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word~river literary review (2011)

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Editor’s Note

Three issues into this endeavor and we are more excited than ever. Each year is a journey of discovery and we look forward to each new issue’s submissions with anticipation: there is so much talent in our adjunct world and, luckily for us, much of it has graced our pages. As in past years, there are many people to thank. Again, the staff and I, and by extension the contributors, would like to thank Dr. Christopher C. Hudgins, Dean of Liberal Arts, and Dr. Richard Harp, Chair of UNLV’s Department of English, for their continued support of the journal. Several others deserve our gratitude, also. Susan Summers has served as Contributing Editor since the beginning of this endeavor and has lent her expertise as Budget Technician for our English department to the success of the journal. In addition, we have a new student assistant this year. Andrew Bahlmann, a Ph.D candidate in the English department, has assisted us by inputting and formatting this issue’s material and has done an exemplary job for which we are very grateful. Once more, I would like to thank the readers, the staff, and the contributors. Our initial vision became a reality and we now have a third issue in print and fourth issue in the planning stages. We have all worked together to create a unique journal and we look forward to many more years of publication.

Managing Editor, Beth E. McDonald
Spring 2011
Las Vegas

It’s not trees or mountains and rivers
Or windswept prairie ponds
Dappled with rainbows and bluegills
Flashing amid the fronds
Of cattails and bulrushes and willows.

Here we do what we can with neon
To keep ourselves entertained.
It’s more like the vacuum of outer space,
The possibilities largely constrained
Beneath a glowering bloodshot sun,

Living amid the moons of Jupiter,
Exotic though it may sound . . .
Somewhere between the rings of Saturn
On a deathly dry parcel of ground
Where monochrome mountains abound.
Property Value

Thomas Fenton rocked back and forth in the thickly cushioned glider on his spacious, screened-in porch. The early morning air was crisp and cool. The sky was a bright, clear blue. Birds sang in the leafy oaks and maples that shaded his expansive, well-manicured lawn. Like tiny diamonds, dew adorned his roses. He could smell the flowers’ fragrance.

Thomas had spent a fortune on his home since he and Mildred had purchased the place forty-odd years ago, improving the property value by renovating the existing rooms, adding new ones, and building this porch, which surrounded the entire house. He’d also spent thousands of dollars in landscaping the yard, adding flowers, shrubs, trees, fountains, statues, a koi pond, and even a sparkling waterfall. As a result, the appraiser had valued his property at $250,000—a far cry from the $45,000 that he’d paid for the place when he’d bought it.

That had been before his neighbors had let their houses go to hell. Frank Haskell, on his left, and Richard White, on his right, had bought their homes within five years of his purchase of his own property. Unlike Thomas, their fortunes had declined rather than risen over the years. As a result, they’d been barely able to make their mortgage payments. There’d been no renovations or additions or any other improvements to their properties. That would have been all right. Had they merely preserved the original condition of their houses, instead of letting them deteriorate, their properties wouldn’t have detracted from the property value of Thomas’ house. As it was, the appraiser had estimated that his property might fetch as much as another $50,000 if his neighbors’ properties had been kept up, the way they should have been.

Thomas glanced at Frank’s place. He shuddered. The house was in desperate need of paint. The clapboard siding was peeling. Great strips of paint fluttered in the morning breeze, and Thomas could see more gray wood in many places than he could see white paint. The yard was virtually barren of shrubbery, flowers, or any other attempt to beautify the landscape. The roof, although intact and sound, was discolored from long-term weather effects, fallen leaves, and windblown dirt, dust, and grime.
Richard’s place was just as bad, and maybe worse. The brick of which the house had been built—*ages* ago—was not only badly discolored in places, but it was also starting to crumble. The window frames were somewhat askew, due to long exposure to the temperature changes between winter and summer, Thomas suspected. Even one of the walls of the house was slightly bowed, because the foundation had shifted an inch or two over the past several decades. Like Frank’s roof, Richard’s, although sound, was also badly soiled from the elements. The paint on the shutters with which Richard’s windows were equipped was badly faded and peeling. The porch sagged slightly. Although the yard was landscaped to some degree, little care had gone into weeding and mulching the few flowerbeds, and all the shrubs needed to be trimmed. What was worse, dandelions grew in Richard’s yard! Thomas, who’d lavished hours and hours of time and thousands of dollars on his own perfect lawn, was terrified that, sooner or later, a windblown dandelion seed would drift onto his property and take root. Thereafter, Thomas would have to spend even more time and money in fighting the stubborn weed.

Thomas had, of course, complained about Frank’s and Richard’s properties. He’d expressed his displeasure to his wife, first of all, but Mildred, gentle soul that she was, had exhibited her usual cheerful compassion, suggesting that he was being too harsh on the kindhearted gentlemen who’d resided on either side of them for four decades. She was certain that Frank and Richard both would have better maintained their properties if they’d had the money to do so. It wasn’t their fault that they’d suffered financial setbacks and hardships. Instead of voicing his displeasure concerning the condition of their houses, Thomas should be grateful that he’d been fortunate enough to have been able to maintain and improve his own property. After his airing of complaints about this topic had resulted in several arguments with Mildred, Thomas stopped raising the issue to her. More than anything, he’d brought the matter up to her out of frustration, anyway; Mildred couldn’t do anything more about the problem than he could.

Next, Frank had lodged a formal complaint with the mayor. Now, he’d thought, he might actually get some action. After all, there were laws against not maintaining one’s personal property, weren’t there?
The answer to that question, Thomas had found, was “yes” and “no.” The mayor himself had assured Thomas that local ordinances prohibited residents from allowing their grass to grow longer than six inches. Homeowners couldn’t store inoperable vehicles on their property. Property owners couldn’t let junk or trash accumulate in their yards. Obviously, a house and any outbuildings had to be structurally sound. The problem was that neither Frank’s nor Richard’s properties had any of these problems.

“You mean my neighbors’ neglect of their homes can take $50,000 off my property value and there’s nothing I can do about it?” Thomas had demanded.

“Based on what you’ve told me, there’s only one thing that you could do,” the mayor had replied.

“What’s that?”

“Help them paint their houses.”

Thomas hadn’t bothered to respond to the mayor’s suggestion. He’d slammed his telephone receiver down, frustrated and angry that he’d received no assistance from the local authorities to whom he’d paid taxes all his adult life.

That had been a year ago. Since then, nothing had changed, except for the worse. More of the paint on Frank’s clapboard house had peeled away, and more of the bricks of Richard’s house had crumbled. A few of the shrubs in Richard’s yard—and he had few enough, as it was—hadn’t come through the winter, but Richard, complaining of a bad back and heart problems, hadn’t bothered to dig them up and get rid of them. He’d left them in the ground, as another eyesore to decrease Thomas’ property value.

Once, during the many months that Thomas had complained to Mildred about his neighbors’ properties, before their discussion of Thomas’ favorite topic had degenerated into another argument, Mildred had suggested that Thomas discuss the matter with Frank and Richard.

“What good would that do?” Thomas had demanded.

“They may listen, but they won’t hear a thing I have to say.”

“You don’t know that,” Mildred had charged.

“All right,” Thomas had retorted, “I’ll talk to them, but, mark my words, it will do no good.”

That weekend, Thomas had talked to both Frank and Richard. Paying a visit to their respective homes, which had been no mean feat in itself, Thomas had told them, bluntly, that the conditions of their properties were adversely affecting
his property value by $50,000. “What are you going to do about it?” he’d demanded.

Frank had been apologetic. “I’m sorry, Thomas,” he’d answered, “but there’s nothing that I can do about it.” He and Edna had bought the house years ago, he’d said. They’d expected to improve the property, but they’d had a long series of financial reversals since then. He’d then bored Thomas with a long litany of the financial setbacks he’d encountered during the last decade. When the company for which he’d worked for fifteen years began downsizing, he’d been forced to accept an early retirement, which had reduced the amount of his pension by a substantial amount. His wife, Edna, had developed a rare medical condition that required a monthly prescription of $300 pills. His heart medicine was another major expense. He’d lost a large portion of his retirement fund to stock market dives. Thomas had left as soon as he could. He hadn’t stopped by to hear a litany of excuses. He’d wanted action. Instead, all he’d received was one sad story after another. Thomas had no patience for anyone who couldn’t manage his financial affairs.

Richard hadn’t been at all apologetic when Thomas had visited him, announcing in a loud, challenging tone that Richard’s failure to maintain his property properly had caused an appraiser to value Thomas’ property at $50,000 less than he would have if Frank and Richard had kept up their properties. Richard had told him to get the hell off his property and never to return. It had been after this run-in that Thomas had taken the matter to the mayor. Unfortunately, he’d obtained no more satisfaction from the mayor than he had from Frank or Richard.

It was unfair that he had to suffer because of their neglect of their properties!

Thomas had worked hard, all his life, to pay for his home and the additions, improvements, and renovations that he’d made to the residence and for the flowers, shrubs, trees, koi pond, fountain, and waterfall he’d added to the yard. The lawn itself—threatened now by dandelions from the unsightly mess that was Richard’s yard—had cost Thomas a small fortune. It was true, perhaps, that Thomas had also been fortunate in many respects. He hadn’t been forced to accept an early retirement. As a civil servant, he’d never been laid off, and he’d received regular pay increases, even during lean years. The government had been very generous to him, both in the
salary and the fringe benefits he received. He and Mildred had avoided serious medical problems. Neither of them required expensive medication. They had a sizeable nest egg, and his retirement account, by and large, had weathered the stock market’s fluctuations rather well. In addition, he’d received several hundred thousand dollars in an inheritance. Still, he had worked hard to pay off his house, to maintain it properly, and to improve it. He had every right to expect his neighbors to have done—and to do—the same.

It was true that these improvements to his house and yard, as well as time, had increased his property value from $45,000 to $250,000 in the forty-odd years he’d owned the place. However, more to the point, it was also true that his property would have been appraised as being worth $300,000 had it not been for the eyesores in which Frank and Richard resided.

It was unfair, Thomas told himself for the thousandth time, that he should have to pay for their failures to maintain their properties! The injustice of the situation negated the pleasanties of the morning’s breeze, the cloudless blue sky, the music of the birds twittering in the foliage of the green trees, and the glitter of the dew on his sweet-scented roses. Frank’s and Richard’s dilapidated properties took all the joy out of living.

If he’d lived in a just world, his neighbors’ properties would be razed as uninhabitable eyesores!

If he’d lived in a universe ruled by a just God, lightning would have long ago burned Frank’s clapboard monstrosity and Richard’s brick perversion to the ground. Thomas sighed. The world wasn’t just, anymore than God was. No one cared that Frank and Richard were costing him $50,000.

He glanced again at the houses on either side of his own, trembling at the sight of them. He’d give anything if the hideous edifices would go up in flames!

“Ten thousand dollars. That’s my price.”

Thomas glared at the short, thin, wizened man with the toothpick in his teeth. He didn’t like the thin frame or the dry and withered, reptilian skin of the man who sat across the table from him in the diner’s booth. He didn’t like the oily, slicked-back hair. He didn’t like the loud, colorful Hawaiian shirt. He didn’t like the way that the other man wore dark...
sunglasses indoors. Most of all, Thomas didn’t like the price the man had just quoted to him. “Ten thousand dollars!” Thomas reiterated, outraged.

The shirt that the other man wore was a bright banana-yellow color, with pineapples, melon slices, and other fruits printed on it in garish colors. It made Thomas sick to look at it. It made him feel queasy. He felt as if he were having breakfast with a fruit salad—and one that was trying to cheat him, at that!

The man in the Hawaiian stared across the table as he slowly chewed a mouthful of scrambled eggs. When he’d swallowed, he said, “Each.”

“Each?” Thomas leaned forward, his face red. “Ten thousand dollars each? That’s absurd! That’s robbery!”

The other man sprinkled more pepper onto his eggs. He sipped his coffee. “That’s my price,” he repeated. He bit into a slice of buttered toast onto which he’d heaped orange marmalade. He chewed. He swallowed. “It’s going to go up to fifteen thousand in about half a minute,” he declared.

Thomas gritted his teeth. He locked eyes with the diner who sat across from him. The thin man with the dry, withered skin continued to eat, as cool, calm, and collected as if he were an iguana sunning itself upon a rock on a hillside overlooking the serene, blue Pacific. “All right!” Thomas cried after a moment. “But there had better be nothing left of either one but smoke and ashes.”

The arsonist caught the eye of a passing waitress. “Could I have another order of toast, please, and some more eggs?”

She smiled. “Sure thing, sugar.”

Two days after Thomas’ meeting with the wizened man in the Hawaiian shirt, fires had raged, reducing both Frank’s clapboard residence and Richard’s brick domicile to ashes, blackened lumber, and scorched brick within less than an hour, despite the fire department’s valiant efforts to save both structures. Fortunately, both houses had been fairly far from Thomas’ own, and Thomas’ home had come through unscathed. The fire marshal had characterized the fires as “suspicious,” but the arsonist that Thomas had hired was a mob-connected pro. It wasn’t likely that he’d ever be caught. Even if he was, Thomas had made sure that his involvement in
the crimes was untraceable. Thank God for Swiss bank accounts, he thought.

In answer to Thomas’ inquiry, the mayor had informed him that the smoking ruins of what had been Frank’s and Richard’s houses definitely were included among the property conditions that the law required to be corrected as soon as possible. Frank had already made arrangements to have the remains of his ruined house hauled off. Richard could make no such arrangements himself, unfortunately, having died in the fire that had destroyed his home. (He was certain to have died an agonizing death, news reports had observed.) Fortunately, Richard’s widow, Grace, had assured the town council that she would take care of the matter as soon as possible, although she might need a few months to comply. That was fine, the mayor had told her.

Thomas Fenton rocked back and forth in the thickly cushioned glider on his spacious, screened-in porch. The early morning air was crisp and cool. The sky was a bright, clear blue. Birds sang in the leafy oaks and maples that shaded his expansive, well-manicured lawn. Like tiny diamonds, dew adorned his roses. He could smell the flowers’ fragrance.

He also smelled the burnt-wood odor of the blackened timbers of his neighbors’ fallen houses. Already, a bulldozer was busy in Frank’s house, and the splintered, broken, and burned wood that had been his ceilings, walls, and floors was being loaded into a dump truck. In a few days, the ruins of the clapboard house would all be gone. It might take a while longer to be completely rid of what was left of Richard’s widow’s property. That was all right, though.

Thomas had waited forty-odd years to be rid of the eyesores that had been his neighbors’ houses, and his own property, reappraised since the fires had destroyed Frank’s and Richard’s residences, had been revalued at $300,000. He could afford to wait a few weeks, or even months, to be rid of the remnants of Grace’s house.

He breathed deeply, inhaling the burnt-wood smell. It was like perfume to him.

Life was sweet, Thomas thought, smiling. Life was rich!
Dressed to kill in Small Town, Utah

Salute to Kim Addonizio

I’m putting on that little black dress.  
Walk down Main Street every hairline wrinkle  
showing in my cleavage endless like time.  
That little dress sleeveless backless  
tight like armor. Oh, how the ruffles flirt  
and veil my weathered knees! And yes  
every strand of hair shaved to a stump  
a showstopper for sure just look at  
the green wave from north Main to south  
no one no crossing can stop me. Blank greeting cards  
sigh and wave from the Hallmark shop window the ones  
ever sent to me and I don’t care.

By the sports goods store prime bicycles  
sparkle in a chorus line front wheels turn  
to follow my little black march and I’ll keep  
walking even if  
this is my last stretch  
under stealthy looks shot  
from idle eyes hooded in family vans  
eyes my spike heels might just gouge out  
eyes starved for steamy sidewalk dreams  
modest shorts aching to drop behind the butcher shop  
where I order tongue and tenderloin.

And how that blue-eyed butcher longs to wrap me  
in crackling sheets of paper  
hairs standing to attention on his beefy forearm.

I might just die and be buried in this little black dress.

And the band will play on  
and we will all paddle to this other world  
across a sizzlin Styx of haute coffee. Black.  
No cream. No suga’.
Hometown: Four Memories

The Snow

It rarely snows in El Paso, but that winter morning brought the invasion of a cosmic white force that lured me to my front window. There, I stared at the billions of snowflakes floating to earth like mysterious white-gowned aliens falling from outer space.

I was in a white trance. The yellow grass, the sidewalk, the asphalt street, my consciousness—all vanished beneath the icy winter surface.

My winter trance, like a time machine, spun me back to about a year earlier, to a certain place, a certain moment in the history of my life. I recalled exactly what sat on the front row of my brain that particular instance, the top student of my thought.

I was thinking: Life is good riding in a high-off-the-snowy-ground red Chevy truck down an upstate New York farm road on a late December afternoon, the passenger of the tall, blue-eyed woman I love, with dark hair streaming from her forehead to her tail bone, and how fine it felt running my hands through it that very morning.

I remember: We stopped at a convenience store for a six pack of beer. She insisted on buying, climbed down from the truck, and as she plodded through the snow in her blue galoshes, she grasped her hair from behind her neck and pulled it like a long sheet of black fabric over the front of one shoulder. I stared at her suddenly exposed back side, covered by a pink sweater. I thought of the long white spine beneath, admired the sway of her hips, thought of the texture of the flesh and muscles in her thighs and the skin which enclosed them. My legs felt weak. She disappeared into the store.

I waited: I reminisced about the first time I’d seen her at an August afternoon party in an El Paso friend’s backyard. She stood alone when I first spotted her, holding a glass of white wine and looking out at the gathering of people. She stood in knee-high boots, faded jeans, a Buffalo Bills T-shirt, her hair arranged in a circle of braids atop her head. Then, she stood looking straight at me, and that moment, as if the ground had been turned sideways, I fell forward in a walk toward her blue eyes, fell into her midst, into a conversation, into a kiss under that willow, into love beneath the August moonlight.
I watched: She carried the green Molson beer carton in one hand, gripped her hair, still hanging over her shoulder, in the other. Her smile moved toward me. She opened the door, put the beer on my lap. She leaned over, kissed my mouth. My eyes focused on her lips—warm, wet and supple—like separate creatures unsupported by her winter-cold cheeks and chin. They moved delicately, whispered, “Let’s go home.” I touched her hair, still blanketing her shoulder, pressed it against her neck as she drove us onward.

My trance returned me to the desert draped in rare whiteness. I tried to imagine riding with her in that red truck through this snow, across this far West Texas winter landscape. But it was a blurry hope spurred by a memory of a white ground, years ago, hundreds of miles away.

I snapped from my longing. I turned from the window. I left her out there in the snow.

The Dump
When I was a kid, a real treat—actually, a thrill—was going to the city dump. My father took me there fairly often in the 1960s. Located on the edge of El Paso, we didn’t go the dump to get rid of something or to scavenge for and salvage some mistakenly discarded item of value.

My dad went to the dump for dirt, and there was plenty of good dirt there, a rich soil he sought to throw atop our yard for planting bushes and flowers that wouldn’t grow in the dense red clay beneath and around our small home. Perhaps he might have been breaking some law by taking dirt from the dump, but being that he scraped by paycheck to paycheck, buying planting soil at a nursery would have been too much of a luxury.

Dad would put several empty buckets in the trunk of his old Buick, and we’d head out early on a Saturday or Sunday morning for that promised land—for him to shovel and for me to roam, inspecting what others had left behind: car parts, broken furniture, electrical equipment, discarded building materials, and other fascinating junk. Once, I came upon a dead deer, its antlers lopped off, the buck’s brain exposed. Today, my seven year-old mind’s vision of that animal’s gray matter still pokes at my psyche.

As soon as my dad had filled the buckets, he’d call for me to return from my traipsing through the wonderful outdoor museum of debris. As we drove home, the weight of all the
Steven Kunert

dirt he’d loaded into the trunk made our car a pretty cool early day low rider.

One time as we were leaving, he said something I never forgot: “Don’t be poor. You don’t have to be rich, but never be poor.”

I didn’t fully comprehend or appreciate those words at my young age, but I suspect they stuck in my mind because while I had just rambled in what was a bunch of seemingly useless garbage, some of it was stuff more unfortunate people could use—truly some men’s treasures—like the increasing number of folks I saw as I grew older who built and lived in shantytown hovels on the outskirts of El Paso and especially across the Rio Grande in Juarez, Mexico.

I also would come to know that as a young man and a World War II refugee in Europe, my dad had himself been poverty stricken, so poor that he painted his toes black so the holes in his dark beggar’s shoes wouldn’t be so obvious. I realized, too, that once he was in America he didn’t work a second job at night for years because he wanted to.

So, as we departed the dump that day, when my father told me, “Don’t be poor,” I suppose he was telling me that he wanted the dump to always be only for his boy’s recreation. He didn’t want his son to someday be embarrassed for wearing shabby shoes. He didn’t ever want me to feel like dirt.

The Big Thing

My friend Mike, in his mid-forties, without his wife who’d left him for another man years before, had long taken up evenings with his new love, Smirnoff Vodka, at Kiki’s in Central El Paso. That’s where I met him and often sat beside him when I was single and in my twenties, and my stories about women I dated seemed to be fresh air in his dense, half-drunken loneliness. You could tell Mike had been a handsome man, his blond hair still thick, his blue eyes never totally bloody or dim, despite the booze. The drinking showed more in his shaky hands, the swollen fingers, and in his ears, which had also swelled and turned purple like those of an old boxing champ.

When he was 49, one of the waitresses moved in on Mike, took advantage of his kind, gentle nature and his loneliness. He told me he had fallen in love, and he drank less and less often.
The late author Barry Hannah wrote, “Truth is, the drunk has all the feeling for the miracle and not quite the substance of it. He is apt for the miracle. What you like about the one nice snap in the blood is the hope for the big thing.”

Mike enjoyed this “big thing” for about three months, but the miracle eventually left him for another guy and with much of Mike’s life savings. Returned to the bar, he got drunker, fatter, more swollen and sadder, and he didn’t care to hear my dating stories anymore. So we talked politics, and he occasionally reminisced about his younger days, when he worked as a crop duster. Memories of flying were now the only things that made him smile, and as he spoke his blue eyes became an open sky before me—I could see him in his plane, dipping down, gliding low over the ground, and then rising, high once more.

A year later, Mike’s liver gave out and he died one morning in the county hospital. I went to our old hangout that evening to honor him in thought. After I arrived, the Kiki’s night manager hung on the wall behind the bar an old photograph that Mike had signed and given to her before he went into the hospital, a picture of him in his plane a few yards above some crops he was dusting. His inscription read: “Thanks for the good times down there. Look forward to someday to seeing you up here.”

I drank a few beers, tilted each one toward the photograph, then toward the empty stool beside me. Once the nice snap in my blood convinced me in its miraculous way that Mike had finally found some better “big thing,” I walked home.

The Last Drive

When the funeral home called and said my mother’s ashes were ready to be picked up, my father asked me to get them. On the way, I thought about how I used to drive my mother places—she didn’t drive—to the grocery store, the shopping malls, the veterinarian with her dogs. And now it would be the last drive.

The box containing the urn was handed to me with a document that would be required if the ashes were to be taken across the state line. There’s never escape from bureaucracy.

I placed the box on the front seat and drove to my parents’ home, where my father joined me with his pick and shovel. It had been decided to bury her ashes on the east slope of the Franklin Mountains, a range rising above her city of El Paso,
mountains she loved so much. In the over thirty years my mother lived in El Paso, those mountains were always her friend, right outside her back door, what she loved most about El Paso, what kept her magnetized to the city since she arrived from Germany in 1953. With the Franklins always in her sight, she made a new life in this country; she grieved the death of a daughter; she welcomed the birth of a son; she made countless friends and witnessed the weddings of her two boys, all those seasons and thunderstorms and sunsets.

My father and I drove up the road that leads to the shut-down tramway and parked in its empty lot. From there, we climbed several hundred feet; I could hear my father crying behind me as I led the way. We found what we thought was an appropriate spot overlooking her neighborhood and the rest of El Paso to the east.

We picked and dug into the rocks and caliche until the hole was large enough for the urn to fit. We filled it in and put a couple of large rocks on top. My mother was now a part of the earth and space and time. And then, as I turned away and looked over the mountains, the desert, the city, the cloudy sky, it happened: It fell out of me and rolled like a large boulder down the mountainside…I felt so light I thought I could fly…it was the overwhelming heaviness of my grief, which had rested on my shoulders and in my chest in the five days since her death, that had tumbled away.

I looked at my father. I knew instantly, from the peaceful look on his face, that he, like me, felt some distorted kind of joy, a feeling we didn’t really understand, except we both knew some good thing had happened. I knew that not all of his grief had tumbled away like mine, but he said, “I think she would have wanted it this way. She would have loved this spot. We did everything right.”

As we walked down the ridge to the car, I stopped and turned around to look at the Franklins. What I saw was my mother. Her mountains had become her, and she had become her mountains. She was there, alive as ever, everything right, at peace for all time, bonded to my father and me and the universe for eternity.
Tu Fu Dreams of Fishing
with Mrs. Tu

He pictures himself
beside her in Wu Gorge,
her pole lax beside his,
a basket of fish at her feet,
waiting to be scaled.

Carp always bite well
on rainy afternoons.

Their coats are damp
from the mist, but he has
a flask of plum wine
in his knapsack.

And despite the cold and wet,
Mrs. Tu, he notices,
has worn a bit of rouge.

They smile at each other.
He tries not to envy
her catch, luminescent
in the ebbing light.

It’s nice to have her
beside him in travel,
even if it’s a dream
and she talks too much.

_Gods_, he thinks, _if I write
that old scoundrel, Li Po,
he will jealously tease me._

He’ll have to replace
his wife in the poem, as if
it could delectate his heart.

It’s a rueful thing to be
a homesick old goat,
drunk and howling at
the makimono moon.
Bruce Wyse

After-dinner Mint

In the mirror: is it you?
And how would you know?

—in front of a Merlot door—in perfume, on staggering tile—
under utterly mistaken florescent lights,
taking too much time, helping yourself to seconds
in heady colour and noisy odour

—mind coiling fume
in the wet now
—there are hands in the sink
like yours
being watered
—fingers ludicrously lingering—
the revolving earth catches up,
archs the truant ghost into the mint-sucking machine

there are people waiting;
there are bills to be paid

money talks
—you listen—
but plastic is protean
after additional Armagnac
Creative Control

People saw her. She was attuned to the “Don’t look now but…” whispers, the odd stare when they thought she wasn’t looking. Jade knew that her presence at Damien Blue’s show was an all-important signifier, an indication that the young man was really on to something, maybe even going places. His music had been sufficient to cause a veritable rock goddess to descend into the depths of a basement rock club on a Thursday evening, after all. She was wearing what looked like a prom dress salvaged from a thrift store, dark and sequined, and made up with plum-colored lipstick and heavily-applied eyeliner to match. Sighing with feigned indifference to her surroundings, she examined her black-polished nails, owning the room with diva aplomb. She sat at one of the few tables in the place and certainly the best, set up high in back where one could see everything and be seen by everyone.

Jade was, however, having trouble catching sight of anyone that she would call a friend, and that was certainly not what she would call Sid Wheeler, who saw her just after she noticed him, made his way across the room, and sat himself at her table.

“Of course you can have a seat,” Jade bit off sarcastically once Sid was comfortably settled in. Her distinctive, smoky voice was already weary with annoyance, her arms were crossed, and she was raising one eyebrow. Sid grinned and ignored her petulance.

“Hello Jade! What brings you here tonight?” His mirrored sunglasses were perched on top of his head, nestled into his spiked black hair. He was in his late thirties but didn’t look much different than he had when he was twenty-five: a few more creases around the eyes maybe, but he had the same grin, the same cocky attitude, and just about the same wardrobe. But Jade knew that behind the wrinkle-free mechanic’s shirt and pristine black-and-white checked slip-on Vans was a businessman as sharp, and if need be as ruthless, as you would find decked in Armani on Wall Street. Once upon a time he used to run his own record label, but he effectively closed down its operations when he got a shot at the majors; it became an imprint in name only, and he became a most unabashed corporate shill.
“I’m here for the kid,” she said flatly, toying with the bright red maraschino cherry that she’d plucked out of her rum and coke. “They say he’s the next big thing.”

“Oh yeah?” Sid replied with smug faux surprise, his eyes narrowing into slits as he continued to grin at Jade. He turned from her and scanned the modest expanse of the club that lay before them both. It was dimly lit, with bare pipes decorating the ceiling, a stage at the far end of the room, a dusty old bar hugging the right wall, and tables selling band merchandise lined up to the left.

The gathering crowd was casual and noisy. Most everyone there was between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight, eighteen being the minimum and anything exceeding thirty being a maximum of sorts. At the bar a girl was leaning against a boy with nearly the same hairstyle as her, long wispy bangs swept across both of their faces. The boy had his hands on the girl’s hips, and they were sharing some rather conspiratorial exchange, laughing at a private joke. Kids were milling around the merchandise tables and calling loudly to one another, and a young man with long black curly hair and Birkenstocks was handing out Xeroxed pamphlets with a photo of the planet Earth on the front. Heaving a contented sigh after taking it all in, Sid turned back to Jade. “I love being around young people, don’t you?” he asked her cheerfully. “They just make me want to – give blood and believe in things.”

Jade popped the maraschino cherry into her mouth. “I always thought of you as the type to take blood, Sid.”

He shrugged. “I’ve left my share on the floor.”

Jade rolled her eyes. Her own involvement with Sid had been brief. She had been a fixture in the area rock scene longer than anyone, and for a time had been its most talked about, if not its most accomplished, musician. Not that she had recorded a thing in years. After fronting the all-girl rock group The Amputees for maybe five years, releasing two albums and a flippant EP of cover songs like “Dream Weaver” and “Magic Man,” Jade had broken up the band. She was now dedicating all of her time exclusively to the exhausting enterprise of being herself. The plan had been to record on her own, but that hadn’t happened yet. Neither had the art gallery that she was going to open one day. Neither had her DIY clothing boutique. But there had certainly been a time when The Amputees were this town’s hot ticket, the ones that the
kids and the men with the money were turning out to see. It was then that Jade had first encountered this particularly fresh-faced and tenacious businessman prowling around packing contracts and trolling for signatures. It hadn’t gone far.

