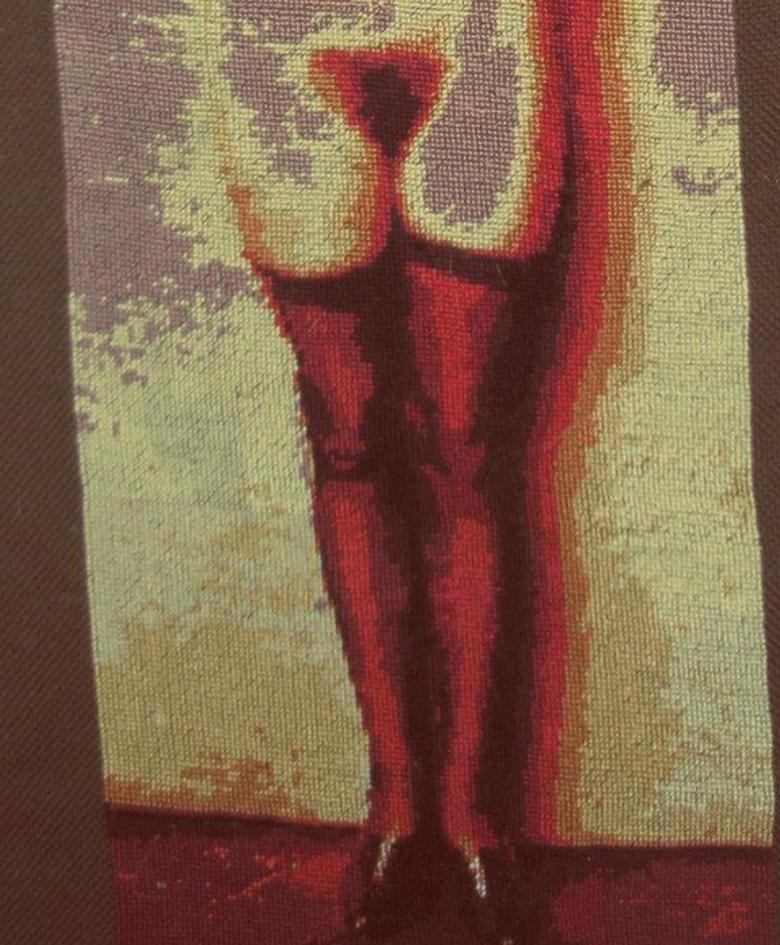




DIRTY CHAI



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DIRTY CHAI

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COVER ART



Holly Day

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FROM THE EDITORS

Thanks to all of our contributors; without your amazing talent, this issue would not have come to life. Unlike past issues, Issue Three is without a theme. This creative freedom supplied us with an abundance of top-notch work to choose from. What we have compiled for you is what we consider to be the best of the best. Hope you enjoy and love the work in this issue as much as we do. It is our goal to publish work that speaks to the time and pops from the page.

Keep it Dirty,

Azia & Sam

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SHARING A CIGARETTE

-Brittany Ackerman

A had a glazed look on her face, the type of deadpan eyes on a girl who lives in Hollywood could have. She drooped over to B on her left side and asked for a cigarette. B had none. She hopped off her barstool and stumbled on her heels. She asked a guy in a green jacket if he had any smokes, and he said yes, but wasn't willing to share. She came back to A and bared the bad news. A got up and sauntered over to a group of frat boys. Frat looking boys. The Polo and a boat shoe type. She was all neon green and they were all corals and baby blues, but somehow she scored a squazie from the pack. She smiled as they both stepped outside to smoke. A began puffing like a French girl in a picture show. B leaned out her right hand and waited her turn. She flicked some ash off the tip and inhaled. A began talking about some audition she had the next day, how she didn't know if it would be bullshit, or if she should just go, what the heck, who knows, it could be the one. B had to go to work like always and was wondering if she'd have to stay late again, when she really just wanted to go to the beach, something she thought she'd see more of in California, yet never got the time. A noticed B pacing and said quit it. B said you quit talking about your fake shit. A grabbed the cigarette and said I'm going to get one of those boys numbers. B said yeah right. A said I'll do you one better, let's just leave, without paying our tab. B grinned and took one more hit of the cigarette. B flicked it behind her as the girls walked arm in arm to the car. Both giggled from the front seat and drove away home. A said she'd never felt a rush quite like that. B said she didn't care if it was wrong. A pointed out that it wouldn't be a big deal at all, heck, no one probably even noticed the two of them anyway. ●

IT'S ALL GOOD, BABY

-Brittany Ackerman

I meet my boss for lunch at Kaya Sushi House in Mar Vista. It's not quite Venice Beach and not quite Culver City either, somewhere in between the two. I'm in a plaid skirt and a grey muscle tee with my leather jacket. I'm trying out the badass LA look, which I feel confident enough today to pull off. Traffic was a bitch, but I'm not concerned, just listened to Arcade Fire the whole way and dreamt of Omakase style and expensive things.

I'm waiting at the bar. I take off my jacket, then put it back on. I watch the fake rain cascade down the windows. A man in a green jacket walks by the door. He turns around startled and comes inside.

He gives me a big kiss on my neck. I give an anxious twitch and smile politely, in a cute way, in a way that appears a bit inappropriate.

We sit down at the back corner booth and he orders a bunch of things I don't understand. I only object to eel and ginger. The rest is fine, the rest is all good, whatever he decides is cool.

He tells me about work, that it's going well; super busy, and that people miss me. Well, they don't miss me, but no one's said anything bad since I left. He says he only heard good things, and that he always knew I was a fucking genius. I look out into the daylight. It's late afternoon, lunchtime in Los Angeles, and he's skipping work for me.

He asks me how I'm doing.

"I'm perfect," I say it as a joke, but then I think I might even mean it.

He tells me about his life, his past life, before LA, before graphic design, before producing, before he got married, twice and had a bunch of kids. He says each time it gets worse, less meaningful, less likely not to cheat.

"Do my eyelashes look like paintbrushes?" I interrupt.

"They look great," he says dumbfounded.

The food comes and it's amazing. When we're done he moves to my side of the booth. The restaurant is closing down for a break before dinner. We're the only two customers left.

"It's so romantic here, with the rain," he points outside. I follow his finger. He means the imitation rainfall. I wonder if he knows what's real.

"That's not real," I say, "None of this is real."

He grabs my thigh.

I stir the ice cubes around in my glass of water. I think about taking one more gulp and leaving, getting out of this place, out of LA. What's any of this mean anyway? Why am I still here, doing this, what am I doing? What am I still doing here?

He moves his hand up my leg. I let it happen, I let his eyes drift deep into mine, he's looking for something, he's waiting for me to pounce, for me to completely let go right here in this booth in the middle of the afternoon with the fake rain and the hand rolls and he sweeps my hair to my left shoulder and I get up, I can't do it, I have to leave, I have to get out of here now.

He follows me outside and says, "Come on," but I say, *I can't* and I look away. I look back at the window panels from outside now and they look different, it doesn't look like rain, it just looks wet, like tears, like a face full of tears. Part of me

wants to feel his fingers, the one that pointed to the rain all over me, and the rest of me, the part that's all good, the part that's cool, gets in the car and drives back down La Cienega, and gets out. I pull over and look above my steering wheel. It's a sunny day, 75 degrees, and I can't tell, I can't tell if any of it is even real. •



SPARROW LUNGS

I knew the storm was over when two
birds nudged open my door,
soliciting my toes for cigarettes.
The rain had puckered their feathers
into sweet gum spines. But what's
their brand of choice? Magpies stash
away Marlboros, black beaks
with aluminum teeth. Only canaries
would croon for Camels, sparing
their coal-dust lungs with Lights.
So sparrows, is it Salem, or Sonoma?

They gussy up a bourgeois barbecue
across the street, bobbing orange irises,
cutting through the salty dusk,
their beaks burning ocher and umber.
I won't miss them, or the \$5.32
that they borrowed from me,
but I'll watch from over the tips
of my feet, crossed on the
sluiced porch rail in perfect
certainty. I borrowed, too,
before they left, my own smoke
tumbling into tornado weather,
then earthquaking into a nautilus shell.

-Cheyenne Taylor

WHITE ZINFANDEL CHRISTENING

She likes boys with Christian names
and barstool habits, but she's her own
new habit now, tonguing her name
like sore skin in her mouth.
High heels hooked on the bar rail
like that jukebox bracketed to
the wall, she wants you with teeth.
She drinks from you, an aphid
from a cherry stem, all spit
and instinct, spit and disappear.
Full is never full enough,
just horny as Nevada
sky and half as blue, but even then,
the West has never seen her face.
Her Newports still slum it
in the trash can, but she wouldn't mind,
if you asked nice, bumming
one good drag, or two, from you.
Dreams are exposed beams and hollow-
sound floors, a stage and a halogen
tan, and having her snakeskin
vocal chords wrapped round you
like a phone cord in her lacy
hands. She's *Rouge Resille*,
Dare-You-Red in pool lamp
finish, a back-pocket psalm in
F minor, and no one reminds
her of anything.

-*Cheyenne Taylor*

LUCK BE A LADY

-Doug Hoekstra

Part I – The Chairman

Over the summer, I was tooling around in the car listening to Frank Sinatra, savoring his Reprise records version of “The Way You Look Tonight.” Goosebumps rippled up and down my arm. The melody always touches something deep inside me, and puts me in a place where time stands still. It had been ages since I’d been able to listen to Sinatra. Music is redemptive, but sometimes artists come into my life at a certain time, and then slip away like an elusive lover, belonging to that moment and no other. Yet, on this particular warm and stifling August day, the cascading notes and smooth delivery seduced me and for a second, I reconsidered the whole notion of romance and the possibilities it holds. The song only lasted for a few minutes, but that’s some kind of magic.

“Fly Me to the Moon” came on after that. “In other words....” Frank crooned, “hold my hand...” Sinatra floated along on top of the accents, repeating the “in other words” with different examples. It’s a list song, you know. My insightful son Jude broke my day dream and piped up from the back seat

“His girlfriend just doesn’t get it, does she? He keeps having to explain it...”

Ah, Jude...someday you’ll be a grown man...and you will come to know all that you don’t know. Just remember, there are no fools when it comes to dreams. And, sometimes dreams are encapsulated in a single moment, a perfect evening. When Frank sang, he was letting us in on this universal truth. I wish I knew this when I was your age.

Part II – Heading Home

Being a single dad, it’s often me and Jude against the world, a bond that grows out of the immediacy of the day, as well as the promise of adventure. The reason I dusted off the Chairman, however, was because of the promise of our impending Las Vegas adventure. Usually when I write about Jude (not Frank), I fill the tales with heartwarming connections, educational milestones, and father and son bonding. Yet, in many ways, Vegas is the opposite of this – mindless spending, Big Replicas of Interesting Things, and disconnected people grasping for something. But, the reason we were going was to see Cirque du Soleil Beatles *Love* at the Mirage, the only place it plays. There’s magic in Cirque shows; and magic in the Beatles music. And, magic in our adventures.

Anyways, the same summer that Sinatra came back to me, several weeks before it was the way it looked that day, Jude and I were flying back from a visit to the grandparents in Chicago. Jude had quickly beaten me in chess again, so I started to flip through the Southwest Airlines magazine and came across their 40 prizes in 40 days giveaway, to celebrate their 40th anniversary. One of the prizes was two nights at a fancy schmancy suite in the Mirage, tickets to the Dolphin habitat, enough food for the weekend, and tickets to a singing ventriloquist named Terry Fator. That would get us close to *Love*, I thought and I took a complimentary copy of the magazine with me.

When the day rolled around for the Mirage prize package, I entered online and checked it off my list. A few days later I got an e-mail. “Congratulations!” You are the

lucky winner of *Southwest Airlines Spirit* magazine's "40 Days of Prizes" with Mirage/Las Vegas." I wasn't that surprised really, because somehow, I figured it would happen. I told a few friends and they found it hard to believe; because no one wins those things. A national contest, no less, it must be rigged. Several told me what I already knew, that I was a lucky man. Sometimes you just gotta put it out there.

Jude and I had a great time; *Love* was something else and it's always great to see masses of people singing my son's name. The first time was Sir Paul at Piedmont Park, the masses spread out over the rolling green lawn, swaying like a cross between *We Are the World* and Woodstock. The next time was this mix of circus people, street performers, vacationers, and Beatle freaks. There would be other times, I was sure and as I looked at my son, imagining his beautiful, bright future, I smiled an uncontrollable smile. The Fabs intended the na-na-na-na-na coda to "Hey Jude" to work as a sort of mantra, and on this night, I was taken to another plane, completely in the moment.

But, I have to admit, that as we left and walked through the Mirage in the late evening hours, the controlled environment took me back, reminding me of all the dodgy suburban clubs I played back in Chicago, in my first band. Skinny and pale, we'd load in for sound check at 3 or 4 p.m., when it was bright and sunny out, only to be submerged in a perpetual underworld where the lights are dim, the air conditioning is on full blast, and the air is still stale as the beer from the night before. We'd check our instruments and without fail, about halfway through, the owner of the club would put down his Coke spoon long enough to step outside of his office, creep down the stairs and watch. When we were done, he'd shake our hands and it would take two days to get the aftershave smell off my fingernails. These clubs had the mark of organized crime all over them, although I was clueless at the time.

A few years later, in a better band, we played some "classier" joints. There was one venue in Chicago where we opened for folks like Edie Brickell and Arlo Guthrie. These were big gigs and well sought after, though we'd only play for half an hour and get \$100.00, literally pulled out of a suitcase of money, resembling the sort of thing you see in crime caper movies. At this place, there was a guy named Gino who always "took care of us." This meant he'd come get us in our dressing room and walk us through a long circuitous back way to the stage, just like in Spinal Tap. As we got ready, he'd get on a phone and call the soundboard. That was Gino's job. He liked us though, because after a couple gigs he'd say "you guys can play 35 minutes." We got an extra five minutes that was our gift.

So, I had a sense that Vegas would be something like that, a place where it was always kind of dank and cold, with crazy times and the ever present feeling of something lurking, but in the end, all would be well, and that I'd get five minutes extra for being so good. We did all we set out to do; The Dolphin Habitat (Jude loved the baby swimming with his parent); Our Posh Hotel; Houdini Shops, Flamingos and Weird Street People Dressed as Elvis and Darth Vader;; The Big Volcano that Erupts; A Peter Max Art Exhibit Exactly Where you Wouldn't Expect it; Meeting the Guy who Directed the Beatles Cartoon Series; and Taking A Boatload of Campy Photos at The Wax Museum. And, of course there was *Love*, which was like being inside a three-dimensional visual montage of the Beatles music. I saw things I never saw before and I heard things I'd never heard.

But, as great as that all was, I still kept waiting for that extra five minutes.

Finally, after all adventures had come to a close, our plane touched down in Nashville late on Labor Day. Jude held my hand as we quietly took the long walk

from our gate down to the baggage claim, where he sat down on the edge of the conveyor belt. He still likes to watch the bags come down the chute, just like he did when he was little. But, now he daydreams, as well, which I love.

After a few minutes of this, he looked up at me.

“You know what Dad?”

“What?”

“This is my favorite airport because when we’re here, we’re either leaving on an adventure, or heading home.”

