

NOTRE DAME REVIEW



NOTRE DAME REVIEW

NUMBER 8

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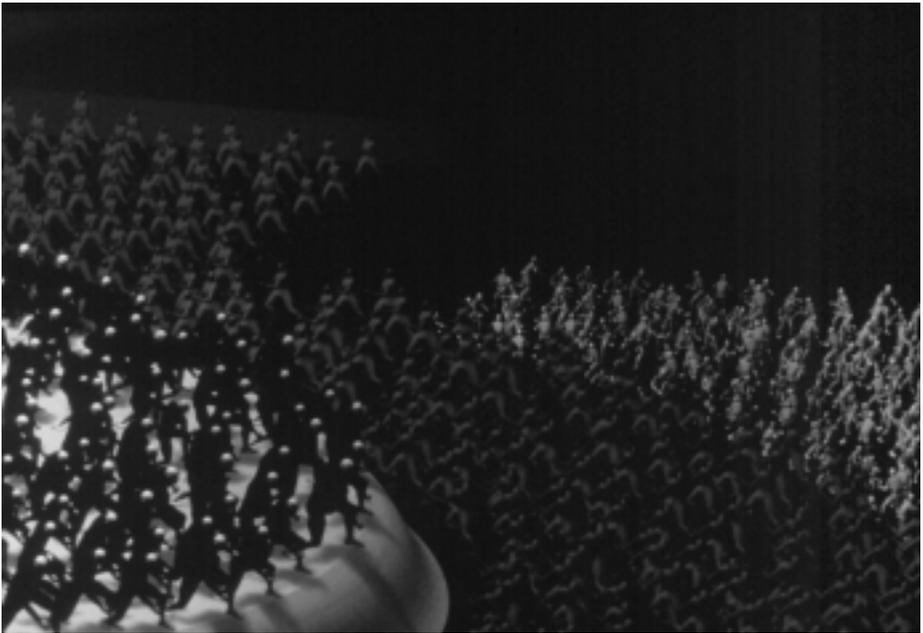
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PLACE/DISPLACEMENT



Jason Salavon, *Diagram for the Apprehension of Simple Forces*, 1997, cibiachrome, 12 x 15 inches. Courtesy of Peter Miller Gallery, Chicago.

GENGHIS KHAN

Yanbing Chen

I

“What’s up?” Lee sounded as upbeat as ever at the other end of the line.

“Everything,” I said. “Rent, tuition, phone bill, insurance, everything except my god-damned wage, still four twenty-five an hour.”

“You still washing dishes at the school?”

“What else can I do?”

“Too bad,” he said. There was a short silence, as if he were trying to think of a way to get me out of my lousy situation. “Do you have to work tonight?” he said after a while.

“No,” I said. Tuesday was my only night off.

“Good. There’s a new casino open in Joliet. You wan’ go?”

“I don’t have any money,” I said.

“Fifty bucks’s all you need. We don’t play no big. You lose, you leave. But who knows, maybe we’ll hit a jackpot and never have to work again.”

“If you wanna go, go yourself.”

“I can’t. That piece’v junk of mine broke down last week. Think it as you do me a favor, OK?”

By the time we pulled into the huge parking lot outside The Empress Casino, it was already packed with Mercedes, BMWs, and Lincolns. But there were the other types as well: a rusty ’78 Oldsmobile with its passenger’s side window missing, an ancient beat-up Mustang, a shiny little Yugo. My car, of course, fitted more comfortably in their company.

Lee made his usual car talk as we cut through the parking lot.

“That’s a good one.” Lee patted the hood of a Continental convertible with the top down. “V-8 engine, turbo-charged, 120 miles an hour no problem.”

“How about this?” I pointed at a red Renault parked next to it.

“Junk.” He kicked its tire. “Don’t ever buy a Renault in this country. They’re all junks.”

With all his knowledge, it was funny though, that Lee had bought one bad car after another. The problem, he explained, was not the lack of expertise, but that of money. “You can’t buy a Rolls Royce for five hundred bucks.”

The admission turned out to be fifteen dollars, something Lee claimed to be unheard of.

“Fifteen bucks just to get in?” Lee challenged the girl in the black and white uniform behind the counter, “In Las Vegas, they even gave me money to spend!”

“This ain’t no Vegas, sir,” the girl said, hands perched on the computer keyboard, eyes glued to the screen. “You decide if you want to go in or not. Next!”

That reduced my fortune-making fund by almost a third. With the quarter tokens barely filling the smallest cup, I headed straight to the slot machines. Lee said he was going to look around for a while, checking out the dealers at the Black Jack tables.

I wandered along the aisles, dropping a token here, a token there. Finally I settled down at a machine that spewed out twenty on my second try. All around, the only thing you hear was the sound of tokens spat out of the machines, clink, clank, clink, clank.... For a moment you would think everybody was winning. I read the instructions: 1 for blank, 2 for cherries, 5 for any 2 fruits, ... 80 for 3 bars... and three cherries, the Jackpot—\$5623.75....\$5624.50....\$5625.25.... The figure in the electronic display kept increasing.

“Put in three at a time, then you can get it to pay at all three lines,” a middle-aged man in overalls at the next machine said, a tip. But having only thirty-five dollars in the cup, I alternated—three times single, one double, three times single, one triple—hoping that would last me a little longer.

Lee and I met working at a restaurant in Chinatown two years ago. I was a busboy, and he a waiter. I had just come from China, and was enrolled at East-West as a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy. Though my tuition was prepaid with my application—a policy which I found out only later was rare in this country—the monthly rent of \$250 for my sleeping room in a rundown apartment house on Sam Davis Avenue was making my money run out like rice in a leaking sack. I was, therefore, very grateful to the Cantonese owner of the restaurant when he hired me, asking for neither work permit nor experience. Three thirty every afternoon, I rode a squeaking bike, which I had picked up for five bucks at a rummage sale, through the dozen blocks swarming with people of all nationalities to the restaurant lodged between a bakery and an oriental pharmacy on Wentworth, pondering all along the ontological differences between Spinoza and Confucius. Lee had been working there for several months. Originally from Hong Kong, he came to the States fifteen years ago. He spoke Cantonese, Hakka, but no Mandarin, so the two of us had to communicate through pidgin English, which he was very good at. Lee taught me how to set the table,

how to fold napkins into flowers, how to carry six glasses in one hand and then put an ashtray on top; and later, how to wrap Moo Shu, how to serve champagne, and how to take the change back to the customer non-offensively when it was not enough for the tip. But the restaurant went out of business a few months later. Lee found another job across the street, while I, it being no longer possible to ride a bike in winter, moved to the dorm and settled down to washing dishes in the school cafeteria.

My first big hit was “three bars,” 80, but it came on a single shot.

“See, I told you to put in three at a time. It would’ve been 240,” the man in overalls said, shaking his head.

But I was happy enough with this windfall. Scooping the tokens into my cup, I looked around for Lee. He was nowhere to in sight. Ignoring once again my neighbor’s advice, I continued with my pattern.

When the bell burst into a blast at the other end of the floor, I had altogether three decent hits, one 50, another 80, and one 160—finally caught one with two tokens.

The bell kept on.

“What’s that?” I asked the man in overalls, who had stopped feeding the machine and was looking towards the other end.

“Somebody’s hit a jackpot,” he said. I followed his eyes and saw a little red light above one of the machines flashing and spinning like the kind on top of an ambulance.

“Really?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. Slowly, the corners of his mouth lifted into a grin, as if he himself were only beginning to understand the meaning of his own announcement.

“How much you think it is?”

“Oh, those are the dollar machines. Must be quite a lot. I’ve been here all the time since this morning and haven’t heard the bell ring till now. Go and check it out.”

I went over.

“Fuck...” Lee was grumbling two machines away from the one that was making all the noise.

“That was mine,” he said, pointing to the old Latino lady sitting in front of the winning machine like a stone corpse, staring at the three 7s centered on the middle line—red, blue, and white, perfect order—deaf and mute to the uniformed attendants around coaxing her to take a picture. “That was mine,” Lee hissed. “I was playing that one when she came up and said she was playing that one since yesterday and had just stepped away to go to the bathroom. Fuck ye mother I gave it to her!” He dropped the

last two tokens in his cup into the machine and pulled the lever—nothing. “Ai,” he slapped his thigh and stood up, heading for the change counter.

I traded all my tokens for plastic chips at the counter and picked a five-dollar Black Jack table to try my luck. It didn’t go too bad. At least I wasn’t losing. By the time Lee came over, I even had a small pile of additional chips on the side. I had just won three times in a row.

“What are you doing playing so tiddy-bitty?” Lee yelled when he saw I left only two chips in the hole for next hand after collecting my winnings. “Play big. Got to play big when you’re strong.”

There were only two more hands left before the time was up for this cruise. I was tempted.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Of course. That’s the rule,” he said, and nudged another five chips of mine over.

The dealer hit a Black Jack right on, and swept the table clean.

“Big, big.” Lee poked at me as I hesitated about the last bet. “Last hand, I don’t think she be that lucky again.”

I slapped a whole pile in the hole. Ten chips, fifty dollars.

6 and 5. The face card of the dealer was 3.

“Double!” Lee poked at me again. “She be busted.”

I pushed another pile over.

“Te-n-n-n!” Lee intoned as if performing some kind of a black magic as the dealer drew out my double card. It was an 8.

“Not bad, not bad,” he said, “you win for sure.”

The dealer’s turn. Her bottom card was 2. Ace, 10, and...4! That adds up to 20.

“Fuck.” Both Lee and I slammed down on the table with our fists.

The cruise was over.

Back in my car, I asked Lee if he had lost all of his fifty dollars.

“Fifty!” He jumped, as if my question were a great insult. “You really believed me, did you? Ten times!”

I didn’t ask anything more, but figured how many tables he had to wait on before he could earn that much back.

“How’s work?” I asked when we stopped for breakfast at a Hardee’s along the Interstate, “Still working at the Cantonese Chef?”

“I quit.”

“When?”

“Two days ago. Had a fight with that son of a turtle.”

“What happened?”

“Don’t ask me about it.” He blew at the coffee the way one would a

mug of tea with the leaves floating on top. “That son of a turtle, the hell with him!” Across the aisle, a man in a flannel shirt with rolled-up sleeves sat alone at a table drinking coffee from a thermal cup; two tables down, a fat sleepy-eyed woman was blowing smoke rings over the remains of her breakfast.

“You want to work in the restaurant again?” Lee asked after a while, crumpling the sandwich wrapper into a ball and stuffing it in his empty cup. “We can go and look for a good place together.”

That was not a bad idea. The spring semester was about to end, and both the cafeteria and the dorm would be closed, which meant I would have to look for another job as well as a place to live.

“How about we wait till I’m done with school?” I said.

“When’s that?”

“In three weeks.”

“Nah,” he said, wiping off the stain his mug had made on the table. “Too late. If you want to go, we go now. When everybody’s out of school, you won’t even have soup left.”

II

After checking out a dozen Golden Dragons, Imperial Palaces and China Houses all around Chicago, we found a place called Genghis Khan in Wheeling.

“What can I do for you?” A man in his fifties sitting behind the bar reading a Chinese newspaper looked up at us from behind a pair of black-rimmed glasses.

That was Wong, the owner of Genghis Khan. It turned out that one of his waiters was going back to Hong Kong to get married, and another was opening a restaurant of his own. He said he would try us out that night.

“No use fooling around with me, OK? I can tell by just watching you wait on a few tables.”

Compared with that little Dim Sum place in Chinatown, Genghis Khan was a real restaurant, and five times busier, but Lee and I worked as a team, and didn’t have too much trouble. By the time the last table was gone, we literally had money dropping out of our pockets.

“Not bad, uh?” Lee said as I counted my tips in the car. I didn’t change them into large bills as Lee did. It felt good having a pocket full of money, even just for a little while.

If you are someone who did not have enough sleep, then the alarm clock must be your worst enemy. It always starts to beep at the best part of your dream, though in most cases the dream is gone the moment you open

your eyes. But that makes you all the more angry because you've just been deprived of even the memory of pleasure, which might be the only consolation you have to last you through the day. But that's something you just have to put up with because things would be only worse when the clock goes on a strike and you wake up to find half the day already gone. My daily routine during the last three weeks of that semester started at five with a mug of strong tea. After ironing my shirt, vest and trousers for the night—first things first—I would start working on the two fifteen-page papers due before the end of the term. On Tuesdays and Thursdays I went to class at one, and then, at three, headed off to Chinatown to pick up Lee and go to work—we had worked out with the boss that as soon as I was done with school, both of us would come and work full time. By the time I got back home it would be around midnight. A couple of times I woke up early in the morning and found I had dropped dead on the bed without even taking my clothes off.

The day I went to turn in my last paper at the department office, the secretary told me Dr. Freeland, chair of the department, wanted to see me.

"You must have heard about Professor Skretkowicz," Dr. Freeland said after I sat down.

"No," I said. Skretkowicz was my thesis director. "What happened?"

"Professor Skretkowicz died of a heart attack two days ago." Dr. Freeland paused, taking off his glasses. "I am very sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," I said, but had no glasses to take off.

"I understand you have worked closely with Professor Skretkowicz and am so sorry that the relationship between you two had to be terminated this way." He replaced his glasses. "As I understand, you've finished all your course work, but have not completed your thesis yet. Am I right?"

"That's right."

"And your thesis is a comparative study of the philosophies of Spinoza and Confucius?"

"Correct."

"You may well know that Professor Skretkowicz was the only expert in oriental philosophy in our department."

"Yes, I know. That's why Professor Skretkowicz became my thesis director."

"Now that he's gone...eh...passed away, I mean, we are really diminished in our ability to guide your present thesis. Do you think there is any possibility that you might choose a different topic at this stage?"

"Well, I'm afraid it would be quite difficult now, Dr. Freeland," I said.

"Oh I understand your situation perfectly. I was only making a

suggestion. Of course there's always the possibility that we hire somebody from another school to read your thesis, but that ..." he paused "...could be difficult sometimes."

"The alternative," he said after a while, "though I hate to say it, will be you to transfer to another school." He looked away at the books on the shelf for a moment. "But don't get me wrong, we don't really want to lose you."

I followed his eyes to the bookshelf, saw nothing in particular, and said nothing.

"Anyway, you don't have to make the decision now. Think about it, and let me know before classes start next semester. All right?"

So, I thought as I walked down the dim corridor, that was about the end of the friendship between Confucius and Spinoza.

Lee was right. Almost everyday the first two weeks after we started working full time at Genghis Khan, people called or just walked in, looking for jobs. We were lucky to have made the right move in time. We made good money, an average of seventy dollars per day, not including our wage. The wage was fourteen dollars a day, well below the \$2.19/hour minimum for waiters if you divided it by ten, roughly the number of hours we worked every day. But nobody really bothered to argue as long as the tips were good.

To save money on rent and gas, Lee and I moved to the restaurant.

The move was easy. Except for a few books and some clothes, I left all my things in storage at school, and all of Lee's belongings were packed easily into an old footlocker, two traveling bags and a few fortune cookie boxes.

Our "dorm," as Wong referred to it, was the space between two steel file cabinets and an old sagging canopy bed in the second-floor office of Genghis Khan. We were not supposed to use the bed.

"My wife might need to take a nap there in the afternoon sometimes, and when she's in there, you keep out, OK?" That was the condition under which the key—there was only one—was handed over to us.

Most times, however, Lee and I made our beds in the dining room by pulling the chairs together. Twelve chairs, and it was a quite comfortable bed. On some rainy nights when it got too chilly we would light up the fireplace, a fake with gas tubes hidden between cement logs. But we had to watch out for Wong, who sometimes after his mid-night Mahjong party would sneak back and check up on us.

Upstairs, next to another "dorm" shared by the amigos—Anastacio, the Pick-up/Deep-fry, and Jose, the Dishwasher—Chef Wu, or Wu Shifu as we called him, lived alone in a small room. Thirty-six years old and wearing a

pair of gold-rimmed glasses, he looked more like an accountant than a cook. Ever since coming over from Hong Kong six years ago, he had been working for Wong, twelve hours a day, six days a week. His salary, which he revealed only reluctantly after our repeated probing, was \$1600 a month. He had a house about twenty minutes' drive away, but since his wife had run away with a white man two years ago and he had sent his son to his sister's in New York, he lived most of the time at the restaurant. Once Lee and I rented a Kung Fu movie from a grocery store in Chinatown and we all watched it in Wu Shifu's room. Aside from the TV and the VCR, the only things that could be called superfluous in his room were a few posters of Hong Kong movie stars printed by a noodle factory, and a framed photo of his wife and son propped up on a nightstand. When Lee asked why he kept the photo of a woman who had dumped him, he said that it was the only good photo he had of his son.

Anastacio used to be a professional bullfighter—Matador, as he called it. Six and half feet, thick shoulders and strong muscles with a dash of black moustache, he did look like a man of the arena. Only his stomach was getting a little pouchy. "All this Chinese food," he grinned, patting his belly. He was saving his money till he had enough to go back and open his own Chinese Restaurant.

III

The days got warmer. Business was booming. At the peak hour, Lee and I would each handle seven to eight tables. Anyone could wait on one or two tables, but to handle seven or eight all at once required a certain level of coordination. The key was timing. Soup, appetizer, entree, and dessert—an experienced waiter like Lee could take all the tables at once and space them out in good order. "The Pot Stickers take about fifteen minutes, would you like something to drink in the meantime?...How about some Chinese beer? Tsintao, you ever tried that?... Never? What a shame! You have to try it. Believe me, you wouldn't be disappointed.....The Mandarin Fish's the Special tonight. It takes a little longer, but you'll see it's worth the wait." Clear and efficient in the kitchen, pleasant and graceful in the dining room, a good waiter leads the customers by his smile, his joke, and his authority, and never loses his pace and composure; a mediocre waiter, on the other hand, gets ordered around, tipping wine glasses and spilling soup into customers' laps from time to time, barely catching up at either end. It was clear I belonged to the soup-spilling type. There was no doubt about that.

But good or mediocre, you work hard. On Friday or Saturday night, by the time Wong and his wife counted the bottles of beer left in the cooler, locked up the box where the air-conditioning switch was located, and left in their white Mercedes, everyone was exhausted. Wu Shifu went to bed immediately, Anastacio sprawled on the grass across the parking lot, while Lee and I sat at the table in the waiter's section, for a long time not wanting to move. Only Jose seemed to have endless energy. After taking a shower and putting on his new shirt and black silk pants, he would slip out the back door with a cowboy hat in hand. Normally he wouldn't be back until three or four in the morning. For him, the day had just begun.

After a while, you got to know all the regulars: Mrs. Rosenberg who lived in the nursing home around the corner and wanted her tea boiling hot, Mrs. Culvert who came twice a week with her thirty-year-old imbecile daughter who beat her plate with the chopsticks like a drum; on Wednesdays, Mr. Jones would drop in for lunch with a roll of newspaper when almost everyone else had left, ordering always Chicken Chop Suey with no MSG and leaving two quarters as a tip. And there was the high school basketball coach with his skinny girlfriend, the insurance salesman in tie and suit adding up his invoices while waiting for his food, and the four Japanese businessmen who came late every other Friday night and drank three rounds of Tsintao and two pots of Sake, running the bill up to more than a hundred, using always a calculator to determine the amount of the tip, fifteen percent, not a penny less, not a penny more.

The thrill of earning cash daily, however, quickly decayed into tedium. As a waiter, all you ever needed to say were only a variation of about ten sentences—"How are you doing today?" "Can I get you something to drink?....Are you ready to order?....Is everything all right?.... Great!.... Here's your change....Thank you, Please come again....Thank you!....You have a nice weekend!....Thank you!....Good night!...Good night!" Sometimes I thought about writing a guidebook for working in Chinese restaurants and selling it to all those in China who were eager to come to the States. *How to Survive in a Chinese Restaurant in America*, I would call it, and I could guarantee it would be sold out overnight.

Since coming to live at the restaurant, I had hardly read anything, let alone begun working on my thesis. Waiting on tables had numbed my senses. But my body was getting strong. My muscles no longer felt sore by the end of the day. As for the mind, there was no need. "Walking corpse," Lee once said jokingly, "that's what we are!" But sometimes in the afternoon after the sidejobs were done, or at night when all the customers had left, sitting in the dining room, staring at the Happy Buddha in the half-

darkness, I felt the conversation with Dr. Freeland at the end the semester grow like an ominous seed, bloated and sprouting in the tepid summer rain.

Changing the topic of my thesis was almost out of the question—I was already more than halfway through my first draft. Besides, I didn't find any other topic that really interested me. Transferring to another school, on the other hand, could be costly, in terms of both time and money. The mere thought of the coming fall sent my head spinning.

"How long you still have to be in school?" Lee asked me one morning while we were still lying in our makeshift beds.

"I don't know," I said, looking at the stained foam blocks of the ceiling. "Looks like it's going to be longer than I expected."

"Then what? Can you get a better job?"

"With a M.A in philosophy, probably not," I said, turning over.

"What use of study if you can't get a good job out of it?" Lee sat up.

A good question. What was the point of studying if you couldn't get a job with the degree? Lee was right.

"Is it too late for you to switch the subject?" he asked, meaning my major.

"I guess it is."

"Then start all over again. Stop your stupid comparison of Confucius and Snowpizza. Go to another school and do something real."

Want it or not, I smirked, it didn't seem likely Mr. Old Con. was going to eat Snow Pizza anymore.

"You speak good English. Why don't you go to a Law School? You'll make good money."

Well, that was what everybody else was doing and what I had been resisting up till now.

"You're young and smart, there're many things you can do," he went on, but then sighed. "Not like me."

Lee dropped out of high school just before graduation the year he came to the States with his brother, and had never gone back to school since. For a while, we lay in the dim morning light and remained silent. A flock of birds hopped back and forth on the roof. Through the cracks, their chirping sounded distant but clear.

IV

On Sundays, when there was no lunch at Genghis Khan, Lee and I went out. I would go and pick up my mail at the school, and Lee would either go have a haircut or buy a pair of new shoes—shoes wear out fast if you work as a waiter—and then wait for me at Three Happiness in

Chinatown with a copy of *Shijie Ribao*—the *World Daily*. After lunch, we took Lakeshore Drive to downtown. On a good day, the lake would be full of sailboats; if we were lucky we could find a meter on Columbus Drive and take a stroll in Buckingham Square.

Instead of bringing me comfort, letters from old classmates in China always left me even more depressed. So-and-so got married, with a girl once I knew quite well; so-and-so got a job in a foreign venture in Shengzhen, and was making 4000 yuan a month, ten times of the wage of an ordinary clerk. Another sent a photo of himself leaning against a brand new Mercedes: he was soon to be promoted to cultural attaché somewhere in East Asia. “How are you doing, buddy?” they would ask. “Going to be professor soon?” Or, “Hey, got an American girlfriend?”

As I sat on a bench reading these letters in the brilliant sunlight, the pigeons walking as unhurried and dignified as the ladies and gentlemen on Michigan Avenue, an occasional gust of wind sending a spray of water from the fountain over our heads, and the colorful sails out on the lake shimmering like a huge live jigsaw puzzle against the fairy-tale blue of the water and sky, I wondered how I would describe my current situation to them. My parents’ letters were worse. While telling me not to work too hard, they never failed to remind me how much was still owed to friends and relatives who had generously lent me the \$7500 dollars for my first year, a debt my parents would never be able to repay unless they robbed the Bank of China.

“What you do if you win a jackpot?” Lee asked suddenly one day as we were lay on the greens on the east side of Columbus Drive eating cones of ice cream.

“Pay off my debt.”

“And then?”

“And then...” I really had to think about that.

“If I win a jackpot, I’m going to buy an Alpha Romeo, a new one, just like that.” He pointed at a little red convertible parked along the shoulder. “You don’t see many of this kind here, but damn popular in Hong Kong.”

“Romeo?” I asked, squinting my eyes to make out the lettering on the hood. The only Romeo I knew was the lover of Juliet.

“Ro-may-o,” he corrected me. “Italian.”

V

One Friday night in June Wu Shifu burned his hand. In the usual chaos of eight o’clock on weekend nights, Jose bumped Wu as he was switching a wok full of boiling oil to another stove. The oil lapped and splashed all over Wu’s hand and forearm. Everyone in the dining room

heard the terrible scream. By the time Lee and I rushed back, Wu was sitting on the floor, tears in eyes, and sweat breaking out on his forehead. Anastacio rummaged through the first-aid box for a cold pack, but only came up with a wad of half-soiled gauze.

Wong came in, stared a few seconds, and took the wad of gauze from Anastacio. "Everybody get back to work," he said.

We moved to fiddle with our jobs, but no one went out the kitchen. Realizing the gauze was dirty, Wong threw it in the garbage and went out. A few minutes later, he came back with a fresh bandage patch. But on close inspection, his brows tightened. "Shall I call an ambulance?" I asked.

"No. I'll drive," Wong said.

Louis and Anastacio helped Wu to his feet. But at the door, Wong turned back.

"You drive him to the hospital," he said, handing me his car keys. "I have to cook."

