enough. She had one big mug full of red wine and declared herself tippled.

"I'm going to bed!" she announced. She kissed Greta and Abraham on their foreheads and padded down the hall to the bedroom, wiggling her bottom slightly as she went, and sometimes wagging a finger. Greta thought there was probably always music playing inside her mother's head, music only she could hear.

Abraham passed his joint to Greta. The kitchen table was dark and wide, old wood. It had been a door in the barn, before the barn became the ticket booth and the Abandoned Unicorn Rehabilitation Center. Outside the window, the Forest was dark, the forest was

dark, the world was dark. Only the light over the Enchanted Forest sign still lit the night, and the road at the bottom of the sloping hill.

"So," Greta said, sucking in a cloud of smoke. "Do you ever think about what would have happened if Mom's bus hadn't broken down here?" Fate was an issue. The gray cloud rumbled around in her throat, drawing maps to places that might have been, places that could be.

"That bus and I," Abraham said, "have an unspoken connection. It would have found me eventually." He beckoned for the joint with a flick of his eyebrow. The coarse hairs over his upper lip somehow managed to escape being singed. The smell was warm and skunky. Greta wondered if people driving by could smell it, too.

"You know that's not what I meant." Greta's eyes felt tighter in her skull, as though they were receding further into her head. She put her palms over them to make sure they stayed put.

"Well, babygirl, some questions are beyond us all." Abraham extended his arms over his head, leaning back with the joint in his mouth. He tilted his neck so that his face was pointed toward the ceiling, and let out a smoky burp.

"You are disgusting," Greta said.

"That may be, but I am yours." Abraham rocked forward in his chair, and patted Greta's hand with his own. She wondered what it was like to have a normal-sized father, what that would be like. Would you grow up and think everything else was normal, too? Would you see yourself everywhere, in every family's station wagon? How would you remember which family you belonged to?

The next day, Nathan came back alone. Stringbean waited at the park. When Nathan came back to the ticket booth, he smiled. His teeth weren't perfect, but they were close, with only a slight snaggle along the bottom row.

"Hi," Greta said.

"Hi," Nathan said back.

He was as good as anyone. There was something safe about his face, something that she knew she wouldn't love forever. In Ohio, roller coasters pierced the sky, unapologetically reaching for something higher than the earth. As far as she was concerned, there was no going back.

It was a Monday, and the park was closed. Judy was at a day-long meditation retreat in Rhinebeck, and Abraham was being Walt at the Enchanted Forest Public Library—his one appointment of the summer season. Greta packed a small duffel bag—wings, underwear, socks—and took it with her in Nathan's car. She couldn't leave without saying goodbye.

The Library was only two rooms long, with low ceilings and brown carpeting. No one went except for people with kids and lonely old people. The old people were Abraham's biggest fans. They came every time, no matter how frequently. The back room, where Abraham did his readings, smelled like pee and mildew.

Greta and Nathan had to stand in the back; all the seats were taken. Their wrists might have touched, but they didn't hold hands. Two ladies had their plastic bonnets on; the forecast looked iffy, and it was better to be safe.

Abraham was halfway through *Song of Myself*, and it sounded like he was gearing up to do the whole thing. Greta wondered if the old people knew it was okay to take bathroom breaks.

He was unscrewing the locks from the doors. He was unscrewing the doors from their jambs. Abraham's voice bounced off the walls and the ceiling. Foamy spit would begin to form in the corners of his mouth, if it hadn't already. The halves of his cheeks not covered with hair would begin to color, peach to pink, then pink to red.

If Abraham were Walt Whitman, not just for pretend but for real, he'd write poems about the Forest, and about her, and about Judy's pies and the view from the top of the Ferris wheel and the burl creatures from California. He'd say *I sing the apple pie electric*. He'd say

but oh daughter! My daughter! He'd say *I will live forever*. He'd say *Don't ever go*. Here was something that Greta thought about: if you had to pick the person you loved the most, who would it be? Greta thought that if someone asked Abraham that question, he would probably say her. Sure, parents were supposed to say things like that, but she thought he might even really mean it.

There were people who were just meant to get you somewhere, like Judy's old boyfriend the candlemaker. They weren't supposed to stick around. And sometimes people had to stay put. Greta thought of the Forest filled with drying candles, their wicks still connected and slung over low branches. She looked at Abraham, who was raising his hands to the sky. The room seemed bigger, somehow. There would be a better time to go.

Arlene Ang

Anima Nera

sonnenizio on a line from Jean Cassou

If I drink at your sky it is because
I fold into a paper doll. Thirst is second
nature to me. Items, like xeroxed copies
of Apollinaire's secret poems and an eyeliner

I've fished from the lake, replace
the ivory keys missing on the piano.
Grass in my hair identifies with the cat pawing
its face before the moon. I cut out

irises from your clouds and pin them
to sleep beside the ibis tablecloth.
A contrail's itinerary lances my mouth like licorice.
I skin the elms, a drought of sorts, to read

the ice crystals on your stars. Wind, strumming
the clothesline, lifts the hem of my idle skirt.

Like Blue Light Inside the Man with a Missing Arm

1
The working hand sloughs off the glove.
This is done with the aid of teeth. How cracked
the lips appear when pulled back—
and purpling.
Had the lips been flowers,
they would be crackling with ants.

And the mouth, they say, precludes
silence. There are many ways to make noises.
Eating the apple. Screaming at birds.
Or biting the rim of an empty plastic cup.

Once stripped, the hand takes a violence
of its own. Two moths circle the overturned chair
as if waiting for a flame.

{ sound of wood as it splinters,
sound of splinter as it enters the fragile
cushion of skin under the nail }

The admission of pain comes in secret:
when squashed, the fire ant smudges the page,
but leaves no blood.

The book is left open
on a chapter about how flowers on the parquet
may disappear under pieces of a broken vase.

2
For all its attachment, the arm
prosthesis is platonic. It is in the nature

of physical things to replace
each other.
How—even now—this scar
swallows and dominates the residual limb.

The back of the hand shimmers.
It may be because it is wet. It may be because,
when glass breaks, the fragments have
a powder of their own to recreate the skin.

{ rubbing the eyes to discard tears,
ripping out venetian blinds
to view what lies outside the window }

The wall paintings have been here
before and remember the fingers that held
the hammer. In order to see an apple for the first time,
Cèzanne took it upon himself to strip in front
of the apple.

If the loss somehow survives
the dead. One is stranded in the room. One is striking
blue light out of matches. The necessity to hold on.

3
Is it the missing arm that owns
the body. Or is it the man. Is it. The mouth has
so many cavities—each one leading
to drink.
The maggot has moved out
of the apple. And still the apple is.

The working hand throws
the bottle against a wall to conceal
its emptiness. How dry the shards glint
on the floor. And how the floor appears to weep.

The light is dancing a seizure.
In the room inside the man in the room held up by walls
that tell of places where one cannot go.

{ carving initials on the artificial
limb with a knife, coming
to terms with the loss of blood }

Remembrance, like a Barbie doll.
There's a box filled with those under the table—
possessions of a girl that have become
homeless after she stopped
coming home.

More ants have set out.
Their bodies alter the letters on the book
as they gather around to bear the dead away.

Ari Feld

If you want to hear ragtime musicians

If you want to hear ragtime musicians
clashing with the cavalry, ask me what
I'm doing this weekend. And if you think
that's acting too presumptuous just wait
until you see what a coronet does
to a saber—Oh, don't take it like that.
I'm going to ask you. That's an offer.
Could I start all over again after
you already love me? I've already
composed all the marches and symphonies
we'll need to conquer the deserts and seas.
Please, I want to get inside of you—like
sheet music getting inside low brass. Please
understand that your epaulets slay me.

Adam Henry Carriere

Comboland

"I wanna go the rodeo,"
skin-and-bones with the buzz cut said

over the rustle of his sighing bags
of denim, lowering to the sawdust

and the popcorn-stained t-shirts
upholstering pierced nipples

in the low tax bracket of rented love
and vermillion sands,

like saliva entering the young
body's old life in dollar-shaped drops.

Ron Burch

The Flower Pot

It rained for another week. That's when the leak started. It started in their bedroom, right above the dresser. The leak pooled and the ceiling started to sag and yellow, the water dripping out from one spot onto the blue carpeting underneath. The sound awoke him and he could hear it but couldn't find it at first. Finally, in her bedroom, he stepped in wet carpeting and saw it when he turned on the overhead light.

What is it? Michelle asked from the bed.

We have a leak.

Where?

Right here, he replied, pointing to the ceiling.

I don't see it, she said.

Right here. He put his finger to the spot on the ceiling where the water was dripping down.

Let me put on my glasses.

She groped around her nightstand and found her wire-rim glasses and put them on. She got out of bed, a little off-balance and groggy, wearing a long tan nightgown.

She came over, stood next to Dennis and looked at the leak.

What should we do? she asked.

Help me move the dresser.

They walked the dresser to the other wall, out of the leak. The top of the dresser had water stains already on it and its purplish veneer had discolored, ruining the dresser.

It got wet, he said.

Michelle looked at it, disappointed, That's okay.

Dennis put a bucket down on the floor to catch the water. Up in the ceiling they could hear the water leaking in from the roof and dripping down onto the wood beams in the attic and onto the plasterboard of the ceiling.

Maybe I should go in the attic, he said.

It might be too late for that, she said. I don't think we can get to that part the way the attic's built.

Let's keep the bucket here then, he said.

Outside it was still raining. Dennis looked out the window but couldn't see much.

Do you know if it's supposed to keep raining? he asked.

I'm not the weather girl, she said, slipping back into bed and taking off her glasses.

He got into bed and sat there looking at his hands.

We should move, he said.

I'm so sick of talking about moving every time we have a problem, she replied, turning away. This would also be happening at our house except we'd be paying for it.

The dripping in the bucket kept Dennis awake and eventually he went downstairs and slept on the couch with ESPN on.

Michelle slept right through it.

They'd been married about seven months and had been renting a house, but he wasn't happy with the house. It had too many problems that he didn't want to spend the money on since it wasn't their house; they weren't expensive problems but he was being cheap.

They had moved six times over the last six years they'd been engaged.

She liked the rented house. It was large and roomy, probably over 3000 square feet, he guessed. The landlord did not want to be bothered so he kept the rent low and the couple didn't complain about many of the problems.

There was a serious termite problem which was eating away at the house. Dennis called the landlord's management office to tell them how bad the termites were but was transferred to the landlord, Mr. Letter.

What do you want? he asked.

It's about termites, Dennis said.

Who is this?

We live at 901 S. Dunsmuir, Dennis said.

Is that one of my properties? Mr. Letter asked.

Yes, Dennis said. You have a terrible termite problem.

Uh huh.

They're eating through the mantelpiece in the living room, Dennis said.

Let me call you back, Mr. Letter said and hung up his phone.

I don't know why he's letting this happen to our house, Michelle said.

It's not our house, Dennis replied.

Their rented house was a Cape Cod painted white with blue trim. They had rented it while it was being fixed up and while the workmen were there painting and fixing holes in the walls, Dennis and Michelle would walk through the house, locating where they would put their furniture.

It's like you own the house, one of the painters said and laughed.

It's our first house, Michelle answered, smiling.

Her father, for Christmas, purchased for them three koi fish that they kept in the 30 gallon blue terracotta urn, or the flower pot as he called it, on the brick porch in the backyard underneath the jasmine that entwined around the white pergola. She named them Larry, Moe, and Curly. One of the koi, the yellow one, Curly, died after a couple of weeks, not eating enough was their guess, but the

black and the orange ones were getting larger and Dennis read that they grew to the size of their tank if they were fed too much.

The flower pot had a hole in the bottom of it and they used a cork to fill the hole so the flower pot wouldn't leak. Dennis didn't understand why his father-in-law would buy a container with a hole in it to store fish but it was a gift. Every morning Dennis would have to refill the flower pot since a third of the water had leaked out overnight.

When the electricity went out in two of the rooms in the rented house, he couldn't take it anymore. It was the back of the house, overlooking the brick porch. One of the rooms was the den and the other room was used as an office. They checked the circuit breakers but that didn't seem to be the problem. Dennis called Mr. Letter's management office and reported it to a woman who sounded bored and said she'd get back to them.

We don't have electricity to part of the house, Dennis said.

Okay, replied the woman.

This could be dangerous, Dennis emphasized.

Okay, replied the woman in the same tone of voice. We'll get back to you.

She hung up.

After Dennis called every day for three days, the office finally sent a man to fix the electricity.

In January the rains started and it poured heavily two weeks in a row. Dennis would get up in the middle of the night, during the rain, and go from room to room looking at the ceilings. From the bedroom to the hallway to the other bedroom to the bathroom and even into the closets. Michelle would tell him that it would be all right, but Dennis was waiting for the leaks to start, to start pooling on the ceilings above them. He thought he could hear a dripping sound in the attic but he couldn't find the right place.

Go back to bed, she said, weary.

In a minute, he replied, going back into the rooms all over again.

I think we should buy our own place, he said. They were in the kitchen. She was frying chicken and vegetables in a skillet and he was cleaning up a few of the dishes in the sink.

I don't know, she replied.

I'm tired of living this way.

But this is our first house, she said. We had our wedding reception here.

Can we just look? he asked.

She smiled and nodded and kissed him on the cheek. I love you, she said.

I love you too, he replied, putting away a dish.

The roofers from Mr. Letter's company were out the next day to fix the roof since the rain had stopped. Dennis could hear them climbing around on the roof and they spread a blue tarp over the portion where the master bedroom was.

Will this fix the problem? he asked them.

One of the roofers shrugged and carried his ladder to his truck.

I told you they'd fix it, Michelle said.

Dennis looked at the roof with the blue tarp over it. He wasn't convinced.

I hope it doesn't rain so we don't have to find out, he said.

The next day the rain started and the ceiling began leaking again. Dennis called the office number but got an answering machine. He left his name and number and put a larger bucket on the floor in the bedroom.

Because of the rain, Dennis didn't have to fill up the flower pot for Moe and Larry who were getting larger. Soon they would be too big for the flower pot and Dennis would have to figure out where to

put them next. He wasn't even sure he could find a bigger pot for them. Michelle had taken over the job of feeding them every morning and he could hear her say to them, Hello, Moe. Hello, Larry.

They started looking for houses but had trouble finding one that pleased both of them and that they could afford. Michelle didn't like any of the houses. She said they were small and expensive for how small they were. He couldn't disagree with her but they had to be realistic.

You're being stubborn, he said.

Did you call me stupid? she asked, turning away from the sink.

No, he said, I said stubborn. Stubborn.

Are you sure it wasn't stupid?

Stubborn, he said.

I don't want to move.

Why not?

Because here we don't have to take care of anything. It's not our responsibility. We don't have to waste our weekends doing chores and pouring money into the house. And we'll never find a house nice as this one that we could buy.

It may look nice from the outside, Dennis said. But it's falling apart on the inside.

She went into the living room and said something Dennis couldn't hear.

What? he asked but she didn't reply.

Two weeks later they found a house to buy. The neighborhood wasn't as nice as their old one.

Their real estate agent was surprised when they said they wanted to make an offer.

Really? he said, sounding excited. Do you really mean it?

We mean it, Michelle said, smiling. We love the house.

Dennis nodded.

Their real-estate agent hurried outside to his car to get the paperwork.

Dennis looked at his wife who was still smiling.

Are you okay? he asked.

Sure, she said. I'm just trying to get along.

That night in bed he asked her if she really wanted to go through with it. Even though they had already written the offer, he was sure that they could blow it over an inspection or something like that because he didn't want to buy a house that she didn't really want to live in, because he wanted to buy a house that she wanted because he wanted her to be happy, yes, he knew that the house they had an offer in on was only half the size of their current house and it didn't have the beautiful pergola in the back where she liked to sit with company, her sister and her sister's boyfriend or other friends of theirs, and have wine and a nice time, and it didn't have all the rooms so they each could have their space even though the upstairs tended to heat up during the warmer days and the place didn't have air conditioning.

It's already too late, she said and went back to reading her book.

She turned off her light and rolled away to go to sleep.

He went to the other bedroom.

They hired movers to help them into the new house. After a few days, even though they still had boxes around, they were settling in.

He caught her looking off.

What's wrong? he asked.

Nothing, she said. We're going to have to get rid of stuff. We don't have enough space here.

He didn't say anything but the new house gave them new things to talk about. What colors to paint the rooms. Whether to put in shutters or not. Stripping paint and re-tiling the bathrooms. And

since the house was smaller, they seemed to be spending more time in the same room together; in the old house, they would only see each other at dinner and then drift off to their own areas. Here, they were planning what to do with their own house.

Moe and Larry were put in their blue flower pot right outside the back door on the cement steps. Dennis and Michelle talked about building a pond for them out near the garage. Their flower pot still leaked, even worse since the move, and the replacement corks they tried didn't help staunch the leak. But Michelle started filling up the flower pot in the mornings when she fed them. Moe and Larry were huge and while they still fit in the flower pot, Dennis knew he had to do something, either buy them a larger container or move them somewhere else.

One morning at their new house, a couple weeks after they had just moved in, Dennis went downstairs and opened the back door to see that the pump was only pumping air and that there was only a couple of inches of water left in the flower pot.

Oh shit, he said, moving to the pot, expecting to see the koi either dead or dying in the bottom.

But the flower pot was empty. No fish.

Dennis looked around the yard, to see if maybe the fish had flopped their way out of the pot but he couldn't find the fish anywhere. He looked in the flower pot again and ran his hands down in the bottom to see if somehow the fish were down there in the bottom with the three black rocks but it was empty.

Michelle, in her blue silk pajamas, came to the door and noticed him bent over the pot, his head inside it.

What're you doing? she asked.

He sat up.

I think someone stole our fish.

What? she said, getting upset. Not Moe and Larry.

I think they also stole the water, he said.

They stared at the empty flower pot and looked around the yard again, hoping that somehow the water had leaked out and the koi were still struggling but they found nothing.

This never happened at the old house, she said. Never.