I smiled and tousled his hair and held the moment as if it were captured in crystal. My son was spot on, and hearing him express his thoughts gave me much, much more than an extra five minutes. Maybe single Dads are the ones with nine lives. And, this is the real reason why I’m such a lucky man. ●

CIRCLE

my father who is dead
dies in me many times
at sunset when red
stains leafless trees
to the west
where the river
congeals in December
weather
or afternoons
when my mother sits
before a fire
I have arranged
and lit on her hearth
he returns to leave again
as my grown sons
arrive for holidays
in the chaos of Christmas
myths coagulate
scabbing over as Druids
Jews and Christians coincide
with sun low
and white in pale sky
we continually begin
the end

-Howard Winn



ONE OF THREE SUNS, NO. 1
REES NIELSEN

BLUE SUNFLOWERS

my lips & fingertips are purple because frozen blueberries are all i've felt like eating for the last 48 hours there's a book under my pillow called space explained a beginner's guide to understanding the universe but i don't think there's any such thing as understanding the universe & i want to cry not because i don't understand the universe but because i don't understand why we're alive i don't understand borders rockets explosions shrapnel the remains of an infant wrapped in plastic pools of prematurely spilt blood if i ate enough orajel do you think maybe my brain would go numb / did you know that acquitted prisoners are still being forcefed in guantanamo? that there are thirty known brothels in austin but no one's doing anything about it because trafficking isn't a taxpayer priority? that a former nazi camp guard charged with aiding & abetting the murders of 216,000 jews insists he shouldn't be punished because his actions were involuntary? why don't people understand that complicity makes us culpable & that if we aren't actively trying to make the world better we're making it worse / a video clip from thursday shows a small russian boy pointing happily at a burning plane in the sky / passports & headphones & teddy bears & bodies strewn across a field of sunflowers / i spend most nights thinking about the nest of dead baby bluebirds i found in my front yard after a storm when i was seven something about discarded potential broken wings tiny feet burnt flowers all these thousands of things that won't ever bloom

-Lily Primeaux

PUNCH LINE

-Matthew Neely

Two guys go on a patrol in Fallujah, and guy number one gets shot out of a gunner's hatch after an explosion. Guy number two films it from the truck behind. He posts it on YouTube and it gets 40 thousand hits in the first hour. Guy number one gets pissed about the video, but he can't do anything about it, because he's fucking dead, so it just stays there and everyone thinks that war is about an explosion and how it messes people up.

And people think they get it. They think they get it because they see a man get blown out of a gunner's hatch or they see a Marine throw a puppy off of a cliff, and that's horrible, and they think that this defines war. But it doesn't even come close. War is mostly about fear, though there are people who don't admit that, or want you to function anyway. They will tell you that everyone has fear, and that courage comes from recognizing fear and doing *it* anyway. They tell you to do *it* anyway, and you don't even know what *it* is. They tell you to do *it* like you're gonna go out there and tell your guys crazy movie lines like "Let off a few rounds—let them know we're still here!" And because those lines are supposed to make you face the fear, you will say those lines. Lines like "If you live through it, someday you'll thank me for it" and "Give 'em hell, boys!"—those lines are supposed to make you change. But they don't. They don't make you face fear because fear can't be faced. There are no courageous people in war; there are just the *too-dumb-to-know-any-better* people, and then there are the *I'm dead* people. I was the first kind of person before I realized what kind of shit I was in. But after Baker and Diaz and Brown and Lieutenant Maynard, I became the second. But that was good. When you're too dumb to know any better, you curl up and cry. But when I become the second—that's when I could finally function in Iraq—after I changed into a dead man—and I finally knew it.

On this day that I die, it is April and I am not on the streets of Fallujah. Rather, I am on the base, running. Before I leave for this run, Melendez asks me why I want to run in the first place. I don't know what to tell her, so I say that I am joking. She gets it. I just want to run.

I leave for my run, and from up ahead, I hear a squad of soldiers coming; they are singing cadences:

"A Yellow Bird," someone sings. The squad following him repeats.

"With a yellow bill." Repeat.

"Was sitting on" Repeat.

"A window sill" Repeat.

Blah blah blah, yellow bird still sitting there. This is war (*or Army, maybe*): No one can do anything (*give orders, talk, dance, fuck, drive*) without rhyming.

"I lured him in." The others repeat.

"With a piece of bread"

"And then I smashed"

"His fucking head."

In the cadence, they kill the bird because they think it's a joke—like this one: What happened to the man who went home from the war? Not a goddamn thing. *They never fucking come home*. When I tell that joke to a guy back in America, he asks me this:

“What do you mean they never come home? I see you,” he says. “You’re home, right?” What a dumbass.

“Naw, man. I’m still running, crying my eyes out for Russell Brown and Baker and Diaz. That’s where I live. That’s where we all live. Ain’t none of us ever coming home.”

“But I see you,” he says. You’re home, right?”

So I die this day in the heat and in the moon dust that gets kicked up when I run. And when I die, I get *it*: I don’t know if I can get back alive again. My wife, Daley, she tells me she gets *it*, how Iraq is doing weird things to me. But she doesn’t get *it*. I am already dead. Not metaphorically, either. I died that day, and you can die too, for all I care.

And then, a few months later, I get back to America. I am dead, but I *can* see things differently. There is the obvious, like how I appreciate a sunset or how rocky road ice cream tastes more fucking delicious than ever. There is that, sure. And the *too-dumb-to-know-its* think that rocky road is all there is. But there is much more. Because in real life, I am dead, and I find myself sitting in my car crying for Baker and Diaz. I want go back to the before time—the time when I had no army in my life, and no Daley, because she doesn’t get *it*, and I can’t because I am in a very different place today. And so, sometimes, I just ignore my deadness, and I grab my pills and I fucking weep before class and I weep when I read Psalms 18:29 and I weep when I travel to Southern California to visit my grandmother in a nursing home and there are dust storms near Barstow and I have to pull over cause I swear that some guy just shot an RPG right at my fucking head.

This is the problem: I am a dead man. I *had* accepted this absolute, undeniable, praise Jesus, hallelujah, I got over the wall truth. I am not *almost* dead. And it is fucking hard to get back alive again, once you’re dead.

Another two guys: One sits in a humvee and the other is outside, playing tic-tac-toe in the dirt with six little Iraqi kids. The one guy keeps trying to draw a tic-tac-toe game board but the Iraqi kids keep copying him. He draws in the dirt. They draw in the dirt. This happens for a long time, until he finally gets across that they are supposed use the dirt as a game board and not a drawing. When he finally gets this across to the Iraqi kids, he draws an *x* in the dirt. The kids start copying his *x*’s. Finally though, he gets across the concept of three in a row, there you go, and they play their first *real* game.

So there they are, playing the beginnings of a tic-tac-toe game, and along comes a man in a tan shirt and a white robe that goes all the way to the ground. He stinks. He walks up close to the soldiers and the kids and he puts one hand inside his robe and poof, the kids are gone. But the two soldiers stay, because they were already dead to begin with. An explosion makes no difference, one way or the other, not to dead people. It has some effect on the living, but even then, it takes a lot to change somebody, and mostly, you *don’t* change.

So these guys, who aren’t dead *again*, are pissed. Guy one, who was playing tic-tac-toe with the kids, says to this guy two: “Aww man, that fucker blew those kids up.”

“Why do you care?” guy two says.

“Because he blew the dust away too,” says guy one. “Now we don’t know who is gonna win.” ●

YARD SONGS

-Jeff Burt

I rise early to place river rock after river rock listening to the snarl of traffic, the clogged landing zones of residential housing, shopping centers seemingly a half-mile away in every direction. But when I am alone in the yard, rebar, asphalt, skyscraping concrete, and roaring semi-tractors become inaudible. Nature talks, and I listen.

The variations of the sky toll the time of day and what to expect. The fog, if thick, tells me my clothes will stay wet until after lunch; if the fog is not thick and dissipating, it tells me my sweatshirt will come off at mid-morning break. When the morning sky is blue behind a thin gauze of dust I know the day will be warm, and if bright, hospitable and clean. And I turn to the sky and say thanks.

Does it matter that we talk to the sky? Does it matter that when we lean on a shovel or a rake, after steady and synchronized motions, and speak to the sun, that we are thrown back in time and become like the ancient slaves and servants working near the Euphrates or Nile, in Greece or in Rome? Even Christians and Buddhists I work with shake their angry fists at the sun. Is it so odd that the sundials we station in a landscaped yard have a face? It is not a sun god we speak with, but a friend, a soul like our own, good for a day, gone for a while, showing up the next. The life of the party, the sun shows and conversations begin. Everything becomes animated, drawn to it, like sunflowers following its journey throughout the day.

The wind gossips. The wind talks to trees and the leaves tick with conversation of their neighbors. A bee rides the wind and couples with blossoms once virginal or fumbles with flowers that share the same bed, the Don Juan of the sky. At times the pollen stuffed in their saddlebags prevents them from lifting off their pistil-and-petal helipad, and their buzz seems a low moaning

of satiation. A dragonfly arrogant in maneuvers drops, zigs and zags when the wind speaks strong words in the dragonfly's face.

Tall rye grass and timothy brush against each other conniving to set their seeds in the soil, whispering secrets. I hear agapanthus in the breeze like spokes of an upside bicycle merrily spinning and making the glad clack of a happy toy against the flat card pinned to the frame. No thing yells. All is murmured, hushed, winked, and suggested. The smallest of spiders borne on a glimmering thread sew strings of a plot the wind has woven. Their stories, no matter how short, keep me interested.

The dirt is passive. It does not speak except when I place the stones, and then dirt grunts, oomphs, sighs, as it is displaced or squashed or pressed, but the sounds are those of the massage, and the pawing and shaping goes well for the dirt. The sounds are ones of gratification.

Earth is clean even though it is dirt. Effort can be joy even though it is work.

Today I make a stone border to the garden. And the stones? Do they speak? No, they do not speak. They sing. They have come from a river and as rivers are full of song the stones sing of the river, they resound with the notes of water splashing over them and covering and uncovering them as is their turn in the season. They are fluent in the language of water though they are obstinate and impediments for the river, like foes that sharpen each other and make their contest reach an ever higher pleasure.

The stones are smooth and cold and in many a stripe with white in the brown or gray. I hear the seduction of the river as I place the stones; I hear the river calling me to the peace that overcomes one kneeling at the bank. I begin to pay special attention to the stripes in the stone and the placement, as if I am a master tile worker laying a mosaic for nobility, commissioned due to

expertise. It is a harmless fantasy that passes the time.

By noon I am ready for lunch, and wash outside.

Quiet singing. Songs with words missing. I hear a woman singing, songs with notes spilled slowly over her lips as she washes dishes. Songs with music hidden in the vaults of secret treasures her memory opens. Childish songs. Love songs. Her singing suspends each note and they float towards me and I no longer feel the weight of a single stone, I no longer feel my own weight. Her voice is pure but not perfect, and thus sounds like perfect innocence. What are the words she does not sing? Why are they secluded from my ears? Are they suppressed, being too tender to voice aloud? She is not a person when she sings calibrated by demographics and societal markers, but a being, primitive, beguiling, ancient, near.

Many male yard workers sing, or moan, as is their voice. We sing of love, of sexual conquest, of sexy women, of drugs and beer, of violence; we sing of God, for God, against God. But the songs we share, that we burst out and sing together, are always about love, the love for another, the love for a woman. We sing like sailors once would chant, we sing only short stanzas, ribald and muscular, protecting the hearts that beat the syllable love loudly, then softly, loudly, then softly, sending it coursing through our cells. It is only then, when we notice the beating that it wounds. The remainder of the long spells without singing is like the mind unobservant of the concussive heart. Though I live in the rushing techno vibration, I sing the chantey, I scare the birds.

On the street corners where my brothers perform, those who can keep a guitar by their bed under a bridge or a grove of trees or an uncle's garage, have coins and currency tossed into the hat or guitar case for most songs, but the songs that draw the purses and wallets the quickest are the love songs, old love songs, new love songs, songs

in French and Arabic and Italian. Men who can strum four chords make pittance, but a man who can strum the chord of love with his vocal cords is the man who will dine better at the end of the day.

My work with the stones is done for the day, and I knock at the door so softly so as not to disturb her singing, and she comes to the door still inside her own head and the song continues in melodic low whispers as she finishes the blue and white plates and the large red serving bowl. When the last dish is washed and set on the counter to dry, the last note escapes from her lips like a bird ascending and the breath it rides on is spent and can carry no more. When she glances at me, I can see she has been transported not place to place, not simply external to internal, but more in time, back in time, out of time.

I could tell her that I enjoyed her singing.

I could tell her that I enjoyed her lifting the weight from my shoulders as she sang.

I could tell her that I enjoyed her transporting me from this place, this yard, these stones, to a place of idleness, of peacefulness, of joy, of transport to that encompassing ill-defined but suitable word, heaven.

But I cannot tell those things. So I speak of washing dishes, of the pleasure in making plates gleam and silverware shine and clear cut glass reflect sharply as it was meant. I speak of the cleverness of dishtowels, the rooster omnipresent, the checkered, the hand-sewn, the watermelons and vegetables and utensils, all these invitations to a world of the familiar and homespun and familial. She speaks of whisks as if they were the applicators of a balm of oil that would pacify the world, of the patience that beaters for the mixers teach when they drip another drop just when you thought you had it clean, of knives coming loose at the rivet and the palsied fear her hands display immersed in the water when the blade they detect.

And during this, has the conducted
electricity of the city vanished, the
orchestration of steel and rubber shushed.

Songs. Love songs. The whole yard
trills and coos and fills with wooing, and the
lyrics hide behind the common vocabulary a
rhythm that is only found in work, in labor,
they hide in the common phrasing and the
plain speech an acknowledgement of creation
and bliss.

I labor. I listen. I converse.

Sun, warm me with your cooing of
light.
Spider, speak to me the importance of
spinning.
Dirt, exclaim the pleasure of being
touched. ●

A BRIEF THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS ON THE NATURE OF THE FRUIT WHEREIN DESCRIBED IN GENESIS 2:17

It is a popular notion
to assume the premise
that Eve gave into
a vermilion Apple.
But why not postulate
the Banana?
Each successive peel
of her blonde conscience
Let us also examine
the Pineapple as a possibility.
Yahweh instituting a preventive
measure to make partaking
of the fruit difficult.
Some scholars argue for the Watermelon.
Dr. Hunter believes, “the mass
and shape of the Watermelon
lends itself to a ‘communal baptism
of perdition.’”
Historically, the church fathers have
described the fruit as Pear, Cherry
and Mango. But I have faith
in a banana revealing the creamy-white
knowledge of good and evil.

-Masashi Musha

SPY GIRLS GUIDE TO AMERICA

-Phyllis Green

Hello Everyone. I am Boris. I am the trainer for girls who want to become spies in America. What I do is have training conversations with the girls and then they are tested extensively so when they are finally sent to America they are very well versed in all the traditions.

So, here is how it recently went with Nadia on her first session.

BORIS: Now Nadia in order to spy in America we first have to get you there. So remember all our brochures and videos? Now what is the best way to sneak into America?

NADIA: I may cross into the border at Canada in a remote unpopulated place and then find myself in America and proceed to the nearest bus stop and hail a bus. Or I may go to Mexico and cross in a crowded vehicle with a bunch of Mexicans and pay the driver with sex and money and hope he gives me lots of water when he drops us in the desert. I think I like Canada way better, Boris.

BORIS: Did you not remember the best way, Nadia, whereby we give you a fake visa and you enter legally with the visa then when the visa is up you do not turn yourself in or leave, you simply go on living in America.

NADIA: But Boris, won't they come looking for me and put me in jail?

BORIS: They don't seem to bother. You know, the sequester, not enough FBI, not enough police, frankly they don't care if you stay. Okay?

NADIA: Suits me.

BORIS: Let's talk food. I hope you have acquired a taste for hot dogs, potatoes salad and apple pie. Have you been working on that?

NADIA: It is very difficult but I am giving it my best. Is it okay if I sometimes make borscht? I love my borscht.

BORIS: Nadia that is a big no. Never. No more borscht. I know it is hard but you must promise. If anyone offers you borscht, you must say, "What is it?" emphasis on the *is* like, "What IS it?" This could cost you your life so be very careful. But just for now, I could offer you some borscht, would you like that?

NADIA: YES! I crave it.

BORIS: That was a test, Nadia. No more borscht for you ever, so don't forget!

NADIA: Being a spy is so hard.

BORIS: Did you read about unisex bathrooms and do you fully understand what that means?

NADIA: That is where I can have sex.

BORIS: Oh god. You haven't studied have you?

NADIA: I thought I could have sex in America. No?