The drive to the hospital, according to Wong, should take only ten minutes. It took me twice as long, however, with the confusion of all the one-way streets and intersections.

At the Emergency, the doctor was furious. "You should've called an ambulance right away," he fumed. "At least you should have used cold-packs. Don't you have any cold-packs at home?"

The phone rang. It was Wong.

"You didn't tell them that it happened in the restaurant, did you?" he asked in a low voice.

"Not yet," I said.

"Don't! Just say it happened at home, will you?"

"Why?" I was not clear what he was getting at.

"They charge much more if it's going to be paid by the employer. It wouldn't make no difference if I had insurance for him, but I don't, you understand? And also..." His voice was now even lower. "That kind of thing could get me into trouble."

I thought for a moment, and said, "All right." As long as he took care of the charges, it would make no difference to Wu.

"And you tell Wu, will you?"

"I'll tell him."

"Good," he said. Then as if as second thought, he asked, "Is he all right?"

"I don't know yet," I said.

There was a short silence. Then his voice switched back to normal. "Drive carefully, OK? Don't wreck my car."

What happened later proved I was stupid to let him off like that. Wong did pay the hospital bills, but he refused to pay Wu for the two weeks he stayed at home. With his own false account of the accident on record, Wu couldn't do anything. Wong visited him once at home with a basket of fruits. But that, like the hospital bill, came out of Wu's own payroll for that two weeks as well.

As the result of the accident, Wong stayed in the kitchen for two weeks. To be fair, he was a good cook. Though Wu cooked good standard American Chinese food, Wong knew the little tricks in spices and fire temperature to bring the subtleties out. To most American customers whose palates were corrupted by Egg Foo Young and Sweet and Sour Chicken, such subtleties made no difference; and even when they did notice the difference, they didn't appreciate it. Mrs. Rosenberg complained that her Mongolian Beef had a funny taste, and she would like it the old way. But for all of us gourmets condemned temporarily to waiting on tables, it was a rare chance to offer some flattery to Wong without losing principles completely.

Wong, on the other hand, seemed indifferent. "What do you know about Chinese food?" he snorted and put on an air of contempt. "When I first started to work in the restaurant, you were still kicking in your mother's belly." This, of course, did not really apply to Lee, for Lee was just a few years younger than Wong. But Lee laughed and said nothing.

Monday was Jose's day off. So everyone in the kitchen had to take turns washing dishes.

"Who made this pot of tea?" Wong suddenly asked as he was loading the dishwasher. "Who did this?" he asked again when no one answered, holding the tea pot with the lid open like some evidence of crime. We all looked at him, puzzled. All the teapots looked the same, how could anyone one know who made that particular pot?

"What do you do when you make a pot of tea?" he quizzed me.

"You take it from the big tea pot." I said. What else could you do?

"And then?" he was still holding the pot, looking relentless.

"Take it out to the customer, I guess." I shrugged my shoulders.

"My God," Wong shook his head and dumped the rest of the tea in the sink. "You been working here how long? Two months? Two months and you don't know you always mix half pot of boiling water with what you take from the big pot?" He shook his head again, defeated. Then he turned to Lee. "He doesn't know, and you don't tell him, either. You want to ruin my business?"

"OK...OK." Lee took a clean pot from the lower shelf and demonstrated it to me.

“You mix in half boiling water next time.”

“Why should you mix in that much water in tea?” I caught up with Lee later in the dining room.

“Well, in most restaurants they make the stuff in the big pot really strong in the morning, so you always mix in half water when you serve. But here,” Lee took a quick glance around to make sure no one was within earshot. “It ain’t quite strong to start with. To tell you the truth, I don’t put that much water when I serve it either. That’s why I didn’t say anything to you.”

“So you think it’s all right?” I said.

“Yeah, you got any complaints?”

I tried to think. “Guess not.”

“See?” said Lee.

In the rest of the three weeks, Wong found more abhorrences: Cashew nuts sprinkled on top of Kung Pao Chicken, Sizzling Rice left in the kitchen so long it no longer sizzled, too much ham in wonton soup, too little ice in coke. “Good Heavens, you’re really going to ruin this business, are you?” Holding a half bowl of left-over rice rescued from Jose, the Dishwasher, he slumped in the only chair in the kitchen and looked us in disbelief, as if he were going to cry.

What almost ruined the business, however, were not our abominable deeds. One Saturday night, a birthday party I served found a dead cockroach in their pot-sticker sauce. The party threatened to call the Health Department. Wong’s face turned white when I came back to the kitchen to report the incident. With his greasy apron still on, he rushed out and caught the party just in time at the door. It took him a long fifteen minutes of explaining, smiling, begging, and bribing to finally get everyone back to the table—the only thing he didn’t do was kneel on the floor and kowtow to them. The bribery worked—all the orders were cooked fresh again, by Wong personally, all drinks on the house, free birthday cake and dessert, plus, everyone at the party was issued a coupon for a free meal on next visit. Such unusual generosity from Wong surprised us all. But it seemed only a small price when we learned later that two Chinese restaurants around Chicago had been closed recently by the Health Department.

VI

One Sunday after Wu’s accident, a girl walked in in the listless hours of the afternoon.

“Can you fix me a Bloody Mary?” she asked, picking out a stool in the bar and drawing a Virginia Slim from a pack in her black leather purse with her long thin fingers with polished pink fingernails.

I had just been dozing off in the bar with a Chinese magazine Lee brought back from Chinatown, and was almost startled to hear her voice. Officially, the restaurant did not open until five o'clock, but sometimes people drifted in to have an early drink. I scurried behind the counter, looking for the tall glass and the tray of garnishes, at the same time searching in my mind for the right recipe—Bloody Mary: half vodka, half Tomato Juice and a wedge of lime—that shouldn't be too hard. But it was not until I laid the glass down with a cocktail napkin on the counter did I remember the black pepper and bitters. I rushed to make the amends, but in a moment of nervousness knocked the ashtray off the counter.

"You're not the bartender, are you?" The girl laughed, puffing out a sequence of fuzzy smoke rings.

My face must have turned red, for she looked at me with an amused smile.

"No," I said, and turned to look for the ashtray, which was now hidden somewhere under the cabinet.

"I figured." She tilted the cigarette to hold the ash still and reached inside the counter for a dirty coke glass in the sink.

I found the object of my quest, now broken.

"You sell a lot of drinks here?" She glanced up and down the bar, as if measuring spaces for a new coke machine, or some extra pieces of furniture.

"On weekends, yes." I combed the few strands of hair dangling on my forehead with my fingers, trying to regain my composure.

"Good," she said, and this time swept her eyes over the rows of liqueur bottles behind me on the rack. She pulled out a five-dollar bill from her purse and made a gesture for me to keep the change.

She took a big sip of the Bloody Mary through the straw, and got off the stool. "By the way, my name's Jane," she said, extending her hand over the counter—I noticed she was not tall. "What's yours?"

"David," I said, and touched her fingers lightly—they were moist.

"Good name." She was again amused. "Well, I'll be seeing you, David boy," she said, and waved before she went out the door, her black purse dangling at the curve of her hip. The next time I saw Jane we had reversed positions at the bar, with her on the inside, fixing Bloody Marys and Wakiki Hulas for my table's order. She was the new bartender. Instead of the lime, she had stuck a stem of celery in the Bloody Mary, which somehow made it more exotic.

"What you say, David boy?" She lined my orders neatly in on the counter. "Beats yours, uh?"

As most Orientals looked younger than their age to Americans, most Americans, young people especially, looked older in my eyes. Jane, for example, was hardly older than I, but the way she carried herself sprayed a mist of worldliness and sophistication about her slender limbs, her sharp vulnerable body of a teenager, and her almost cherubic face coated thickly in blue eye shadow, black mascara and purple lipstick. David Boy, she called me, with a flirtatious wink.

Jane worked on weekends only. The rest of the time she said she was going to school to be a hairdresser. The style of her own hair changed weekly, this week the shape of a chicken nest, and the next a cascade of golden torrents, then one day she cut the extra length off, and had it all frizzled like a thousand tiny, black, rising serpents. Black? “Yes,” she said, tilting her head as if to give it a better display, “the color, you know, is just as much part of the fashion as the style.”

Lee did not like Jane. “Big mouth,” he said. Once Jane made fun of him for saying Margarita as Margaret. “Margaret? There’s no Margaret here. My name’s Jane.” But as a bartender, she was good, and efficient. The usual complaints of funny tastes in exotic drinks made by Mrs. Wong turned slowly to subtle nods with smiles. Even Wong was pleased; when Wu came to work again, he resumed his usual seat behind the bar with the daily newspaper, overseeing our commotion above the rim of his horn-rimmed glasses. “If you all worked like her,” he said once while both Lee and I were at the bar, “I’d have a few more years to live.”

Early in June, Lee and I made the dining hall our permanent bedroom. At night, I had dreams. In most of them I went back to the old college days in Shanghai, the dorm with eight of us packed in a room, the windows that leaked the damp and bone-chilling wind in the winter, and the occasional fistfight in the crowded canteen over a bowl of lukewarm soup with cold fat floating on top—yet in the dreams, all those mundane routines we once hated and tried every way possible to escape seemed to have lost their sharp, unpleasant edges and appeared warm and fuzzy in a nostalgic blur as in an old movie. In others dreams, I was back in my small hometown outside Wenzhou, now a booming port of trade on the east coast of China. The streets were as crooked as ever, the people forever familiar and young. In our house, my father, a shoemaker in the old fashion, still bent over his low working table, putting lasts into the half-finished shoes or nailing a sole with tiny black nails, while my mother, an old woman already at the age of forty, moved in the background, cooking, sewing, fighting a hopeless battle against the dust that fell, forever falling, on everything in the household where our family lived. In one dream, my sister, who ran away at the age of

seventeen with an antique dealer from Canton and only sent money and a note home on New Year's Eves with no return address, came back. Her face was still the same, even her clothes were the ones she wore the day she disappeared; the only thing different was her hair, instead of the long thick oily black braids, it was now short, and straight, every one standing on its end, gnarled and coiling. I stared and stared until, waking up in a cold sweat, I realized with an inexplicable horror that it was...it was like the hair of Jane.

VII

Across the street, two blocks down from Genghis Khan, squeezed in between a stationery store and a place that sold used sewing machines and vacuum cleaners, was a small reading room of the *Christian Science Monitor*. Sometimes in the languid summer afternoon when the dining room was empty and the air was turned way low by Wong when he and his wife left, I would sneak out over to this cramped, but cool, haven. One day, digging through the pile of university catalogs and bulletins Mr. Wunderlich, the custodian, brought in occasionally for local high schools seniors, my eye was caught by a brochure from the MBA program of Saint John's University: a two-year program in New York City, and the possibility of a full scholarship for someone competent in doing research in Chinese. The application was enclosed. I noted the other things I needed to send along and filled out the forms on the spot, using the pen I carried around in my pocket for taking orders, making quite a few smudges with the ink leaking all over from the heat. I borrowed a used big brown envelope from Mr. Wunderlich, put Genghis Khan as return address, and dropped it off on my way back to the restaurant.

Jane was already there behind the bar, smoke from her Virginia Slim coiling between her fingers. The air was turned back on high. "Where have you been, Philosopher?" she asked.

Philosopher, that was the new name she had for me after she found out I majored in philosophy. "Now maybe you can help me on this. What are philosophers?" she said, coming out from behind the bar and settling on one of the stools. "What do they do?"

"They think," I said.

"That's it? That's too easy, anybody can think," she said.

"Not everyone."

She took a drag on her cigarette, as if considering, then said, "Maybe you're right. But I mean, what do they do for living?"

"Waiting on tables."

“No, seriously.” She flicked the ash off her cigarette. “I never figured that one out.”

Well, Wittgenstein, I told her, scrubbed floors in a hospital, while Confucius begged a good part of his life.

“That’s pathetic,” she said. “They’ve got to do better.”

I told her about Spinoza.

“Make lenses?” the dark shadows on her eyelids peeled back. “That’s cool! I like that.”

But most of the time, Jane kept an aloof distance. Except for poking fun at Lee and me, she kept to herself behind the bar, clipping photos of new hair fashions from *Elle* or *Le Monde*, touching up her makeup with the tiny mirror in her compact, filing her nails, or just smoking.

Lee didn’t hit a jackpot, but his luck at gambling seemed to have taken a good turn. Since I had told him that I was not doing him any more favors giving him rides to the Casino, he sometimes took the tour bus there on his days off from Chinatown. Once he came back in the evening with snacks for everybody: moon cakes, sweet rice chicken, barbecue buns, and Phoenix Claws—he went with two hundred, he said, but walked away with four thousand. One night he told me secretly that if his luck stayed with him like this for two more weeks, he would be well provided for the rest of the year. I was not completely surprised, therefore, when, one Tuesday evening, a golden convertible sailed into the parking lot with Lee at the wheel. It was an Alpha Romeo.

Though an ’88 model, the car looked almost new. Lee wouldn’t tell how much he paid for it, but it was clear he thought it was a good deal. That night after work, Lee took me out for a ride. We went all the way to the lake shore. The night was cool. On one side, the silhouette of the Congress Hotel, the Prudential Building, and the Sears Tower loomed on the skyline, on the other, the beacons on Lake Michigan blinked in the unknowable distance of mist and darkness.

VIII

The response from Saint John’s came quickly, with a personal letter from the department chair, who happened to be writing a book on Chinese economy and needed an assistant. My credentials looked impressive, he wrote, and he would let me know about the scholarship as soon as the fund he was applying for got approved.

“MBA! New York! Good for you!” Jane said. “So you’re going to be a CEO, huh? But what about your philosophy?”

The hell with it, I said. I didn't want to scrub floors or beg on the street, and lenses were not ground by hand anymore.

On Saturdays Wong did not show up until the afternoon. That was his day for golfing. Mrs. Wong had no interest in golf, and never went with him. In fact, she couldn't if she had wanted, for one of them had to be in the restaurant. When lunch was over, she rushed home to catch up on her sleep—their Mahjong party on Friday nights usually lasted till the morning—and came in most times just before five, hair ruffled and eyes bleary. Wong came in at least half an hour early. So did Jane.

Now that I had two tutors, I took my bar tending lessons seriously. Weekends between lunch and dinner was time for my practice runs. But once Wong or Jane was back, the bar became their domain. Sometimes, they came in one right after another. One day, filling salt and pepper shakers in the smoking section, I heard them talking.

"That really was a nice shot," I heard Jane say.

"You should see me play last year. My back's been aching since the rains this spring."

There was a stiffness in Wong's body when he looked up and saw me through the lattice that separated the bar from the smoking section.

"You wiped the mirrors yet?" he asked after a short awkward silence.

"I'm going to," I said.

"Do the mirrors first," he said, impatiently. "And don't forget to clean the big tea pot and the soy sauce bottles!"

Some noise on the roof woke me up in the middle of the night. Though the restaurant had two floors, it was structured in a way that there was nothing above the dining room. At first I thought it was mice, or the rain. But no, it was something larger, a cat, or a squirrel. No, not even that. Someone was up there crawling on the roof. I sat up. Lee was awake too. We listened. The sound was moving toward the other end. Lee switched on his flashlight, and motioned for me to follow him. On bare feet, we groped our way up the two rickety flights of the narrow stairs. There was a skylight in the office that was supposed to be our dorm.

Slowly Lee opened the door. The roof creaked, and we could hear the tiles being crunched. Pulling me after him behind a steel file cabinet, Lee aimed the flashlight toward the skylight. A yellow, haggard face emerged on the other side of the windowpane.

"Open la ventana! Open la ventana!" The window rattled. "It's me, Jose. Let me in!"

Mumbling a curse, Lee climbed on a stool and opened the window to let him down.

“Fucking cold, man.” Jose shivered. His shirt was torn, and the black silk of his pants gleamed in wetness. A few strands of hair clung to his forehead, the cowboy hat nowhere to be found.

“Hey, you have thirty bucks?” he asked, wiping his face.

“What you need money for at this hour?” Lee growled.

“I got to pay the taxi. Thirty bucks, I give you sixty next week.”

Lee went downstairs to find his pants. “I don’t want your no sixty bucks—go pay what you have to pay, but just don’t ask me to open the window again at four o’clock in the morning,” he said when he counted the money out to Jose.

Grinning, Jose took the money and went out through the back door in the kitchen. By the time he was back, Lee had found a half bottle of vodka and a shot-glass from the bar.

“Good stuff! Where you get this?” Jose was grinning again.

“Just shut up and drink.” Lee put the glass down in front of him.

Jose took a small sip, made a face, and then emptied it out.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Oh, fuck!” He combed his hair back with his hand, and began to take off his shirt. Only then did I notice there was a big bruise under his left eye and his face was swollen. “Fucking shit.” He pulled off his soaked pants and wiped his ass with the napkins.

It took us quite a while to get the whole story out of him. It had been a long night. As it was payday that night, he headed as usual for the Cicero strip joints in a friend’s car with two other Mexicans who worked in another restaurant nearby. Two girls stopped them and asked for a ride. They let them in. As their hands fumbled beneath the girls’ blouses and skirts, the girls went straight for their pockets. It was only after they had sat down in the club that they realized they were penniless. They got into a fight with the guards who tried to throw them out, the police were called and they had to run, each on his own way, in the pouring rain. He walked for more than an hour before he finally found a taxi. Then the door was locked—it was probably Wu who did it, not knowing anyone had been out.

Jose rubbed at the bruise in his face. In Lee’s black baggy pants and my college sweater, he looked funny, like a collage of incongruous elements from some wildly different parts of the world.

“How old are you?” Lee asked, eyeing him up and down as if seeing him for the first time.

“Why? Seventeen.” There was a baffled look in Jose’s eyes.

“Why don’t you be like Anastacio?” Lee sighed. “When you get my age, you be just like me. Or worse.”

“I don’t know if I want to live to your age.” Jose laughed. “When I get thirty...” He formed his hand into the shape of a pistol and pointed it to his temple.

IX

Jane would be finished with her cosmetic school in August. I asked if she would open her parlor in the fall. “If things work out,” she said with a veiled smile.

Two weeks after Lee got his Romeo, my Datsun died. The transmission had to be completely rebuilt. The lowest quote I got from a garage was six hundred dollars, plus any parts if necessary. Not knowing where I was headed after the summer, I called the junkyard. “How does twenty bucks sound?” The owner offered after I told him the year and model. Politely, I pointed out that he could easily take off one tire and sell it for that much. “Well, you gonna let me make some money, right? Or you want to keep it and sell the tires yourself, that’s fine with me.” I said he could do that more easily. “Yeah, that’s why I’m here,” he said. “Hey, listen, I got other things to do. I’ll give you five more bucks if that’s what you want. But that’s the best I can do.” I said I appreciated it and asked when he would come and pick it up. He said he would be right over.

One Saturday afternoon around three, Mrs. Wong called in. “Is he in the restaurant?” Her voice had already told half the story.

“Mr. Wong?” I said. “Isn’t he at the golf course?”

“I am at the golf course,” she yelled. “How about Jane, have you seen her?”

“Not either,” I said. “Is Mr. Wong supposed to pick her up today?”

“You tell me!” The phone clicked.

Whatever happened between Wong, his wife and Jane that afternoon remained beyond our speculation. The three of them came in around five thirty, almost half an hour late. It was going to be a big night—with three large parties, the whole dining room was virtually booked out. Except for the fake smile he put on for the customers, Wong kept a sullen face the whole night, while his wife’s face glowed with a strange mixture of rage, contempt and satisfaction. Only Jane seemed indifferent, though she didn’t poke fun at me that night.

The last customers left around ten thirty. I was counting my tips of the night in the bar when Mrs. Wong slapped a cash envelope in front of Jane on the counter. “Take the money and get out!”

Jane didn’t pick it up. “You didn’t hire me, did you?” Jane asked coldly.

Wong sat at the end of bar adding up checks. “Just go home,” he said,

without turning around.

“All right, I’ll go.” Jane slipped the envelope into her purse, and started to leave. “But don’t think you can fire me like that.”

“Go please, will you?” Wong said. “We talk tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Mrs. Wong snickered.

Jane didn’t come to work the next day. But the letter from the director of the MBA program at Saint John’s came finally. I opened it before I got back to the restaurant from the mailbox at the street corner. It confirmed my admission and scholarship—full tuition waiver plus a monthly stipend of one thousand dollars. I had already gone through it several times when I stepped in the door, but I kept reading it, over and over again. Wong was in the bar, talking on the phone.

Jose was behind the door in the kitchen, listening on the extension. He chuckled so loud that finally I couldn’t help looking up from the letter. He thrust the phone to my ear.

It was Jane’s voice. “Fuck you,” I heard her say, and then a click.

X

For Lee, in the meantime, things couldn’t have worked out better. One night he came back from his casino trip with a bottle of Mao Tai. Enough, he said, he would not go to the Empress anymore. He had all the money he needed. A friend of his from old times had a Chinese grocery in California, and had asked him to be a partner. He would work till the end of August and then go over there.

“Never have to wear this black-and-white skin again.” He tugged at my waiter’s shirt and vest.

Wu went out and bought some snacks and a pack of playing cards that night after work. We were going to play “Catching the Pig”—or Hearts, as Anastacio said it was. The Mao Tai was too strong for Jose—only one sip, and his face was twisted in a grimace, but Anastacio liked it, and sneaked an extra cup when the rest of us removed silverware, salt and pepper shakers from the table, arguing about the different rules of the game’s Chinese and Western versions. Wong stayed a little late, doing inventory in the basement. “Don’t steal any beer, OK? I got them all counted,” he hollered as he shut down the air and walked out the front door.

For a few minutes, we listened, waiting for the sound of the engine to start and disappear. We heard nothing. Jose stole to the back door.

“Come! Quick!” he called from the kitchen.

Two men stood by Wong in the shadow of his Mercedes. It seemed they were in an argument. One of the men gave Wong a shove. Wong

shoved back. Then one of them had Wong by the collar, and the other started to punch him in the face.

“Help,” Wong cried.

Wu dialed the police. But no one went out.

The one who had Wong by the collar swung him around, and slammed him on the side of the car parked next to Wong’s Mercedes. He kicked his knee up into Wong’s stomach. “Hey, hey, don’t touch my car.” Lee pushed open the door and went out. It was his Romeo.

“Easy, easy...” The one who had punched Wong in the face came up, blocking Lee’s way.

The other one now dropped Wong. “So, this is yours.” He pulled out something from his belt, and mashed it down on the windshield. It cracked.

“Fuck your grandpa!” Lee yelled and leapt.

The next thing we knew, the guy who had blocked Lee was groaning on the ground, hands in his crotch, and Lee was banging the other’s head on the garbage bin.

Wong scrambled to his feet.

“Fuck him! Fuck him!” Jose cheered.

Then we all heard the sound: a loud but muffled thump, the kind of sound a chunk of thawed meat made being slammed onto the chopping block. Lee slumped. Caught by the side of the garbage bin, his body slid to the ground.

Then the deafening blast as the men bolted out the parking lot on a motorcycle.

The two men were never found. Neither were the police able to locate Jane, who disappeared the same night of the incident. Lee died in the hospital the next morning. The shot ripped through his chest. The police waited for three weeks and finally had to have the body cremated. There was no funeral. Lee’s car stayed in the parking lot for two more days, and then a tow truck came and dragged it away, along with Lee’s other belongings—the footlocker, the traveler’s bag, and the fortune-cookie boxes. They were notifying, said the young officer as he filled out the police form, a cousin of Lee they had found in LA.

That same night, I left Chicago, on a Greyhound heading for New York.

XI

It was three years before I returned to Chicago on my first business trip. The last day of my stay I found myself again in Wheeling. What used to be the Genghis Khan was now the Royal Garden. It was three in the afternoon, the cook was not back yet. The waiter on duty, a middle age man from Chaozhou, asked me if I wanted a drink. I told him I used to work here. "Genghis Khan, you mean?" He looked at me. He knew the story. So I asked him what happened after I left.

"The Immigration came soon after," he said, "and rounded up the amigos. Fake green cards, you know. The boss was fined and locked up a couple days, his second time."

"And then?" I asked.

"Oh, he sold the place after he came out. I've been here since this new one opened," he said, and fixed a napkin flower that had wilted.

We walked around the dining room and talked about what all waiters talk about—tips, side jobs, and boss. The decor had changed. Instead of the old red and golden, it was now white and green. "That old owner was really a son of a turtle, I heard. Was he?" he asked. He walked with me out to the parking lot. I thanked him and was just about to leave when my eyes fell on a car at the back of the lot.

"Whose car's that?" I asked and walked over.

"This one? That's mine." He followed me over. "I bought it when I first started working here. It was a real bargain. Three thousand. Police auction, you know. Looked almost new. Only the windshield was cracked. Don't know what happened. But that was OK. I got it replaced." He patted the new glass.

I headed back downtown. It was four o'clock. The traffic finally ground to a standstill on I-290. A black young man knocked on my window and waved a bouquet of roses wrapped in cellophane at me. I waved no, but he didn't go away. I said I had no need for it, but, separated by the glass, he couldn't hear me, and started to show me the different colors he had. I lowered the window to tell him "go away," but he had already picked out a stem and thrust it through the window. All right, I said, and slipped him a five-dollar bill. God bless you, he said, thanking me repeatedly before walking down to the next vehicle.