He looked at her, not knowing what to say.

She looked around the yard to see what else was wrong.

Dennis started washing out the blue flower pot. He took the cork out of it. She came over and helped him but didn't say anything.

Maybe you can use this to plant flowers, he said.

She didn't respond, cleaning up the pump and washing the algae off it.

Or put it anywhere you want, he said.

She disassembled the pump and put it on the ground.

It's our home now, he said.

We're far from home, she replied, going inside.

He turned the flower pot over to let it dry in the hot sun and then followed her in.

Richard Downing

Crossing Chachagua Bridge

—on the road to Arenal Volcano, Costa Rica

Tom agrees that the bridge is a bitch
with its crooked—even missing—planks,
making crossing the valley,
no, the canyon,
no, the abyss
beside Chachagua

the nightmare you replayed as a child
sweating
into white sheets,
falling into the terror of falling

into the unknown,
into the mouth of the monster
only you could know.

Tom is from New Jersey.
He likes Spanish women, he says.
He says he will marry a Nicaraguan
who speaks no English,
of whom his father disapproves.

Bueno.

The Tip

– Manuel Antonio, Costa Rica

My beach breakfast of black beans and rice
is of interest to the tan and brown spotted dog
who circles the cement tables and stools each morning,
pausing to pee on the occasional palm.

Moments ago he was on his back
scrunching his ass into the sand
for whatever reason dogs do this.

My brain has dollars colliding with *colones*
as I try to figure out a reasonable tip.
Now this dog of many mixes
is ready for whatever I have chosen
to leave on my plate.

He would be a good dog to take back home with me
but I know he belongs here in the land
of the not-quite-empty plates.

He knows as only a dog can know
that I know nothing about peeing
on the base of a palm,
the cold, coarse touch of the deeper sand,
and the sadness of the coins
that I leave on the table.

Carolyn Moore

The Olson Sisters: Field Notes of a Descendent

1

They looked alike back then, as any pair
of sisters can, and spoke in our clan voice.
Yet there all semblance ends—there the trail branches,
and daughters, nieces, grands and greats, must choose
a fork or stray down one with little heed
for the consequence of family mimicry.
A botanist without regard for *genus*,
I mist our orchid genera and log
the scentless *differentia* that all
the petals, sepals, lips conspire to hide.

2

Like the ornate jewelry boxes she collects,
indifferent to the trinkets within, the younger
loves surface quelling form, the high baroque
of Cellini's salt and pepper bowls concealed
amid enamel, gold, and ebony,
with Nymph and Neptune huge above the spice,
his facial cast more petulant than godly.
Nymph's thumb and fingers idly cup her nipple—
perhaps he pouts at her impertinent pose?
Perhaps he knows he's just a bantam knock-off
of Michelangelo's huge "Day" and so
turns glum as any junk-bondsman now sunk
to schlepping ketchup packets to fast-food

condiment bins. There! See how such excess
distracts us from the task of salting meat?

3

The older sister? No collections there.
Shelves kept spare and free of clutter, dust.
If a box, then she was made of unvarnished wood,
joints trim. Apart from function, no décor.
Hold to the ear—do you hear the whir of watchworks?
Inside, a mechanism plain with purpose,
gears ticking close in tolerance, a thrift
of sufficiency, a shift to just enough.

4

Make no apologies, both the old sisters
would agree, the elder gone the way
of the wild native orchid, "Lady's Slipper."
The younger losing hold on that tree bark
where the mind shelters from the clutter of soil.

Lindsay Marianna Walker

An Interview with Courtney Eldridge

"I always stop to listen to the rantings of homeless people . . .
Really, any voice of distinction."

Courtney Eldridge is the author of *Unkempt*, a collection of short stories and a novella. Her work has appeared in numerous literary publications, including *McSweeney's, Post Road, Bomb, The Chattahoochee Review* and *The Mississippi Review*. In 2006, she received a fellowship from the Edward F. Albee Foundation, as well as a residency from the Ucross Foundation, and she was awarded a French literary prize, the Prix du Marais, for the translation of her novella, "The Former World Record Holder Settles Down."

In the fall of 2008 I had the good fortune not only to meet Courtney, but to participate in her first writing workshop ever. Frank, funny, genuine, and honest, she left a big impression on all of us at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Dave Eggers says she is "one of the smartest young writers in America, and she knows how to use knives." Rick Moody calls her "one of my favorite living short story writers." After reading *Unkempt* it's easy to understand such praise. Inspired by her visit, and to mark the release of her second book, *The Generosity of Women,* which will be published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in June 2009, I conducted the following interview with Courtney via e-mail. (She currently resides in Buenos Aires, Argentina and that type of phone call tends to get pricey).

LW: Rick Moody, Amy Hempel, Dave Eggers, Frederick Barthelme—none of these writers have been shy about expressing their admiration for your writing. How, and to what extent, have they influenced you? Who else do you credit?

CE: One of the things those people have taught me is the value of—forgive me if this sounds in any way self-referential—generosity of spirit with other writers. I was pretty snot-nosed in my opinions when I first began writing, and I can be to this day, but when someone is classy enough to offer their help, to read your work and give you their honest response, when they have nothing to gain . . . Until you've put your work out into the world, until you've taken some hits from critics and readers, alike, who really loathe your work, you don't have to reel in your own nastiness that much. So in that way, I wish everyone had the opportunity to be published. On a personal level, the support those people have given me is largely why I find ways to keep going another day, another week, another month, any of the hundreds of times that I've wanted to quit writing altogether, and get something like a "real job." If you think you'll reach a point that, by virtue of having a couple books under your belt, you won't have to keep scraping by, struggling, collecting rejection slips, even after ten years, I have news for you.

Beyond the people you've mentioned, there are so many unsung heroes in the literary world—just about every single editor who's ever published my work at a little magazine or literary quarterly has given it incredible time and attention. They do that for little to no pay, and precious little to no thanks, certainly. They do it because they love it, and that never fails to put my own pettiness and setbacks and false expectations in perspective.

LW: On the back cover of *Unkempt*, your short story collection, there is a tongue-in-cheek bio listing the various schools from

which you dropped out. In a market saturated with creative writing graduates, what perspective can you share having never had a workshop?

CE: I think, because I didn't attend a writing program and never took a class, I had a chip on my shoulder in that I kept telling myself there was a right path and a wrong path, and that all these people with creative writing degrees knew secrets of the trade that I would never know. Today, I don't know a single successful writer who is successful because of where they went to school. The successful writers are the ones who do the work every day and don't make excuses.

The only thing that really matters is that you're spending every possible hour you can, writing. Other than that, it doesn't matter if you went to school or where you went to school—unless writing programs and workshops help you carve out the most writing time for yourself. It's completely unromantic, I know, but the sooner you get down to the work of being a writer—which is writing every day, nothing more—the better your chances for getting your writing published.

In the meantime, I'd recommend saving a nice shoebox, maybe even a boot box, and labeling it, MY BIG FAT REJECTION BOX, and then dedicating yourself to the task of filling it. Because rejection slips are a rite of passage, and the truth is that you will continue to receive rejections for the rest of your career, no matter how many books you publish. That's the reality. So I'd recommend sending your stories to anyone who will read them, because the real trick is getting your work into the right hands, finding the right reader for your writing, and the right reader is the one who sends you a note, asking if they can publish your work.

That said, the single best piece of advice I was ever given was this: Ask yourself if there's anything, absolutely anything else in this world you can do besides writing, and if you can, do it. In other

words, if you can quit writing, quit. But if you really can't quit, you better settle down, because a writer's life is not an easy one. The truth is that I tried to quit many times over the years, and I'm still struggling with that now.

LW: Who are the writers you would recommend for someone learning the craft? Which books do you think every aspiring writer should read?

CE: Of course many come to mind, but at this point in time, I'm wary of singling out individual writers and books. The thing is, it doesn't matter which writer influences you, but rather, what you do with the education their work affords your own writing. Looking back, I think that I, personally, spent an inordinate amount of time trying to emulate certain stylistic elements of my favorite writers rather than asking myself basic questions like, What are they doing that I love and how do I take a page out of their book and run with it? That is, how do I take this particular element and make it my own? Really, I don't care if it's Austen or Auster, whatever that element or device is that speaks to you, can you translate it into your own language, your own storytelling, or are you going to spend ten years trying to write in someone else's style?

LW: What role does writing play in your life?

CE: Curse and cure. Writing is an affliction. It's not sane. In fact, there's nothing sane about writing and/or the life you have to live to support the habit. But as of yet, there's nothing else I'd rather do more.

LW: What role does life play in your writing? To be more specific, your novel is set in New York but you wrote much of it

in other cities, states, countries—what effect does your environment have on your writing?

CE: I work best in confined spaces, small rooms with minimal stimulation or visual relief or any kind, except if I'm pinning up notes. A cement block with one cork wall and no Internet access would be ideal—honestly, I need the bare minimum of distraction or forget about getting any work done. Also, I prefer to write early, shortly after I wake and pour a cup of coffee, which is less and less "early" these days, but still. I prefer to get in a few hours of writing, even if it's just rereading notes, before I allow myself to check email, read the paper, think about lunch or dinner. By now, I'm pretty disciplined, so I write every day, seven days a week. There have been days in the past two months that I've worked between fifteen to eighteen hours for a solid week or month, and there are days I've only worked four hours, total. But again, I show up to work every day, that's the main thing.

LW: Can you speak a little about your process?

CE: In terms of the creative process, I handwrite notes to begin, and continue throughout the entire process. Every purse, every room, every table, every jacket and coat I own has paper and pen. I walk a lot, every day if I can, and that's when I write. I go to the park and walk laps, and once in a while, I'll get a break and have to stop to take a note, because I've overheard a piece of conversation in some distant corner of my brain. So I collect and transcribe those notes as I go along, and if I'm lucky, the notes accumulate and pick up speed.

LW: Do you use any other props?

CE: I work with large-scale corkboards now. A friend urged me to try this software, Scribner? It's supposed to help writers, but it didn't help this writer at all. I simply have too many notes and require far more space to see a composition than a computer screen allows. At one point, during the novel's writing, I was in residency in Wyoming and had this amazing studio I still covet, but anyhow. I had something like an 18x18-foot wall covered in notes. I literally had to use a step stool in order to reach some of the notes—written in thick black magic marker on index cards. Usually just keywords, headlines, "Goddamnit, Jordan!" "You're evil, you know that?," whatever the key words were, and I'd know. Oh, right, that's such and such a scene and that has to be repeated here, here, here and there, and it should transition to this and this . . .

LW: What's the weirdest thing you've ever attempted to overcome writer's block?

CE: Well, there were several periods when I wanted to see an acupuncturist in the hopes that he or she could relieve my blocked Chi (because a writer's block is obviously a sign of blocked creative energy, right?). Unfortunately, owning to the fact that I was trying to become a writer, I never had money for anything, so I had to weigh these things: Chi or food, Chi or food? I chose food every time. I still think I might have a little blocked Chi, but it's much better since I realized a visit from the muse wasn't going to do my writing for me.

LW: What's the weirdest thing you've ever attempted?

CE: Well, moving to Argentina might prove one of them. We'll see what happens in the year ahead.

LW: What do you miss about New York?

CE: New York is in my blood. Then again, a lot of things have been in my blood that weren't necessarily healthy for me. Tragically, New York is no longer a place that has any room for struggling artists and writers—it's pushed those people out, altogether, and will pay for it—is paying for it. There's money in that city, but far less creativity and creative energy than ten, twenty years ago.

What I miss most about New York is walking every day, the life on the street, the voices you'd hear, taking a side street, dodging retail traffic. But I don't miss living in a closet. And I certainly don't miss working three part-time jobs six or seven days a week and not being able to pay my bills.

Buenos Aires has been very kind to me, has given me a quality of life I've never known. For the first time in my career, I'm now able to write full-time, and I can go out to dinner or to see a movie once a week. I don't live with the cancer of constant, nagging anxiety and poverty that was my lifeblood in New York. I think that's where much of the neuroses of the first book came from, simply trying to keep my head above water. In that sense, I'm very interested to see what the next year holds for my writing, what direction it takes. Beyond this next year, I have no idea where or what's next, which seems to be the rule, not the exception.

LW: Speaking of neuroses, Jeff Turrentine is quoted in the *NY Times* as saying (about *Unkempt*): "Neurosis is to Eldridge's stories what suburbia was to Cheever's: it's at once context, antagonist and metasubject. Her brilliant trick is to write in a voice so colloquially familiar that we don't automatically classify these crazy people as 'the other' but rather recognize them as our friends, our family members or even ourselves." In *Generosity* there are certainly some neuroses among the characters but what do you think of Turrentine's comment? Is neurosis

a "metasubject" you cultivate in any sort of conscious way? Rick Barthelme sent out an e-mail the other night which defined neurosis as "the inability to tolerate ambiguity." Does this definition match your conception of the word, or would you define it differently?

CE: Oh, that Rick is such a card. But he never gets his quotes right, poor man. In fact, neurosis is defined as, "the ambiguity to tolerate inability." Really, was that one of his famous 3 a.m. emails? I'd love to see it, if you can send it, by the way.

No, I don't cultivate meta in any conscious way, but at the time I started the story collection, in the late 1990's, meta was still very much in the air, so what can you do but breathe? And, although I was actually pretty leery of its overuse, of accomplishing little more than offering fourth- or sixth-string meta, at best, I still don't think it's wise to work too hard to avoid certain trends if it comes into play in a way that is genuine and true to the work you're trying to do. Same with, say, irony. Irony was vilified for a few years, there, and it's like suddenly everyone was crying out, Down with irony! Irony is tyranny! There are limits, certainly, but I think it's a bigger mistake to consciously work to avoid a natural direction in storytelling, if it's natural to you. Because the fact is that the literary world goes through its own fads and trends on par with *Glamour* Do's and Don'ts, but anyhow. In general, I recommend keeping your underwear or lack thereof to yourself, but otherwise, don't worry about fashion.

What I do relate to is the mention of colloquially familiar voices. Until I was about nine years old, we moved a great deal when I was growing up; I went to at least a dozen different schools, and we lived in several states in the west, and we had family in the Midwest and the East Coast, so I learned, early on, that how you dress was one clear indication if you were a new kid (nothing worse than being a new kid!), but also, how you spoke.

I think a strong voice is a force of nature that can stop anyone in their tracks—used to happen to me in NYC all the time. I always stop to listen to the rantings of homeless people; cab drivers shouting at cyclists, or vice versa; bridge-and-tunnel couples drunkenly brawling on the sidewalks of the LES, what have you. Really, any voice of distinction, I don't care what the story is: I just want to go along for the ride for a while, see where it takes me.

LW: Your friend, Amy Hempel, says that she begins every story already knowing the first and last line. Your stories and novel, apart from content, are so formally interesting (by that I mean interesting in terms of form—as opposed to intriguingly stuffy) I'm curious as to how you begin a story or novel? Are the processes different?

CE: *Is that right?* She begins every story already knowing the first and last line? Well, damn her. That woman gets the hair, the dogs, all the beginnings and endings? There is no justice in life or literature!

No, I never know the ending, and if I did, I'm sure I'd over think it and screw it up. I always begin with a voice. I scribble and doodle and wear sock puppets, talking to my hands, until I finally hear a voice speak up. It might be as little as a paragraph, or a sentence, even. You gotta start somewhere.

I've done enough writing now to trust that if the characters are honest, if I'm being honest to the character, if I'm telling a story honestly rather than simply trying to look good, personally, the ending will come of its own accord. And more often than not, it does. But still, damn her and her all-knowing short story beginnings and endings. Seriously, that's pretty humbling, huh? Thanks, Amy, never mind me and my all-unknowing story endings. Honestly, Amy is phenomenal. There are few people in publishing, few writers I've ever met who are as generous as she is.

LW: You consider yourself a short story writer first; can you talk about the experience of writing a novel? What were the surprising challenges? Surprising joys? Stumbling blocks?

CE: Naturally, it's a little more complicated than that. Originally—this would be ten, twelve years ago, when I first started trying to write fiction—I wanted to write novels for some reason. I don't know where I got the idea I should write a novel, really. But then, very early on, I seem to remember trying to write a novel about something that I'm sure I fantasized would set the literary world on *fire!,* and now, I cannot recall. Thank god for repressed memory.

Anyhow, when a novel proved too ambitious for my abilities, I decide to give the short story a go, at which point I started reading just about every collection and anthology of short stories I could find. Then, when I actually managed to finish a short story or two, I decided that was a more worthwhile way to spend my time than finishing unfinished novels. So yes, by virtue of completion, I became a short story writer first and foremost.

LW: I got the feeling, very early in *The Generosity of Women*, that I was experiencing a high wire act. The form of the story—a weaving of six voices, six characters, all told in first person—pulls you in immediately and the line never goes slack. When I first picked it up to read I'd planned to give it an hour—it took six before I could come up for air. I had a similar experience reading your short stories and I'm wondering if, and to what extent, you write with this effect in mind? Perhaps a better way to phrase it—how does the telling of a story affect the content and vice versa?

CE: Thank you, that's very kind of you to say.

Honestly, if any high wire aspect ever occurred to me, I'm sure I'd look down and fall, so I guess the answer is no. Although I am aware, at least in my own life, that asking someone to give you their time and attention doesn't allow for much time or attention in this day. So I do feel that writers need to respond to the realities of how little time people have these days, how many other forms of media are far easier to consume, to respect the fact that people are pressed for time, that time is a luxury for everyone. I mean, really, as a writer, you're competing with: film, television, video games, the Internet, pornography; you have to move it along, like it or not. If you don't like it, well, that's a choice you make.

LW: The bulk of the novel takes place over a very short time span—basically a weekend—and while the chronology isn't hard to follow, the scenes don't unfold in a straightforward way. The scene between Bobby and Joyce in the dog park—a conversation that is drawn out over the course of the book—is one example, and I'm curious as to how you paced it: Did you know from the beginning that the real time in which the novel occurs would be so brief?