BORIS: OF course you can have sex in America. American's love sex. You can have it with your boyfriend, no problem. Now 60 years ago that was a no-no but now you are weird if you do not have sex with your boyfriend or girlfriend if that is the case. Whatever. You can also have sex with your husband or actually other men who are not your husband. Sex is very popular in America. But not in the unisex bathroom. That could get you arrested. A unisex bathroom means men can go to the bathroom there and be messy as men tend to be, maybe get pee where it should not be, and women can also go to that bathroom, individually of course, let's hope but women tend to say to each other, "Let's go to the ladies" and they will usually be neater so do be neat yourself and make the bathroom presentable for the next person be it male or female or child or I don't know, not dogs I don't think.

NADIA: How well do you know America, Boris?

BORIS: I have been chosen to teach this course so shut up Nadia.

NADIA: Well I'm glad I can have sex.

BORIS: Which brings us to another situation. When you have sex, do it with protection.

NADIA: Use a rubber band.

BORIS: Oh god, Nadia. You are so stupid. Just a rubber.

NADIA: I thought there would be music, thus a band.

BORIS: My patience is not unlimited. Now when you have sex, it is possible no matter what protection, you could become pregnant.

NADIA: Oh a baby. I like babies.

BORIS: Babies would be a problem when you are a spy. It's hard to get babysitters in America. You have to be on time when you spy. You can't wish for a babysitter. You have to get rid of the baby. But that is not a problem in America. You just kill it.

NADIA: How? It would be inside me.

BORIS: You don't have to do it yourself. There are clinics to do it for you. Don't worry. The government wants to help you kill it. It's the law.

NADIA: Okay. But what if I wait too long and it comes out of my body. Can I still kill it?

BORIS: No then it's too late.

NADIA: What if it gets to be a teenager and I really want to kill it?

BORIS: Yes everyone wants to kill teenagers now and then but you are out of luck by then. That would put you in jail for life or at least five years, maybe just probation. I did hear that there was a mid-western state, was it Nebraska, that said if you were fed up with your kids up to the age of 21 you could bring them there and leave them at a fire station or hospital or nun's residence and just leave them on the doorstep. I don't know how that is working out.

NADIA: If my parents had known that, I would be in Nebraska already and not taking this stupid guidance.

BORIS: And I would be a happy man. In fact I feel like killing you myself.

NADIA: So what do I do in America, Boris? Can we move on? I can't be here forever. I need a ciggie.

BORIS: You have had your last ciggie, Nadia. America is non-smoking. The few smokers left in America are treated like lepers. They must smoke outside twenty yards from the nearest entrance to a building or restaurant. They are noticed. Non-smokers glare at them. They spit in their direction. You cannot smoke on an airplane or a bus. You cannot smoke in a motel or hotel rooms. Smoking is out, Nadia. Get it?

NADIA: Why did I sign up for the effing assignment, Boris? I was promised fun and champagne and dancing and romancing and living like a Hollywood star!

BORIS: You will get that as a spy, my dear dizzy Nadia but you won't get Borscht or ciggies or sex with an orchestra.

NADIA: It will still be fun, won't it, Boris? I do like fun and laughing and flirting.

BORIS: In time, with my training, you will have more fun than you can imagine and you will turn American men's heads and they will fall in love with you and tell you their deep technological and military secrets and you will repeat these secrets to our authorities and our beloved country will pay you big bucks, Nadia. You will be a very rich and powerful woman IF YOU STUDY YOU DUMB CHICK! This session is over and I must take my pills to get ready for the next nudnik. Get out of my sight now, you little...oh god, help me.

END. ●

WORDS SLIDING DOWN MY THROAT

wanting to tumble off my tongue
strung together
like Christmas lights
or a well-crafted prayer
these words never breach my lips
tears that erupt
without the courtesy of a warning
proof of your existence
in everything that moves
in all that doesn't
proof of the irreversible stain
of guilt
these tears escape without a sound
as you did
apologies offered to the curtain
we call the sky
the words
the tears
they are yours
as this grief is mine
I suffer alone in a silence
only you can hear

-Bekah Steimel

I'LL REMEMBER YOU

-Kirby Wright

DADIO STARTED LEAVING on weekends to supervise his Puko'o project on Moloka'i. He insisted my big brother Barry and I take turns accompanying him. If it were my turn to remain in Honolulu, I'd catch my Irish mother singing while hanging out the wash and tapping on linoleum to tunes on the kitchen radio. Her singing and dancing had a purpose—the girl inside was trying to find the fire of optimism the married woman had misplaced. The use of voice and limbs fired up her positive nature and soon her face took on a vibrant glow. I could see what had attracted my father all those years ago in Boston: she bore a resemblance to Rita Hayworth and she also had a beauty mark like Marilyn Monroe. There was a star quality about the way she carried herself, as if she were walking a red carpet while a hundred cameras flashed. I felt bad she wasn't a celebrity because I knew that's what she really wanted. She invited my kid sister Julie and me into the living room and we listened to her recite a Blanche DuBois monologue from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Her hand and facial gestures were terrific and, after finishing, she bowed to our applause.

"The star!" I cheered.

"Oh, go on," she replied.

"No," I said, "you're a natural."

"Better than Ethel Merman," Julie added. My sister was a shy, reticent girl who took after our *hapa haole* father. I knew hearing the beatings Dadio inflicted on Barry and me had caused part of that reticence. She wanted our mother to be famous because she thought it would help her become famous too. She ached to be a rock star like Elton John. I knew my mother lacked the drive and ambition to really make it, but it was fun playing along.

"You know," my mother confided, "I feel so happy with Daddy gone."

Julie nodded. "Me too."

"Why do you call him 'Daddy?'" I asked.

My mother looked puzzled. "Because he's your father."

"But he's not yours."

"Well then, I guess that I shouldn't."

"Would you have married him," I asked, "knowing then what you know now?"

"No. But at first your father was quite the gentleman. He listened to every word I said and even wrote me poetry."

"He wrote poems?"

"Oh, yes. He'd recite love poems that he'd scribbled on legal pads, down by the Charles River. I was certain being married to him would make every day of my life wonderful. I must confess, your father's the best actor I've ever met."

"He deserves an Oscar," I told her.

"He certainly does."

"When did he change?"

"About two years after we were married. That's when I knew he wasn't the same man who'd courted me in Boston. I couldn't believe it when he started hitting you boys. I'd never seen anything like that in all my life. He threatened to hit me when I tried standing up for you and Barry."

"He did?"

She nodded. "My father called him 'that strange fish' and told me he sensed something odd about him."

"Was it his slanted eyes?"

"No. It had to do with his personality, some odd thing my father noticed but couldn't put into words. 'Devious,' he might have said. Thank god you boys didn't turn out like him. If I didn't have you children, I'd feel that my life was meaningless."

"You could divorce him," I suggested.

"Let's wait until you and Barry get into college. I don't want him punishing you if we go our separate ways."

June McCormack had grown up in the upper crust burbs of Waltham, Massachusetts. She was the child of an adoring father who'd made a killing in the stock market during the Roaring Twenties.

They'd lost everything during the Depression and it wasn't long before Pops began drinking and craving the company of other women. Her mother hired a detective who found him with a blonde at the Black Rose Tavern. June was twelve when the Waltham house was sold and her mother moved them into a Brookline flat. Her mother hocked her pink sapphire bracelet to pay the rent. The ruby engagement ring paid for food. Finally, the cognac diamond wedding ring was sold.

My mother pulled out her old photo albums and I joined her in the dining room. She leafed through pages that smelled of mildew and marveled how young her parents and aunts looked. I knew she was drifting back to a less complicated time, the years of plenty with a powerful father eager to spoil her. She showed me a daguerreotype of her parents strolling the Atlantic City Boardwalk. Her mother wore a hat, a mink coat, gloves, and an orchid corsage; Pops sported a camel hair topcoat, fedora, tie, and an ebony cane he appeared to be using more for effect than for balance. There were photos of her childhood home in Waltham, a Tudor mini-mansion featuring a nightclub-sized bar with a red baby grand. Her parents wrapped her in a world of silk dresses, singing and tap lessons, and music. The black maid Isabel loved her like a daughter. My mother was the star of the house, singing show tunes as her mother's fingers tickled the keys. Pops promised she would go to Broadway. She could do anything knowing her father was sitting just beyond the stage lights. Like the plant that can survive on air, her soul nourished itself on the fantasies of an indulged girl.

My mother had lost Pops earlier that year. He'd suffered a heart attack after losing a leg to phlebitis and he died alone in his apartment at the Pick-Congress Hotel in Chicago. The concierge found him in his wheelchair with Sparky, his pet parakeet, clinging to his shoulder. My mother couldn't stop crying the day the death call came in and there was nothing I could do to cheer her up. She stayed in bed all day. I wondered if guilt

was mixed in with her grief because she hadn't visited Pops in years. She'd only seen him twice in the past decade, on stopovers on the way to Boston. Chicago was never a final destination. She must have harbored a deep resentment for Pops because he'd failed as a provider after the divorce, then failed a second time when he couldn't pay for her wedding at Saint Aidan's Church in Brookline. I wondered how she could reconcile her lack of forgiveness with the teachings of Jesus. By ignoring her crippled father, she was getting revenge for all the years she felt abandoned. This sense of abandonment turned her bitter because it was his praise and money that nourished her dream of stardom, a dream that struggled to survive as her mother sweated to pay the rent in Brookline. Pops meant everything to my mother as a child and nothing to her in the lean teenage years. Her pain eventually became his pain, as he languished alone in his wheelchair in a third-rate Chicago hotel. That's when I became aware of my mother's vindictive nature—if I ever did anything to cross her, I knew I'd have to pay a hefty price.

My father tried comforting her after the death call by giving her a box of Kleenex and patting her on the back like she'd done a good job at something. He brought home a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken for dinner and fixed a Manhattan. He placed two breasts, a scoop of coleslaw, and a muffin on a plate, then carried his drink-and-fast-food offering into the master bedroom on a TV tray table.

Dadio's weekend on Moloka'i inspired my mother to phone a trio of Bostonian aunts. After catching up on their latest ailments and financial woes, she invited Julie and me out to the lanai for a Cole Porter concert. She sang "Anything Goes" and the haunting "In The Still Of The Night." A fashion show followed the singing engagement—she modeled cocktail dresses, necklaces, and an assortment of wigs. I remembered our cruise to Disneyland aboard the *SS Lurline* and the band playing the intro to "California, Here I

Come" during the Talent Show. She approached a silver microphone and sang about a magical land of golden gates and sun-kissed girls in a ballroom filled with strangers. Their raucous applause and a First Place trophy gave life to her dream she could still make it. But now she was singing to her children on a lanai 5,000 miles away from New York. She'd clung to her fantasy for too long, and had never once tried out for a role at Diamond Head Community Theatre. Still, I entered her dream world and excited her with the possibilities.

"Would you consider Off Broadway?" I queried.

"On Broadway would be nicer."

"You could be Laura's mother," I suggested, "in *The Glass Menagerie*."

"I should be Laura."

"But you're a mother."

She looked at her reflection in the glass doors. "Oh, I guess you're right, Kirby. I'm just a fat old woman now."

"That Star Market cashier thought you were my sister."

"Oh, go on."

"No, really."

"Do I look that young?"

"Yes." I told her she should land a reoccurring role on *Hawaii 5-0*. She said she'd heard through the Coconut Wireless that you had to be 'friendly' with the casting director. She launched into a vicious attack of Jack Lord, saying he was a strange man because he never smiled in public and wore a big floppy hat. She claimed he didn't offer her his grocery cart after wheeling it out of Star Market. "The nerve of him," she said, "he saw me coming and just returned his cart to the rack." She said he'd been a used car salesman in New York and that she couldn't be bothered trying out for *Hawaii 5-0* with such a rude star running the show.

"You've got to start somewhere," I reminded her.

"You're right, Kirby."

"What about Community Theater?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"They're auditioning for *Hot L*

Baltimore in Manoa."

"That play's full of dirty language."

"You can't be picky."

"Oh, everyone's so young and talented these days."

"You're not old and you've got plenty of talent," I coached. "You just need that first big break."

"I should lose a few pounds."

"You're perfect as you are."

My mother's make-believe world transported her to the crossroads of absurdity and delusion. The sky was the limit and, if she could imagine it, it could happen. She had never abandoned the dreams that Pops inspired back in Waltham. I fed her dream world of absurdities because I didn't have the heart to crush her. I told my mother she could be as big as Liz Taylor or Barbra Streisand.

"Please," she pleaded, "not Liz Taylor."

"Why not?"

"Liz can't sing."

After all the talk about stardom, my mother launched into her list of 'I Wonders.' These were her musings on how life would be different if she'd married someone else.

"I often wonder about that Fletcher Eaton," she mused. She said he had to sell his blood to pay for their dinner at Durghan Park.

"Was he the man who got away?" I asked.

She gazed sadly into the ti leaf garden. "He invented polyester," she said. "Now he's a millionaire."

"I wish Daddy was Fletcher," Julie chimed in.

"Does Fletcher whack his children?" I asked.

"Why, that nice man wouldn't hurt a fly."

There were other men besides Fletcher. My mother adjusted her mood according to each man's earnings. She was heartbroken about Fletcher, but her spirits picked up noticeably when we discussed the Boston College quarterback she'd met on a blind date.

"I'm glad I dumped Burt," she chuckled. "Last I heard, the poor man was selling shoes in Southie."

Later that night, my mother put on her honey blonde wig with the flip and applied mascara and blue eye shadow. She squeezed into a white sequined gown and draped a wrap of pink ostrich feathers over her shoulders. The gown revealed a midriff bulge. "Kirby," she said, "what shape is my face?"

"Heart-shaped."

"Mrs. Machado says it's moon-shaped. It's not moon-shaped, is it?"

"Oh, no."

She patted her belly. "I think she's jealous of me."

The only kink to 48 hours of R & R for my mother was the obligatory call from Dadio on Saturday night. I picked up the extension in the master bedroom.

"I miss you, Dear," my mother lied.

"Very good," he replied. "Is Kirby doing his chores?"

"Yes."

"Tell him I'll be inspecting his work."

"I will, Dear. How's Barry doing?"

"That boy's a big help."

My mother celebrated Dadio's absence by not cooking. She took Julie to Papa Nino's for pizza. They snacked on jumbo hot dogs at Orange Julius, bags of chocolate-covered macadamia nuts at Morrow's Nut House, and cheese sandwiches at the Woolworths' lunch counter. They dined at Farrell's Ice Cream Parlor on Saturday nights. My mother seemed more like a girl on a binge than a wife worried about her figure.

I made do with Hungry Man TV dinners. I rebelled against Dadio by sleeping late and staying up to two in the morning. I got addicted to KORL talk radio and phoned incessantly. The talk jock Tom Slaughtery nicknamed me 'The Kalihi Kid' because I spoke pidgin English and asked if anyone listening wanted to fight. The by-products of my calling gave birth to three new characters—a Portuguese bus driver, a Japanese mama san, and a hooker from Oklahoma. I would dial and redial, switch voices, and have one person agreeing or disagreeing with another. The mama san

called to criticize the hooker for selling her body. The bus driver called because he wanted to date the hooker. The hooker called to inform the mama san she was just a working girl and to tell the bus driver she'd be the one wearing a red bikini at Makapu'u Beach that Sunday. I created a soap opera of intrigue. Invariably, another listener would call and racially slur one of my voices, and that would trigger an avalanche of calls from the Portuguese, Asian, and haole communities, with offended listeners either defending or attacking the mama san, the bus driver, and the hooker.

"I'm having a nervous breakdown," Tom Slaughtery admitted over the air.

"Eat Portagee bean soup," the bus driver advised.

"I'll massage you," the hooker offered, "for fifty bucks."

"Everyone *pupule!*" the mama san chortled.

Dadio assigned chores to the son who didn't accompany him to Moloka'i. That son had to water the garden and perform odd jobs, such as hand sanding the garage ceiling, trimming the bamboo and ginger in the front yard, and scrubbing dust off the exterior walls of the house with a bristle brush. The second Dadio returned from Moloka'i, he'd rush out to his ti garden and dig through the soil. "This dirt's bone dry!" he'd say. He wasn't happy unless the soil was the consistency of mud. If you devised a more efficient way to do a chore, he considered that a challenge to his logic and authority. When I borrowed Mr. Applegate's power sander for the garage ceiling, he went ballistic.