There were certain things that Jade could not abide. She didn’t mind music journalists: those who insisted that she was nothing but surface flash and hated her for it, and those who conceded that she was nothing but surface flash and loved her all the more. Publicity was publicity, right? She didn’t mind the poseur fans that showed up to see her band because it was the thing to do, but struggled to credibly mouth the words that most of the crowd could scream by heart. Hey, they paid their cover, right? But she hated it when roadies talked down to her, couldn’t continue singing if a thrown bottle threatened her or one of the other girls on stage, bristled if you called her by her Christian name, Janine. And she would not be told what to do. It was that last commandment that Sid Wheeler had broken, and The Amputees had signed with someone else.

“This take-no-shit-girl-punk thing of yours has been a great way to gain attention,” Sid had said. “Now we reel them in by having you adopt a more melodic, more accessible sound.”

“The bleach blonde thing is fun, baby, believe me, but I want to see you with a more classic look. An old school pin-up goddess. You’d look gorgeous, not to mention incredibly marketable.”

“You’re already bigger than the rest of the band. One more album and you become a solo act.” He held out his hands and gasped at an imagined marquee. “Jade. One night only, sold out. Down-and-dirty rocker turned rebel diva, desperado fashion plate.”

*Desperado fashion plate*. A cringe-inducing turn of phrase in casual conversation, to be sure, but it had made a great second album title, and it had served as a fantastically extended middle figure to Sid Wheeler.

Of course, Wheeler had taken wing the second The Amputees went off the market, the ink still wet as he headed for his next attempt at conquest. But he couldn’t quite let it end there. Interviewed by a youth-skewing magazine after he landed his label a string of hot bands out of New York City (the article had been titled “The New New York Sound”), Sid had worked in a parting shot about the ones that got away.
“The Amputees? You know, I thought at the time that I had missed out on the big one, maybe that I was going to lose my job. But I see now that The Amputees were largely a reiteration of an old sound, and largely a production of hype, which I don’t want our label to be about. We just want to bring really great music to people you know? That’s my passion: finding something new and real and getting it to as many people as possible.”

The article indicated that Sid’s “face crinkled with laughter” before he spoke again.

“I think I might have thought I was in love with Jade for a while. She’s a very abrasive personality, and not conventionally beautiful, but I think she does have a very sort of rude charisma that hypnotizes people for a time. And of course, the war paint works wonders.”

Here the article mentioned that Sid “took another bite of sushi and began talking about his favorite Clash record.”

Jade had written a manic thrash song called “War Paint,” but The Amputees never did record it. For all of Jade’s refusal to be defanged or Svengalied by Sid, she had come to a conclusion similar to his when it came to The Amputees. She was bigger than they were, and she deserved creative control. It was only a matter of time before she hit the scene again. There was still plenty of time for that. Sid had had a lot of nerve to sit down with her tonight and insinuate that she was the same age as him.

“Can I get you another drink?” Sid asked as he eyed Jade’s glass, now filled only with melting ice cubes.

Jade shook her head. “I was taught to always get my own drinks. There are a lot of creeps out there.”

Sid raised his eyebrows as if she had shocked him with her response and held up both of his hands as if she’d drawn a gun. She rolled her eyes again and looked toward the stage as the crowd erupted with cheers and applause for Damien Blue.

A very handsome boy, this one was, with an open, honest and unlined face and the most attractive bedhead Jade had ever seen — a head full of artfully arranged, sandy blonde cowlicks. He accompanied his quiet, vulnerable singing with quiet, vulnerable acoustic guitar and closed his eyes as he delivered his tender lyrics, face bathed in lights of his own namesake hue. Oh yes. Damien Blue had the makings of a very dear heartthrob for a very large portion of the population.
Let Sid get his hooks into this kid, and he would sell millions of records – and anything else someone wanted to sell: concert tickets, DVDs, soft drinks, T-shirts, nightshirts, dolls. Of course, Jade mused, Blue Boy’s soul would have to be forfeited first. In between songs the kid was all nervous charm, thanking the crowd profusely and running his hands through his hair, looking abashed by the loud shouts of “I LOVE YOU!” that seemed to spring up whenever he wasn’t playing and holding the rapt attention of the crowd. As he stood readjusting his tuning for a moment, Jade leaned across the table and whispered to Sid.

“Hey – Sid!”

He turned to her with his eyebrows raised and an expectant look on his face.

“I just wanted you to know,” Jade told him huskily, “you are not signing that kid.”

Sid grinned. “You don’t think so?”

Jade pursed her lips and shook her head. The pair sat in silence for a few moments, watching the young singer standing and strumming in his pool of blue light, eyes closed and body gently swaying, carried away on the enchantment of his own music.

Sid leaned in and whispered again to Jade. “I bet you two hundred dollars that I sign that kid tonight.” There was a glint of excitement in his eyes. Sid loved a challenge, or at least a challenge that he was fairly certain he would be able to meet.

Jade snorted her disdain. “I don’t need two hundred dollars from you.”

Sid smirked. “I don’t need two hundred dollars at all.”

Jade gave him a look of irritation. “Keep your money.”

“It’s a point of honor then.” Sid said resolutely. “You have my word that I will sign Damien Blue this evening.”

“Not on my watch.”

“Buy me a drink if I do?”

“Get the hell out if you don’t?”

“Deal.”

They watched the rest of the show in deceptively civil silence. As soon as the set finished, Sid quietly rose and disappeared out of Jade’s sight. She guessed he was probably going to try and get backstage, but she didn’t follow.
was another band coming on – they had scene seniority over Blue even if they couldn’t match the buzz around him – and she was sure that the lovely young man would be making his way out into the club fairly soon, and then the game would be on. Jade examined her nails and yawned, pretending to be watching the next act setting up even as she was really scanning the room for any signs of Sid or the kid.

She was surprised to feel a rather fierce protectiveness when she finally spotted Damien Blue, standing toe to toe with her own nemesis. Sid was chatting the kid up and handing him a business card, the lovely Mr. Blue was nodding either out of politeness or a genuine naïve respect for Sid – she couldn’t be sure. Concerned but unwilling to show it, Jade yawned again and waited for her turn.

Sid ambled back to her table, a whitened grin spread across his overly tanned, slightly leathery face.

“How’d you do?” Jade asked as Sid slid into his chair.

“I give it an hour.”

“You’ll be out on the sidewalk in less,” she countered, her eyes trained on the kid, now leaning nonchalantly against the bar. She slid her glass across the table – melted ice cubes would have spilled into Sid’s lap if he hadn’t caught it at the last moment – and strode over to the boy.

The kid had been holding court with a coterie of friends-and-admirers. A girl with long black hair stood next to him, nodding eagerly at whatever point he was making and smiling rather fawningly. When Jade had just a few paces left to go, Jim Bailey, who had been covering the local music scene longer than she had been a part of it, caught sight of her with a visible start of recognition. He whispered in the ear of the girl with the long black hair, and she stole a glance at Jade before stepping away from Damien Blue. He had instinctively turned and watched Jade’s approach, maybe just a little transfixed.

A slightly naughty smile seemed to flash across the kid’s sweet, smooth face for a moment when he greeted her. “Hello there.”

“Hi,” Jade replied. It turned out to be her final opportunity to speak at a reasonable volume – the next act had finally kicked into gear, with guitars and distorted vocals breaking into their conversation. They both turned and
watched the new band’s singer, a chubby, thirtyish blonde man shouting into the mic and wearing glasses with black plastic frames. He rhymed “corporate” with “desperate.” Jade shouted.

“I saw you talking to Sid Wheeler?”

The kid turned to her again, wearing a look of mild surprise. “Um, yeah, the record company guy.”

“That guy is trouble!” She was still shouting. The kid smiled and shrugged, then held out his hand. “I’m Damien.”

She nodded. “I know!”

But he was still standing with his hand extended, expecting something from her. Jade felt a pang when she realized just what it was: an introduction. She felt the blood rushing to her face, but after missing just one more beat, she took his hand.

“Jade.”

“Nice to meet you!” He was shouting too.

Jade studied his face. God, he was young. Very young. Too young.

“Look, about Sid Wheeler. He really tried to screw over my friend’s band. I think you should –”

The kid shook his head. “Don’t worry about it!” He shouted. “My agent has something lined up for me with the works. Three albums, full creative control and my choice of producers. Royalties, everything.” He gestured with his head to indicate Sid. “I was just being polite to that dude!”

“You rock Damien!” someone shouted from behind them. The young man smiled and sheepishly waved his thanks.

Surprised by the kid’s savvy, Jade managed a nod of approval at his business transaction and stole a quick look back at Sid, who was watching them both as much as he could while still pretending to check out the band. She turned back to the kid, smiled and took another step closer.

“Glad to hear it! Your music is great!” She pulled him nearer to her so she could kiss him on the cheek.

A bit startled, Damien Blue blushed. “Thank you!”

“Thank you!”

They stood regarding each other for a moment, an awkward silence settling over them. It was Damien Blue who broke the silence, offering his hand again.
“It was wonderful meeting you.” Neither of them knew how to take the conversation anywhere further than that, and more people were shouting at and crowding around Damien Blue.

Jade made her way back to the table, doing her best to look imperious as she sat down with Sid once again. She waited for him to question her, which he did almost immediately.

“What did you say to him?”

She took a half-moment to savor the power that she was wielding over Sid and let a femme fatale smile curl across her lips.

“I just let him know that you’re a greaseball, and that I’d love to - collaborate with him some time. Kid was pretty starstruck.”

Sid glanced anxiously back at Damien Blue.

“You might as well leave now,” Jade added. “I doubt he’ll come within ten feet of you again tonight.”

Sid narrowed his eyes at her, but she could tell that she had him.

“I already gave him my card,” Sid said lightly if not confidently. “He’ll be in touch if he needs me.” He looked at his watch. “I actually need to be at the Avalon by ten. There’s a great band playing there tonight.”

Jade nodded with all the smugness that she could project and sat with her head held high as she watched Sid make his way out of the club. She would count this one in her win column, even if things hadn’t gone exactly how she’d anticipated. Her eyes fell on the band again. They were churning their way through a fast song about a politician and his dog. Or maybe it was about how some politician was a dog. It was hard to make out the words.

Her eyes wandered from the earnest lead singer and she began to scan the crowd – the young man in Birkenstocks was standing calmly near the back of the room, nodding in affirmation with the singer’s every yelp, the conspiratorial couple were still close together with arms entwined. Damien Blue was still at the bar, surrounded by the same core group of people but regularly fielding approaches from passersby who wanted to shake his hand, give him advice, tell him again that he was wonderful. Jade was tired. Her eyes swept over the crowd one last time and failed to connect with anyone else’s. She stood and headed to the ladies’ room.
The mirror over the dingy white sink was cracked at eye-level, as if a baseball – or more likely a fist – had been lobbed into it with great force. The splintered bits offered a kaleidoscope of tiny Jades, splayed in front of her like a peacock’s tail unfurled. Jade bent lower to examine herself in the unbroken portion of the mirror’s surface. She moved to gently touch the fine lines that had begun to spider their way under her eyes. Her mascara was smudging.
Platonic Idealism

for Alison

We took ballet lessons in a flat above a strip club named “Monday’s” but once Miss Linda touched the copper needle to her ancient record of Tendu with Plié, we could hardly hear the bass of stereo-quality sex below. At certain frequencies, however, our reflections quivered in the barre-bound wall of mirrors, turned watery and earthquaken like people in time-travel films just before they teleport into the future or the past. All we knew of the postures and asymmetry blooming from the bodies below us we had gathered from a subversive babysitter and her VHS copy of Showgirls: how the dancer’s skin became a pallet arching back from the pole, splashed with an irregular rainbow of stage lights. We started to see that movement everywhere—a young birch in the throws of a storm, the peel shedding the banana, a repentant clutching the pastor as he baptizes her back, deep under the dirty water. When I learned, years later, about Plato and art and how he believed everything was just a copy of a copy of perfection, and how it all just slides its way down heaven’s pole to our stationary perception, I had trouble bearing the memory of their weight, those women flipped upside-down on stage, suspended by their ankles, as we, just feet of insulation above them, mirrored the early allegory of their movements: relevé, petit saut, perfect pointe.
Of Dreams and Dumpsters

I met an old man once who lived outside.  
He was rough and drunk and felt like talking  
With everyone who passed by, so I tried  
To give him a buck and keep on walking,  
But he stopped me and gave the dollar back.  
More booze, not money, would keep his buzz right.  
All sales done, his bottle dry in its sack,  
He seemed out of luck, at least for tonight.

But a little buzzed too, I understood  
And had a twelve pack waiting in my car,  
So I told him and said “maybe could  
Drink some by the dumpster behind the bar?”  
Its damp rotten stench echoing his toast:  
“Da worl’ gon’ shit on you too man, you’ll see.”  
Here I was slumming with a bum while most  
Folks slept. I egged him on out of cruelty—

Hoping to laugh later with all my friends  
At this boozed-out old man’s philosophy.  
He takes a drink, stares me down, then begins—  
The words come slow, then gain velocity.  
He speaks lamenting of a poor youth lost  
In the dusty squalor of old Jim Crow  
And his lust to get out at any cost,  
Then deciding to give the Army a go.

It was here that he would learn how to fight—  
Not in war, but in the gym, with his fists.  
His eyes are lost in a past full of light,  
Not this dark present where his life consists  
Of drink and memories of better days.  
Upon discharge, the ring became his life,  
With uncanny speed and macho displays  
Of dispatching opponents. Like a knife,

He cut through the South’s amateur elite,  
And won a spot on the national team  
To fight for his country and to compete  
With the best in the world—a boxer’s dream.  
He won a silver that should have been gold,
But the judges didn’t want a ‘negro’
Beating the Russian. The medal was sold
To someone for booze money years ago.

The last piece of his former life now gone—
Sometime, somewhere, he’d reached the bottom rung.
He lives out here, like the trash, heaped upon
Old boxes and crates, forgotten among
The living. I left him my beer to drink,
And went home sadder and wiser. A chance
Encounter with a bum caused me to think
Of why things die: time, fate, or circumstance.
Master Blasters:
A contemplative essay on Smoldering Rubble and the Nature of the Creative Process

Just when I was beginning to think that reality TV was unforgivingly soulless, I stumbled upon a programming bonbon known as “Master Blasters,” a show that briefly aired on the Sci-Fi network during that blissful television summer of 2005. The premise of the show was not complicated: have two teams of weekend engineers strap rocket engines to things like houses, cars, 900 lb lawn darts, or whatever, and try to launch them as far as possible through the rural Texas sky. These guys’—or maybe we should call them ‘contestants’—day jobs I imagined were as Harley mechanics, bartenders, truck drivers, pipe fitters, forklift operators, shop teachers, blue collar you-name-it, plus the occasional renegade BS degree holder. Now, I could relate to this kind of show because it set a simple task, like, “You and your buddies have a week to launch this Mini Cooper 1000 feet through those goal posts over there,” and I, as a viewer, didn’t have to worry about things such as alliances or dancing celebrities or team weight loss or really anything that didn’t lend itself to making a car flying fly. I felt better knowing that average people—not so different from myself—were thrown gauntlets like these—turn a car into a football—and through the magic of television had access to absurd things like military surplus rocket engines. There were no cash prizes, no vacation packages, no next rounds or anything like that because to watch a garden shed flying to an altitude of 1,300 feet then come crashing back to earth is pretty damn rewarding in-and-of itself (plus, most of the show’s budget must have been spent on explosives anyway, which was fine with me). I enjoyed seeing how serious the two teams got during the design phase of the project, with their dry erase boards covered with sketches of little cars flying through goalposts next to NASA-like trajectory calculations and weight objectives, twirling the ends of their mustaches, smoothing bandanas, cautiously uttering things like “Yep, I think it’s going to work,” and “Light ‘er up,” as they watched team members arc-weld “navigation” fins to the trunk-mounted engine housing.

It was rocket science and it wasn’t.
“Master Blasters” took me back to Fourth of July’s of my youth when Whistling Moon Traveler bottle rockets were bought by the hundreds and then taped, glued, wedged into anything that looked flight worthy. Many a GI-Joe met his end helplessly strapped to our artillery, pitching and yawing as rocket and payload skipped forward across the driveway, or on occasion when we became too ambitious, not even leaving the bottle, screeching upward an inch before settling back to report Joe’s doom a second later, plastic chunks hitting us and the house. The flight was important, but not as important as what damage was inflicted on the cargo, and what, if anything, was worth strapping to another Moon Traveler for further deconstruction. I’ve always found the word “report” a particularly interesting way to describe the explosion. Maybe this is worth returning to.

The first “Master Blasters” episode that I sat riveted through involved recreating the flight of Dorothy’s house from the film *The Wizard of Oz*. The teams were each given small structures about the size of a portable garden shed and the requisite high-power rocket engines. They scored points for the number of times they could rotate the house in the air, total altitude, deploying a parachute, and, bonus points for ejecting a Wicked Witch of the West mannequin. It proved to be a very ambiguous system of determining a “winner,” and I would argue that the competitive nature of the show was an ever-so-thinly veiled guise to allow for such nonsense to get underway in the first place. There was no winner. Of course, everyone could already see this from the start, and it really didn’t take away from the charm of the show in the slightest.

This show was undoubtedly pure pornography for pre-teen boys. The running joke as I saw it was that one objective of every launch was to return the vehicle back to the ground “safely” via parachute, which, I note, was not accomplished once in the four launches I viewed. Nor did it seem of great importance as the teams openly took satisfaction in their creations careening groundward toward a viscous, devastating impact and equally (if not more so) enjoying the post-flight hunting through the wreckage, giddily muttering things about “a lot of energy” being needed to turn a perfectly good UK sports car into the smoldering hunk of twisted metal now sitting before them. They were having *fun* doing this.

Let’s face it: some individuals have a need to blow things up. Their prehistoric ancestors were the monkeys who
invented new ways to fling feces harder, farther, and with more accuracy than the next guy. I’m suspicious that the Blasters’ mechanical expertise was only developed to allow them access to rocket fuel. If, for instance, the show gave the teams crates of dynamite and told them to go find things to blow up, I believe the individuals on the show would have been just as happy. Who wouldn’t be excited? Perhaps that would be too gratuitous, however, because we all know that watching something being blown up is not anywhere near as fun as actually blowing it up yourself; for some reason, and the viewership might become bitter at not having crates of dynamite of their own to experiment with. Thus the competition aspect of the show to keep people interested. If there was only one team trying to launch a house into the sky I would be hard pressed to justify my time spent watching such inanity. But with two teams, the days of the Cold War were summoned up, when there was a real sense of urgency, a sense of mission to beat the other guy’s Mini Cooper through the goalposts or to land a house on the Wicked Witch of the West just to be the first to do so, nanner-nanner-boo-boo. The Cold War was when a successful rocket launch was something to celebrate, a triumph of technology, not, mind you, what the beer drinkers of Middle America did to pass the time waiting for football season to start.

This detail really made my skin goose-bumpy: to launch the Mini Coopers the teams were provided two rocket engines each, identical to those used to fire cruise missiles. Cruise f-ing missiles. Green-dot-in-black-night Gulf War type shit. Who exactly do you talk to to get these things? Did they fall off a truck? Was this show even legal? The Blasters got everything except the bomb, which to some team members I’m sure was a bit of a letdown. But they welded those things to their cars and away they went. The launch ramp was an equally impressive feat of pointless architecture. It rose about sixty feet in the air, dwarfing everything else on the flat Texas farmland, making it that much more obscene. The Blaster teams surveyed it, agreeing, “Gawd it’s big! Heh heh!” And either that or howling were the only two possible responses, admittedly.

What I found most interesting about the show was the urge to create and destroy simultaneously. The desire to rise above the pull of gravity, to defy the gods, to soar on high, to
accomplish a goal, and, the need to lay waste to what made that possible. To smash something up in the process. To squander, to expend. To render useless. To start fires in the name of experimentation. Why do we laugh when Letterman throws watermelons off rooftops? Because he takes order and creates chaos, with an oh-so-essential dash of pre-impact anticipation. In bottle rocket terms, it’s the delightfully wrought moment between screech and bang. The report. Chaos from order is an illogical progression and we cannot look away, because for a bent instant we are in the presence of beauty.

The Blasters’ create/destroy arc identically matched the flight of whatever object it was being launched that week: the cameras captured the fire burning as the lawn dart took off, breaking free of groundly constraints with aerospace aspirations silhouetted for a moment against a blue sky full of possibilities, peaking in flight, then burning out, nose tipping down as its speed slowed and gravity reclaimed its grip on the projectile, tipping back towards Mother Earth, parachute deployed incorrectly flapping uselessly behind, the only mystery remaining being that of how big a crater was going to be made and how many fire extinguishers were going to be needed to subdue the flaming wreckage that attempt. What a beautiful thing it was. This, to me, was high art. At least when the images spoke for themselves.

Many artists have said that the creative process is one of illumination, shedding light onto what is hidden. Perhaps this essay isn’t solely about creativity; perhaps it’s about fire, too. For early man who ventured deep into caves to draw pictures of successful hunts on the walls, not only did fire provide charred sticks to mark with, but also the light to guide the way. This flickering light must have been what made his creations dance with life, a vision far different from the well-lit photographs we find in anthropology textbooks.

But the glow that creates and illuminates will also destroy. Heaven help the cave-venturing Paleolithic shaman, for example, who didn’t pack enough nice dry wood: the orange glow of light with its blue base and white hot center, almost invisible, that turned his torch to carbon inch by inch as it crept down towards his hand, needing to be transferred to another stick maybe every half-hour or so. How important it was, that glow, to show the way in and to guide the way out. How magic it must have seemed. Fire is, by modern
definition, “a rapid, exothermic oxidation of a combustible substance,” but how, we must ask, does that explanation do the mystery of fire justice? Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher who pointed out that you can’t step in the same river twice, believed fire to be the underlying substance of the universe. In his own words, “[t]he world was created by neither gods nor men, but was, is, and will be eternally living fire, regularly becoming ignited and regularly becoming extinguished.”

Again, the Blasters. They didn’t paint on cave walls, but on our television screens. Their chosen medium of smoke and flames was perhaps the most elemental of all, showing what could never have been seen without them: a wonderful articulation of creation through destruction. Their goal was to show us that beautiful insanity exists in our world: that pointlessness on a grand scale verges on the profound. The Blasters knew that there couldn’t be illumination without something turning black, released from its current state, spent of its potential, given back to chaos. Be it Mini Cooper or charred twig, perhaps art must set something free. To realize one possibility is to destroy another, and vice versa. Aether is born from ashes. Artist Damien Hirst was harshly criticized in 2001 for describing the attacks on the World Trade Center as being “visually stunning,” among other things, and that the hijackers needed to be congratulated “for achieving something that nobody would have ever thought possible.” This is not a comfortable equation to draw up. What I like to think he was saying is that art lives in war, and war lives in art, and we are now forced to rethink the tools we use for each. The planes weren’t used as weapons; the images of the planes were used as weapons. The terrorists who took those pictures were given awards, and the artists who flew those planes are dead.

The Sci-Fi Network didn’t feel as strongly about Master Blasters as I did. As far as television shows go, it was extremely short-lived. It’s criminal, in my opinion, that only four episodes aired. Rumor has it that a fifth episode exists locked in a vault somewhere in the network’s basement, an episode in which the two blasters teams engage an epic battle between a pair of missile launching golf carts. We can only guess what that must have been like.
I imagine the night the network execs pulled the plug on the Blasters and I see many bandana-wearing, Harley-riding Blasters sitting around in their kitchens with a phone receiver pressed to one ear, cigarette hanging between their fingers, being told the bad news, all the while in the back of their minds thinking how, when they go to clean out their lockers, they plan to snag one of those relatively new socket sets or the other team’s acetylene torch, which was much nicer than the one they had at home. I bet they all wanted to cry and hug and ask each other if life was going to be possible without flying houses and cruise missile engines and golf carts that traveled four hundred miles per hour, but, more realistically, all they probably did was take a long drag on their cigarettes, flick the glowing butts across the room into the sink, and rasp to the Blaster on the other end of the line, “Well, it was good while it lasted.”
Taco Truck

I raise my hand for veggie tacos
He knows me, I been asking
He says, “I make for you.”
No one else will eat them.

On the bank steps people go around
If I want to sit
Where you going, mami?
You got to be somewhere?

Not today and not tomorrow
I wait with the still hot air
The Santa Ana winds
Will blow September back.

And there you are, in a blink, in a flashing,
In my eyes there, stinging with the bistec smoke.

Will your fingers be in the spiral wind
To draw the hair from my face?
Will your breath be in the halo moon
Tapping at my window?

We huddle by the scorching carne
Crowding black umbrellas
A cruel and cloudless sky
Rainless, searing haze.

Just an old old megaphone
Mounted on the hood.
No La Cucaracha
No Yankee Doodle Dandy.

A feedback beep, another one
Don’t got no city license
He will come and park
Until it is time to go.

And there you are, on the edge of a glance,
Behind my ear, along my cheek.
Thea Cervone

I feel you in the boulevard heat
In the rustle of the bearded palms
In the smell of the acid air
Beneath the burning mountain.

I raise my hand and move aside
To gaze and remember on the steps of the bank,
To crumple oily paper into my fists
As people go around.
Ephemeris

He watched Hale-Bopp with its two-fisted tail through his small, wide telescope in his long, tall yard, raised two kids and three dogs not all gone to good ends,

Sketched Hyakutake's sheer thin smear across his dark night almost all absent of cloud but present of wind,

Worked one job for three companies, some low, some high, none gone to good ends, mastering the last great telephony entrenchment before the cellphone explosion and the texting that followed,

Thought sometimes of that last date with Alisa and how the best things he had known could not be made into language but instead came across his sky in silent spectacle of form,

Like something that moved under the surface of things but was always there, or always returning, in every end he could ever see.
…nor did Pnin, as a teacher, ever presume to approach
the lofty halls of modern scientific linguistics, that ascetic
fraternity of phonemes, that temple wherein earnest
young people are taught not the language itself, but the
method of teaching others to teach that method.
—Nabokov

Orientation

The first thing Summer noticed about the incoming
group of westerners was that one woman, who was heavy and
plain, wore a sleeveless shirt. No one had told her. In an hour
the bus would come and take everyone to the Zayed Central
Library, where the Minister of Education, His Highness
Sheikh Mubarak, would give a speech. He would be angry if
he saw this woman. He might have her sent back home to
Australia or South Africa or America or wherever it was that
she came from. Stupid woman, Summer thought. Where does
she think she is? She clutched her keyboard and looked
around the office space, which was impeccably tidy,
wondering what could be reorganized.

Her university ID read Samar, but she knew this
tasted strange in foreign mouths, like zatar and kofta, so the
nameplate on her desk read Summer. It was a good job,
Assistant to the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at
Fujairah International University, so she didn’t want anything
to stand in her way. International? she wondered. The student
body is 95% Emirati girls. There were only a handful of
foreign students, and most of them were from Oman,
Palestine, Syria. No one who wasn’t covered by a headscarf.

The new teachers were native English-speakers,
which made sense since FIU courses were taught in English,
like almost every university in the region. In the old days, she
knew, most of the staff had been from Egypt and Jordan, and
some of them were still hanging around, but the new Provost
wanted to put a stop to this. He was from Nebraska, or maybe
Indiana. He had a sprawling smile and fastidious hair. FIU
was becoming a real university. The new professors had been
trained at prestigious western institutions, and they published
often, and they held regular office hours, and they wouldn’t
stop teaching a course two weeks before the semester ended.
The old guard was quietly afraid or, in some cases, not so
quiet at all.

“Dr. Saif?” Summer knocked on the Dean’s half-
open door, but he didn’t seem to notice. His elbows were on
the desk, hands clasped, face planted on his knuckles. “Excuse me, doctor?”

“Hm? Yes? Oh, Summer. What is it?” The Dean raised an unconvincing smile. Ever since the new Provost had been hired, to get rid of the dead weight, he’d been spending his afternoons staring into space, running his fingers over the spines of old books.

“Hello, sir. It is the new professors. One woman, she is wearing sleeveless shirt. Should we inform her of this? Encourage her, yanni…to wear sweater or light jacket?”

Dr. Saif nodded as though considering her question, eyes fastened to a blank spot on the dirty white wall. If you asked what was going through his mind, in moments like this, he wouldn’t have been able to tell you. The air in the room became, for Saif, a softly murmuring penumbra, like the maternal blue glow of a TV screen.

Summer began to worry. Her eyes fell on a large object sitting by the window, an epicene hunk of metal. *Typewriter* was the English word, though she didn’t know the Arabic. She’d never actually seen one before, except in ESL textbooks, disembodied objects floating near unlikely scraps of dialogue. As always, the thought of ESL made her recall the word *enervated*, another bit of English that never materialized in real life. “Sir?”

“Yes…I…what do you think?”

“I think maybe you should have a small word with this woman. The sheikh will upset if he sees her.”

“Um. Yes. But you know, this is a woman’s issue. Better speak to her yourself, Summer.”

“Yes, sir.” She backed away from the office. “Should I close the door, Dr. Saif?” He didn’t answer.

She stood in the hallway rubbing her hands. After three days at FIU, she’d had little contact with the westerners and absolutely no experience telling people how to dress appropriately. Will the woman be angry? Will she laugh at me?

Summer walked slowly down the hallway until she came to the woman’s office. She could hear her voice from 40 meters, and the great barking laugh could probably be heard in Yemen. Dr. Susan Foreman. Dr. Keith Damiani. There wasn’t enough office space for all the new people, so they were sharing.
The door was almost completely shut. Summer hesitated, listening.

“—get a load of the make-up, Travis?”
“Keith.”
“What? Did I just call you Travis? Christ, sorry. I know your name…anyway, the make-up?”
“I know, I know. Like someone who failed out of clown college for using too much.”
“Streetwalkers with bad acne wouldn’t use so much,” Susan said.