CE: That's actually one of the few things I knew about the book early on, at least from the point of realizing I was dealing with six different characters, all female, all first-person narratives. Because that fact alone was so overwhelming I decided, very consciously, to create a narrow time constraint on the novel's main events as a means of preserving my sanity, if nothing else. In any case, all I knew when I began was that I wanted to take a chance with the book's structure. Because structural risks are something I always look for in storytelling, and because I believe a book can be both structurally innovative and emotional resonant, that there is no need to compromise one for the other. Bottom line is that I don't think in a straightforward, linear, plot-driven way, so traditional

story structure is never going to work for me. I have to figure ways that do work for me, that are natural to the way I think and write, and this way worked. It wasn't preconceived; it happened step by step, and I built the story piece by piece, really.

LW: Did you plan each of the main characters beforehand? Were there any surprises that popped up along the way?

CE: I knew that it would be a book about women and that there would be more than four characters from the start. Originally, I thought there would be three main characters and three supporting characters—seemed balanced, at least. Well, given six women, maybe it shouldn't have come as a surprise that none of them wanted to play a supporting role, but it was still a surprise. I tried to stick to the plan for a month or two, which was principled, maybe, but I got no cooperation, whatsoever. So, since I had to weave six separate voices into one narrative thread, I had no choice but to make some adjustments in the blueprints. Take the character Joyce Kessler, for example. I thought she'd be a "buddy" to the character Bobbie—every gynecologist needs some comedic relief, right? But then, the more I got to know Joyce, the more she had to say for herself, the more she told me. Namely, "Fuck off. In fact, why don't you take your buddy idea and fuck off, the both of you?" So I went with it.

LW: Visual arts, and artists, play a big role in this novel—Joyce owns a gallery, Greg's an artist—are these characters (or characteristics) derived from real life?

CE: I think it had more to do with timing, really, in terms of what's been happening in the art market, the ever-expanding art bubble of the past decade, watching the art world take over Chelsea and spread to other neighborhoods of New York City, like

the Lower East Side, Dumbo, Williamsburg. And then, of course, watching the money follow. High art is such big business, and for the past ten years, there's been one article or another in the papers just about every week, either a story about that week's biennial, or a record-breaking auction price, or some new hot gallery, or this year's hot crop of visual artists, fresh out of grad school. So it had more to do with that reality and time period than any particular artist or gallerist.

LW: In the Acknowledgments you credit the artist Robert Szot and his painting exhibit from which the title of the novel (presumably) comes. Was there something about that painting, or exhibit, or artist that inspired you? Were there other titles you considered?

CE: I've never actually met Robert Szot, and I have only seen a handful of his paintings. Szot was a friend of an ex-boyfriend of mine, who was storing some of Rob's paintings for him. This was in December 2004, I think, and my ex- had a warehouse space in Brooklyn at the time, and after looking at a few of his paintings, which were maybe five foot by five foot canvases, I asked about the artist, and that's when my ex- told me the title of Szot's exhibit was "The Generosity of Women." Which was just so . . . so you-cheeky-little-art-boy-you, but at the same time, I was humored. I couldn't help laughing, really. And over the course of the next year or two, that title kept coming back to me. That was how the book began about a year later, with a title that I wanted to turn inside out.

LW: Slightly off-topic, but how did you choose the cover art?

CE: Ah, yes, book covers. But one of many things they don't tell you until they tell you: writers don't choose their artwork; cover

art is chosen for writers. I don't know if it's true or not, but I heard that Bill Clinton had a say in his cover design, which is great, if you're Bill Clinton. But for the rest of us, you take what they give you. Also, for what it's worth, this is the stage in the game when you begin to hear things like, "Marketing loves it." Which is another way of saying, "Done deal."

LW: Are you pleased with how it turned out?

CE: In this case I have to say that I was greatly relieved. Ugh, you have no idea how worried I was about what I'd be handed. Because, think about it: the cover design for a novel about six women could have gone so haywire—an illustrated stiletto heel, a bowl of cherries, a bit of pink frosting and colored sprinkles on the side of a woman's painted red lips—you know what I mean, scantily-posed fruit or lingerie, who knows what—I shudder to think. In a glass half-empty or half-full sense, here's the rule: don't waste your time imagining how good the cover design could be, imagine how bad it might have been, and count your blessings.

LW: What role does research play in your writing? Do you avoid it, get absorbed in it?

CE: Now that I think about it, I don't know what part of writing your first novel, or any novel, isn't research. The entire process of writing a book, from the first word to the last, from everything that you write to everything you learn about getting a book published in this day in age, how labor-intensive the entire process actually is, is research, absolutely. So yes, I get very involved in the research process.

Because of how I had to live to get by in New York, and just how little writing I was getting done in the course of a year, trying to make ends meet, for the past few years, I had no choice but to leave

the city and spend a few months of each year in solitary confinement, whether at an artist colony or borrowing a friend's house, upstate. Because those stints might be the only time I'd really have to write all year, during those periods, all I did was write: I wouldn't check email; I wouldn't read papers; I was not in touch with friends and family: I would check out, basically. I am very fortunate that the people in my life give me that space, but even so, it's not easy to get into the sort of marathon mind frame, and it's not easy to come out of it, either.

Regardless, if you mean research in the formal sense of the word, like learning about the rings of Saturn or what the temperature was in NYC on a given day in 2006, well, that's easy. Actually, for me, that type of work is always a nice break from more creative demands—where Google serves no purpose. I love a well-researched book, but for me, that simply means writing that convinces you that the author knows the story, inside and out, that the author knows the characters intimately, and that the author gives every reason to trust he or she is going to take you somewhere you've never been, no matter what the route.

LW: Favorite character?

CE: Joyce was the easiest. Joyce was the most fun. Which, I admit, is probably because Joyce is the most profane. I mean, keep in mind that one of my favorite female literary characters is the Wife of Bath. It's a stretch, not to mention ridiculous self-flattery, but still, I'd like to think Joyce Kessler is of the bawdy female literary lineage of the Wife of Bath—without the spousal abuse and much sexier footwear, of course.

LW: What was the experience of editing the novel like?

CE: This book taught me to edit in a way my stories didn't, because there were literally hundreds of loose ends that needed resolution, at least in the short term. So I had to keep asking myself the basic questions: Does this feel like a natural ending to the thought/emotion? Is it strong? Does it create the necessary segue for the next narrator? Does this piece of the puzzle fit somewhere else? If so, move it or cut it.

The other half the story is that in the daily tumult of publishing, the editor who acquired my first novel was no longer with my publisher, Harcourt, by the time I finished this novel. So I was incredibly fortunate when my book landed in the lap of one of that dying breed of editors who still work with text, who actually loves working with text, and most of all, who know how to help a writer really shape the story they're trying to tell. Adrienne Brodeur read the book five or six times, easily, and gave me incredible line edits each and every time, while also setting very firm expectations of a total page count, and she never wavered, no matter how many times I whined, "Oh, but I love that scene, I can't lose that scene!" To which she would say, "You're right, it's a great scene, I agree. So what would you rather cut, instead?"

Listen up, young writers, nine times out of ten, you really can lose that scene you love, and frankly, no one but you will be crying for its return, trust me. Come on, how many times do you read a short story or novel and think to yourself, Wow, why do I have this awful suspicion that this writer was forced to cut the most brilliant scene for no good reason? Really, if your scene is that one in ten, if it truly is as wonderful as you think it is, well, you'll figure how to put it to use one day. So buck up and cut it, already. That's what I learned from this book. And that's what a good editor teaches you without ever making you feel like too big a whiner or prima donna.

As something of an aside, let me just say that I don't think many people realize how long it takes to get a book published, that from the point a writer hands over a finished manuscript, even if it's in

near-perfect condition, the schedule of most American publishers could easily have a window of 12-18 months before that book will hit the shelf. The entire editing process, though, took about eighteen months, and a full year after I began working with an editor. The original draft was 635 pages, I believe, and that was cut to 535 in four months' time, and that was then cut two more times, taking 50 pages out of each draft over the course of another six or seven months. So I had time to focus on polishing every voice, every transition, and the overall pacing, making sure one cut or segue made sense. I tried my best, at least.

LW: How did you know when the novel was done?

CE: For me, a story or book is finished when the editor or head of production cuts me off, and I'm not allowed to make any more changes to the manuscript. Even then, I'm not sure a story is ever really done; it's just gone to print, so again, my work becomes making peace with that fact.

LW: You began as a short story writer; now that you've published a novel, is there one form you prefer over the other?

CE: Yes, my attitudes have definitely changed. When my story collection sold, I got a two-book book deal, because that's how a publisher is most likely to stand a chance of seeing a dime in return for their investment. They agree to publish your short stories in exchange for a novel—and of course, when asked, I said that I had a novel in the works, which, of course, was a complete lie.

So you see, the two-book book deal is a mixed blessing, because on one hand, I thought, *Excellent, now I know I have a publisher for my second book.* On the other hand, I'd never written a novel and I'd never written on demand, so the fear of failure was greater than I'd

ever known. I can't tell you how many days I had to ask myself, *Why did I do this? Why would anyone ever do this to themselves? What am I doing? How do I do this?*

Well, having no idea what I was doing, feeling obligated to deliver something, I started a novel, and finished a novel, sort of, but it didn't work. For more reasons that I care to enumerate: it just didn't work. So, a good year past the novel's delivery date specified in my contract, I tried again. I started from scratch, knowing I'd be two years behind deadline, at best. Scary.

Now, three years later, I'm torn: because I prefer the novel to short stories in that you spend so much more time with characters, figuring out how they work, how they think. But again, the short story is where I can take chances now and then.

I do feel that the short story is the best place to learn craft (and yes, I do cringe writing the word, *craft:* it's so *Actor's Studio,* no?). By craft, I mean how an individual writer tells their own story, as opposed to how they think a story should be told; craft is the process of undoing your own preconceptions, largely.

What's more, the short form is the perfect place to take chances with storytelling. Because readers are far more forgiving of one rather misguided story than a completely misguided novel. I am, at least. And creatively speaking, I always love seeing someone jump off the springboard, whether or not they checked if there was any water in the pool.

Really, it's fifteen, twenty pages, so why not take the risk?

LW: What can we look forward to from you next?

CE: I'm juggling a new novel and a long non-fiction piece. I don't know if either will pan out, but as long as I'm showing up to work every day, I try to focus far more on the value of doing the work and far less on the romance of getting that work published before I've even done the work. You know what I mean?

LW: *Mississippi Review* recently released an issue on literary magazines—where do you weigh in on the online vs. print debate? Do you have a preference?

CE: For me, it's much like the difference between novels and short stories: I love to hold a book in my hands, to have something I can curl up with, which is what a print quarterly provides. On the other hand, online publications have tremendous freedom to experiment, to take the risks that I crave of new writing—to publish work no one else will, often because many print publications simply don't have the money/space/time/staff to provide more than a handful of short stories in any given issue. Now that I'm living overseas, I've become dependent on the online side of any given publication, whether it has a print edition or not. Down here, they're all equal. I just want work that surprises me, really.

As far as print goes, the sad truth is that, more often than not, it's very difficult to find a wide range of quarterlies in any given city—even New York. I used to spend countless hours at this hole in the wall, Niko's, on 6th Avenue and 12th Street. (God, I hope it's still there, despite the owner's chain-smoking!) Anyhow, at the time, I never had the money to buy anything, so I'd stand in the corner, reading entire 25-page stories, hoping I could finish before getting a dirty look. But they got just about everything that was out, so I'd pick up one book, flip through it, and then move on to the next.

Here books are extremely expensive, particularly English-language publications. So again, online is my primary source of information anymore. And as much as I love having a book in my hands, I care far more about that high of discovering some new voice, some new writer who is telling a story in a way that is so original and mind-blowing, I have to reread their story almost immediately. That's what matters to me—that exhilaration.

Genevieve Burger-Weiser

Annals of an Ice Fisher

At five she stood on a glacier in red cable-knit tights.

Have you ever held a fish?

A man gave her one breathing herring
From a hole in the lake—
Purple cracks spidered out.

—

Later she ate clams from a tin pail,
Forking small lumps of sea-meat—
Wince of brine and sand kernel—into her mouth.
Her parents applauded.

From the balcony she smelled
Woodfire in his ice hut.

—

Buckets of pike.

He dusted his catch with salt and ground chokeberry
Before searing the white petals of flesh.

—

She stared at the inn keeper's narrow arms:
Two whittled antique candlestands (whale oil wax)
And dreamt of the ice fisher

Sitting in his shanty for days saying
Amaranth
Over and over. Behind her eyes
Gold crops foliated like rapidfire
Dropping fat seeds to the frozen lake.

—

Hello Susitna. Hello ice saw.
Quicksilver's at thirty below.
Feel the cold drilling pins through your front teeth.

E.R. Carlin

Ode to My Avatar

program OdeToMyAvatarPascal (Output) ;
begin
PascalIRun2And3/4MilesForYouAlone

1. **millcreekmetroparks.com/trails6.htm**

Not an ounce of pretension, I say
that the un-Walkman jogger will never know high and burnout.
When the rhythm's so strong, your pace alters, step by step.

On a picnic bench
just off the hill,
a balloon dog
dangles above
a young boy
on spooled thread.
As he lifts the band-aid
from his knee,
someone with blue
facepaint bends
over to kiss it.

Low batteries—
slow down, speed up, and I am reminded that everything good
rises from opposition.

So I imagine Hastseltsi, god of racing,
paces ahead, his red flash continuous, soaking my headband,
as the murmur of heartbeats drum up my ears.

Under dandelion puff,
an old woman
surfaces
from a sea of tall grass
blowing bubbles
from a stem.
Her hair sparkles
with fish scales.
Her cell-phone
a siren's song.

I cross Shields Road to East Hike-and-Bike;
I Frogger-style everything, hop on a length of log, leap the curb,
dodge traffic to the lip-synch of wizards walking invisible dogs

and sages with hearing aids. Unexpectedly, the god of racing
evaporates against a fender, and his wind *ruh* rises beneath me.
I dread the parking lot beyond.

Under dark clouds,
a raccoon-bearded priest,
covered in blood,
stands on a soapbox
with a fist full of money
wagging skyward,
and a dozen crew-cut teens
in army fatigues
begin a slam dance
in front of
the first chair violinist.

2. millcreekmetroparks.com/trails7.htm

Wagner has taken control.

Still that's not the point, sure I could
shake it, *wah-wah* pedal it, bootleg my endorphin rush by flipping

my sacred 'electric' bundle from Local to DX on trickster solos.

Over firecrackers,
a metro-park ranger
with dirty hands
yo-hoes ' ice-cream'.
Three young girls
put sugar cones
to their ears to hear
a glacier melting.
The god of fire, Agni,
extends his 7 arms
across a levee of clouds.

Even now I run like a robotic fox,
fly like a mechanical jay or even the representamen, Raven.
Full speed, non-stop abandon. Scared of the sacred, I think

of finding nothing beyond digital.
So I make the Walkman de-crescendo me, force me
to coast on fumes, voodoo of alkaline

in the bloodstream. I fall
into a trance halfway out. Beyond the choir of braches,
I huff past a drinking fountain to lie down in a polluted sandtrap.

A shriek from over
by the 9
where a mime
with blood streaming
from his throat
pumps for water
at a dry well.
Just then, the sky busts
and all run –
eyes wet, hair wet, all wet
to their cars.

Dreaming up,
the crab trees flower open for the cannonball rain, and my body lifts
awakening just past the lich-gate of treetops.

Then dropping back to wet sand,
as if I had sat on my own mote, body castle sinking into the ground,
I was alone with myself, a hollow golem in a courtyard of wind.

> *Over everything then*
> *is rhythm –*
> *beer cans,*
> *tin rattle*
> *in rain.*
> *Old toddler diaper*
> *becomes*
> *a breathing fishbowl.*
> *And still the orchestra*
> *plays on,*
> *program repeating,*
> *everyone deleted.*

Alone, but for that one familiar woman:
headphones on, overalls rain-soaked, lashes raised and eyes closed,
her palms up, listening as a nimble violin accompanies thunder.

To her everything is clear. She came to hear the music.

3. millcreekmetroparks.com/pdf/MCPmap.PDF

I came to hear the music too,
but I am immobile, afraid of hyperventilating again,
so I keep meditating on my next incarnation—

past Vishnu locked, leather and studs, with Kali,

past geekgold and wishlists, all the way
past my wheezing body into this park system website.

Under the black troll bridge,
two boys
with wine cork
earplugs
want to become blood brothers,
but since their pocket knives
are combs,
they burn
each other's thigh
with menthol slims.

This avatar's an ashcan, a sensitive instrument.
I experience my meta/morph de-digitizing (firstness)
and a score of ducks crying south by southwest (secondness).

Every illusion is a mouthful of smoke.
I'm looking for a sly graveyard in the whirling feet of trees.
Out the corner of my left eye, I will

leave nothing to burn under these cheekbones anymore.
A cello bow breaking on a low down rust
of mills, and I'm back to mindscape Youngstown,

thinking of Tetsudo, The Iron Man.
In this movie a young man stares at a poster of Carl Lewis
and slowly forces a steel pipe into his left calf.

Over deep potholes,
the three young girls
appear again,
breasts flashing
in a blue pickup bed;
their cones have become
party hats, vanilla dripping
down each forehead.

In union, two boys reach
into side-pockets groping
for 8-ball lighters.

Where do the white blossoms hide my body?
I was so young when I stared at that poster of Carl Lewis,
imagined a *Steel & Tube Co.* pipe smoking out my left calf.

From top of the rough,
two old men swing
for the mills.
One pitches buckeyes
as the other whiffs
with his cane.
The bases are loaded
with hardhats,
cropping their souls.
After three strikes,
the smokestacks
turn back into treelines,
and both men lumber
through sprinklers
into the sun.