"Didn't I tell you to hand sand?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, "but it went tons faster."

He climbed up on the bumper of his Olds and ran his hand over the ceiling. "You lil' sonuvabitch," he said, "You gouged the god damn surface!"

"Where?"

"Right here," he answered, "right where I'm feeling."

Later, I stood on the bumper and ran my hand over the spot—it was as smooth as silk.

My mother made sure we weren't around when Dadio returned on Sunday nights. We fed the homeless on the grounds of Saint Andrew's Priory downtown. Julie handed out plastic spoons. My mother slung scoops of macaroni salad and I ladled out beach stew. Father Keelan discovered my mother liked to sing so he brought along a microphone with a small amp. She sang tunes like "If I Had a Hammer" and "He's got the Whole World in His Hands." The homeless made requests. A Hawaiian lady asked for Kui Lee's "I'll Remember You." My mother sang it with such conviction that some of the

homeless cried.

We always got back after Dadio returned. He said my mother only went because she liked pretending she was a famous singer. But my mother had a glow from entertaining the less fortunate and there was nothing Dadio could do or say to dampen her spirits. Her dream was alive and well, and it remained nestled in her heart even after he popped the cork on the Lancers Vin Rose as his signal he wanted sex. She'd convinced herself she was sacrificing her body for the good of the children and, as he sweated over her in the oily moonlight, she smiled imagining herself on stage an ocean and a continent away. ●



REDBUD WINTER

Take the word eros from me, give me
aphasia, give me dreams of a red blood moon
where my heart was instead of our bodies interlocked
beneath magnolia trees, beneath spring stars attempting
love, my throat closes off at the word. I am sick
of writing you love poems. I'd rather this day
be immemorable. I'd rather forget every time
I have been Kentucky snowfall
mid-april, creeping cold into floral limbs, weighing down
new petals, saying take me back. The trees are sick
of me, damn you. Turn me away, wither at my touch.
Spring was never our season.

-Sosha Pinson

EASTERN KENTUCKY BODY POLITIC

No bullshit, my first act
of rebellion was standing creekside
14 years old with twelve bottles of Bud Light
emptying each one into the clear water
at my feet to spite my dad
whose mere voice scared me shitless
most days. I remembered the times
my dad told me never to start drinking
the night I read 3000 gallons of oil
was spilled into Big Sandy River,
mother of the creek I grew up by
but I sucked down a whiskey sour
through a thin straw and remembered
the time he drunkenly dangled my sixty pounds
over two flights of stairs while my mom screamed
because the velocity of blood draining from her face
as he tossed my body midair before catching me
was the same rate I imagine oil drained
into that body of water. There is always something
spilling here. And if I lie and tell you I don't relate
the landscape of home to my own body,
it's because it hurts too much to identify
my body wrecked and wasted
like this.

-Sosha Pinson

RANSOM FOR YOUR JOURNEY

I'll build you a fort constructed out of
books about how to build forts. I just want to get everything right
I want you to stay, I want your muffled moans to sorrow
my name when I leave the heavens we study from science book earth;
instead I eventually just take you inside.

I am a blanket. I can't find any of the right words;
the only thing trembling to tongue is light,
winds, heat. I get so easy lost in the velvet
of the vowels roping from my your lips that I can't distinguish
the sparking of fear from between my thighs.

If you are reading this you'll know
this is ransom
that I still write it for you every corner I find to rest.
Don't you know, life keeps changing & there are paths
I've crossed so many times but the stars
that shine are brighter than the sun. Tiny
galaxies of gardenias surround what guides me home &
when I look through the crack in the roof
where we hid from death,

I can see it all.

Maybe if I bring home an extra gallon of milk,
keep my anxiety from my past, if I could control
the ghost in my dad

you would still find desire locked into my hair. You
would still find home in my breath.

Everywhere I look I see explosions & skulls
looking right beneath the sweatshirt
that keeps me whole yet, still,
all the carbon is leaking from my veins
& my hands shake & the nails
I burn into place burn my skin away too.
I hope you are listening, I will
build you a happiness, I will build a library of ransom
to protect the dying comets sprouting from within.

-C.M. Keehl

PATRIOT IN THEIR MIDST

-Michael Dwyer

“I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice.” Albert Camus

The morning fog disappears over the finest natural port in the Southern Cone just as our driver announces that we have reached Montevideo's one and only Sunday fair. A dizzying array of stimuli await the minute our feet touch down on the infamous *Calle Tristán Narvaja*: fragrant flowers and fruits, pungent cheeses, huge mushrooms, scared-stiff parrots locked in small cages, forlorn puppies and kittens for sale, a cobra on the loose, poison dart frogs reads the sign, free-range city chickens, fresh fish from the Rio Plata, designer rip-offs from China and beyond, new & used appliances and tools of every kind, false teeth in-a-barrel... take your pick... even tiger balm to soothe the nerves, so where are the tigers? I'm nearly hallucinating as we float down *Tristán Narvaja* and feel like I'm bathing in the collective unconscious of the Uruguayan people themselves as the parade slowly comes to a halt.

As we move away from the center of the fair and on to the side streets, friendly court jesters magically appear and a vague sense of trickery and deception begins to fill the air. I see only smiling faces as those on the margins appear to be joyfully basking in their own glory. A blind man plays the concertina. In a tin can you can place a coin if you like, upon hearing the sound, he'll take it immediately and store it in his vest pocket. Two youngsters half-asleep in a doorway... at their feet a filthy mongrel dog, tired and motionless; around his neck is tied a huge sign but his sleep remains undisturbed; the sign simply reads: *Se Vende*. If you want to get "your feathers plucked", there's always 3-shells-and-a-pea. "How about a little bit of cannabis?" whispers *un chamaco*, "It's legal, just ask President Mujica". All the while, the girls of the night offer a sensuous Sunday buffet in an adjoining alleyway, "How do you like your coffee, *ma petite chérie*?" she sighs.

Backing away slowly from the periphery, we find ourselves on La Calle Paysandú euphemistically known as "The Street of Fine Arts" where they shamelessly pretend to sell the great paintings of the seventeenth century Dutch Masters and refer to Rembrandt and Jan Vermeer as if they were old friends reincarnated. A little further down, we approach a narrow alleyway full of tarnished reproductions as the coy young salesman simulates disinterest urging us only with sly glances that suggest we might even find *el loco* Van Gogh or *le français* Cézanne in the nave of his bountiful treasure lair.

Famished, we stop for a snack of succulent, newly baked sausage and delicious hot rolls. Directly ahead, I notice a large, eclectic collection of translated books neatly stacked against a crumbling brick wall: World War II, philosophy, history and nineteenth century classical literature including the *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas as well as *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain. In that instance, I wonder to myself how the translated version of Huckleberry Finn might sound; could it even be possible to capture its true essence in another language? As I turn to my right, I spot two misplaced, but identical photography books titled *Lucha Vietnam*. As I start to peruse, I realize that these books are nothing more than pure Soviet propaganda published by the Novosti Press, translated from Russian to a flowery Castilian and printed without page numbers, dates, nor tables of content with

the authors named only in brief initials. In the upper left hand corner of the inside cover of one was written in pencil "1965" which had clearly survived after almost 50 years. So vile were the photos and captions that I thought just maybe, for the first time, I might even know what it feels like to be a Muslim looking at pictures of the Prophet Mohammed depicted as a clown or a pathetic caricature. At a glance, I found a picture of our ambassador at the time, Henry Cabot Lodge, smiling gleefully juxtaposed against the self-immolation of the Buddhist monk Thith True Zien in 1963. Then, I saw a depiction of President Lyndon Johnson along with his imaginary Army Ranger son with the caption reporting that both father and son were just as willing to kill innocent Vietnamese children as they were "niggers" in Alabama. How ironic, I thought. Besides the fact that Johnson did not even have a son, it was he who signed into law the 1964 Civil Rights Act that prohibited all forms of racial segregation. Without thinking, I bought both identical books although neither my lovely wife nor I could understand why I would have purchased both?

Our home is a decaying Penthouse in *La Ciudad Vieja* where the water pressure is barely a trickle and the frequent wind and rain place predictable small puddles throughout our apartment almost daily. However, the view is panoramic and we can see the boats coming into this breathtaking harbor at eye level. Many Russian ships are clearly visible with their names neatly blocked in Cyrillic lettering. Early the following morning while my wife slept, I sat on the balcony with my *café con leche* and my weird books watching the boats come and go and idly ruminating: What kind of relationship did the Uruguayans have with the Soviet Union during the Vietnam War? Did these people really believe at the time that the Americans were as bad as the "Angel of Death", Dr. Mengale, or perhaps as evil as Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge? Would they still believe the same if I showed them these pictures today? Would both young and old agree? What about other South American countries and how about the Europeans? The French, after all, had an unsuccessful war with North Vietnam, as well. And Americans like me, what do we think of these pictures as we approach the golden anniversary of the Vietnam War?

The next day, I finally realize why I might have bought both copies of these identical books. Perhaps, subconsciously, I thought they were the last two copies on earth and very well they may be. Do I fancy myself as a kind of Irish monk who after the fall of the Roman Empire feels responsible for hiding from prying eyes the incriminating remnants of Western civilization? Could the Huns, the Visigoths, the Anglos or even the Saxons be hiding nearby? Why do these confabulated, pre-photoshop depictions strike such a visceral chord in me? After all, I lived in San Francisco during the late 60s. I slept in Golden Gate Park by night ... roamed Haight-Asbury and Berkeley by day... read Che Guevara and the Berkley Barb and listened to Bob Dylan around the clock... even crossed the bridge to Oakland to rally with the Black Panthers. In fact, I was deeply involved in the anti-war movement and I must admit that I loved our home-grown political posters from the Vietnam era; yea, I remember helping my friend Pilot hang a bunch one night straight across The Haight. Our posters were just as unrelenting, visually grotesque and acerbic as the Soviet depictions, so why does the word blasphemy seep from my pores when I look at one, but not the other? I rationalize that our posters were spontaneous, grass-root expressions designed to expand our consciousness, not to distort and alter the very process of thinking itself. For that matter, what is the true nature of propaganda? I muse, as my third cup of coffee turns cold. Can information be

manipulated so astutely that a seemingly normal person can actually come to believe it? Can propaganda be so powerful that it can actually change neurological structures in the brain? Where can I find a good neurobiologist when I need one? I consider, as a smiling seagull flies by.

The following weekend, we find ourselves strolling down Le Boulevard Sarandí in search of our new favorite drink, a delightful mix of sparkling wine and muscatel called *medio y medio*. As we pass the Catedral Matriz, Gregorian chants entertain all those seated in the park nearby as the church bells soon announce the nine o'clock hour. If you turn too quickly, you might just think you were in Paris or Madrid. We head towards *El Puerto de Mercado* and soon seat ourselves at a funky outdoor hipster bar where we'd gone once before. It's Saturday night and tourists from Buenos Aires are seated just to our right. They came across the bay in just 3 hours on the fastest large ferry in the world. The crowd is mostly Uruguayan with a few Germans thrown in for good luck. Just as we order our drinks, familiar faces appear: it's Galileo and his pretty girlfriend Sandra, both dressed all in black. She taller than he and wears her hair in a braided bun. Galileo's locks are long and loose and held in place only by a thin leather headband. They make and sell jewelry in *El Peatonal* by day and by night enjoy *la vie de bohème*. We once shared a joint outside *El Café Brasileiro* during *El Festival de Condombe...* as I remember, despite our age difference, they seemed to really enjoy our company and were especially interested in my San Francisco hippie life during "The Summer of Love" and even wanted to know if I ever met Charles Manson.

The atmosphere is communal and the sweet leaf they call *porro* is passed freely and openly between tables. The subject of the night seems to be... oh my God, not the 911 conspiracy theory again. We've heard it all before! My stomach starts to curdle when I realize that this time it's our friends Galileo and Sandra leading the way. They begin to outline in detail this all too familiar plot as those at nearby tables begin to nod in agreement. I tell myself to shut up. I tell myself it's hopeless, but after another toke on the magic dragon, my *résistance* wears down and I jump in. "Don't you know that Noam Chomsky himself clearly dismisses the 911 conspiracy theory and considers it nothing but a distraction", I announce in my best Spanish. Although I try to stick to the facts, I find myself getting emotional as I wade deep in the water. "We did not cremate Jews in Eastern Europe. We did not pile up bones in the killing fields of Cambodia and we did not bring down the twin towers; however, I must tell you, my friends, that the Bush Administration may be responsible for crimes just as serious. Yes, we are capable of overt violence, but our crimes are almost always clandestine in nature, crimes involving profit over people that take years to incubate and hatch. The late Howard Zinn simply called it 'a skillful terracing to stabilize the pyramid of wealth'- just ask Mitt Romney, if you don't believe me", I add.

The small crowd is quickly getting restless and will have nothing to do with my nuanced arguments. Galileo has a particularly surly look on his face as he openly dismisses my comments as *pura mierda*. Sandra even begins to laugh out loud as I slink back into my chair. All these fools can envision is the propagandized, snapshot version of their 911 tall-tale and see Bush and Cheney, with ghoulish grins on their faces, simply lighting a proverbial match to the towers. Don't they realize that it's so much more complicated than that! To me, their homogenized view looks exactly like something from one of my distorted, circa 1965, soviet propaganda books. "Why don't we just save our breath", I say

to my wife, “Let’s just Photoshop their favorite 911 image and paste it clear across *La Plaza Libertad*, maybe we’ll even put one on *La Columna de la Paz*,” I interject sarcastically as we head out the door.

Sunday mornin’ comin’ down leaves us with some cobwebs so we head to *Las Ramblas* for a quick run. Later in the day: a 4th of July, barbecue celebration in Pocitos at the home of our ex-pat friends Diana and Ray. I’m really looking forward to some fine Uruguayan grass fed, organic beef, the most tender and flavorful in the world! For now, however, I’m left to reflect on last night’s “happening” while my wife is out-and-about with her best friend Araceli, shopping up on nearby Calle 25 de Mayo.