Instead of going back to the hotel, I went past Michigan Avenue and turned north on Lake Shore. A sweep of black clouds moved on the horizon. The yachts and schooners were coming in. The boaters gathered their clothes and lowered the colored sails. On the other side, the skyline was steeped in the last spilling of the setting sun. I took the exit off at a recreation area near Belmont.

The beach was empty. Only a few coke cans lodged between the rocks clattered in the wind. I stood for a few minutes. The gulls, squeaking, hovered low on the lake. I remembered the rose, and went back to fetch it from the car.

It was a large one, a few tattered petals on the outside, but the rest still fresh, dark and crimson, like someone's bloody fist, or heart. I planted it in the sand and left, wondering how long it would be before the dusk turned into the night, and how long before the wind and the rain would pluck out the rose and toss it to the dark rolling water.

ANSTRUTHER

Robert Crawford

Here the great presbyterian minister
With his lifeboat and memorial lighthouse

Sails with the captain of many clippers
Towards the Salutation Bar.

Herring gulls take off. Terns loop down to us striding
On slime-green steppingstones over the dreef

Under a clear, bespectacled sky
Crowstepped with masonic symbols.

Where the Beggar's Benison met to measure their pricks
On a special platter, we stand and stare up at the stars

Near the electrician's. They look so close
They should be catching lobsters and called

Not the Plough but Breadwinner III,
Shearwater of Cellardyke, North Carr Lightship,

Morning Ray, Fisher of Men.
High above piers and long breakwaters

They trawl dour, intergalactic North Seas,
Making pantiles sparkle and cornfields with tubular stooks

Harvested in farmtouns beyond Anstruther
Wink in their great moderator's eye

Overseeing his congregation
As they sing in a tethered boat that is bobbing

Down and up, gently
Up and down.

KNOWLEDGE*Robert Crawford*

Ferrier invents the word *epistemology*
 Sitting in a doorway wiped across with light

From an early flashgun. Round him, young buck students
 Scatter in the aftershock, vanish.

*

Euclidean rain stots on cobbles
 In wintry St Andrews. Ferrier hunches with cold,

Drawing his black gown over his head
 Like a photographer, abolishing himself.

*

A sore has developed, a gland gone syphilitic.
 He reads up the chemistry of mercuric oxide,

Hears his Aunt Susan, the famous author
 Of *Marriage*, has died in her sleep.

*

Frail, he blocks a lecture-room entrance.
 A New Woman confronts him: 'I wish to know

By what right you keep me from these Chemistry lectures.'
 He can't move, at one with the stone.

ALFORD

Robert Crawford

Blearily rummaging the internet,
Aged thirty eight, not knowing where I was,
I found a site designed as an old harled manse,

Sash windows opening on many Scotlands.
Through one surf broke on the West Sands, St Andrews,
And through another Glasgow mobbed George Square.

Templeton carpets fluttered up and clucked:
Crevecouers, La Fleches, azeels, minorcas,
Cochins, Langshans, Scots dumpies, Cornish game.

The hallstand's canny, digitized gamp
Pointed to fading pixels; when I touched them
I felt *The Poultry-Keeper's Vade-Mecum*,

Though in the next room, where a bren-gun spat,
Its title changed into *King's Regulations*;
Tanks manoeuvred round the hearth and range,

Smashing duck eggs, throwing up clouds of flour.
Fleeing the earth-floored kitchen, an ironing table
Hirpled like girderwork from bombed Cologne

Into the study where my Aunt Jean studied
How not to be a skivvy all her life,
While my dead uncle revved his BSA,

Wiping used, oily hands on Flanders lace.
Ministers primed themselves in Jesus's Greek.
Bankers shot pheasants. Girls sang. My father

Walked me through presses with a map of Paris,
Though all the names he used were Cattens, Leochil,
Tibberchindy, Alford, Don, Midmill.

I understood. 'Virtual reality?'
 I asked him. In reply he looked so blank
 His loved face was a fresh roll of papyrus

Waiting to be made a sacred text,
 Hands empty as the screen where he projected
 Slides of our holidays at Arisaig,

His body fresh cotton sheets in the best bedroom
 Of his boyhood home before he was a boy.
 Waiting here, he waits to meet my mother,

For a first date at St Martin in the Fields.
 Here, his father, Robert, catches light
 On his own deathbed, pipe and *Press and Journal*

Combusting in a way none can control.
 Manse rooms huddle, fill with shetland ponies,
 London tubes. There is no here. Here goes.

En te oikia tou Patros mou monai pollai eisin:
 In my Father's house are many mansions:
 If it were not so, I would have told you.

EXPOSURE*Corrinne Clegg Hales*

Every afternoon, Wesley Allen stands
 stark naked in his mother's front doorway
 as my sister and I pass on our way from school.
 Usually, he's pulled a grocery bag or a pillow case
 over his head, making his pale, teenage body
 seem detached—like a headless doll—

or the dead person I'd seen when my grandfather
 had to unlock the apartment of a missing tenant,
 and I followed up three flights, unnoticed,
 and saw the man clearly, hanging
 from a leather strap looped around his neck
 and threaded through a metal ceiling vent.

In the World Book Encyclopedia, thin black lines
 connect each part of the male anatomy
 to a word: shoulder, torso, armpit, chest,
 abdomen, penis, scrotum, thigh, and I think
 of those clean lines when I look at Wesley,
 all that exposed and blotchy skin an illustration

of something. My sister and I stare silently
 at the boy as we walk, but we never stop,
 even when he calls our names and points
 to his scraggly crotch, and we never tell anyone
 what we see. Before he cut the body down,
 the policeman took a flash photograph

of the suicide in my grandfather's building,
 and for an instant, the room turned
 luminous, like the paintings of miracles
 in church, and I thought the man might be
 Jesus—or an angel. Then, as the strap came loose,
 my grandfather caught the dead man

straight up in his arms—almost as if
 they were dancing—shuffled him
 across the floor to his bed, and dropped him
 without saying a word. I still wonder
 what becomes of such a photo. What resolute
 lines must be drawn—what conclusive words.

But the day I carry my mother's Brownie Reflex
 past the spectacle of Wesley Allen,
 I'm not thinking of thin black lines or clinical words
 or even the dead man. I'm thinking of proof
 and punishment and power. I don't know yet
 that film is as deceptive as memory—

touched by light, it reverses the value
 of everything in the world—and light itself
 makes no moral distinction
 between subject and object. Wesley's pale body
 at the dismal mouth of his mother's
 house becomes a harmless shadow

in a halo of sunlight, and gloom lifts
 like fog from the room around my grandfather's
 hopeless tenant, his dangling presence at the center
 of a negative impression held up to a lamp
 has become nothing
 but an obstacle, blocking the light.

one by one, in some alien town
where everybody goes to sleep at night.

Only in Venice
do you sleep all night. All night it seems
I watch you and I hear
bells in the campaniles ring, each
sound suspended through darkness
until it begins again.

And here, behind pine green shutters
in the slatted afternoons—
light splitting into ribs against the dark—
we can make love again,
not as a diminished act, but containing,
like a photograph. Or like a mosaic,
the way the Byzantines created them,
using just enough mortar for a single day;
placing the astonishing shards of colored glass
at angles that would refract the light
a hundred ways.

HERON

John Engels

Gathering marsh marigolds,
on the lookout for sundews, orchids,
pitcher plants, I come

on this flat clot of feathers
in the shape of a heron, head
caught back in the slow contraction,

and then a hundred yards out
a great blue heron takes flight
just as I begin plucking the long hackles

from the smelly flesh
to rib my spey flies,
and of course I have to stop

what I'm doing, and watch,
his huge awkwardness
utterly transform itself, long legs

streaming out behind, the big wings
after the first few embarrassing flaps
strong and steady, neck

curved back a little, the marsh
still echoing some with the gross
croaking of his fear, but nothing

to pay attention to, he was flying, flying,
and watching him I kept on trying to pull
dead feathers from the dead bird,

both of us earthbound and flightless,
both in our own ways gone heavy, tugged
at the beautiful gray-blueness of feathers

that even rooted in that week-old
stinking vulgarity
of movelessness, resisted, seemed

somehow to pull back.

THE ORDERS

John Engels

In this house everything
is where it ought to be.
The mirrors reflect
a perfect order. We cannot say
the same for what goes on

outside the doors and windows,
wilderness of up-
and-down, slantwise, crosswise,
to-and-from—earth-

eating roots gone
every which way purposeless,
rain, great jumbles of snow,
a cardinal dropping from the cedar

into the spreadings of white alyssum—
all the processional put up against

the serenities of alignment
for which we've worked: stillness

of knives, spoons, forks

in their drawers,
the calm reaches of carpets,
flat clasp of wallpapers,
and the forceless diagonals

of banisters, even
the unbreathing, unsaying
stillness of the bouquets
of orange calendula
in their shaggy symmetries arranged

to the precise centers
of tables. And here we are
standing here, looking on, trembling
with something more we knew,
for which we can invent
no theory.

GHOSTS

Ed Falco

Marly watched Vince from behind the barred windows of her brownstone. She had guessed he would walk a few blocks and spend a half hour at the Guggenheim or pass the museum and go on to Central Park, where there was a concert by the lake—but as she watched, he extended his arm to hail a cab and she realized he was leaving.

She pulled the curtains.

On her study desk, two stacks of manuscripts bracketed a computer screen and keyboard. Her desk was an oak door, flat and thick and solid. She had bought it as a graduate student, when she thought she was a writer. Later, she discovered that selling novels was easier than writing them, and more lucrative. Years later, after she sold an unauthorized biography for a ton of money, she gave up even representing fiction.

Marly turned on the computer and fell back into an over-sized, leather desk chair. As the monitor came to life, a familiar series of opening images emerged and faded into each other, and she noticed for the first time an eyeball sitting atop the monitor looking down at her. She knew Vince must have put it there. He had talked about setting them up for video conferencing. Before she left for the office that morning—Vince had spent the night—he had urged her to give him a key, so that he could get into the apartment before she returned from work. Marly had sensed that something was up, that he wanted to surprise her, and now she figured that this must have been the surprise—the video-conferencing equipment. She took the eyeball down from the monitor. It was white and plastic and really did look like an eyeball plucked out of some monster's head. It trailed a white cable like an optic nerve. The recessed camera lens looked like a pupil. She put it back on the monitor and followed the wire down to a tangle of electrical gear plugged into a surge protector. In the waste paper basket behind the surge protector, she saw a discarded box with *Connectix VideoPhone* in large letters beneath a drawing of a woman in a business suit looking at a computer monitor in one part of a city, and a man at a desk looking at her image on his computer screen in another part of the city.

She couldn't help but laugh. The man and woman on the box were like caricatures of her and Vince. At thirty-five, she was a senior partner in an agency that sold entertainment packages: from the writer's first draft of a manuscript to the director's final cut of the movie made from the manuscript, the agency sold everything. Marly's area was the unauthorized

biography, which is what Vince had become wealthy writing. Most of his time was spent in meetings with lawyers and executives, and his sources: the ex-lovers and ex-wives and ex-friends or friends of friends of the famous person whose life he was appropriating and recreating, with as much emphasis as possible on titillating details. Vince had been Marly's client for years, and they had enjoyed an on-and-off sexual relationship for just as long—but it was only in the last few months that the relationship had transformed itself into something more significant than a business association with occasional sex.

Marly reached for the phone, thinking to call Vince, and then reconsidered. She left her study and wandered quietly through the several rooms of her apartment. In the library, she browsed her books, reading spines and occasionally pulling one down to look at the dust jacket. She couldn't remember the last time she had actually read a published, in-print book. It seemed that for as long as she could remember all she had read were manuscripts, most of which were terrible.

She went into her bedroom and looked herself over in the full-length mirror. The years said she was getting old, but she didn't look it. Her body was sleek from daily work-outs at the Mid-town Athletic Club. Her longish hair was still dark and lustrous. She took off her blouse, wiggled out of her skirt, and looked herself over thoroughly. Her stomach wasn't as flat and hard as it might be, and her thighs were expanding some—but the rest of her looked fine, and given her money and her influence, she didn't think she'd have a hard time attracting men. Having herpes was a drawback, but half the men she met had it also. Thinking of herpes, though, made Marly think of AIDS, and then the several other STDs going around the city—and suddenly her confidence about meeting new men disappeared.

She wanted Vince. At forty-two, he was the youngest man she had dated in years, and they had careers in common—though being his agent and having a long-term relationship with him could get tricky. And there was the problem of sex, which was why Vince had just angrily walked out of the apartment when they had planned on spending the evening together.

Marly fell back on her bed and kicked off her shoes. When she first met Vince, he reminded her of her father, who was an English professor at Hunter College. He favored the same casual jeans-and-a-jacket attire that she associated with college professors. Vince dressed conservatively, was quiet and well-mannered in meetings—and easily the kinkiest man she had ever known when it came to sex. He liked handcuffs. He owned leather apparel. He belonged to sex clubs on the Internet. He had a collection of magazines and videos that could probably land him in jail in most any

Southern state. Though Marly had known Vince for years, she had found out all this about him in just the past few months.

It seemed to Marly that Vince was into sex the way other people were into rock climbing or collecting coins. New sexual activity was like a steeper rock face or a rarer coin—something that made his blood percolate. Still, each time he suggested something new, Marly was surprised. A week earlier, he had broken into laughter at the sight of her face when he suggested that he strangle her with a belt as she neared orgasm.

“You should see yourself,” he said. They were in her apartment. It was late afternoon and the sunlight that seeped in around the pulled blinds was red and cast the room in a red glow. They were already in bed.

She said, “Am I that amusing to you?” She lay on her side, elbow on the pillow, head in hand.

Vince lay on his back, with his arms crossed over his eyes. He took a couple of deep breaths to recover from his fit of laughter. “You are,” he said. “Who would have thought you could be such an innocent?”

“An innocent?” she said. “Me?”

Vince turned onto his side and licked her chin like a puppy. He wasn't an especially big man, but, like Marly, he worked out regularly at a health club, and his chest was broad, with sharply articulated muscles. He leaned over her, covering her body with his. He kissed her breasts and her belly, and worked his way down until he was nuzzling between her legs. Marly let herself melt into the pleasurable sensations spreading up and through her. She loved the way good sex emptied her mind of thought—and Vince definitely provided good sex. When he entered her, she closed her eyes and let her body fall into a rhythm with his movements. Then she felt him slipping the loop of a belt over her head and down to her neck, and her hands shot up instinctively. She struggled against him without saying anything, as if she had somehow lost the ability to speak. The belt cut into the palms of her hands as she pulled it away from her and Vince yanked it up, tightening it around her neck. What she saw in Vince's eyes then wasn't pleasure or even sexual excitement: it was a kind of terrified wildness, a frightened hysteria. She saw that look in his eyes and she seemed suddenly to remember that she could speak. She yelled “Stop! Stop it!”

Vince stopped immediately. “What is it? Is it too much?”

She wrestled out from under him. “Too much?” She pointed to the bedroom door. “Get out!” she said. “Please! Go!”

Vince didn't say anything while he dressed, but he appeared surprised—and angry.

At the front door, as he was about to leave, Marly said, “I can't believe you did that. I can't believe it.”

He answered, “And I can’t believe you’re behaving this way.” Then his eyes grew watery. “Why didn’t you just say no? Why didn’t you just tell me you didn’t want to do it?”

“I did!”

“You did?” Vince looked at her as if she were mad. He walked away.

When she was alone and had time to think about it, Marly realized she hadn’t said no. She had been shocked at the very suggestion that she might allow Vince to strangle her during sex—and she had assumed he understood that it was out of the question. She should have known better. Never assume anything with a man. She knew that. She called him the same night and they talked a long time on the phone. Vince told her he didn’t want to do anything she didn’t want to do—but he did like sexual experimentation. He did like—and need—a little sexual wildness.

They were back together by the next evening. Marly, as she explained to Vince, liked a little sexual wildness too. But there were limits—and strangling your partner during sex was absolutely not within them. “I can respect that,” Vince said. Marly said, “Okay, then.”

Marly slipped into her clothes and returned to her study and her computer. Leaning back in her desk chair, the video eye staring down at her, she recalled, precisely, Vince’s final words before leaving. “Look,” he had said, with an air of resignation. “You know what you need? You need to be married to some nice guy with whom you have ordinary sex once every two weeks or so. That’s who you are, Marly. That’s the life you’re meant to lead.” Then he left, and instead of going to the Guggenheim or the park, he hailed a cab, which meant he was going home. And maybe it meant that the whole relationship was over. At that thought, Marly wondered if the financial relationship would be over too, if he would no longer want her to represent him. The thought embarrassed her by the way it merged her emotional life with her financial life—but the fact was that the agency would not be happy with her if Vince went somewhere else. And she would decidedly not be happy about the loss of income. She told herself that she should have known better than to ever get serious with a client.

She still could hardly believe what he had asked her to do. They had met after work and had a light dinner and then returned to her place, and they were getting ready for a casual evening together—which usually began with sex. Vince placed a box he had been carrying down on the foot of the bed and removed a rubber sheet.

Marly said, “What the hell is that?”

When Vince told her what it was and what he wanted her to do, she laughed. She thought he was kidding.

"I told you," he said. "I told you I was into experimentation. You have to cross limits to find wildness. You have to be daring." He folded his arms over his chest and stood with his legs spread slightly, a defiant look, as if firmly standing his ground.

"You call getting pissed on daring?" she said. "It's sick. You're not on the cutting edge of sexual experimentation. You're just fucked up."

"Okay," he said. "Whatever you say." He found his jacket and put it on.

As Marly watched him getting ready to leave, she saw that under his defiant stance, he was hurt. She could see it in his mouth, like a little boy pressing his lips together to keep from crying. "Vince," she said. "Are you really . . . I mean, do you really . . ."

At the front door, he delivered his little speech and then left. She watched him walk away and when he hailed a cab, she pulled the curtains.

In her desk chair, under the gaze of the video eye, she wondered if it were true, what Vince had said about her needing a nice guy. He said *nice guy* as if it were an insult. Fact was, she thought *he* was a nice guy. His only weirdness was sex. Given his history—an ugly childhood; bad marriages; acrimonious divorces; a grown son who hated him—he was amazingly nice. She liked *nice*. He was decent, generous, considerate, patient . . . Marly leaned forward in her chair. She laid her hand on the telephone and closed her eyes. What was she going to say if she called him? How would she begin? She recalled the look on his face when she told him he was sick, the tightness around his mouth, like a little boy whose feelings had been hurt.

She dialed his number. After five rings, she started counting. On the ninth ring, he picked up. She began innocuously, saying she was calling to make sure he had gotten back okay. He responded politely, if curtly. There was no energy in the conversation until Marly brought up the video camera.

"By the way," she said. "There's this eyeball looking down at me from on top of my computer."

Vince said, "If you had any idea how long it took to get that all set up."

"Get what set up?"

He explained, growing animated when he told her about the various software and hardware involved. Apparently, it had been a complicated procedure to get it all working. He listed all the difficulties involved and how he had handled them.

Marly said, "Want to try it out?"

He hesitated. Then he said, "Sure. Why not. You have a pencil and paper?"

"I'm at my desk, remember?"

She wrote down his instructions, and a few minutes later her modem dialed into their shared server, and a few minutes after that she was looking at his image in a window on her computer screen. Alongside his image, in a smaller window, her own image fluttered and then focused. The microphone and speakers worked like a telephone handset. "Hey," she said. "There you are."

Vince was on his living room sofa with one leg crossed over the other and his hands clasped together in his lap. He looked serious—as if he were about to conduct a business meeting with an adversary. "Here I am," he said. "You look good."

He had somehow rigged his computer so that he could use his television set as a monitor. She could see from where he was sitting that he was looking at the television, and she realized that the tiny image of herself on her monitor would be much larger on his TV. She asked, "Do I look, like, life-size there?"

"Hardly," he said. "But you do look good."

"Thank you," she said—and then, in silence, she watched his image watching her image on the television. They were both, apparently, waiting for the other to get down to the business of their unfinished argument. Marly went first. "Vince," she said. "All right. Look . . ." She pulled the desk chair up and leaned closer to the monitor. "Hey," she said, when she saw that the camera remained focused on her, and the window on her computer was filled with a close-up of her face. She closed one eye and looked into the camera lens, as if she were looking through a peep hole.

Vince laughed. "My television set is a massive eyeball."

Some of the tension between them was broken by his laugh. She leaned back in her seat and continued, more easily. "I'm sorry about our argument," she said. "But look . . . I really just don't understand. What you wanted—Vince. Honest. I can't comprehend it. I was shocked."

"You want me to explain?"

"Yes. Really. I'd like to understand."

"I can't." He uncrossed his legs and sat forward. "Marly," he said. "We're not right for each other." He paused, then continued. "I think we should end this. Entirely. Just cut it off completely. Everything. I'm sorry, really."

"Oh, Vince," Marly said. Her heart was rocketing, she didn't know if from fear or anger. "You're overreacting. I'm . . . I'm close to you. I just don't understand, that's all. Explain. Convince me."

"I don't want to have to do that," he said. He loosened his tie.

“Vince, please. Do you want me to beg?”

“No,” he said, raising his voice. He moved close to the camera so that his body filled up the window on her monitor. “But I don’t want to explain. I want sex to be something you *can’t* explain.” He paused and covered his eyes with his hands and then laughed, as if laughing at himself. He made a mockingly serious face, and stepped even closer to the camera. “I’m a strange guy, Marly. You’re right. I’m weird. I’m weirder than you can handle. You don’t want to have to deal with me anymore. You don’t need to put up with someone like me.”

“Oh,” Marly said. She was silent a long moment and offered him a look of sincerity, of affection. “Vince,” she said, when he didn’t respond. “We can work this out.”

Vince shook his head, stony-faced.

When Marly saw that he wasn’t going to relent, she let the look on her face modulate into something playfully seductive. “Are you absolutely certain?” she said, and she took off her blouse and bra and arranged herself as if she were posing for a firehouse calendar. “Because,” she said, “you know I can do the things you like me to do.”

“Can you?” he said. He crouched down in the center of his living room, his arms crossed over his knees. He looked up at the television.

“Don’t you think so?” She pushed off her skirt and panties.

He was silent a long time, crouched and looking at the screen.

He undid his zipper and began to masturbate, slowly, his eyes fixed on the television.

Marly purred. She fondled her breasts and let her hands slide downward, following the lines of her body.

Vince whispered, “And that other thing? The thing we argued about?” His voice was low and raw. “Can you do that?”

“I can,” she whispered. “If you want it. For you. I can do it for you.”

Vince fell out of his crouch, onto his knees. Marly waited until it was over, until his body stopped moving with each heavy breath. She said, “Does this mean you won’t be joining me tonight?”

He undid his belt buckle and pulled off his pants to keep from soiling them. He grinned at the television.

“You’re quite a vision,” she said.

He looked down at himself, naked between his shoes and his shirt. “I’d like to walk to your house like this,” he said.

“I bet you would.”

“Not tonight though,” he said. “I’m used up.”

“It was good to watch,” Marly said. “It was a rush.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Tomorrow night?”

“It’s a date.”

“Good . . .” He nodded to her, and his hand flew up toward the television, and then his window went blank, leaving Marly looking at herself sitting alone, naked in her desk chair.

She sighed. With her toe, she flipped the switch on the surge protector, cutting off power to the computer, which died instantly and went black with a loud staticky crackle.

She was tired. She went through her rooms, turning off lights, and when the apartment was dark and she was standing in the living room, naked, she noticed an unusual silence. For a rare moment, the city that was never quiet was quiet, a stillness as complete as anyplace in middle-of-nowhere Montana. She remained motionless where she stood, the polished wood floor slick under her bare feet, waiting for the city’s noises to resume, and in those few moments before she heard tires squeal somewhere and then the hum of a car driving by—in those few moments she felt insubstantial, as if she were a ghost. It was a disorienting feeling. As if she didn’t exist. As if she weren’t really there at all. Thinking of herself as a ghost made her remember Christmases as a child, when Dickens’s *Christmas Carol* was widely shown on television and the other kids teased her because of her name, the name of the ghost in the Dickens story. She remembered the scene from the movie, the howling, gauzy figure of Marly laden with chains fastened to heavy boxes of money and coin—and then that image got mixed up with the image of Vince on his knees in his living room. She laughed at herself, which is what she did when she was frightened. On the way to her bedroom, in the dark, she tripped and lurched forward and knocked her head into the wall and then cursed as she recoiled, her arms instinctively flying up over her head, as if protecting herself from something, as if there might be something above her in the dark, something descending toward her, with malice.

ANNOINTING THE UNPREPARED

G. E. Murray

In one disconsolate city, among many schemes, alas,
now shutting down for second thoughts, you believe
in both the theory and the plumbing,
as well as any truths behind winning colors.

At times, you become the period to the last paragraph.