And I rise from this sandtrap believing I am cyber-real.
My torso in-line with parking lot of the clubhouse.
I face my destination, Hitchcock Woods, and illness

fades to circuitry as I touch earth again,
my lucky buckeye again. Dehydrated, almost cramping, I mix
it up, change the tape, Al Di Meola— energy gremlin

with balls to the canopy wall guitar. I burst
into a sprint on *Kiss My Axe*, passing roller bladers,
biker gang children and power walkers.

Solo time ; I'm speeding off the map
into the whole system like Lilith touring Eden—

Bears Den, Old Furnace, West Glacier,

Milton Avenue to the ghetto, and then I'm back
(past this urban assault serenade) to the lily pad people
and those Newports are catching up to me.

Pause and rewind ; I blur
into the consciousness of a pine grove,
hide in the shadows, and try to catch my breath.

I watch everyone I passed, pass me.
There's almost humility in the way I stare at their planned,
methodical motions, dissolving my feet in desolate castles

and longing after bike pedals,
that reflect sunlight into distant diamonds,
turning to pavement and dust.

end { OdeToMyAvatarPascal } .

Claudia Smith

Derrick

after Kelly Link's "Lull"

Her husbands would not leave. The smallest one, her husband at seven, was feverish. He was the one she liked the most, although she wondered if he were really a boy, after all. When she brought him ginger ale, he asked for Gatorade. His eyes were the color of lime Life Savers, too green to be real.

There was the one who stayed in the shadows, pushing big glasses up his greasy nose. The glasses were large and clunky, the style of glasses from Derrick's childhood. He spied on her whenever she changed clothes, even peeked through the door when she took baths.

There was another, probably Derrick at around twenty. He was constantly grabbing her, biting her shoulder, asking for sex. At first he called it fucking, but then, looking at her again, he asked politely, calling it sex. She was practically old enough to be that one's mother.

Derrick, the original, the one she had married who had grown older, spent most of his time in the garage. The other Derricks did not like him. He smelled of something, some scent she could almost identify. Wet carpet, perhaps. Or a mold, a mold in the back of a basement. His hair globbed together, and when she tried to comb it, came out in chunks.

"Doesn't that hurt?" she asked him. "You must be in pain."

"It may be time for a separation," he told her. His voice was flat, but still Derrick's.

"The other ones need me," she said. "Besides, how will we explain, where all these Derricks came from?"

They never left the house. The youngest Derrick was constantly achy, down with low-grade flues. She fed him popsicles and rented action movies for him. She wasn't careful enough, not the way she would be if he'd been her son. Besides, these Derricks, they probably wouldn't grow. She was afraid to take them outside. What would happen then, if she took them outside?

The real Derrick had liked experiments as a boy. He said this other must be an imposter.

"Maybe not," she said, "Maybe you just can't recognize yourself."

It really was too exhausting. The house itself began to smell, like old laundry, or rotting wood. Perhaps they were aliens. Or something more sinister.

When she came home from work, with a box of Triscuits, the other Derricks came to the door. They patted her with their soft hands and walked her to the sofa. The littlest Derrick put his head in her lap. Teen-age Derrick brought her a beer from the fridge. They watched *Mystery Science Theatre*, laughing together, and then fell asleep with the light flickering over their pale bodies.

She got up, stretched, and got another beer. It tasted better than the last—colder, crisper.

John Findura

Driving the Lincoln Tunnel

1.

As the final cars weave from the left lane into the right
barreling towards Weehawken where Burr and Hamilton
dueled and old Saint Hoboken where Sinatra was born
I stay steady—steady—and gently curve along until the trees
give way and the skyscrapers of Manhattan grow to my left
reflecting off of the Hudson and lighting the restaurants
along the river banks until I'm facing the cliffs with their
condominiums and apartments and billboards proclaiming
that I could hear you if I so choose, and indeed I have.

2.
The portals sit like open eyes, watching patiently as stone
will often do, as patiently as our uniformed finest do while
gazing through the windows of every other car, at every other
driver, and I watch them too, starting in Rutherford at times,
trying to perceive their fear or their purpose or what they
might be hiding and how much and where and when the time
might be right, but that must be washed out of the head
otherwise the muscles fail to respond and common sense
strikes the chest like a blast of heat, forcing the breath out.

3.
For eight thousand and six feet I hold my breath while
seventy five thousand tons of dark water are supported
thirteen feet above my head and the fact that this was the
first major tunnel to be constructed without a fatality does
little to relieve the strain, the worst part being the blue line
drawn down the side of the wall showing where New Jersey

ends and New York begins, but then I think of the hydraulic engineer being pushed by his feet through a small hole to shake hands with the crew who were digging from the other side.

4.
The ears of the workmen would pop as each section was pressurized until it matched the adjoining lock, then they could proceed and everything was repeated until they reached the forward end where they had to work quickly before the pressure caused shortness of breath and dizziness, the brain starting to make the laws of physics and God bend to its own whims, but these men worked one hour days, half in the morning and half in the evening to make sure there were no mistakes, because mistakes here are erased by water, and erased well.

5.
The helix is far behind me as the lights brighten and air clears itself like an exhalation, this is what it is like when the syringe pumps into the vein, no turning back, straight on to the heart and the brain until we are lost to everything except the holy body, and we fall further south, away from the spires and glass, away from the brain and heart and directly to the soul resting gently with eyes half closed and a thin blanket pulled up around the neck until we are there and the blanket lifts and invites us in to gather in this holiest circle of warmth and love and deep, deep thought.

One Act Plays

The executioner loved bondage
and the star opened her wrists
onstage while the supporting
cast drank behind the screen

I was only a voice, covered
in black, a small stitched rip
in the shoulder, mended quickly

When she used her eventual
skills of needles and leverage
of string to suspend me

She, of course, was always
important like a flashlight
near a cliff on a dark night

Things, though, moved quickly
off-balance, eventually ending
in the rain beside a flat tire

Jenny Hanning

Origin

When their daughter was born they named her Jacada, after nothing and nobody. The name was Michelle's pick, one she came up lying on the couch. Keith had argued against it. Jacada for a dog, maybe—maybe for a dog you could make a word up—but for a child it wasn't right. A name should be a name, a word that meant something. He wanted his child to have substance. He liked Alice, noble, and Gillian, youthful. Perfect names for a daughter.

Keith could feel the weight of his Alice between his hands as he lifted her from her baby-bed, or when he was stretched on his back in the grass, Alice giggling, balanced on the soles of his feet with the clouds behind her.

She would have little yellow dresses with puffy elastic-legged pants that went underneath, and her favorite toy would be a wooden duck, one of those ones attached to a string with rubber feet turning on wheels. Keith knew the smell of her baby-scalp—cool instead of warm—his green algae-scented girl. No pink powder babies here. Alice.

Alice, English in origin, made famous by Lewis Carroll, who was a mathematician, a logician, and maybe a pedophile, but Keith didn't really think about that. He found Carroll's photography beautiful, and had read the biography by Karoline Leach. Keith was certain Carroll was a man who enjoyed children, who befriended them, as he would befriend his own daughter, his Alice.

Jacada.

When Michelle suggested it, Keith, confused, had asked her, "Is that a black name?"

Michelle had looked hard at him, her mouth turning down at a ferocious angle as she said, "What's that supposed to mean, 'Is that a black name?' Sometimes you hurt me so badly." When she finished speaking she curled in on herself and sobbed and sobbed, only unrolling to scream, "You disgust me!" when Keith reached out and put his hand on her shoulder.

Michelle talked to her growing belly all the time, "Who do you love more, Jacada?" she would ask. "Daddy or Mummy?—Oh! Mummy! You love Mummy more," then she would smile unkindly at Keith as she ran her hands across her stomach whispering, "I love you too, my sweet sweet baby."

It was apparent to Keith that Michelle took great pleasure in taunting him, that she enjoyed making him uncomfortable, but what could he do? Michelle was the mother of his child. When Keith thought about the two of them, their relationship—in the brief moments when his anger or hurt overcame him and he asked himself *Why don't I just go*—he found that the idea of leaving chilled him, made his hands shake, and sweat puddled at the base of his spine. Because he could not leave Michelle, Keith was almost certain that he loved her. She was, after all, the mother of his child.

Keith met Michelle at a party hosted by another graduate student in his department. Keith, who had never been one of the guys, but always wanted to be, had started his master's degree program with high hopes. He was optimistic, eager to developed deep and meaningful bonds with his new peers. He was quickly disappointed. Everyone talked about movies he had never seen, or were tangled together in a mess of praise over ones he had seen, but disliked; it was all bands he did not listen to, and books he had not read. They argued political points that seemed pointless,

always accusing, ever angry with one another and slamming out the student lounge in disgust. Keith was terrified to speak, certain he would accidentally cause someone mortal offense and be unable to retract or, or worse, not want to retract but, but feel compelled to, and have his apology rejected. Among them there was aggressive competition for favor and popularity—both with the other students, and with their professors, and even with the department secretaries who assigned classrooms, kept the keys to the photocopy room, and accepted the summer grant money applications. After the first semester when the cliques had solidified Keith wasn't in one, but he'd read all over that networking was essential; it was important to make an attempt to attend the department's social functions.

The party host was two years ahead of Keith in the program, a man with a long beard who wore knee socks every day and was pursuing a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. He took a ridiculous pleasure in what he believed to be his superior intelligence and deeper understanding of the underpinnings of the world, and possessed an incorrectly defined concept of irony as a comedic trope—so the party was themed, eighties-dance-and-dress-up. When Keith walked in the lights were off and people were thronged together in polka dots and leg warmers grinding to *Alone.* Keith instantly felt terribly alone, and was ashamed. Surveying the crowed room he was overwhelmed by the careless contact of bodies, by the music, and the flashes of light thrown across the walls by a tiny turning disco-ball. It flooded into Keith's mind—he had never born the weight of a great secret love, and he wished he did, right then, so he could plot the moment of exposing it.

Keith got drunk off Wild Turkey, danced to Michael Jackson on a table, knocked over a pillar candle, set a roll of paper towels on fire,

then went home with a girl— Michelle—and they must have had sex, because five weeks later she was two weeks late for her period.

"I'm super regular," she had told him, then that she studied Bastardy—the study of bastards—particularly in France.

Keith didn't know her last name. But he thought of the new cells forming inside Michelle, his future child, and found that he felt very protective of her. He decided to learn about French Bastards and prenatal care. Keith believed he wanted to make Michelle happy.

Still, he resisted Jacada. Not for himself even, but for his daughter. Keith's mother's name was Gayle, gaiety, and his grandmother's name was Cadie, flowing sounds, an alternate spelling of which, C-A-D-D-Y, was the name of major character in William Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*. Noble, youthful, gaiety, flowing sounds. Names a child could flourish under, a child could grow into, names with fascinating history.

Keith tried twenty different baby name sites on the internet and Jacada wasn't on any of them. It wasn't even an alternate spelling of anything. There was a company though, marketing, or technology, with that name.

He told Michelle and she said, "See—it is *something*. So it's not *nothing*. It's a *company*."

Keith said, "Michelle."

Michelle answered, "French in origin. Who is like God? God-like. Goddess." She flicked her finger at him like he was a cat she was trying to scare off a counter-top. "I'm like *God*, Keith."

Michelle was more than nine months pregnant. Back before it was safe to tell anyone about the baby, during the weeks when it was possible the cells that would make their eventual daughter would trickle out of Michelle as strings of blood, Keith had given her a book of baby names. He wanted to be supportive. He wanted Michelle to know he meant it when he said he would marry her. She had been angry with him.

"It's too soon," she said. "This whole deal could still be off."

When Michelle was three months pregnant, the deal was officially on. They were married, and there were sonograms, and shopping for pink blankets, and tiny hair bows, and a rental house, and then the baby was past due, and they had still not agreed on a name for her. Keith thought—not really—but pretended to think, it was the name dispute that was holding his little girl up. She was waiting until he and Michelle were ready. She would allow herself be born only when she knew her name was waiting for her. She too, in Keith's fantasy, found Jacada unacceptable.

But if the baby wasn't born soon the doctor was going to induce Michelle to make her deliver. It had to be settled.

Keith said, "Michelle."

Michelle said, "I can't believe you don't know your own daughter's name. How can you not know her name? She has a name. I *know*. I can *feel* it. You can't change a child's name, Keith. Keith. Warrior of the woodlands or whatever. Half the time it's Gaelic then it's Scottish. All those people all killed one another and raped everybody's wives and had that first night rule where the English Lord came in and had a lords and squires gangbang with the bridal party. So don't give me, 'of English origin.' This is our fucking daughter, not some hound dog named Blue that you want to call Chester. So fuck off, Keith. Keith. Keith. Keith. Her name is Jacada. Your own daughter, Keith, and you have no idea who she *is*. Sometimes at night I dream that you die and then we live happily ever after."

Michelle and Alice, happily ever after, without him.

So when Keith's daughter was born, lifted free from a slit cut into Michelle's uterus, she was named Jacada.

More than ten years ago, because Jacada was ten years old on the Wednesday of that week, and on Saturday had a party in a rented theater with all her little girlfriends, and on Sunday it was going to be a family day, just Keith, Michelle, and their daughter.

For her birthday Jacada wanted her ears to be pierced. Michelle suggested it. As Keith was watching the light on the waffle iron, waiting for it to go green, Michelle said, "We should have a girls' day."

But the plan had been a family day. "Hey," Keith said, "What about old Dad over here?"

Michelle ignored him. "We should go to mall and get your ears pierced at the booth," she said to Jacada.

Keith wanted to sit down at the table, but he didn't want to risk Jacada's waffle burning. He said, "I don't know about that," speaking to Michelle. He didn't think Jacada should have her ears pierced so young, but if it was going to happen, he wanted it done by her pediatrician, not under a tent in the mall.

"Man the waffle iron, Keith," Michelle said. Then to Jacada, "You can get little gold stars."

The light switched to green and Keith gently shimmied the waffle iron open with the end of a wooden spoon. The handle had gotten far too hot to touch. Both Michelle and Jacada were on second helpings and Keith was pleased by that. He had planned in advance to make special birthday waffles for Jacada. He made a special trip to the store for sparkling water so they would be puffy and crisp, the way Jacada liked them best, and he had bought strawberries and whipped cream and rainbow sprinkles for them.

"What about silver stars?" Jacada asked. "Or pearls?"

"We can see," Michelle said. "They probably don't have real pearls, but they'll have something."

"Jay Gatsby is double digits," Keith said. He wanted to distract her from ear piercing and a girls' day. "The big ten. Jay Gatsby is a newly inducted member of the double digits club."

Jay Gatsby was Keith's name for Jacada. When she was still a little baby he had tried calling her Jack—diminutive of John, English in origin, God is gracious—but it upset Michelle, and he hated to argue with her in front of the baby. He could get away with Jay

Gatsby, because Michelle thought it cute—she didn't guess that it had a meaning any deeper than pop-culture reference—J. Crew had a whole *The Great Gatsby*-themed summer catalogue—but sometimes Michelle called Jacada Hot Gun Gatz, and Keith could hardly stand it.

For Keith it was the first part—Jay—that was important. Jay, taken from Latin, meaning a bird, a member of the crow family. They had jays at the feeder outside the kitchen window, and they were beautiful, blue and powder white, with black tipped wings and black eyes. They didn't sing, but they were feisty birds, screaming and twisting, swirling blue. They controlled the feeder. Even if it was a boy's name, a man's name, the jays were beautiful birds. They were *something*.

They were on the edge of an argument, but Keith didn't want to fight. "A ten year old," he said, "doesn't need pierced ears." He had decided he wasn't giving in on this. It wasn't *right*, and they were going to finish breakfast, and they were going to have a family day.

Michelle took Jacada's hand across the table, "We aren't talking *needs*."

"Please," Keith said. He didn't want to fight. He thought it would be so terrible to fight. It was his daughter's day, but he thought it would be so terrible for her to spend it getting holes punched through her tiny ears, and at the mall, and without him.

"But what if I did need it?" Jacada asked.

"Jay Gatsby—" Keith said.

At the same time Michelle answered, "Don't worry, Sweetie."

Keith saw she and Jacada were holding hands across the table. Jacada was petting Michelle's knuckles and staring at Keith with an angry little face. "What if there was some decree across the land that all ten-year-olds had to have ears pierced or else get executed like Anne Boleyn?" she said. "Would you let me get my ears pierced then, or would you just let me die?"

"Jay," Keith said.

"Would you let someone chop my head off and orphan my poor baby?"

Jacada's voice was rising and Michelle held her hand, smirking, "Would you?"

"Would you let me die?" Jacada demanded.

Keith loved her, his daughter, he loved her so much. "Now," he said, "let's not. Let's not fight. Let's not do that." He could feel the day crumbling—all his happy plans.

With the hand her mother was not holding, Jacada thumped her breakfast plate away. There was a half moon of uneaten waffle on it. "You *would* let me die," she accused. "You wouldn't even order me a special head-chopper from France." Jacada's voice continued to rise, "You'd get my head hacked off, then you'd just get another kid and when she turned ten you'd let them chop off her head too."

Michelle did nothing. She sat in her chair with a kind of smirk on her face playing with Jacada's fingers while Keith put plastic wrap over the bowl of waffle batter. There wasn't going to be thirds, he could tell.

He said, "Nobody is chopping any heads off."

Jacada shoved away from the table with enough force to tip her chair over backward. It clattered on the floor and Keith flinched.

Jacada screamed, "I didn't say anybody was! I said what if somebody was going to *unless*!" Then there was only the echo of her stomping retreated up the stairs and the sharp clap of her slamming door.

The settling stillness was hard to breathe in. Keith thought of science class in elementary school, when the teacher would whack a tuning fork against the desktop then walk around the room, holding it to each student's ear. The air hummed. Keith hated the feeling. His teeth felt rattled like he'd been punched, and though he had never been punched, he though *It would feel like this* to be punched, without warning, a fist in the teeth.

He put the bowl of batter into the fridge, then righted the chair and pushed it back into its place the table. Michelle was still sitting,

still with that look on her face, shaking her head just a little, "You handled that like gangbusters. Way to go." She pumped a fist in the air then shot her arm straight out with her index finger pointing, "Super Dad!"