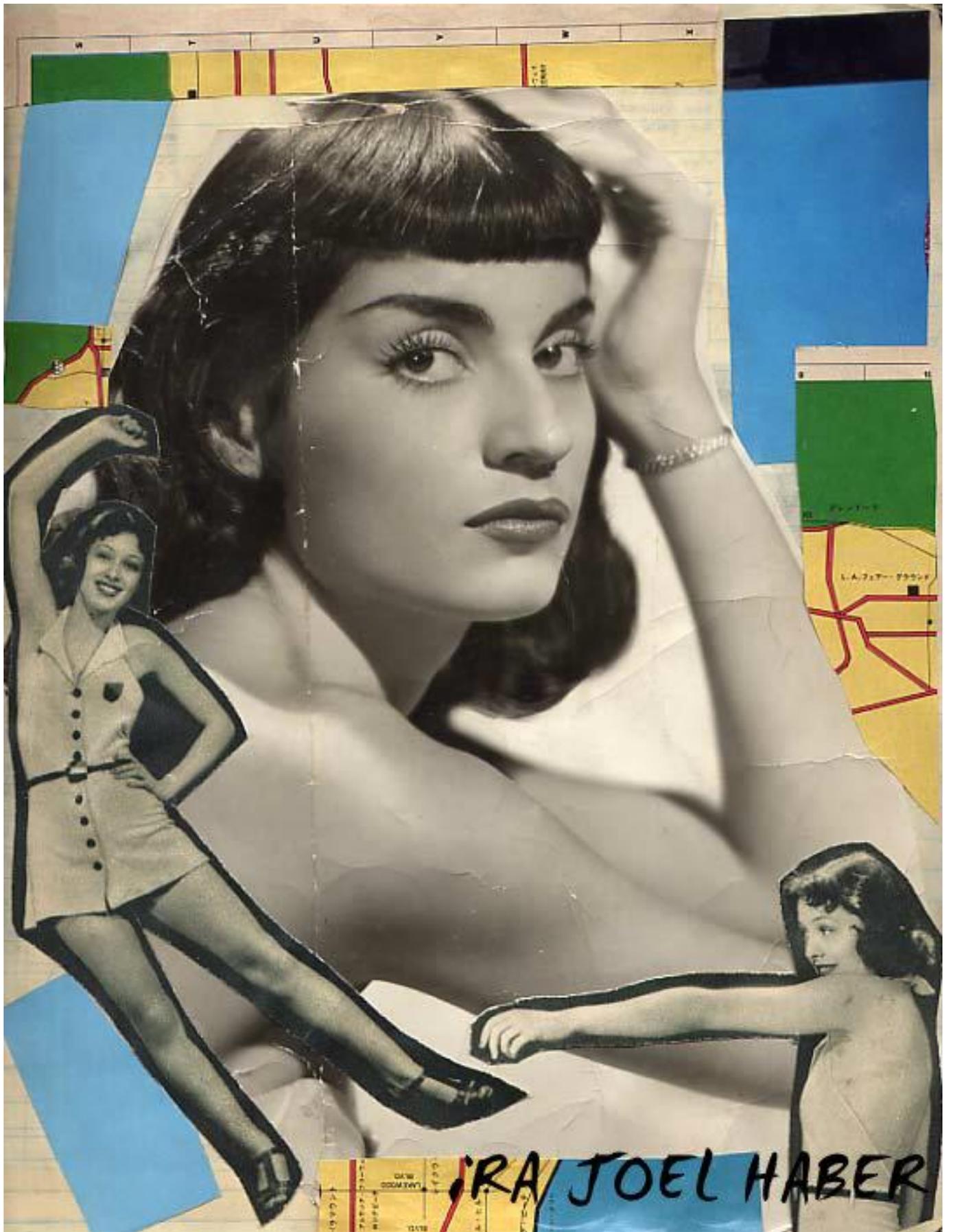
While sitting on my balcony, I absentmindedly thumb through my Soviet propaganda books almost as I way of centering myself as I puzzle over how those seemingly bright, young, beautiful people could be so blind. *In one of my crazy daydreams, I see Galileo’s imaginary father, Copernicus, working as a young boatswain on a large Soviet ship anchored in the harbor. While he works, he is being bombarded with propaganda books and pamphlets that literally rain from the sky. At the flagstaff stands Vladimir Lenin, straight and tall. Were some of Copernicus’s neuropathic connections distended, tangled and twisted forever when he was young, I ask myself? Could he have passed a mutant gene onto our poor, little Galileo? In my madness, I envision freezing their brains so neuroscientists in the next century can take a good look - Walt Disney here we come!* In that moment, I’m startled when my beautiful bride brings me back to reality. “Hola, Bueno”, she sings. “I bought a big box of pastries at *La Pastelería Iruña – churros, ricarditos and pasta frolas* - but keep your hands to yourself, my boy - there for the barbecue, not you”, she chides. Delightfully sweet smells of apricot, quince, caramel and meringue intermingle in the air, but, thank God, I know when to keep my hands to myself.

There’s still time to read my e-mail before we go, so I grab my laptop. My hipster friend Bobby just sent me a link from The Guardian about the Edward Snowden case so I decide to check it out: encryption... decryption... the NSA... fundamental American liberties... movie-maker Debra Poitras... journalist Glen Greenwald ... some call them traitors, but others might say great Americans in the same tradition as Daniel Ellsberg, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Michael Moore, and Woodward & Bernstein. *Ooh La La*, it’s time to wave the red, white & blue, chimes my partner, as we head downstairs with our huge box of pastries. Huge breakers flood over Montevideo’s ancient sea wall and spill clear across *Las Ramblas* as our taxi speeds towards Pocitos; all the while, I ponder, what is it about my country that I really love? It’s not our military might and certainly not the buzzing drones overhead. It’s not our sagging economy, once the envy of the world. ¡Ay Caramba! it comes to me in a flash: young Galileo and his friends don’t need to waste their freakin’ time making up tall-tales ... we’re always the first to tell our own damn story ... whatever the cost may be ... yea, that’s what I love about my country! ●

THE FOOLISHNESS OF PASSING BY

When I lapse into the tangled forest of my past,
Those days when I climbed that many-branched tree,
I wish I had been a different person.
I wish my eyes had noticed every shade of green,
The pale light of dawn, the twilight glow.
Often I ignored kind words and nature's noises;
I scarcely listened to the little wren's song.
Yes, I sniffed the glamorous red roses
But skipped the scent of sage and allemande.
I wish I had touched more tears on plump cheeks
Wrinkled hands, bald heads, coarse beards.
Why didn't I care more about my people,
Their heartaches and hand-wringing,
Their days of triumph, jumps for joy?
I yearn to drop back and find what I missed;
I long to be more than I've been;
Surely, I could have climbed higher,
Made it to the highest tree branch.
I might have been a better me.
So foolish to pass by and by.

-Noel Zeiser



DANGEROUS FISH

-John Biggs

Mary Burk didn't have much on top so she had to work her booty. Fourteen years old and still no period. Her mom told her breasts wouldn't really develop until that happened and in the meantime she should make do with what she had.

"When Aunt Flow is late," her mother told her, "It means you'll be taller, and thinner than your classmates, and then those boobs will come on like gangbusters and if they don't there's always plastic surgery."

Mary wondered if any of her friends had mother daughter talks like the ones she had with Ellen. That's what Mom wanted Mary to call her now.

"So we can be girlfriends, right?" Ellen said. "Now let me show you how to move that ass."

According to Ellen there wasn't a man alive who could resist staring at a fourteen year old booty. "Even the gay guys will turn their heads. Girls too, but for a totally different reason."

Mary's skinny jeans were way too tight for comfort, but she didn't let that slow her down. She practiced walking through the food court at Penn Square Mall moving her booty in a perfect figure eight the way Latina dancers did on *Dance Sport*. Guys were looking all right, just like Ellen said.

She could feel her thong panties working their way into places where nothing should ever go. She could sense the eyes of the dirty old men and the nerds on her bottom, and if she was not mistaken, some junior and senior eyes were locked on too. Success didn't feel all that good, at least physically, but Ellen promised the skills she learned now would pay dividends later on—whatever dividends were.

Mary didn't know why it was a good idea to have men leering at her booty, making them want to see it naked, to touch it, even to smack it, but Ellen said she'd understand all that later on. Meanwhile it was important to learn how to make guys want her, and that was going pretty well.

I wonder what dad would think? Mary asked herself as a nerdy sophomore with a lip piercing and eyes that didn't track the same *accidentally* brushed his hand across her bottom before she realized what was happening.

Creepy.

Did Mary's father turn his head to watch teen-age girls strut their stuff in the mall. God she hoped not.

A scruffy kid about her age watched her from across the mall. He'd been watching her for some time now. He might have been Asian, or Mexican, or maybe Indian—lots of those in Oklahoma—but whatever he was he didn't wear designer jeans, his sneakers were cheap, and there were sleep wrinkles in his Harley Davidson T-shirt.

Thief, was the first thought that came into Mary's mind. It made her feel a flash of shame. Who was she to judge, a teen-age girl practicing slut-skills in a mall? She made a quick turn so she could get a better look, but he'd already disappeared into the crowd.

Another teenage boy brushed passed her, too close for comfort. Touched her bottom. Didn't apologize. Didn't even pretend it was an accident. One quick grope and he moved on.

Frottage. That was Mary's vocabulary word for the day. Nothing she could do but put a name to the act, but she turned and watched the boy retreat anyway, hoping lightening would strike.

And then it sort of did.

The scruffy boy who might have been Asian, or Indian, or Mexican stepped out of the crowd jabbed the groper in the groin, hard enough to send him sprawling.

All because of me. Maybe things were getting out of hand. Ellen warned her that could happen. "The Guys are bigger than us and stronger than us, but the poor things minds get clouded with testosterone when they turn twelve or thirteen, and they never quite get over it."

Guys with the highest testosterone levels are easy to spot. They're the ones in the muscle shirts with tattoos and cigarettes and a smell of

rut they can never seem to wash away. They are the easiest to hook, according to Ellen, but they are dangerous fish.

That's the only kind of fish Ellen went after, but she recommended Mary start off with lower octane guys, "The ones who know they're not really good enough for girls and probably never will be—like your Dad."

Mary considered finding someplace private with a mirror where she could practice her orgasm face for a while. Ellen said that still needed work. Then try the walk again when the atmosphere cooled down, maybe on the lower level near the arcade where the less aggressive boys hung out.

"You can spot the safer guys by locking eyes with them," Ellen told her. "If they don't look away—you walk away."

Vicarious experience. That's what Mary got from Ellen and she learned the name for it too. Probably an SAT vocabulary word. Having a slutty mother was useful on a lot of levels.

Mary watched the guy who'd groped her writhing on the floor. No one stopped to help him or to ask what happened. They just walked around.

Was this a good thing or a bad thing? Kind of hard to tell, really. Of course the violence was appalling, but having a guy come to her defense made Mary feel like she just made the highest score on a math test or had a poem published in the school newspaper. The Asian-Mexican-Indian kid probably wanted to have sex with her and that was pretty disgusting, but having a guy fight for her felt pretty good.

Even though it wasn't much of a fight.

So Mary decided to practice her orgasm face later. She made the mall circuit one more time. Walked through the upper level doing her booty thing, aiming it at the guys with nice haircuts and designer jeans without snuffbox imprints in the back pockets, and she picked up quite a following. She heard their whispers and knew they were talking about her and that felt good even if they said some pretty nasty things. Then she walked through food court toward Dillard's department store and she heard some distinctly masculine footsteps behind her.

She had a momentary flash of fear, the kind a mouse must feel when one of those high testosterone boys drops it into a glass cage with a snake. So she stopped and leaned her back against the wall, putting her delicious booty against the cool ceramic tiles, and she looked into the eyes of a blond-haired blue-eyed guy at least six feet tall, with a stain of whiskers on his cheeks and the smell of cigarettes on his breath and yes, there was that rut odor her mother warned her about—like someone just opened up a bear cage. He put both arms against the wall on either side of her shoulders, effectively pinning her. She wondered if mall security could see what he was doing and if they might do something about it.

"Nice butt work," he said to her, and Mary remembered to look him in the eyes. Willing him to look away, but he didn't. Mary knew the boy saw fear in her face and he liked it more than a little bit. But after a few seconds he smiled and he didn't look nearly as scary as he did before.

Which one is fake? The scary guy or the guy with the Mormon missionary smile. But he still didn't look away and missionaries probably wouldn't talk about her booty at least until after they said a prayer or two.

"Where'd you learn to move it that way?" He asked, and she pretended she didn't know what he was talking about.

"What's your name?" she asked.

He told her, "Paul." That sounded good, one of those names you hardly ever hear on the news associated with rape and murder. He stood back, offering her a chance to escape if she wanted it. A very good sign.

She looked away from Paul's face and brushed her eyes over his groin. Tented like a Shriner's Circus. Way interested, maybe not in the best way, but his face looked kind of civilized when he stood a couple of feet back, and the rut smell might be at least partly one of those sport stick antiperspirant deodorants. Paul was kind of cute and he must be a senior, just like she was going for.

"You got a car?" she asked, and of course he did and it didn't take long until he bought her an ice cream cone and escorted her out onto the parking lot like a real gentleman so she could see it for herself.

But once Mary looked inside the car and saw the beer cans in the floorboard, and the deodorizer dangling from the mirror that was a cardboard cutout of a naked woman, and what might have been a meth pipe on the console between the two front bucket seats, and what looked like a blood stain in the backseat, she wanted to go back into the mall. Paul didn't think that mattered much, because he had hold of her arm hard enough to cause some pain and it was pretty clear he was going to put her into that car whether she wanted to go or not.

"Gonna have some fun with that nice little butt," he said. "If you didn't want it you shouldn't have walked that way."

Paul pulled the back door open and was shoving her into the car, not paying much attention to the fearful little whimpers Mary couldn't stop.

"Go ahead and cry, bitch," he said, and gave her a little slap on the face, not hard enough to sting but it got her tears running.

"That's what I'm talkin' about." He leaned Mary back into the rear seat, too far to keep her balance and even though she desperately wanted to avoid lying on the blood stained upholstery she fell flat on her back.

Mary couldn't do a thing but sob when Paul ran his hand down the front of her skinny jeans. She couldn't do anything but plead when

the tip of his index finger found what it was looking for.

"Please don't do this," she said in the exact tone she used to wheedle things out of her dad. Of course Paul was nothing like her dad, but it looked like her ploy might have worked anyway.

The expression on Paul's face went flat. He stood up straight so quickly that he thumped his head against the doorframe of his car. Then he dropped to his knees revealing the scruffy Asian or Indian or maybe Hispanic boy standing behind him.

The boy held a bloody case knife in his right hand. He wiped it on Paul's shirt and fished the keys to the car out of one of Paul's pockets, and dangled them in front of Mary.

"Mall security's not too hot but they'll figure this out pretty soon," he said. "Unless you want to talk to the police, we'd better get out of here."

"What's your name?" Mary asked as if that made any difference.

He told her, "Daniel," and looked away, just like her ideal guy was supposed to do according to Ellen. So she climbed into the passenger seat and rode away from the parking lot with a murderer instead of a rapist. She hardly noticed the bump when they backed over Paul's arm. ●

CHARLOTTE VON ROTHSCHILD

-Peter Clarke

Lucy Allen, a newly admitted mental ward patient, decided that, if anyone asked, her name was Charlotte von Rothschild. That way, she might really get some good psychological attention. Otherwise known as some respect. She would go along with anything. Juggling lessons or strait jackets. And she would never be intimidated. You don't intimidate a dead person. Especially when her name is Charlotte von Rothschild.

During the first ten seconds of her time in the mental institution, Lucy experienced the next thirty years of her life within the walls of the place. By her fifth year, she actually began to enjoy shock treatments. She mastered self-hypnosis techniques and used them against the shock machines. She also began to enjoy the company of the ward's infamous borderline triplets by year seven. It became endearing the way they roughhoused during meals and screamed constantly during the night. Truly her biggest problem at that point was nurse Fruit Juice. The bitch's husband was some kind of renowned psychiatrist, otherwise she would have never even gotten her job in the first place. But finally, by year fifteenth, Lucy schemed a way to successfully poison the nurse using the mercury she milked out of the ears of Mister Faustrul, the midget schizo.

Back to her admittance day. Lucy found herself alone in a room with Dr. Meinphragm. A middle-aged man with yellow teeth and a tie that hung down past his crotch. She respectfully answered all his questions with three-word sentences. Yes that's true. I don't know. Sure why not.

Then, after what seemed like years of blood work, Lucy was led down a hall and into a room that was supposed to look comfortable. Couches, televisions, carpet, and plants. For some reason she held some papers in her hand. She set them down beside her on a couch and stared at a wall. Whatever sort of sedatives she had been given were working great. Her eyelids bobbed out a lullaby tune. No need for thinking. Too numb even to eavesdrop on the boys mumbling behind her.

Eventually her eyes drooped off the wall. But they did not close completely. After some moments of somber dimness, Lucy found herself gazing into the skin on the back of her hands, which were languishing in a small pile in her lap. Then she considered her arms. And then her knees.

Ah! Something ridiculous came to mind just then. A joke she had heard long ago in her childhood. She felt the urge to say to someone, "Hey, have you ever heard the joke where...?" But unfortunately it was a long-winded joke, and she lacked the will to verbalize its entirety even to herself.

The joke went something like this: There was once a man taken captive by the Nazis. While imprisoned, he developed gangrene in his left foot. The sick limb would require amputation, said the Nazis. Submitting to the amputation, the man entreated his captors to send the dead foot back to his family in a far-away country. The Nazis complied. The man subsequently developed gangrene in his right foot, and then in his legs, and then in his arms, etc. For each new amputation, the man made the same request that his amputated limb be sent home. Finally, when the man was reduced to his head and a few failing organs, the Nazis said to him, "Enough. We will send no more of your body back to your family. We think you are trying to escape!"