Purely provincial, and ready to calculate
the effects of popular statistics, you wish
you could, like a French priest, smoke in church—

this in praise of abstracted spirits
on a cold spring day in Strasbourg. No question
about it, no worthy way to proceed
as if a few lonely notes struck on a piano,
jinxed by darkling, instructive times.

Come the rainy season and its need for deep
listening, you leave directions
on how to explain the dissolution
of boundaries among us. There are conditions
galore for our rattlings and tremors,

for the suspense of the debris of the mirror.
Schisms necessarily implicate.
Dogmas abound. Always protocols elsewhere.

What is it when people have more teeth than they need?

TROMPE L'OEIL

Kevin Prufer

The dead are as an echo resounding off a wall
on which someone has painted the shapes of stars.

My mittens unravel. The long strands
flutter against my coat sleeves. I put my fingers in my mouth
where they will be warm. In the air again, the weave stiffens,

shells over. Snow falls as stars or, cast in a deceiving light, as dying
embers. Shadows thrown by street lamps so each black footprint
appears larger than it ought to be, the low crying

of wind, an echo thereof, the evening slowing, stopping—
does the mind tick to a close like this?

In January of 1610, cast adrift by a mutinous crew, Henry Hudson
and his young son were never seen again, or

it is 1912 and Xavier Mertz slips into a crevice, legs twisted
behind him. He calls and calls, but the rope isn't long enough.
Please don't ask me to explain—It is 1820

and the British load their lifeboats
with candlesticks and china, lash them with ropes, and set out,
dragging them across the Canadian tundra.

It is any year at all. The landscapes thicken, crust over,
all the people clicking forward, their minds

slowly unticking. I have seen from below the domes of cathedrals
designed to convince us that they are not there

at all. Someone painted them a perfect bottle blue,
traced over them with the outlines of stars which, later,
he gilded—so even in the weakest candlelight

they shone as though they were real. I stood, head tilted,
and looked into an unmoving sky. I whispered my name,
and heard the echo come back to me.

from the splintered cliff of a bench,
 guiding the head. And I ask
 you, my listener, myself
 down the days, *Have you, too,*
heard it?

The gardener
 propped an ancient bicycle
 against the privet, and spat.
 That was in real time. And in
 that other time, its jumbled
 measure spurting from
 those high caves, I will then
 say the contradictory
 same—already that thrust
 throngs here, crowds to push through
 though with least force, *Exist!*
Just here! almost known yet
 forgotten. Loom-thud, gush,
 capable of dissolving
 architecture because
 it is the architect.
 It is the fountain, though
 I do not name the water.
 One does not name it, that water.

GRANDMOTHER CROW*(from a painting by Meinrad Craighead)**Teresa Iverson*

I

In a universe of eyes you have none:
 white linen wimples head and beak
 in a corvine V, above human hands
 whose nobbled fingers entwine between
 legs an orange egg-hoard, livid
 with worming zygotes. Wings tipped
 in gold fan out, a magician's cape,
 and you are footless now, only memory
 scratches foregrounded a zig-zag track—
 black-white black-white—:
 stylized lightning.

II

A cathedral on a foothill of the Pyrenees,
 St. Bertrand de Comminges,
 boasts in stained oak a misericorde;
 on its narrow, buttock-shaped ledge,
 monks choring glories of their God
 through centuries fat and lean
 have rested behinds.

Tipped up below

wooden wings for arms, nose lopped, scarified,
 spread legs splay into a crow's
 clawed feet: between vulvular lips,
 She gives birth to a leafy head . . .
 Aphrodite of the sparrows and doves
 (*pukna dinnentes pter'*—feathers

thick whirling), owled Athena,
unsexed seraphim, amoretti,
the Stork, Mother Goose—

and didn't Hermes borrow Her wings?—
and before, 30,000 years
of ancestors, long-necked, egg-bellied,
scratched, molded in stone.

III

One February, deep in illness, alone,
I thought I felt talons strafe, curl
into my chest, and lifting me up on
firm wings in and out of pain we flew,
till I saw death
dawn, and like fledgelings unfurled, my lungs
caught a new updraft of breath.

IV

In a universe of eyes you have none
except those ranked in rows,
scant on your underwings.

Blind you work in darkness, purity
in which memory's colors
wash together . . .

 You call again
and we respond: *Sho-ji*,
song of life and death,
the "we" slipped from its moorings:
clawed lightning.

TRAPPED IN THE CATSKILLS

David M. Katz

The game is over. But something remains
 Of the late-fifties summer, a radio's traces
 Of "Moulin Rouge" leaving room for greater silence,
 Suddenly stiller air: "Whenever we meet,
 I worry and wonder: You're close to me now,
 But where is your heart?"

A whacked ping-pong ball
 Whizzes past the table's border, alights
 On one rare current, hovers, dips, and bounces
 Away and up the pavement into the woods,
 And a boy, the game winner, takes off after it
 Up a slight rise, arriving where it lands
 Slightly late. Nested there, amid the slowly burning
 Jagged leaves, the ball begins to brighten—
 And the boy hears the faintest sound, like laughter
 From inside a moon. His heart hasn't yet slowed down.
 The heat of the day and the haze suffuse one gaze
 That takes the upward sweep of shrub and the gravel
 Sliding away below, and in no time,
 Hand over hand up through the stinging bark,
 He rises over bungalows, sighting
 From a mountain ledge a silhouetted crown
 Before a sharp-edged coin of sun. The game
 Is over; the other boys have gone.

Is it now

The first shiver starts, with no one near
 To spot a stranded body through the brush?
 When does the bright panic begin? Does it come
 Shimmering with the faded scrap of song,
 The verse resuming through the static, as if
 No time had passed? "It's always like this,
 The spell that I'm under: Your lips may be near,
 But where is your heart?" For his foot on the ledge
 Holds half of nothing, and his head holds nothing

But a spell. The terror of never coming down
Comes hard upon him, a sudden bug
Clinging to the bitter mound a glacier cut
Terrible aeons ago.

Oh teenage muse,
Counselor, older sister, step up lightly
Toward his aerie, where he shudders like a rigid
Little bird! Lift away the heaviness
Of unending afternoon with all the grace
Of loving homily: Tell him that one foot
May follow another, in the descent
As well as in the rise; say that the mother
Who tells you never to go up to the place
From which you never can return, though harsh
Is not completely wrong; say all that, but
Tell him he will come down. For the decade
Has long since sealed the terror of that summer.
The day and the song will slide down from the hill.
He will slowly make his way from there to here.

GETTING LANGUAGE*for Chloe at 15 months**Linda Kinnahan*

Before it was the lustres
 the way a teacher once told me
 to read theory
 or Emerson's essays
 for the lustres
 not the in between

window (white noise) juice (background) bear (static) baby
 these are the lustres
 shifting now when I say a sentence
 create syntax
 you pause within the spaces between
 your mouth slightly open
 breath of concentration slowly slow
 blue eyes fixed on mine
 as though they could stare through
 to the system you think
 is inside my head

It begins now
 resemblance, correspondence
 yes this is a light and yes so is that
 and the book has a picture of a bear like your bear
 metaphors frame us we are so like

unlike this space
 among the lustres
 your eyes will soon see as emptiness to fill
 learning the words, the systems, the likes replace the lustres

Except that in learning a window is like a window
you may also see all windows open at once
as so many choices
such views of air
and lustrous words
encircle you like spirals of stars

RAISED ARMS

Christie Hodgen

Other kids watch for South Dakota license plates, wheels without hubcaps, blown headlights. In my father's car we scout for men in black sedans who speak into their sleeves. Men wearing dark, gold-rimmed glasses and somber fedoras. We're on the lookout for cars with plenty of trunk space. Beware of the fat cigar, the upturned collar on a trench coat.

Today our father is charged with a handful of errands. Our mother asked him to get out of the apartment and give her some goddamned peace and quiet. Take the twins to the dentist. Pick up a turkey, cat food, a Christmas tree. Fill the tank with gas. Five things, Jeff, not too much to ask. Take your coat and come right back. Don't go off on another one of your world tours.

It's the eighties, decade of high-flying optimism, and our family is determined to fight off decay. To drape itself in the gewgaws of normality. Two kids and a cat, tinsel on the tree. Regular trips to the dentist, our teeth polished, the holes plugged with silver.

Our father is a reporter with the Worcester *Telegram*. His picture in the newspaper bears an unfortunate resemblance to Burt Reynolds. People are always writing in about it, and so he's trying to grow a beard to disguise the likeness. Our mother works at Friendly's restaurant. She treats us like her sisters, which means that we get to try on her heels and watch *Dynasty*, but which also means that we cook for ourselves. My twin sister, Fiona, already has her eye on the White House. She makes the best grades in school and practices giving orders at home. She keeps an autographed picture of Ronald Reagan taped inside the bedroom closet, behind our clothes, where our father can't see it. Occasionally she sends the President handfuls of jellybeans in business envelopes. My father says when I grow up I can be Fiona's decoy, that she'll need a good one. Which I am, her exact twin, born second for just such a purpose.

Today, though, we will be made appreciably different. Fiona has a cavity in an upper right molar, and mine is lower left.

Our father parks the car at his choice of meters, cuts the engine. "Ladies," he says. "A little bit of fatherly advice."

Fiona rolls her eyes, sulks at the sideview. She is slumped so dramatically in the front seat she might be dead.

"Do not take the shot," our father says. "Needle long as your arm. He flexes his jaw, shows five molars jacketed in silver, like a general's stars.

“Never a shot for me,” he gloats. He describes the tremendous swelling provoked by Novocaine, the tendency to bite through one’s tongue.

Which reminds him, by the way, of how pocketless Russians once carried coins in their mouths. Had to endure the tang of suffering. And paid for goods by fishing under their tongues for rubles, spreading disease. But then Peter the Great comes along with his revolutionary change purse. “Try it,” he says. “Ruble. What a word.” This is our father’s pastime, this trivia, this history of strife.

All the time he is talking, his glasses catch the light reflected by the snow, which is everywhere. He is a man with glasses with nothing behind them, as in cartoons.

“What a parking space,” he says. Although the street is empty. Is always empty, the dentist being the last surviving business on the block. I press a quarter into the meter, and the red needle hacks forward, buys time. A lousy pole, its head swollen with change.

The dentist’s office is a building in the shape of a trapezoid, brick on three sides, the fourth a sheet of thick glass, dimpled and green, angled toward the sidewalk. Through which the people inside look muted and hopeless, as though trapped under water.

The dentist is a man with a morbid flair for decorating. There are model human skulls placed about the waiting room, their long yellow teeth supposed to scare us into flossing. The carpet is stiff and orange, spotted with metal folding chairs. We sit. Our father takes up with a cardboard children’s book. Fiona examines her fingernails. She takes every opportunity to groom. Smoothing her eyebrows, pressing her long eyelashes between fingers to curl them. She assesses the health of her hair. Waist-length, nearly black. Our hair is so thick it seems inappropriate on twelve-year-old girls. It is our most notable feature by a mile. Our faces are long and thin, the miserly faces of librarians and grandfather clocks. And so Fiona sits and practices positioning her jaw in ways that give her face a softer line.

The usual turquoise chair, tools hanging from jointed metal sticks. The dentist plinks around, making preparations.

“No shot,” I tell him. “I don’t want a shot.”

The dentist tugs at the high collar of his smock with a crooked finger. “I would advise,” he says, “a shot. Please.”

He continues, intensely slow, as if speaking to a toddler. Describing the tooth’s root as a kind of miniature dragon, who breathes fire whenever disturbed. The dentist mimes horror, claws at the air. “That will be you,” he says, in a breathy Hitchcock drawl. “Trust me.” Lowers his set of square

glasses, which are strapped to his forehead. Through which his eyes are grossly magnified, wet and beseeching.

“No shot.”

Pokes at a sliver of metal in its pleated paper cup. Frowns. Quick, a lump of cotton wadded against the cheek. And the drill.

Our father has been an active member of the Communist Party U.S.A. ever since we were born, but in recent months he's quit the party and downgraded to a home-based, non-specific loathing of the human race. Now that he's around, the apartment seems overcrowded. At dinner, someone has to squeeze between the kitchen table and the wall. Fiona and I are still in the process of adjusting to his habits. He yells at the television. Every newscaster is a bastard. He tends to rearrange the dishwasher after you've loaded it. He suddenly cares about the quality of our bed making, the alphabetical arrangement of books in their case. He lets the phone ring unanswered. And the only time he ever places a call is when he wishes to inform various mail-order solicitors of his recent death. “You must stop sending brochures to this address,” he always says. “Not that it's any of your business, but he was run over by a Pinto. Yes,” he says. “Very unfortunate.”

It wasn't so long ago that our father had larger concerns. Most of his free time was devoted to an underground newsletter called the *Working Man's Bugle*, which he wrote for under an assumed name, Clyde Snavelly. Clyde Snavelly spent his evenings with the *Bugle* staff, at various covert meetings, until he published a suggestive article about Worcester's Cavanaugh family. The Cavanaugh's own a car dealership and two restaurants. They are holders of a vast fortune of unknown origin, friends of the police and the President. Our father cringes at their every success.

Since publishing the article, our father imagines himself to be in grave danger. He secretly believes that every trip to the grocery may be his last. So he drives across town for a gallon of milk, takes a different route to work each morning. He prefers back doors, dentists of ill repute.

The hygienist steers me back to the waiting room, and my father jumps up to retrieve me, a dead goose from the mouth of a clever hound. “Hey, buddy,” he says. He picks up a basket of lollipops from the receptionist's desk, their small colorful heads the size of quarters. “Have a pop. How'd it go?” And so begins a fit of guilty solicitation that will last an hour.

The logical choice would be to head for home, where there's a grocery full of turkeys right behind our apartment, its lot crammed with trees. And a nearby gas station of the type our father prefers, locally owned by a man

named Lenny. But we're miles from home. Our father says it's better to keep driving until we locate the absolute lowest price on a gallon of gas. Several months ago, Clyde Snavelly had predicted a drastic rise in oil prices in an unpopular column titled, "What You Don't Know About J.R. Ewing."

"Would you just pick one and get it over with," says Fiona. She's in the front seat, combing her hair.

"Yes, dear," he says.

"I don't know what the big deal is," she says, attacking a snarl. "If you'd just gone to the first one we'd be home by now."

Our father passes up another string of gas stations. "Did I mention you girls should never, never agree to a credit card," he says, looking into the rear view. Lately he's been imparting fatherly knowledge. In the event of his sudden disappearance, we'll at least know a thing or two about life.

"They put your name in this computer. And then they control you." He taps on the horn. He tends to do this when he makes an important point, which is unfortunate, since it draws attention. "And another thing," he says. "When you're buying eggs, you should always consider brown. Support the small farmer. When you're shopping in Tuscaloosa, or Green Bay, or Transylvania, or wherever you each should roam, never let anyone tell you that brown eggs are inferior to white."

"When are we going to the store?" says Fiona.

"Right," says our father. "Coming, coming. Any minute now."

"You're not supposed to be driving around all day."

"Yes dear, quite right." More and more, our father treats Fiona like a second wife. He does whatever she says. He allows her to yank him from daydreams.

"And slow down, Mom said."

It's true that we're flying. Our father believes in the left lane, the hydroplane. That way, no hired gun can keep up.

"You should relax, Clyde," Fiona says. "Nobody reads the *Working Man's Bugle* anyway."

When we finally pull up to the grocery, I'm still thinking about Tuscaloosa, Green Bay, Transylvania. I'm thinking about the possibility of moving. I'm wondering what's keeping us here.

Understand that we live in Worcester, Massachusetts, where nothing good ever happens. People here resist progress. The last technological advance we fully embraced was the windbreaker jacket. We're the world capital of obsolete inventions. Honorary home of the telegraph, the steamboat, the 8-track. The inside of every storefront window is circled with soap. We're all going out of business forever.

As a city we are notable in tour guides for only three reasons. First: The Higgins Armory Museum, a miniature castle with false turrets, which houses the largest collection of armor in the world. The tour is self-guided. You wander through the dark, torch-lit halls. Every so often you encounter an empty, dimpled suit of armor standing guard. There's the occasional display of medieval weaponry encased in glass. A studded club, a forty-pound sword, a board with a nail in it. There's a chain mail suit, its links glistening like the gills of an exotic fish, the last of its species, trapped in an aquarium. It's the only field trip our school is willing to pay for. I've been five times.

Second: Union Station, former command center of the Worcester-Providence railroad, now a condemned building. Its once-white face is sooty with exhaust, like a marshmallow left too long over a flame. The domed roof hunches over its four columns, and seems in perpetual danger of collapse. Even so we are flattered when a team of clipboard-wielding scholars says Union is of extreme architectural importance, the last standing example of a particular type of foyer. They try and fail to raise funds for renovation. And so Union remains condemned, a popular murder site. Two months earlier, Scotty Truman, our downstairs neighbor who was in line for a baseball scholarship to UMASS, and who Fiona used to be in love with, was shoved off the roof of the station by an unnamed party. Scotty used to work at Cavanaugh's restaurant. His accident was one of several unexplained phenomena that provoked Clyde Snavely's interest. People say Scotty was lucky to survive, but I'm not sure. Though he's seventeen, he's now back in the fourth grade.

Third: One thing to be proud of, we know our place. Worcester is home to the world's first diner. The quick, uncomplicated meal. Then and now a measure of convenience for the weary traveler who is undoubtedly headed elsewhere. Even those who live here prefer the sense of the temporary. We keep our jackets on at church and eat dinner standing. The car is always running in the drive.

We've succeeded in buying a twelve-pound turkey and a six-foot tree without incident. The cat food has been forgotten. When we pull up to the house Scotty Truman is standing in the front yard up to his ankles in snow, swinging an aluminum bat at imaginary pitches. Baseball is one of the things that survived the accident. He's forgotten long division, but his swing is as swift and level as a pro's. He squints off in the distance, wagging the bat below his hips. Then he rears back and swings. We all imagine the ball soaring across the street, over the roof of the Monsieur Donut Shop,

and we follow an imaginary arc. Scotty trots a diamond through the snow and surprise, he's next at bat. Every swing is a home run.

You'd mistake Scotty for a normal adult except he's dressed like a scarecrow, in loose overalls and a red flannel shirt. He wears a pair of yellow rubber boots. His blond hair is shaved down to a shadow, something he never would have allowed before. Scotty's mother, Marsha, is primarily concerned with matters of convenience. He'll wear pants with elastic waistbands and pull-on shoes the rest of his life. Marsha is our landlady, who lives on the first two floors, who is our mother's only friend. Marsha often mourns the unfairness of a second round of mothering, having come so close to freedom.

"Hi there, Sport," our father says, untying the rope from the half-closed trunk.

"Hi," Scotty yells.

"How about coming up tonight? You want to help decorate this tree?"

Scotty is so excited he doesn't know what to say. He looks at me and Fiona for a few seconds, all smiles, before dropping the bat and running inside. "Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy," he says, giggling all the way up the stairs. You can hear everything that happens in our house from any point in the yard.

"You girls should make an effort to say something," we're told. "Don't just stand there like mimes. Nobody likes a mime."

Fiona mimes like she's crying, her mouth open, rubbing her eyes with fists. "Gimme a break," she says. He doesn't hear her. He's leaning into the trunk trying to exhume the Christmas tree. Every year he buys a tree he can't handle.

Fiona heads inside. She leaves small, determined prints in the snow. I try to place my feet exactly in her trail. I walk past Scotty's bat, which is sunk in the snow, which means he probably won't be able to find it later. I take it up and try a few swings. It's heavier than I thought. I pull a muscle in my arm and decide to leave the bat on the porch.

My father's got the tree by its trunk. I hold the door open while they squeeze through. The spruce is so fat it takes up the whole width of the stairwell, rustling over every step. "Son of a bitch," he says, gasping at the first landing. He sets down the tree and wipes his forehead with his sleeve. He combs his moustache with two fingers, catching his breath. Watching him rest on the landing is like watching a stage actor fuss in the wings. He is settling into the tree ritual. It's the only time he ever swears.

He won't look me in the eye. I decide to go out and shut the trunk of the car, which is open and collecting snow. I find the turkey thawing in the belly of the spare tire, covered in green needles. It's mine to carry.

Our mother has gone back to bed, so our father fights with the spruce in a hushed growl. They go the distance, leaning against each other, our father breathing heavy, trying to keep the tree on its feet, trying to force it into its corner in a sand-filled bucket. The tree won't stand. Every time it looks straight, it slumps over, spraying the carpet with sand. Our father son-of-a-bitches his way through the first few rounds in a controlled voice. Fiona and I play Old Maid at the kitchen table, snickering at his misfortune.

Finally our mother emerges from her bedroom and slaps down the hall in her slippers. She loves to drag her feet.

"Don't tell me you did it again," she says, zipping up her royal purple housecoat.

"I did," he answers, from somewhere behind the tree.

"Girls, I was counting on you." She shakes her head at us.

"I tried to stop him," says Fiona. "He wouldn't listen."

"You're your own worst enemy," she tells him. "What's wrong with a normal size tree?"

"This was the better value." He makes a few pathetic straining noises. Our mother sighs. She informs us that there's a Doris Day movie on Channel 38 about to start in her room, and that we should leave our father alone so he can swear.

"You're an angel of mercy," he tells her. They kiss. They still do that sometimes.

"I'm staying in my pajamas all day," she announces. "Isn't it exciting?" It's her first day off work in weeks. Her black and white checked waitress dress hangs from the closet door. It still holds the shape of her body. There are two slight dents where the fabric is too tight around her breasts. Today we see her long red hair out of its usual bun. Times like these she is still girlish, the kind of woman you'd expect to see advertising milk.

By the second hour our father has graduated to son-of-a-bitch-of-a-bastards, shouted at the top of his lungs. The three girls, as our mother likes to say, are marooned on her queen bed, waiting out the storm. It's a lot like camp. Our mother confides a few things while braiding our hair, like any good counselor. She warns us that being married to a Communist isn't easy. Your husband at a certain point begins to find your suffering endearing. He finds you attractive at odd, frugal moments, like when you're rinsing out a plastic sandwich bag to use again, or when you're wiping the kitchen table with a rag. Soon you begin to suspect he loves you best when you act in ways that remind him of his mother. Nothing would make him happier than to see you wielding a scythe in the back yard, or carrying two pails of water dangling from a yoke. If only you could yodel.

By the way, it is worth noting that a Communist is still better than no husband at all. Just ask Doris Day.

In return, we offer our mother a view of our teeth, mouths open like baby birds clamoring for food. “Dad calls this the tang of suffering,” Fiona says. “Not featured in most movies.” We tell her the story of the drilling, the refused needle. Clearly a mistake. This changes our mother back to an adult. She’s ready to sulk, to smoke a long chain of cigarettes. To ignore our father for several days.

When I venture to the kitchen during a commercial, the tree’s down again and he’s kicking it across the carpet. “You goddamn bastard,” he yells. The tree sways, slightly bemused. He drags the tree into the kitchen and lifts it onto the table.

“Do me a favor there, Francie,” he says. “Look under the sink and find the saw.”

I do.

“Do you know what this is?” he says to me, taking the saw by the blade. He indicates the tree’s trunk. It’s the usual brown, but it bulges in places like a can infested with botulism. “This is a split stem. It’s like two goddamn trees grown into one.” He’s right. One side of the tree is a bright blue-green, and the other side is paler. “It’s uneven,” he says. “Any way I stand this it’ll fall, see?” He goes to work sawing at the trunk. He uses exaggerated movements—some knee bending, some teeth gritting. He’s a hammy magician sawing through his assistant.

“Do you see what I’m trying to do here?” he says.

“Not really.”

“I have to make it even. I’ve got to trim down one half to save the other.” He cuts through the stem and starts slicing away at the bottom branches. It’s like the time when Fiona tried to trim her own bangs. She kept evening up until there was just a short spike left. I stay long enough to realize that both halves are useless. It’ll be a while before he can bring himself to give up.

We hear the door slam some time before Doris Day gets married, and our father still isn’t back when Scotty and his mother, Marsha, show up. Marsha works down the street at Clark University. She’s always talking about the way things are done on the college level, even though she dresses almost entirely in animal prints.

“Francine!” she says, like she hasn’t seen me in ten years. She grabs me by the shoulders and squashes me into her chest. She’s wearing a zebra-print scarf.

“Marsha!” I say, an exact imitation. I’m trying it on for size.

“We’re here,” she calls. “We’re ready to decorate.” Scotty is standing by the door, hooking and unhooking the shoulder of his overalls. My mother emerges from the kitchen, where she is busy teaching Fiona how to spike eggnog. She points to the tree with a wooden spoon. The tree is split in two, lying in pieces on the kitchen table, like garnish. There’s a tangle of branches on the floor. Our father’s cat is busy with its first exercise in years, swatting the needles around the linoleum, bewildered by their sleek travel. Green-eyed with a gray coat, the cat is the size of a watermelon, fattened on table food and backyard rodents.

“Look what Jeff did,” she says.

“Would you look at that.” Marsha wiggles into the kitchen and gives the branches a few pokes with her purple satin shoe. She and my mother start giggling. They often share a laugh at my father’s expense. They’ll drink eggnog for the rest of the night and discuss Marsha’s recent dates. Scotty stands just outside the kitchen, hands in his pockets, peeking at the tree.