Keith doesn't decide to kill Michelle. He just does.

Later Keith is made to understand he has burned his hands quite severely. There will be permanent damage. He is surprised at the extent of injury—at that moment when Michelle's finger was pointing toward him, and the vibrations of his daughter's rage were clawing up the air, as he picked up the waffle iron and swung it into Michelle's face, then ripped the plug free from the outlet, stepped forward and swung it again, then straddling he toppled body swung it a third time—he had not been aware of any physical pain.

But in the sliver of time between the waffle iron impacting and all the bones in Michelle's face collapsing in, something strange did happen. Time stretched. It pulled itself taunt and thin, until it became enough time for Keith to think, *This is what they mean*: *Moment of insanity!*—because he was insane, driven to an act of terrible violence, and he was able, in that moment, to see himself standing before the judge, and the jury, and Michelle's crying family. He saw himself shackled with his head down trying to explain, how it was like being told you'd won a prize. You've won! You've won! And then they bring you up on a stage and tell you, You're the guy! You're the winner! You've won! You've won!

The prize is right there, but it's behind glass, and it's yours, you're there to claim it—you're the winner, you've won, but you can't touch what's yours. Your prize, and you can't have it. You've won, but they won't let you have it.

Banvard's Folly

"Does anyone still want to go with me into a panorama?"
– Max Brod

The sun floats down river
Resting from a long day.
As Banvard draws love

Birds in the sand.
She tries to explain
How his deformity angers her.

Unable, she leaves him
On the other side of the shore.
Banvard becomes a traveling salesman,

A campfire fiddler,
A drunk, a painter of shores.
Yearning for her—

He turns her into the Mississippi shore.
Riding the long river, floating
On a brush, he paints her portrait.

Huge bolts of love
The canvas sags from longing
Immense wood contraption

(Gears-pulleys crank machinery)
Three miles of canvas.

An uninterrupted portrait.

The papers publish the spectacle
"The hunch back painter and his panorama!"
He builds a wooden stage

Winds up river then down.
The lines are long, (.50 cents.)
They wait for hours . . .

He sits in the middle
Of hungry brush stroke
Up river

Down. Up river down
Eyes straining—
To find her.
.

257 Delmar Court

My mom came to my house—
Fed Ex. In a clean white

Mailing box. Half of her
Mailed to me, the other

Half mailed to my sister
In Hawaii. I didn't know

What to do with the box.
Should I put my mom

In the closet?
In the pantry?
In my room?

I settle on a corner
In the living room.

The white
Box sitting casually

On the floor
Like something ordered

And not yet opened.
She sits in the corner

Like a little girl punished
For doing something bad.

Waiting for someone
To tell her she can come out.

Julius Kalamarz

North American Landscapes

The wilderness was untamed, yes,
but subject to the whims of Jimmy Rojo's
chainsaw. With it slung over shoulder
he trekked North Coast forests
to fell trees for his craft—
carving Big Foot likenesses into trunks
to sell at highway-side attractions.

He was my shaman. And I his savage.

We rode the backcountry landslides
of rural decay, cat-skilled, beneath the
lampshade of late April.
Spring degrees were finally afoot
enveloping winter woefulness complete.

In the pick-up's cab, shotgun, I
salted hardboiled eggs on the east side of acceptable.
And took a plum in hand.
Jimmy in sweatpants and old Air Force blazer,
shirtless beneath, scratched the ringworm on his chest.
The fungus now running on two months old.

Out the window, plots of land evergreen
belched in settlement. Bark, beetles and breeze.
This, while myriad wisps of uncloaked winds
accosted petals in no particular order.
Camped along Fauvist lines forever, the
forest veered along colors pre-disposed to
big sky sun sets with trees trimmed

in shining ringlets of cosmic viscosity.
God's Country.

Nightfall. Still driving. Closed eyes
and catatonia here I come.
Mine was a mindset of genteel collaborations
with subconscious recesses yet un-plumbed
and a lax policy toward personal hygiene.
The longitudinally canted terrain
scrubbed the softer sides of existence clean
anyway.

I tucked my legs beneath me on
the bench seat, a hamstring shy of the half lotus.
And clucked along unkempt reminiscences
of the Milkblotch Maiden. The Maiden
held my heart in cupped hands complete.
Had she poured the pulp over sand,
she would have had a lean love brew
in which to leave handprints.
I stuck adoration notices into her
envisioned figurine—
her breasts only slightly exaggerated.

Arrived. My revelry snapped by Jimmy's
volley of insults hurled against my ancestry.
This night, Jimmy was in search of
a pine tree, the needles of which appeared
tipped in phosphorescence whenever
the moon was tardy in its ascent,
or absent altogether. I'm speaking
of the white-needled pines of the Aleutian Lows
that glow in a lunar eclipse. Their beans of a
fungus-hue foretold collusions that alit in
condensation across my upper lip when
cooked just right. The sensation was a
drowsiness akin to the raspy going-ons
in my skull that allowed me to stave off

residual nightmares of a reincarnated state—
of an age when I was young and clean shaven
and Gothic architecture miraculously survived,
unscathed, the fire bombing of Köln.

To work. Jimmy ground blade against growth.
The blazer flung upon a bush. Bodied, now and again,
by wind. As I was apprenticed to the man,
I shouldered the carbine employed in the
intimidation of black bears and Forest Rangers.
We labored by industrial flashlight. Jimmy's
body wet with work. On his arms rode
raised scars as if stitched insects.
Long ago knives. Nails. Glass. One due to a
screwdriver-wielding barmaid. The Tahitian treat
tattooed on his left bicep (Jimmy the Gauguin man)
thereafter appeared to have undergone
a cesarean.

Toppled. Jimmy resting in harsh light.
He handed the chainsaw to me
to further trim the branches.
So that it resembled a monkey island tree, he said.
I got the chainsaw started only after realizing
the choke was off.
Gasoline seeped into the air. A near
flooding of the machine. Once it
gunned into rhythm, I made feigned
swings at Jimmy's braided beard.
My castigation was short lived
as we went to work securing the tree to the truck bed.

Back in the cab, bouncing along un-paved fire roads.
The forest bigger in the headlights. Radio on.
Jimmy and I singing Bowie lyrics that he misheard
and I was too tired to correct.

Donna D. Vitucci

Underneath

Like anywhere else, this house has a basement where things accumulated. Dust furs the plastic furniture inside the girl's dollhouse. A crack runs across the bottom of the dish pan in the child-sized sink where the girl once stood, imitating a mother. For several brand new weeks one Christmas, hidden tubes in the toy amazed them all with running water. Stacked in the sink sit tiny cups, grimy from sand box tea parties, and the old muffin tin the girl and her friends splashed water through whenever they got out the hose.

Bicycles with rusted chains lean into the wall, the handlebar streamers mostly dog-chewed or plain gone, stripped by a bored sister and brother dizzied by summer. Deep in the laundry basket, clothespins hide under the pillows that plumped the station wagon's far-back on drive-in movie nights. Two sorts of clothespins—the pinchy kind and the kind you could draw faces on.

The basement was where the kids burrowed out of reach, the little animals. When they played, the dad didn't know what to do with them, he was glad to have the floor between him and the boy, a babbling maniac, and the girl, bookish, goddamned owlish in her spectacles.

While mothballs in the cedar closet preserved the mother's favorite suits from the 1940s, everything else in that wardrobe the girl long ago pilfered for dress-up— high school graduation dress, wedding gown, old aprons and housecoats the mother received from her own mother but never shrugged into or tied on.

The mother mowed the large yard, even the copse grass on the steep hill where the machine half-lost its hold on gravity. Neither the boy nor the girl ever saw the father pull the mower's cord except when he was timing the spring-time-new spark plug in the oily-smelling garage.

Atop scaffolding the mother had painted the stairwell ceiling. She lived up there for three days. They handed sandwiches to her, and refilled her thermos with tea.

The father called her *she-who-hates-me*.

She called down at him *loverboy*, with great sarcasm. Paint splattered in his hair when he passed below her on his way down the steps. This was no accident.

The dad had organized all his tools high up on peg board so the children couldn't reach them, and when the mother called for a screwdriver to release a penny from a slit in the radiator—and with the dad out of town on a sales jaunt again—the boy dragged a chair in merciless screech across the cement floor, then reached across the jutting-out box with all the baby-sized drawers of screws, nails, tacks, bolts, nuts, washers and any other tiny metal thing (dozens of them!), risked his armpit to the cobwebs to lift the red handle. The tool popped up and fell to the floor like a weapon, scraped the floor like a knife. The girl, always with her eye on him, jumped out of the way just in time. Once, she hadn't. Five stitches in her scalp at the Emergency.

Beside the washer machine, soap powders leak out of their box ends, lined up along the stationary tub, free dishes pulled out, some smashed in fits, or for effect. The weight bench the boy asked for when he turned teenager claims its rust. The toy box lid became so cluttered by heavy things atop it that everyone in the family forgot what treasures they'd once played with.

On hangers from the line strung across the basement ceiling are still clipped old bathing suits, rubbery material and hard cups waiting for breasts that were cut away with their disease and tossed.

The down flight of stairs bisects the basement. The laundry area holds the door to outside, for quick exit to pin wet clothes to the line. The play area has the door to the old coal bin, the creepiest of rooms, with the creakiest of doors, rarely opened, locked, in fact. When the boy and girl were small, the dad teased them about mummies and coffins behind there "that you'd be sorry you laid eyes on," his most hideous laugh puncturing the air.

After the mother died, the girl couldn't walk down the steps without the coal bin magnetizing her eyes to its keyhole, and her fearing something behind that locked door was set on stomping out her heart. She divorced the basement and its toys, a clean break the dad didn't know how to comment on, so he said nothing.

Across from the ever-locked coal bin stands a wooden table, bloodied by oil and battery acid, car parts strewn across it, as if someone were assembling a plane's jet engine, *or a bomb*, the boy once whispered to the girl, who lingered at the top of the stairs and would not come down.

The girl ceded her brother the whole sub-floor. He sometimes teased her about the mummies, and about Dracula, who, in dreams, became her mother. Her brother might have been a brat, a braggart, she wouldn't argue with you there, but she loved him the way a mother loves, in place of her mother, with no help for it, with all hope packed tightly inside her and ready to detonate.

Her sparkly cape for baton twirling, his nicked-up baseball bat, tangled line in the tackle box, the wood frame of the jiggly screen door easing a break-in—none of this valuable or tempting to burglars. Yet, in aggregate, the elements of the house loom large, nightmarish, a bad molar finally yanked, tilted baseboards, cockeyed cabinet hinges, each rusty key in its lock memorized inside and out, a schematic burned in their bones. End-of-the world movies flash four body outlines on the walls, a nuclear happy holding of hands. Step close, see for yourself. The bomb went off here.

Sarah J. Sloat

Rainmaker

the sky holds distant lovers
—swimmers

we skin the fish, scales flicker
into the sink, evening sequins

Inge in her pewter pants asks why
don't I starve my unease

languid Inge, even fish keep track
my eggs aren't done unbuttoning

my baby's cough won't fit into my hand
it is a teacup tottering

I can't roll the saucer down the driveway
can I

I don't want another child
the baby weakens me, all my oil spent

skin sistered
to the drumming rain

I Will Now Eat a Loaf of Bread

Lunch will be followed by dinner.

Walking, then sitting down.
Sprawling around.

I was thinking of something, only what?

The ocean, or Monet?
The complaints department?

No complaints here, the dust pipes up.

Here neither, chirps the ant,
returning to his tribe.

Ohio #5

The sun is up. The sun is gone.
The red barn is still there,

chasing what moves towards it.
Too much of the *what* is spent

on the silhouette of its coming.
A religion for any moment, I believe

in nothing, I believe in Ohio.
How glad I am to be so simple

as to write love poems for a state
shaped like a disfigured heart.

Kevin Stewart

Mike, the Coyote, and the Feral Cats

Myles Mires was the one who saw it. To this day, we believe him. I mean, he's out every morning way earlier than most anyone else. In spring, summer, fall and winter, he's out before dark. Before even the homeless climb from under their cardboard lean-tos or from under the bridges, Myles Mires is on his way to work. He scavenges. He covers the parking lots near the bars, he covers the alleys, the campus. He finds many things but usually only keeps CDs, jewelry and money. One day he came into Chimes claiming he'd found a hundred dollar bill earlier that morning. We said, Yeah, right. Then he showed it to us, a tire print on it. The drinks were on Myles Mires, who had a socialistic attitude about finding such booty. He considered it was everyone's. We all agreed, even Wylie and his Teddy Roosevelt economics theories. Wylie also believed we must support the president we most closely resembled, hence TR for him.

This particular morning, though, the only physical objects Miles Myres had found were a mechanical pencil and a *Playboy Party Jokes* book from 1967. We howled at the jokes, how outdated and un-p.c. they were. My fave was one about a guy in a bar who was overheard saying to a woman, "You're the kind of woman I could fall madly in bed with."

But Myles Mires' real treasure for the rest of us that particular afternoon wasn't physical or monetary in nature. Before he shared the party jokes book, he gathered us around and said that he saw Mike the Tiger, a female coyote who'd set up residence on the Indian mounds, and some of the feral cats huddled together at a cor-

ner of Mike's habitat. He said the coyote looked faintly green, possibly from the light on the mounds that mysteriously showed up after Hurricane Rita and had remained there since, elongating and contracting, rotating as if on an invisible spit.

Myles Mires said, after what appeared to be whispering going on between all the animals, the green light dissipated from the coyote and appear to settle like road dust on Mike the Tiger and the cats. He said they all sat there for several moments, shuddering, and then Mike stood, shook his body as if wet, throwing green off like water. The feral cats tore off for the nearest hedgerow. The coyote beelined to the Indian mounds.

Myles Mires followed her, but when he got there, the coyote wasn't there. Myles Mires looked at the green light above the mounds. It appeared to be losing its brilliance. It appeared more static than it had been. It appeared to be dying. Myles Mires watched the green light fade as daylight brightened, feeling spooked, he said. He shook his head and trudged to his office. The green light burned vague as love.

The light did leave, but no one knew for sure until dusk, when there was nothing but streetlamp sepiaed darkness above the mounds, sending researchers on campus scrambling to the mounds with their various implements, devices and research assistants. The head of Paranormal Mythological Sciences showed up with an infrared transit and tripod and a Gypsy psychic medium. Someone from biology brought cotton swabs and medical culture containers. Civil engineers showed up with EDMs, chemical engineers brought nuclear-powered microscopes, and geologists assaulted the mounds with augers, test tubes and Geiger counters. Someone from the Chronological Narratives Program lugged over all four volumes of Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God* and a compass. Other onlookers and armchair paranormalists set up lawn chairs around the periphery and watched, took notes on their laptops, snapped digital pictures and recorded digital videos. It must've been what Roswell,

New Mexico looked like, someone said, when that alien spacecraft went down in the 50s.

Later, at Chimes, when Myles Mires told us about the animal powwow and the fading green light, we all waited until after happy hour and then hurried to the mounds ourselves. There was no coyote, there were no lizards. We, along with all the researchers and other interested parties, watched the darkness as if the light might return. Students and maintenance workers had also gathered around, all asking about the missing light. No one had an answer. No one said anything. No one other than the researchers went very near the mounds. Wylie even admitted it was spooky, and he trusted Lockean empiricism like a Dead Head did a packed bowl.

We overheard some passers-by that Mike the Tiger was suddenly acting strange, so we wandered over to his habitat. It didn't make sense, but Mike the Tiger did seem different, staring at us like he knew something we didn't. So we all started telling what we knew about Mike, especially after the hurricane. For instance, Big Custus reminded us about that day when Myles Mires saw a nutria blunder in and out of Mike's habitat before the hurricane. Mike watched it but did nothing. The nutria got away. He has it too good, Myles Mires said. Mike got lazy.

We wondered if Mike suspected that something was wrong with himself. In days past, no doubt, he would've sprung on the oversized rodent, slapped its ratty webbed feet from under it, clamped his teeth around its neck and suffocated the animal. He'd have then carried it off into the shade and eaten everything except those ratty webbed feet. A nice little snack between his usual meals of vitamin-fortified and fiber-enhanced dry food and leg of cow his handlers brought to him every day.

This time, though, Myles Mires said, the nutria slipped through the bars on the north side of Mike's habitat, did a fly's circuit across

the west end, and slipped back out between the bars on the south side, Mike watching it much the same way that visitors gawked at him. After the nutria disappeared around Tiger Stadium, Mike realize he'd lost his instincts. Already almost twice as old as he likely would've been in the wild, Mike had grown complacent, Myles Mires surmised.

"Can't cage a wild animal like that," Big Custus said, "and expect him to keep his edge."

The only time people really bothered Mike was during game days. When the RVs started arriving on Thursday evenings, tent shelters popped up like mushrooms after a Gulf Coast storm. Plumes of charcoal smoke rising into the boiled sky, people would whisk up to the bars of Mike's habitat in their purple and yellow skins, towing little kids, faces sweaty and Kool Aid-stained and wide-eyed. They'd point at Mike, and we'd overhear fathers misinforming sons and daughters about his savage nature. Tigers ate babies. Tigers ate ponies. Worst of all, Tigers ate bunny rabbits. Some fathers would be so far off the mark as to claim Mike was from Japan, Africa, Australia. No, dumbass, we wanted to say. Not until people and ships, he wasn't.

Another lie about him was that he was colorblind. Maybe, but we figured he could distinguish bright from tacky. Mike may not have understood the humans' purple and yellow skins, but on game days, the place would be almost chromatic with them, no doubt hurting his eyes. I mean, on game days, you couldn't sling a dead nutria without hitting something tacky, as Wylie would say, with *LSU* scrawled across it.

Then, not long before kickoff, Mike would be led into his trailer and hauled inside the stadium, 95,000 people screaming at him. A version of him that smelled of human and something acrid and unnatural would jump at him to make him roar, which he did, not because of the masquerading tiger but because he loved the sound of that crowd, as if their roar could catch his, soak it in and then yell it out, all in unison, his roar and theirs, one giant roar rising from the

huge oval yawn that rose from the drained and engineered swamp along the Mississippi River. Mike must've liked that a lot.