Keith laughed softly. “And the perfume.”
“Ode. It’s called ode.”

*Oud,* Summer thought. She tried to picture her own face in the bathroom mirror, comparing herself to the new women. Are they talking about me? Do I wear too much? It was a difficult calculation to make. Whenever she tried to imagine a mirror, all she could see was Dr. Susan’s face.

“—right about that, Susan, but it smells like the ugly stepchild of a cinnamon stick and a burning log.” Keith was shuffling papers. Summer could tell he wasn’t paying that much attention to the conversation.

“I don’t mind the smell, not really. I mean yes, it’s sort of ghastly and pungent, but there’s something nice about it too. It’s just that they use so much of it, you know?”
“Oh, I know. I hear the Emirati men are worse, much worse. Bathe in it.”

Summer had always thought she was a modern woman. She looked down at her blue jeans, her Italian sandals, her tunic from the Gap in Dubai. Pink lipstick, gold watch, gold bracelets, gold necklaces, gold rings and diamonds. Her head was wrapped in a bright floral scarf, but no so tightly that a few hairs didn’t escape. In her mind, she was more like the American women on TV than the girls she saw around campus, who were covered from head to foot in black silk, some of them veiled as well.

“The local men do wear dresses.” Susan looked at Keith with a smile, waiting for the laugh. What he did was grunt ambiguously, which seemed to serve as some type of comic verification. “They also hold hands.”


“Yep. Saw it at the mall the other night.”
“Well surely that doesn’t mean they’re gay. I mean, technically that’s illegal here, right? Must go on, but there’d be no public display…”
Susan shrugged. “It’s just something they do. Oh, and the men rub noses too.”
“You’ve gotta be kidding?”
“Nope.”
Keith laughed out loud, which was the exit line Susan had been looking for. She sighed theatrically, rooted around in her purse, and started working quietly.
Summer knocked on the door.
“Come in,” Susan said.
“Hello, sorry to, excuse.” Summer entered the office, which was still practically empty. No computers or printers, no bookcases or file cabinets. Just two desks and four chairs.
“Dr. Susan. Dr. Keith. Welcome.” She nodded slightly.
Keith leaned back in his chair, arms crossed behind his head. Dr. Keith? He smiled, laughing inside. It’s Dr. Damiani, sweetheart. Someone should set her straight.
“What can I do for you, Summer?”
“Oh, well…” Dr. Susan is always smiling, Summer thought, but it’s like a Halloween mask. “Just one item from Dr. Saif. We going to hear the sheikh very soon and it is formal occasion.” She took a break, unsure how to continue. It was a steep climb with no obvious footholds.
Susan looked at Keith, shrugging tactfully. He widened his eyes comically, which almost made Susan burst out laughing. There was nearly 30 seconds of total silence.
“We’re very excited about this opportunity, Summer. I hear the sheikh is a very eloquent speaker.”
“Yes, Miss. He is Minister of Education and Vice President of Executive Council as well. Very VIP man.”
“Very VIP,” Keith repeated.
“Yes, like this.”
“Yeah, yeah. Well great. I’m looking forward to it.”
Keith yawned.
“We’ll see you there, Summer, ‘kay?” Susan executed a convincing imitation of enthusiasm.
“Yes, doctor. Oh, and there is one more thing actually. It is formal occasion, as I said. It is better, I think, if you wear sweater or some other…with sleeves actually.” Summer couldn’t make eye contact after the first few words.
“Oh!” Susan held her right hand in front of her mouth, while the left covered her chest. “I’m dressed like a slut, aren’t I?”
“Miss?”
“I’m…not suitably dressed, am I? I should be wearing sleeves to campus?”
“Yes. Would be better.”
“Oh, God, thanks for telling me, Summer.”
“Welcome, Miss.”
Susan giggled. Why is she calling me Miss? I’m a Mrs. and a Dr., for Christ’s sake. And I’m 20 years older than her. “Did you know about this, Keith?”
He shook his head.
“Gosh, I’m so sorry.”
“No one told you about this, Dr. Susan? Not discussed in New Faculty Orientation?”
“Disorientation,” Keith said.
“Excuse me?” Summer asked.
“It doesn’t…orientation hasn’t been very useful.”
Keith aimed a pencil at a coffee cup and threw it, sinking the shot. “Down to the hospital for blood tests, so they can throw us out of the country if we have HIV. A rainforest of pamphlets and monographs, all impeccably designed and bound, with administrative flowcharts and…hierarchical diagrams…nothing of any real importance. Like, how do you teach girls when you can’t see their faces? How do I teach art history without getting into sex and the human form and politics and religion, all the forbidden subjects… Oh, we did choose our bank. There were four choices, but I think the Minister of Education owns all of them so it doesn’t really matter…”
Susan and Keith laughed.
Of course he does, Summer thought, confused. Why wouldn’t he? These people mock everything. United Arab Emirates is greatest country on earth. Most money, best people, most pure and religious, safe and comfortable lifestyle. Very famous country around the world. Everyone knows us and looks up for us. No poverty like Africa, no violence like West. Very famous country around the world.
Keith noticed the unpleasant look on Summer’s face. He’d spoken rashly. He twisted the coffee cup back and forth, reading the logo. Fujairah International University: Reach
Higher!! “What else haven’t they told us, Summer? Maybe you can enlighten us?”
“Sir?”
“Teach us! Orient us!”
“Okay, okay. May I?” She pointed to an empty chair.
“Of course, dear.”
“Haram. This word you must know. Means bad, unsuitable, religiously forbidden. To eat pork as a Muslim, for example. This is haram. Let’s see….Dr. Keith, many time you might want to have discussion with girl in office, but she will bring friend even if the discussion is private. Because she cannot be alone in room with man.”
“Hm.” He’d been half-joking when he asked the secretary for enlightenment. She’s got some useful insights, though, he thought, and I’d probably benefit from hearing them, but I’m just not in the mood. I need a cigarette. A nap. A something.
While Summer spoke, Susan went out of her way to act interested, adding verbal and nonverbal interjections as needed, but Keith just sat there looking increasingly bored. His mind drifted to other settings, other people, a country he’d left behind for reasons that were beginning to look vague.
“—you just let her fall. Do not touch a girl for any reasons at all.”
“Hold on. Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that.” Keith sat up straight and leaned toward Summer. “Even if girl, say, get dizzy and start to fall over, do not catch her. Do not do this.”
“Let me get this straight.” He was suddenly invigorated. “I’m supposed to let her fall down and crack her head open on the floor?”
“Yes, let it crack open like falcon egg.”
“And this is what her parents would want? They’d rather have her die or get injured than be touched by a man?”
“Yes, like this. If she is injured, then this is God’s will. Better she die than become impure.”
“God’s will? Huh.” He looked at Susan, who’d become very quiet. “Christ. Wow, this really is an orientation, Summer. Thank you.”
“Welcome.”
Keith didn’t think he could do it, though, let someone fall down and get hurt while he just stood there and did nothing.

Susan was excited to be in the presence of a real sheikh, even though he was disappointing to look at. She’d seen pictures of the other Emirati leaders, and they all had aristocratic features, charismatic smiles, impeccable grooming. Sheikh Mubarak was overweight and nervous with a slovenly gray beard. He blinked obsessively, like someone who’d been abused as a child. Susan tried to get Keith’s attention, but he seemed to be asleep so she looked around the room. The university had over 200 faculty members. Maybe 70 of them were women. They look so casual, she thought. Most of them are wearing pants. No one else is wearing a skirt and pantyhose. Everyone looks so young. Like Teenagers. Susan caught a glimpse of her hands in the sickly florescent light. Veiny, wrinkled. Old. It came as quite a shock. In her mind she had always been a young professor, but somehow she’d turned a corner without ever realizing it. Susan was hurt and relieved.

“— welcome a new era of professionalism at the university. We will move from a decree-based to a policy-based institutional culture, from bad habits to best practices, from entrenched ideas to forward-thinking paradigms. I—”

There would have been a murmur in the crowd if it wasn’t a Government Minister standing before them. The old guard could read the writing on the wall, though, so they silently gnashed their teeth. The so-called Egyptian Mafia would now have to be responsible for more than one course per semester, and in that course students would be expected to learn something. According to Sheikh Mubarak, a Portfolio Review Committee would examine copies of all final exams and final research papers, cross-referencing them with final course grades. The illiterate could no longer be awarded a B-.

Saif couldn’t get comfortable in his seat. His throat was dry and scratchy. I am a good leader and able scholar, he thought. I publish a book review, or an article, once every year or two in an online academic journal. Attend a conference once in a while. Keep the faculty meetings short. What else can I do?

Keith looked at the transliteration of the Arabic-language speech that was being splashed across the movie
screen. He thought of the opera at Lincoln Center, where the German or Italian had been decoded in red on a discreet screen by his right knee. The Met? Is that what it’s called? He’d been living abroad for so long that his memory of the US had grown dim. He looked at the Minister, at the screen, at the two Indian men squatting beside a laptop computer. They nudged the PowerPoint along and, like ball boys at a tennis match, were ready to pounce on whatever technical problems might arise. They were paid something like $200 a month. Keith wondered how much of the speech had been composed by these men and how much the Minister had actually written himself.

Sheikh Mubarak listed the new protocols, methods and initiatives that the new Provost, with his permission, had instituted. He was necessarily vague about the details, however, since he hadn’t been told what they were. Keith, listening with half an ear, approved wholeheartedly of the changes, yet he suspected they wouldn’t do much good. I mean, would you just look at these people, he thought. The Minister of Education entertained similar doubts.

―very pleased to see that FIU made the list of the world’s top 500 universities for the first time.‖

Susan looked at Keith with wide eyes, impressed.

―Yeah, but where does that list come from?‖ he whispered.

She shrugged.

―No one knows. There was no reference. I saw it on the school’s website. Thing is, American University of Cairo wasn’t on the list. Or AU Beirut. Not even Duke or the University of Birmingham. It’s not even remotely legit. Mubarak made the list himself. Or maybe it was the Provost.‖

Susan made an ambiguous face. She was scared to make noise and offend the sheikh.

―Did you hear?‖ he asked. ―After this, we get to shake his hand. Shake the sheikh.‖

―Oh you, stop it.‖

Keith sighed and sunk down in his seat. He listened to the speech, but there was nothing in it for him. He wanted to know what it was really going to be like, teaching these girls. He’d lived in Russia, Vietnam and South Korea, but that wasn’t the same. How could he get through to someone so different, who didn’t speak English very well, whose values were so discordant with his own. What was it like to be
plastered in black silk, to be trapped behind a veil? But the Minister didn’t say anything concrete, just pale abstraction and empty platitudes. The same jargon you heard in America. Maybe the rhetoric was something you could buy at the mall, like Coke and Levis and Nike. Keith had so many questions about his new job, but the Minister didn’t seem to have the answers.

The rental car smelled like cigarettes and stale milk, but that’s not what concerned Keith. It was the driving. *These people drive like maniacs* was the chorus to a pop song stuck in his head.

He slammed the brakes in the middle of a roundabout because an Emirati man talking on a cell phone almost crashed into him. “Did you see that guy?”

His wife, Deb, patted his leg. “Just pay attention to the road. Don’t worry about all these...crazies.”

“What are they thinking? I mean, are they thinking at all? It’s fuc—” He remembered the two children buckled into car seats. “—It’s unbelievable. They have no thought for the future, even two seconds into the future. They just drive as fast as possible, in as many lanes as they can, and then brake if they’re about to hit someone. It’s nuts.”

“I know, Keith. I know. Just concentrate on the road, okay? Nothing you can do to stop them.” Deb was almost more worried about Keith having a heart attack than about dying in a horrible crash. Almost. She’d read in *The Gulf Enquirer* that traffic accidents were the leading cause of death in the UAE.”

“Come on, how can they drive like this? You know, it’s no different than holding a gun to our children’s heads?”

“That’s a bit much, Keith.”

“Is it? If you drive the way they do, people will get killed. Fact. Same as if you pull a trigger. The only difference is that, with a gun, it’ll happen more often.”

“A *lot* more often.”

“Even so, it’s murder. We need to do something.”

“Like move somewhere safer?” Deb wouldn’t have minded. She hated Fujairah, and they’d only been there a week.

“Like write to the Minister of...Safety? Do they have one? The Minister of Back-Assward Driving?”
Deb laughed. She looked over her shoulder at Mary and Lisa. They were quiet, bug-eyed, scared. “Let’s change the subject, Keith.”

He turned up the stereo and tried to remember why he’d left the US, why he’d left Vietnam, why he’d come here.

At the next traffic light, Keith looked into the rearview mirror. He caught Mary’s eye. “Hey, buddy.”

“Hi, Daddy.” She smiled, tilting her head to the side.

“You doing okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good. We’ll be home soon. Play cards or soccer or something?”

“Okay.”

“How’s your little sister?”

“Asleep.”

“Good. I—Christ, what is that?”

A wall of black smoke was rising 100 meters behind them.

Deb turned around. “Another accident?”

“Looks like it.”

“Pull over.”

Keith edged over to the roadside. A change in wind had parted the veil of smoke, and they could see an overturned car. There was a small fire near the trunk. No one was crawling from the wreckage. There was no one else around.

No police, no ambulance, no bystanders.

“You should do something,” Deb said.

“Me? Why me?”

“Who else is there?”

“I’m supposed to risk my life for them? They were probably driving like maniacs. They get what they deserve.”

“That’s what you want to teach them?” Deb nodded her head toward the children.

Keith scowled.

“You’d let those people die?”

“What if I die. What about the kids then?”

“Keith, I...” Deb crossed her arms, looked back at the burning car. “We can’t just leave them.”

“Here’s the thing, all the other bullshit aside, you’re not supposed to touch a Muslim woman. Not in this country anyway. They told us this, no kidding. Even if they’re sick or injured, you just let them be. Unless you’re a brother, father,
whatever. If I touched them, I’d be fired immediately, maybe put in jail.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding?”

“Nope.”

She paused, taking a closer look at the overturned car. “Well, maybe it’s just men in the car. You’ll have to check.”

Keith had been staring straight ahead, toward the next traffic light, but he turned to see what Deb was looking at. It was terrible. He opened the door and let one foot slide down, but he couldn’t make himself get out and run to the accident. Mary asked him a question, but he didn’t hear it. He’d been listening to people lecture him all week, about any number of topics, but he still didn’t know anything.

The fire had spread to one of the car’s rear doors. Keith wondered if it would explode, or if that was something that really happened. He wondered what his life would be like if he’d never left Michigan. He could hear Lisa’s muted breathing, Mary humming a song. The flames were as tall as the palm trees planted up and down the road, but they were a peculiar shade of orange, like something computer-generated. In the movies, he thought, everything looks more real.
The Writer’s Ballad

What we carry through
runs deep in the palm, runs deep
in the idle grip of the pen when no words will do,
runs deep in the grip of the gun
when no life seems worth taking, runs deep
in the despairing fist, runs deep in
the soft glow of the secretive palm…

There is so little love
I keep what I have in a small, mahogany
box on my dresser.
Next to it is a dim lamp that stays on
all night, that stays on through the drizzle
on the dank street corner, that stays on in the eye
peeking out of the alley…
Who are you, the voices asks,
and in the midst of an answer
we exchange a vow of ignorance.

I'm not sure what I can do for you,
or for myself for that matter.
All I wanted on this afternoon in the late
shadows of these Vermont hills,
blessed by the wild flowers in the
faint blush of memory,
all I wanted was to isolate the moment
when you and I met, met like
never before, when the late afternoon shadows
fell across our haunting looks as we saw
in each other the last veils
of a terribly human urge to lay in each other's arms
and disappear under the blue vapor of undulant pine.

Perhaps there is only a single romantic moment
that we carry on for as long as we understand
it vanishes and stays whole
only in the absence of regret…
I keep it in the mahogany box,
hidden in the secretive palm, the years passing,
notebooks filled with fraudulent and lyrical grunts.
I don't even remember her name…
or yours.
Dear grandma,
This week we learnt about one of the ways of knowing: by observation and reasoning. The fancy name for it is the positivist paradigm. Those who practice it gather evidence from everywhere and add things up like a pile of stones. They think "what you see is what you get." And "what you get" would teach you the kinds of questions to ask, no matter where you are. This theory makes you think in layers, because you can't make sense otherwise. And every layer must follow a specific pattern, just like science. But unlike science, stones by themselves don't tell stories. Though we may gather stones, but the use to which we put them might be different. We may build houses with some and haul some at our enemies. That's why many things depend on those who gather the stones. Or, what do you think, grandma?
The positivists have a hard time agreeing to that kind of reasoning, even though they are all for observation and reasoning. They like to predict and generalize things, and they want to teach me to do the same.
Help me, grandma.
"What I love about our students is that there is so much to mine out of them. They're not used to valuing education, or thinking that they have intelligent things to say, but it's in there..."

This is my answer to the question I hear a lot these days: "What do you like about teaching?"

It's true. Our students are at a wonderful crossroads in their education, where they can decide to complete an associate's degree and begin careers, or they can transfer to a 4-year college and earn a bachelor's degree. No matter what they choose, they are very often accomplishing more than they, their parents, and many of their teachers thought possible.

I'm not sure when I first compared teaching to mining, but I can't think of a more apt way to describe it. What makes mining unique is that it's not a guaranteed success - you can fail. This doesn't mean the precious metals or diamonds or rock salts aren't there - it just means sometimes you don't find them. What I also love about being a miner is that each site is different. Some sites yield sparkling diamonds; others yield coal. Regardless, you go into a mine looking for something. And often, you have to shake things up to find it.

According to my very brief online research of mining, "Modern mining processes involve prospecting for ore bodies, analysis of the profit potential of a proposed mine, extraction of the desired materials and finally reclamation of the land to prepare it for other uses once the mine is closed." What a concept! To prepare it for other uses once the mine is closed...to prepare you for other endeavors once you leave school...to prepare your mind to think critically in all facets of your life after this class. Finding the gem, mineral, or lump of coal is indeed exhilarating (in my classroom I will shout, "That's a win for teaching!"), but after a period of time the site closes and the land has to be able to do something else. It can't be left deserted, drying in the sun with the entrance boarded up, a place where once something wonderful was found. But it will be left this way, unless the student decides to put the land to another use, to find a valuable and meaningful purpose for the site. To recognize that their minds need to constantly be illuminated, shaken, panned, and
excavated. To know that what they say, think, and believe has meaning, and will have meaning for as long as they allow themselves to go through the processes of removing bedrock, stripping away vegetation, enduring painful digging, explosion, and sometimes, accidents that set them back.

Unfortunately, not every mine yields a pocketful of gemstones. Some students continue to yield nothing but dust, dust that infiltrates the air and infects the miners and coats other surfaces so that it becomes hard to tell if something is struggling to shine from under the layers of dust, grime, and sediment. But as long as the mine is open, as long as a miner is granted entry in some capacity, the task is to continue to try: strap on the helmet and the headlamp, pack up the tools, and start looking.

The challenge is not to lose heart. Often I leave a site at the end of the day thinking that if only I’d struck the wall at a different angle, or used a sharper tool, or panned a little more gently, surely the gems would have come falling out like colorful, sparkling raindrops. Other times I leave with dirt under my fingernails and a handful of coal that I know I should be grateful for, but the longer I look at it, the blacker, dustier, and uglier it looks. How will this site ever be prepared for another use? How will it ever be more than just a messy, toxic, eroding hole in the ground?

I suppose like anything that means anything, it demands more faith than most people think they have: faith that if the mine is open, something is inside. Faith that if I was hired to mine, then surely somebody believes I’m capable of finding something down there. Faith that when I see a glimmer in the darkness, my job is to stay and dig and dig and dig and dig until I reach it. Faith that when this happens, it is as joyous for the mine as it is the miner.

I have to believe - as all teachers have to believe - that the discovery of precious gems in a mine is enough to inspire it for the future, to prepare it for life as a valuable mine, to help it recognize that its very potential makes it beautiful.
I Speak Barley At School

*From a student essay on trying to pass the University's entrance exam.*

"I speak barley at school," he wrote.

Later, I listen to a student read
A graphic story of being raped by a friend—
I look out the window to escape
the deep shame of being a man.
Below in the pond, the koi
barely move in the murky water.

I think of his misspelling.
It’s *barely*, of course, not *barley*.

It's not a language of grains they speak.
Not a dialect of rice or wheat.
Most of them barely speak
in class though they might know
the glib dialect of American teen-agers.
A student from Korea told me
His first English word was “chill.”
Privilege has many dialects.

From China, Vietnam, Korea,
Thailand, Cambodia they’ve come —
the Far East to us, the “real” Americans
who time and privilege have taught
to speak and write the proper
English we teach to newcomers
so they will fit in and lose the telltale grammars
of their mother tongue and seal the stories
we cannot imagine in their silence
—the mother left behind
to make room in the boat for her son
(she would rejoin them later
but she never did); the father who escaped
the killing fields to become a symbol
for the glib talking heads
of the American dream, for people
who somehow found the promised land,
Jeffrey Arnett

where fields of swaying grain feed us too well
but not the poor who deserve to go hungry.
Where no one is allowed to speak barely at school
because we are one nation under God,
our God, not theirs, indivisible,
with justice for some, sometimes,
and as much as they left behind
to come here,
we want them to give up
even more.
A Poem is Meant

A poem is meant to linger
in the mind, haunt
days after, cause
you to cock your head like
a wary sparrow,
hearkening to an echo
from yesterday.
Even if it is good
for a laugh, it is meant
to tickle an old ache—
not just that, but shine
a light, narrow, yet bright,
a light that bends around
corners of your mind,
bounces off forgotten
experience and creates its
own experience. It is
earthy and transcendent.
Listen now! Do you hear
the rushing in your ears
when the room is still?
A poem is happening—it is
crawling up your back,
over the knot in your spine, feeling it,
but moving, tracing an old
scar, playing neck muscles like
harp strings. Heart-pumped,
it is bubbling through your
veins, coursing toward toes
and fingers, blossoming
out of your palm: a poem is action.
Do you see the grass reaching
toward the sun, ninety-three million
miles from earth? Do you smell
the greenness? Taste the warmth?
Do you feel the breathing earth
shudder like a sleepy mammoth?
Poems are moving everywhere,
toward us and away, beckoning:
listen, feel, smell.
The earth is erupting
in poems, strong and gentle,
sweet and bitter, violent, life-giving,
sorrowful, healing,
peacemaking poems. A poem is meant. A poem is movement. A poem is you.
My story, I’m embarrassed to admit, is infinitely revisable.

-Jonathan Baumbach

Your story is mine, monsieur, and the story of ten or twelve hundred young fellows besides who come from the country to Paris every year.

-Balzac

Academe

They’re afraid of him, you know.
You know why.
No I don’t.
C’mon.
Really, I don’t.

He paused, exhaling rather loudly, as if auditioning for the role of Exasperated Man on the Left. Well, you know. Here’s the— He tugged at the neck of his pale green t-shirt, which was really quite talented, an expensive boutique item that did a splendid Thrift Store imitation. I guess I really don’t know either, he said.

She raised her eyebrows, ambiguously.
But it’s true all the same. They’re scared of him.

You can just feel it.
Yeah. I know what you mean.

They were talking about Jomma. Doctoral candidates in Interdisciplinary Studies, they were always talking about someone. This place is loaded with freaks, you’d hear them say. Just loaded.

The assignment, in Dr. Kuhn’s The Rise of Individualism and the Bourgeoisie, which wasn’t meant to be an ironic title, was to speak to the class for five or ten minutes about your research. By “research” the professor meant either the paper you were working on for his course or, in a larger sense, your dissertation, though in practice they tended to be the same thing (a Venn diagram would reveal significant overlap). Graduate students can shoehorn just about any assignment into their ongoing thesis research. One of the persons speaking, for instance, was writing her dissertation on Nicholas Biddle and his able management of the Bank of the United States; in the previous semester, she’d used Chapter 7, an excursus concerning Biddle’s great uncle, who pioneered the medical use of tobacco smoke enemas, in Dr. Knipp’s African Fiction seminar.

I can’t believe he kept talking, you know?
He just kept talking and talking, he said.
An hour?
70 minutes, actually.
My god. And that poem... The ellipses rolled off her tongue like intransigent Skittles.
I thought Dr. Kuhn was gonna shit himself.
I know.
What was that one line—
—I know, she said, putting her messenger bag down. It was...hold on...almost got it. She closed her eyes. After a few moments, a thin smirk climbed out of her mouth and pulled back her teeth, like a dental hygienist inspecting for plaque. Yeah, here it is. *I'm a titty-sucker, / I'm a mean mutha-fucka.* That’s all I can remember.
Well, he said, admiring his own incipient apercu, that’s more than enough, isn’t it?
True. What was he thinking?
Who knows... He laughed, mirthlessly, readjusting the awkward heft of the seven books he’d been carrying.¹
I mean, maybe in Fr. Ong’s Orality seminar.
No, you’re right. He spoke for an hour? And no one shut him up...
Kuhn’s scared of him, like I said.
Yeah, you’re right. Sr. Kolmer wouldn’t have stood for it, though. That’s for damn sure.
No kidding. Or Dr. Barmann. He was in the seminary once, long time ago, did you know that?
No, yeah. Yeah, I think I did know that...
This was a Jesuit university. Still is. The nature of their studies was entirely secular (except insofar as the quest

¹ Four of them (thin hardcovers with almost impressively bland titles and cover designs) were for various courses, texts written by his teachers and his teachers’ friends and his teachers’ teachers. The fifth and sixth, works of modern German philosophy, were chosen on the basis of being (or rather, appearing to be) the most abstruse and obfuscatory he could find and which, therefore, presented the best possible version of himself to onlookers, a semiotics of pretension; these texts roosted on top of the pile, naturally. The seventh book, sandwiched dead center, was a recent novel about a poor woman in Carolina who, having lost a family member, finds something much more poignant: the courage to love again. It had a sticker in the upper right hand corner, white with a ring of orange, and three portentous words emblazoned in the center, which he made sure onlookers could not see (hence the readjustment).
for “pure knowledge” is, one might argue, a religion), but the university still had a divinity school and, though their numbers were dwindling as quickly as our national ability to perform mathematics, a few non-lay professors.

Did you get a load of Jomma’s family crest?

Yeah. What, did he make it with cardboard and magic markers?

He did, actually. He said that he made it himself, just as he gave himself his own name, because he rejects all external authority.

Oh. Well anyway, when he held it up and showed us the iconography? Then read his family motto? I almost barfed laughter.

(He noticed that she sometimes uttered statements as if they were questions, which many women do. He considered, but did not, mentioning to her that this was because women were not traditionally encouraged to share their ideas and, when they did, men tended to disregard them, which made them lack interpersonal self-confidence. He wrestled with the possibility that alluding to phallocentrism would get him somewhere with her.) Why? I mean it was ridiculously funny, and bathetic, but why did you specifically almost laugh/throw up?

The words? They’re lyrics from Steel Pulse. Or hold on, Black Uhuru? Some fairly popular 80s reggae band.

80s reggae is fun.

Yeah, 80s rap too. Ton Loc.

Young MC.

DJ Jazzy Jeff, Biz Markie.

Sir Mixalot.

Mix-a-lot², she corrected.

He shrugged, with a waving right hand motion that served, she was fairly certain, as the gesticular equivalent of “whatever.” And…De La Soul.

Good one. Yeah, pre-gangsta.

Those were fun times. Prelapsarian.

He winked at her and smiled, quietly acknowledging her ironic appropriation of highbrow classroom jargon within a popular culture context. She opened her mouth too, swallowing his discrete reification of her wit like a sumo

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² The ostensible written/oral confusion here is actually a functional error.
wrestler attacking a plate of deep-fried squid entrails, but more delicately of course.

It was quite a shock to them both, the sudden awkwardness. It struck without warning, and at the height of their collective discursive strength, which is perhaps the way these things tend to work. A civilization crumbles at the height of its glory, or a great man is laid low through a single wrongfoot, because power leads to a feeling of invulnerability, which in turn creates an opportunity for oversight and failure.

The more they tried to think of new conversational lands to conquer, the more impossible it became. Self-consciousness was the cudgel that beat them silly, and because they were effete bookish types, the beating was not difficult to administer.

So he’s a plagiarist then, he said, gazing nostalgically over the dialogic past.

Looks that way. Hey, I wonder what JJ would’ve done?

Good question.

JJ was a "cool" teacher. 80 years old. No syllabus, no homework, no assigned texts. Essays were negotiable. A haiku might do, or a video, or a concordance to a translation of a dramatic monologue rendering of a novelization-in-progress. JJ did not publish or attend conferences, did not read scholarly journals or suffer fools lightly; he was, by some margin, the most respected and intelligent member of the faculty.

He stared into the middle distance, he thought, though in point of fact he did not know what constituted the "middle," as distinct from any other subset of, distance. He tried to appear, as he often did, like a poster he'd once seen of a controversial, savvy and rather louche French critic, which meant continually raising his chin and turning his face so that people saw him from the side.

I dunno.

Me too, she said. I mean, me neither.

Hey, speaking of JJ, remember that guy…The Poet. Jomma’s performance today reminded me of him.

She squiggled her eyebrows in an imitation of concern and concentration that was, in reality, merely a demonstration of her willingness to imitate. Civilians, non-academics, who might not really get it, who might oversimplify the matter, who might be reductive, would say that she liked him, would suggest that she touch his arm,
stroke her hair, lean back and expose her neck. But no, she didn’t do that. As an added gambit, however, she scrunched her nose and index-fingered her black glasses more securely to her face.

He…okay, let’s see…he always wore a big white t-shirt and a black vest. And a beret. I think? Maybe not. But he’s the kind of guy that you remember wearing a beret, even if he never did. You know what I mean? He was nodding, smiling, vigorously.

Totally. She nodded and smiled back, with equal gusto, though she had no idea what he was talking about.