“Mom?” he says. “When are we gonna decorate?”

“You know it’s too bad,” Marsha says to us, in a tortured whisper. “He was really looking forward to this. It’s hard for him to understand not everything works out.”

“You know what?” our mother says. She crosses the room and puts her arm around Scotty. “How’d you like to decorate the windows? You know.” She leads him into the living room. “How about we put some lights here?” She traces the window frame with her finger. By day we have a good view of the loading garage at the back of the Big G market. But now it’s so dark you can’t see past the glass, past our mother’s and Scotty’s yellow reflections. He’s taller by a head. Our mother enjoys the sight of herself in a man’s arms.

Scotty gives a short, excited hop. “Where’s the lights?”

“Somewhere in the basement,” our mother says.

“I know where,” says Scotty. “I know.”

“He probably does,” Marsha says. “He’s down there all the time. I hope he hasn’t been messing with your stuff. Sometimes I can’t get him out of there.”

“Can I go? Can I?” He bounces on the balls of his feet.

“Well,” says Marsha. “I don’t know. It’s dark down there.” She examines her flamingo-colored fingernails.

“Jeez, Mom.”

“Okay, okay.” She waves a hand at him.

“Francine,” says my mother. “You go with Scotty. Go ahead.” She uses the voice reserved for favors. She forces coats on us.

The stairwell is unheated, and Scotty jumps up and down to keep warm. He stutters down the stairs in his loose boots, and it’s a miracle he doesn’t fall. “Hey,” I say, when we reach the ground floor. “You left your bat outside.” It’s the first thing I’ve said to him since the accident.

“Oh no!” he says. He rushes out the door and scampers around the porch. I follow. We look for a while at the wood underneath our feet. We look at the sky. We look at Scotty’s perfect snowman, standing guard on the lawn. Three circles of light and two jointed sticks, positioned to suggest raised arms. It could be defeat, or joy, I can’t tell.

You have to devote a certain length of time to looking for something, even when it’s certainly gone. “Oh no,” he says. He paces the porch, hands stuffed in the pockets of his silky green Celtics jacket, a get-well present from Cavanaugh’s restaurant. The jacket is many sizes too small. The fit is so tight around his shoulders that the sleeves are starting to unseam from the body. “Oh no,” he says. His eyes fill up. One thing I can’t watch is someone crying.

“It’s okay,” I say. “We’ll find it tomorrow. Let’s get the lights.”

The stairs leading down to the basement are steep and splintery. There’s no banister. Scotty has to go down backwards, like he’s crawling down a ladder, so he can keep his balance. We use the light from the hall. There’s a single bulb with a pull chain at the bottom of the stairs, but it’s burnt out. There’s the smell of mildew and fabric softener. There’s the smell of things put away for the winter—grass dried on the blades of the lawnmower, the plastic of watering cans. Somewhere in the basement there’s a science project I started with a cup of yogurt that was supposed to sit for a week in a dark, damp place, and that I could never bring myself to collect.

We’re all the way down the stairs before I notice the smell of someone’s cigarette. Scotty lopes off toward a pile of boxes, but I can’t move. I’m waiting for my eyes to adjust. And then I’m waiting to see if it’s my imagination, or if there really is a shadowed man crouching under the stairwell, a man sitting with his knees pulled in who is rocking ever so slightly, who is holding the slender glimmer of a boy’s silver bat tight against his chest, a man whose eyes are wide open with terror, a man who I have not seen before though I have known him all my life.

LOVE PENNED RED*Sean Brendan-Brown*

My mother finished her life in side-boxes
 in shabby playhouses; she was an actress
 and then she was old, and then she watched.

She had Old World grace and cut fresh flowers
 each morning for Sebastian, an octogenarian who
 brought ice-cold four-percent milk in bottles.

She'd laugh at this theater—lighting wrong
 music wrong, set design some novice's concept
 of angst, the discomfort of a crowd

smelling each other's cured flowers, the exhaust
 from the organ snuffing candles and souring breath.
 Everyone thinks someone else

has ruined the tempo—she'd take responsibility,
 wave off-white and marble-veined hands thumbs-up,
 airbrushed blue mouth whistling

to silence that freaky, cheap-tuxedoed impresario
 licking beads of sweat from his cupid's bow
 and patting the coffin lid like a sideboard

he's left a deck of cards on, or his gloves.
 She'd hand him a summons, *love* penned red.
 That'd do it; god willing she'd be his halting place.

Excerpts from
WALKING

Rob Faivre

Late June

One could make a fine bouquet
of roadside flowers,

of daisies, clover, and the bright
yellow clusters of birdsfoot trefoil.

Bind it together with brome
and orchard grass and green vine.

The bouquet exists, wildly,
weeds in waste places,

exists over and over again
in every combination along the way.

October

Wind in the trees. October morning.
Blues and greens blown toward damp

gray and brown. The hands tingle,
then fall numb. Hunks of tumbled clay

where the bulldozer has been pushing
the earth around. What does he hope

to accomplish here? A cluster
of blackbirds sweeps up with shrill

cries from the pines, swirls in a single
intelligence, then drops into the woods.

Someone's lost balloon, tethered
in the little thorn tree, flaps

jerkily. The brook offers
little commentary, holding greenly by.

Thanksgiving

This morning we wandered
into a sacred grove.

Mostly maple. I had noticed
the tumbled bee boxes before,

but not the old harrow
like a ribcage. We waded

through the undergrowth
and stepped into a clearing.

Maples rooted in shale
drop down their leaves.

Quiet. The harrow lay belly
up in a low hollow filled

with leaves. Maples stand.
Quiet. We passed among the trees

and big lichen-painted stones.
Someone has been here, leaving

wildflowers in a clutch of foil,
someone comes here, beating

this stump down ragged.
Maples witness silent.

We cast around for a path
and find it hidden. Quiet,

then bird cries: hawk,
jay, crow, chickadee.

Thirty Below

Thirty below. Ping
dances the sad and gentle

Dance of the Dog with Cold Feet.
Black figure on white ground,

turning in slow motion. From here,
one cannot tell if that white on his snout

is the mark of age or frosted breath.
I'm cold, I'm getting old, he dances,

slowly lifting right forefoot
and left hindleg, hopping,

switching to left forefoot and right
hindleg, always hopping, and always

presenting a sad mask to the audience,
saying *This is no dance.*



Don Pollack, *Westward the Course of Empire*, oil on canvas, 1996, 23 x 45 inches. Courtesy of Marsia Wood Gallery, Atlanta.



Don Pollack, *Heartland*, oil on linen, 1998, 36 x 48 inches. Courtesy of Marsia Wood Gallery, Atlanta.

BITTER ALGAE*Orlando Ricardo Menes**You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me*

Ps 139:5

Calvinist guerrillas wage holy war
 ambushing Spaniards, plundering silver
 ciboria and ivory ampullae
 Sephardic exiles sell to Ottoman
 pashas in Levantine ports.

Conceiving himself an Israelite,
 Commander Joshua van Roosendaal
 —selfcircumcised—wears tefillin
 as he rides into battle,
 shofars blowing. Yoked oxen
 transport the ark across Brabantine moors

and heather, Zeeland's peat bogs,
 the Young Dunes and cold mud
 of Holland's seashore. Bullskins
 canopy the holy of holies,
 incense altars swinging from flesh hooks.

Duke of Alva's troops sack Naarden, Zutphen,
 Mechelen. Joshua incites
 Zeelanders to rebellion, peat dredgers
 hang Dominican friars

with their own cinctures. The drunk men
 pass around a porcelain font
 like King Carnival's chamberpot,
 Mad Meg slips a *pekelharing*
 between St. Ursula's breasts.

Pede Sainte Anne bonfires
an effigy of His Most Catholic Monarch
King Philip II—dressed as Pope—
on the peat knoll Luttel Calvarieberg.

Alva's Blood Council retaliates
ordering the village be cleansed
of heresy; horsemen armed with pikes
massacre infants and their mothers,
magpies swooping from scorched gallows.

Joshua paints a calfblood seal
of Solomon, recites *kadish yatom*
for the innocents, seven synonyms
to exalt Adoshem.

The ark sheds its skin,
roses of Jericho
flare seven petals in the mire.
YaHVeH's Carib angel touches
his green eyes with live mangrove

charcoal and Joshua dreams squalls
that hail rock candy on green
windward islands, turbulent waves
frothing muscovado. At dusk

young iguanas skulk
through glorybowers hunting moths
with tobacco wings,
purple-throated colibri
nest on rose-cups of menorah
cacti. Joshua climbs
coral steps to a copse of mahoes

and Jerusalem thorns
where maroons, marranos, Huguenots
pile the unhewn coral,
altar of the wilderness. Joshua slaughters
a wild goat. The circumcised share
with the uncircumcised
manioc cakes, boiled meat, bitter algae.

THE BUTTERFLY PROJECT

Tom Smith

*(Jack's Beans: A Five-Year Diary—stanzas
from January & February 1952)*

Monarch & mimic Viceroy.
Luna moth & Ghost.
Jack with wings.
The powder rubs off
on your inexpert fingers & makes you sneeze.

I have involved Laura in a plan
of composition: a decade of poems
about butterflies. She is to provide
the facts. She doesn't know
we're building her birthday present

Mused through the late afternoon
over Laura's collection while she lectured
& reminisced. She carpenters the little box
frames & prints the India labels perfectly.
A strange repose. A fact of secret life.

The Fritillaries are named for a kind of Lily:
checkered blossom, speckled wing.
This is coincidence & not design.
They live by sucking nectar & like me
prefer Thistles & Brambles.

The larva's
protusible osmeterium,
normally hidden,
can be suddenly erected.
Even Apollo has one.

Taxonomy: Psyche, Apollo, Nymph,
 Lysander, Lunus, Junonia, Helicon.
 Morphoi. Hesperii. Satyridae.
 Brimstone & Sulphur science
 would be mute without mythology.

When Lady Glanville in the eighteenth century
 died, her disappointed heirs contested her will,
 maintaining she was clearly mad for she collected
 butterflies. The court declared:
 curiosity is sane—even in women.

Pigmentation of the Common White
 derives from leucopterine,
 chemical substance
 formerly confused
 with uric acid.

Camouflage is not the only way.
 Monarchs survive by warning coloration,
 wear their poison gaily as a caution.
 Cardenolide:
 bad for the heart & tummy.

I'm counting syllables for butterflies
 in the manner of the Japanese
 & Miss Marianne Moore.
 This puts me in a new relation to the words:
 I whittle on stilts.

My butterflies
 are made in art just
 as they grow in nature.
 Process is as fine as finish.
 The reader should feel it.

His prettiness, dear friend, is tough
& not for the birds as
birds learn soon enough. Cas-
ual, brave parade of unruf-
fled wit drifting topaz!

Four-six-eight: appreciable pat-
terns flutter to take shape
on the page. Ticks or tape-
worm eggs maze & mottle the flat
white pulp: alphabet ape.

Tomorrow will be Laura's birth-
day & the valentine
done. The Swallowtail sign
says keep courage as mute as earth
& mirthfully salt mine.

Laura enchanted
waved the pages
from both hands
aloft like wings
of Cabbages.

MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE

Harriet McBryde Johnson

She sets folding chairs in straight lines across the center of the back room of the American Legion Hall on Romney Street. The arrangement is satisfying, but still she feels low. An old rusty air conditioner makes big noise but fails to cool or even stir the air. Smells—mildew and Lysol—just hang there. When the first of the workers get there, she feels like she’s looking up at them from a hole.

But she knows that attitude always follows action. She plants a smile on her mouth and makes her eyes beam alert concern. She constructs the face she needs to greet the hospital workers she is trying to unionize and hopes that, once again, her attitude will fall in line.

They greet her with polite, unreadable faces. “Hey Miss Hazel, how you doing?”

“All right,” she nods back. Will they ever drop the “Miss”?

The women arrive in twos and threes and form little huddles in the booths that line the walls of the room. Away from her, they start teasing and joking. There is defiance in their hilarity.

A good organizer does not intrude into the life of a community. Hazel lays handouts on the table, tries to diagnose the air conditioner, dumps chips into bowls, and pours ice tea into paper cups.

Their talk bursts out of the huddles, darts from booth to booth, shoots across the rows of chairs. The women have forgotten she exists. It’s usually White women ignoring a Black woman who’s making everything tidy and laying out the food. The turnabout is good.

She hears the door swing open but it doesn’t close. Nehemiah has come and has stopped in the door frame. As the old local-union man and elder relative to half the City, it’s his job to be solid. He’s like a tree planted by the water. He cannot be moved. Coming up from behind, Joel turns sideways and slips right past him. Joel is as nimble as a fish; he can do that tricky maneuver waving both arms and exclaiming. He has a way of exclaiming.

“We’ve been to such places! You wouldn’t believe!” He’s especially bright after driving Nehemiah on his rounds.

Hazel speaks to Nehemiah. “I’ve already laid out the handouts and passed out the agenda. The air conditioner’s not doing much but there’s sweet ice tea.”

“All right!” Nehemiah gives her two slow pats on the back that come close to an embrace. He’s still in the doorway.

It’s twenty minutes past the announced time for the meeting, but Nehemiah is in no hurry. He, at last, gets moving across the linoleum floor, but in a slow, stately way. At each huddle, he stops. He stands. He speaks. “How you doing? All right?” When he finally ends up in front of the head table, he stands in place. He rubs his head. Hazel and Joel sit down in one of the back booths. Not one folding chair is taken.

There is nothing that could be called, even loosely, a call to order. Nehemiah stands in his spot. Gradually, purely recreational razzing becomes purposive. The meeting is underway. No one pays attention to the agenda she typed and duplicated. Issues rise and fall, new issues roll in, abandoned issues resurface, issues cross in deflected paths.

Romney Street meetings may seem random, but she sees an underlying structure. They go in waves. Like the waves breaking on the shore, they seem to be getting nowhere. But if you watch long enough, you can measure the rising and falling of the tides. Over the course of a season you can see erosion of the beach and accretion of sand bars. In geologic time, big things happen. The process will continue long after her. Others will see the results long after she moves on, long after she dies.

Beside her Joel is smiling with that cheerful, open face of his. He’s enjoying the meeting. How can Joel enjoy a Romney Street meeting? He is so New York, fast talking, fast moving. A Romney Street meeting ought to drive him nuts. She used to think he was just being polite. But now she’s lived with him, and she knows better. He really enjoys these meetings, as he enjoys almost everything. He has patience, and not the put-upon patience of people who are forced into patience by some situation that must be endured. He knows what he wants, but he doesn’t mind waiting—no, he’s happy to wait—as long as it takes.

The wave-energy of the meeting dips. Faces are glum. The workers are grumbling. Ancient history has come back to life; words of blame rumble with the air conditioner. They are back to a pointless discussion of what went wrong and who was to blame in the strike of 1969. Nehemiah drifts into ineffectual muttering. His gaze is vacant, floating up to the asbestos tiles on the ceiling. He looks suddenly senile. The momentum—the whole cause—seems lost.

But Joel is still smiling. He’s waiting. Almost winking at her.

All at once the wave rises again. Attention moves in one direction. Rising voices merge into a united, positive force. An issue is on the table. A plan is forming. Hazel feels herself bounce up, the way you bounce when

you're standing chest-high in the ocean and a strong wave rises around you. At that moment, you reach out for your lover's hand.

She grabs Joel's hand, and she says it.

"We ought to get married and settle down in Charleston."

Joel smiles the same smile he has been smiling since he entered the room. "OK! Great plan!"

On the surface, nothing has changed between her and Joel. Only inside are things different.

They knew each other before they actually met. As soon as she came to South Carolina, she started hearing about the New York lawyer who was criss-crossing the state for legal aid. She had landed in a tight little circle of progressive people; there is no room for the bickering that is one of the luxuries of life in big places. It was no surprise when he showed up late one night with his sleeping bag. They were in the same struggle, so he was entitled to floor space in her apartment. She pointed him to the bathroom and went back to bed.

Since then, he's stayed at her apartment whenever he works in Charleston or passes through town. Now that's most of the time. His assignments are mostly up and down Highway 17, in Beaufort, Charleston, Georgetown, and Horry Counties. Her apartment is right off the crosstown leg of Highway 17.

Whenever their schedules match, they eat together, usually in front of her TV. They watch McNeil-Lehrer; sometimes they tune into the Spanish soap opera and speculate about what's going on. He drifts into her union meetings.

Their relationship has been easy and companionable from the beginning. Nothing changed when they started having sex. For them, sex has been a simple shared pleasure, a feeding of the senses as natural as taking in food. When he moved his stuff in and started paying part of the rent, it was no milestone, no turning point. They were not in love, not committed; they simply shared a convenient stopping place. Someday it would stop being convenient, and then they would sleep in other places, with other people. That was fine.

But now she knows he wants to marry her. He's a man who knows what he wants and is willing to wait, and now he's waiting for her. She wants to end the relationship all together, but that's hardly fair; she is the one who brought up marriage.

For three months now she's been thinking they should have a serious talk. But first she has to decide on the agenda. And that would destroy

what she's always liked about their relationship—its lack of decision. So her struggle has been to go back to the way things were.

Joel seems to be biding his time. Gently he confirms that the issue is still on the table. One Sunday last month, he looked up from his Bar review materials. "This is interesting!" he said. "Any notary public can perform a marriage! I think Nehemiah's daughter is a notary! How about it?"

She laughed, pretending to think he wasn't serious. But she knew he was serious. He always is.

Just last week he did it again. "Hey! South Carolina recognizes common law marriage! Apparently, if neither party is married to someone else, all it takes is living together, the intent to be married, and holding yourself out as husband and wife!"

That time she pretended to think he was just discussing the law. "What's the age of consent in South Carolina?" she asked.

"Well, that depends..."

Patiently, Joel gave her a lecture on domestic relations law in South Carolina. He won't force a decision.

Joel really doesn't mind that all the washing machines are busy. All day he has been running Nehemiah around. They started at ten o'clock with a thing in the yard of a country church—he still doesn't know what it was about—and then they went the rounds of corner stores, fishing spots, pool halls, and little neighborhoods. They were all over Charleston County. At some stops there were people to meet; at others they picked up people to take them to work, to hospital visits, to their church things, wherever. At odd times, people gave them food. Some food they ate right then. Other food they carried off and ate in the car. And other food they gave away. It was all pretty mysterious, but it was interesting.

He sorts the laundry. That doesn't take long. So then there's nothing to do but wait for Hazel to get there and watch other people's clothes spin around.

Joel is happy to be down South, hanging out in a Southern laundromat. He has always, always wanted to come South. As a kid in New York, he dreamed of coming down to change things. But then his idea of the South came from his uncle who was a Mississippi summer volunteer in 1964. He made Hazel laugh about it. "When I was about ten," he told her once while dishing out spinach lasagna, "I learned that a few things had changed—I came too late, you know, for de jure segregation and all kinds of peculiar institutions!"

“Yeah.” Hazel laughed. “Too bad they abolished slavery before you got here.”

The truth is, he was a little disappointed. But he never stopped wanting to go South. For years he cultivated people with Southern connections. That’s what it takes to find a job in the South. Finally a friend of a friend in legal aid in South Carolina offered him a job. He said yes right away, without even asking the normal questions about pay and all that. So here he is, studying for the South Carolina Bar and working for seven dollars an hour as a paralegal. It’s great! He travels from branch to branch, doing odd jobs for the lawyers—the real lawyers, with South Carolina licenses.

He’s done stints in the Midlands, Pee Dee, and Piedmont, but he has the most fun in the Coastal area, moving up and down Highway 17. The land’s totally flat. And there is so much of it! Every time he sees a stand of big trees in the middle of a broad field, he has to grin. A big wide Southern grin. The South! For real! Headed south from Charleston, he drives past repeating sequences of trees and marsh and rivers all the way to the legal aid office on St. Helena Island. There, at the Penn Center, he walks under huge oaks hung with Spanish moss, on dirt packed hard by the pacing feet of Martin Luther King and Septima Clark and so many nameless people who came for strength. It is almost too much! North of Charleston is different. There, on the way to Georgetown and Conway, miles and miles of pines stick up like bottle brushes by Claes Oldenburg.

“What’s the deal with these trees?” he asked a local, a trailer-park White man with a tangle of credit problems.

The man didn’t get it at first. South Carolina people don’t notice the bottle-brush effect. But finally Joel made him see.

“Oh that! That’s where Hugo stripped’em, you know.”

“You mean the hurricane? In 1989?”

The man nodded patiently. A special patient nod reserved for Yankee idiots, Joel suspected. “See,” the man explained, “they used to have branches and all, and then when Hugo stripped’em, the new growth shot out of the trunks, I reckon.”

Now Joel tells Hugo stories that way, in the active voice, making the storm a character that does wild things. And now he loves those tortured pines as much as he loves the old, whole oaks whose sturdy arms shelter St Helena. And everywhere he goes he breathes in the musty smells of earth. Could anything be better?

Well, yes. Better even than the landscape is doing intake. All day he interviews people—the people who live in the tiny houses by those open fields, in the trailer parks, in the little pockets of poverty in the cities and

towns—and writes up their problems for the lawyers. It's not easy to figure out what they are saying. From one end of the state to the other! They talk so funny! But he keeps at it until the clients understand his questions and he gets their answers. Not just their answers. Their stories.

He tells Hazel those stories. He makes them funny, but she always sees something serious in them. She's so serious, committed, full of scruples. He has wondered if she might think him shallow. But it's much more interesting to wonder about her. How did she get the way she is? What makes her care—not only about the goal, but just as much about the process? What will come of it all? He wants her story. He has wanted it from that moment at 1:00 AM when she greeted him on her doorstep, as cool as a receptionist, as polite as if he had an appointment, and left him to sleep on her floor.

But he knows, for certain, that she won't just give her story to him. He can't just ask for it. The only way to get it is to be there and to watch it unfold, to be a witness. And that could take years, maybe their whole lives. Long before she surprised him—and herself obviously—by mentioning marriage, he knew he would stay as long as it takes.

She walks into the laundromat. "You'll never guess!" he says, his face lit up with cheerful irony. "Nehemiah's stuff all ran late! I only just got here! And now we have to wait for a machine!"

She sits down and re-sorts the wash.

"I think I'll walk down to Woolworth's if that's OK," she says. "I need some flip-chart paper and stuff."

"Sure! Hey, I know!" He turns to a woman who is staring at a washer. "Could you watch our stuff so I can run to Woolworth's with her?"

The woman seems charmed that he asked. "All right, go head on then."

"I'll just get my stuff and meet you back here." Hazel is gone as soon as they pass through the theft-detectors at Woolworth's.

Joel wanders around the front end of Woolworth's. He looks at the soaps and detergents. What kind of soap does Hazel like? Probably not Ivory—"My wife, I think I'll keep her." He picks up some oatmeal soap and then some light bulbs. A package of M&M's plain. He lurks around the displays listening to the voices of unseen Gullah people on the other side of the racks. He takes a pair of lurid red socks. Only \$1.25 and they might be cotton.

Standing within sight of the cash register, he rotates the jewelry display. Pink and orange plastic beads, tiny silver-colored sea shells. Hey! A pair of

Malcolm X dangle-earrings. They are sleek, simple, and elegant. Light weight. Made of real aluminum. But what he can't resist is the white card, oily with handling. A lot of young Black girls have handled those earrings, wanting them but not getting them. He wants to track down every one of those girls and ask why she didn't get the Malcolm X earrings she wanted. He wonders how he got so nosy.

It's only been about three minutes, but Hazel will be ready soon. She doesn't like to wait, so he stakes out a place in line, carrying his little things in a green plastic bin.

It's a long line. Teenagers, parents, and children are at Woolworth's to buy school supplies. He looks around. Behind him is an older White woman with a tight curly hairdo. She looks at his bin and scowls. She disapproves. Of the red socks? The M&M's? The Malcolm X earrings? Surely not the light bulbs! Without meaning to, he grins at her. Her scowl deepens. He has to speak.

"My wife's doing the serious shopping," he says.

He's surprised by what he has just said but keeps on talking. "And I'm just killing time."

Her face softens a little. "My granddaughter will have her first day in school next week. I hope she'll like these things."

He looks into her cart. "Wow!" he exclaims, "a Beauty and the Beast lunch box and all those rainbow colors! Sure she'll like 'em! She'll go wild!"

The woman beams, won over.

The line moves up and Joel is at the register. He steps aside and turns to the White woman.

"Ma'am, you go ahead. I'm in no hurry. I have to wait for my wife!" This time he says it deliberately.

The cashier begins ringing up the school supplies. The scanner isn't working right; after repeated tries she keys in the prices. She's good. She must have been a cashier a long time before scanners came in.

The White woman looks up from her checkbook. "Oh, here she is, I bet."

Hazel is pushing a cart full of flip-chart paper, markers, poster paper, peel-off vinyl letters, copy paper, and other organizing tools.

The White woman has finished her business but stays behind. She smiles at Hazel and then at Joel.

"Is this your wife?" she asks.

Joel raises his eye brows at Hazel, kicking the question over to her.

She hesitates for barely a second. "Yes," she answers.