After kickoff, Mike would be returned to his trailer, to gnaw on a cow leg bone, cooling fans in the walls lifting little tufts and ridges in his fur. After halftime, Mike was driven back to his habitat, maybe assuming it resembled where he would be if he were actually in the wild. He'd watch people watching him or passing by. He may have especially enjoyed girls, in pairs, jogging past, strange markings—"T-I-G-E-R-S" or "L-S-U"—across their bright tacky plump rumps. Mike watched them with his head cocked like a dog's when it detected high-pitched sounds only dogs can hear. Mike might've longed to run after those girls, not to eat them, but to run with them, the freedom just to lope a long distance, for no other reason than to be able to run, to stretch his legs in a fully-gaited tiger gallop. The joggers, though, would disappear over a rise or around the stadium, and Mike would sigh through his nostrils and lay his chin on his crossed front paws and doze.

By Sundays, when the game crowd had taken down its tailgates and left, a sad quietness took over campus, the sprawling live oaks dangling lion's manes of moss over the dark sandy ground. Dark men in solid blue skins poked at garbage with sticks and dropped it in large black skins that contained no animals. Occasional cars would crunch the oyster shell parking lot near his habitat but the people would remain inside the cars, dark ovals covering their eyes, a tiny orange glow flitting back and forth between them. Mike would shake the mosquitoes from his face, rise and yawn, his spine popping as he arched his back. He'd walk into his cave and lie down, the surrounding night-time jungle agitated with sirens and horns, with car alarms and rattling bass thumpers, with laughter and footsteps. The sky growled with occasional giant walloping dragonflies whose eyes became fiery red at night.

The resident feral cats ventured out from the hedges and shrubs at the onset of dusk, hunting geckos, mice and roaches, just beyond

Mike's cage. The feral cats lived the life that Mike may have felt he was missing out on. He never bothered the cats whenever they eased into his habitat, sniffing out any raw rank morsels of cow leg that Mike may have dropped and overlooked and the crows had not found. Mike left them alone, even though they'd warily watch him, seeming to sense that he was one of them but he was also very big. If he flicked his tail, they darted in as many directions as there were cats inside the bars. Mike should've been able to indulge in this power he had over them, but he appeared only to grow sad when they ran off, and maybe he ended up wishing he were one of them.

One night they didn't even shown up. For a couple of hours after dark, Mike scanned his habitat, the tall grass, the pond, his rope-laced scratching board, and the rocks, where a movement caught his eye. A tiny gecko lunged at a moth. He watched the gecko, the moth's wings still fluttering outside its mouth, until the gecko took a couple of gulps and the moth was gone. The gecko licked its chops and sped around to the dark side of the rock. It seemed everything was hunting, everything except Mike.

Then the sky grayed behind a heavy horizontal saw blade of a cloud and the wind blew and the rain lashed everything. Limbs ripped from the live oaks, and a noise like an elephant stampede rattled his den. He lay inside and watched waves of foliage rise up and sweep away like flocks of birds on the wind. Trashed whirred by and rain poured from all directions. After a while, Mike tuned the storm out and slept.

When he awoke again, all was still. He rose and stretched and ventured out. The sun was brighter through the live oaks, whose foliage had been stripped to winter amounts. Few people wandered around. He heard no birds, but the sky was unusually busy with the large dragonflies. Mike watched one fly southward until it was gone and then noticed his keepers creeping toward him with their long shiny stick again. He knew what was coming. He expected the sting

that always followed the appearance of that stick. Thud. Sting. Dizzy. Blur. Dark.

After the hurricane, his keepers had to give Mike a checkup, to make sure he wasn't somehow injured. After Rita, they did so again, but not without some deliberation as to whether drugging him again so soon after the first time was a good idea—Mike, after all, may have been the world's oldest tiger—but they went ahead and did. When Mike awoke the second time, he felt woozy and sluggish. He had little appetite, would only lick his legs of cow, nose around the dry food. At night the cats and rats stole all they could. During the day, crows cleaned his bowl and pecked at the cow legs. Even buzzards circled overhead if a leg lay uneaten for more than a day.

Mike's handlers were puzzled by this. They worried and felt guilty. They feared they may have killed him. But he is old, one said. They couldn't help that. He'd never have lived this long in Indian jungles. They tried to convince themselves that this was a correct hypothesis, but Mike was getting thinner, slower, and more depressed, it seemed.

When the green light appeared over the mounds, though, even Mike perked up. He sauntered to the northwest corner of his cage, sat and watched the commotion as people were drawn to the light. Around him, throngs of lizards scuttled in that direction and died when they reached the apex of the mounds. He could see the glow, strangely the color of jungle, burnt into the darkness. He must've sensed everyone was skittish, like a heard of antelope when it caught the scent of Mike. He howled. He couldn't understand why, but he howled. His handlers returned and watched him and were concerned. None of us had ever heard a Tiger howl. It was awesome and like a dirge.

A couple of nights later, Mike was still howling, more handlers watching, scratching their heads. And then something else howled from near the mounds. A higher pitched howl. We all hurried over to the mounds and saw a coyote on one, matching its yips with Mike's gut-bucket howls booming from his habitat. Up there in that green light and among the dead lizards, the coyote appeared confidently safe. And then it shushed its howling and started eating on the lizards. Mike also silenced, and we all returned to his habitat and saw that he'd returned to his cave.

The coyote, it was soon hypothesized, was the same one that'd made *Channel 2 News* and *The Advocate* earlier in the summer. In the Garden District, people began discovering their cats and small dogs missing, an empty collar in an alley, a severed paw under banana trees. The first suspect was the "foot traffic," as they were called, passing through the Garden District from the north side of Government Street, which served as the northern boundary of the Garden District and as a buffer zone against the impoverished black neighborhood beyond it. Most people there didn't mind the nannies and maids and home-health providers who brought the bus into the Garden District from the north side of town. People even trusted the lawn guys with their pick-ups and steel-grated trailers full of mowers, chainsaws, weed whackers, and leaf blowers. That suspicious looking "foot traffic," pants halfway down their asses, baggy sports jerseys, coming and going from their neighborhoods to the basketball courts in City Park.

The "foot traffic" was finally exonerated of the missing pets crime when it was discovered that City Park itself was the unknowing host of the perpetuator, the coyote. At dusk on several evenings, motorists claimed they had seen it emerging from the bamboo and brambles that clotted the small creek bottom through the west side of the park. Animal Control underwent a trapping program to catch the coyote and relocate it, but she was too wry for their traps and their easily-

gotten fresh meat. She stuck with the small pets. By Labor Day, forty-three had been reported missing.

Animal Control decided it would have to exterminate the animal. They concocted a plan. For the Saturday after Labor Day, they would force all officers to work, some even on overtime, and enlisted several police volunteers, and scheduled a drive. They would sweep up through the creek bottom starting from Dalrymple Drive, spacing men with shotguns ten feet apart, and shoot the coyote when they got a chance.

Luckily for the coyote, Katrina altered those plans. When the storm was approaching, all city officials were put on hurricane alert and had to assist with evacuations and emergency shelters. After Katrina, Baton Rouge was so overrun with abandoned pets from all over south Louisiana, Animal Control was busy trying to catch and identify pets and track down their owners. The coyote continued pillaging on this new bounty until after Rita. The green light beckoned her somehow. Unlike everyone else, she did not fear the light and came to it and took to it as if expecting it all along.

But after her pow-wow with Mike and the cats, when she ran off and Myles Mires couldn't keep up, she blew past the mounds, cut down Chimes Street, made a left onto Ivanhoe, crossed State onto July and followed winding July between the lakes and into the secluded month-streets neighborhood. She headed for the golf course across Dalrymple, where she met a Volvo wagon. The driver, a woman who'd lost three cats over the summer, saw the coyote in the periphery of her vision and gunned the car. The collision was greater than she'd anticipated, the coyote thudding against the grill and front bumper. The woman claimed she heard the animal screech like a scared cat before rolling under the car, the rear left wheel bouncing over it, crushing its ribcage. When she cleared the coyote, the woman pulled over, got out and looked at the dead coyote, eyes glazed and tongue lolled out onto the

oven-warm pavement. "Kill another cat now," she said to the carcass and then returned to her car.

Every car driving from the Garden District to campus put a couple of tires over the dead coyote, until there was barely enough to scrape off the streets, other than the tail, when street maintenance showed up.

"Like getting an inspection sticker off a windshield," Big Custus said, interrupting Myles Mires.

He said the workers shoveled the flattened coyote into the back of their dump truck and tied the tail to the radio antenna, as if displaying a trophy from an animal *they*'d killed. No one felt sorry for the coyote, though, except for possibly Mike, who howled all alone now, his voice strangely close to a falsetto, his trainers were apprehensive to hear. They were, however, pleased to see him eating again, savoring his leg of cow as if he'd been craving it for a long time.

The next morning everyone was surprised to see a gang of the feral cats out in broad daylight. At first they appeared to be chasing a couple of female joggers, who'd screamed and sprinted away from the cats. But the cats persisted, catching up with the two girls. When the girls tired and slowed down, the cats slowed with them until they stopped, and the cats rolled around in the dirt, exposing their bellies. From their own cats, the girls understood these cats were in a playful mood, very unlike how they normally acted, panicked, when people neared. The cats rubbed up against their legs, nudging them slightly as if trying to coax them into running again. Those cats wanted to run with those girls, Myles Mires said, stroking his Spanish moss of a goatee. They actually wanted to just run with them.

Mary Crockett Hill

This Is the World

This is also the world.
A small boy drops
a maple leaf down a well.
A girl, slightly larger, does likewise—
peering over the stone lip to guess
the leaf's curled and wayward descent.

Across the yard, behind a stardust bush,
the housecat is toying with something still alive.
It flits through the grass, now here now there,
delighting the cat with its antic struggle for flight.

I am in the world too, wondering:
Do I kill the bird for mercy? Do I take it inside?
What would Dickon from *The Secret Garden* do?
The book-animals loved him so, showing their mildest
bellies beneath satisfied, glinting eyes.

I might think we all want such love,
even from a half-dead bird—except
my brother was once chased down a walking trail
by a man who'd just killed his first turkey
and to celebrate, downed three six-packs
and started firing at hikers. He hounded after
my brother, hollering for all the world
like Yosemite Sam, "I'm gonna get you, I'll get you!"

The man later told the police, "It seemed at the time
like the thing to do."

This is the world, and where we spit,
where we stomp, where we fuck and crap,
and all that Jack built, and whatever's next,
and whether we forgive our father
or trust strangers or take zoloft,
and why the trees on one side of the hill
bud green before the others,
and if we make our way to Egypt,
and who there holds a broom, and who a gun,
and once we finally lie down at the end of the day
on our mattress or hammock or stone slab,
how the moon just keeps throbbing
so we sense loss too keenly,
and what finally *is* the thing to do—
        and if we carry our children
                inside our own bodies, and where
        we plant our pumpkin seeds,
and why we fear caves
and dark
        underwater places,
the dark under water,
the dark
        —someone please stop me,
I could go on forever, it is
after all, the world.

Jars

There are many ways to fill them, so much
on this side of sanity that must be kept.

Buttons, of course you think of buttons,
coins, Q-tips, bolts, wads of string,

but have you given thought
to what should not be preserved?

My brother Sam, for example, would fart
his rankest disappointments

into an empty mayonnaise jar
and keep it on the mantle

until we young ones returned.
"Edgar, I have something for you,"

he'd almost sing. A flying headbutt,
a body slam, and Edgar

was pinned to the floor, his nose
mashed into the open mouth of glass.

Also this: tiny sharks, dismembered fingers,
unborn anythings: all the bloated

wonders on a laboratory shelf.
If I were a better person I might say love

should never be contained
but forgiveness must be kept jarred
on your bedside table where you could find it
even when you wished you could not.

I am not that person. I am the one
who thinks of toenail clippings and lard,

peaches waxing bluish-brown,
the body-juice of bees.

Is it possible that toenails equal love?
Lard, forgiveness?

Might the million jars of our world
choreograph their own end—

wrenching themselves open at the same
exact moment to spew their contents in a whirled

rebellion, the air flocked with all the things
we should have thrown away?

I've been told Pandora's box
was really a jar, and she herself

made of earth and water, a jar
full of the need to open

what the gods had given her—
plague, sorrow, poverty

of mind, and the hope
that what was to come

could be both binding
and boundless.

Certain Homes in Certain Towns at the End of the World

There is a room where the house cricket
has her own small desk and a tidy, open notebook.

She is welcome to sit there all day if she likes,
not humming, not writing a word.

There are similar rooms
for the flies.

Rooms for the field mice come in from the fields.
Rooms for the moths, rooms for the lice.

A single bookshelf holds whole colonies of vermin.
A single windowsill, a million lives.

In this house, the cat settles on the sofa
and strokes his own ears.

His fleas. His fleas' remembrances.
Ah, his fleas' regrets.

Kyle Hemmings

Is There Life on Mars?

She sat on his log-hard shoulders as he took giant steps, surveyed the prairie that was hers too. The ice crystals hung from trees like pointed little fingers. From her mitten, Freddy the Tiger dangled by his tail. Marjorie felt she was somebody else or a girl richer than a man sitting on the top of the world.

It's getting cold, her father said.

She was wrapped tight in her coat and scarf like the package delivered last week. A book for her mother that had strange lights on the cover. There were words she could not understand: UFOs, crop circles, black holes.

She remembered her mother saying that in Texas several people reported strange sightings, like the lights on the book cover.

"Are we Martians?" Marjorie asked. She imagined Freddy the Tiger winking at her.

"Just in winter," her father said. "Only Mars is someplace colder. A place where you'd float forever, forget your name."

And Texas, she said. Where's Texas?

Someplace far and deep, he told her. Someplace where you could get lost and they'd never find you.

He carried her back towards the house.

Inside, she stood next to her mother, who was cutting long sticks of rhubarb to make a preserve. On the counter, Freddy the Tiger sat quietly, watching everything with a wide careless grin. Squeezing her hands, she imagined her love for her father like the pecans now in her palm, the ones she could never crush.

In a deep crisp voice, her father asked her mother, what had she been telling Marjorie about Martians?

The night he asked her to lie still, she said to keep the engine running, the heater moaning. In the backseat, they were naked as tiger moths. Under her bare flesh that was thinner than a memory, she felt the cold made her too visible. Like an actress forgetting her lines. Marjorie opened the door and adjusted her long skirt, her sheep-skin boots. He lit a cigarette.

She folded her arms. Staring down at the hard ground that was harder than her thoughts, she admitted he was the first boy she let enter her without a promise.

He chortled. How did it feel, he asked.

Like riding a comet. Like giving birth to a tiny star.

Are they just words, he said. "Stupid words? Or you mean that?"

They were words, she knew, from a poem a girl had read in class. But Marjorie wrote the poem for her because the classmate hated to do anything that made her gawk over her own words, expose her braces. Marjorie knew they were really her words.

Something distracted her. That light, she said, pointing. A space ship.

Sundog, he said.

No, not a mock sun, she said. She wanted to believe it was a space ship. She wanted to believe in something amazing. It loomed closer over the horizon, to the right of its twin sun, her parents' house, about a mile past a twirling road of dirt that exhaled dust in summer.

They lost track of the time. She wanted to hear him make promises that could sweep her like a dust devil. They circled around each other. He said it was getting late, dark. The sundog and its twin disappeared.

I want to get married someplace warm, she said, running one hand across her breasts.

I can't afford Cancun. He dug his boot into another cigarette butt.

You can't afford to stay cold all your life, she said, and walked into the night.

Years passed like tiny feet in the night. They settled in a ranch-styled house outside of Dallas. It shielded her from the scorching heat in that part of the country. It chased away her memories of cold nights back in Wyoming.

In that house, she watched her son grow tall and forgetful. Away at college, he had wired her for money. For books, rising tuition, the increase in room and board. She thought it was really for something else. When he arrived home during college breaks, his manner turned taciturn, distant. He scratched the side of his face, mumbled one or two word answers she could barely make out. She wished she could be a fly lodged on the rim of his ear, his shoulder. That way, she could watch his every move, how he was spending her money, cutting her leash of maternal love.

Her husband sported a handlebar mustache, thick, graying. It reminded her of something soft and deceptive. Perhaps a raccoon. Raccoons, she knew, could be dangerous. They could bite, infect you with a constant hunger, delusions of nightly thirst. She accused him of having affairs. She imagined the voices of his women, wisps in the night, their bodies elusive, pieces of evidence turning to phantoms. At night, legs splayed against the floor, they played Scrabble. She combined letters that could never form words. He always got up in the middle of a game for a beer.

The sheriff arrived at her house one day. He sat at the edge of the sofa and mentioned something about the heat. She didn't know why he was there, dismissed the thought that her husband or son committed a crime. Hunched forward, he said he had some bad news. Her son was killed in an accident on an overpass above Route 61. She remembered when that overpass was first built. It reminded

her of something swerving with crazy arms. She wondered how something with crazy arms could get you anywhere faster.

"It's a bad site for accidents," the sheriff said, rubbing his forehead. "I can't tell you how many. This road rage thing. The heat makes people crazy."

It can't be my son, she told him. Her son was alive that morning. And after all, she thought, it takes years to die. Her train of thought broke into tiny incomprehensible cars.

He described his features from the license, the photo ID, the actual face at the scene that she now feared was disfigured: the crown of chestnut hair, the hazel eyes (gimlet, as she always thought of them), the smear of upturned nose, the slack mouth he inherited from his father. In deadpan voice, he repeated the full name like reciting a license plate.

She insisted it couldn't be him, maybe someone who looked like him.

But the driver's license, he said, the face and matching photo, wasn't it more than just a coincidence?