Anyway, vest, beret…black goatee. He was bald, balding anyway, pretty flabby. Fat? Heavyish anyway. Thing is, he always wore this pin on his vest. It said, and I shit you not: LIVING POET.

No.
Scout’s honor.
Oh. My. God.

I know, he said, wondering how, how in god’s name, this whole conversation could somehow lead toward their going out on a date. The signifiers had floated so far afield that he couldn’t even see them anymore. How did people do it? He’d read all of Lacan, well most of it anyway, well okay, he’d skimmed some abstracts, and he’d read part of that article on Foucault, or was it Derrida?!, and lots of other stuff besides, but still. Still, he didn’t have the answers he needed. Still, there was an absence. So…oh yeah, and he always wore some other pin that said something about Vietnam. Excuse me, “Nam.” What a tool.

A-hole, she said.
Exactly. So one day he hands out a manuscript. An entire manuscript, 150 pages maybe, of his own poetry.
Prisoners of laughter were making a break through her mouth, but the guards of her hand shot them down as they ran through the yard of her face and scrambled over the fortified wall of her imposture.3
It was all about “Nam” and the atrocities we…I don’t know the verb here…foisted?

Visited?

Yes, good. Thanks. He thumbs-upped her. Visited upon the Vietnamese people. GIs raping young girls,

3 The imposture being that she was pretending to find the story riotous when in reality it was only mildly amusing.
napalming quiet villages, rifle-butt-smacking the elderly, whathaveyou. Man…

Was it any good?

The poetry? Are you kidding? The writing was more grisly than the events he tried, with such utter futility, to narrate.

She smiled as thinly as a butterfly wing, and her eyes were illuminated by two extraordinarily small Japanese lanterns. He knew, therefore, that it had been worthwhile to spend the better part of a week drafting the epigram about the man’s writing. Always write your material in advance, he thought. At least make an outline. Can’t go in there without a battle plan and plenty of ammo.

I think I remember that guy, she said. He looked like that actor.

Which one?

Oh, you know. He’s in everything. Fifty-ish, losing his hair. You know who I mean.

I think so. Yeah, he was in that movie…

Yeah, him. But I wasn’t in that course you’re talking about.

You weren’t?

No.

Huh. Well, someone who looked a lot like you sat right across from me. He squinted just slightly, as if suffering through a minor gastrointestinal event. He stared through the space she was occupying as if she weren’t there, though we can be fairly certain she was. Oh yeah, sorry. That was someone else. My bad.

No biggie.

They both started walking, though no exchange of words or even nonverbal signs had precipitated the movement. They rounded the corner, walked down the dim yellow staircase, passed through the front doors of the neo-Gothic building, descended the pristine white faux-marble external stairs, stepped over a scrim of cigarette butts sleeping like homeless people at the foot of the stairs, then headed south, on the new red brick walkway, toward the black iron fence that separated campus from the sour-milk pong of increasingly anxious city streets.

Anyway, the guy was just like Jomma. He read his “work” for, I dunno, maybe 15 minutes.

Christ. So what did JJ do? she asked.
Well, you could tell the guy was just gonna keep on reading and we were all getting pretty restless. You know that moment, in a real boring lecture or play, when everyone starts coughing, clearing their throats, moving their butts around in their chairs? Well, it started the minute he started reading and lasted the whole time. After, like, 15 or 20 minutes, JJ said: Really nice work. Let’s move on.

Now that’s good classroom management, she said.
You said it. Kuhn could learn a thing or three.
So no one’s scared of the poet guy, though, whatever his name is.

No.
Why not, do you think?
I dunno, but they’re sure afraid of Jomma. Personal politics, I guess. He angled his torso in such a way that she couldn’t help but notice the profile of the German thinker festooning his topmost book.

They walked side by side, he on the right.
That’s redundant, isn’t it? The personal is always political. This was her famous blue-ribbon sound-bite, reserved for contests at the regional and state level.

Yeah, but it could be situated within a social context rather than a personal one, so I was just trying to establish a…trying to differentiate.

Oh, right.

No, but maybe you are right, sort of. It was more social politics, or political correctness. Something. Jomma gets away with everything.

Even plagiarism, she said, wittily.

Yeah. She snorted, which was supposed to suggest something ironic about Academe.

He allowed his left arm to brush against her right, for just a moment. Soon, it would begin.
Muck in the Dark

*Poetry is stumbling in the dark.*

My job is to keep from mucking it up,
the rumpled man told me
who fancies himself a poet
and predictably loves a girl
who will not love him,
so he writes her a poem of rain
and toads and rainbows and still
she will not love him,
so he grafts his desire
to a flight of the dragon fly
he imagines flying to the planet
of dead poems where he waits
for his love to find him
though by now he is very old
and cannot dance or sing
but stumbles over his longing
in the half-light
of mucking it up.
Laputa

my mind is an island of flies,
fleet, promiscuous thoughts, faecal footed,
or gnats in a suspended knot of bother,
a busy self-important ignorance
asking for trouble

Want a revolution?

Cut the head of a king
Bake the queen in the oven
give the bread to the poor
not cake, oh not cake
so not cake
just some bread
and a bucket of wine.
Evil Makes Us Human  
(An Exercise in magic realism)

The trial was held in a small municipal building. The man they brought in had been caught just as he delivered the final blow. He was young, pallid, drenched in a sweat of terror. Blood was streaming from his lips, split open by the butt of a rifle; and he was smearing it over his face with gore-spattered hands, the fingernails of which were torn. He was a hideous sight. His body shook; he was filthy and obviously miserable, but still recognizably human.

The presiding judge questioned him. The man did not respond, not even give his name. He merely cast his eyes wildly, in a frenzy of anguish and hostility. Then some policemen testified, loudly, with vindictive enthusiasm. The charge was clear: the man had killed a soldier on his way to Afghanistan and had taken his watch and wallet. There were no further questions. The judge stared at the man and raised his gavel for sentencing. Movement in the courtroom stopped. As the gavel struck the desk, the eye of a reporter caught sight of the judge’s manicured fingers and a flash of his gold cufflinks.

“In accordance with criminal law,” the judge said, “I sentence this man to death. Take him away.” The man did not grasp a word said. He let himself be led away, snuffling and wiping his lips with blood-stained hands. The trial was over.

***

The judge picks up his pipe and goes outside to smoke. It is just getting dark. When the moon comes up, its marbled light makes everything look ossified. A white road, ghostly trees, pale meadows stretches as far as the eye can see. A translucent whiteness, a crystallized longing, an endless, frozen tension. As far as the eye can see. A pale silence as far as the ear can hear. A lifeless, icy, peaceful night. No starlight to give its approval; there is nothing but a cold and intense glare.

Yet there was to it all, it seems to the judge, an infinite but unexplainable meaning. He looks up. Directly above the neck of Pegasus, swirls Andromeda, the galaxy of 200 billion suns. The judge thinks: we can only stand and admire it from across an unimaginable distance. But it lies, unbounded, beyond the reach of any truth or certainty.
Then, at home, the judge sleeps with his wife. He hears something stir. He hears a sound as of bedclothes, and what seems like a faint sigh; and somewhere in that darkness he hears something that sounds like, “love.” He can hear breathing next to him and along his side he can feel, like a faint exhalation, something like her nearby side, so close that his arm hairs bristles.

In the station house the policemen are snoring. With these hearty snores, the night protests the beauty of the moonlit night. On the other side of the street, in the cell where the condemned man is confined, it is dark and quiet; there the terrifying moonlight only has a slit to work its way through.

The prisoner sweats. Beads of sweat break out, run down his face. It’s as if his forehead is shedding tears. His shadow is untouchable. In a dream, the judge sees himself sentencing the man to death. The man’s mouth is open as if he is trying to yell for help. The judge never lowers his gaze from the face of the condemned man. Nothing is banal; nothing can ever be, under the chill light of the moon. No creature stirs anywhere, no mole squeezes its way through the grass; no bird sings as proof that it exists. Leaves, blocking light from the moon, turn something into nothing.

Are all things nothing but inexplicable ghosts? Is there nothing but this unearthly negating moonlight and the condemned man, shivering in his cell? Suddenly, a Voice, as if uttered by an endless universe, breaks the silence: “There is no center or circumference.” The judge, waking from his sleep, replies to the Voice: “How can anyone say there is no center and no circumference. They were designed, according to law, by nature and God.” The Voice replies: “There is no law.” The judge responds: “We are surrounded by the law like the sky and horizon around us. How could we do anything unless we are compelled by it to act a certain way? How could I hold the citizens in line without the law? There would be no justice without the law.”

The Voice, speaking calmly through the moonlight, says: “There is no justice.” The judge replies: “No one should say that. I condemned the man because he killed a soldier; I acted in the name of the law. If there was no law, I would have acted according to the dictates of my conscience and killed him on the spot—and my conscience would have been clear. I would have done the right thing.”
To this the Voice replies: “There is no conscience.”
The judge puts on his shoes and robe and walks outside to confront the Voice. “Out of conscience and justice, we cry and rage…we strike out with fury and with compassion. If you were God himself, you could not do otherwise.”

The Voice, speaking through the moonlight, does not reply. The condemned man in the cell turns his face toward the sky. What he can just make out through the slit in the roof looks like a milky dome infused with petrified light. He feels it must be possible, if only he had a long, long ladder to climb up and into it. But the further he penetrates, raising himself on this gaze, the further the dome recedes. And still it is as though in time it can be reached, as though by sheer gazing he might be able to stop it and hold it. The desire to do this became agonizingly intense.

Then the Voice repeats the message: “There is no justice because there is no love or conscience.” Surely, the judge thinks, the white stones, the blood of all the murdered people, will rise up against the Voice and cry out in protest; they will defend God, the source of all love; they will passionately bear Him witness. Deadly silence. No sound but the snores of the policemen in the station house.

It is midnight. The judge breaks his reverie; puts on his clothes and drives past the station house. There is a policeman standing outside the door. The moonlight shrouds him with a strange, unearthly, indifference. There is nothing unusual to see; there is nothing odd to hear; there is nothing; there is only the usual silent universe.

The municipal building is dark. The judge lights a candle, and makes his way into his court where he sits in judgment. He lowers himself into his chair and sets the candle on the edge of the desk. The yellow flame wavers, droops, lighting and warming only itself.

The judge holds the flame in his steady gaze until his eyes fill with tears.
My Sister’s Heart

For three nights I dreamed of cartoon hearts saw-toothed in half; bleeding hearts crushed by irreverent heels into the sidewalk; a split heart, like a single profiled breast, wafting in the sky; tweezers picking apart my own heart’s striated muscles until Monday morning when the routine EKG said damaged muscle, said your heart had broken. You didn’t even know it had resisted, sullenly balking, some muscles deciding, “I’m sitting out the rest of this woman’s life.” You remember no pain, and I wonder about the heart’s wisdom, how it knows to quit sooner than we do. Our hearts have been wheezing and slurping for years. My heart’s too big, pushing the X-ray’s edges. It’s stretching to keep all my dead people in. Your heart shrinks to keep living trespassers out. We rely on will power, our hearts having lost their authority to steer us to love, to let us keep it. How long can a heart limp along before it quits? Our father played professional football, our mother danced in a chorus line. Their bodies were beautiful and did not love each other. They preened singly their whole lives, hearts on hold, hanging fire until their bodies stalled. Right to the end, their hearts beat as reliably as metronomes. They’d hardly been used. We’ve taken ours for granted, worked them double-time, given contrary orders, and so the missed beats, the fluttering, overexcited muscles. Our hearts are dead-tired. Mine in its utopian expansion, so thin at the edges. Yours in its realism, so atrophied, so small.
Dress

Not stitched
to a self, a home; a soliloquy
of form.

Marble-sized stars
strung together. A necklace
and a dress. No address. A boy
in a necklace of stars. Fabric
loose, textured, soft,
paper-colored.

Red constellations
of chicken pox.
Also a sky of blush; a sunset
of fever. Where shoulders
and neck intersect, a string
of stars. Out of season.
Bike Riding, Salsa, and the First Line of *Anna Karenina*

1. After Dinner

It’s an October dusk in Logan Canyon, Utah, and my husband and I are midway up Steel Hollow Trail on our mountain bikes. My husband tells me, “Be aggressive. Pedal harder and you will clear the rocks.” We climb through chaparral and juniper until I can hardly pedal any more. I’m on my period. Finally my husband looks back and sees me struggling. He says we can turn around if I want to. I nod vigorously. Then we lift our bikes above our heads 110 degrees to make the turn above the brush, and we prepare to descend. My husband says, “Lower your seat, and sit way back. Brake evenly, and be alert.” He rides ahead until I can’t see him anymore and then until I can’t even hear the skid of his tires hitting rock. I edge downward on my titanium frame, dodging, faking and alluding rocks as a running back might, but it’s not how one’s supposed to descend on a bike. It’s quiet except for a few scolding birds and the whirr of my brakes against metal. The sun is already below the peaks and a residue of color lights up the Indian rice grass like candles.

Soon, in the periphery of my vision, flaming bushes appear in all directions under red maples and yellow aspen. My front tire hits a rock and I fly over the top of my handlebars. Powerless as a Hefty bag in the hands of a gardener, I land in a ditch. My bike lies crossways to the trail, jackknifed. I pick myself up, throw my right leg back over the frame, and continue slowly down the trail until I meet my husband. He smiles at me and I grin back. I tell him I flipped my bike. Only then do I check my body for damages. I feel my husband staring at my scrawny arms, criss-crossed with scratches. He says, “I’m proud of you.” Above us the aspen leaves chatter like a sack of dry chicken bones. The Halloween moon is rising when we ride again. The spruce-covered cliffs are dark as menstrual flow. Steel Hollow Trail comes to an end and we load up the pickup—back to our three kids and a cluttered kitchen.

Later, I enjoy a long soak in the tub with a copy of one of my favorite novels, *Anna Karenina*. For about an hour, I think about Tolstoy’s first line in that novel: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” While I often quote this line for my fiction students at the university, I’m starting now to wonder about it.
2. El Gringo De Utah

“Marlowe,” I say, thinking about a character in another book I’ve been reading. “It’s something like that.”

“Would it help if I said the first letter of his first name? Or his first name?” My husband asks. We are riding home from church on a Saturday evening, and the music inside the Camry is playing from a CD that my husband had inserted into the car stereo months earlier. Out of the corner of my eye I also see our teenaged son, plugged in to his own iPod with headphone wires dangling from each side of his face. The big box stores are passing on the right and left. I know I know the name of the keyboardist playing his Latin-styled piano on the speakers faded to the front of the car, as per request of our son. But all I can think of is Marlowe.

It’s been about six years since my husband emerged with a latent love for salsa music. It was like, one day he got out of bed and he was El Gringo de Utah. The man has no Latin blood in him that we know of; he’s 6 foot 6 inches, in stocking feet, and his Scottish background bequeathed him the fairest of skins. Lovely thick curly hair, now slightly graying, coronas his thin angular face. Nevertheless, he’s been relentless in pursuit of the perfect salsa collection, amassing CDs by the hundreds and remixing the songs on MP3s, just like the one currently playing.

Trying to collect music from the most authentic of sources, he came in contact with a man from New York, a Nuyorican, who first gave my husband the nickname, El Gringo De Utah, in response to an email order he made. For a while, my husband adored this guy, who had all the right suggestions for a truly superior collection.

Since he’s amassed his gigantic stash of the finest salsa available, my husband plays it constantly; it’s blaring from the speakers of his car until no one can hear the other speak. It’s on the home stereo when we will let him choose the mix. He loves Eddie Palmieri with his “wall of sound” and he’s drumming on the steering wheel the Palmieri clap-“duh-duh—duh—duh-duh.” Some of the songs go on for more than five minutes with one word repeated continuously. Our plugged-in son, who also happens to be a drummer in the school marching band, says he’s heard two thousand more claves than he’s ever wanted to hear in his whole life. I say that Celia Cruz’s voice is a bit low for me, and my husband
takes it personally. We’re all trying to cooperate, but he’s aggrieved.

“Larry,” my husband says, raising his voice over the music, “is his first name. Does that help? He’s called El Judeo Maravioso.”

I hit my leg with my fist. Jeez, I say to myself, I already knew that. The Marvelous Jew. I’ve heard him say the name so many times, and yet, why doesn’t it sink in? The last name is on the tip of my tongue, but I just can’t think of it. I know Johnny Pacheco, Willie Colon, and Pete “The Count” Rodriguez. I can tell the difference between the music of Eddie Palmieri and his brother Charlie. But on this, I think I’m going to have to cave in to the pressure.

“I don’t think I can get it,” I tell him.

“Harlow,” he says. “Larry Harlow. You were so close.” He checks the line of cars in his rear view mirror.

I feel the way people must feel who were on Let’s Make a Deal and Monty Hall asked them for a paper clip and all they have is safety pins. (Over forty years ago, my father was chosen by Monty Hall at the end of the show to produce exactly 99 cents in change, but all my dad had was dollar bills and a few small coins.)

So I don’t have the answer, but I file away the name Larry Harlow once more in my porous brain, trying to pin down the elusive rhythm, trying to feel it in my bones like my husband does. In the driver’s seat, my husband’s still drumming on the steering wheel and in the back seat, our son’s head is bobbing to the music playing separately on his iPod, but neither of them is missing a beat.

3. My wedding dress

My wedding dress is hanging from the top of the closet door. Next to the closet, framed, is a Hollywood star, just like you might see on Sunset Blvd. Inside the star is the name: Irving Berlin, in reference to that marvelous talent. For we are in Palm Springs, at the La Quinta resort, and everything here is the best, or nearly so. To me, it comes off as a bit over the top, but it wasn’t my idea to come. The wedding dress is the lightest shade of petal pink, almost like the glow on a baby’s skin, or the color of a pair of panties that you washed with a red sweatshirt. The bodice of the dress is adorned with the teeniest of sequins and silvery thread. I
would be proud to see it hanging there, except that it is not mine any more—it is my mother’s.

In my periphery, I can see my mother glow in the warmth of her extended family. Unlike Dolly, Kitty and the ill-fated Anna of Tolstoy fame, my mother was lucky in love. My grandmother, who left an alcoholic husband but never divorced him, sits in the room’s most comfortable chair, rocking forward slightly. She’s wearing a red wool dress lined at the neck with real fur, the exact dress that she wore to my parents’ wedding fifty years earlier. My mother is wearing a designer dress, geometric patterns emblazoned on a stretchy material, loose on her size 0 frame, her bleach blonde hair perfect in a long uneven bob. (I am wearing a traditional cotton dress from San Miguel, Mexico).

Twenty-six years ago, when I was sliding my own body into my mother’s wedding dress, it looked a bit different then. I had asked the seamstress, with the permission of my mother, to remove the fifties-style cuffs from the armholes of the bodice, giving the dress an unfortunate eighties look. I also had to have each of the seams around the waist expanded by millimeters, and even then, my body was unliberally tucked into my mother’s corset, expanding uncomfortably at both top and bottom. In the end, though, the buttons buttoned.

As different as the versions of the dress had been, so had the last twenty-six years been for the two of us. From my vantage point, she experienced very stable golden years, with tennis club parties, a reupholstering of her vintage bamboo sunroom set in bold tulips, and, weekly, a cocktail with my father in the lounge of a famous horse breeder’s restaurant. My last two and a half decades, by contrast, were infused with the stress of loading moving vans and relocating the family several times, the uncertainty of the academic life, and heady trips to Europe while trying to maintain stability and breastfeeding. I’m thinking that it could have been easier for me had I not tried to do so much.

But then we all gather around my mother and my father for a posed picture, and the women congregate in front of the suspended wedding dress (I notice that my mother had reattached the sleeves) for an all-girls shot. Both of my parents have just recently passed their seventieth year but they are giddy as teenagers. As we prepare to walk out into the Palm Springs sun for an early dinner, I turn to my mother and
see her face glowing. None of it is over the top for her, for this is her day.

Red bougainvillea blossoms float in the turquoise pool lined with white tile. In the distance the Santa Rosa Mountains pierce the sky like brown gems. This bobbing line of relations, some slightly drunk, makes its way over the patterned tile toward the restaurant. The clicking of the ladies’ high heels is almost like a drum solo. I join in the rhythm as the dry hot breeze caresses my arms and seduces my compliant heart.


The squeak of rag against the glass cuts into the chill. The wheeze through my nose hits a sharp C as my breath steams the air. Behind the ladder where I perch runs the continuous slap of car tires on slush. The hedge of the arborvitae, which divides our small front yard from the road, muffles the pulse of sounds as if a drummer were running his brush over a snare. The only thing missing from this live concert is the cymbal roll of the little creek out in the backyard where the mallard ducks usually hang out. The creek’s dried up for winter and the ducks have long since taken off for warmer climes.

Two doors down the neighbor’s dog barks in a pattern of 1-2-3-pause, 5-6-7. For an extended moment the city bus motor drowns out all other sound and when it fades away, dog, car, rag and wheeze strike their pitches again. Through the window, a cluster of sheets tumbles in the dryer. This is the base drum that pulls this whole wall of sound together.

I think about the explanation my husband gives for his love of salsa music. In the type of music called son, he says, from the pueblos in Cuba, there is a dialogue between the singer and the chorus. In the interlude, the team of instruments—conga, drums, guitars, flutes, and other tools of percussion, the clave, the cowbells, the chimes, etc., form the wall of sound behind the vocals. For most gringos, he tells me, their ears are dulled to the subtlety of this sound, and they hear it just as noise. But for him, he says, it’s the music he’s been looking for since he was a teenager.

This very afternoon I decide to try it out for myself. Perusing my husband’s CD salsa collection, I vocalize out
loud the names of the artists as if for the first time. Pete Rodriguez, El Conde; Johnny Pacheco, El Maestro. Bebe Valdez. Johnny Polanco. For my first foray on my own, I decide to go back to the familiar name of Larry Harlow, El Judeo Maravioso. If Harlow was a Jew who could play salsa with the best of them, surely I could learn to appreciate it. I pull out the CD, Hommy: A Latin Opera. I like opera, so I figure, why not start there?

As I close the CD player and strike *play*, the livingroom booms with the gravelly voice of a narrator announcing the birth of a son. Even with my limited knowledge of Spanish, I can understand the chorus. *Soy sensacional.* I am sensational. Horns blast. Drums rumble. Cowbells clang. But then something goes wrong in the narrative. I stop the CD and play it again. The son, the one for whom the father has hoped for so long, is blind. Not only blind, but mute and deaf as well.

I listen intermittently throughout the next hour as I finish washing windows and making beds. The music tells me that the boy in the opera grows up to be a fantastic drummer. It turns out that Hommy has perfect rhythm and, what’s more, a direct channel to the Greatest Musician of all.

Our front door slams with half of a salsa beat as our three kids come home from school. Bang, bang, bang, pause. Three more slams of the bathroom door finish the basic beat. The heater clangs like a cowbell and water moving within insulated pipes sings like trumpets. Noise from the outside, always a dull roar through the clerestory windows that separate the kitchen from the livingroom, fades innocuously.

Before my husband arrives home, I have worked my way through two more discs, including a collection of Celia Cruz. I hadn’t realized I was swaying my hips until he comes up behind me and catches my hip movement between the palms of his hands, 1-2-3-pause, 5-6-7. He doesn’t say a word about the salsa music playing in the background.

“So did you accomplish anything on your day off?” he teases. “Or did you eat bon-bons and watch soap operas all day?” He flips a dishtowel against my backside.

“Actually, I washed windows,” I tell him.

“Didn’t you check WeatherChannel.com before you decided to wash windows?”

“No, I didn’t do that, but I did consult a website on drying sheets. So I dried our sheets with a mint tea bag.”
“Hmm, that could be interesting.” He bends over to kiss my neck. “Can we finish what we started last night?”

“After the kids go to bed,” I say. I reach my arms back around his muscled shoulders and hug him backwards.

Later that night after the music has long been muted, I can still hear as an echo in my brain: *Soy Sensacional*. My husband and I approach the stairs with our arms around each other’s waists, and our shadow on the wall is lit by the moon through the clerestory windows. The moon above us is smudged in the glass. Not a window I can clean, I say to myself. As I walk arm in arm with my husband, I think that while I don’t have a perfect marriage, I have what I want. Someday, we will no longer have car-noise in our house and ducks in the creek and muddy feet on the carpet and two boys sharing a room with a sister next door, but in this moment, at least, there is just one thing left to finish, and my husband and I don’t wait until we get to the top of the stairs.

5. Final Thoughts on Tolstoy’s First Line.
   It’s entirely possible that all happy families are not alike.
The Lovers

--after Utamaro

Four thin fingers clasping
the moon of her shoulder.

Her loosened obi.

Her neck a calyx or snowy egret’s.

Her kimono anikki falling open.

Mushroom growing in an opacate cellar.

His rumpled hakama.

His oiled queue.

His pale feet without tabi.

Arms embracing hips the way snow girds the carnelian stone.

The katana and the halberd.

The monument and the sheaf.

The shrine and the scripture.

The tatami. The moon.

His snail. Her shell.
Mute

Suppose we awaken stripped of speech.
No greeting issues from open mouths,
no mumbled word in return.
Hours before, we lay stark against crisp sheets,
fingers linked in one last ruse
of solidarity, until sleep tossed us apart,
and, past twitch of tissue, crossbow
of bone, clutch of mind and muscle,
our souls slipped softly away,
their journeys erratic, traceless. Separate.

When, bruised and dazed, we startle back
to breath, nerve, nuance,
our eyes skip away from each other, shy
from dark travel, from all we have seen
and all we have not. Memory, fragmented,
roars in our ears. How, without speech,
shall we silence it? How meet the coming hours?
How explain, justify, edit—
how shall we fill our selves?

The moments heap themselves before us
like foreign fruit. Action withers:
our arms lift, stop mid-gesture, fall listlessly.
Soon our minds cease even to label thought.
Thought becomes a vapor trail, dispersing
in a mute wind. Next
is a sensation of falling inward. Silence
is an empty room we must furnish:
we have only ourselves.
Simultaneously expanding and contracting,
we find ourselves—and each other--
in a steadied gaze, in a turn of the wrist,
in economy of movement:
we fear the heft of our bodies will split
the now jeweled silence.
We are warm, wrapped in wordlessness,
and the touching of our souls.
Gail Radley

This day, this long awakening, this newborn thing—
we guard it, cup our hands around its flame,
love it, that perhaps the days will reel themselves out
this way, until
    the Word,
    the new and holy Word
startles us, as the silence did,
to another new wakefulness, calling,
echoing across the canyons
like the sudden golden gonging
    of light
Within the Very Flame of Love;
or, No Abatement in Sight

i am too starving for her

it is unnatural

and I have said so

i am not normal

claudius you have lied*

*There lives within the very flame of love / A kind of wick
or snuff that will abate it.@
(Hamlet 4.7.13-14)
The Voice Bank

One has a voice like bubbles in sunlight.
One has a voice like polished mahogany.
One has a voice like a dancer in quicksand.
One has a voice like apple pie.
One has a voice like the sun on your back.
One has a voice like antique leather.
One has a voice like a machete.
One has a voice like a stained glass window.
One has a voice like going home.

You have—nine—saved messages.

First voice message.

One has a voice like bubbles in sunlight.

“Hi, Angel Pie Cutie Pa-tootie! I just wanted to hear your cute little voice.” Although three times a mother, her voice possesses the sound and spirit of a little girl. “I was just thinkin’ aboutcha and really missin’ you today! And I just want you to know that I’m praying for you and Nathan and your business and your marriage… and I love you so much!” Any perceptive person could tell that she is a singer; it’s unmistakable, even through the crackled fog of a voicemail. “You can call me back if you get a chance, or… later on. I love you, Hon.” And despite its bubbling enthusiasm, it perceptibly carries the weight of a family.

“Bye.”

This voice is light and airy, but full of life. It catches iridescent color as it drifts. It is an heirloom passed down in word and melody. This voice is grace. It has comforted you, always hovering nearby, since the day you were born. It is especially beautiful because of its fragility. It is especially precious because of its impermanence.

Next message.

One has a voice like polished mahogany.
“Hey, You… just wanted to say thank you for doing all that running around and stuff this morning. Um… totally appreciate it.” You can hear the smile start to tug at the corners of his mouth. “I love you, you’re the best.” His voice softens.
“Bye.”

This voice speaks carefully. It is low and smooth. Words flow heavily, but are artfully placed. This voice has roots in your heart. It grows towards the sky as it speaks. One simple gesture of appreciation comforts like the sight and touch of polished wood: familiar, strong, and beautifully stable.

Next Message.

One has a voice like a dancer in quicksand.

“Hey… it’s Meg. Um, I’m calling to tell you that I was at a forensics tournament today reading Augusten Burroughs’s book, Dry, and in it, he… is… sober for a long time and then…um… relapses, as his best friend, slash, used to be lover, lots of complicated stuff, is dying of AIDS and dies of AIDS…” Her voice cradles this stranger’s tragedy.
“And I was like, so moved by this story, and I don’t know why, but I just like, the way he describes the death-- cause it’s true, the story is autobiographical, I believe, and-- not that that matters, but like-- I don’t know it’s just very real, and …I think for the first time ever, I pictured you not being alive.” Her voice is heavy with the experience of death, but sharply aware of the inevitability of fresh wounds. It begins to flutter with the onset of mild panic. “Which made me cry harder, which made me be like…like… realize that there is a level of pain that I have not…that has not existed… I mean, I’ve thought about my mom’s death, and how awful that’s going to be, and I’m sure I’ve thought of like, (flushhhh) - sorry, we’re in the bathroom- I’m sure I’ve thought of, like, losing you-- I don’t-- This sounds ridiculous for me to be saying this to you, but I’ve never thought about it and I… I just lost it, and …like, more selfishly than anything in the world I just thought…That is something I hope I never have to experience…ohgh! I just, It’s not bad, I was just so emotional and I wanted to share it with you, and… um… I’ve already started planning
stuff for your birthday and I just like… like… what if one time there was your birthday and you weren’t alive— AGH! I just started freaking out and I’m sure you do this all the time about people in your life, but I apparently haven’t done this to you, or about you, in a long time. So… I freaked out and I love you so much and I really hope you’re still alive, so call me if you are!” Her voice cracks and squeaks with anxiety and urgency. The effusion of words, gathering speed with mounting frustration, is begrudgingly aware of its own inadequacy. “I love you so much, Natalie. Like so much, like more, like I’m going to start crying in the bathroom and I can’t, and I just feel like…I have less people to spread out my craziness on…” The words become thick as they slow in a rush of tears. “And you’re always the one to take so much of it… I hope you can understand me, I’m sorry- ohh!... I’ve just been really bad lately… I need to chill out… but my anxiety’s been bad, and I need to stop talking about it because I think that makes it worse…” She begins to accept that her best attempt to express this complex emotion via voicemail, though insufficient, will have to do. “Ok, I’m going to go watch a D.I. round, which hopefully will be very sad and I can cry a lot, and that will be good, and then I’ll look normal… ok, I love you.” Surrender. “Bye.”