Not a terribly funny joke. But in her dulled mental state, Lucy listlessly dwelt on it for a while. She imagined her body chopped up into hundreds of pieces. Each piece nicely packaged with a ribbon and bow and addressed:

*To the front steps of the enduring estate
of Charlotte von Rothschild
wherever on Earth
that might be*



K NAMES: KELSEY

Kelsey strays in on the edges of soliloquies
street lights
highway heartbeats
folded valentines
water rings on your nightstand.

Parking Lot Under Your Window- ragged ear tomcats, swoop like owls at the corners of
dumpsters, the color and texture of salt.

“I want to show you, I want to show you, I want to show you.”

Her voice is bloody and full of resurrection.

Kelsey takes me to a sepulcher in the woods
a rock formation arming in the gypsy eyed galaxies of the both of us,
overturned boats, red stag bottles, peach pits
photographs never taken- now all ash.

“This is where he burned the bodies when he was done. I want to show you what he burned.”

Her hands on my face, I realize I want to have tea with her too.
She’s crystal ball reading me because when you share a person
you share more than bong hits and Facebook friends.

Above us, the clouds are rolling in and the nooses that hang- ready to use- sway from low trees.
-Jill Ann Mceldowney

THE LONGER I RUN

I came here because
I was trying to outrun the something that was myself
that was Ian
that was the way I couldn't wear the color red without feeling like a fraud.

You are digging graves the size of horses in the woods behind your house &
I understand Ophelia now.

What I am is suddenly a measuring cup
a BMI that could be lower
dangerous
a pair of legs, a face carved out of cold
a black birthday cake on a stove top, cooling freight train.

An entire day
shoveled into furnace, ice lined barges,
veteran's lungs
who have given up on surgical masks, who survive on the space between the coal dust.

I've dropped too many zeros.
No.

This is the year 2006 clinging to the inside of my hips.
This is the coal yard under the rusted out bridge.
This is a man who should not be alive limping from the tree line.

-Jill Ann Mceldowney

FLYING

-Brittany Ackerman

We drive down to Kendall, Florida. It's the day before my twenty-fifth birthday. I asked my brother if he would jump out of a plane with me as my present. He said yes. We are wearing our athletic clothes and sneakers and the sky looks like rain. The clouds move fast, but we can't tell which direction they head. I know today is the day though; we're going to jump. We step out of the car and he lights a cigarette. He says he'll be right there.

Do you remember when we had dreams of flying? We used to jump off your bed, the couch, the kitchen table, and count how long we were up in the air. We tested time. You said it would be possible one day, someday, that we could access the atmosphere and dive, flip and soar through the clouds in flight. I said I would bring my red Kipling backpack with the monkey on it to carry all my stuff. You would wear your Oakley shades to look cool, like you always do.

Sometimes I worry about serotonin. Sometimes I worry about the receptors. I used to visit you every Sunday in rehab, then every other Sunday at the halfway house, and then there were places I couldn't go. My parents didn't want me at an Al-Anon meeting with them, so I just did research on my own learning the twelve traditions, the steps, and the ins and outs of recovery. I dated half the city of Delray Beach, which I'm not proud of, but maybe it has prepared me for better coping with this situation. I put you above everyone else.

We suit up in our skydiving gear and watch the instructional video. I can tell you are nervous because you don't say much. Usually you'd be talking shit, making remarks, telling jokes. The video basically tells us that if we die it is our fault. There's no backing out now though. You pace the grounds and look out at the sky that seems to clear up- just for us.

You balance a rusted silver-gray slinky in the palms of your hands and shift it back and forth. You cannot write a paper, study for a test, or complete a project if you are sans slinky. Mom sits in the left of the two big plush chairs in our loft with a pencil and a legal pad of paper while you pace back and forth changing the slinky between your hands. You dictate to mom, since your handwriting is illegible, and she diligently copies the dictation down word for word. Sometimes I lie on the floor in front of you coloring in my notebook or drawing on the white board dad got for me from his office. The squealing of the markers distracts you and you give me a stern look. I cap the marker and open the toy drawer, take out string to make a bracelet, or the nail polish kit that teaches me how to make animal print or patterns on my nails. Mom suggests I go to my room and do my homework, but it's math and I need help with it, and even if I go in my room I can still hear you talking, your voice getting louder when you've just realized a good thesis, or I can hear mom rambling off different creative titles for your paper. When I get to high school, I'll use my smaller rainbow slinky when I write essays and read them to mom so she can copy down my words. I'll be just as smart as you. But for now, I make matching daisies on my index fingers, and the left one is significantly better than the right one.

The plane takes off and I'm at the front. I turn my head to see you sitting in the back left corner. "I'd be more afraid to land in this plane than to jump," you say, your words muffled by air pressure. Your tandem instructor hands you a pair of goggles and you fasten them on tightly. I put mine on as well and another instructor opens up the jump door. There is a rainbow outside of our plane that stretches across the sky.

Where did you even get a gun anyway? Not that it matters now, and I'm not mad, just wondering. The cops took it when they found you here at the house, but I was always just curious where it came from. On the terrace I watched you chain smoke for four hours until your fiancé came to pick you up. I saw the ashtray fill up with cigarette butts, haphazardly shoved into it with your jittery hands. I cried with the sun in my eyes and begged you not to go. You said that sometimes the only way out is down.

It's my time to jump. I sit on the edge with my legs hanging out of the plane. I turn around and grab your hands. I say *I love you* before I go. Just in case, you know. You say you love me too and it's time to free-fall. It's time to go. You jump a few seconds after me. The cold air rushes against my body and my teeth shiver from smiling so hard. My tandem instructor points and says, "There's your brother." I watch you fly.●

A WOMAN WITH FLOWERS

She tiptoes around the line
of sunlight that embroiders
the darkness,
longing to plunge into
the bouquet of black holes
she presses tighter each day
to her chest.

-*Valentina Cano*



ONE OF THREE SUNS, NO. 3
REES NIELSEN

NOVICES

-Rebecca Andem

The monkeys were supposed to adore me. They were supposed to gather around my peaceful presence, and we were supposed to share long gazes of silent understanding.

They weren't supposed to steal from me.

At the park entrance, I'd bought a bunch of miniature bananas, not so much because I had an unfulfilled desire to hand-feed wildlife but because I thought my purchase would help fund their upkeep as well as contribute to the local community. Unfortunately, I burned through that single bunch in ten frantic seconds. I don't think the monkeys even tasted my offering. And as for the local community, I doubt my few Rupiah made that much impact.

Watch out, Bali, I thought. *Self-inflated westerner buying bananas*. Maybe I should have been thinking, *Watch out, Gillian*. I should have known I was due for a lesson or two.

First, I left my guidebook on a bench.

"You forget," said the soft-spoken man in the green sarong. When I turned around, he squeezed out a tired smile in response to my eager giggle as I lurched for the book. "The monkeys," he added and pointed past my shoulder.

A group of adolescent macaques were spaced in a semi-circle only two feet away. They were tiny with their little pot bellies and arms and legs that looked so easy to snap, but their attentive postures reminded me of a military maneuver. While I was busy pondering my own significance, they had been closing ranks. I was surrounded.

"Hey, little fellas," I said. "Mind if I pass?"

The monkeys stared at me. I have to admit, intimidation wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind when I'd imagined locking eyes.

"Sorry." I shrugged. I smiled. The monkeys, however, weren't buying it.

The soft-spoken man still stood near me, a fact brought to my attention when he hissed. I think I jumped about six inches. The monkeys didn't even blink.

"I guess they like where they are," I said once my pulse returned to a normal pace. I smiled again and nodded at the monkeys. I tried to gaze into the eyes of the largest one.

The man in the sarong stamped his feet, and the monkeys broke formation, scattering over the cobblestone path and disappearing beyond the mossy stone wall. Within seconds they were hanging from high vines and lounging in the deep arms of trees whose names I would never remember even if I asked. They were enormous with smooth gray bark and thick green leaves, standard tropical fare. Still, I made an effort.

"What are those trees called?" I asked, but the man in the green sarong had already exited my little scene. He was at the kiosk, tying a rather faded sarong around the midsection of a female tourist. She, apparently, was not menstruating and would be allowed to enter. I, on the other hand, thanks to timing, Mother Nature, and ancient Hindu law, was designated to the steps outside. In fact, the monkeys may have already determined my unclean status, which would explain why we weren't communing, although it did seem unfair. I'd always thought nature was less gender biased. Perhaps the monkeys capable of sensing my good intentions and inner peace were the ones inside the gates. The ones on the outside were only beginners, novices.

If communion with nature was my goal for the day, I couldn't have asked for a more idyllic setting. The Monkey Forest, situated on the bottom curve of the main road that ran through Ubud, Bali's central colony of souvenir shops, offered an oasis of peace. A canopy of trees shielded the park from the sun and cast bottle-green shadows over the full range of gray branches and stones below. I'd never considered gray to be

such a soothing color. In my mind it had always been a post-apocalyptic color, a grim science-fiction wash on my sunny mood, but there in the forest, the gray and green came together to cast a false twilight, a sense of closure and reflection. The tourists were subdued, and aside from the occasional screaming rush toward bananas, so were the monkeys. The day and the place had all the makings for a sacred moment.

But then I stepped into the sun.

The monkeys were rather territorial about the temple steps. I had wandered around to the front for a better – if still restricted – view and was pleased to discover a somewhat heavenly glow marking the entrance. Of course, the entire temple was bathed in sunshine. It was, after all, made of concrete, and trees don't grow in concrete. I know this. But at that moment all I saw was a golden halo and the potential for a head-tilting, eyes-closed, smile-spreading pose of grace that would make everyone around me nod in recognition and envy.

The monkeys, of course, had seen it all before, and like good thieves throughout the world, they knew when to strike.

I think I actually screamed. Despite years of yoga, I'm still as jumpy as a cat caught in an intersection. I manage peaceful reflection just fine. It's the coming out of serenity that I don't handle so smoothly. I can be walking down any street in the world, through the chaos in Mumbai or the throb of Miami's South Beach or even the lazy squeeze of Monkey Forest Road in Ubud, and I can glide through it like a leaf wafting on a breeze, fateful and trusting, without the tiniest shiver of apprehension as I maneuver around construction and tourists, hawkers and beggars. Cars and motorcycles and even buses can dart around me, and I am a gliding slow-motion montage of calm. But one impatient horn blast or predatory cat call, and I've jumped out of my skin and landed, quivering, four feet away.

Not that I've heard a cat call lately. It's a vague memory. And it really isn't a good analogy because I'm pretty sure a

construction worker would never leap, arms and legs, onto my hip, grab the sunglasses out of my hand, and scurry down my thigh. At least I hope not.

After my brief, yet potent, scream therapy, another irritatingly calm man with a soft voice and green sarong acknowledged my predicament with a nod.

"Wait here," he said, whether to me or the monkeys, I don't know.

I tried to arrange my features into an expression of benevolent amusement. Meanwhile, the monkey sat on its haunches on the other side of the gate and quite calmly examined – and tasted – my sunglasses.

"Did it take them right off your face?" an American woman asked. Her tone was both appalled and amazed.

I'm afraid my face flickered the same emotions. Across her back and under the straps of a neon-green tank top, she had tucked a batik scarf to protect her skin, but it was too late. The cleavage that escaped was an angry, blistered red along with her face, and both were slick with sweat. Assuming the woman had been too distracted by impending heat stroke to see me remove my sunglasses in order to turn my face beatifically up to the sun, I decided to forgive her such an obvious question.

I smiled graciously and turned back to the scene at hand. Behind the gate the monkey scurried away from the park employee. The crowd laughed, but the man in the green sarong didn't hurry or lunge. Unruffled, he shuffled his rubber flip-flops across the hot cement. At the gate he retrieved a long pole, and on cue the monkey leapt to the top of a nearby statue, one of those fierce gremlins that guard every temple in Bali.

"Oh dear," the woman said.

I assumed she was commiserating with the almost certain loss of rather expensive sunglasses, and I nodded. She wasn't.

"I hope he doesn't beat the poor creature. It's only following its nature."

Is that what I sound like? Forget yoga and union and peace. Forget communing with nature or transcendence or whatever I thought I might master. I wanted my sunglasses back. They were prescription, after all.

“I don’t think burglary or licking glasses falls into the *nature* category.”

The woman glanced sideways at me as she cooled her slippery chest with one of those Popsicle-stick fans children sell on the streets of third-world countries. I have three.

“We are in its home,” she replied. Already she was sidling toward an equally burnt man whose unfortunate orange clothes advertised his support of the Denver Broncos.

Inside the temple gates, the guard was still shuffling lazy semi-circles around the monkey. It appeared to be a stand-off. My eyes were burning a bit in the sun.

“Remind me never to visit your home.” I think I intended to mutter this bit of sarcasm to myself.

“Excuse me?” The woman’s postured stiffened, and her husband lowered his camera to step beside her.

I couldn’t help myself. A defensive reaction was natural. “Not if you molest your guests,” I said, “and then lick their possessions.”

Beneath his camouflage hat, the husband’s face hardened. He raised his hand to his wife’s shoulder. From such a large man, I expected a caveman-like grip, but his touch was light, intimate.

“There’s no call for that,” he said. “She was only being friendly.”

The woman’s hand fluttered to her husband’s chest, her palm facing out. She was either holding him back or protecting his heart from my evil rays of sarcasm. Considering the sour aftertaste my defensiveness had left in my mouth, I couldn’t entirely blame her.

“It’s okay, Hank.”

“No. It isn’t.”

He flung his free hand at me, but his camera made the gesture awkward. His wife

reached after him, waving at his hand, urging it down. Frustration boiled in his face as he dropped his arm. He gestured again, this time with his chin, and it communicated the direction of his thoughts quite clearly. There was no question who he despised.

“If I’d’ve known I was gonna meet so many people like you traveling, I’d’ve stayed home. You think you got it all figured out with your organic this and all-natural that and your ‘om-mani-kiss-my-ass.’ But this woman –“ He caressed her hair. “This woman has more kindness in her little pinkie than you got in your whole scrawny body. *And* she smells better.”

Considering the climate, a competition for the most pleasing odor was sure to generate more losers than winners, a small consolation when traveling, but still, I did fight the urge to sniff my own armpits.

The woman shook her head. Her smile was indulgent but not, of course, for me.

“Don’t mind him,” she said. “He gets fired up sometimes, but you can’t blame a man for being protective.” She leaned against his side, and an old familiar fist of jealousy hit me in the stomach.

Hank squeezed his wife’s shoulder and straightened his spine. “You’d be privileged to be a guest in this woman’s home.”

Before I could muster a response, the park employee stood beside me.

“See there,” the woman said. “All’s well that ends well.”

I turned and accepted the sunglasses and acknowledged the man’s effort to retrieve them with a gesture hovering between a nod and a bow. Behind me Hank snickered.

“I’m sorry,” I said to the man in the green sarong.

“Be careful,” he answered, a rote response that must have lost it potency within the first week of his job. With nothing more to say, he walked away.

When I turned back to the American couple, Hank had led his wife into the shade. Squinting, I put on my sunglasses and looked around. The onlookers had thinned a

bit. A few monkeys posed like statues on the steps to the gate, but most of them had scampered off.

With the park map in hand, I wandered away from the temple. Either clouds had moved in while I wasn't looking, or my sunglasses were a bit foggy with monkey saliva. I took them off and added them to my bulky bag. I wandered toward the back of the park, but the monkeys were scarce beyond the main draw of the temple. In a wood shop near the back wall, a man was carving erotic statues, and he urged me to "look for a short time," but I shook my head and wandered on. Normally, I would have stopped to have a conversation with the man, later marveling at my ability to connect with people beyond cultural and linguistic divides, but really, what was the point? I wasn't going to buy anything.

Sooner than my mood could circle back to where it had started, the path led back to the entrance. On my right a man-made creek gurgled into a gorge. A few boards that made do as a bridge led to a footpath and a stone staircase that circled up a hill on the other side. It was inviting, the kind of detour I've developed a flair for, but I resisted its lure. At the top of the hill, the trees were young and thin, and beyond their branches, I could see open sky. After only a week in Ubud, I knew that open sky meant open space, and open space meant rice fields, and honestly, I'd already seen my share.