She stood in the middle of the living room, felt her feet, her eyes grow hard; she wished for blindness, for deafness. Imagine being Freddy the Tiger again. She felt too deadened to cry. Later, she knew she would come alive, in the bedroom, at the hairdresser's, maybe in the kitchen, washing dishes. It would hit her. She would cry for years and never shed a tear. A feat of strength. A minor undocumented miracle.

The sheriff rose, and mentioned something about signing some papers. She shivered at the thought. Her son was no longer someone she wanted to identify. A motionless mass of bone and flesh that was also hers. The sheriff left.

That night, she smelled a woman's perfume on her husband's skin. It was a different scent than the previous ones. This one was Ocean Dream, not the wild orchard of some topless dancer he had

met in a Dallas club, a month before. She told him their son was dead. She told him she had to identify him earlier that afternoon.

In the bedroom, peeling off his boots, he said, "What?" and said it again. Why didn't you call me? he asked, a fury rising in his voice.

You . . . You might have been busy.

He turned abruptly to face her, to see her in her thin white skin that didn't smell of rose or orchid, or even of Chinese oranges, her favorite scent. He made a move as if to lunge at something, an object he could grasp, throw against the wall. Instead, his knees buckled, and his lips trembled. She imagined him growing smaller, down to a child's level. She wanted to hold him, if only for a brief moment, to keep him from shrinking, but she couldn't stand the scent of someone else's orchard in her bedroom.

It really wasn't an accident, she told him. She didn't believe in them. It was something else. Some god, some power she couldn't understand, took him away. What was the word she was looking for? Absconded. Yes. That was the correct word. Some higher power absconded with their son. If there was a god, she said, he lived in a cold climate and very far away. He was a lonely god, an alien, and he needed humans for warmth. But absconded, she repeated, was the correct word.

After that night, they never played another game of Scrabble.

In the room that was not hers, there were objects, photos, hairbrushes, faded watercolor paintings, stuffed animals, that could be hers, when she was younger, when she was somebody else.

The woman, dressed like a ghost, pressed her fingers into Marjorie's wrist.

"Eighty-two," she said, "almost her exact age." She said this turning to the man Marjorie called Dr. Freeze. He was bald with smooth skin and Marjorie wondered if he ever had hair. Maybe he was a baby who shot up too fast. Like her own son.

"Mrs. Barnes," said Dr. Freeze, "do you know where you are?"

"Yes," she said, "somewhere on Mars."

"No. You're in Saint Anthony's nursing home in Dallas."

"How did I get here? By space ship? I don't remember coming here."

Dr. Freeze twisted his lips into a wry smile. He scrawled something in a chart.

She wondered if he would melt in warm climates.

And this, Marjorie said, writhing to free herself of a vest restraint that reminded her of an apron tethered too high—what is this?

It's for your safety, said the ghost who at times seemed to blend into the walls. You've had too many falls. Marjorie didn't like the sound of her voice. She wondered if the ghost had a shady past.

I'm changing her medications, announced Dr. Freeze.

"Hey," Marjorie yelled, "I've heard that line before. What does that mean around here?" Even prisoners of black holes, she knew, had rights.

It was the ghost's turn.

"Honey, do you know who that man is?" She pointed to the bed next to Marjorie's.

Propping herself on her elbows, she struggled to turn.

"Yes, it's my son."

"No, darlin'. It's your husband. We put the two of you in the same room."

"Oh, how nice. It should be that way, shouldn't it?"

The ghost then held up a photo of a young man posing in tight denims and cowboy hat to Marjorie's face. He was leaning against a pick-up and his face was scruffy. He flaunted a proud smile. Next to him was a girl with a belly bulging like a watermelon. She wore a mischievous smile.

"Honey, you remember that handsome devil?"

"I remember a dust devil."

"And the one next to him? Who's that girl?"

Marjorie squeezed her eyes, craned her neck. Her eyes danced a zigzag pattern over the photo. The girl in the picture seemed to be staring out at her, smiling, as if to say, "Why don't you step in?"

"It was me in somebody else's shoes," she said to the woman who could shift shapes, blend into the walls.

Dr. Freeze shone a light in both of Marjorie's eyes. The sundog light grew large, eclipsed everything. Something clicked and he put the strange pen-like instrument in his shirt pocket.

"Mrs. Barnes, who is the president of our country?"

Marjorie laughed.

Now how would she know that, she said. She wasn't from his country. And Mars was a place colder than his eyes. Mountains and craters where you could drift over forever.

Her captors whisked past the door. The ghost lady turned and winked at her.

Placing both hands over the bed sheets, Marjorie sunk her head, listened closely. The world, the one she was on, was growing still. She could have cried.

Evan Peterson

Homerun Cereal Angel

(after Mysterious Skin*, dir. 2004 by Gregg Araki)*

Coach spills cereal. The floor is a nebula, vibrant cereal planets. Blue light. Homeruns, star players, angels. He lays you down in the mess; this is how he loves you. Swallow. Cradled in crunch, the artificial colors. His adult mouth is big enough to This is how to love someone. [weight of the adult body] Straight out of the ballpark. Pressing you, cereal beneath crackling. Recorded voice, tape recorded playtime, lost time. Blackouts. Cereal. Your whole arm disappearing in. His body tries to eat you, pull you in. Precious. Crumbling slower than if ground between teeth.

Heidi Shira Tannenbaum

Correspondences

It is just like you. The first snow
quiets footsteps and muffles
house-noises. Last year
for me there was no winter,
and in the steamy November heat
I waited for news of your cold world.
The palm pressed its striped fingers
over the rising sun, stroked the room.

It was there I lived the life of trees,
my days dictated by sunlight
or the fierce wind of monsoons.
I awoke feeling the scratch of insects and wood.

After three more weeks, when no word came,
I bought a pad and a ballpoint and wrote:
The sky is trembling over the rice paddies.
Where are you?

The women I slept beside on the matted floor
awoke each morning to fix breakfast,
feed the chickens, work the fields.
Some sifted through trash,
sorted plastic, paper, tin,
sent bottles to be broken into pieces.
I sweat beside them in the heat,
but at night I dreamt of snow,
and woke up moaning for the cold.
There was no reply.

Now, in ice–bitten December air
my body holds a feverish memory;
the heavy crush of metal against glass,
the silent blush of orchids opening at dawn.

Setting fire in the woods
is primal American Space

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary to sharpen your pen before writing the last paragraph of a letter, remember Abigail Adams. Remember the ladies. Remember gravel and blue ribbon, magnolia in the rain. The father leading you on a one-eyed horse because soon he will ask you to be the executer of his will. We hold these truths to be self-evident. Salt from the brackish pools of our first emergence, still traces in the blood. Salt water anoints the baby's lips. A fistful of snakes: an offering for rain. Highways and ditches and a mush of wet leaves. That's caveman shit. That's the night you can't sleep because you realize you loved too long and you want to punch glass. But you never do. These are injuries that nature cannot forgive. Confession doesn't matter if you are already in Hell. The pregnant woman can't say the child isn't hers and just got over a fear of down escalators last month, looking for gardens. The bed of limestone under Kentucky produces the finest single batch whiskey, the world's fastest horses. The river Styx passes through the mammoth caves. My first job will probably be writing obituaries. Bury me with starfish. But you never do.

The Oracle at Delphi
tells you to know yourself

The oracle of Oxford, Mississippi tells you to sleep under a magnolia and wear overalls. The journey to Delphi is part of the preparation for the supplicant. On the way to Oxford you will cross the Yazoo River. Take a left at the blind fiddler (it might be nice to buy him a drink). For either place, carry laurel leaves. The Oracle will always be a woman named Pythia. She smokes and drinks bourbon and is hard of hearing. Vapor rises from the earth, smelling something like propane and home cooking. Supposedly the Oracle is a virgin. I don't buy it because when I asked her about Cait she said something about open doors and closed doors, about how I should've known the moment showering became an exercise in cleanliness. I kicked myself the whole way back for asking such a wasted question. When I told the blind fiddler, he bought me a drink. I decided to take an alternate route home which delivered me to mourning doves in cotton fields, wishing I had a pocketknife and a map. I took up a handful of dirt. Fuck you, Pythia, and your vapors and cigarettes. I knelt to pray by a river, but couldn't clear my mind of morning sex and railroad ties. And then the sound of shape notes from the sweetgum, a congregation all in white. A man with six fingers on his left hand washes my feet. He traces a map in the dirt and tells me to follow the river. *Sure*, I say, *but where am I now?* He clears his throat, points and says you're here.

Howard Good

The Parable of Sunlight

It's a rare sunny day,
but the streets are strangely quiet,

as if arrests have been made,
or are about to be.

Head down, heart bending,
I start across the square.

The fountain is dry, stained in dead leaves.
An old man, with the drab, diligent face

of a lifelong student of numbers,
scatters bread crumbs for the pigeons.

I pretend not to notice him—it's safer—and in seconds, reach the far side,
where bodies in the early stages of decay hang like gray rags from the trees.

I glance back at the old man.
He's watching me, and I wonder why

and whether tomorrow
is supposed to be just as nice as today.

Lovesick

It isn't love if our embassy isn't burning,
if the windows haven't exploded

in a shower of diamonds from the heat,
if the ballerina isn't staggering around on stage

as from an accidental elbow in the face,
or if the knife-thrower, subject to ironic applause,

doesn't suddenly doubt the accuracy of his aim;
it isn't love if the moon isn't breathing,

if we don't receive unsought help from machines,
an automated summons to appear in court

and our bewildered joy upon entering the night
a moment after everyone else has left.

Greg Schutz

Skunk's Gospel

Where I was raised, tents sprang up overnight, like mushrooms, in the lush heat of June and July. Revivalist preachers, their collars spongy with sweat, their voices bobbing high and low like the Apostles' boat on the stormy Galilee, laid hands on the elderly and infirm. Once, when I was a little girl, my mother raised her arthritic fingers to the pulpit, and the panting, red-faced man took her hands in his.

"I felt the power of His love," she told me and my father on the drive home. "It entered me and the hurt fled before it like a shadow."

I collected hatchlings from our lawn, baby sparrows and starlings that had fallen from their nests to lie shivering in the grass. At the bottom of my shoebox, they scrabbled with their claws and stretched half-formed wings. No one could have loved those screaming, starving little things any more than I did; no one could have spent more hours stroking their delicate down. But they died all at once in the night—I woke, and the box atop my dresser was silent. In the morning, my father carried the shoebox to the milkweed and thistles at the edge of the yard and waved it through the air, and the tiny bodies flew for the first and only time. From the porch, I watched them settle into the tall grass together.

My father returned, hands greased with birdshit. He commanded: "Never again with this nonsense."

But the Epistles promised healing powers; like a child, I expected them as my right and reward. And because I couldn't rebel against God when I grew up powerless and plain—that stern old man in the clouds was as impossible to hate as my own grandfather—I rebelled

against my parents instead. At seventeen, I drove my shambling Bonneville as far as a tank of gas would take me and found a job waitressing at a truck stop outside a town I'd never heard of.

By then it was nearly December, and the thought of winter coming raised in me a vague, gnawing hunger. Evan, the short-order cook and dayshift manager, kept eyeing me from the kitchen. He was hungry himself, I thought with a flutter that could have been fear.

I was working a table by the front window one morning, pouring coffee for a trucker, when I saw a man in a ratty overcoat come tilting across the parking lot, kicking through the empty Styrofoam cups and windblown receipts.

The trucker saw where I was looking. "Friend of yours?"

"No," I said, but the man shuffled right up to the window and pressed his face to the glass, peering inside.

The trucker leered. "Looks to me like he'd like to be your friend."

I took the coffeepot back behind the counter. Evan was cracking eggs onto the griddle. "Yeah, I seen him," he said.

"He's staring at me."

"What do you want me to do? I your boyfriend? I run guys off for you?"

Evan, with his bull's neck and muscles that ran like cables beneath his shirt, was the kind of man my parents had spent years warning me against—"No more shame than a dog," my mother might have said. My first day waitressing, he'd told me my rump looked good in my skirt. No one had said a thing like that to me before. He worked the eggs with his spatula now, tearing the yolks, rolling the whites into little puffed mounds.

"Some coot with a hard-on," he said. "Want to run him off, you be my guest. I get paid to cook."

I drew myself up. "All right, then. Watch me."

I stepped outside into a blast of icy air, hoping to prove to myself that I could be brave. But I was disappointed. The man in the park-

ing lot was no threat—just a burnout rocking slowly from one foot to the other. He looked sixty at least, with a round pink face and wattled bird's neck. His eyes were glossy and gummed at the corners, and a delta of tiny red sores spread from beneath his dripping nose.

"What do you want?" I asked.

His breath was the thin blue-white of diesel exhaust. In the high, cracked voice of a ruined choirboy, he said, "Pancakes, hold the flour, milk, and oil."

Meaning—I puzzled it out—eggs.

He recited the line solemnly, as if it weren't a joke but a red-lettered verse from the Gospels. I imagined it was something he'd picked up years ago, and which had stuck with him long after almost everything else had been burned away. The only name he had for himself anymore, I would eventually learn, was Skunk.

"Scrambled?" I asked him. "Fried?"

The wind whipped across the parking lot, slapping at the hem of my skirt and at the flabby white calves I'd always thought of as hunks of uncooked dough.

Skunk hung a crooked smile. "Any way you want it is fine, beautiful."

Who you think's paying? Not him," Evan said that first morning.

"I'll pay," I replied, feeling suddenly bold.

"Your paycheck. But he's not eating in here." Evan waved a pink slab of a hand at the diner around us: truckers and local boys working over their breakfasts while the two other waitresses, women decades older than I was, worked the tables. There were crumbs on the counter, stacked dishes in the sink. "We got standards to uphold."

I lived in a semi-furnished trailer half a mile down an access road from the diner and separated from the interstate by a stand of pines, a muddy ditch, and some cyclone fencing. On dark nights, scrawny

deer came bounding across all four lanes of I-26, lured down from the hills by the scent of corn cribs on the farm behind the trailer park. More than once, I woke to squalling brakes and sprang up onto my elbows just in time to catch the meaty thump of an impact. On my bedroom ceiling, the blue glare of the police lights mingled with the yellow flashers of the wrecker, and in the morning there was just the skinny, dead deer, or pieces of it, kicked over to the shoulder to rot.

Walking to the diner to begin my shift one morning, I found a doe tangled in the collapsed fencing. She'd dragged herself down from the road. Her haunches were a mess of red and white, her hair twisted into bloody spikes, her rear legs folded bonelessly in the ditch, but she was still breathing. Her diamond-shaped head swiveled to watch me.

Back at the trailer, I dumped a plastic tub of caramel corn into the trash and filled it with tapwater. With a fallen branch, I nudged the tub close to the doe. Then I left, in case she wanted privacy before drinking. But when I returned that evening, the deer was dead, her head tipped over into the grass and the water untouched.

"I'm trying to help you," Evan said, using a spatula to bulldoze Skunk's heap of hot scrambled eggs onto a plate. "You can do what you want for a bum like that, but you're not going to like how it turns out in the end."

Skunk returned the next day, and the day after that, until before long his visits had sewn themselves into the fabric of my mornings. As the tractor-trailers idled in murky clouds of exhaust, he came to me, saying, "Hold the flour, milk, and oil," as serious as any preacher. Behind the counter, I slipped the tip roll from my apron pocket and peeled three dollars into the register till, and in the alley between the diner and the Goodgulf station where the truckers showered and played Galaga and paid for their gas, I watched Skunk crouch, plate balanced on the balls of his knees as he shoveled eggs into his mouth. A warm awareness of my own

power and benevolence filled me the way I imagined the food was filling him. Satisfaction floated me through the rest of my shift and beyond, into the long empty hours at my trailer. I came to feel as though—every day for one more day—I was saving him.

"Your boyfriend's here," Evan took to announcing whenever Skunk ambled up to the window. He spoke loudly, so that everyone in the diner—dirty-faced men hunched at the counter or in booths along the walls in their crumpled jackets and workshirts, their hairy knuckles collapsed around mugs of black coffee or tented over whitebread sandwiches—would hear. Some grumbled as I carried the eggs out. "What about me, sugar?" a trucker with a braided beard thick as a taproot asked me once. "What do I get?"

His attention reminded me of the way my belly bunched above the waist of my skirt, the way my arms jiggled when I leaned over a table to clear the dirty plates. But I hid my discomfort. "You think that bothers me?" I asked Evan. "You think I care what you say to those people?"

He was pressing a hot sandwich against the griddle. "What ever happened to you, Lizzie? You used to be the sweetest little thing."

Only Evan, his sweating, grease-spattered bulk wedged between the grills and the stovetop, could call me little. The other two waitresses on my shift were both short and sinewy, their lipsticked mouths filled with teeth the color of cigarette filters. They traded what they called "war stories" about children and stepchildren, husbands and exes and lovers, and treated me as though they were members of a club I couldn't join. I was new, young, from out-of-town; I was chubby and wide-eyed and probably wouldn't last the winter; they wanted no part of me. Evan was the only person who really spoke to me, though around him I was afraid—the mere sight of him splitting open eggs with his thumbs was enough to shock me to stillness. The hot sandwich burped grease onto the griddle now, and the grease hissed.

"Guess I got tougher," I said, hoping it sounded like I had.

"Guess so." Evan jerked a thumb over the counter at the bearded trucker, who was sopping up ham juice with a hunk of cornbread. "But hey—if I was your boyfriend, I'd deck that jerk for you."

If I really was getting tougher, I didn't feel it. When I wasn't at the diner I was alone, and some evenings I felt a mouth yawning open inside me, screeching to be fed. But I didn't know what it ate. My prayers sat dully on my tongue, like chewed-up bits of communion wafer. So I cranked the volume on the radio in my kitchen until the jelly glasses rattled in the cupboards, or else I drove slowly through town, the globes of reflected streetlamps oozing slowly up my windshield.

I always thought I might see Skunk as I drove, but I never did. Once I knew to look for them, though, I noticed others: ragged men puddled in doorways and women hunkered on the steps of the Methodist church, their grocery sacks fat with secrets I could only guess at. Caught in my headlights, they froze. Only after I'd passed could I look in my mirrors and see them trudging off to someplace else.