This voice is in constant battle with its own human limitations of physicality and language. Infuriated, it flails and surges, pushes and pulls, trying to create more than words allow. It asks for your help in its frustration, only intensifying the struggle, playing into the hands of the hungry sand. But even in a frantic thrashing, this voice moves with grace and beauty. It stretches and elongates its muscles, striving for fuller expression. It dreams constantly of using 100% of the brain’s potential. It tires, so for now it quiets, resolving to sink peacefully beneath the surface. Only warmth and calm remain. Until the next burst of passion that will inevitably draw it up like a Phoenix for a rematch with words, it sleeps. It will never be silent until it learns to float.

**Next Message.**

*One has a voice like apple pie.*
“Natalie??... This is your favorite Grandmother!” You can already hear the laugh coming. She is the only Grandmother, and always has been. “I j-h-h-hust wanted to tell you that I found something just for you yesterday at WALmart! It’s a kit to bake a roast, with the vegetables and everything in it, all you gotta do is take it out, put it in the pan, and put it in the oven. And you could have roast beef, roast pork, or beef stew!” She assumes correctly that these are delicacies in your typical diet. “So I just wanted you to know I was thinking about you w-h-h-hen I saw it! Hahaha…” Her laugh trails into her last sentence. “I’ll talk to you later!” Having hooted her way through the entire message, she can’t resist one last good laugh…it echoes as she hangs up. “Byebye! Hahahahahahaha…”

This voice is comfort food, affection, history and tradition. It is the voice of a matriarch. It is the voice of a family. It hovers over her you like a protective umbrella. It is sweet and warm, like a holiday. This voice is memory.

Next Message.

One has a voice like the sun on your back.

“Heyyyyy, lover. It’s me. How are ya? Um….. I hope you had a great weekend, and I’m sorry I was not able to go bowling, but I hope you guys had fun. Aaaand, I would love to catch up with you…” The tone of his voice is rich and warm. It effortlessly envelopes you as if its only purpose is to make you feel loved. “But most importantly, I want to talk about the Halloween party… Mmwwaa-ah-ah-ah-ah…um… cause I really wanna be there. And I think I’m gonna be.” He pauses, knowing that this assertion is undoubtedly causing an ecstatic reaction. You can hear the smile on his face. “And I want to discuss costumes. So I’m just working right now, I work till three, then I’ll be out and about for the day so if you get a chance, give me a call… And I hope to hear-- OH MY GOSH!!! He interrupts himself with a jolt that startles even him. “By the way, happy anniversary! I think it’s today… oh my god. I hope that you and Nate are just...
enjoying each other more and more every day.”

His voice drips with sincerity as he pauses to decide if he wants to continue the thought. “Um… I love you guys. And I’ll talk to you soon! Ok, bye.”

This voice is complexly emotional. It seeps through the phone like syrup. It is sweet, sticky affection begging you to lick it up. It does not quiet until it drenches light. This voice restores. It is a vessel of care. The specific words it speaks are inconsequential; one phrase continuously rings out: “You Are Loved.” This voice is a hand on your shoulder, offering warmth and support, even and especially when you are facing away from the sun.

Next Message.

One has a voice like antique leather.

“Hi Nana, it’s your brudder Dayday… um… I just haven’t talked to you in a while… well, I have, but now I miss you more…” A past of pain has made his voice hard. It is laden with the experience of an old man, but still exposes the natural spark of a 24-year-old heart. His voice softens when he speaks to you.

“But, uh, just wonderin’ how things are going… uh… got a side job, paint job, that I’ve been workin’ on for the last couple days for a few hours, that’s been kind of—um—keeping me afloat, here…” He hints at struggles, but is proud to be working with his hands. “But, um, hope everything’s goin’ good for you, I’m prayin’ for you and Nathan and Apstin… to kick ass… and the trowels to be smooth… huhuhuh!…” His deep, rumbling chuckle assumes your laughter is echoing it. It can only be compared to a giggle; an immeasurably masculine, guttural, growl of a giggle, but a giggle nonetheless.

“But, um, just give me a call back. I love you.” He never hangs up the phone without saying it. “Bye.”

This voice has been tried. It has spent its life searching for the perfect word. It is venomous in anger, but life-affirming in love. This voice exists in extremes. It has been weathered, stretched and worn. It bears a spider web crackle of life-lines.
But it is also getting better with age. This voice, though gruff, sounds like a little boy to you. It bears scars, but wears them well.

Next Message.

One has a voice like a machete.

“DAM STRIT!!… I LOVE YOUR DIRTY ASS WHEN NO ONE’S LOOKING! …” A booming, cartoonish voice with a Spanish and somewhat Jamaican accent bursts through the receiver. “I EVEN LOVE YOUR DIRTY ASS WHEN EVERYBODY’S LOOKING!!!!! IN THE COLLOSSEUM! EVERYBODY SCREAMING! It sounds like nonsense at first, but after spending some time with Cootiechochonkey, it’s easy to pick up on the underlying messages of his ear-piercing rants. “Cause I do little black tsings… not in a dark corner… BUT IN FRONT OF EVERYBODY’S EYEEEE!”

Cootiechochonkey has a violent streak. He’s a vigilante with something to prove, but underneath all that, he’s really a very loving monkey. “I love your dirty ass. Is TRUE! Dam striiiiiIIIIITTTT!!!”… Scuffling ensues. “Cootie, gimme the phone!… Sorry, hello?”

One has a voice like a stained glass window.

“Oh, he was leaving you a message. Well…I just wanna say ‘I love you’ to my best friend.” All goofing around aside, he suddenly drops the character. His voice takes on its most personal tone. “Um. If I was gonna share anything cool, like go to six flags, or something fun like that… going camping or canoeing… I’d wanna invite you first. I always have, ever since we were little kids. And even though there’s been years where we haven’t talked, nothing’s ever changed. You still bring so much life and energy into my heart like nobody, literally, nobody, ever has.” The acknowledgement of childhood friendship sits deep in his voice, permeating his words with familiarity and comfort.

“Also…One of my revelations that I had the other day as to why you’re back in my life now is because…um… one of the major things that sucked about my breakup with Gabby was just the life and little world that I had with her and Cootiechochonkey and Sueno. And I just never thought that
would ever be replaced, but... this is... I don’t want you to take this lightly, but... you’re way better with the monkeys than I could have ever imagined.” A pause reflects the depth and sincerity of the compliment. There is a vulnerable confidence in his voice. Even though the monkeys are rambunctious stuffed animals, he seems to know that you won’t, as he says, take this lightly. “And I think that the monkeys represent how a girl would be as a mother. And... out of all the people that have ever interacted with the monkeys, I think you are the most loving, and caring, and understanding... mother to ‘em that they’ve ever had. And I can honest to God say that, like... you totally understand ‘em, you never raise your voice to ‘em, and... you know how to calm ‘em down with just a very nurturing, loving voice. Most people, if they need to calm ‘em down, they’ll yell at ‘em, or like, you know, ground ‘em, or shout at them, and you never have, you’re just always so kind to ‘em...and that just proves that you’re gonna be such a wonderful mother. The wonder of childhood begets compassionate wisdom in adulthood, if you let it. “So... the phone’s beeping, I don’t know if that means I’m running out of time... or something, but... anyways....um.... yea.” His tone is resolved; he has said all he needs to say. “I love you.”

A machete’s not a weapon, it’s a tool. It clears a path. When there isn’t time to beat around the bush, a machete will slash that bush in half. Now the stage is clear... Say what you need to say.

This voice splits into many colors, each appealing to a different eye. As the light from the sun illuminates the window, you can see one artist’s rendition of the truth. This voice is here to teach. This voice is here to reach. It lets the light flow through it, a vessel for something greater. It colors the world with imagination. This voice will not let you forget your childhood. It will flood your big picture with all the hours of daylight until you can finally see.

Next Message.
One has a voice like going home.
“Hey craysee lady! It is me leaving you a craysee message!”

Her voice conveys laughter, even when she isn’t laughing.

“Um… yea! So, hope you’re having a fantastic day, and I love you so much… and… don’t forget to bring my stuff tomorrow!”

Her expressions of love are light-hearted and genuine, as is her gentle admonition against your notorious absent-mindedness… “And give me a call whenever, K? Love you, sis!”

Love you, too. “Bye!”

This voice is familiarity and closeness. It is relaxed and playful. It carries the admiration of a youngest sister speaking to an oldest sister, but it still pokes fun. This voice has grown into something unique and beautiful, but still asks for protection. It reminds you of the place you first learned to be responsible for someone littler than you. It contains the essence of your family name: your grandmother’s hoot, your father’s belly laugh, your mother’s softness, your brother’s affectionate teasing…

But most of all, she sounds like you.

End of messages.
Mash Up

If I were a record and you played me backwards,
Checking my RPMs, here's what you'd swear I said:

\textit{I frequent dirt bags}. Drop the needle and play me again.

Do you still stay up all night playing oldies?
Still store your weed in that scorched wooden box,
Still keep Visine handy? That first morning,

On your way to work, you paused at the door,
Head thrown back, unlit spliff between your lips.
I asked, \textit{were you bumming a light from God}?

"Welcome to the real world," you said, blinking hard.

If I were a record and you played me backwards,
Checking my RPMs, here's what you'd swear I said:

\textit{I frequent dirt bags}. Drop the needle and play me again.

Now weigh the disclaimer implied
By my pairing of \textit{frequent} and \textit{dirt}.
Belied, in turn, by that coupling
Of same-sex parts of speech.

At this hour, I still get up
When the beat comes back,
Hard.
Love Poem to the First Woman I Hated

_for Joey, my boyhood friend_

Julia, you were the first.

Uttering your name over the toilet
I gripped myself like one of the weapons
you bragged your gangster friends
carried for protection.

For his protection, your son
carried his silence like an i.d.

At twelve Joey was stealing clothes,
pocketing money where he could,
trying to adopt your foul language
Into the shy lyric of his painful voice.

Julia, you slut.
Waiting for your son, I saw you
cross your legs slowly,
the hem of your stocking still a
blindfold over my eyes.
I remember you pointing the knife, for fun,
your laugh an edge of steel against his fear.
You didn’t see the wound flowering within…

Joey never made it out of sixth grade.
Even now the needle marks in his arms
are nothing more than ellipses
of an overdue composition.
In and out of jail
the bars he gripped could have been
the bones of your shoulders.

Julia, the red light in your bedroom
burned its promise through
the cold of my adolescent night;
it burned in the small fire
under the back porch
where Joey and I warmed our hands;
it burns now, aflame in my heart,
Ross Talarico

not sex, but love
for the boy who reached out toward
such an awful woman…

And now, at a time
when the simple lyric of confession
becomes the sick chant that
drives us; at a time when I wanted
to say only Joey loved you, he loved you,
he loved you…

now I make my way back
eyeing your legs turned bone,
and caked red of your thinning lips
and the rusted edge of the voice you plead with.
You should have known the one violent deed
separates the boy within from the man
who will stand before you.

Kneel, Julia.
Unlatch this thick belt.
Pray for your dying son.
Romance

An addition symbol of ash for your forehead,
it might have suggested blackberries.

The daylight lurks on its corner
desperate and pushy. Evasive
are the maneuvers I’d suggest.

You look lovely;
Your skin has a glow;
Have you lost?

Science is the determined animal.
A trial of errors is struck.
Fire is the cause of the match.

My gift to you is a faucet,
the freckles endowed to your brow;
I could be your father.

Your hair is a rainbow
arc above the roof of the pawn shop.
The Request

Peter was smoking behind the bushes to the side of St. John’s, the small church he had attended since childhood. He positioned himself so he could see who came and went: his son’s baseball coach, his old high school flame, his work nemesis from the tannery, and so on, but no one could see him. The waiting and watching had become a weekly ritual, as Peter never felt free to walk right in as the others did.

Although he committed fewer sins than he used to, it was no easier to confess them. This paradox was what he was contemplating as he tossed his cigarette butt into the bush, then he wondered whether it was really a paradox at all or irony or just something that made no damn sense? As he entered, he whispered a short prayer, nothing fancy, something he picked up in AA, hoping this small effort would save him, at least until next week.

As he approached the confessional, Peter heard weeping. In his time outside on this particular day, he hadn’t seen anyone enter. Curious, despite better judgment, he continued forward. The last thing he wanted to do was interrupt another poor soul’s quest for forgiveness, but something felt very wrong. The curtain to the right of the confessional was quivering; he could feel a slight breeze blowing from inside.

Upon reaching to draw back the curtain, a chill and the strong smell of incense overtook him bringing him back to a different time. He held onto the curtain tightly like he was trying to squeeze something out of it. It felt like the tablecloths his parents used at the Italian restaurant they owned when he was a kid.

Suddenly, the cry from inside turned to a plea, “God, please help me.” Peter immediately recognized the voice as one that had haunted him since adolescence. He jumped back and let the curtain slip.

According to the arrangement, Father James wasn’t supposed to be conducting confession on Fridays. Peter and the others hadn’t asked for much, hadn’t made the fuss they could have. Couldn’t the church at least respect their one minor request? He momentarily forgot the cry and considered marching over to the parish office to wage a formal complaint. Before he could this, the voice called out again, “Is someone there? I … think it’s a heart attack.”
Peter knew he should do something. He was no saint, but he wasn’t vicious. After all, hadn’t he been taught forgiveness lead to salvation? The elderly priest was not the same man he encountered years ago, and his death could not take away what happened.

Despite this sound reasoning, Peter couldn’t be moved to get help. He looked up at the sunlit stain glass window above. The scene depicted a young St. John the Baptist bartering before he become the reforming zealot obsessed with the justice of God, before his head was presented on a platter. Peter acknowledged nothing in his image and walked away.
A Loss (a poem in the voice of my mother)

--in memory of Edward Recar

There was a time,
before I lost my French,

I knew enough
to sing with tunes
my grandpa crooned.

When I was small,
he spoiled with his sweets

and he toted me
upon his back
around the gallery.

We’d end up
at the pantry shelves

where I would root
to my small heart’s content.

(I liked the pictures of the kids
on cookie tins and apple cans.)

One day you’ll have your own;
and I’d shake my head.
His eyes would crinkle
as we put them back again.

That year I got the influenza bad.
He wrapped me up and drove us
round and down the lanes.

So now it seems all wrong
he doesn’t have a stone,

no iron cross
to mark the place he lays.

One year, my daddy paced it off
a dogwood tree,

but now that tree is gone,
and all I know is
he's in Richwoods' churchyard there.

He died in summer.
I remember that.

My uncles made the box
they put him in.

They laid them out at home
back in those times.

I wasn’t scared.
I don't think I understood,

not until my mother covered
our few mirrors one by one.

We wouldn’t want his soul
captured up at home, she said.

When she found me in the parlor
pulling all the pillowcases off,
she spanked me hard.

I sat out on the porch
and cried all day, knowing
he never would have minded
that I’d wanted him to stay.
A Year Sober

They tempt you, even now, those college-town pretties, sitting across the bus aisle in short skirts, and some with no panties, multiplied by their reflections in the window, like bottles lining a mirrored bar. Once you took the bait, moved her to a club and watched her pour down sticky cocktails while you picked at the napkin beneath the glass. Back at her apartment, she tried to open a bottle of wine while you unhooked her bra and let it slip down her arms and swing from her elbows. You left when she passed out, the lace cups still hammocked across her stomach.

And there are other mementos of anniversary: the occasional urgency of exit, the tattooed man at the pool hall urinal finally conceding that he has nothing to offer you. Sympathy for a brassy, coin-shaped moon. There is so much to turn away from no wonder you still question what it all has to do with you, the dark regularity of Mass, the wet cigarette you try to light in the rain.
Dear Robert

Maybe you don’t remember me, but I sat next to you in 1962, in eighth grade math class, Leestown Junior High School, Lexington, Kentucky. Vietnam was still a world away to us and the United States had resumed its nuclear testing, detonating a place called Christmas Island, but we didn’t know.

I didn’t know about a segregationist group in New Orleans, offering African Americans free one-way bus rides out of New Orleans, to go anywhere, to just leave. It was in response to the Freedom Riders they said. I did know about the Freedom Riders. I loved the idea in those words, the idea of getting on a bus because you could, going where you wanted to go, with people you wanted to be with, Freedom Riders. I may not have known math that year, but I knew that being black meant you sat at the back of buses. And, I saw the separate water fountains for you, the separate entrances to the movie theaters downtown. If you went to see "The Blob" with Steve McQueen with your family, like I did with mine, you didn't even stand in the same line I did to get tickets. One time when I was getting popcorn I watched the white ushers rope the black people off from where I was standing, then they motioned them up the stairs, silently, quietly, before the movie started. From where I sat on the main floor I turned and looked up behind me. I tried to see if you were there in that second balcony. I hadn't even known there was a second balcony.

That year at school, Robert, you said hello to me every day. You wore white shirts that were so crisp they looked as if they could sit in your chair without you. You walked straighter than anyone I'd ever seen. You wore dress pants and you walked so quietly that sometimes I didn't know you were there next to me until you moved the chair to sit down. No one, no one, had hands like yours - calm, clean, determined and confident. And, I watched your hands when you raised one of them to answer the teacher's math questions. You were always right. Even if I’d known the answers, which I never did, I could never have raised my hand like you did. Your voice matched your hands.

I wondered what riding on a school bus was like for you. Mine was full of spitballs, boys pushing, shoving, stepping on your feet then taking the saved seats. Those buses smelled awful, like hot rubber and sour socks, but our new
school, Leestown, smelled even worse, full of what they called plastic - chairs, tables, desks. The cafeteria smelled like petroleum; the food tasted like petroleum no matter what they served. I never did find you at lunch, but I looked for you almost every day. In October there was a school dance in that cafeteria on a Saturday night. Mom dropped me off. The music was “Big John,” over and over again. I never did find you. I wanted to say could we talk, could we dance.

But in that math class, when the tests and homework papers were handed back to us, I saw the one hundreds handwritten across the tops of your papers. Sometimes you'd ask me what I got, and you’d show me your paper. I pretended I hadn't already seen your grade. You'd ask me to show you my grade. I couldn't. I would just shake my head and say I didn't pass. You'd say keep working at it. Sometimes you'd try to explain the problems to me when we were supposed to be doing the homework. I still didn't get it, but oh, how I loved your attention on me.

That May my dad quit his job at the Post Office and Mom quit her secretary job at the Kentucky Highway Department. They sold our home on Taylor Drive, down the road from Leestown Junior High and bought a motel in Florida. By July I'd learned to wash sheets, make beds, clean rooms, clean a pool, fold towels, and answer a switchboard.

That summer, when Mom went to enroll me in the school there, the principal at that junior high said my math grades were too low. He said I had to go to summer school, so I did. After that, I made As and Bs in math at school. I thought of you. I was in the National Honor Society my senior year in high school and still, I thought of you.

I knew my life was hard back then, but I always knew yours was harder. I knew it took more courage than I had to be an African American. You were the only one in that math class. I saw how none of the boys I knew, or even the girls, spoke to you. It was as though you were invisible to them. I want you to know I looked for you after school every day at Leestown. I stood in the noise and exhaust fumes from the school buses and wondered if I found you would you speak to me.

One of my friends back then took me to her uncle’s house one day in our subdivision. It was a mansion in Meadowthorpe Subdivision, the family house for the farm that was there before the land was sold and subdivided. The house
had a winding drive to a huge white house with columns, like Tara in *Gone With The Wind*. We were on our bikes; mine, bright blue, with a white seat. We left our bikes in the back yard and went to the back door. An African American lady in a white starched uniform with an apron as crisp as your shirts opened the door. She recognized my friend and let us inside. She smiled and gave us glasses of cold water and we walked around the huge house, running up and down the giant steps to the second floor. I had never been in such beautiful rooms, where the wood seemed to echo and the rugs were so thick you felt as if you were walking on air. The windows and drapes went from the ceiling to the floor. I asked my friend if she ever slept in the house. She showed me her room.

Then we went back downstairs and to the kitchen. The lady who was the maid hugged her. She said to come back anytime and we left. On another day, maybe the next week, I was riding my bike and thought it would be fun to go back to the mansion. I left my bike in the back yard just as we had done before and I knocked on the same back door. The same lady answered, but this time she looked at me puzzled. I said I had come back to visit. She told me I’d need to be with my friend to come in. I said I thought she said to come back and visit anytime. She closed the door. I have not forgotten the feeling I had when she closed the door. I have not forgotten standing in those fumes looking for you.

I saw you again once, eight years later, 1969, in the courtroom of Lexington’s City Hall. I was working for the City-County Planning Commission, putting my then husband through the University of Kentucky. That day in that courtroom, I was there taking minutes at the Planning Commission meeting where they approved and disapproved zone changes. I looked up and there you were, walking in through the double doors, taking a seat with an older man, your grandfather I thought. I knew it was you immediately. When your grandfather’s case was announced, your grandfather stood and began walking very slowly to the front of the room before the board. You supported him as he walked. I watched your hands. They were still yours. You stood behind him while he talked to the Commission. Your weren't a lawyer, few African Americans were at that time. Your shirt was wrinkled, not white. You didn't have on dress pants; you wore jeans. But you stood just as straight as I remembered you could and I knew at any moment you could...
raise your hand and say the right thing, say what needed to be said.

Your grandfather was thin, kind of bent over. He held a dusty brown hat in his hands and asked for a zone variance so that he could put a trailer on his land for you. Your grandfather’s request was approved. You never looked at me.

I wanted to know if you were married, was the trailer for you and your family, were you in college, did you have a wife putting you through college, were you going to Vietnam. As you left I wanted to run after you.

I’d been married about a year. President Kennedy was dead. Martin Luther King would be as well, soon. The Freedom Riders were making news and the anti-war demonstrations were everywhere. My husband and I agreed on nothing, not even the theme of “Easy Rider” or “2001 A Space Odyssey.” He wasn’t going to any peace demonstrations he said. He was a Republican and I better vote the same way he did. He was going to be another Frank Lloyd Wright, and I could come if I wanted to. I wondered often why I was putting him through college instead of myself. That day in the courtroom I knew I still didn't have your courage.

In 2004 I read an article in the AARP magazine, “Freedom Ride Revisited.” On page 26, the article says that in August a bus tour, sponsored by the AARP and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, moved along a route the Freedom Riders took in 1961 when they were testing the regulations barring segregation in interstate transportation. The article said that each stop on the 70-day tour featured Story Stations where passersby could share their memories. It said the tour included New Orleans, a destination the Freedom Riders didn’t reach in 1961 because of the escalating racial attacks.

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I got out my *Twentieth Century, An Almanac* to see what it would say about the '60s. In the year we were born, 1948, the Premier of Egypt, Nokrashy Pasha, was assassinated for failing to win the war against Israel. The World Health Organization was established and began large-scale application of DDT to control malaria. And, Robert Braidwood, an American archaeologist, was digging at Jarmo in the foothills of Iraq when he found a site crucial to understanding the Neolithic revolution. Then, there on page 302, I found something in the chapter heading, "In Search of Stability 1946-1962;" that's it, Robert, we were there, and we were searching for stability.
It’s been way over forty years now since the eighth grade at Leestown Junior High. It’s not Vietnam anymore, it’s Iraq. People lied again and are arguing over who is right, who is wrong and what to do now. New cars smell like Leestown Junior High did in the 1960s. My former husband remarried two weeks after our divorce was final in 1994.

But, I keep thinking back to Leestown Junior High, to eighth grade math class, to the back row, to you sitting there next to me amongst all that white. And now, I like to imagine a great bus, a Freedom Riders’ bus, huge, rumbling the ground. I imagine you already on the bus, your shirt bright again with hope. I’m on the bus steps getting ready to go inside. I wave goodbye to the people who are standing there, the people who are watching who is getting on this bus. It’s 100 degrees here maybe, or thundering, lightening and raining, or snowing and sleetting. It doesn't matter. I climb the steps and move down the aisle. I can't find a seat. It is so full of people, all colors, all ages, all languages, talking, laughing, all wanting to be there. Some have iPones, some those music things. I’m not sure I can find a seat. Then I see you. You are toward the back, on the right. You were one of the first ones to get on. You look just like you, only older, sixty something like me now. You are smiling again. You motion for me. You’ve saved me a seat. I sit down next to you and this time, Robert, when the bus doors close, the bus we are both on the inside. And, this time, this country has elected an African American president of the United States. And, this time Robert, all things seem possible.

Perhaps you don't remember me Robert, but I sat next to you in 1962 in math class. You are the bravest person I have ever known.
Nobody Liked Him

Friday: St. Mary’s Hospital

Father in a bag unzip it unreal
Eighty-nine years inside a bag lips froze-open to sweetness
not to speak but nearly to speak nearly to ask for his tea
or his cane or yell at the nurses again He won’t stir
he won’t yawn or cough or listen to reason
Where on earth is his voice? can’t they do something?
I’ll put his glasses on him and maybe he’ll snap out of it
maybe he’ll stand up or shout or raise a hand—
And that peculiar smell
of extreme medicine or spoiled food that slyly rises
    uncoils spreading
    permanent apathy
    where all the light should be

Saturday: Sinai Memorial Chapel

Carrying my father’s clothes I wait for the mortician
in the shining and silver rotunda
A stranger appears across from me bearing clothes as well
He rests them on a chair
as I rest mine our eyes meet we cannot speak
he with his clothes
I with my clothes What can we say?
What is proper? What is needed? Stranger lost
in the cold rotunda friend. . .
Somewhere nearby they must be storing Father—
will they let me visit him?
    What would be the harm?

Sunday: Around Golden Gate Park

Henry J. Frankel
with your beat-up Jaguar your millions your stingy tips
What am I doing lugging around your glasses in the trunk
your rings your bracelet your watch your billfold
Who will I persuade to go to the funeral?
San Francisco: upbeat crowds
rich young couples pushing strollers stop to chat with
rich young couples pushing strollers
and I thought Henry Frankel *owned* this town!
Who will I recruit
for the funeral? No one answers
or returns calls
and the hands of the old Vietnamese masseuse
feel tentative and feeble along my thigh
  “You no want hand job? Too tired?”

Monday: Eternal Home

The gravediggers are dark and hot
not more than twenty-four
What do they talk about at night without music or a breeze?
God
make this dream explode
into such a fairground of hair and stream and cotton candy
Sweet mystery in that coffin!
Sealed in there forever? Not my father he’ll claw
his way to safety feisty
free to explore downtown in the blazer I brought him
free to check balances reclaim his passport
because he needs Lake Como and the Alps
as badly I need his anger
  and his voice
Absence of Presence

I found a black parka abandoned in the tall file cabinet while looking for an old syllabus. The jacket, perhaps stored here on purpose over the summer, had a ripe odor, like my son’s laundry bag in his college dormitory.

At first, I thought it belonged to a particular young man, one of the three other adjunct professors, who shares my small basement office at the university. We teach on different days, and our paths had never crossed. I posted a note on the bulletin board, but nobody seemed to know whose jacket it was.

I thought about throwing it in the trash, but first I decided it would be a good idea to inspect the item of clothing more carefully. After all, we endure cold winters here in New England. It was a men’s size small and the inside label read “Prada.” Wow, I thought, like in “The Devil Wears Prada.” This item was expensive and someone was surely missing it. I called Lost and Found at the university police department, but nobody had reported it.

The outside pocket contained a two-year-old ticket stub from Lufthansa, the German airline. A dry cleaning tag with Chinese letters was attached to the inside loop near the collar. Could the owner be a wealthy international student, perhaps Asian? Perhaps he didn’t bother tracking it down and simply purchased another on his next trip to Newbury Street, Boston’s center for boutiques and upscale shopping.

The next time I held office hours, one of my male students, a self-described fashionista, stopped in for some advice on his essay assignment, and I mentioned the jacket. He inspected it carefully and decided it would fit.

“I’ll take it if nobody claims it,” he offered.

The black vinyl Prada jacket, size small, has spent more time in my office than I or any of my suitemates have over the past year. One of my fellow adjuncts thinks she might now remember whom the parka belongs to. She sent an email, but nobody responded. Meanwhile, I’ve taken the liberty to air the jacket out on the coat rack. It seems puffier now, perked up from the attention after all those months in suspended animation, like a bear over a long winter. And what a brutal winter it’s been so far.

The other day I carefully folded it up like in a boutique and placed it on the empty shelf by the wall. The
Prada parka is the first thing you see when entering the office. It occurs to me that none of the adjuncts could afford it, yet we are bound by some ethical standard, perhaps far above that of the jacket’s owner, to keep it safe.

Two weeks later: the jacket has disappeared. No note, no thank you, no explanation. A literature professor of mine once coined a phrase, “the absence of presence,” which seems apt.
Rosann Kozlowski

Saints in Stained Glass

His hands bless the same woman since the sixteenth century. For hundreds of lives I look at the hue. Today the azure fashions my arm into linden leaves. When the sun strikes, my chest bears a kaleidoscope. I’m all color and prompt.