"And you must be newlyweds! I can always tell!"

“Yes, definitely.” Hazel is red in the face, like a bride.

“And you’re a teacher?”

“Well sort of, but my students know more than I do.”

“I know you’re a good teacher,” the White woman coos. “And you’re a darling couple. I know you’ll be very happy.”

Business has come to a standstill. Joel shrugs and smiles at the people in line behind them. No one seems in any hurry.

The cashier is ringing up their stuff. The White woman gives Hazel a kiss, and then Joel. “Now you take good care of this pretty girl,” she says. Joel hands her her bags and she leaves.

Hazel picks up the Malcolm X earrings and speaks quietly. “What’s this?”

“A wedding present!” They both burst into laughter.

They pay and take their bags out of the store. Rain is coming down in sheets. They lean on the front of the building under an awning and double over and laugh.

“Do you think that lady would like us so much if she knew our politics?” Hazel sputters.

“Probably!” says Joel. “We are a darling couple!”

Hazel leans back and breathes in the curry-charcoal smoke from the Indian restaurant up the block. She is serious now.

“So what’s the deal? Are we really married now?”

Joel seems to be working through a Bar review problem. “Let’s see! Neither of us is married to someone else! We live together! We’ve just held ourselves out—in the Woolworth’s on King Street no less—as husband and wife! Only one issue... Did you intend to be married?”

“When? In that moment? When I said yes?”

“In that moment, yes.”

“Yes.” She says it seriously, but with an air of disbelief. “Is that all it takes?”

“I believe so.” He smiles.

“Does South Carolina have common law divorce?” she asks.

“I’m afraid not.” His smile broadens. “For divorce you have to go to court and have grounds. The easiest way is to be separated continuously for a year.”

“Well, that seems like a lot of trouble,” she says.

“It is.”

“And just because we’re married—.”

“Doesn’t seem like a sufficient reason to split up?”

“Exactly. We do get along pretty well, don’t we?”

She cannot hear his answer. The rain and all the people talking under the awning and all the traffic sloshing through the water drown out his words.

The rain slackens and again the sidewalk is alive with people. When a shower has stopped but the sky is still green, Charleston people walk as fast as New Yorkers. The tourists, oblivious, plod along.

Shoulder-to-shoulder, Joel and Hazel head up King Street. On a crowded stretch of sidewalk, Joel falls behind and she walks in front. She steps aside to let a Black woman pass with her three brown children and it hits her: if she has children, they'll be pale, pale like her, pale like Joel. A sea of possibility is swallowed up. On both sides, the narrow street is walled with rows of old shop buildings. They press against her, and she has an urge to run, to escape from all these people pulled along by the street's North-South current. But then she pushes herself forward. She looks up King Street and now there is a kind of comfort in its line, its direction. She knows which way to go and feels better for knowing.

Maybe her children will inherit Joel's open face. She hopes they will know what they want, and be willing to wait for it. It's good to have things settled. Yes, it is good. Maybe that's what she's wanted all along.

Up the street and around the corner their laundry waits. By now that woman has put a load in the machine for them. Their white things are spinning around together in warm water. Her panties, his shorts, their T-shirts, their towels, their sheets.

HISTORY

Kelly Ritter

Another slip, balanced on
the delicate needle
is another century.
I am throwing my belongings
over now, into a compartment
with my name on it,
without realizing:
Planted in the masonry, a transformation.

Something was said about fire,
the way stones do not burn.
A girl gives up her two sticks now.
Fire—the changing back—
this is how
everything owns everything.
I could build a hole.
The sky blazes with its trappings.
We are part of a conversation
falling into itself,
an effigy.

MICHAEL FUREY

Kelly Ritter

Passing us now, going the other way
 he is the photographer on the agit-train
 asking, *how is your revolution?*
 He wants fine-tuned specifics:
 frame after frame of newsreel
 and the roll of bleak countryside,
 her face can become less
 than her face.

Another world at dawn,
 he is on the run from the water
 dripping from her window sill.
 History travels:
 Two people on a train, or

two thousand people on a train—
 breaking down the peasantry
 into sub-species: here is the old woman
 who does not trust the camera.
 Here is the dirty child
 among the sea of dirty children.
 And Michael Furey, half-made,
 waits for a sign

in the darkness—waits
 for his tree
 to split to its spine.
 Rendering the day's footage
 useless, he writes in the margins:
The rain has taken me over.

LAMENT

Kelly Le Fave

Wished well, as a penny turned green,
the wisher's palm years ago gone on to good fortune—

I have crept up to the edge where such a place leads.

Weightless decades gone and my tongue crusted
with salt, an old woman eats crackers, drinks tea, says nothing

about the future left in the leaves. Her cup frightens my table

that I might think of my still mouth and not forget, hold
my finger to the wind, make motions, forge ahead.

I'm ripe, but not as ripe as butter. No old letters

or stained handkerchiefs testify in my drawer.
What holds breath there is unwritten, odorless.

My prayer itself rests assured, imaginary, knowing it could
hurt itself

if it wanted. Coin to pond, the arc of the throw
leads again and again to the breaking of water.

How alone that sound traces me in the hour of confusion.

LOOK*John Latta*

Seeing is a concern
 Radical enough in its usual unconcern
 To untether itself, to unhitch the seen

And trot it off unnoticed, *as* the unnoticed,
 Though I do see now how the unclipped grass
 Across the street is a green mob of greens.

The sun is hitting it
 And a lazy skiff of wind is riffling
 The individual blades—like a whole uprooted tribe

Amassed and brandishing
 Spears of white light.
 (That's not seeing.) (That's not grass.)

Ordinary scrutiny of the ordinary grass: what's extraordinary
 Is how green is a caution. . .
 It is the color of ambivalence, it is the color of angelic necessity.

Green sunlight and breeze.
 Something invisible as thought
 Is pawing the pointy thoughtless

Sequins of a semi-formal gown, green and variegated,
 A sleek shimmer, recumbence on a lawn.
 (That's not it.)

So go the idiot riffs of a mad combo—
 Every single squeezed-out note
 A music *and* a metaphor

You always accept without knowing it.
All the otherworldly spectacles of green—Zulu uprising,
Post-cocktail déshabillé—and green itself escapes in the garment

Of your looking,
Falls like music into the perfect daily order
Of the inexpressible, unseen.

AT NAGS HEAD

John Latta

We lope single file down the Beach Road,
Counting the different ways of spelling
Omelette at the earlybird breakfast joints.

And every day the brown pelicans go by, singly
Skimming the wave-troughs south or
North in squads of five or

Six arrowing over the dunes.
What kind of behavior is that? I like the way
That pelican's little head looks

Like a cue ball in the sun.
Doodlebugs hiding in tiny craters below the deck
Spit back geysers of sand

If we tickle the peripheries with something,
Timothy grass or twig. I read *Fenollosa*
Who says there is no grammar in nature, no noun.

He is trying to posit Chinese as a language
Where being is never simply being: it is always *doing*,
All process and motion unstilled by mere sign.

I admit it: I am restless as a Chinaman today.
On the beach we walk the foam-edge, there
Where the ocean hikes up its lace skirt.

We find a square ray, a stiff brown parallelogram
With a tail, desiccated, rubbery. What mishap
Of stranding, what single midnight's blue

Wave's unwitnessed glorious push
Left it there like a geometric marker, a clue
To the ancient verb of the sea?

I am restless. Here. It is still May.
The wind keeps blowing. Deep in the primordial
Night we exchange light shivery dream-doings—

Of leaving, of being left. You curl like a cloud
Around me and we sleep and wake
To a morning of hundreds of clouds.

Rainy washout of a Thursday,
Whatever is coming through is transgression and collapse,

An unthrowable switch.
The way music begins

Not here or *here*,
Begins in the nowhere grace
That graces the fraying unseen edge of the immediate.

Where music begins is in the *undoing* of the real:
Unrefereed and implacable, a green fissure
Widening ostensible song into song's
Own unheard-of song.

Spicer: "Words turn mysteriously against those who use them."
Bicycles. Clocks.
Green bicycles, green clocks.

I am talking about the hard polarity of the summons,
The call,
How it musters up against the real,

Goes belly to belly with that blockhead of an ump
And cannot shout him down.

A thing is here or it is not here.
Our vocabulary is *yes*. Our vocabulary is *no*.

Coleridge: "The apprehension of polarity
Is itself the *basic act of the imagination*."

Think of the American printer Benjamin Day, inventor
Of the Benday dot,
A way of transforming the wild smear of a photographic
continuum,

(Unrepresentable, unprintable)

Into an orderly field
(Screened)

Of imaginative decisions:
Every dot inked or not. Here, not here. On. Off.

A switch, a translation.
No other necessary vocabulary. Available.

Green how much I want you green.
Rain of a Thursday
Fouling up the switch. Incommunicado.

The useless furniture of the room. Coming through:
Unwilling tokens and these
several keepsakes
Fusty with verdigris.
A collage of the ineffable, the marriage of *yes* and *no*.

The old story of what to do
With a sewing machine, an umbrella, a dissecting table.

No disclosure but in the disappearance of the self.
Goodbye, Jack. Goodbye, Pritch.

(And I recall a tornado on the road
To Palmyra,
r & b hawking up a dying cough on the radio. . .

The only other noise that
Of tires pulling
A long stuck bandage off the black wound of the road.

Pritchard's angel and my angel gabbing about metaphor,
Gadding about benign, askew.
Two canaries in a mineshaft.

Two lemons in a trunk.
We were *lit* back then.)

FISHING THE PLAINS

Melita Schaum

A man I knew once fell in love with a Thai woman he saw across the room at a party, and followed her all the way back to her country without ever having spoken to her. It was a 20-hour flight, and he had no idea where he was going; he arrived in Bangkok at 2:00 in the morning of June 3, 1979.

The driver of a renegade cab brought him to a verminous hotel in the red-light district. In a lurching combination of French and English he was offered a woman along with his room, which he declined, trying to make clear to the small, gap-toothed man at the front desk that he wanted the room for the night, not just an hour, no woman, just sleep. “*Bo doi*,” the toothless man kept repeating, gesturing to himself, “*bo doi*, hello USAID.”

The room itself was nothing more than a cinderblock square with a palette on the floor, a bead curtain in place of a door, and the unmistakable stench of human sewage from the alley outside. Despite his exhaustion, he would not undress, but spent the night hunched over his luggage, sleeping in fits, imagining the woman he loved had come into the room and was riffling the breast pocket of his suit in order to steal something he had never given anyone else before.

In the morning he went to the Embassy, and within three days he had located the woman, who had been a medical resident on an exchange with Oakland General Hospital. Unfortunately, her attending physician informed him, she had just left on a volunteer medical relay to Cambodia with the International Red Cross. They would be five weeks in the northern provinces, traveling to remote stations. She was a very fine surgeon, the doctor said, not clear about this American’s relation or interest, her expertise would be much welcomed.

The man I knew checked his luggage at the Regent, folded a change of shirt and underwear into a backpack, and followed the track of the medical team into the countryside north of Battambang. Again, it didn’t take too long to find the medical unit; news travels in villages about free service, and the man was surprised how many of the Cambodians spoke at least some English after the war. As he journeyed in the day’s heat that was thick as syrup, he couldn’t shake the feeling of lightheadedness. When he followed the last gutted road on foot into the medical camp, he felt like the explorer Livingston coming upon Victoria Falls.

The camp was laid out as a series of tents and jerrybuilt cabins, loose-slatted and lined one against the other like stables. A steady mill of people moved within the compound with the dazed, patient intent of pilgrims at Lourdes. The doctors had set up surgical units under old French occupation army tarps strung between the limbs of silver-pillar trees. He found her operating on the mine-shattered hand of a ten-year-old boy.

What the attending physician in Bangkok had neglected to say was that the woman was here with her husband, also a doctor, with whom she was very much in love. She explained this carefully to the man who had come up to her with the strange look in his eyes. When she understood what he was there for, she managed to hide her amazement and spoke to him kindly and tactfully.

“I’m so sorry. But if you have love,” she said, “perhaps you could give some of it to these children, they need it so much.” He found himself having trouble focusing on her face, which seemed to pulse and contract like an orchid blooming. There was a bursting, expansive feeling in his gut he thought must be heartbreak. “First,” she added, “we should have a look at you.”

What he thought was heartbreak turned out to be a bad case of dysentery. He was given a bed in a cabin in the nurse’s quarters and looked in on twice a day. But the staff was overwhelmed with other patients, the Cambodians who wandered like phantoms out of the forest in an endless, quiet exodus bringing their suffering—malaria, cholera, children with faces or limbs half torn away from neglected mines and unexploded mortar shells that lay like the cartridges of gigantic bullets across the jungle.

By the third day he was too weak to make it to the outhouse and had to lie in his own shit until one of the nurses came and changed him. It seemed to him, lying there looking through the slats of his wall, that the world had condensed to an interminable stream of misery, of blood and torn flesh and excrement, the wounded eyes and souls of children gathered like a tide of despair, and in the midst of it all, bobbing and about to go under, the unbelievable smallness of love.

The cabin adjoining his belonged to an aide from Las Vegas who had made porn movies before she found her vocation in nursing. She had apparently not abandoned her habits with her past, and managed to entertain a steady retinue of different men in her cabin every night. The sounds—of conversation, of laughing protest, then of sex—through the loose wooden boards dividing their rooms kept the man whose heart was broken and who spent most nights lying in his own fouled sheets sane, able to concentrate on something other than his own misery.

She made the same sounds with every man, he noticed, a high rhythmic keening like a hinge in a wind—*unh, unh, unh*—harmonizing finally with his climax, but never seeming to reach a higher octave of its own. Each of the men's sounds was unique. One man huffed once upon orgasm like an inner tube deflating. The French neurologist with the sensitive hands groaned like a buffalo, and one man with an accent could only make himself come by reciting a crooning litany of obscenities that rose and fell like a radio wave.

The man lying in his own shit was amused, sometimes aroused. He imagined someday having the nurse for himself, but he didn't think he was the kind of man she would go for. Anyway, she was probably tired of smelling his indefatigable diarrhea through the wall they so casually shared.

Despite the distraction, his condition was getting worse. By the eighth day he began to think that he might die. His insides felt hollowed out, and his brain burned in a strange, loose way, as if his thoughts were vapors about to escape through the holes of his eyes. He thought how it would be just his luck to lose his life looking for love in this disease-infested, bloodied, shrieking place.

The next night around suppertime the door opened and it was her, his neighbor, standing with a bowl of broth she'd brought for him. He was too ill even to turn towards her, but setting the bowl on the floor by his bed, in one smooth, tender motion she pulled him upright against her, his back propped against the deep, warm cushion of her breasts. Leaning back into her certainty, the feeling in his heart was like dry leaves silvered by a sudden rain, like being gathered and bursting into bloom. At that moment he knew somehow that he was saved, that he had begun to understand the strange ways of grace.

She fed him that way, like a big child, or as if they had discovered a new erotic position: his frail body impeded onto her strong one, her hands moving to steady him. They were the gentlest, surest two things he had ever known.

Twenty years later he would read, on a subway in New York, about the death of Pol Pot. The dictator had died of a supposed heart attack, but was actually probably murdered by the Chinese. The hair of his corpse had been dyed red, as a final fetish of the pornography of power.

The small print of the *Times* would repeat the statistics of genocide, the photographs of beautiful children, followed by fields of skulls with blindfolds still covering the bone. The old Tuol Sleng highschool turned into an

extermination camp for “enemies of the revolution,” some six or seven years old. When the liberation forces arrived, the guards left so fast there were still decaying bodies chained to the metal beds used for torture. *Spare them, no profit; remove them, no loss.* Belsen of the jungle. 1.5 million killed.

Once a year, each September, the Mekong River floods the central plains of Cambodia, a country built up from centuries of sifting delta silt, the wash of eroding jungle mud. The entire province of Kompong Thom becomes a vast inland lake, and aquatic life feeds on what once was meadow grass and rice shoots. Life stops for the villages as their fields transform into uninhabitable expanses of water; it is as if the world overnight had transfigured itself into the inhuman, primordial visage of a pre-civilized earth, time reversing with the same weird paradoxicality of a river that flows in two directions. But when the waters pull back and the devastation recedes, the villagers come down for the plenty. Whole towns, like families, go around with baskets, collecting fish from the bushes.

HAHASATIGII

Not long ago I was driving cross-country with a man I loved, coming home from a joint sabbatical in California. It was about 2:00 on the second day’s drive when we pulled into the Trading Post Truck Stop in Union City, Utah, for some lunch and a rest. Our car was dwarfed by the shiny, party-colored eighteen-wheelers—electric blue; frosted Pepto Bismol pink with black cursive lettering that read *Rex and Billie’s Rig, Cribs, Oklahoma*; a big, angular Peterbilt in deep maroon, the color of crushed velvet, with the silhouettes of naked women enshrined on its mudguards. Virgin of the Asphalt, my lover quipped, Our Lady of the Flying Earth.

Union City was a small, nondescript town laid out across the desert like a transparent chessboard over the red, precambrian geology of north central Utah. Its street names, bald with the effort to convey some small-town hominess—Main Street, Broadway, First—imposed a neat, logical grid over earth that had memory only for the sinuous lines of sidewinders and desert wind.

We bought a couple of microwaved hotdogs in foil envelopes and two Cokes and wandered back out into sunshine as sharp as battery acid,

shimmering across the crystal, convex air of the desert. A range of mountains loomed behind the city's flat-roofed skyline like a monster from a Japanese movie. Across the street was a small city park, a square of Chem-Lawned green with a few picnic tables, adjacent to it a middle school, 1950s fallout shelter architecture, ochre brick scattered with a glimmer of bike racks. A trio of Latino boys hunched against the building's corner, smoking. They looked up but didn't move as we wandered to one of the tables, then relaxed back into their rehearsed teenaged nonchalance.

The shade felt good to us Easterners. It had been a long, hot drive, and we ate in silence, gazing aimlessly around us and past each others' profiles, like grade schoolers slowdancing. Our bodies doing what they needed to—chew, swallow, rest—our minds adrift. I guess we didn't even see him come up to us, the old guy with the faded, misbuttoned shirt and trousers so dirty it looked like he'd slept in an oil spill. He gestured courteously to the spare end of the bench as if he were inviting himself to sit down, then accepted his own invitation with exaggerated grace and joined us.

He started talking as if he'd just returned to a conversation interrupted a moment before, about Union City, about how late his social security check was, about his fat bitch of a landlady who milked him for rent for that narrow room over there, a street and a half away. I nodded politely, my mouth full of hotdog bun, and looked from his rheumy, eighty-proof eyes in the direction his finger was pointing. On the corner stood a square cinderblock building painted the color of orange sherbet, faded in the corrosive desert sun. The yard was dirt, and scattered near the foundation were a few of those cactus-like succulents called "hens and chicks" that seem to be a favorite landscaping of retirees. A plastic lawn chair leaned against the cement wall as if it were tired to death—of the yard, of the prospect, of the endless ungrateful asses it had had to support.

The man's narrative rolled on like a skein unwinding. At one point he said he was Native, part Athabascan Indian, and my partner cocked his head sociably, wanting with his personable instincts to engage him somehow, lob a few back like he would at a party of attorneys or university administrators. But the old guy wasn't interested in dialogue. He was obviously building up to something—a request for money or cigarettes—and it seemed to make him uncomfortable that his performance was being interrupted by questions, expressions of interest, attempts to individualize and make porous his wall of words. I got the sudden impression that my partner's smiling stabs at conversation were, in this setting, actually rude—making a neutral act harder by personalizing it, like some men think they're being bighearted when they ask hookers to talk about their lives. I felt that by imposing

social convention on this man and his routine we were being inexcusably patronizing, in a way that was worse the more unintentional it was.

But perhaps it was we who were being patronized, I found myself thinking as the man held his own, spoke stubbornly over all replies, changing the tack of his story to elude each attempt at connection. If patronizing makes invisible, then we were the ones who had disappeared beneath the stream of this impersonal narrative, blotted out by the opacity of his dodging thoughts. It was simply a different convention, one we were on the outside and ignorant of, to which we were being asked to conform. And here we were, two clean white people eating hotdogs, trying rudely to resist the anonymity demanded of us.

It was only later, lightened of a twenty and wandering back to where our car was parked in the swimming heat, that I remembered a student I'd gone to graduate school with, a Native American girl named Teena on scholarship from a reservation somewhere in New Mexico. I thought of what a jolt it must have been coming from the arroyo to a manicured campus fake with midwestern Gothic, where she spent four years without making a single friend. I remembered her as a shy girl who always dressed impeccably for seminars—high heels, stockings, makeup—but the effect was weirdly incongruous, like somebody wearing organdy to a frat party.

The rest of us were easy in our inheritance, enough to rebel against it, knowing it was a trust that couldn't be taken away. It was a sense of belonging—as that word forks into ownership and fit, a sense of place and of a thing possessed, being in possession, in position. Teena was always hardworking, always deferential, never a misstep, and that itself branded her as not right in a world whose rules must have been maddening for this moon-faced, straight-haired girl who had grown up where women still washed laundry at the creek, though these days they carried it down in lurid plastic K-Mart tubs, sipping Cokes. A place with cactus for barbed wire, Joshua tree for guards.

Meanwhile, we wore out the already worn out seats of our Chinos and drawled on about phenomenology and sneered at the mechanical plotting of Umberto Eco and pretended we'd discovered Oswald Spengler, because it was all ours, irrefutably, like skin you could scratch at but never remove. The shell game of a profession whose cups we held even as we cast them away. It was always beyond her; she was always a heartbeat behind. The last I heard of her, some years ago, was that she had been unable to find a job in her field of Victorian literature. Departments clamored to hire her as a minority, but all they offered her to teach were lower level courses in multiculturalism or liberal studies seminar units that reexamined Wounded Knee.

“Diversity is good,” a freshman of mine once wrote, staring down the double barrel of a Composition assignment and a pending C- for the course, “otherwise it would be like eating the same thing every day.” I wondered whether he would ever know the unintended rightness of his clumsy simile, the whiff of cannibalism beneath the rainbow and the concerts for global peace.

My lover says there is a tale told by the First People that goes something like this. One day coyote was out hunting and, coming upon crow in a moment of distraction, caught him by the tip of the wing. “Coyote, brother,” crow said, “if you eat me now you’ll only be hungry again in an hour or two. But if you let me go, I promise I can cure you of hunger altogether.”

Coyote had his suspicions, but he was intrigued by the prospect of never again suffering the lean pains that were even at that moment gnawing at his gut. He hesitated, but a particularly sharp pang encouraged him to comply and see what crow had up his sleeve.

At this point, versions of the story differ. Some tribes say that in return for his freedom, crow offered to teach coyote how to fly. Following instructions, coyote ran along beneath the skimming, airborne bird, waiting for the moment that he too would take off and become the Other, feathered and graceful, finally at home in the alien blue expanse of sky. He ran and ran, so fast it seemed his heart would burst, and the intensity of effort did indeed make him forget his hunger; the wish to escape his rangy coyote self filled him to the brim like no meal could. It was only when crow finally flew off, cackling in amusement, that coyote, exhausted, realized he’d been had, and his own real emptiness came back to him as keen as baffled fury.

But the other version of the story goes like this. When crow was released, he didn’t fly off, but stood before coyote gathering his black coat regally like Svengali. Then he began to dance, first a low hopping circular motion, then a more and more splendid display, wings unfurled, beak thrust to the sky as if to call down thunder, whirling and stamping the dry unfamiliar ground beneath him, until coyote sat mesmerized and in his wonder did indeed forget his hunger and could only stare hypnotically at the hurricane of feathers that marked crow’s impeccable, impersonal performance. Of course, crow flies off in this version too, but not before he’s played the shell game of survival, done the dance behind which you disappear, the one that keeps the predator at bay. Sometimes we perform in

order to keep from being devoured. Sometimes we perform in order to be what we're not, and that itself devours us.

It's a lie, actually. I just made it up, that story about crow and coyote. The ultimate colonial act being not genocide but ventriloquism. But it fits, and I consider it a gift to the old guy in Union City, a sleight-of-hand story of my own given back to him who taught me how words can double back, how stories can form walls or transcend them. Like hands, they can be cupped or fisted, reaching or resilient: the doublespeak of revelation that isn't intimate at all, speech that is only a game of disclosure, a labyrinth that veils and misleads.

Crow the Storyteller knows that there is a charm of language when words suddenly form like those dust devils in the plains, a sudden communion of what was only particles an instant before, shaped by some force of heat or magnetism into a sinuous, momentary funnel that passes through and over all borders and boundaries for one alchemical instant, before it dissipates again back into wind and dirt.

ICE FLOES

David Sanders

Driving home at dusk across the bridge
I think to look upstream toward the floes,
the glossy islands anchored where they froze
cushioned by the warmer leaden water
separating them like flux and solder
in an ornamental window. Best to hedge

against that stillness. For when the traffic light
turns red and I myself come to a halt,
the scene beneath me shifts: each slab and fault
sails past, fluidly or nearly so,
and in that vertiginous minute when what I know
was moving stopped but what I thought just might

be static started up, I get the notion
that this may be what death is like—below
the textured surface a steady unseen flow
slowly working, leaving me behind—
or worse, what our lives are like, and find
a world I didn't recognize in motion.