They were gorgeous. I'd give them that. Vibrant. Peaceful. But after a while, an emerald-green field can begin to look like any other emerald-green field, and I had a suspicion that my sense of wonder had – at least temporarily – been slimed with monkey spit. In terms of inspiration, I was ready to chalk the day up as a loss.

Then, on a side path near the entrance, I saw the American couple. Hank, with his tree-trunk legs braced wide atop the stone wall, stood with his camera poised. On the path below, his wife was squatting, her hand stretched and still in front of her. Just

inches beyond the woman's fingertips, a monkey sat alone.

The monkey was gazing directly into the woman's eyes.

After a minute, Hank lowered his camera. He must have sensed they weren't alone, because he turned his head. The smile on his face wasn't for me. It faded as he registered my presence.

He turned his attention back to his wife. The monkey had moved closer, and his wife was glowing.

"Animals," Hank whispered, and although he didn't turn his head, I knew his words were meant for me. "They got a sense, don't they?"

He looked at me then, not with the judgment I deserved but with an offering, the forgiveness I didn't. We stared at each other for a long moment. I waited for him to say something more, to defend or compare, and when at last I realized he wouldn't, I nodded.

They do. ●

SERENITY

As the bombs go off
in Bahgdad, Beirut, Bombay
we should give thanks
for temporary safety
in the good old U.S.A.
-Gary Beck

SUMMERTIME

And the living's eased itself right out
of our bones for weeks, the two of us
liquified where we sit, with the busted AC
I've forgotten, again, to remind Maintenance
about. *It's damn near a desert in here,*
you accuse for the ninetieth time, your face
red as Mars, reproach like a bit of Hell
flashing in your eyes, as you slap the lever
down to 55° on the thermostat, though
the temp never creeps below 80°. You mean
the Sahara, of course, with its camels
and Bedouins, and air that shimmers above
steep, endless dunes. I nod, but recall the barren
sweep of Antarctica, polar white and blue,
where summers at the coast still require a coat,
a hat, gloves. We've come to this: opposites
even when we agree. Do you know, desert
is any arid place where almost nothing grows?
Like your heart: sandy, with hardscrabble shoots
of bitterness that poke through at times like these,
and my own, frozen as diamond dust, in apology.

-JC Reilly

ELEPHANT SOUP

-Janet Doggett

Fifteen years ago I found out the tattoo of the Chinese character done in pastel colors and outlined in sharp black ink over my left breast signified something other than “soul of a poet.” We were in my husband’s office at the university on a blistering and dusty West Texas day. The sky was orange. My husband’s Asian friend took a step closer, peered through her thick glasses: “It says, Elephant,” she said. “Or something maybe about Soup, but no Poet here.” She smiled wide. I blinked rapidly, and muttered my thanks as those around me laughed loudly to the music of “Elephant Soup.”

“How many times have they tried so far today?” The Boston hospital nurse was touching the pad of her index finger to needle marks on my arms and hands. She was wearing blue gloves with the finger part ripped out, and had on blue lipstick to match. “What’s wrong, your veins don’t make no blood?” She thought this was the first time I’d heard that. “Seventeen,” I said. “Seventeen times.”

“We are going to have to put a port in you,” she said. I pulled back my shirt a bit, showing her my scar where my port once was. She also saw my tattoo. “What does it mean?” she asked. I never knew what to say when people asked that. I knew what I wanted it to mean. I knew what it probably really meant. I said what I always said. “It means poet.”

I have four tattoos. My elephant tattoo was my first. I was incredibly young and rebellious and somehow getting that tattoo made me feel dangerous in a sexy way. I was marked by an apprentice in a Lubbock, Texas, shop in the backroom where there was green neon paint and black lights. His name was Eddie. He had pointy elf ears and black greasy hair. My second tattoo was one of a gecko on my left ankle. Simple, straightforward, I was hooked. I had finished my master’s degree and felt like shouting to the world, “I’m the Lizard King I can do anything.” My third was of a phoenix – just a black outline – on my lower back. This was before they came to be known as “tramp stamps.” (One day my son, when he was 10 years old, asked me why I would get a “tramp stamp.”) My fourth and last one was on top of my right foot. The pain of the needle screeching through my thin skin, popping nerves was memorable at least. The picture is of a flower with a Sanskrit saying that (I’m pretty sure means), “watched over.”

There are people who say that those who get tattoos get them in order to outwardly show an inward hurt. They are a way to mark oneself, to denote a difference. If that is true, I guess I have reason enough. What’s interesting is those reasons didn’t come until after the tattoos.

After moving to the Boston area, I begin to get sick. It took about five years and hundreds of medical appointments for doctors to diagnose me: Type 1 diabetes, Celiac Disease, Stage 3 Cirrhosis, hypothalamic hypothyroidism, bipolar disorder. I had my gallbladder removed, a hysterectomy, both of my knee caps were crumbled from degenerative bone disease and had to be replaced. In two weeks I'm facing colon surgery. I have been in the hospital a lot.

"You have been in the hospital a lot," said the 20-something white coat whom I had to see as part of my pre-admission testing this week.

"Yes." I didn't know what else she wanted me to say.

"Why?" she asked. "I mean you had pancreatitis your last admission. Did you do some heavy drinking the night before?" Her pencil tapped the clipboard she was carrying. She looked just past my right shoulder.

I wanted to stick a fork in her forehead at that moment. Instead I calmly explained to her that I no longer drink because I have liver disease in an advanced stage and I'm in the hospital a lot because with more than 4 autoimmune diseases a lot can and will go wrong at any given moment. In my mind. I mean I explained that to her in my mind. In reality I stuttered and blinked and said something like, "No, they don't know why I got that."

I realized later that what she was looking for was a confession that I was in the hospital a lot because I wanted to be – because something was *mentally* wrong with me. Perhaps I had something akin to Munchausen's Syndrome. The thought made me nauseated.

One day last summer I was driving my then 14-year-old son and 18-year-old daughter to her friend's house. My daughter's friend smokes a lot of cigarettes. My son asked me if I had ever smoked cigarettes and I honestly could tell him that I had not. He said, "That's because you're pure!"

I wanted to stop the car and hold him tight. At that moment I couldn't think of another person on this God-given Earth who would think me pure – me with the four tattoos and the liver disease. Me with the crooked little veins. My dietary restrictions. The extra weight. My idealism.

Sometimes I wonder if I will live to be elderly. And if I do, will anyone find my tattoos attractive on this porous sagging green-veined skin that I'm covered in? Does it really matter?

One day I will unzip my body from the top of my head to the bottom of my toes. I will throw away my marked skin, my elephant soup, and my diseases. And like so many doves, my true self will tumble out white and pure, and soar. ●



AMONG NORMAL PEOPLE

-J. Thomas Meador

When my eyes finally open up I see my breath makin' crystals in the air. Frost stick to the car windows and the cold come in from a crack grandma never got fixed in the windshield. Fall gone and winter already eaten up the trees, lookin' like something outta old cartoons. Naked branches going up and out, shaking in the wind.

Both sides my neck hurt. Heart going like a hummin' bird. I look 'round the world. Put pieces together.

Three cans of Busch Lite empty on the floor. Other three hanging by the plastic six-pack ring on the rearview mirror. I don't remember drinking.

I remember driving to the old Gas-N-Go. Leanin' the seat back. Sleeping. Tired and running. Waiting for Maddie to show up before we run any farther. Nobody'd find me. They'd all be at my grandma's house asking where I was. They'd be all nice and sweet, but fidgety underneath, sniffing, wanting to know where their money is.

I check my pocket. Pull out a big wad of half crumpled tens and twenties, turned in every crazy direction that'd make a banker go nuts. One thousand two hundred and sixty-three dollars. That don't count the coins I got, too.

I stole it all from them, even though they's my friends. We need it to get out of town more than they need it to get geeked. They got the rest of their lives. They can do that whenever they want. They know enough people. I'm being the better person here. Maddie don't need to get back involved with people like them. She needs a knight in shiny armor.

Last night I went to the jailhouse and left a note with the clerk. Told him to give it to Maddie when she got out this morning. Told her meet me at the old Gas-N-Go on Johnson Highway. All she had to do was show up. I know it'd be best for her, 'cause she got the ass-end of the stick for the past two years. If she hadn't gone to see Hundred Dollar Bill, then drive into that roadblock, she'd still be out partying with us. I could'a known her more, and maybe she'd be my girlfriend now.

When she shows up I'm gonna tell her everything's been put right. I'm gonna tell her about Seth and John Ray, and about Lisa and Emma, Frank and Denny. Gonna tell her I took their money 'cause I care about her. Maybe she's gonna cry 'cause she feels the same about me.

Last night I dreamed about me and Maddie driving through the mountains out of Tennessee. Windows down, our hands sticking out. The wind lifting them up like an airplane. Dreamed we was talking at each other and in love. We had a place to go to, where no one would fund us. Me and Maddie'd buy a trailer and we'd be brand new people in a brand new town. I dreamed we'd be happy for the rest of our lives.

Then I waked up. Cold and alone.

Cars pass by on Johnson Highway. I watch them all, think 'bout which one's gonna pull into the gravel lot and she's gonna hop out of. She's been exercising in prison, so she's gonna look slimmer, prob'bly. I know what she looks like, so slimmer or fatter or whatever, I'll know it's her 'cause nobody changes that much that fast.

I wonder if she's still got that long brown pony tail she been growing since high school. Goes down past her shoulders, stopping short of the tattoo she got right north of her butt. Her hair makes me think about that naked lady riding through town on a horse, and Peepin' Tom watching her through his window. I ain't no Peepin' Tom. I'd be polite and all, but it won't be secret I'm staring at her titties. Been wanting to touch them for as long as I known her. I seen them once, too, when Maddie flashed some folks standing around talking after church one Sunday. She's got dark pink nipples and a mole on the side of one of them. They look like big fleshy melons, and all I ever wanted to do was suck on them and hear her moan and make her smile. I think about that lots.

It's all Hundred Dolla Bill's fault. He probably didn't think nothing about Maddie getting arrested. Bill prob'bly just counted the money she gave him and showed her out the door. Bet he prob'bly grabbed her ass, too. Prob'bly laughed when she smacked him, if she smacked him, if he tried touching her. He always been a selfish prick. Last time he seen me he just turned and walked away, back to the pool tables, pulling his jeans up to hid that hairy ass crack he got. Just went back to playing pool with some redneck missing part of his nose. They was both real twitchy, too.

I should'a called the cops then and there, but Bill don't carry unless he's at home.

She and Emma wanted to surprise me with a quarter bag for turning twenty-five. It would'a been funny, but I ain't ever laughed about it. I spent all this time since then thinking about making things right. Maddie was the nicest out of everybody. When I moved in with grandma Maddie's the one who asked how I liked the town. She took me around and showed me where things was. I met everybody through her – they was all friends since grade school – and she made me feel like I was part of them.

John Ray told me Hundred Dollar Bill's got his name 'cause he don't snort nothing 'less he's using a rolled up Benjamin. He thinks it's classy that way. I think it's bullshit. It's like people saying they don't eat meat if it ain't organic or free run, or whatever. It really don't matter. Steak's still a cow, and Bill's still snorting dope if it's with a twenty.

A blue lookin' S-10 truck pulls up into the lot and sits there. Two people in it. We stare at each other through my rearview mirror. I drink one of the Busch Lites while them two talk. Truck don't look familiar. Cigarette smoke comes outta both sides' the cab.

Three nights ago me and everybody was at John Ray's trailer smoking up and drinking, and that's when we thought Maddie'd like a party when she got out. Said we'd all help make it a good one.

I let them call Hundred Dollar Bill. I let them order everything we needed to celebrate her welcome home. It'd cost a lot, he said, and that was okay, we told him. John Ray and Emma been saving money for a while 'cause they been skimming off everything her baby's daddy sends from Afghanistan. Seth's been selling dope on the sly to truckers coming through town looking for sex. Frank got paid three hundred dollars to leave his daddy's pawn shop door unlocked so some Mexicans from Saluda could steal guns. I don't know where Lisa and Denny got their money 'cause they never have none, but nobody ever asks questions when they do.

Then there's me. I got mine from the shoebox in grandma's closet. She been saving up since grandad died, just in case his pension runs dry. She never counts it, so she won't know I been in her room.

Passenger door opens.

Maddie leans down and stares at me. What the hell you doing out here, she says.

I just smile big and look in the mirror. Who's truck's that?

Friend's. Got any junk on you?

She sits sideways in the passenger seat and I give her a sniff. She ain't had one in a long time. Legs hanging out the side and goosebumps cover her arms. Closes her eyes and feels it run through her.

Oh, shit, yeah, she says.

I take a sniff, too. My pants start getting tight. I missed you, I tell her.

I'm glad I'm outta there, she says. Smiles a little, distracted 'cause the marathon in her blood.

I'm the one making her heart beat so fast. She only got me on her mind.

Hundred Dollar Bill's got an easy address to remember. One-two-three Pine Tree Road. Easy to find, too. When I called the Sheriffs and told them 'bout Bill's drugs they asked who I was. Concerned citizens, I said. Heard that on a TV show grandma was watching one day when I was twitching bad and stuck at home.

Grandma's car only got a hundred thousand miles on it. Someday I'll bring it back. Hell, she won't know I'm gone 'til I don't take her to Bible study tomorrow. God'll forgive me. I'm doing a good deed.

It's the people you gotta get from. Bad people make everything worse. Might be fine smoking and drinking and sniffing at somebody's house, but you're stuck when one of them says they want to go steal beer from Bi Lo, or go hunting at Cedar Lake in the middle of the night. Your head's cloudy. Your heart's thumping like a flat tire going sixty miles an hour down the highway. Everything tells you go home. Let the twitches come on. You ain't slept in a week.

But, no. You stay.

After a day or two you forget you want to go home.

Sometimes grandma wakes up 'cause I been sniffing so hard it sounds like I'm allergic to everything on earth.

It ain't allergies, grandma.

She give me pills. I put them in a little baggie with all the other pills I stoled from her. It's a backup plan, in case me a Maddie need more money.

Maddie kisses me. Whiskey tongue. Sweet wood. She puts her hand on my leg. Squeezes hard. I'm mixing the feeling of the junk in my blood and her touching me. Don't know which one's better.

There ain't nothing about it that makes me feel sorry for them. I ain't wrong in what I done. They're all losers. They're happy being nobody's going nowhere. They won't even care in a couple weeks. They gonna forget about it, and about me and Maddie. Everybody else gonna keep living and doing what they been doing since they was in school. They gonna tear through jobs like paper and prob'ly go to jail a couple times. But not me. I got everything I need.

I imagine when the Sheriffs get to Hundred Dollar Bill's and find all those drugs he's gonna start crying. Maybe try and run for the woods out back. They gonna throw him on the ground, and he's gonna grunt like a hog when they arrest him. Sheriffs gonna find all the drugs nobody picked up last night. Prob'ly more than that. They prob'ly gonna find guns and pipes and stacks of money. I heard Bill's got a thing for little girls, too. They prob'ly gonna find videos. Sheriffs gonna put his hairy ass away forever, and then he won't get nobody else in trouble.

She kisses me so hard and squeezes so tight I don't hear the door open behind me. Another hand on my body. Maddie pushes herself away. Smiles at somebody else and I get pulled by my shirt.

Truck doors slam shut. Engine revs. I can still taste her whiskey.

Alone. Cold. Half out the car. Watch my breath freeze into crystals. Mind wandering 'round my head, thinking 'bout Maddie. Thinking 'bout where we're gonna go when she comes back. She'll get in my grandma's car and she'll smile at me. She'll be so happy she ain't in jail no more. She'll be happy 'cause she known somebody was thinking 'bout her. Somebody cared enough about the future to come up with a plan to save us both. And we escape. And then, someday real soon, we'll be someplace different. Someplace better. Someplace where we can be normal people. ●

WILLY HIMSELF

This morning he held a broken cloud in his mouth

which I couldn't remove. I tried with rays of sun, rock paper, scissors and words that sounded neutral but meant *I'm so sick of this game!* He fended off an eight-month-old black lab for it. I sweet-talked him using my I'll fix-it voice that runs on light bulbs. *Suchagood buuuu—oooyyyy!!*

He's consumed with having, must, it's never too late

and being smarter than the atmosphere, erased or written on. He's our Magna Cum pup and Summa Laude dog, object of our perception.