One breast holds sovereign, the other snow; my heart is a study in intaglio, fire grips my knees; my ribs raise winter’s indigo. If I breathe, the seasons flare to the rafters. I’m fired and dazzling: what have I done with my life?
Barbwire halo

You don your crown of steel thorns in the morning
from the stand where your necklace rusts,
head out into the streets of illusion
already splitting apart like parthenon marble.
I tell you the broken interstate is the grass and clay
reclaiming its place,
you say it's a sign
and the door opens through grace.

-- And works, I say,
and works, you say,
of a tireless heart.

You come home in the sunset
to the carpets of immaterial fabric
that catch the dust for us
and hold its unspoken breath.
You make bread, and I make soup,
and I tell you what the people of Greece
have said today,
and you tell me what the people of Rome
have done.
Letters To My Mother

A family bonds in prosperity, and grows through tragedy. As mother and daughter, two women lost one man. Identity forms through experience. These are ours.

Nanny, Champion of the World

When I was 10, Dad gave me a book to read called Danny, Champion of the World. It was about a 10 year old boy who lived with his dad. His dad was a poacher, and it talked about the trouble they got into, how they lived their lives as a twosome, and essentially, how his dad lifted him up to be his Champion of the World, because the only important thing was each other. This became a very special book for us, and really defined how we felt about each other as a family. Although this story was about a single father and an only child, it really hit home because of the relationship they had.

Single parenthood, a theme of this book, had no resonating reality with our family at the time. That wasn’t what stood out to me. What I knew was that I had a relationship with each of you that was as close and as strong as if it were just the two of us. That’s an incredibly strong bond, one that I don’t think many people really experience with their children. I was lucky enough to have the closeness by choice that most people only get by circumstance.

That Christmas, I got a present from the two of you in a small box. I opened it to find a silver necklace with a pendant on it. It was rectangular with a large, decorative “N” on the front. When you turned it over, it said “Champion of the World.”

I want you to know that I have treasured it. I used to wear it every day. When the chain broke, I put it in a box. And through every move, from house, to dorm, to house, to dorm, to house of my own, I have kept it safe and precious. When I got my first serious boyfriend in high school, I thought I was in love. I gave it to him because I wanted to give him the most important thing of mine that I had. He made it difficult for me to get back when we broke up, but I rescued it, and
vowed to never give it to anyone again. Even after actually falling in love and marrying Nathan, and even though he’s an “N” too, years later, it stays tucked away in a fireproof box, belonging to no one but me.

Bring Him Home

It was 1996. For my thirteenth birthday, you and Dad got me tickets for the three of us to go see Les Miserables in Chicago. I had grown up on the soundtrack, because our 16-hour family road trips were always colored by full soundtracks of musicals. All three of us kids knew Les Miserables, Miss Saigon, West Side Story, and Phantom of the Opera by heart by the time we were old enough to sing along.

You and Dad had seen the show before and raved about it, but all I knew of it came from listening to the soundtrack and you telling me the story, filling in the holes as it went along. I remember that me, Dayday and Julia always liked “Master of the House” the best because they said two swear words in it. Because you were excellent parents, you censored what we saw and heard; consequently, hearing “damn” in the score of a Broadway show was relatively shocking. When I officially became a teenager, you showed me that you knew I was mature enough to appreciate the music for more than just that.

We got all dressed up and went out for the evening together. It was one of the first times that I really felt “grown up.” I remember feeling honored that the two of you would choose to share this experience with me. When I settled between the two of you in the red theater seats, the first notes came rushing like a powerhouse from the orchestra pit and we all flew back like a hurricane hit us. You grabbed my arm and said, “Are you ready?” The passion for music that united you with Dad clearly resides in me.

I remember tears coming to my eyes because of the sheer beauty of people’s voices, a phenomenon that would frequently repeat itself as I got older. “Bring Him Home,” one of the final songs, was a favorite of Dad’s. He loved when I played it on the piano. It was one of the only songs he would
stop and listen to, and even ask me to play again. A gruff, burly man sang it, but the softest sounds came out of him that I have ever heard. It was comforting, protective, and selfless. The last note floated high into the rafters and settled on my eyelids, gently closing them.

Four years passed. My birthday came again. Just a few days after that, Dad died suddenly in his sleep. You later told us that you woke to a faint choking noise, realizing quickly that he wasn’t breathing. I awoke to being violently shaken, although in the split second it took me to open my eyes, I saw only the rush of your nightgown through my doorway as you flew back to his side, screaming for us to help. In the blur that followed, Dayday attempted CPR until the paramedics flooded the house. My eyes were locked on Dad’s near-naked body, a house for his soul for the past 46 years, showing the typical signs of middle age. The muscles around his waist and arms had softened through comfortable years of good food and relaxation with family. The crow’s feet that cradled his eyes gave away a lifetime of laughter. His hands, wide and calloused, had pulled my tiny, fragile body onto his stomach countless times, where I had buried my face in the thick, wiry hair on his chest. But I was older, and he was vulnerable. Lying on the floor in only his underwear, the strong figurehead of our family was completely exposed and unconscious in front of strangers. I didn’t want them to see his belly, his crow’s feet, or his body hair. I didn’t want them to touch him. I thought that if I just pressed my face to his chest again, maybe he would feel it. But a wall of outsiders trying to help now formed between my father and me. Numbness began to creep over my body. I retreated to a corner in the living room, assumed the fetal position in Dad’s recliner, covered my ears, and sang “Bring Him Home” in my head.

Even as the paramedics put him on a stretcher and carried him to the ambulance, I could not relax my muscles from the ball I was curled into. And I couldn’t stop hearing that song. Eventually, although I’m not sure how I got there, I found myself sitting in our Suburban, waiting to follow the ambulance to the hospital. Julia was crying. Dayday was staring out the window and frantically asking why it was taking them so long to get going. I silently stared at the back of your
head as your white knuckles gripped the steering wheel. You knew there was only one reason why they wouldn’t be moving yet. Even so, the song continued.

Still, while we sat in the hospital waiting room, it played. Even after the doctor came in and told us that Dad was gone, those words still echoed in my head, clear as a bell. At the time, it was a source of comfort. It was a reminder of that 13th birthday and the music that filled our family road trips. It didn’t occur to me until later that I had been unwittingly lifting a prayer.

I have seen Les Miserables again since then, more than once. At the end of that musical, they sing a specific phrase. “To love another person is to see the face of God.” You have often repeated it to me in conversation, reminding me of its importance. I think it is the greatest truth you and Dad ever taught me.

The Arkansas Special

In the spring of 2001, we took a family vacation to Eureka Springs to visit Memah, Dad’s mom, for Easter. Along with you, me, Dayday and Julia, we brought Dayday’s friend Chris, my best friend, Katie (your honorary daughter), and of course, our loyal and beloved family dog, Edith Ann. The Suburban was packed to the brim with people and their stuff, not to mention the fact that we were pulling our 30-foot trailer behind us. We formed a caravan, following Uncle Rick, Aunt Kathy and our cousins in their similar vehicle situation.

After several hours of driving, we found ourselves in Rolla, Missouri, about halfway to our destination. As we traveled down the highway framed in rolling hills, laughing about one thing or another, I turned my head slightly and saw a flash of green out of my left periphery. A jeep was swerving uncontrollably after cutting off an 18-wheeler. He jerked to the right and flew straight for us. You tried to compensate but turned the wheel too far, and the Suburban and trailer jackknifed. The semi drove into a ditch to avoid hitting us. We started spinning around in a frenzy of shattering glass and
screams. I was silent. It seemed to go in slow motion as I held my breath and waited for it to be over, my right arm secured tightly over Katie’s chest, half protecting her, half clutching her for dear life. She was equally silent next to me. The wall of earth screamed toward the windshield, unavering and unforgiving. I don’t remember a deafening crash, but a deafening silence. It hung heavily in the air as we all began to tentatively exhale, afraid to breathe. Slowly, we started climbing out of the car. It was obvious at first glance that the trailer was totaled, probably the Suburban too. We had punted the propane tank about 30 feet away from where we crashed, and there was a gouge in the pavement an inch deep where the hitch of the trailer had scraped along the ground. Only then did we realize how close we were to flipping over and how easily we all could have died in that crash. We looked around at each other, suddenly marveling at our good condition. We were literally untouched; Dayday had a cut on his arm from the window exploding, but that was the extent of the injuries. We muttered words like “lucky” and “blessed,” which were painfully inadequate.

I remember that Dayday and Chris stayed at the scene while we went with the tow truck and a stranger brought them McDonalds. I remember that many, many people stopped to help. I remember that Uncle Rick couldn’t get off the highway to turn around right away and didn’t know if we were ok. I remember that when he finally got there, his eyes were glistening with tears. I don’t even remember him crying at Dad’s funeral.

Most people would have turned around and gone home when that happened. But for some reason, the thought never even crossed our minds. Looking back, I really can’t believe we kept moving forward. But you rounded up your family, took us to Walmart, bought a huge tent, rented a car, and kept driving.

A six day roller coaster followed. Sleeping in the tent that first night was one of the worst nights of my life; we were not typically tent campers, and we were unprepared. It was Arkansas, but it was April, and while the days were warm, the nights were definitely not. Katie and I slept on a thin blanket,
sharing an only slightly thicker blanket over us. The cold prohibited sleep; it was the kind of cold that seeps into your bones, causing muscles to involuntarily contract and spasm in an animal instinct to encourage blood flow. The brain fights it, though- moving around invites the cold air to swirl around you, and your every thought focuses instead on collapsing into the smallest, most contorted ball of human flesh and bone imaginable. Everything hurts. Katie and I tried to crawl inside each other, and eventually gave up, eyes squeezed shut, fists clenched, praying for sunrise. When it finally came and we all began to thaw, I started complaining and found out that Dayday and Chris had slept on the bare floor of the tent with only a sheet over them, so I shut up.

The stress you dealt with on that trip eroded your heart. You had been shocked with the responsibility of the sole care of your three children less than a year prior. And on this trip, you were caring for not only the three of us, but two of our friends as well. You were a single mother of five children in an unfamiliar place, stripped of your only means of travel and shelter. Your determination got us through that trip, but you were not without weakness.

One of those first few nights, you had a meltdown. You were wearing a flannel nightgown and your hair was in two blonde braids that stuck out asymmetrically. You looked like a tiny, scared little girl. The stray hairs that fell around your face were wet with tears and sticking to your forehead in feverish sweat. Your eyes were sunken and overcast, swollen and red. You walked toward the tent in a jolting stagger, staring straight ahead but seeing nothing, clutching your cell phone even though you had no service in the Ozark mountains. That image of you wrapped itself around my heart and squeezed it, tighter and tighter until I couldn’t breathe. I followed you into the tent where you had laid down, still staring, still digging your nails into your phone. I asked you if you wanted me to take it and put it away for you, but you declined and gripped it tighter. In sad exasperation, I asked you why you needed it. You replied in a fragile, tiny voice, “In case I wanna call someone, or someone wants to call me.” Your vulnerability pierced my chest and surged back up through my lungs, catching in my throat and choking me. Tears spilled uncontrollably from my eyes as I looked at you, helpless and
afraid. You clung desperately to a worthless chunk of matter that symbolized human connection to you, but its shape didn’t fit the hole that Dad left.

Katie and I sat by the lake almost every night and sang “It Is Well With My Soul.” Her voice, which by that point was well-established as a symbol of familiarity and solace, harmonized with mine and echoed over the water. I learned in those moments that you can create peace even in tumultuous circumstance. I also learned that small moments like those could be magic.

It was Easter. Death hung in the air, but redemption was imminent.

**Thanksgiving**

The scariest phone call I have ever gotten in my life came to me in a very roundabout way. It was the night before Thanksgiving, and I was with my boyfriend, Nate, playing Euchre at his friend Mike’s house about 15 minutes away from home. Our neighbor, Tina, after having no luck getting through on my cell phone, somehow tracked me down through Nate’s parents and began calling all his friends until one of them picked up. I knew right then that something bad had happened. Tina had never even called me on my own cell phone. If she had found a way to find me through people she didn’t even know, this couldn’t be a typical phone call.

Tina was so flustered that she could hardly talk, and all she told me was that you had fallen down the stairs and they had rushed you to the hospital. She wouldn’t even tell me if you were ok or not, despite the fact that I asked repeatedly. All I could do was hang up the phone, sputter a fast explanation to the faces of my bewildered friends, and rush to Silver Cross Hospital to find out for myself.

Nate drove me. I don’t remember the car ride there. But I do remember getting Julia on the phone; although hysterical, she managed to tell me that you had fallen down all thirteen steps...
from our kitchen to the basement, and that you landed face-first.

That face was the first thing I saw. Your eyes had black and blue hoods over them, which swelled and traveled down around your nose. Blood was caked in your hair, and your bottom lip was quadruple its normal size and black. Your eyes looked empty as they stared around the emergency room, twitching and skittish. Your left hand was propped up on your elbow as you rotated your wrist around in a flowing figure eight, directing a choir that no one could hear.

We stayed with you as long as the hospital would allow, then went home to sleep. Dayday and Julia had left earlier and stayed with Katie and her family. When Nate and I left, we went to our house alone. Despite a number of beds to choose from, we slept on the couch. It was too small for Nate’s 6’6” frame alone, much less the two of us. We slept under the comforter that you bought me for my first college dorm room, and we didn’t move all night. We sank down together after hours of anxiety, fear and sadness, and turned to stone. We slept as though dead. Strangely, I remember waking up and thinking that I had gotten one of the best nights of sleep in my life. Somehow, contrary to every law of physics, we were comfortable all night. My limbs, which should have been completely numb from the tangled heap we slept in, felt renewed. Nate said the same. I don’t know why, but it made me think that you were going to be fine. It was Thanksgiving morning.

I went to the hospital and stayed with you. You told me that you fell because you had been drinking and you began to tearfully apologize. I told you that you didn’t have to apologize. I told you that God knew what you were going to do before you ever did it, and He forgave you before it ever happened. I told you that I wanted you to think of my forgiveness that way. You asked me how I got so wise, but I thought that was a silly question. You and Dad were the ones who raised me that way.

It is easy to discover the true meaning of Thanksgiving while sitting in a hospital room; there’s rarely a shortage of things to
ask for, and always a promise of gratitude. Sometimes giving thanks before receiving is the only way to get what you need.

**Full Circle**

One day, I went with you to a wedding you had to sing for. I didn’t know the bride and groom, I just went to hear you sing. You stationed yourself in the balcony where no one could really see either of us, so we had kind of a secret date that day.

You were upset. You had trouble singing for weddings since Dad had died, and it didn’t help that you had recently lost the necklace that you had made out of his wedding ring. A small garnet cross, which you had kept since your childhood, fit perfectly inside the gold ring that was a larger version of the one on your left hand. It hung on a thin gold chain, never leaving your neck. It had vanished in the chaos of rushing you to the hospital that Thanksgiving, and you had ransacked every corner of our house looking for it. You looked in the car, you looked outside. You even thought the paramedics may have thrown it somewhere. It was absolutely nowhere to be found. Enough time had passed by this point that you had somewhat resolved yourself to believing that you would never find it, although a glimmer of hope remained every time you lifted a rug to clean beneath it or peeked behind a shelf to unplug something.

You practiced with the organist and got ready to begin the service. As we were waiting for things to start, I was looking in your purse for some gum. As I was digging around, I saw a shimmer of gold in one of the dark corners. My heart almost stopped. Fumbling, I frantically grabbed it and yanked it out of the purse, clenching the chain in my shaking fist between our faces, which were inches apart. Neither of us said a word; we could only gawk at each other and back at the ring. Your face twisted into a sob as tears rushed from your eyes in a flood of surprise, relief, joy, and grief. We collapsed together, clutching the chain and each other.

The service started soon after that. You stood and began to sing “How Great Thou Art.” I sat down right behind you,
both arms around your leg, singing a soft harmony. No one could hear me. I don’t even know if you could. All I know is that I felt God with us in the church that day. The bride and groom said their vows, everyone cheered and took pictures, and new beginnings were everywhere, especially up in that balcony.

_Sometimes healing happens when you aren’t looking._
_Sometimes you have to look for it long and hard._ The woman in these stories lives only in memory, but you are strong today because of her. In many ways, so am I.
Hunter-Gatherer: Five Exchanges

One: Syrup

One kilogram of honey
is the first gift.

I say
I will make good things with this honey.

I am sure you will,
he says.

We stand over the sink pitting cherries.
He slides a chopstick through the stem end.
The stone twists out.
Our hands redden blacken.

I switch to peaches.
I pare an X in the smooth bottom of each fruit.
He pours the boiling water,
careful not to splash me as I watch.
I slide the skin from each fruit.
I feed him a pieced skinless peach.

I have never been fed a peach by hand before,
he says.

How is it?
I ask.

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In Twelve Roses: A Cookbook for Healthful Living,
I read about honey syrups for canning fruit.
I preserve twelve jars of huckleberries
sixteen jars of peaches
sixteen jars of cherries
and three jars of blackberries
in honey syrup.

***

In the Winter, I pretend to be joking when I say this, I will send you a box of this fruit.
Then, though you will have forgotten about our summer love, you can eat the sweetness.

I will not forget you, he says, not joking.

I know, I say.

Two: Berries

I search the sheets every morning for his hairs. Each one is a new shade of copper and strawberry, a variation on long curl.

This room has so many smells. Sometimes, while I sit sewing beads onto felt, I smell sandalwood or shit or diesel. Sometimes even lavender or sage or sweat.

Ghosts, the Persian prophet Abdul’Baha writes, often manifest themselves through a scent of unidentifiable origin. Jasmine flowers on the deck of a sailboat in the Pacific. Seaweed on the hot sidewalk of a prairie city.

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One woman here tells a joke about berries: I don’t like the hwooshum so I chuck’em because I really like the chuk’em.

***

Bitter hwooshum are a valuable trade berry. Once the berry skins are broken and the pulp is whipped with a splayed stick the froth rises above the basket. A kind of sea foam tinged with the desert berry’s pink.

Our trade is one kilogram of creamed Canadian honey for a paper grocery bag of sage sticks still damp from the grasslands. One bowl of millet with blackberries and almonds for two sets of oak chopsticks. A minor scale in three variations for the lyrics to May the Circle be Unbroken.

Trade is never fair. Currency, by way of fluctuating drafts, the weather of our desire.

Poverty is a mindset we, this bright summer, my darling,
Norah Bowman-Broz

cannot afford.

Three: Shell

“Hunters thus not only live without a sense of future, they do not produce a real future, that is, a future with the potential to be anything but a continuation of the present instant. This is a temporal mode of determination with a dialectical vengeance, since it undermines the evolutionary temporality that is part of its motivational sources.”

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This green glass bead slides along a black thread from the needle.

There is a box of crushed oyster shells at the post office.

Distance across water is difficult to judge.

Distance across moons suns fireworks is not a chromatic scale.

*I only have one appetite at a time.*

*You have a way with words.*

*I have always had long-distance relationships.*

Yes.

*They are difficult.*

Yes.

***

Round holes at the centre of a Pacific Clam shell indicate a predator. That predator is the Moon Snail. At low tide, the Moon Snail drills a hole in the immobile clam and draws out the living flesh with a powerful pale vacuum.

Don’t tell me the Moon Snail has no motivational source. Don’t tell me the Pacific Clam does not lament a draining future.

When will I stop polishing the phone with this pathetic ear? I hear the last jar seal just before you don’t call again.

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Four: Apple

We walk to town to buy spark plugs.  
He dances away from the chemicals  
leaking off the shelves.  
Moves his head slowly in front of flashlights, coils of rope.  
I finger green electrical tape, dowelling rods, bicycle tires.

“Hunter-gatherers, certainly, function in a circular, seasonal  
temporal reality, less marked by predicted and manipulated  
events than by intuited seasonal change.” (Feit 16)

Between Canadian Tire and Highway Seven he finds, he feeds me  
red plums  
soft summer chestnuts  
runner peas  
lemon thyme. Most daring, the  
red apples fallen across a triangle of  
lawn. His strong body a tossed leash, he passes through  
aluminum link and palms me  
the smallest brightest fruit
Butterfinger Blizzard:  
Or How Chelsea Clinton Left One in My Mother’s Car

I got the nod to drive the day before Chelsea’s second visit to Terre Haute during the Primary Campaign of 2008. The Clintons were fighting hard to win the nomination and the Indiana Primary was crucial. On Chelsea’s second visit, the topic was her mother’s healthcare plan. I was assigned to pick her up at the local airport, drive her to a local hospital for her speech and then return her to the airport. Simple enough, but I was so freaking excited I couldn’t contain myself. I should have been getting used to this whole star-studded atmosphere the election had created in our little town; the whole Clinton family had visited at least once. Hillary created a sensation. Bill, well, Bill is Bill: he left many star-struck in his wake. Chelsea whipped up the college crowd on her first visit. My meetings with Bill and Hillary had been brief. This was the chance to be face to face with Chelsea for more than just a photo op. Cool!

Chelsea would have three people with her: Her assistant, Dr Parker who was helping with the speech, and another driver for the doctor’s vehicle. I was the lead driver. Since the campaign was only renting one car, we decided to use my mother’s car for the doctor to ride in. I would drive the rental car with Chelsea.

Two months before, I met Tressman in the line for Hillary’s visit to Terre Haute and we became fast friends and fellow campaign workers. Tressman was in love with Chelsea Clinton and routinely told people he was Chelsea’s fiancé. Our District Director, Erin, and our Field Organizer, Alexis, thought it was funny, at first. But when he went from telling everyone he was marrying her to telling them she was having his baby, it lost its humor. When we got word on Chelsea’s visit, Erin and Alexis told me that I was under no circumstances to tell Tressman. “We don’t want any kind of scene” Erin told me. That’s all she needed to say. Tressman driving Chelsea might lead to harassment charges or at the least Erin getting fired; Tressman could not be trusted with Chelsea Clinton.

The morning of Chelsea’s visit, my mother and I drove to Hulman Field International Airport to pick up the rental car at the lone rental agency. On the way, I phoned the agency to confirm the car. The reservation form said I would
be picking up a Suburban or another large SUV. When I relayed this information to the agent, she paused.

“We only have one car in that class. An H2.” A Hummer? Not good.

“You have nothing else?” I asked.

“No. We don’t rent them very often. We’d have to send over to Indy to have one delivered.”

“Okay,” I said. “If that’s all you have, that’s what we’ll have to take.”

I immediately called Erin. “All they have is an H2. The media will have a field day with this. Hillary’s Green Jobs plan and the campaign is using a gas guzzler. People won’t realize it’s rented.”

“You’re right.” She paused. “But we’ll have to take it. There’s nothing else we can do.”

The plane was late coming in from Evansville, of course. Campaigns never run on time. We had the cars lined up, and when the plane finally landed and everyone disembarked, Chelsea’s assistant frowned and walked over to me as I sat by the Hummer.

“We have to switch cars. Chelsea can’t ride in this,” she said as she pointed her finger at the H2.

“Yeah, I know. But it’s all they had.”

She consulted with the other driver then returned to my vehicle. “You’re driving Dr. Parker in the Hummer. Pat will drive Chelsea in the other car.”

My heart sank. That meant no big celebrity moment for me, and I was embarrassed that Chelsea was now riding in my mother’s car. The car was clean, but was it clean enough? I didn’t have time to think about it. Everyone switched cars and we were off, me driving the H2 and this other woman driving Chelsea in my mother’s 2002 Saturn Vue.

After a short, five minute drive to the hospital we arrived to a large crowd waiting impatiently inside. Once the cars emptied, I sat and waited outside while Chelsea started her speech. It felt kinda cool; I felt important. Once people knew who was inside, they started looking at the vehicles and staring at me and the other driver. I tried not to worry about the H2 creating bad PR. I had a more pressing concern at the moment. As I peeked around at the crowd outside, I exhaled: no sign of Tressman.

Halfway through the speech, I sneaked inside to see how it was going and I nearly peed my pants at what I saw.
inside: Tressman, lurking in the front row, taking photos and trying to get as close to Chelsea as security would allow. How the hell did he find out?

“Damn!” I hurried outside and fired off a text to Alexis.

_Tressman is here._
_Crap! Avoid him!
Will do!

I crouched down in the car as far as I could, door closed and windows rolled up, even though it was late April and the temperature was unseasonably warm. I sweated it out, literally and figuratively, until the speech ended and people started to file out. Then I saw Tressman head straight for the H2. He was taking photos of the vehicle, obviously expecting Chelsea to be riding in the black SUV with tinted windows. I leaned over pretending to look in the glove box but it was too late. He slammed his hand on the windshield. I looked up into his blue eyes and shrugged. His jaw dropped.

“I’m driving the doctor, not Chelsea.” I said.

His bottom lip started to quiver.

“I’m sorry!”

Before he could respond, our passengers piled into the car and we sped off. I felt sick knowing that I had hurt a friend’s feelings; and I felt guilty. What if Tressman had driven Bill? I would have been jealous and hurt, too. I bit my lip. How in the world could I ever make amends to him?

We drove a couple of blocks, and then the Saturn pulled over into the Dairy Queen parking lot. I stopped when I realized they were no longer behind me and I watched as Chelsea and her assistant hurried into DQ.

“They’re hungry,” Dr Parker explained.

“Oh, ok.”

“I’d love some coffee myself.”

“Sure thing.”

I told the other driver I would be across the street at Joe Muggs in Books-A-Million bookstore.

The Saturn met us across the street a couple of minutes later and Chelsea and the assistant got out again.

“They want coffee too,” the driver told me. I went inside to make sure they hurried. They were late for the Indianapolis event as it was and I didn’t really want to get blamed for creating a delay.
As I entered Books-A-Million, I glanced at the table for featured material in front of the store and my stomach dropped. There on the table with an assortment of political books sat a stack of Hillary Clinton Voodoo Dolls. I glanced over at Chelsea, but she appeared to be unaware. I hustled over to the clerks who were standing behind the counter with open mouths.

“Uh, yeah, can you move those voodoo dolls behind the counter until we leave. How would you like to walk it a store and see something like that of your mother?” I pointed to the stack of dolls.

“Uh, what?” They said, still staring at Chelsea.

“That’s Chelsea Clinton!”

They fell over each other trying to get the items off the table.

Coffee in hand, we sped to the airport, and after my mother and I each got our picture taken with Chelsea, she took off for the next stop.

My mother and I headed for headquarters. We chit chatted and at a stoplight, I glanced into the back seat and burst out laughing.

“Oh my god! Look at what’s in the back!”

“What’s that?”

“Chelsea Clinton’s Blizzard!” There it was, half melted and half eaten in the rear cup holder. I knew just what I was going to do with it.

Tressman milled around headquarters, tying not to sulk, but when he saw me, he almost burst into tears.

“Wait! Come out to the car! I have something for you!”

He followed and I opened the back door for him.

“Look! It’s Chelsea’s Blizzard!”

“What?!” he nearly jumped in the air.

“She left it. It’s yours!”

After he took five or six photos of the cup as it sat in the holder, the car, the seat where she sat, then taking it into headquarters to show everyone, he took the Blizzard home. He left smiling. The Blizzard became the topic of conversation up until Election Day. Tressman proudly displayed numerous photos on the office wall: photos of the Blizzard on the table in headquarters, him holding it next to his face, and the car photos. A couple of weeks later, the election took place, the Indiana campaign ended and our close-knit band of friends
dispersed to return to their normal lives. A few of us kept in contact afterwards. Tressman and I remained good friends. Tressman moved last year. He IMed me shortly before he left town.

I had to throw out the Blizzard.
That’s sad. Why couldn’t you take it with you?
It got nasty in the fridge.

I laughed myself sick. I knew he would keep the cup, and the spoon of course, but I had no idea he had kept the whole Blizzard all this time. Though, I don’t know why it surprised me. At least he didn’t eat it.

This week, my mother traded in the Saturn on a newer car. I felt a twinge of sadness, but I told her “Mention the Blizzard to the salesman. Maybe he’ll give you more on the trade-in.” That car had served as a reminder of a pivotal time in my life, a time full of tears and triumphs. But it reminded me of the Blizzard and the friendship that it surely saved. But time marches on, things change as we all know. The car and Blizzard are now both in parts unknown. God speed to them both.
To the Statue of Christopher Columbus, Tampa Theatre

Christopher Columbus was a cockroach and look what followed him.
—Sherman Alexie

Always, the artists insist on that hair—
dusting his shoulders and scooping back up,
the tip lost in itself like the swirling core of a seashell.
So many attempts at his same sour bust float through history,
each varying the extreme to which his turnip head
is stuffed into that stifling bloom of collar, or seek to refine
the tilt of the worried, side-long glance of a balding European
(perfected later by Galileo, Shakespeare.)
Until tonight, my iconic Columbus
was the sketch from grade school textbooks: the explorer
before a herd of hunch-backed Indians,
his pantyhosed toe pointed like a ballerina’s.
The ink lines so thick, so unbreathable.
Even the colorless sun in the background is furious.
How innocuous he now looks among the panel
of plaster Eberson knockoffs flanking the proscenium,
his hand atop his slender rapier,
the stiff X the baldrics form across his chest.
Perhaps it is only his placement in the darkest corner
of electric twilight that causes me to notice him at all,
glowing in that shade of tempest blue that longs to be purple,
his hollow gaze sweeping the audience, looking for land.
On Why I Got Kicked out of the Girl Scouts

The scouts, a trio, are blonde, freckled, their pre-pubescence evident from the awkward way in which their respective knees are knotted into each other, into the strong yet vulnerable physics of a teepee—a structure from which my body never evolved. They serve boxed cookies to an old woman in front of me with smiles, chatter about how peanut butter soothes the soul or some other mawkish, Thomas Kinkadean sentiment.

I wait behind her at a civilized distance, but as this gaggle of women continues to squawk about how “cookie time only comes once a year,” and “oh! a merit badge for teamwork!,” I edge closer, into uncomfortable third-world proximity. The old lady senses me in the space that you can feel more than see, and glancing at me over her shoulder, she clears out with her boxes of those hackneyed thin mints. Cookies are not fucking meant to be frozen.