Ease off the brake. The traffic's peristalsis
begins anew. I roll my window down
and listen to the evening carillon
of horns and rusting mufflers above the ice:
the usual fare but tonight a voice,
almost, in concert with whatever calls us.

THE BEARDED SEAL

Neil Azevedo

Three inches in and you begin to feel
the cold. Heat haunts the sensitive body
inside your body. Those ghosts reveal
your underwater breath, your still steady

motion in the dark fragrance of salt.
Grains of ice float off your whiskers
and rise lightly through ocean's nudge and halt
of light and dark, of water's tons: the askers

of you: a mute, a steady wing. A question
they follow now, you seem to hate the sea,
and seem to be the bear's reflection
that ghosts the mirror's thought, banality

and shadow that's a larger thought of you
now swimming through the world turned white:
white predators, the weather white, the food
a darkness to avoid. From color you invite

the universe, and, watching from the floe,
a monk, the largest brown of depth, you lie
to everything that knows and dive. You go
to the dormant, into that chill, and never die.

for Rod, committed to an institution in 1989

OPHELIA AT MIDNIGHT

Neil Azevedo

Cold streams dream deep.
Your skin in the boredom of grass.

Blood gathers in angel's
trumpet, the blossoming blisters,

the thousand shoots. Gun-loud, a catbird,
speed of the chimney swifts;

in weir, garbage and thick carp,
and the shade that I'm lying.

I will bring you here later
when heat leaves the water

and acorns crack, when dry air
enters trees beautifully still,

where the rare squirrel is thin.
I will love you in snow.

THE POET AS ORACLE

—for L.G.

Jan Lee Ande

She speaks in the voice of flowers,
familiar gods, the tiresome seasons.

She is three bronze coins
with square holes at their center.
Flung six times, she tells of good fortune:
tells just the right time to set out
in a small boat across the great sea.
She mimics the turnings of all things.
Within her bones thunder rumbles,
far above the mountain.

She takes part in a medieval pageant.
A man and woman fall from a stone tower.
Like leaf and lead weight, they level
in their descent. The fool in a blue
velvet waistcoat steps toward the abyss.
Behind him tiptoe a hierophant,
the grim reaper, a maiden spilling water
out of an earthen vessel.

Shifting between realms, she glides
through darkness, eyes bright as berries.
Painted with blood she ascends—
bearing leaves, mysterious words,
premonitions.

BAROPHOBIA*David Starkey*

For them, it's a matter of the load
we daily bear versus the promise
of ascent. They're overtaxed
by the consequence of earth's rotation.
Better to be jackstraw, they believe,
better to be eiderdown in outer space
than to embrace this ponderous life.
Galileo dropping weights
from the Pisan tower only confirmed
what they'd already feared.
The impact of Newton's laws,
all that mumbo jumbo
about distance, force and mass,
is plain: stay small and far away.
Yet no matter how they try
to huddle and hide, always
there's the deadweight of their dread
urging them to imagine
what they fear most. At night,
the gossamer internet lights up
with their brooding. Later,
their dreams are full of asteroids
breaching event horizons,
that moment when a chunk of rock
becomes something altogether different,
then altogether disappears.

JOSEPH*Lee Upton*

Did he consider himself dimmed, the faithful one,
half-invisible, secondary?
Some would say: the prop for respectability,
a bowl and basin man.
Or was the peace of mind he had so wide
that humbly, almost happily,
he drops out of the picture?
Soon all the great dramas pass him by.
Is he in a shed?
Is he working with his hands
the burls of wood,
sawdust and oils,
taking the temperature
of planks while
the boy he knows isn't his son
is tortured to death on a post?
Was he still alive? Did he know?
A good man rescued by his work?

THE UGLY DUCKLING

Lee Upton

There is always the possibility
that the swan grows up
without ever having seen another swan.
She has tried so hard and so long
to look like a duck
that the swans wouldn't recognize her
even if they saw her:
Her neck drawn in,
and that floating soap shape hunched,
and that snakelike serenity of her body
twisted back upon itself.
She doesn't look to the sky.
And when many years later at last
she sees a swan settling on a lake
she doesn't think:
Oh how gorgeous—
or—That's one of my kind.
She thinks: strange strange strange.
Such a vulgar neck and awkward wings.
She thinks: how painful,
how that creature must suffer.

RITARDANDO: THAT LACK*Sharon Cournoyer*

I

Imagine the veiled afterlife of Alcestis,
 la pauvre, those few days before the broken
 bargain's kept, she totters about the house
 enduring the halflit stare of Admetus

they're less in love than before

he'll go soon, indignant
 to where she left her soul bright
 as a coin in the Styx, await
 She fixes filmy grapes in a bowl
 and feels her own flesh wet
 under the fingertips and sapped feet

at night, they don't speak
 all she'd say is muffled, although
 he prods her for clues

(Never, never, she knows, unless
 some reluctant hero saves you
 will you collapse into what I am.
 She cannot tell him this)

Imagine those few days, and the days
 after, the longing, the overt
 fixing of things. The nights.

II

I don't forget it, for a moment.
 Every swipe at the mirror bears a swipe

back, my legs sing “ah, ah” when I walk
 The men begin, guilish, to adore,
 I can smell it on their clothes
 they advise
 finding some man alike, mad
 but nice. Nice. I know him already
 but he asked over miles of mythos
 and the din of regular life to be replaced
 I allowed it—I wrote, I said, I’ll go.
 You may be, I said, the hero from now on.
 Exit. Exeunt.

III

He dreams himself bruised, his hands
 yellowed and spotted with age and bats
 his hair some less than white
 He dreams the day he’s sure
 he can elude this, and step out
 into some figment of space

Someday, mind, I may want
 to live again. And it will be, bruised yellow
 and bloodbatted, late enough.

IV

Imagine the veiled afterlife of Alcestis
 as you have, or I’ve asked you to, luring
 at the ache of it, the basso continuo,
 the dull friend long dead
 beating at the basement door:

V

I thought you might bring me some
luck, he said, although she'd asked him
never to call upon her after the last.
Some luck of some
sort, whichever, that I might
extend some intensity—
grope for that, then, some luck—
it works into the dough like currants
(we never, truly, imagine a life
lived completely on the ground)

But with all her pleasures come small
deaths, pointed écstases, parabolic functions
of the earth's connection with her,
or its attention, at least, to the virtuosic
form of the epilogue, when the time begins
to slip loose

TWO HOMINGS

Sharon Cournoyer

I

What should be a seasonal
function of reciprocity
progress, parity
and transgiversation
water and stone,
survives itself into a fog
that transfixes us, isolates
our dim houses
from the street
from the lush wood
so we are to it as a deed might be
to a notion
or a set of notions urged
into another form and forced
aside. The season's green
even in the quite dark.

We never made dinner, you
did not call, wherever
you are: we
watched the day diffuse
and linger over the roofs in wet
skeins: these decisions are made
wrapped by fog, quietly,
irretrievably:
if your hand's there, I need
to take it, to pull you in
to this halfbound place, this
house aflame and calm, in a green
season, above all:

II

As a creek hems outside
under a dull moon,
she moves mouselike to undisturb:
her hair a tangle of mistaken
moments, her pains nebulous
and irksome as a fly in the dark
her fingers on his face
the same: she's awake in his
bathrobe at 2AM waiting
to be summoned by a call
that won't come—she waits
for the density to diffuse, the bomb
to stop tocking
He's never liked her thin jokes:
if she did not wrap her fortune
in the cloudcloth of all those stories
she'd be gone.

But there's silence here full of lush
sleep, folks breathing in slow
metronomic dactyls, measuring
the depth of night, feeling about
for death. She can't disturb
that. Those breaths turn up dust.
Rarely, she can see why it is, what's
what with that urge, when a steady pause
dilates her pinpoint love.

THE LAST DAYS OF ATLANTIS

Eugene Wildman

I

“You’re thinking,” Mimi says. “If you’re not thinking you should be talking.”

Mimi is opposed to thinking; she values spontaneity and possibility and pure expression of being. “Do whatever you do,” she is always lecturing Todd, “only don’t get lost in your head.” What Mimi likes doing more than anything is talking.

Todd blinks and rubs his eyes, trying to clear the sleep away; he is not quite there yet. Images flicker and wink out: a cat in a doorway, an enormous Buddha, a girl with a serpentine smile. Like traces of an earlier existence. He wonders if he was dreaming about Da. Or was that Mimi smiling?

Lately she has been starting his day by calling in with her newest dreams. She has several of them each night, which she wakes up from and immediately writes down. She keeps a notebook by her bedside, a discipline begun more than twenty years ago, and now the many accumulated notebooks contain the record of an inner self over nearly half a lifetime. Mimi is so in touch with her internal process that she easily alters the content of bad dreams and produces recurrences with the outcome she likes.

Todd can never remember his dreams and he keeps hoping he will show up in hers. He would like to be the man of her dreams, but for now he is only their captive audience. For a moment more he holds himself back, and then his resistance falls away and he lets himself float on the sound of her voice.

Mimi is always lost in these nocturnal sagas, trying to find a way home; there is always something about water. In this installment she is at a strange hotel set at the shore of an unknown lake. The rooms are empty and she wanders the hallways searching for a purse filled with jewelry that somehow she has mislaid. Outside there is a flash of lightning; a door flies open and two of her sisters emerge from one of the rooms. They look cautiously about them, and then they notice her. There are six girls in the family in all, and an equal number of brothers, but only the three appear here. Her sister Margie is present, the one she is closest to in age, and also

the one she likes best. Her younger sister Connie is there too, the *femme fatale*, who had an affair with her husband. Till Connie came along Mimi was the youngest. Everyone called her Mei-mei, which means younger sister. That is where she got her American name. The sisters walk outside to the lake, where a shadowy form rises from the water. The shape stands with arms outstretched, as if beckoning, and with that she wakes up.

She wants to know what Todd makes of it, but he is not sure what to say. There is the matter of rivalry among the sisters. Margie is happily married, to a man he suspects Mimi has a crush on. Connie, the other, stole her husband, though that was ten years ago. Todd is curious which of the three the shadow was reaching out to. But is this a can of worms he wishes to open up, first thing in the morning yet?

“Even in your sleep you play hard to get, what’s the big megillah?” Todd says.

“How profound,” Mimi says, but he can tell that she is pleased.

He wonders for the thousandth time what went wrong between them. How could everything have disappeared so suddenly? It is hard to take this reversal seriously, not to look for some meaning inside it, some clue that may lead to a way back. Mimi of course would find that absurd. She clings to the here and now. Even the suggestion of an underlying meaning is sufficient to produce an outburst from her. “Things are what they are,” she would say. “If anything was there we would be in bed now.” But he knows something about disappearances too.

These dark strangers have figured before, always in odd, aqueous settings. Streets and buildings dissolve around her, plunging her into murky depths where the stranger either rescues or pursues her. These scenarios mirror her life. In China the family moved from village to village, one step ahead of the Japanese army. Her father was a famous general, a leading light in Kuomintang circles, and they would have been killed or put in prison, dangled as bargaining chips. Afterward came Hong Kong and Taiwan, and a desperate stretch in the U.S. where she moved from state to state. The dreams reveal a rootless core, someone who is at home everywhere yet nowhere.

Occasionally a breath of humor shines through. Once the stranger turned out to be a brother who is gay and there was great merriment as well as mutual embarrassment. Another time, entering a theater, she spots the stranger again, watching from a storefront window that sports a sign saying PRAWN SHOP.

Mostly they are romantic intrigues, often with a certain scatological flair. In one she is at her mother's house when some prominent Japanese arrive. Desperate to relieve herself and unable to find anywhere else, she goes inside a priceless vase which the visitors apparently covet. Urns and baskets and steaming bowls appear with regularity. Women smoke cigars in her dreams, and men, sometimes women too, smear her with food and lick it off. Lately she has taken up cigar smoking herself. Waste matter often floats through the water, but somehow she emerges untainted and untouched.

II

Mimi sits across from him holding a cigar, turning it with her fingertips, looking at it musingly. They have come from *Wings of Desire*, a movie where angels see only in black and white, except for those moments when they feel human. Then the screen leaps into color. Now they have stopped for a nightcap. The place is crowded and the tables are jammed together and theirs is much too close to the bar. You almost have to shout to be heard.

"I don't love you," Mimi says.

"All right," Todd says, "it's enough."

"You don't turn me on," she says, puffing on the cigar again. She tilts her head back and blows a cloud of smoke.

"I got the message," he says.

"If I wanted it we would have had it before. I know how to get what I want." She gives the cigar another turn and puts it back in her mouth.

"You stuck a knife into my heart," he says.

"That's your story," she says.

"That's right, it's my story and I don't like it," he says.

"Then stop telling it," she says. "Take your knife out of your own heart and stop being such a victim."

They have known each other since he got back from Bangkok, on the trail of the Thompson mystery. Jim Thompson was a legend when he vanished, twenty-five years before. Seemingly gone up in smoke. The story was a sensation when it broke. Celebrity expat, millionaire silk merchant, and very possibly a spy. Todd was bursting with ideas—on a tear, on fire, feeling like a rocket blasting off. He was closing in, he could sense it. That was over two years ago, twenty-six months today. He is still on fire, but this is Mayday. Now the publisher is gone as well, the project is out in the cold. The mystery too has ground to a halt, is just a mass of notes; the rocket has crashed and burned.

Mimi had placed a personals ad describing herself as an artsy type, one time FOB, had it with cheating SOB's, seeking to meet a superior man, long fingers a plus. She has her own graphic design business, whence the artsy part. But why the contentiousness, was it real or put on? And what of the reference to the superior man? Ironic echo of the *I Ching*? It turned out she was frank to a fault, did not have a clue what irony meant. In the end the ad intrigued him and he responded. He sent her a tracing of his hands and they talked on the phone and arranged to meet at an espresso place they both liked. When he saw her walking through the door he felt an electric shock. Everything he wanted was coming toward him.

He regards her as retribution for Da, a balancing of accounts, divine justice. They are paired in his mind, merged almost, as if they themselves are lovers. Da is the woman he lived with in Bangkok. Her real name is Suchada—Da is a nickname—and there is a story that goes with it, about a virtuous girl, the primal Da, accused of being unfaithful by the king. She protests her innocence but to no avail and the furious ruler has her beheaded, whereupon her blood, transformed into a rainbow, shoots from her body up to the sky. The day he left Da was devastated, rushing from the terminal, sobbing bitterly, unable to hold herself back any longer. She writes him often and in his replies he tries vainly to soften the blow.

He had prayed at the Rama Shrine that he would meet someone, burned incense, placed a wreath of flowers, picturing the woman he had in mind. A few days later the picture came alive. They fell in love, but then all at once his feelings somehow were gone. It was as mysterious to him as it was to her. He could not recapture what he felt before. Now he is being repaid in kind.

Today another letter came. She has not written in a while and feels awkward, but she thinks about him always, dreams of him. Things are very bad. She is thinking of returning to her village, entering a temple, living as a nun. Last month her brother died. A truck transporting a load of fish swerved into his car, killing him and her half-sister. It is the rainy season and the roads are dangerous. She is alone in the world and has no one to turn to. Can he send money? She knows she has asked too often already, this would be the last time.

How different these are from her first letters. Todd wonders if she is really writing them. He should compare the handwriting with the earlier ones. It would make a nice piece. Some enterprising friend acquires his address, and along with her scuzzy foreigner boyfriend concocts these heartrending letters he gets. He could send back a letter mirroring hers,

describing how dreadful things are for him. But he is afraid of what else he may bring down on himself.

III

He listens to the whoosh of a car in the distance, like the sound of a boat at the Floating Market. With his eyes closed Todd sees the river, winding like a serpent around the city. Whether held protectively or in a lethal embrace no one can ever truly know. The streets twine sinuously out from the bank, so many serpent heads on the Buddha's crown. On the far side a temple spire points an admonishing finger to the sky. When he opens his eyes it is all gone.

Sometimes he thinks his life is a dream and he tries to wake up but does not know how. He remembers the day he first arrived, stepping from the terminal at Don Muong airport, squinting in the light and looking up. A white balloon shimmered in the sky, like a sign from above, which in fact it was. It was a promotion for Kismet, a line of perfumes being introduced in the stores. The balloon was in the shape of an elephant and was 150 feet long. The newspapers called it "The Great Sky Elephant." The sky is about the only place they have not looked for the missing man whose life he had come in search of.

Maybe he will phone the bar today. It is mostly in the mornings that Todd thinks of calling. Perhaps because here the day is just starting, while there where she is already it is dark. The sudden, deep darkness of the tropics. At the Lucky Star the night is beginning and Da is putting on her face. It is tomorrow there. Out of reach in time and space she sits at her dresser playing with her hair, doing her nails, adding the final touches. Soon, with a last look around, she will put out the light and leave quickly, her face blank, revealing nothing.

The letters have begun to weigh on him. Last month was the downpayment on the house her aunt has put up for sale. Before that was the CAT scan, dizzy spells, something about a blood clot. Before that her best friend Tuk walked off with the money before that. Todd would like her to have security, a place to call her own. His friends laugh and tell him he is a fool, he is supporting a whole village, a province, and he replies so what, then so be it. Besides, he knows what he knows. Your tongue may lie but your eyes cannot, and Todd has looked into hers.

He reaches over, punches the numbers, and one of the hostesses comes on the line. "Allo," she says and sets the phone down. He does not know the voice, though how would he, more than two years later. Bar girls come and go all the time. A year is a lifetime in the bars. He waits but no one

comes back on the line. Above the din of voices in the background he can hear the tape deck booming out. Stevie Wonder, "I Just Called to Say I Love You," that at least has not changed. He tries to pick out bits of conversation, even a word here or there. But it is not possible, it is just din.

Twice it rained, unseasonable downpours, just after he got there. And then a month later again. They were sitting in his room sopping wet, Da laughing, shaking her head. "You always bring the rain," she said. He remembers her excitement when he bought her reading glasses. She kept refusing, insisting she could do without them, but in the end relenting and now she wore them everywhere, almost never taking them off. The room suddenly filled with magazines, Da jubilant, bursting out, "Before, my eyes are dark!" Then later, after they made love, "You give me my eyes, you cannot give your heart." Da and her way with words, he thinks, what does it matter if the stories are false.

IV

Todd sits on a packing crate in a storage area at the international terminal. A group of workers, Mexican mostly who speak no English, are sorting Christmas tree ornaments, taking them from cartons and placing them in others, writing what kind and how many there are in Magic Marker along the sides. Yesterday the trees were stacked neatly in rows. He is here with Mimi who is supervising the shift, a favor for Jeri, a close friend, a landscape architect who has the airport contract. There is nothing for Todd to do but watch.

Mimi is wound as tight as he has seen her. She comes over every now and then to ask the name of an ornament. When he is unable to say, she looks annoyed. "I'm not the Christian," he protests, whereupon Mimi glares; in fact she was converted when the family lived in Hong Kong. She asks him to roll up the sleeves of her sweater, her hands are dirty, she explains. The left one goes smoothly enough, but the right is harder because her blouse sleeve is bunched and she yanks her arm impatiently back.

Driving up they had their old familiar argument about why couldn't he accept the way things were. A Chinese torch song from the Thirties was on the tape deck. The singer had a velvety textured voice and the melody was hauntingly beautiful.

"I feel the way I feel," Todd said. "How about you doing some accepting?"

"That's all your conversation," Mimi said.

"All right, it's my conversation," he said. "So we're conversing, so what?"

“So get out of your head just for once.”

“I don’t think I’m in my head.”

I don’t think I’m in my head. Listen to yourself. Think is all you do.”

The song came to an end and she rummaged through her stack of tapes, popped in Debussy’s *The Afternoon of a Fawn*.

“That’s more like it,” he was about to say, “an afternoon of fawnication.” Then he figured let it go. “Is this the time or place?” was the best he was able to come up with instead. “Do we have to go into it here?”

“I love that. *Is this the time or place?* You’re so lost in your head.”

“For god’s sake, that’s not true.”

“You live in your head, for god’s sake.”

“Is my erection in my head?”

She shot a grudging smile. “With you it probably is.”

“Why don’t we find out,” he said.

But Mimi was not listening anymore and they drove the rest of the way in silence. Every few seconds she kept changing tapes. “Nobody knows me like you do,” she said, as they were pulling into the parking garage. “Don’t you know what that means?”

“No, I don’t know what,” he said.

“I’ve turned into such a bitch,” she said.

The workers watch Todd watching them. He takes out his notebook and jots impressions. *The women wear sweaters and dark skirts. The men are dressed in boots and Levis and have tooled leather belts.* They glance over and murmur in Spanish and he senses disapproval, even scorn. Why is he not dressed for work? What is he writing down? What is it between the woman and him, why is she so angry?

He wonders what flights are leaving tonight. Why put up with any more? Another word and he is off for Aruba, wherever that is, and then he remembers, an island off Venezuela. There was a piece on TV recently, something about a revolution in paradise.

In a few minutes he will go upstairs and check the departure board. Maybe there will be one for Bangkok and he will go back and live happily ever after in a cozy cottage for two with Da. Not even bother saying goodbye, just fall off the earth like Jim Thompson.

Mimi’s friend returns with Bill, her partner and longtime companion. They were off in another part of the airport when he and Mimi arrived. They are tall, with faded blond hair, and look almost exactly alike. They remind him of an aging Tristan and Isolde. She is the one with the intensity, though; next to her Bill is flat. She is the beauty, and Mimi adores her.

Jeri and Bill round up the men and lead them to one of the other terminals where there is heavier, more physical work to be done. The women remain sorting ornaments, counting little glass cherries and throwing them into cartons. Other cartons are filled already with glass oranges, glass snowballs covered with glitter, silverfoil fans and stuffed Santas. There is even a box of female Santas in cute red pantsuits topped with little yellow wigs.

Suddenly Mimi is poking him, shaking her head, wagging her finger. "You don't like sticking to facts," she says. "Things are what they are, why can't you get it?"

"At last I see the light," Todd says. "So tell me, is there anything that is not what it is?"

"Yes, you! Because you're hopeless. Don't you know what it's like just to *be*? Not in your head, for once in your life. Free of your tapes, your identity, your *shit*. Finally, *really*, who you are." She turns and stalks away.

"That's right," he shouts, "I don't get it, because unlike you I'm not out of my head." If Mimi has heard she does not let on and suddenly he is famished. It is late, they have not eaten since lunch, and he calls out that he is going for sandwiches but gets no answer in return. Forget it, he thinks, they are too entirely different. He is tired of endlessly quibbling and arguing, feeling like a spectator trapped in his life.

Can this be what it was like for Thompson? Todd is disappearing also, out in plain view. Fine, he thinks, he will face the facts. Mimi is right, it is simple. He will tell her finally that he has had it, put a stop to the mess with Da. He deserves have something too. He will dedicate himself to the project and stay with it all the way; a calling reclaimed, purpose recovered. It has always been a race with time, and his constant fear is that the remains will turn up. Some tourist or developer will stumble on the skeleton and that will be that, the bitter end.

People take off all the time, maybe he should approach it that way. And then it suddenly occurs to him, how could he not have considered this before, what if it was a hoax? What if Thompson, having tired of it all, of his double life as businessman-spy, simply walked away? Took a new identity and began again. Another Mimi, free of his tapes. Though Todd personally still believes the Golden Triangle is the key. He is convinced that poppies were involved, a drug ring piggybacking shipments of silk. Possibly CIA sponsored. When Thompson learned of it his fate was sealed. Only why did he never report what he knew? Or was that the fatal misstep, that he did?

There are too many possibilities, that was the catch from the start, and as Todd makes his way through the maze of corridors it strikes him that he may not find his way back. Could he wish for a better windup? It is like his vision of solving the mystery, cutting through the tangles of secrecy and lies. There is no way anyone can know the truth, even to conceive it is madness. He opens a door and climbs a flight of stairs, already picturing the headlines in the paper: HOPE FADES FOR MAN LOST IN AIRPORT.

In the departure lounge people mill about, expressions of shock and dismay on their faces. "I can't believe it," a woman says, her voice small and quavering. She is close to tears. A few feet away a crowd is clustered in front of a TV set.

"What's going on?" Todd asks.

"See for yourself," the woman answers, "the whole downtown is underwater."

On screen a crew of workmen is pouring sand and maneuvering pumping equipment into place. A tunnel wall has apparently been breached and the Chicago River is flooding the Loop. A city official is on the scene offering reassurances. "There is no need for alarm," he says, "the situation is under control." Cut to the anchorman who declares, "What the public will now demand to know is why there were no precautions in place. Was this an accident waiting to happen?"

The cafeteria is at the end of the terminal, so he nods to the woman and continues on his way. There is a long line and service is slow, and by the time he has gotten his sandwiches and come back the TV is off, the woman is gone and the waiting area is empty. A cleaning crew is buffing the floor.