I wondered where they went. What were they looking for, when they disappeared from sight? Alone again in my trailer, I turned on all the lights, but darkness still crowded the windows. Night after night, deer, panicky with hunger, stumbled skittering and spider-legged onto the highway. They never made it.

As February edged into March, I went a week without seeing Skunk and grew sick with worry. It was the last cold snap of an unusually bitter Carolina winter, and I kept imagining him curled like a comma in a ditch somewhere, his mouth packed with snow. I misheard orders and slopped coffee over the rims of mugs, my eyes tugged again and again to the empty front windows.

Evan cornered me as I carried a plastic tub full of dirty dishes behind the counter. "Listen, Lizzie. You're asking to get shitcanned."

I hefted the tub from one hip to the other. "You're shift manager. Are you going to shitcan me?"

I don't know whether it was my tone or my expression, or simply that he'd never heard me curse before—an impurity from a woman's lips was something my parents would never abide, and the bitterness of certain words still stung my tongue—but at this, Evan's entire face pulled down in a puggish, earnest frown.

"Maybe not," he admitted. "But don't think I don't know what the problem is. That old dog of yours—you'd think he left you at the altar, tore your heart out."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lied. Outside, bare branches and the radio aerials of tractor-trailers sagged beneath beards of ice. For three days, wet, feathery snow had fallen at dawn, pellets of sleet at midday. I let my faucets drip all night so the pipes under the trailer wouldn't burst, and, lying on my mattress in the dark, I fell asleep to cold water tapping the bathroom drains on the other side of the wall. Dreaming, I found myself living once more with my mother and father in the house I still couldn't help but think of, whether sleeping or awake, as home, and daybreak saw me waiting for my morning coffee to spurt out onto the linoleum—at least then I'd know where the hole in me was. I walked to work past the skeletons of dead deer, their ribs interlocked like steepled fingers. Without Skunk, I'd surely lose all hope.

"Please," Evan said. "Just pull yourself together, all right?"

I set the tub beside the sink. "Leave me alone."

"Alone," he repeated. "Really?"

I felt his eyes linger on me as I wandered, dazed, to the front of the diner to bungle another order and go tipless again.

"Maybe you could try talking to someone for once," he called, but I ignored him.

That evening, I drove to the county shelter, where the frost lay in fronds against the windows and the woman doing crosswords at

the front desk eyed me and said, "You lost, honey?"

I was looking for someone, I told her. "He calls himself Skunk."

"In here," she said, "we show people the respect of using their real names."

"I don't know his real name. *He* doesn't know his real name." But she'd already turned back to her crosswords.

The overhead fluorescents occasionally sputtered—as if in sympathy with, or mocking imitation of, the wet winter coughs of some of those who shuffled between the dinner line and cafeteria tables at one end of the room and the rows of collapsible metal beds at the other. Like everyone else there, I wandered aimlessly. No one paid me much attention. They saw a fat girl, her eyes darting about the room and her soft pink fingernails, where they peeked from the sleeves of her ratty parka, notched and torn by her nervous teeth. I could have seemed neither trustworthy nor threatening. I probably looked like a runaway. I was one.

"Do you need help?" a man standing near the end of the dinner line asked. His coat was worn and his cheeks were hollow beneath a scabby beard, but he stood close to me with an air of habitual authority. His voice was slow and soothing, his vowels buoyant.

"I'm looking for someone," I told him.

From his coat pocket, he produced a folded slip of paper. "Maybe this is what you're looking for."

It was a tract, of course. I sat at one of the tables, across from an old man who aimed a wet grin at me. On the front of the pamphlet was a drawing of a man and woman clothed in rags, their faces twisted by despair, raindrop tears sprinkling from their eyes. "I Have Nothing To Eat," said the man's speech bubble. "I Am Broken Hearted," said the woman's. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*, said the caption.

I opened the tract. The same man and woman were smiling. They stood straighter now. Their clothes didn't appear as ragged as before, but instead seemed to wrap them like robes. "Jesus Loves Me!"

said the man. "This I Know!" said the woman. And behind and between them loomed the tall, handsome, bearded young man I was so familiar with. His smile was inscrutable, His arms outstretched. The caption completed the Beatitude: *For they will be filled!*

The back of the tract had a map and directions to a church in town. Tall letters proclaimed, *Speak His name and you will be saved!*

A woman approached, tall but stooped, her shoulders hunched like a perched bird's. She wore pink galoshes and dragged her feet like a child, scuffing her toes and tripping over invisible obstacles. She sat beside me, slipped a pill from her pocket into her mouth, and swallowed. Her throat clicked.

Meanwhile, the old man across the table had stood. When he'd caught my eye, he flashed me another gummy grin, his shiny, wind-burned face creasing. Carefully—with the same reserve I saw in every image of Jesus, who often smiled but never showed his teeth—I grinned back.

His smile spread. He pulled down the top of his sweatpants. Like the tiny arm of someone struggling to lift himself up and over the waistband, his penis flopped out.

There was nothing awful or even all that strange about it. I'd never seen a man's penis before, and all I could seem to think about were the many other things it resembled: a bitten, bloodless tongue, a grizzled hinge of jerky. After a few moments, the man shrugged, flipped the thing back into his pants, and left.

No one else seemed to have noticed. The woman laid her head on the table, facing away. Her arms were stretched across the table, her fingers molded around the Styrofoam cup.

The man and woman on the tract stared up at me. The captions above them bellowed salvation in a boldfaced font. But what good was a promise that was always retreating—hiding in the future tense, remote from present need? Beneath the revival tents, people had toppled into the aisles, crying, "Come down *now*, sweet Jesus!" But

no one had seemed too disappointed, afterwards, at the silent scudding of clouds that was the sky's only response.

I reached out and touched the woman's matted hair.

She flinched, fingers squeaking against the Styrofoam cup. Then, slowly, she surrendered to the touch. I worked my fingers down the length of her hair, feeling the gluey tangles separate. It was not all gray—single strands of cinnamon and chestnut caught the light and burned. Gently, the woman pressed against my fingers, the curve of her skull rising to fill my palm.

"Honey," I whispered, "what are we supposed to do?"

But my hand did not throb with awakening power, and the woman did not rise, sober and sane, to find all she'd lost returned to her. All that happened was I stroked her greasy hair until the lights started flickering out and the lady from the front desk came by to ask if I was going to stay the night.

I called in sick for three straight days and sat listening to sleet tapping at the door and knots of ice popping like knuckles beneath the rivets of the roof. On the fourth morning, Evan said, "Goddamn it," and hung up on me.

Minutes later, his truck pulled up outside. He knocked once and opened the door without waiting. "I'll carry you if I have to," he said. Then his face emptied. "Oh, Lizzie, look at you."

I sat back on the sofa, pinching my bathrobe closed at the throat. "Go away, Evan."

"You're not sick," he said, pouring himself through the doorway, "you're just sad. You need to come back to work."

"Has anyone seen Skunk?"

He closed the door and looked down at his thick fingers gripping the knob, as if embarrassed by what they'd just done. Because the room was small, and because neither of us were, we seemed pressed close together. The oily snick of the latch was an intimate, bodily

sound. This was the first time, I realized, that anyone other than myself had been in the trailer.

"Maybe he just moved on," Evan offered.

I pictured the diner. One of the old waitresses would be scooping grounds into a filter; the other would be alone in the corner with a glamour magazine. In a few hours, following their predictable daily rhythm, truckers and millworkers would begin filling the room for lunch. I could almost hear them, the grumble of their laughter and the laughter in their complaints. Their utter indifference to which was which.

"I don't believe in God anymore," I said.

It was the worst thing I could think to say. I understood that I was making a promise—one that I'd be held to, down the line, for years to come.

All Evan said was, "Well, you don't get time off for that."

In my kitchenette, that morning, he cooked me breakfast, an omelet made with cheese from which he scrubbed scaly blue mold and slices of pressed supermarket ham he tore into strips. I stood at the counter and watched his heavy hands grow nimble, weightless with purpose. "Comfort food," he said, setting the steaming plate in front of me. The first small bite spread warmth through my chest and reminded me of my hunger. Then, panting and snorting in a way I could hear without being able to control, I ducked my head and ate as though I couldn't remember the last time I had—which was, in fact, the case.

Afterwards, I wiped a hand across my lips, licked my salty fingers, and looked up at Evan, forcing my eyes to meet his. His face was as broad and open as a dinnerplate. He had a thick, pooching lower lip and a red nick on his chin where he'd cut himself shaving.

He took the plate and turned away. "Go get dressed."

Behind the closed bedroom door, listening to the hiss of hot water in my sink, I stood naked before the full-length mirror on the

closet door, doing what Evan had first requested I do: I looked at myself. I studied the folds of nude, goosebumped flesh, the fragile pallor of vein-laced skin, with a fondness that surprised me. Here was my burden, the thing I'd been given to care for. It felt like love.

Then I did the bravest thing I'd ever done: I listened for the sounds of Evan in my kitchen, and, when I'd gathered breath enough, I spoke his name.

He took a few steps; the trailer creaked around him. "What is it?"

"Evan."

He was standing right outside my door. "Lizzie?"

"Come here."

He filled the open door and froze. "Oh," he said—a long exhalation, breath flowing out of him until it seemed like he'd never speak again. I'd known, of course, from my first day at the diner, what he wanted from me, but I'd never once thought that I had the power to answer that need—or that my own needs, in fact, might be the same. Sometimes, like Skunk ordering pancakes, we're helpless to name the thing that can save us. We can only hold our hands up and hope. So I held my hands up to Evan; I let his hands hold me. When he cupped my breast, I gasped. Here was a new sensation: the weight of my own body being lifted up. As he lowered his face to mine, I closed my eyes, tipped my head back, and opened my mouth like a baby bird.

Contributors' Notes

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Las Vegas, Nevada, where he won the 2006 Council Literary Arts Fellowship in Poetry and is a member of the NAC's Tumblewords Touring Initiative. He also publishes *Danse Macabre* (thedansemacabre.blogspot.com), Nevada's first online literary magazine. He is currently working on his doctorate in Creative Writing at the University of North Texas.

Darren C. Demaree is living with his wife Emily in Columbus, OH. He is finishing his Masters at Miami University this spring, while working as an editor for Ohio Rocks, and writing some new poems for a collection to be entitled *Do You Remember The Pine Bed?*

Richard Downing is the author of *The Waking Rooms*, a novel, and his poems and short stories have appeared in such journals as *Potomac Review*, *Left Curve*, and *Tacenda* (featured poet), as well as the anthologies *Hunger Enough: Living Spiritually in a Consumer Society* and *The Dire Elegies*. He has won *New Delta Review*'s Matt Clark Poetry Prize and The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation's Barbara Mandigo Kelly Peace Poetry Award. Co-founder of Save Our Naturecoast and the Florida Peace Action Network, he wants to think poetry can change the world.

Ari Feld was born and grew to young manhood in the midwest. He currently lives with his sweetie in western Massachusetts where he is finishing his MFA in creative writing at UMass-Amherst.

John Findura holds an MFA from The New School. His poetry and criticism appear in journals such as *Mid-American Review*, *Verse*, *Fugue*, *Fourteen Hills*, *No Tell Motel*, *H_NGM_N*, *Jacket*, and *Rain Taxi*, among others. Born in Paterson, he lives and teaches in Northern New Jersey.

Howard Good, a journalism professor at SUNY New Paltz, is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Death of the Frog Prince* (2004) and *Heartland* (2007), both from FootHills Publishing. His poems have appeared in numerous print and online journals, including *Right Hand Pointing*, *Stirring*, *The Rose & Thorn*, *2River View*, *Prairie Poetry*, *Armada*, and *Lily*.

Jenny Hanning is from Maine, but lives in Austin, Texas. Her stories and poems have appeared in *Caketrain*, *Harpur Palate*, *Third Coast* and others.

Kyle Hemmings has an MFA degree in creative writing and likes to cook, bake, and burn whatever he cooks or bakes. He also listens to The Beach Boys sing of an endless summer that never arrives.

Mary Crockett Hill's new collection, *A Theory of Everything*, was selected by Naomi Shihab Nye for the Autumn House Prize and is forthcoming in early 2009 from Autumn House Press. She is also author of *If You Return Home With Food*, winner of the Bluestem Award and nominee for the Virginia Book of the Year in Poetry, and co-author of the history *A Town by the Name of Salem*. She lives in Virginia

Julius Kalamarz holds degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Columbia University. His work has appeared in the *Sidebrow Project* and is forthcoming in *Word For/Word*. His short, "Ticket-Taker, Figure," won the 2008 *Opium Magazine* Shya Scanlon 7-Line Story Contest. He lives in Chicago with his wife and daughter.

c.a. leibow lives in Salt Lake City. He graduated with an MFA in poetry from Antioch University in Los Angeles. He has been published in numerous journals, including *Barrow Street*, *Interim* and *Stray Dog Review*.

Carolyn Moore's poems have garnered over sixty awards and honors including the Foley Poetry Award, the *New Millennium Writing* Award, and the C. Hamilton Bailey Fellowship for Poetry from Literary Arts, Inc. Her first collection, *Against a Second Fall*, won the New Eden Chapbook Competition, and three more collections are pending publication: *The Last Night of Maskmaking* (winner of Southern Hum Press's "Women of Words" Chapbook Contest) and *The Great Uncluttering* (co-winner of Bread & Lightning's chapbook competition), and *The Flavors of Quarks and Blame* (winner of The Refined Savage Press's chapbook competition). After teaching for years at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California, Moore now works as a freelance writer and researcher on the last remnant of the family farm in Tigard, Oregon.

Evan Peterson will complete his MFA at the Florida State University in the spring of 2009. He is currently finishing his first book-length manuscript of poems, all narrated by Frankenstein's monster.

Luke Rodehorst is a fourth year English major at the University of Chicago originally hailing from Cleveland, Ohio. He is director of Men in Service, an organization seeking to increase male participation in community service, a flanker on the U of C club rugby team and sings baritone in Chicago Men's A Cappella.

Greg Schutz is a Lecturer at the University of Michigan, where he received his MFA and later served as a Zell Postgraduate Fellow in Creative Writing. "Skunk's Gospel" is his first published story.

Sarah J. Sloat grew up in central New Jersey and now lives in Germany, where she works for a news agency. Tilt Press has just published her chapbook *In the Voice of a Minor Saint*, and she has poems forthcoming in *Court Green*, and *Bateau*. She keeps a blog at therainingmypurse.blogspot.com.

Claudia Smith's stories have been published in several online and print journals, as well as anthologized in such places as W.W. Norton's *The New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond* and So New Media's *Consumed: Women on Excess*. Her collection of short-shorts, *The Sky Is a Well*, was anthologized in Rose Metal Press's *A Peculiar Feeling of Restlessness: Four Chapbooks of Short-Short Fiction by Four Women*. More about Claudia and her writing can be found at www.claudiaweb.net.

Kevin Stewart is a native of Princeton, WV, and the author of *The Way Things Always Happen Here: Eight Stories and a Novella* (Vandalia Press 2007) and *Margot* (*Texas Review* Press 2000). The collection was nominated for *Foreword Magazine*'s Book of the Year Award for Fiction/Short Stories and the Weatherford Award for Appalachian Fiction/Poetry. Stories from his collection-in-progress, *Tales from North Gates*—set in the post-Katrina North Gates neighborhood adjacent to LSU in Baton Rouge—appear in *The Southeast Review* and are forthcoming in the online journal *The Hamilton Stone Review*. After stints at WVU and LSU, Stewart now teaches in the writing program at the University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown.

Emma Straub received her MFA from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Her work has appeared in *The Saint Ann's Review*, *Barrelhouse*, *Flatmancrooked*, and other journals. She is the co-editor of *Avery: An Anthology of New Fiction*. She lives in Madison with her husband and two cats.

Heidi Shira Tannenbaum is a poet. She has spent the last two years abroad, living first in Thailand, then in France. She recently returned back to the States and now resides in New York, where she works at an independent bookstore.

Donna D. Vitucci lives and works in Cincinnati, Ohio, helping raise funds in for local nonprofits, while her heart is engaged in the lives of the characters mounting a coup in her head. Since 1990 her stories have appeared in dozens of print and online journals, and in a few anthologies. Recent work can be found in *Salt River Review*, *Front Porch Journal*, *The Whitefish Review*, *Diner*, *Storyglossia*, *Cezanne's Carrot*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Insolent Rudder*, and *Another Chicago Magazine*.

Angela Ball's books include *Quartet*, *The Museum of the Revolution: 58 Exhibits*, *Kneeling Between Parked Cars*, and *Possession*. Her most recent book, *Night Clerk at the Hotel of Both Worlds* (University of Pittsburg Press, 2007), was winner of the 2006 Donald Hall Prize in Poetry. Her poetry has appeared in such publications as *The New Yorker*, *Partisan Review*, *New Republic*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Chelsea*, *Ploughshares*, *Boulevard*, and *Poetry*. Her work was included in *Best American Poetry 2001*, and she has represented the U.S. at the Poetry International Festival, Rotterdam, and the Colombian International Poetry Festival, Bogotá. She has received grants from the Mississippi Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts. She is a mainstay on the faculty at the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Mark Winegardner was born and raised in Bryan, Ohio. His books, which include *The Godfather's Revenge*, *The Godfather Returns*, *Crooked River Burning*, *That's True of Everybody*, and *The Veracruz Blues*, have been translated into more than twenty languages and sold almost two million copies worldwide. They have appeared on *The New York Times* Bestseller List and in best-of-the-year lists by *The New York Times Book Review*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *USA Today*, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Chicago Sun-Times*. In 2004, *Cleveland Magazine* named *Crooked River Burning* the best book ever written about Cleveland. His work has appeared in such magazines as *GQ*, *Men's Journal, Doubletake, The New York Times Magazine*, *The Oxford American*, *Playboy*, *Ploughshares*, *Story Quarterly*, and *TriQuarterly*. He is the Burroway Professor of English at Florida State University.