It is my turn. Wordless, the Girl Scouts squint up at me as I do down at them. Their mothers, two, are laconic. They do not speak until I’ve handed them my money and helped myself to two boxes of Samoas. Then, suddenly, “Thank you for supporting the Girl Scouts!”

“Uh huh,” I say and give the girls the eye that stinks.

On my walk home, I look to one of the cookie boxes, first ignoring the nutrition information then reading the mission statement on the opposite face. The Girl Scouts organization, the box proclaims, allows “young women [to] discover their potential connect with others and take action in their communities and the world.” I recall my experiences with the Brownies, the precursor to Girl Scouts, and remember nothing but public humiliation in the fog of hot glue stink. To this day, I haven’t the slightest idea as to how watching the adult supervisor use a hot glue gun to construct a house made of popsicle sticks is any significant contribution to the world or young women’s place within it.

Having been suspended between the two groups that dominated my elementary school in the port city of San Pedro, California—the white girls from the hills and the Mexican girls from the numbered streets—I begged my mother to support my enlistment into the troop that I hoped would elevate me in the world of stratified lunch tables and the more complex social geography of the recess blacktop that was
divided, appropriately, by lines in yellow and white. Despite her protestations about the cost of uniforms, my mother, overworked from parenting me and caring for bedpan-flinging patients at the hospital where she interned as a nursing school student, conceded in hopes of keeping me occupied and less alone than I usually was with books and the dolls on which I had bestowed odd problems like leprosy and sex addiction.

I was ejected from the Brownies for a variety of reasons. The first problem they found was my failure to wear the uniform. I’d like to testify that, at eight years old, I was a politicized self whose refusal to wear the uniform had purpose. The best lie I created for myself is that I didn’t wear the two-toned uniform because it mirrored those worn by the females belonging to the North Vietnamese communist party whose regime my mother had fled. Or, after I take a postcolonial theory class in college, I tell myself I didn’t wear all that brown because I was asserting my biracial subjectivity by insisting to wear mismatched outfits, consciously assembled to consist of a long-sleeved pink Catalina shirt my dad bought me during one of our summer parasailing trips that tanned me, my mother said, so brown it made me ugly; a t-shirt with Beast from the Disney version of the French fairy tale because I identified with It much more than the Beauty character; purple stretch pants whose stirrups hugged my arches unsupported by the cheap black-and-white saddle shoes that slapped a rhythm capable of transporting me from 1980s San Pedro to some nameless 1950s American town where black and white were quaint divides.

My present self, though, must belie the precociousness and militancy I attempt to grant the eight-year-old me to justify my subversion of the Brownie code. These justifications operate under the assumption that these racial, class-based injustices are my burden to bear, as if the memories of Việt Nam and the struggle of a divided self born in the diaspora actually belong to me.

The truth is that the skort was just too tight around the waist for my round belly, my sash too sparse, whatever merit badges dotting it too sloppily sewn, and the uniform all too brown—it matched my freckles and erased my skin. The troop leader first asked questions so that all of the blonde ponytail-swinging heads would turn to stare: “Where’s your uniform?” and “So you’ve decided to not be a Brownie today? Hmph.” I tucked away the troop leader’s disciplinary letters to
my mother in my Sweet Valley High and Mark Twain books.
The subsequent phone calls home only angered my mother
during weeks when money was particularly tight; she was not
concerned about my not belonging, but only frustrated that she
had spent the money on an unworn uniform. So, I wore the
skort at home as I attempted Olympian gymnastics moves on
arms of chairs and ends of the coffee table, and my mother felt
her American consumer satisfaction fulfilled, doubly so as my
younger sister went through a vintage brown skort period
years later.

It was, however, coffeecake that finalized my exile.
My mother, having grown up in third-world poverty, admires,
desires, and seeks sugar-laden foods, twice as intensely as she
renounces the American gluttony, extravagance, and
imperialism producing the sweets that still to this day wink,
pucker, and coo at me from grocery store shelves like
Vietnamese hookers from nightclub doorways. So, though our
apartment was rendered austere by my mother’s financial
struggles, our kitchen was reliably equipped with sweets—the
one in question being the six-pack of coffeecakes baked
exclusively by the now defunct Lucky’s supermarket. These
cakes were soft from the drizzled icing, yet crunchy from the
sprinkled clumps of brown sugar and walnuts—stickily
clinging to one another, yet individual entities: islands. These
cakes were perfect for breakfast, easy and quick to eat. My
mother and I were always in a rush in the mornings. She
would let me stay up past my bedtime to watch shows like
90210 with her, feigning disapproval by clicking her tongue
when she looked at the clock at every commercial break, but I
know she was eager for my company. So I would wake up late
and exhausted in the mornings, rolling over to find my mother
in the same state.

One morning, a Lucky’s coffeecake wadded into the
inside of my cheek, I rushed to finish homework that I had
foregone in opting to, at my mother’s side, watch the latest
developments in the Brenda-Dylan saga. Chewing, I scribbled
sentences, contextualizing each of my twenty spelling words
in about six minutes. My mother stood by my side and
watched what she considers a redoubtable feat that she still
speaks of to this day when someone inquires about what her
oldest daughter is “doing these days.” It is my effortlessness
with the English language that has been the primary source of
both my mother’s admiration and resentment of me. Our relationship has never been defined by any purity.

And it was with the taste of coffeecake still lingering on my breath, even after a greasy school lunch purchased with the meal tickets that put me in line with all of the Mexican and Black students, that I went to my weekly afterschool Brownie meeting. One of the subjects of discussion for that particular meeting was some privileged white middle-class lesson on nutrition, based, of course, on the government-constructed food pyramid, a hierarchy alien to my mother, who was kept alive in her childhood in Việt Nam by cans of sweetened condensed milk and white rice. The lesson entailed asking each Brownie what she had had for breakfast and an ensuing discussion about what was nutritional about it.

Answers circled the room around me—oatmeal, cornflakes, orange juice, wheat toast, yogurt, and some fucking second grader had the temerity to announce, “assorted melon”—so, as I waited for the troop leader to call on me, my excitement swelled. I was finally going to have the opportunity to rub in their clean faces the sticky sweetness of the coffecakes my mom was cool enough to buy me for breakfast. These girls would finally long for my life as I secretly had for theirs.

The troop leader turned her head to me where I sat on the outside of the circle. “And, Jade, what did you have for breakfast this morning as you were not putting on your Brownie uniform?” A couple of the girls snickered, and I straightened my habitual slouch to proudly declare, “Coffeecake!”

The Greek chorus erupted in unison, informing the illiterate masses that the villain had stabbed herself after all. The Brownies kept laughing, and the troop leader laughed too, composing herself only long enough to say, “That’s not a breakfast” and point to the fats and sugars peak of the food pyramid. I shrank from the circle, from the periphery I already inhabited. I was immediately ashamed, reminded that I was only a child. The troop leader moved on to demonstrate the next craft assignment—a cotton ball Easter bunny with Chiclet teeth. As she explained the importance of placing the googly eyes just right, I confronted the memories I had tried to ignore: my classmates’ wrinkled noses as I unwrapped a pork liver paté sandwich from Lee’s; my gradual exclusion from the white girls’ jump rope games as I spent more time with a
Black-Lebanese girl from the afterschool latchkey program; and the one time, just weeks prior, that a tall Black sixth-grader had mowed me over on her way from the lunch tables to a tetherball match, leaving me on the ground with scraped, bloody elbows and tater tots and ketchup smeared across my shirt, and the PTA moms who worked as lunch ladies merely watched, from ten feet away, as I brushed myself off and walked to the nurse’s office.

I should have known that coffeecake could not undo all of those events that defined who I was in the world of school, but I am more ashamed to admit that the coffeecake incident made me resent my mother for far too many years, that in so doing the Brownies left me completely alone.

But, in looking back at the incident now, I can understand more about how and why I love my mother. Those Girl Scouts-in-training heckled my coffeecake breakfasts, the “disadvantaged” status and sloppy parenting that the sweets represented to them. Some of these girls did the same when one of the ape-looking PTA moms openly criticized my mother for not helping out with preparing and serving food at classroom parties, for “being poor,” she’d told me in front of a table full of wide-eyed, snickering classmates. This ape-woman and her squeaking chimp minions could not comprehend that the mother-daughter relationship I knew was not one of servant-master as it was for many of the Brownies. Their mothers served them individual plates of dinner at night, bought them Lunchables and fun-sized this and that for their insulated lunchboxes, baked them cupcakes on their birthdays and brought them to school to serve children, one by one.

Though my mother tried, when she could, to make ham or sweetened condensed milk sandwiches in a brown bag for me, our food relationship was more reciprocal. When I pulled the lilipads of beef from my bowl of phở, I placed them floating on her broth; when she cut up a piece of steak on a plate of rice, I wiped the crust forming at the spout of the soy sauce bottle; when she stood at the stove stirring soup, I read to her from a ring of her nursing school flashcards so that she could better remember the body and its illnesses; when she pushed a bowl toward me and promised, “If you eat this all, I will love you,” I ate long after I was full. These laughing Brownie faces did not understand that food was, for my mother and I, a private matter, that the way we ate side-by-
side at the coffee table every night was not a public display, but how, together, we survived our alienation.

When I open the first box of Samoas. I pull out one cookie and study its reef of coconut toasted brown, dark lines of chocolate drizzled across it like prison bars. The chocolate beginning to melt into my fingertips, I recall an image of my mother, fierce but lovely—she squats low to the ground, hair draping over her shoulders, and slings a hammer into the tough husk of a fresh coconut, its milk sweet on her lips, then mine. I squint through the Samoa’s empty center, then fill my mouth with the memories the Girl Scouts have sold me.
At the Orchid & Butterfly Farm

In the elephant hills above Chiang Mai, where orchids are home to butterflies, beneath a potting bench for bromeliads, where no sensible butterfly would fly,

the greenhouse screen is frayed and torn. Outside, a small stream puddles by as teak trees shed their parchment leaves ahead of summer's scorching storm.

Then something moves beneath the bench. Inch by inch, in perfect, glossy camouflage, a slender emerald serpent bears a smaller, even greener frog aloft full half its jeweled length, intent on distant Burmese hills, all nonchalance and serpent strength. The frog's legs flutter like butterfly wings as toxin weaves its compassionate spell.

Here at the orchid and butterfly farm in the morning shade it's already warm, and, omen or not, it's like magic to find a Siamese snake eats its own cold kind.
outlaws: boreal

out here we
shoplift the highway we
give birth to chikens
out here we greenhouse forts
we slip a saw into the thin flock
of birches and how their white
dusty blood papers our arms.

out here we are nails bleeding the birch
bodies, sooty and slick leeching
in dark creeks beyond hot meadows.

out here the gravel is singing ninety-nine
names of god to our bicycle wheels
that, hurled from our desiring, spin slower
until we with salmon hearts
pink up the water do you know
we breathe the saltwater we breathe the freshwater.

out here the sheep ride us through floods
on our thorny backs the greasy wool combs in firm
they are bleating for soapberries dogwood yarrow any
white plant to bleach away horror of
ram in autumn.

out here the bonfire is a remedy for endings
falling from tree we are briefly balanced above in rising air
then fingered in and begun into the birch bones.
Manicure

I had just returned from having my nails done when my mother asked me about when I might go over to see Twyla. “She asks about you all the time,” Mama said. “She lives over there off of Lillie. You should go and see her some time.”

I would receive encouragement from Mama to see any number of people whenever I came back home to Fort Wayne for my holiday visits. It’s not as if I avoid my former classmates, but when I come home I usually try to stay to myself and with family. No need to relive the past, which is why I avoid South Side High School class reunions, too.

But why Mama was emphasizing that I see Twyla, more so than anyone else, was baffling to me, especially since Mama didn’t tell me about where I was most likely to see her. And it was not on Lillie Street.

“Did they do a good job with your nails?” Mama asked.

I held my hands, fingers spread out, in front of her to display my latest manicure.

“I suppose they did a good job. Nothing like the way they do manicures in New York City. Here they cut too many corners. Ha ha. That was a joke, Mama.”

Mama just looked at me, shook her head and grabbed my right hand. “That’s a nice ring,” she said, nodding at the gold band, which tried to mimic bamboo, and the oval shaped lime green stone. “It’s imperial jade. Got it at a pawn shop. That’s the best place to buy jewelry, I swear. You’d be surprised what kind of jewelry people give up when they’re down on their luck,” I said.

Mama let go of my hand and sighed. Was shopping at pawn shops bad? I wondered about this --- briefly --- until Mama said, “I’m almost out of meal. Can you go over to Kroger’s and get some? I need the yellow cornmeal, not the white.”

I wish Mama had asked me to go to the store for her while I was out getting my nails done, but she had an increasing habit of forgetting about what she wanted me to whenever I came home. I had to visit old friends. I had to go to church. I had to visit some of her friends who doted on me as a child. I had to go to the grocery store. There were seemingly a million things I had to do other than relax from
the fast paced life I led as an advertising consultant in New York City. It’s all about appearances, I thought.

And perhaps it’s because I’m in advertising that I care so much about appearances or marketing. As any advertiser knows, it’s all about the packaging. Put dog poo in a beautiful box and say that it’ll fight wrinkles and people will actually buy it. No difference than in getting Botox (which I get once every two months to keep the crow’s feet around my eyes at bay). Not everyone may like it, but people make their judgments first on what they see on the outside. What’s on the inside is what people will take their chances on, but outward appearance is what sells. Maybe that’s why I’m so particular about my fingernails.

Some say that you can tell a lot about a person based on the quality of their shoes. I think you can know everything you need to know about a person based on their fingernails. You know that a person with dirt underneath their fingernails is someone who works at a blue collar job that does not have adequate scrubbing soap in the washroom. The nail bitter is insecure and uncertain and thus takes this frustration out on their nails (I used to be that person before I got into advertising). The person who gives themselves their own manicures is cheap and possibly forever broke. But the person who gets the high priced manicure, complete with acrylic nails, is the one who truly cares about her appearance.

And I am that person. My manicure says as much about me as a mink coat. The nails are filed to perfection and look natural, but they’re as hard and as sturdy as rock and almost as impossible to break. They’ll solve any nail bitters problem because they are virtually impervious to anything including teeth.

Once I started to earn thousands of dollars a week working as an advertising consultant, I was able to afford the weekly $200 manicure at the Luxe salon in New York City. But here I am, back in my hometown of Fort Wayne to see my mother for the holidays and all I’m really worried about is where to find a suitable nail salon. Not one where there is nothing but Asians working for slave wages while doing nails. Instead, I prefer a salon where the workers at least speak fluent English to where they can actually have a conversation with you while they’re doing your nails.

Of course, having nails like mine speaks volumes about so many things like my wealth, my status, my having
“made it” in the corporate world. I don’t like to break them by doing mundane things like washing dishes. That’s why I own a dishwasher for goodness sake! I can only hope that my mother, who suffers from severe arthritis, will not expect me to massage her legs like I used to do when I was a child. Not that my nails could not withstand the activity, it’s just the point that my nails were not meant for pedestrian uses like massaging someone’s legs.

As I drive into my old neighborhood I remember how much I disdain it. It’s in southeast Fort Wayne or what is known as the “hood” or the “ghetto”. My mother’s house is less than a mile away from the corner of McKinnie and Anthony, a corner where many of the cities crimes, including murder, occur. It’s the kind of neighborhood where someone is gunned down in front of dozens of people, but when the police arrive, no one claims to have seen anything. It’s the type of area where you will usually see a man dressed in camouflage with the sign “Hungry and Broke. Can you spare any change?” It seems that I see this man on the corner of Calhoun and Rudisill --- always on the black side of Calhoun, I might add. He’s never on the side of the street where mostly whites live in the nearby Harrison Hill neighborhood. I get ready to pass him and want to say, “Find a job, idiot. Your time is better spent doing that instead of standing on the corner begging.” But I push the button that lets down my window and I virtually throw some change into his outstretched and dirty hand, more impressed with how my nails, dripped in the color of Drop Dead Red, shimmers in the sunlight.

He thanks me and I grumble something back at him. I’ve done my part for charity. I think this as I drive up Rudisill toward Hanna Street where my mother lives across from Weisser Park, the “ghetto park” as it’s also known.

But that’s when I see Twyla. On the busy intersection of Calhoun and Rudisill. Holding a sign, begging for money.

I did a double take, of course. Twyla and I had been good friends in high school until she got pregnant and had to drop out. That was pretty much the end of our friendship. I was too busy with the speech team, the yearbook and the National Honor Society to worry about a friend who got knocked up. All of her dreams of going to Purdue were shattered. I’d see her sometimes standing in her bedroom window, waving at some of us as we walked our way to South Side High School. Many times I would pretend not to see her.
I pulled my BMW over to the curb. I noticed that I was the subject of stares from the young men who were standing on the corner across the street and I wondered why there are always young men standing on the corner in this neighborhood, seemingly with nothing worthwhile to do.

Twyla looked busted. Her hair was a nappy mess of an afro that was in need of a trim. Her blue jeans had black smudges on them from dirt that had settled in to make a home. Her jacket was too flimsy for the cold weather and when I stepped out of the car I was thankful for the warmth of my three-quarters length leather jacket that I had bought on sale at Saks Fifth Avenue.


She smiled to show missing front teeth, which startled me.

“Katrina!” she shouted out loud in a way that was embarrassing to me. I did not need her to broadcast that we knew each other that loudly. She dropped her sign on the ground and step forward to hug me. My body stiffened. I wondered how long it had been since she had bathed when she hugged me. It’s not that she smelled bad, which was a surprise to me. But she was dirty nonetheless and I didn’t want any of that dirt to rub off on me.

“Look at you!” She continued to shout. “Girl. You look good. Real good.” She tried to run her hand over her hair, but stopped as if realizing that her hair was a mess, especially compared to my perfectly coiffed pixie cut.

I struggled at what I could say. Usually, you compliment people in return and tell them that they look good, too. But that would have been a lie and I didn’t know what to say in place of a lie.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. I looked around and saw the men on the corner were now staring at us. I began to worry about my car and started to clutch my keys more tightly as I pulled at my leather jacket. Then my right leg started to shake a little bit, which always happens when I’m nervous about something.

Twyla laughed and I saw that the few teeth that she had were somewhat gray.

“Girl, I’m just trying to hustle. Just trying to hustle, that’s all.”
Hustle. I immediately thought of the popular dance that we all knew from back in the day when “The Hustle” was a hit song. I could see us doing it as a line dance, much like the Electric Slide. “Do the hustle!” it beckoned and then there was this whistling type of beat with horns. “Do the hustle!” and “Do it!” were the only lyrics and for a moment I could see Twyla doing the hustle with her sign in her hands. It was a funny thought and I almost laughed from thinking about it. But “hustling” was what a black person was supposed to do best. To get your hustle on meant that you were trying to make some money, quick money if possible. Illegally gotten, maybe.

I realized that I do the hustle every day in New York. Making that money. Yeah.

I wanted to ask, “What happened?” as in what happened to put you out on the street. Instead I asked about her mother.

“She’s been dead for about three years now,” Twyla said softly. “Heart attack.”

Miss Jenkins had always been a strict, church going woman, which made Twyla’s teenage pregnancy even more of a topic of gossip. How could she let that happen to her daughter when she was so pious and straight laced? It seemed that teenage pregnancies frequently happen to “those kind” of families. The ones that put themselves up slightly higher than everyone else only to come falling, crashing down in their own hypocrisy. I remember that Miss Jenkins always had a curfew that was an hour earlier than what the rest of us had, but look at where that got Twyla. Obviously, nowhere.

“Uh, what about your baby?” I couldn’t remember if Twyla had had a boy or a girl. But that child should be a teenager by this time and I wondered how the child coped with having a mother who was on the street.

“Oh, she was taken by CPS years ago. She’s been in the system ever since. I see her every once in awhile, but not much,” Twyla said as she bowed her head slightly. “I had a little problem with drugs back then, but I’m clean now. I’m clean now.”

I wanted to ask her what her drug of choice was or whether she was still using, but I figured that would be impolite. It was probably crack. That was the drug that usually caused people to lose everything and anything. I thought for a moment that it could possibly be meth and that would account for the missing teeth, but black people didn’t bother much
with the drug that was really associated with white people in rural parts of Indiana, not black folks in the ghetto. No one has time to “cook” up some mess that’s made with battery acid. That’s white folks’ madness. Or at least that’s what many black folks had decided.

“Look at your nails!” Twyla exclaimed as she grabbed my hand, the one that was clutching my coat. “Those are nice! Are they real?”

I almost felt insulted at the suggestion that she could possibly tell my nails were fake so I lied: “Yes, they are.”

Twyla threw her head back and laughed. “I remember when you used to bite your nails all the time. You never had any fingernails. Now look at you now! You be stylin’!”

You be stylin’. We used to say that when anyone was fashionably sharp. I looked down at my leather thigh high boots and admitted to myself that, yes, I was stylin’ alright.

“I heard you were in New York.”

“I am,” I said. I started searching for words to say, but couldn’t think of anything else to say before Twyla spoke again.

“I ask your mother about you all the time, whenever I see her. She usually gives me some money. Yes, I can always depend on Mrs. Churchill to give me money. I can’t say that for everybody else I know though.”

I took that as my cue. I turned toward my car, opened the door and reached in for the wallet inside of my Gucci bag. I pulled out a $50 bill.

“Here,” I said as I thrust the money out at her.

Twyla’s eyes widened.

“Wow,” she said. “That’s more than I can get in three days! Thanks, Katrina. Where you going? Can you give me a ride?”

I was surprised by the request. I thought that if I gave her the money I could be done with her. I didn’t want the moment between us to last much longer than it already had.

“Where to?” I asked.

“Not too far. I just need to go over there by Lillie and Pontiac.”

Lillie and Pontiac. It was a well known drug corner even when we were kids. Not much had changed in Fort Wayne, I thought.

“What’s over there?” I asked because I was curious to know her response.
“Oh. That’s where there’s a boarding house. I’ve got a room over there.”

I thought that maybe she was telling the truth and that maybe she wasn’t. But I figured that giving her a ride would not hurt anything even though I shuddered at the thought of someone so dirty being in my car. It’s hard to get stains out of white leather, after all.

“Well, I’m really not headed in that direction, but if you need a ride…”

Twyla frowned. “If you don’t want to take me, that’s OK. I have enough money now to take a bus. I mean, I need some change though. They don’t take $50 bills on the bus.”

I reached into my pants pocket and pulled out the loose change that I always kept in it. As I put it into her hand I noticed her fingernails. They had what looked like black soot underneath the nails and the palm of her hand was blackened somewhat also.

“That’s all I have,” I lied.

“That’s alright,” Twyla said, smiling. “You made my day, Katrina. How long you gonna be in town? Maybe we could go and get something to eat some time. I’m usually here on this corner, but I move around a bit too. If the same people see you too much you end up getting nothing because they get sick of seeing you. But people tend to be more sympathetic to women these days. Times are tough. You know how that is.”

Now why or how would I know “how that is”? Didn’t she notice the car, the way I was dressed and my fingernails? What would I know about times being tough? I was making money. Mad money. Cheddar is once we once called it. What would I know about being unemployed to where I was begging on the street?

“I’ve got to go, Twyla. It was good seeing you though.”

This time I leaned forward to give her a hug. I felt I owed her that much.

“Well don’t be a stranger,” she said in a muffled tone as her face brushed up against my cashmere scarf.

“I won’t.” I said.

When I arrived back home with the corn meal, I told Mama that I had run into Twyla. “Where?” she asked. “At Kroger?”

For some odd reason, I thought that maybe my mother already knew where I had seen Twyla. “No. Actually, I
saw her on the corner of Rudisill and Lafayette. Not far from South Side. She was had a sign and was begging for money. She said that it was a somewhat common spot for her. Have you ever seen her there?” I asked.

Mama hesitated. “I’ve seen her there every now and then. But you know how it is. ‘There but for the grace of God go I.’”

Mama used that phrase countless times and I still cannot say that I understood what it meant --- precisely. Something about how I could easily be in the same position, but I didn’t see how that could be possible.

“Twyla has had it rough,” Mama said. “She came by once and I would have let her in, but she had someone waiting for her in a car and I didn’t know nothing about who was waiting on her. I didn’t want her in the house. For all I know, she could have hit me upside the head and burglarize the place. You never know these days. Everybody knows Twyla hasn’t been the same since she got on those drugs.”

This was news to me. What did Twyla want when she came by? My mother said she had wanted to ‘borrow’ some money. I knew, by the way Mama had said, “borrow,” that it was meant to be something that was assumed, but never believed.

So all this time Mama knew Twyla had become a junkie, but she kept insisting that I look her up. What was the point? So I could see how her life had turned out when we both had started out at the same place? It was not a new story. Two old friends meet and one has become successful while the other has not. One falls prey to the lure of drugs and one does not. Well, almost.

I snorted cocaine more than a few times, but I never let it destroy and own my life. I also knew that crack was more potent and that’s why I had stayed away from it. But what was the difference between my casual and occasional drug use and Twyla’s? I didn’t have an answer for that. In my own way I had been a “functioning addict,” which meant that I was able to do my gig and get high at the same time without the drugs interfering with my work. Could it be that I was a hypocrite? I stared down at my fingernails and remembered how the fingernail of my pinkie finger could easily scoop up a bit of coke to be snorted. There but for the grace of God go I. It was starting to have some meaning.
Later that evening I drove to bridge that was near downtown and stepped out of my car. It was a place I had frequented as a child, the place or the point where the three rivers --- the Maumee, the St. Joseph and the St. Mary --- meet. I thought about Twyla as I bit into one of my nails and ripped it off with my teeth, tearing the real nail underneath it to where blood trickled onto my lips. I spit the nail into the river below. But I didn’t stop there. I kept biting until the acrylic nails were ripped off of both hands with each fingernail left bleeding. I spit them all out into the river and wondered which direction, which river, would they follow.
To Skin a Rabbit

i.
There is no need for the knife, just now,
for you will hope to find it has already strangled
in the wire trap having kicked, throat first,
into the patient sliver of moon-waning metal,
or perhaps raced panic to the end of its twitching heart.

ii.
If neither of these is true, find a heavy, flat stick.
The natural tendency will be to pause just before the blow,
but follow through, swift as a thief,
or you will merely stun it into death-deception
and skin it alive.

iii.
Slit the belly and swing it by the ears and feet
until the autumn leaves shudder under the scattering of entrails.

iv.
A seasoned harvester’s hands should still be clean,
but if you are not certain the cavity is empty
reach inside.
The lungs and heart
tend to linger.

v.
Take a bite of the heart to ensure next year’s hunting fortune.

vi.
Peel its fur back from the shoulders
as you would take a jacket from a dinner guest,
a mourning shawl from your weeping wife.

vii.
Regard your hands, how the lined palms tell
of your capacity for catharsis, for a whole other
wilder-life molded from brambles, graying denim,
and bone,
Kate Sweeney

which, come to think of it, you should move to next, breaking each hind quarter at the joints. This will help the fragile flesh slip from the body.

The skin is papyrus.

iix.
And you are the tear.
On the most vivid day of my life, 
the man and his accomplices 
smuggled their equipment 
onto the roof.
They passed the wire 
across the void 
with a bow and arrow. 
They bridged 
what was not meant 
to be bridged.

I was sent to stop them. 
I worked for the Port Authority. 
A month before, I’d lost my wife 
to cancer 
and I had begun to think 
that life was simply 
a march toward death.

By the time I got 
to the south tower, 
it was too late to do anything 
except watch. A crowd 
had assembled below. 
I couldn’t see the faces 
but I imagined they looked like mine, 
full of wonder.

The man did not walk 
along the wire; he danced. 
He smiled and laughed 
as he bounced up and down 
a quarter-mile above Manhattan, 
among the clouds.

Who could blame him 
for such ecstasy? 
So close to God.

I read that it took Philippe Petit 
six years to plan the artistic crime
Eddie Malone

of the century.

Before he danced between
the twin towers, he was a mime,
street juggler, magician.

After his stunt, I spent weeks
walking, thinking.
I saw his spirit in everything:

The jump shot of a boy
alone on a half-lit court.

Portraits of tourists
sketched by a street artist.

The absent-minded twirl
of a teenage prostitute.

After I saw these things,
I knew I could go on.

Almost thirty years later,
the twin towers collapsed
but it’s not their death
that stays with me.
I don’t remember them
as victims.
Instead they are actors
in a joyous play about life,
saluting a hero who
leads us to the light.
Before I Mention the Soul Again

Before I mention the soul again, 
I must tell you about the albatross; 
but you must be patient 
upon the bow in the Antarctic, 
and then above you, sailing 
(is there another word at how 
the wings taper soft and slow 
into the periphery?)—sailing 
the high mountains of water— 
surpassing your length, tip 
to tip; here, following your 
slight move—an exhale 
you thought was lost.
Eddie Malone

This Is Not a Suicide Note

By the time you read this, I’ll have been dead for a day or two depending on the efficiency of the U.S. Postal Service. Don’t be sad! I’m happy to go! I’ve decided to leave this world on a high and in my prime. Like Kurt Cobain and Jimi Hendrix. Bruce and Brandon Lee. River Phoenix and Jesus. Not that I’m comparing. I’ve made no contribution to society. I’ve existed. That’s what they should put on my gravestone. He existed. I like that. I’m not kidding. I hereby put you in charge of my gravestone. I hereby make you the executor of my last will and testament. I don’t want my parents to have control over anything. You’ve made the last six weeks the happiest of my life and so I’d like you to be in charge. Will you do me that favor? The honor? I know. It’s a huge responsibility and you’re only 17 years old and you’ve only recently left the hospital. I know. This is the last thing you need, but I have to do this. Let’s make one thing clear. This is not a suicide note. If you want to call it anything, call it a suicide essay. It’s too long to be a note. Haha. But seriously I don’t understand why it’s such a big deal when someone takes their life. Why is life such a big deal? Do dogs spend time worrying about their mortality? Do fish? Why should we be any different? We’re animals just like them.