We see Willy in 97% of our universe: In the face of

Jane, the crossing guard, who's had six cups of coffee, two Excedrin and one cigarette before arriving at work at 7:15am. Willy's ready like that.

Like the pigeon, which blindly flies into people to get the breadcrumb under the tree, he's all about eating off the street. We see him in the angry little boy in the schoolyard who's not listening, because Willy won't listen either. In the baby who cries when he's anxious, Willy barks really loud for the same reason. Like the old man who can doze off during a conversation, Willy is that tired while I'm talking. We see Willy in anyone who reads, drives, sneezes, coughs, who we feel sorry for and anyone not-giving-over-to something. Someone who wants to sleep on the couch and get a head rub or a back rub is Willy. The president of the United States is Willy when he smiles or when he makes other people feel good.

Looking for the next cloud to solve.

-Susan Bruce

RED ONIONS

-Erin Renee Wahl

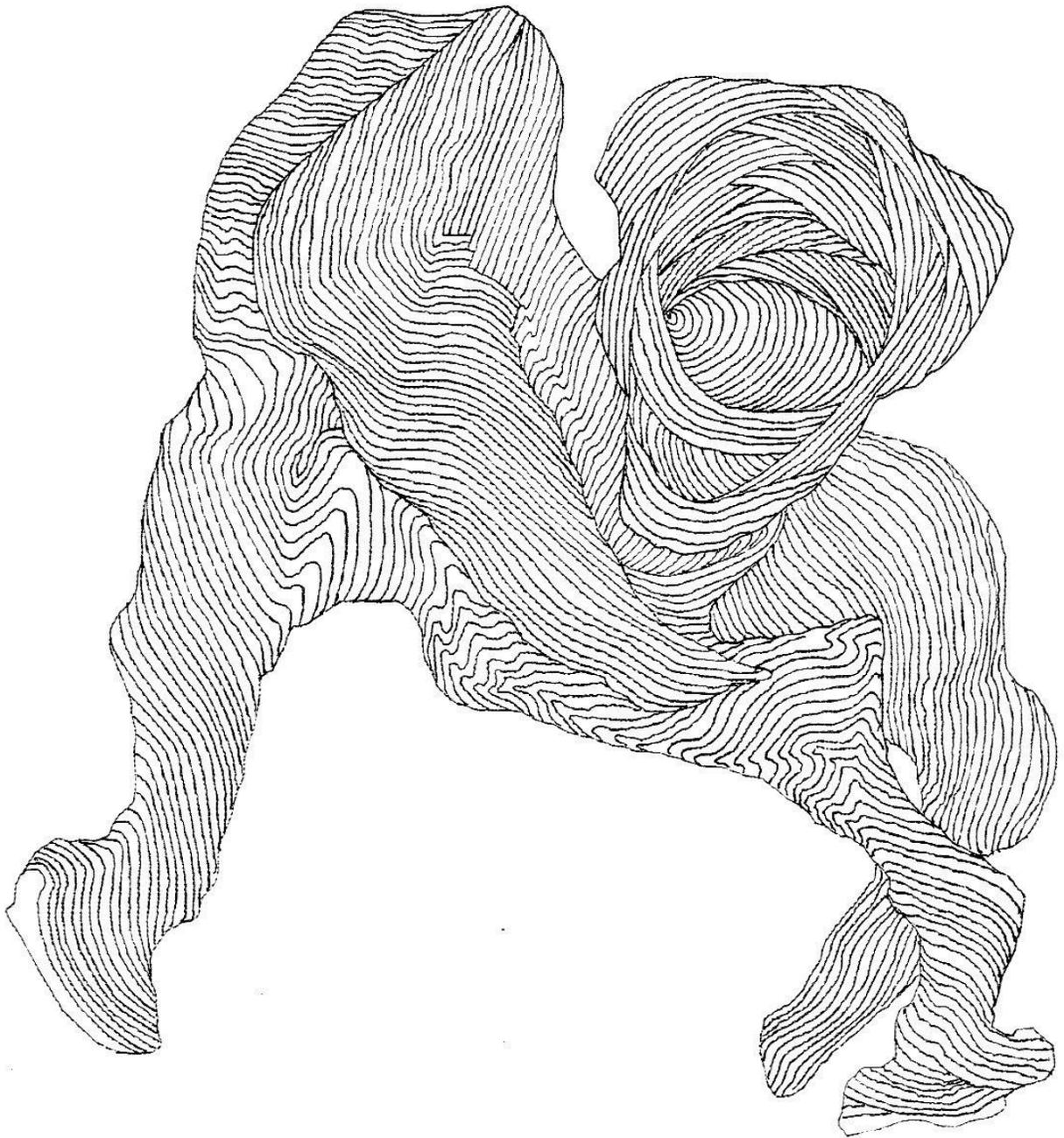
I choose a course that no one expects, past the green peppers. I head toward the red onions. Everyone is watching. They're pushing the carts with their oversized faux-leather purses slung over their sagging shoulders, shoving pacifiers into babies' mouths, peering at shopping lists—really watching me. I never buy red onions, but tonight I'm going to stuff some full of feta cheese, wheat bread crumbs, a bunch of herbs and spices. I'm going to feed them to my boyfriend and his friend who always comes over and drinks much more than seems healthy and makes me wonder whether or not I'm with the right man, who matches the other drink for drink. Later, much later than I'd like because I'm a graduate student who has all this reading to do, his friend will say goodbye and the man I love will pull me from the couch where I'm reading for my classes the next day, towards the bedroom to watch a movie with him. He will insist. And I won't argue because he is the man I'm in love with. He will fall asleep after twenty minutes and I will go to the kitchen for a glass of water and discover that he has left all the cleaning for me to do in the morning when I wake up; when the coffee is not ready fast enough and the sun is a little too bright at the one sad window; when there is no time.

But right now I'm in the store and everyone is watching me go towards the red onions when they really expected me to head for the piles of potatoes or the tomatoes stacked high and waiting for someone to come juggle them. They expect me to stop at the tofu, which is on sale, because I look like the kind of person who never has to worry about pieces of meat between my teeth or excess amounts of breath-freshening chewing gum; the kind of person who eats tofu on purpose. I do not have any children with me and I'm wearing glasses and knee-high boots and I'm carrying a large purse that they know has a copy of *Mrs. Dalloway* shoved in it with a homemade cross-stitched bookmark and my watch is exactly on time. So they know that I must be a graduate student who does not get paid enough money to be buying red onions all the time and who may never make enough money for fancy things like fresh feta cheese and cherries that aren't in season and who should definitely be stopped in her tracks by a sale on tofu, but I keep right on walking and they keep right on staring.

I'm sidetracked for a minute by what I could do with pine nuts, which have always fascinated me. I think briefly of pesto and fancy salads and stuffing more vegetables with these expensive little nuggets. Then I remember that I'm already buying red onions and I really don't want to clean out the tiny secondhand blender I own after the pesto is all scooped out, and that my basil plant has died in the window from lack of light and hating my apartment and I haven't had time to mourn so it's too soon to replace it. Everyone watches me walk past the pine nuts.

I'm at the red onions, and I think that perhaps everyone's staring has carried me to these onions. Everyone wants me to buy the red onions I cannot really afford. They're watching me and they don't want me to buy something as common as potatoes. So I plunge my hands into tissue paper onion skins, scratching delicately, making me regret the vanilla hand lotion that sticks little wispy sections to the tops of my hands as I dig for three beautiful, tragic, purple specimens. I've found two and placed them delicately in the plastic basket on my arm, because I never use the little plastic bags they have for the vegetables; I feel sorry for trapping them so rudely. I've found those two and I'm searching for a third when I'm wrapped from behind in a large squeezing hug and feel the grate of my boyfriend's beard on my cheek. His arm snakes around; drops a small container of raspberries, which I also cannot afford, into my meticulous basket. He embraces me; my right arm carrying the basket with the two red onions, also a couple, and everyone is watching. ●

HIS OWN TECHNIQUE W. JACK SAVAGE



ANIMAL CRUELTY

-Jose Pasqual

She wasn't violent. If anything, she was a "good girl." Which was why she was having a hard time looking at the trail of blood that lead from the back door, through the kitchen and out into their living room. She could smell it. She knew she couldn't clean it up and she couldn't do anything with the body. It was going to be discovered and it would be soon. Still, she didn't regret it. It had been the right thing to do.

She turned her head. Had she heard something? Was he still alive? She retraced her steps back into the living room. He was still there. The blood that had pooled around him had stopped spreading. Instead it was sinking into the carpet. He had that clueless look on his face, even after he was dead. She use to think that look was so cute. What kind of fool had she been? She got down on her side and looked him in the eyes. Could the dead see? What was left of him to register that she was there with him at this moment? Was he really gone? She felt nothing. No signal of anything. All she saw was the inert mass stretched out on their living room floor. She smelled something else now. Not the blood, but something different. He had always had a rotting tooth smell that came rolling across his pillow at night when they slept. She would push away from him when she smelled this. Then he would snuffle and stop breathing for a few seconds. It would wake her up, every night, that tooth odor and then the sound of him stopping breathing. Then his breathing would return to normal and he would snore and she would be agitated for several minutes before she could get back to sleep. Now he wasn't breathing and she was awake. There was just the smell of blood and the gasses, slowly drifting, escaping his mouth and sinuses.

She hadn't meant to do it, she thought. It had probably started when she saw the newspaper that morning. He had

rushed out without a word, leaving her to wonder. He had been distant the last few days. But things happen, careers are hard, people struggle. When she saw the paper she hadn't thought much of it at first. The headline read "Vivisectionist attacked by Animal Rights Group." The picture was of David, her David. His coat was pulled up on one side and he was being pelted with paint and rotting vegetables. Which would explain why he was in different clothes when he came in last night. But what was he doing? Why had he done this? Why hadn't she known? Her David, Dr. David Altimont. The man who people called "Doc." The soft spoken man who helped the neighbor bring in her groceries. The guy who threw the ball back to the kids in the park when she didn't want to be bothered. What had he been doing?

She was going to discuss it with him that night. She was going to be calm. She would ask questions and then listen. Then he came home in a rage. She never got to ask the questions. She never got to be calm. He was spattered in garbage. Someone had dumped it over him. He was shouting, cursing, ranting. He shouted at her. She had stayed calm. Then he threw a dish at her. It missed and then shattered, covering her and the floor in shards of broken ceramic. That was when she snapped.

She didn't remember doing it. It was all a blur. Instinct. She saw nothing but red. He had been startled, then terrified and finally silent. She hardly noticed. She had been in a frenzy and lost track of everything. Long after he had stopped moving, stopped making noises, she had continued. Then she fell away from him, exhausted. She retreated from the living room, her breathing labored. As she calmed down, she thought about their nights together – not the smell or the snoring – and how they had cuddled. She thought about their weekends when they went out and the trips they had taken together. It seemed

impossible to her that he could be the same person as the one whom she had just killed. A memory flashed through her mind of something they had shared. It wasn't important in a way that most people would understand, but it had been to them. It had been something that had been a constant in their lives. She left him in the living room and went to look for it in their bedroom. She started out slowly, methodically looking for it. It wasn't there. She began to cry, she began to scabble through the clothes and items strewn about their room. He never picked up after himself. Then she found it. It was on his side of the bed- of course - wedged between the dresser and the bed frame. She had to get down to where she could see under the bed to get it and even then it was awkward. But she managed to retrieve it. She looked at it. It was so simple and it had been so important to both of them. She took it down the hall into the living room where he still was. She laid it down next to him. Then she stretched out alongside him, her head level with his and she stared at him. This was how it should be. When they found them she would be here. They might think what she did was wrong. They might even think she was "bad." But they would see it, and they might understand what it meant. She closed her eyes. She was so tired. Her last thought, before she fell asleep, was that whoever might find her would have pity for her and would take her for a walk. Then the vivisectionist's dog fell asleep. ●

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

BEKAH STEIMEL is an internationally published poet living in St. Louis. Find her in Southern Pacific Review, Gutter Eloquence, The RPD Society, Sinister Women, Vayavya, Verity La, and more. In addition to writing poetry, Steimel is also working on a novella exploring the themes of love and loss. Visit www.bekahsteimel.com

BRITTANY ACKERMAN is a current MFA candidate in creative nonfiction at Florida Atlantic University where she is also a graduate teaching assistant. For her 25th birthday, she and her brother went skydiving, a feat they'd always hope to accomplish in their mortal lives, and it was both a humbling and invigorating experience that the two of them will never forget. She would like to take a moment to thank all her haters, because as stated in Hustler's Ambition in the words of 50 Cent, "I need you to hate so I can use you for your energy." Her work has been featured in 3 Elements Review, One Image, One Hundred Voices, Coastlines, and more of her work can be read online at: <http://dailyackermations.blogspot.com>

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GARY BECK is a former theater director and playwright. His poetry and fiction has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines. You can find his novels and books of poetry on Amazon or to see the scope of his work, visit him online at www.garybeck.com

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JC REILLY is the author of the chapbook, *La Petite Mort* (Finishing Line Press), and a 25% co-author of a recent anthology on occasional verse, *On Occasion: Four Poets, One Year*. She has had work published or forthcoming from Kentucky Review, Flyover Country Review, the Louisville Review, Rive Gauche, Black Widow's Web of Poetry, and other journals.

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JOSE PASQUAL studied history, economics and comparative religion at college and graduate school. After graduate school he worked doing ethnographic histories in South and Central America. From there he began his career as an author. Presently, he divides his time between Chicago, IL, Naples, FL, and Sittee Point, Belize. In March of 2014 Jose's novel, *Walking Back From Key West*, was published by Hell Bent Press. <http://josepasqual.com>

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MATTHEW NEELY, a moral survivor of the "war" in Iraq, writes, teaches, and taps his way through life. His work can be seen in Colorado State University-Pueblo's *The Hungry Eye* and *Tempered Steel*, the *Open Face Sandwich*, and Pueblo Community College's *The Final Note*. He teaches writing at Pueblo

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MICHAEL DWYER presently lives in Medellin, Colombia where he is pursuing a doctoral degree in the Social Sciences at La Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana. He formerly lived in La Ciudad Vieja in Montevideo, Uruguay where he spent his days mostly readin', ritin' and ruminatin' with a little drinkin' and dancin' thrown in for good luck. He is originally a proud Irish-American from the State of Connecticut. Michael graduated from The University of Connecticut and once played basketball for the UConn Huskies. He spent a large part of his career working as a teacher and school psychologist in both Connecticut and New York.

NOEL ZEISER likes writing stories and poems more than anything else she has ever done. She loves how it makes her examine the present, the past and even the future. Being able to use imagination in a creative way is a treasured gift.

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REBECCA ANDEM earned her MFA through the Stonecoast program at the University of Southern Maine. Since then she has been pursuing her writing and teaching English at universities both in the US and abroad. Currently, she teaches at a university in China, and in her free time she travels through Southeast Asia as much as possible. For more information and stories, go to www.rebeccaandem.com

REES NIELSEN farmed stone fruit and grapes in California's San Joaquin Valley for 35 years. He began painting at the request of his wife Riina 25 years ago. In 2011, 3 years after her passing, he moved to Indianola, Iowa where he lives within a mile of his grandchildren, Marshall and Adelaide Taylor.

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SUSAN BRUCE was inspired to write poetry by Tony Kushner in whose Pulitzer Prizewinning Angels In America she starred when it premiered on Broadway. While still appearing occasionally in movies and on the stage, she now turns most of her creative energies towards the written word. She has been published in Barrow Street, Luna Luna, 34th Parallel, Written River, Open Rooms Press, Halcyon, Minerva Rising and Women's Studies Quarterly.

VALENTINA CANO is a student of classical singing who spend any free time she has reading or writing. Her debut novel, THE ROSE MASTER, will be published in June 2014.

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