Here’s some directions for my funeral. Under no circumstances should it be held in a church. The parents are Methodists. They’re not fanatical. But they have no imagination and they don’t really know me, so they’ll probably try to put me in a church. I’m an atheist and a church is the last place I belong. Here’s another reason. Once I went to a kid’s funeral. Eric was his name. Jesus Christ, last year the kid got a new Jeep for his 16th birthday. Two days later he was playing chicken with the biggest tree in the city and of course he lost. The preacher was this young guy and he tried to sound like he knew Eric. He said Eric was a student just starting to show his potential and Eric was well-liked by his classmates. Bullshit. Eric was stupid and hated. No one was really sad to see him go. At my funeral, I don’t want some preacher telling lies about my life.

On second thought, I don’t want a headstone. I want to be cremated. But I don’t want my ashes to be stored in some boring-ass urn. I don’t want to be put on display like one of my mother’s precious knick-knacks. This is what should be done
with my ashes. Other than you, Sasha and Cleo are my only friends. You know Sasha from the hospital. I went to school with Cleo. I’m writing her phone number at the bottom of my essay. Please get in touch with them. Tell them to meet you at the lake. Even as I say lake in my head I’m picturing the majesty of the Pacific Ocean. My brain is cinematic. But the lake will have to do as the ocean is hundreds of miles away. Maybe you guys could go on a road trip. That would be awesome! Like a movie. No, you have things to do, I’m sure. You have a life again. You’re all better. We’ll make the lake my final resting spot. There’s a dock there. Cleo knows it. Go on that dock and spread my ashes over the water. I don’t want any eulogies. A few tears are inevitable but I want this to be a celebration! I’m leaving on such a high! Now I can finally rest. I’ve never been good at resting.

I went to the gun store today. I held a Walther P99 and a Smith and Wesson 45. I really hammed it up for the skinny bubba working the counter. I acted like I knew what I was doing. Really eyeing the guns. Mashing up my face like I was thinking hard about its features. Then I decided to have some fun. I asked the bubba what’s the best gun for offing yourself? And of course he looks at me real funny and while the slow-ass gears are working in his tiny brain I pointed the 45 at my temple. Then I put it under my chin. Then I put it all the way in my mouth. I fucking deep-throated the gun. It was classic! You would have loved it! All the while I’ve got the thoughtful look of a connoisseur on my face. A connoisseur of suicide. Finally this bubba wakes up. You can’t do that! he tells me. And he grabs the gun and my spits all over it. How old are you? I need to see some ID he says. You gotta be 21 to be in here. And I’m thinking, what an idiot. I’m 17 and let’s be honest. I don’t look a day over 15. This bubba’s head is on another planet. If I had time, I would report him to the better business bureau.

I don’t know why I even went to the gun store. My dads got a gun. A 38 special tucked in a dresser drawer. I found it years ago. I thought about all this before. It felt almost right. But something held me back. Now it feels a hundred percent right.

Do you remember your last night at the hospital? Of course you do. It was barely a week ago. Sometimes I ask the stupidest questions. If there was some kind of life after death I’d remember that night for all eternity. Why did you care? No
one ever cared that much. The hospital has been pretty much my home since I was 12. I had some people I guess you could call friends. They were lifers like me. And I saw other people build friendships, I guess. But for the most part people stick to themselves in there. It’s not like school where everyone latches on to each other for dear life. Everyone’s gotta have a group! A clique! Don’t leave me stranded! Being crazy is pretty much a solo experience. But you were different. You seemed so normal. Crazies have this force field of crazy all around them. It keeps you from getting too close. But you didn’t have that. You were so funny. I laughed my ass off every time you played the thought bubble game. You’d look at Jeremy or Kasey and you’d know what they were thinking. Or at least it seemed that way. Jeremy was always chewing his fingers and you’d say in a goofy voice, funny, they tasted better yesterday. Or Kasey would climb the fucking couch like she was surfing some big wave. Making like she could lose her balance at any moment. Your voice was all breathless. Look at me! After 15 years of trying, I’m standing! But you weren’t mean about it. It was comedy. It was a diversion. Besides, everyone loved you. You talked to everyone even the real freaks. The unreachables. Since I’ll be dead, I can be real honest with you. Embarrassingly so. I used to get jealous when you talked to the others. I wanted you all to myself. I know it’s selfish but it’s true. But that last night was special. You spent your last night with me and me only. We didn’t sleep in our rooms. We stayed in the community room. They turned off all the lights while we were still on the couch. They didn’t see us there. We held hands and you put your head on my shoulder, and I watched the clock wishing I could make time stop. It was just past 4 o’clock when we kissed. 4:04 to be exact. Then you slept for a couple of hours. You fell asleep on my shoulder. But I couldn’t. I haven’t really slept since. That kiss was like a shot of adrenaline. I’ve been so high for a week now! I didn’t want anything to get in the way so I stopped taking my meds. I got offered a weekend pass and this time I didn’t turn it down which brings me to now. The parents will be out tonight. Dinner with friends. Thank god for being alone. So I can do this.

People will want to know why. You can tell them. We’ve talked about it. I’ll put it into words again. When it happens, it feels like I’ve wandered into black sludge. We’ve all seen pictures of those oil disasters. Some asshole oil
company has a tanker that crashes near the shore, spilling all that fucking oil. And the wildlife gets caught up in it. I’m like one of those birds. I can’t get that sludge off and it starts to suffocate me. That’s what it’s like. And it’ll happen again once I come down from this high. It’ll be worse than ever, and I don’t think I can take it anymore. I’ve fooled with the idea that that kiss was some kind of cure. I’ll just stay high forever. And maybe just maybe that would happen if you were still around. But you won’t be. You can’t be. We don’t even live in the same city. You have your own life. If this was a romantic comedy, we would find some way to overcome these obstacles. Another confession that don’t matter because I’ll be dead. I’m a secret fan of the romantic comedy genre. At the end of every one of those movies is the promise that happiness lasts. But if you have any kind of brain at all you know that everything changes. Nothing stays the same. Especially the way you feel. Why did I watch those stupid movies? So I should know that even though I love you now it won’t last forever. But god I don’t want that to happen which is why I have to do this.

I can do this!

But maybe I’ll call you first. I won’t tell you anything about the plan. The plan for tonight! You’d just try and talk me out of it. I’ll call so I can hear your voice one last time. You were always so sane! Are you sure you were ever crazy? Do you even exist? Sometimes I thought you must be an angel sent to save me. But I know you’re human and at one point you were crazy like I am and will be forever unless I take matters into my own hands.

Please be a faithful executor of my last will and testament. I know it’s kind of a hassle but I don’t think I’m asking for too much. If the parents get in the way, show them this letter. Go to a lawyer if you have to.

This is a terrible way to end an essay. My English teachers said you gotta end with a bang. Actually they didn’t say bang. They said you have to end with something memorable. As a writer I’m too scattered and disorganized. And I could never end with a bang. Well, my life is gonna end with a bang! haha Better at suicide than writing!

god I want to hear your voice.
Jeffrey Arnett

God's Breath

I stand on the same bridge
and breathe in the fog
you called, *God's breath*,
your epitaph falling
into the ocean far below.

If you listen between heartbeats
you can hear the suicides
falling, always facing the shore.
Splashing more softly
than you expect,
most sinking so quickly
you barely notice.

When you jumped
did you look to the bright lights
of the city or close your eyes?

The fog lisps over the sea
and it could be God’s breath
and this is the very bridge, brother,
where you let go your last handhold.

From here, I can barely see the shore
and the silence drowns your voice.
If we were deaf only our hands
could speak of love.
Open Moon in Blackness

Tonight I will visit my friend among the dead. We’ll walk along the ocean and talk about the soul. Mine has gone to the high mountains and I don’t understand; he’ll say the mountains are beautiful this time of year, wet with spring. I’ll think I understand such answers, the rhythmic spray of salt, the stars expanding, an open moon in blackness. Once I saw you in the dark reflection of a window. He smiles and the night sky becomes a portal. I should take your hand here, say I’m sorry—but so much time has passed I won’t remember for what. I should ask the immeasurable, but I am silent and let the ocean pass between us.
A Cloud of Inattention

Homer, my friend who promised to write the story of my life, has died. A great loss! Not only to me and his other friends, but also to the world of letters. Why? Because Homer’s words about me (he was a very famous author) would have invariably reached a very large, and extremely discriminating, audience. I would have become, if not famous, at least noticed. But now, forced to finish what Homer started and to tell my own story, I’m certainly doomed to remain what I have always been: the least important character in fiction. A cloud of inattention, which has always surrounded me, is bound to become even thicker.

I am the exact opposite of what I wanted to be. I came into the world with the firm purpose of being known and I have failed completely. I have developed into a totally obscure character. It’s not that I haven’t tried being noticed. I have. But everyone, authors and other characters alike, ignore me. The other day I was in this café where authors go to find characters for their fiction and I met a famous author. I bought him a coffee and a Danish and, in order to make him remember me, I stared hard into his face, shook his hand violently and yelled at him, “It’s great to finally meet you! You’re my favorite author!” Then I slipped my name and address into his hand. What happened next was completely contrary to what I wanted. He turned away from me and started talking with another famous author about how hard it is nowadays to find suitable fictional characters. He had become totally oblivious of me!

The next day I was back in the café and tried, with another famous author, a different kind of introduction. Instead of approaching him from a standing position, I remained seated. And, instead of adopting a bold, forward, manner I put on an air of indifference and what might be called an extreme Byronic pose. My demeanor and handshake were totally consistent with that of the celebrated poet: languid, retreating, leaving in their wake the atmospheric suggestion of a mysterious past. The reaction of the famous author? After looking blankly through me, he turned and walked over to talk with a character who had appeared in his recent bestseller.

So, on the advice of a friend, another obscure character, I started frequenting a café for bad writers. Perhaps,
I told myself, this café was just what I needed to become known. Here writers came to find some good secondhand bargains and also some good, cheap, new material. And, since literary fashion always changes with the times (and economic fluctuations) writers had a reasonable hope of meeting characters who had once been famous but now were unemployed. The first day I was in the café I remembered meeting characters who had worked for Nobel Prize winners. But now, out of work for some time, they were hungry and in need of rent money.

On this particular day, I was sitting in the café with a second, or third, rate (I forget which) writer discussing character-identity and fiction writing.

“Why not make me a character in your next book?” I asked.

“So what are your qualifications for being a character in my kind of book?”

“I have a totally blank personality. No one ever notices me. Dogs never bark at me. Beggars look right through me. I’m perfect for contemporary fiction.” I could see, through the heavy cigarette smoke, that he might be beginning to take interest in me. But then a surprise!

“You might do, if the price is right. I’m not sure. Right now I’m thinking about renting a cheap, second-hand character for my next big book.”

I, of course, knew about agencies that rent out characters. Several discount agencies I had approached about employment had rejected my job application. All of them gave me the same story—with words of dismissal like “too two dimensional;” “totally lacking in personal qualities”; or, the most cutting of all, “After several in-house discussions about your application, we have concluded that you don’t exist.”

“My book is very much mainstream. It’s about anonymity and evil in the big city. So the character has to be just right,” the writer added.

“I’m your guy,” I said. “Anonymity…a piece of cake.”

“Well,” he replied, “send me your resume. I’ll take a look at it.”

Days, weeks and months passed. Spring turned into summer, summer into fall and then winter came. Nothing. Not a word from the second (or third?) rate author. So here I’m in another café, one patronized by fictional stereotypes. I’m...
Gene Washington

talking with a type who escapes from things, prison, Devil’s Island, chains, walled enclosures, etc.
    “So what’s your secret? How did you become known?” I ask.
    “By committing suicide.”
    “Really?”
    “Not a real suicide, an official one.”
He then went on to describe how he had left his coat on a bridge with a suicide note pinned to it; how the police declared him dead and how the newspapers had played up his death. He was finally known and the job offers from bad writers started pouring in. So, following his example, I went to a bridge over the deepest river in town; I wrote a suicide note, “My name is…and I have killed myself by jumping off this bridge.” I removed my coat, pinned the note to it, left it on the bridge and walked away.
And…

Note from the editor: The story you have just read seems to have been ghostwritten by several persons. But nothing is known of them.
Was there ever a time, maybe so,
The creeks up here ran crystal clear
A good foot deep and three across.
Maybe no. And certainly not now.
Now only cattle tracks, jackrabbit
Deep, and cheat-grass clumps brown
Around a dried-up sidewall seep
Relieve the heat-cracked gully-wash.
The sun’s monotony has made a Mars
Of this, an otherwise perfect place. . .
Perfect for antelope who flicker to water
Like lizard tongues: Not there. There.
Then gone. Even the cobblestones
Stuck in the cut bank lie about floods
That tossed and tumbled them here.
The cattle have all abandoned
Their tracks, and the antelope will not
Come to this place, where even
The snakes have pulled up stakes.
Notes on the Staff

Beth E. McDonald (Managing Editor) has an MA in Creative Writing (Poetry) and a PhD in 19th Century/Gothic Literature (University of Oklahoma). She has published numerous poems in several small journals and worked as editor on others. Her book *The Vampire as Numinous Experience: Spiritual Journeys with the Undead in British and American Literature* has been published by McFarland. Since moving to Las Vegas, she has worked as an adjunct professor for UNLV, teaching courses in Composition II and World Literature. (Nevada)

Susan Summers (Contributing Editor) serves as the UNLV Department of English Budget Technician. She is the past Executive Director of a Pediatric AIDS organization and served as the Nevada State Coordinator of The Adoption Exchange. (Nevada)

Sandra Hooven (Nonfiction Editor) received her MA from Cal Poly Pomona. Before coming to UNLV, she taught English at Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, California. Currently she is teaching the 101 E/F sequence at UNLV. (Nevada)

Rebecca L. Colbert (Fiction Editor) has an MA from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and an MLIS (Master of Library and Information Sciences) from the University of North Texas. She is currently employed as a Reference Librarian with the Las Vegas Clark County Library District and teaches World Literature in the Department of English at UNLV. (Nevada)

Erin Kelley (Poetry Editor) is an adjunct professor of English at Richland College in Richardson, Texas and College of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas. She holds a Juris Doctorate and an M.A. and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of Texas at Dallas with a focus on Shakespeare/Renaissance Studies and Law in Literature. She has published both creative and critical works in various scholarly journals. (Texas)
Andrew Bahlmann (Layout Editor/Cover Design) is a husband, father and award winning poet. He is working on a PhD in medieval literature at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has taught, dug ditches, checked groceries and fixed toilets to fund his academics. He has a BA from Southern Utah University and an MA in medieval literature from the University of Colorado at Boulder. He has presented numerous papers on topics ranging from Poe to Tolkien to Batman. He serves as an Assistant to the Graduate Coordinator (Nevada)

Thomas U. Knapp (Front Cover Photo) is a sixteen year resident of Nevada. Tom holds a BA in Criminal Justice Administration and is a graduate of the FBI National Academy (137th Session). He is also a graduate of the Paralegal Studies Program at UNLV. Tom is a retired law enforcement executive and now spends his time doing professional photography for the Travel Channel and other commercial photography clients. He is especially fond of Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area and enjoys spending his free time hiking and photographing its many wonders. (Nevada)

Stan Braaten (Back Cover Photo) has been taking photographic images for the last four years. He likes all forms of photography, but he really enjoys travel and landscape photography. Stan has won numerous awards for his photography, but this will be the first time he has been published. Stan shoots with Canon equipment and currently uses a Canon 7D with various Canon "L" lenses. (Nevada)
Notes on Readers

Alex M. Frankel was born in San Francisco and, after attending Columbia University in New York, lived in Spain for 10 years before returning to California in the mid 1990’s. He holds an MFA in Poetry from New England College and hosts the Second Sunday Poetry Series in Pasadena (www.secondsundaypoetry.com). His poetry and fiction have appeared in several journals, including previous issues of wordriver. He currently works in the Extended Education department at Cal State Los Angeles. (California)

Allan Johnston earned his M.A. in Creative Writing and his Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Davis. His poems have appeared in over sixty journals. He is the author of one full-length poetry collection (Tasks of Survival, 1996) and a chapbook (Northport, 2010), and has received an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize nomination (2009), and First Prize in Poetry in the Outrider Press Literary Anthology competition (2010). Originally from California, he now teaches writing and literature at Columbia College and DePaul University in Chicago. He serves as a reader for the Illinois Emerging Poets competition and is the editor of the Journal for the Philosophical Study of Education. (Illinois)

Susan Nyikos is a lecturer at Utah State University where she has taught an array of composition and literary survey classes for eight years. Her poems have appeared in her local poetry group’s chapbooks for several years and in the wordriver anthology in 2009 and 2010. Susan has been judging for poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction contests in her local community and on campus. (Utah)

Paul Sacksteder grew up in Shelbyville, Kentucky and still prefers to go barefoot when possible. He’s a recent graduate of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas MFA program in poetry. Currently, he’s an adjunct professor at UNLV teaching primarily composition classes. (Nevada)

Anne Stark has been a lecturer for twenty years, eighteen of which have been in the English department of Utah State University. She has published several scholarly pieces on her research topic, the female hero, and two pieces of fiction in
university publications. Currently, she is working on a collection of short fiction and continues to write and teach fiction and literature courses. Her work has been published in both local and out-of-state university publications, including 2009’s *wordriver*. (Utah)
Notes on Contributors

Jeffrey Arnett has been a part-time lecturer in writing at UC Santa Cruz for 22 years. He has an MFA from the University of Colorado in Creative Writing. He also edits a publication for UC Santa Cruz. (California)

Jeremy Beatson is an adjunct English instructor at Florida Gateway College. He is a veteran of the U.S. Army, a Georgia State University alumnus and completed his graduate studies at UNLV. Jeremy writes fiction, literary criticism, and poetry. (Florida)

Norah Bowman-Broz is an ABD PhD candidate in the English and Film Studies Department at the University of Alberta, Canada. Norah is also a part-time term English instructor at Okanagan College in Kelowna, BC, Canada. She has had publications in both literary criticism and poetry in several countries. (British Columbia, Canada)

Dianna Calareso is a writer, editor and adjunct writing instructor in the Boston area. She teaches in the English Department at Marian Court College, and teaches Humanities online through Rasmussen College. Her memoir At Ease is under agency review, and her essays have been studied in undergraduate, graduate, and adult learning curricula. (Massachusetts)

Thea Cervone lectures in medieval and renaissance literature at the University of Southern California. Her field of study is the English Reformation. She has published on the ghost traditions of the Early Modern period, and she has also published on propaganda plays of the Reformation. She is currently writing a book about oaths in politics, literature, and polemic in the sixteenth century, forthcoming from MacFarlane Press. (California)

Publishing as I. M. Chapman, Harry Brown is retired from the Eastern Kentucky University English Department and now teaches part-time—one or two classes each semester. This fall Wind Publications will bring out his seventh book (his sixth poetry collection): In Some Households the King Is Soul: Poems. He has had a number of recent publications. He submitted “Within the Very Flame of Love . . .” under the
pseudonym I. M. Chapman, which he has used occasionally since the early eighties. Chapman has also published in several journals. (Kentucky)

**Blase Drexler** teaches composition and rhetoric at both New Mexico State University and Dona Ana Community College. His fiction and reviews have appeared in multiple journals. (New Mexico)

**Laurie Duesing** a long-time resident of California, moved four years ago to Louisville, Kentucky, to be with her family. She is currently an adjunct member of the Classics Department at the University of Louisville, where she teaches Latin. She has published her poems in several small journals and a chapbook *Hard Kisses* with Swan Scythe Press. She has been the recipient of an NEA in Poetry. (Kentucky)

**Alex M. Frankel** was born in San Francisco and, after attending Columbia University in New York, lived in Spain for 10 years before returning to California in the mid 1990’s. He holds an MFA in Poetry from New England College and hosts the Second Sunday Poetry Series in Pasadena (www.secondsundaypoetry.com). His poetry and fiction have appeared in several journals. He currently works in the Extended Education department at Cal State Los Angeles. (California)

**Victor Hawk** is an adjunct instructor in the English department at the University of Central Oklahoma. He has had several poems published in various venues. (Oklahoma)

**Jade Hidle** is an adjunct faculty member in the English departments at Orange Coast Community College and California State University, Long Beach. Her creative and literary works have appeared in several venues. (California)

**Susan Howard** is currently an adjunct instructor at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne, Indiana. (Indiana)

**Rosann Kozlowski** currently teaches as an adjunct professor in the English Department at Bridgewater State University. She recently received a Massachusetts Cultural Council Grant for her poetry (2010) and has had publications in multiple journals. (Massachusetts)
Steven Kunert has been an adjunct writing instructor for twelve years at Oregon State University in Corvallis, where he also serves as the English Department’s Undergraduate Academic Advisor. He grew up on the Texas-Mexico border and got literary "training" in the vast nowhereness of the desert and intense somewhereness of back streets in El Paso and Juarez. He has published prose, commentary and poetry for over 30 years. (Texas)

Victoria Large is an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at Emerson College, and holds a BA and MA in English from Bridgewater State University. She is a Visiting Lecturer in the English Department at BSU, and an instructor in the First Year Writing Program (part of the Department of Writing, Literature, and Publishing) at Emerson. She has had multiple publications in short fiction. (Idaho)

Andrew Madigan is an instructor and journal editor at United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates, where he lives in the Hilton Hotel. His last publication accepted was a book of short fiction. (United Arab Emirates)

Eddie Malone is an adjunct professor in the English department at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles where he teaches creative writing and freshman composition. He has had other creative nonfiction and poetry published. (California)

Natalie Ivnik Mount is an Adjunct Instructor of First-Year Writing at Lewis University in Romeoville, IL, and has also taught at her alma mater, North Central College in Naperville, IL. She is currently applying to Ph.D. programs in Creative Writing and Media Studies, in hopes of eventually teaching writing across the curriculum. (Illinois)

Susan Nyikos is a lecturer at Utah State University where she has taught an array of composition and literary survey classes for eight years. Her poems have appeared in her local poetry group’s chapbooks for several years and in the wordriver anthology in 2009 and 2010. Susan has been judging for poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction contests in her local community and on campus. (Utah)
Rebecca Leah Păpuca ru is a graduate of the Humber School for Writers (Toronto) and is currently a doctoral student at the University of Montreal. Her poetry and prose have been shortlisted for a number of awards in Canada, including Arc Magazine's Poem of the Year. Her poetry has been anthologized in the 2010 edition of The Best Canadian Poetry in English (guest editor Lorna Crozier and series editor Molly Peacock), and in the Headlight anthology of emerging writers. Her work has appeared in publications in Canada, the United States and Ireland. (Quebec, Canada)

Gary Pullman, a graduate of Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas, is a part-time instructor in the Department of English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he teaches English Composition. He also teaches a variety of English courses as an adjunct instructor at the College of Southern Nevada and at several local proprietary colleges. He has published four young adult novels, and he writes Chillers and Thrillers: A Blog on the Theory and Practice of Writing Horror Fiction. (Nevada)

John Quinn teaches as an adjunct professor of English at UNLV. Over the years, he has published three wee books of poems and seen somewhere around 200 poems printed in sixty or seventy magazines and journals, none of which has kept him from aging . . . (Nevada)

Gail Radley is a full-time lecturer in English at Stetson University in DeLand, FL. This year brought the publication of her 22nd book for young people, one of which was made into a movie. She has also written a variety of articles, poems, and short stories for adults. (Florida)

Denise M. Rogers teaches at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She holds a continuing line faculty appointment at the university in the English Department there. She received an M.F.A. from the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville. She currently teaches composition, literature, and humanities courses at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. She has had several poems published, including in her first book, The Scholar's Daughter, which was published by Louisiana Literature Press in 2008. (Louisiana)
Nina R. Schneider teaches creative and expository writing at Bentley University, where she is an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the English & Media Studies Department. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College. Her short creative nonfiction and fiction have appeared in multiple journals. (Massachusetts)

Judy Shearer teaches as adjunct faculty for the Department of English and Philosophy at Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky. Her MFA in Writing is from Spalding University and she has three publications, including ALL BONES BE WHITE, a creative nonfiction book coming out in May 2011 by the University Press of America, their Hamilton imprint. (Kentucky)

Anne Stark has published several scholarly pieces on the female hero, and two pieces of fiction in university publications. Currently, she is working on a collection of short fiction and continues to write and teach fiction and literature courses. Her work has been published in both local and out-of-state university publications, including 2009’s wordriver. She is proud to be in her twentieth year teaching as a lecturer at Utah State University in the English department. She teaches various writing classes, but currently is teaching fiction writing. (Utah)

Kate Sweeney completed her MFA in poetry at the University of Florida. Her chapbook, Better Accidents, was winner of the 2009 YellowJacket Press Chapbook Contest. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in several publications. She is currently an adjunct professor at the University of Tampa. (Florida)

Akin Taiwo is a sessional social work professor at the University of Windsor, Canada, where he is also a PhD student. He has three degrees in Political Science and one in Philosophy. He has been a newspaper columnist, magazine editor and a percussionist. He has a poem published in "Voices From the Fringe: An Anthology of New Nigerian Poets." He is working on his poetry collection tentatively titled "Therapy and other neurosis." (Ontario, Canada)

Ross Talarico has published several books, has been awarded the Shaughnessy Prize from The Modern Language...
Association, The Lillian Fairchild Award, and he was designated the Langston Hughes Poet/Scholar from Kansas University. He has also published hundreds of poems in multiple journals. He teaches part-time courses in Writing and Literature at Palomar College in San Diego. (California)

**Gene Washington** is a Professor emeritus at Utah State University. His latest publications include poetry, plays and essays and has had several plays produced in New York and Los Angeles. He teaches part time in theater of the absurd. (Utah)

**Maggie Wheeler** has been an adjunct in the Department of English at Indiana State University since 1996. She teaches Advance Expository Writing, Folklore, and Introduction to Creative Writing. Her latest publications have included poetry and a short story. This submission came about as the result of her involvement in the last presidential primary. (Indiana)

**Katy E. Whittingham**, Originally from Upstate NY, received her MFA from Emerson College in Boston. She lives in Wareham, MA with her husband and teaches writing at Bridgewater State College and the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. She has had poems published in several journals and magazines, and has one chapbook entitled *By a Different Ocean* published by Plan B Press, Virginia. (Massachusetts)

**Bruce Wyse** is currently a sessional instructor in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University and the Department of English at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. His poetry and short stories have appeared in multiple journals. He is currently a contract instructor in the English and Film Studies Department at Wilfrid Laurier University. (Ontario, Canada)

**Brian R. Young** graduated from Penn State University in 2001 with an MFA in Poetry. His poems have appeared in several publications. Currently, he teaches composition at Walsh University. (Ohio)
Submission Guidelines

*wordriver* is a literary journal dedicated to the poetry, short fiction and creative nonfiction of adjunct, part-time and full-time instructors teaching under a semester or yearly contract in our universities, colleges, and community colleges worldwide. Graduate student teachers who have used up their teaching assistant time and are teaching with adjunct contracts for the remainder of their graduate program are also eligible.

We're looking for work that demonstrates the creativity and craft of adjunct/part-time instructors in English and other disciplines. We reserve first publication rights and onetime anthology publication rights for all work published. We do not accept simultaneous submissions.

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See [http://wordriverreview.unlv.edu](http://wordriverreview.unlv.edu) for the most current information on submissions.

All submissions must be sent by email as Word.docs. MS Word 2003 or earlier (no Vista or .pdf files PLEASE.) Times Roman font is preferable.

Poetry: Maximum 5 poems (60 lines or less each poem). Send all submissions as separate attachments in Microsoft Word format (see above) to one email. Each poem must be formatted to fit within 5 ½ inch margins in 10 point, Times New Roman font. Include your name, address, phone number, and email address in the body of your email, as well as a short bio (no more than 6 sentences) listing your university, college, or community college affiliation, your adjunct status, your department and any previous publishing history, and your degrees, where you obtained them, and what field(s) of study. Do not put your name or personal information on your attachment(s). Send all poetry submissions to Poetry editor wordriver@unlv.edu (The subject line of your submission email should read: wordriverPoetrySub)
Short Fiction: Maximum 2 submissions (10 typed, double-spaced pages each). Send all submissions as separate attachments in Microsoft Word format (see above) to one email. Include your name, address, phone number, and email address in the body of your email, as well as a short bio (no more than 6 sentences) listing your university, college, or community college affiliation, your adjunct status, your department and any previous publishing history, and your degrees, where you obtained them, and what field(s) of study. Do not put your name or personal information on your attachment(s). Send all fiction submissions to Fiction editor wordriver@unlv.edu (The subject line of your submission email should read: wordriverFictionSub.)

Creative Nonfiction: Maximum 2 submissions (10 typed, double-spaced pages each). Send all submissions as separate attachments in Microsoft Word format (see above) to one email. Include your name, address, phone number, and email address in the body of your email, as well as a short bio (no more than 6 sentences) listing your university, college, or community college affiliation, your adjunct status, your department and any previous publishing history, and your degrees, where you obtained them, and what field(s) of study. Do not put your name or personal information on your attachment(s). Send all nonfiction submissions to Nonfiction editor wordriver@unlv.edu (The subject line of your submission email should read: wordriverNonfictionSub.)
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Photo Contest

We are accepting photo entries that display the meaning of the artist’s/photographer’s interpretation of *wordriver*. There is only ONE prize which will be awarded and that is to have your photo printed as the full cover photo placed on a volume of *wordriver*. The first two issues of the journal cover were pictures of rivers taken in Yosemite National Park and Ashland, Oregon. We are now looking for entries that are river images from anywhere in the world, or are renditions of your own interpretation of *wordriver*.

There is a $5 per photo entry fee with unlimited entries accepted. Photos must be the original work of the entrant. No copyrighted work will be accepted. Photos must be in color and submitted in a 6 X 9 print or electronically (300 dpi). No prints will be returned. The photo contest is open to everyone.

Please email wordriver@unlv.edu for an entry blank or visit http://wordriverreview.unlv.edu
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Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area just south of the Red Rock overlook, looking west toward Rainbow Mountain