He wonders if Mimi and her friends have heard. He cannot get the footage out of his mind, the water rushing up from the ground, like a scene from the Atlantean endtime, the workcrews trying frantically to contain it. When he gets back, before he can say a word, he sees that something has happened. The Mexican women are standing with their coats on, looking uncomfortable, waiting to leave. "We finished up early," Mimi says, her voice hoarse and hollow. Mimi and Jeri stare at each other, seem to sink into each other, then Jeri turns to Bill and slaps him. You can see the red spot on his cheek. Bill rubs it where he was struck, shaking his head and smiling sheepishly, then raising his hands as if in surrender. Todd keeps looking from one to the other, and suddenly it comes together. Boxes in boxes, he thinks to himself. Meet the dark stranger. Not so dark after all. The reason she ran her ad in the first place and then, like that, broke it off. The drama

outside seems only an extension, almost as if the city itself has entered one of her dreams; the flood hardly more than a sign of whatever is raging within.

He notices the glass snowball in her hand, watches unable to say a word as she slowly begins to squeeze. She stares helpless at her own hand, mouth half-open, then seems to stagger, and a carton tips over. A pool of glitter spreads on the floor. Like powder, he thinks, from the wings of a butterfly. Luckily for Mimi the skin is not punctured, but she looks frightened all the same. He reaches over to look at her hand and this time she does not pull it away.

“It just broke,” Mimi says.

“Just like that?” Todd says.

“Yes, like that,” she says. Her lips press together, he can see the tension, and he knows enough not to push. Time later for things past and talk of new beginnings.

As they walk through the corridors to the parking lot he thinks again how different they are. She runs from meaning while he yearns for it; she savors dreams while his are unknown. When they get in the car he can feel her exhaustion. For all the problems she causes him she is so surprisingly, unexpectedly slight. Such tiny shoulders to rest his hopes on. He wonders what her dreams will be now.

“Do women always come to you?” Mimi says.

“I came to you,” Todd says.

“I advertised for you,” she says.

She reaches for a tape and puts it in the deck, the Chopin *Ocean* étude. They sit quietly as the music swells, and then as the car begins to move he notices glitter on his hands too.

ESCAPE FROM THE ORKNEYS

Robert Hahn

The sea is slate grey,
The air is peat-smoke and mist.
The stones are called the Standing Stones

The Blue Guide tells us as if
That would help, but no one has a clue
What the stones meant

Or who the Picts were
Or what they splashed on the walls
To appease the gods. What was Pictish at all,

For that matter. I think
These stones are like works
Of the Late Modern age, grey on grey,

Or white on white,
Luminous rectangles hopefully arranged,
Blank fields hovering on the edge of sense.

They are like the abstract paintings
I found in an underground mall, in Albany, New York,
Commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller,

Grim in their subterranean gloom, beneath an avenue
Where the giant tilted cubes and arcs of a modern
Imperial city rose, and so on, but to resume,

The Stones are arranged in a wide ring
At intervals that might have meant something,
At certain hours, depending on the sun and moon.

So we set up our tripods, and the cameras
 Whose whirrs are a comfort to us. Standing Stones.
 And cut-away views of the round mound houses.

Stone bed and hearth. Stone barn. Stone byre.
Dry stone walls, cheap and reliable
 Says a hand-lettered sign by the roadside.

The same stone. The same walls.
 We are back in the Stone Age
 With little or nothing to distract

From *silence et prière*,
 No local color, no highlights
 Glancing in the polished curves

Of a black sedan
 Whose passengers pour from the doors
 And flow up the stairs like a chorus,

No boulevardiers under domed umbrellas
 Where the gaslit cobbles swim with color,
 No trolley grinding around the corner

With figures whose stories we know
 Riding by, on the stiff wicker benches
 Lacquered a bright lemon-yellow.

JUST ONE LOOK

Robert Hahn

*O toi, qui vois la honte où je suis descendue,
Implacable Vénus, suis-je assez confondue?*

Ye wrathful gods! What did you have in mind, to buy the picture
 Without seeing what it was? Just one look and you brought it home
 To fill a white space on the kitchen door, who knows why.
 I think it might have reminded you of Ghiberti's doors of paradise,
 Somehow, the dazzling scenes in this silver-and-black exhibit poster

Whose rhythm is vaguely familiar, whose rows of panels are artful enough,
 No longer the sardine cans they were but transformed, *objets trouvés*
 Bathed and polished to a lustrous glint, their lids
 Peeled away, and elliptical scenes within, hammered in low relief,
Cloisonner-small, each surrounded by a backdrop of midnight plush,

A blackness that swarms and gapes, like deep suicidal pauses in Chekov,
 Like the blank gaps in the Parthenon frieze, which centuries later
 It seems we have not seen clearly—those figures we assumed
 Were wending their way to a feast, the usual grist for a poet's mill,
 Are a deadly processional, on their way to a human sacrifice, and the daughter

Whose rounded hips sway beneath her pleated gown has another story.
 She is doomed. What we took for serenest art is a mad scene, a plea
 To those implacable gods who withdraw themselves at will,
 Whose random returns invade us, in forms we can hardly face
 In the mirrors of our darkened rooms. They rise within us

And float back down, and now what we took for surface is not,
 And the thin layer of sea, which you saw from the plane window
 As the aquamarine of a travel poster, is something else,
 A refracting realm where you sink confounded, descending in reefs
 Unfolding their umber feathers, and the shadows in fact are caves,

The hiding places of blue flashes and orange gleams and eyes looking up.
 How strange you must appear to them, in their trembling sky,
 With luminous beads of air trailing behind you.
 How strange you were in those afternoons of greenish light
 Drained through the curtains, bizarre, as he curled tightly behind you

In echoing curve where you kneeled and raised your hips,
 How deep that was you murmured in the pillow as you pressed
 Your face down in a pose of devotion, and how absurd,
 How indecipherable those images were, as you pleaded,
 As you looked back and lifted your head, to kiss, in tribute

To the visitation you would later call delirium, those afternoons
 No longer you, denied, or half-forgotten, like Ghiberti's doors
 Which burned in your sight the day you first saw them,
 The low swell of their sinewy metal, the flaring bronze
 Of scenes you had known from black and white photos mounted on boards,

Pored over in a library carrel, barely remembered, like the vertigo
 When you reached the top of the tower and looked down,
 The unwilling *Oh* as the roofs and squares below
 Swarmed in new shapes, drifting back down again, and sifting away
 Until one day, who knows why, you kneel in surprise before the door

To see these almost abstract patterns like stylized flora and fruit,
 These fragments of scenes, for what they are: a shoulder, a thigh,
 A tongue flickering in a wreathed grotto, an ardent arbor,
 A rising stalk in the grip of a guiding hand, a finger crooked
 As it probes a ripe fig, a rondure tipped in glittering arousal,

Steamy variations pleased, as you see, by repetition, silvered scenes
 Of swooning Eros, afloat in a setting of sheerest black,
 Which is not the design element we thought, but night
 Falling on our *fêtes gallants*, on the torchlight and lutes,
 On the small glowing scenes drifting in the dark, from which our gaze

Is averted. There is no limit to the power of our denials
 And the forms we give them, the rows of columns glinting
 In the sun, the measures of the temple whose inner steps
 Lead down to the spring, which is so cold your forehead aches
When you cup your hands and lift its shadowed water to your face.

CEZANNE'S ATELIER NEAR AIX

Samuel Hazo

It's as he left it, or as it
 left him after he painted it.
 A sprawl of dappled quince,
 three pipes and two pairs
 of spectacles command a tabletop.
 A crumpled tam relaxes
 at the opposite end.

I think
 a lamp centers the two,
 but I could be wrong.

Recently
 an ophthalmologist appraised
 the spectacles and saw how fuzzy
 and miscolored they made everything
 appear.

He wondered if Cezanne's
 whole alphabet of color
 erred as a result.

Call it
 impressionism or call it
 a mistake, but Sainte-Victoire
 seems falsely brown beside
 the real thing.

It's reminiscent
 of El Greco, isn't it?

His portraiture
 of Christ and saints and bishops
 with their equine faces, upturned
 eyes and lengthened bodies
 wasn't Gothic, as the critics claim.
 El Greco's optic flaw turned
 circles into ovals, ovals
 into candleflames, and horizontals
 somehow into verticals.

Like Paul
Cezanne he painted what he saw
though all he saw was wrong.
Astigmatism was his problem, not
perspective.

If what resulted
was majestic, how do you explain it?
Does art transcend man's failings?
Do masterpieces simply happen?
Should art historians be qualified
in ophthalmology?

If you regard
such questions as redundant
or ridiculous, then you explain
El Greco.

You explain Cezanne.

BERNARD BARUCH*Baron Wormser*

When I was a boy, people were always talking about
Bernard Baruch the Wall

Street wizard who unofficially advised presidents,
made a fortune for himself and sat

On a park bench from whence he tossed his wisdom
upon the queasy tides of human events.

He was always in the newspapers
where his considered yet snappy quotes

About how to give everyone a share
in the pie called "America" made

First-rate, things-are-looking-up copy
and he was always being photographed

On that park bench, an urbane yet somehow bucolic
philosopher who was securely rich

And hence credible because a poor man couldn't
have known much—if he did he would

Have been a rich man. When the wizard died
there were various encomia,

Though not from my Uncle Sidney who, though he'd never
met the gentleman, pronounced Mr.

Baruch a self-important windbag whose notion
of civic virtue had more to do

With preserving the prerogatives of finance capitalism
than altruism.

Sidney was an intelligent

But embittered schoolteacher who wanted to become
a trial lawyer but owing to

The circumstances of the Great Depression
found himself spending his

Life appraising tenth graders' inchoate essays about
Machiavelli and Pericles.

When Sidney died there were no telegrams from
politicians, corporate titans,

Or financiers.

Sidney hated the glib tone of newspapers.
His scruples were incorrigible.

I wanted to ask him what it all mattered.
Bernard Baruch would never visit

His stuffy, overheated classroom. Instead I listened
and thought at times I heard inside Sidney's

Clockwork rants about who got noticed in this
money-hungry world and who didn't

And who read Herodotus and Plutarch
and who knew them only as names,

Something more frightfully prideful
than either wealth or hurt.

THE BEAUTIFUL MONK

(for Sam Turner)

Kevin Di Camillo

In a shaft of panic was he
not dreaming
being other

the what was thought
to unravel
the constant knot

being woven madness
her distaff
no pastor's crozier up

-side-down
spinning a replicate. No, not
now. Easy *nones* where he trod

discalceated (I hate
& I hate that, too) unaware
of the cold coal priest

-collar-white,
those. And like I say he was

THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE

Peter Robinson

Geoffrey Hill. Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

It is little more than two years since Geoffrey Hill published *Canaan*. Not since *Mercian Hymns* (1971) followed so quickly on the heels of *King Log* (1968) has the poet been as prolific. His new book-length poem evokes the *Trionfi* of Petrarch in its cover design, its title, and in the text itself:

Vergine bella, as you
are well aware, I here follow
Petrarch, who was your follower,
a sinner devoted to your service.

Readers who expect Hill's language to be densely burnished, and will perhaps be at ease with the poem's familiar latinate mariolatry, may be surprised by the subsequent simplicity of these lines. The section's apostrophe to the BVM acknowledges that 'One cannot purchase / the goodwill of your arduously simple faith' like setting up 'a small convenience store / established by aloof, hardworking Muslims'. Hill's almost-identification with the 'aloof, hardworking' people of another religion, maintains its own laborious distance in the 'One cannot purchase ... faith / as one would acquire a ... shop'. This self-evident observation has not prevented wealthy Christians from investing for eternity, sponsoring centuries of European culture into the bargain, as Hill's poem registers: 'Donors are permitted / to give of themselves, with saints and martyrs, / kneeling at the altarpiece's edge'. Addressing the Virgin, *The Triumph of Love* petitions to be received as such a gift:

I ask that you acknowledge the work
as being contributive to your high praise,
even if no-one else shall be reconciled
to a final understanding of it in that light.

These lines suspect that the culture into which it is published will not be able to take the poem as such, and not only because too many are not

Christians: 'The rule is clear enough: last / alleluias *forte*, followed by indifferent / coffee and fellowship.' Does the line-end-isolated adjective qualify both nouns? Hill's practising co-religionists are either routinely nice people who drink unpleasant coffee, or, hearing the zeugma, hypocrites who can't make coffee either.

A model for the poem's numbered sections of varying lengths may be the sequences by Antonio Machado, who is praised in *The Triumph of Love* for putting 'his own voice to slow-drawn induration'. It was Machado's Abel Martín and Juan de Mairena, among others, who served as prompts for the imaginary writer Sebastian Arrurruz of *King Log*; here too, there are signs of a framed text that would institutionalize the separation between composing poet and enunciating subject. This critical distance is repeatedly underlined by the interventions in square brackets of a meddlesome fictive editor, who officiously inserts information, even daring comment on the state of the text. The 'GREAT WORKE' of which its Nehemiah 6:3 epigraph speaks and from which the writer 'CAN NOT COME DOWN' (for 'WHY SHOULD THE WORKE CEASE, WHILEST I LEAVE IT, AND COME DOWNE TO YOU?') is not then just Geoffrey Hill's *The Triumph of Love*, but one that doubles up as the text of a projected old poet with distant detractors who, despite the epigraph, betrays himself into descending to his critics' imagined level. Putting words in their mouths, this projection states, with smartly miscalculated justice, that 'It's self-evident he can't / keep up a fiction, even for twenty lines'.

Though his earlier, scrupulously impersonal work bespoke its maker from the recesses of a dramatized lyric speech, *The Triumph of Love* gives of its author with bluntly intrusive references to Hill's situation as man and poet. The Christian faithful are quizzed for a suspected residual anti-semitism:

But what strange guild is this
that practises daily
synchronised genuflection and takes pride
in hazing my Jewish wife?

Elsewhere, the poem ventriloquizes some literary types chatting about the author photograph on the jacket for *The Lords of Limit*: 'How would you define his body-language? / Stoic consensuality? Sceptic paranoia?' Much of the work is taken up with stooping to worse *ad hominem*s than those to which even malicious reviews or critical essays usually descend: 'Rancorous,

narcissistic old sod - what / makes him go on?' Thus, this buffeted and buffeting poem does not read as a hermetically-sealed monodrama, or portrait of a martyr poet à la Charles Péguy; its framing devices are self-consciously riddled with lines which purport to be in more or less *propria persona*. The resulting disturbed fiction is not unlike Pound's Mauberley, where author and character overlap in what one hopes is an absurdly exaggerated self-portraiture. It thus demonstrates the self-ruination involved in seeking amid the deafening noise of spite to preserve a measure of dignity even when such efforts serve further to bemire.

The Shakespeare of Sonnet 24 knew the poet to be a lowly trader at work in his 'bosom's shop' - the heart being both 'artist's studio and retail outlet' as one editor felicitously glosses it. Yet where in Hill's English period, the poet's words demonstrated how high-sounding language would be ensnared in base motives, and was emblematically impacted with such trip-ups, now a spaciouly discursive style (recalling *Four Quartets* in its mockery of 'senex / sapiens' or 'the wisdom reserved for old age') deploys a barrage of mis-takes, errata slips, envious calumnies and the like from which it would remain loftily aloof, however compulsively driven to 'COME DOWNE':

Extraordinary how *N.* and *N.* contrive
to run their depilators off the great turbine -
the raw voltage would flay them. Such
intimate buzzing and smooth toiletry,
mingled with a few squeals, may yet
draw blood from bloodless Stockholm. *Mea culpa*,
I am too much moved by hate -
pardon ma'am? - add greed, self-pity, sick
scrupulosity, frequent fetal regression, *and*
a twisted libido? Oh yes - much
better out than in. *Morosa*
delectatio was his expression, that Irish
professor of rhetoric - forget his name.
Forget my own name next *in hac*
lacrimarum valle.

On one of the other occasions when the bounty of that explosives expert Nobel, nowhere mentioned by name, ruffles the poem, the writer concerned is noted: '[Internal / evidence identifies the late / Eugenio Montale as the

undoubted / subject of this address. - ED] The poem's ancillary figure, who editorially parenthesizes yet more as the sequence continues, sees no need to point out who might these phoney be, for whom the poem later seems to intercede: 'Bless, / of your charity, for your orator's sake, / worthless *N.* and *N.* now Swedish millionaires.' Does loving thine enemies require the Christian to maintain those who are to be loved as enemies? Certainly 'worthless' is chary of being over-charitable: 'I / write for the dead; *N.*, *N.*, for the living / dead' - a jocosely enjambed the poem naturally recognizes, by continuing: 'No joke, though...'

While, beyond the sphere of shop-talk's higher and lower gossip, it's not possible to identify these two wealthy scribblers, 'that Irish / professor of rhetoric' is unmistakably Seamus Heaney. The 'forget his name' can be short hand for 'I forget...' or an imperative, a quibble made clear by the reapplication of the phrase to the poet figure himself. Nor does *The Triumph of Love* give reasons (outside the self-inflicted sins listed) for this attack, beyond Heaney's worldly success and use of a Latin tag to label its poet's involved melancholic brooding. It is hard not to feel, then, that the sequence is, for better or worse, a bruised and self-bruising scuffle in the top poets' yard - what *The Triumph* itself admits is: 'thirty / vicarious rounds of bare-knuckle.' For other literary-critical enemies, the poem employs pseudonyms: Croker, MacSikker, and Séan O'Shem (read, presumably: shorn of shame), who seem like the Englishman, Scotsman, and Irishman of a schoolboy joke. A grimly slapstick, scholarly humour is frequently deployed, as in the be-moaned but aptly inept evaluation of that earlier Shem's *Finnegans Wake* as a 'dead end'.

The Triumph of Love is an exemplary study in ruination. It returns again to Europe's war wreckage in its stylish evocation of a Blitzed Coventry ('flame-shadow bronzing the nocturnal / cloud-base of her now legendary dust') and to *Daniel* for its painfully acute image of Bomber Harris's 'whirlwind': ('in Leipzig, out of the sevenfold / fiery furnace?') Most centrally exploded, though, appears to be its poet's sense of himself. The sequence opens in Offa territory, with a one-line image ('Sun-blazed, over Romsley, a livid rain-scarp') and announces that 'Guilts were incurred in that place', guilts that are questioningly glossed as 'self-molestation of the child-soul'. Having found its author's own young self wanting, the poem does not stint on the shortcomings of contemporary youth, who are berated for being culpably unaware of others' pain, death and grief:

By what right did Keyes, or my cousin's
 Lancaster, or the trapped below-decks watch
 of Peter's clangorous old destroyer-escort,
 serve to enfranchise these strange children
 pitiless in their ignorance and contempt?

The exhortation to judge not that ye be not judged is mere prudence if taken to mean that you can hedge on the Judgment Day by keeping your counsel; rather, it warns that judging words constitute judgments of those delivering them. Of this, and its consequences, *The Triumph of Love* provides eloquently self-aware illustration.

Hill's poem is approached through the triumphal arch of a title-page design adapted from a 16th-century translation of Fraunces Petrarcke. The hardback has a jacket whose framing devices form a contrast with the parodic self-denigration of its own staged position-jockeying. There is a pre-publication canonization by Harold Bloom: 'a great and difficult moral, cognitive, and aesthetic achievement- "a sad and angry consolation" almost beyond measure'; a blurb that calls it 'a masterpiece in the forgotten mode of *laus et vituperatio*'; and five further plea-bargaining quotes (methinks it doth protest too much) singling out Hill's poetry as 'the finest' or 'the major achievement'. To reach such heights, the *Wall Street Journal* notes, 'the ascent is steep, the view austere sublime', and the *Boston Globe* places his oeuvre, not with English-language writers, but 'the work of Mandelstam and Montale' - two Ms whose posthumously published poetry wouldn't persuade me to bracket them together.

A sorry, elegaic light plays over Hill's poem's elegantly-sketched '*moral landscape*', its:

conglomerate, metamorphic rock-
 strata, in which particular grace,
 individual love, decency, endurance,
 are traceable across the faults.

'But leave it now, leave it', the verse urges, rising to beseech or, more frequently, dragging itself down to writhe like Sebastian as yet another exaggerated critical barb strikes - but not home. In the light of the jacket encomia, a reviewer may be left speechless, further *laus*, let alone balanced or limiting judgment, appearing invidious or otiose. So, in its much-wounded, lonely superiority, let *The Triumph of Love* stand as an example to us all.

COLLECTED POEMS 1920-1954

Eugenio Montale. Translated and annotated by Jonathan Galassi.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1998.

John Peck

An Italian poet of my generation once remarked that Montale had long seemed old-hat to his contemporaries in Italy, who simply wanted to move on. Less important in their relegation of the master was Montale's conservatism, disgust with mass culture, bleak outlook on the prospects for the making of poetry, and great intensities of direct address in the major poems. The younger poets stepped around all of this, including Montale's charged address to a *you*.

Which is understandable: defeated by the Alps in front of him, a youngster may wish to shift his ground. But this pronomial stratum keeps glinting from the mountain. While the pronouns *You* and *I* may be topical now among our literati, they disturb no one's sleep, whereas for Paul Valéry, Gottfried Benn, or Montale they were of great moment. Against the pressures of a collapsing civilized order and his own melancholy pessimism, Montale found ways to address a *tu*, a screen lady with several faces, whose figure let him constellate his own inner workings alongside the themes of his survival. This discovery, along with sharply lived details within an allegorical frame, lent his work enormous power. Since that power is densely specific, and also tightly unifies the first three books (*Cuttlefish Bones*, *The Occasions*, and *The Storm, Etc.*), Jonathan Galassi adds an essay, "Reading Montale," to his version of them. He nicely shows that Montale not only avoided being eaten alive by the *tu*-tradition of Petrarca and Dante but finally ended by "devouring it himself," and claiming that "tradition is continued not by those who want to, but by those who can." Galassi specifies Montale's mode of strength, however—and rightly—as "suspicious, off-center, often parodic," and finally depleting; an acid scepticism towards Italian lyric marks Montale's late work (which Galassi translated in *Otherwise*, Vintage, 1984, alongside Montale's essays in *The Second Life of Art*, Ecco, 1982).

I would qualify Galassi's remarks in only one respect. His belief that Montale's poetry "not only set the course of twentieth-century Italian verse but also [has] had an increasingly resonant influence on our own" overestimates us. With all due respect to Charles Wright (Montale's translator),

Alan Williamson, and a few other American poets, the resonance which carries to Galassi's ear I fail to register. We have not had Montale's history lesson, we lack his powers, and we do not eat allegory for breakfast. Those of us who have tried to address a *you* in a some non-collective way (that is, in a manner not simply casually intimate or familial) find his actual influence to be, like his field of meanings, in American terms untypical. This view may seem too astringent to many, yet while many may go for a stroll in Montale's garden, they will find their host, when they encounter him, somewhat remote. Montale acknowledged initiation only into individuality, the fated kind which tries to ride passion's agonistic hope of redemption beyond solipsism's gravitational pull (in "Times at Bellosguardo": "sweat that throbs, sweat of death,/ mirrored acts and minutes/ that never change"). That *I-You* tension generates force, not simply our current fascinations with the poststructuralist *Other*. At the latter Montale would have smiled, as I infer from "Time and Times II," translated by Galassi in *Otherwise*.

There was a *he* with a weight, a sound, maybe a soul,
and, who knows how, a destiny ahead.
Now we need to be told: You're you
in some rare cases, for to distinguish ourselves
we need someone else, who with subtle artifice
we suppose to be different, other than us, a scandal!

The late William Arrowsmith translated everything rendered here by Galassi, as well as the autumnal *Satura*. Galassi's ways with Montale's diction, syntax, and metrical inclusiveness let him conjure effective passages where Arrowsmith came up somewhat short. Even where Arrowsmith's tone edges out Galassi's, as at the beginning of "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel," Galassi at least refrains from interpolating words, which Arrowsmith here and elsewhere cannot resist doing (in this poem a simple "la mano" becomes "the clenched hand"). Arrowsmith jumped things up in this way in his translations of Greek tragedy, whereas Galassi is not tempted. Galassi does benefit from Arrowsmith's scholarship, however, to which he adds handsomely, his notes fully situating the poems as well as digesting the commentaries of Italian critics.

My narrow preference for Galassi's versions I can show by examining "On the Greve," from *The Storm Etc*. This nine-line poem about the full experience of love condenses into one throw Montale's typical moves: swift suggestions and expansions, ellipses, and glimpses of heraldic particulars.

Arrowsmith's rendering interpolates a personal pronoun before *acqua*, where none is implied by Montale. Arrowsmith also improvises a neologism, *glissando*, to match the invented *glissato*, whereas Galassi settles for an extant term which sparkles in his most resonant line, a line in which the participle smoothly achieves what Arrowsmith's more angular syntax does not. All in all, Galassi's translation yields a more attractive poem in English. Though Galassi cannot match Arrowsmith's tonal best, his hand is often steadier.

Sulla Greve Ora non ceno solo con lo sguardo
 come quando al mio fischio ti sporgevi
 e ti vedevo appena. Un masso, un solco
 a imbuto, il volo nero d'una rondine,
 un coperchio sul mondo...

E m'è pane quel boccio di velluto
 che s'apre su un glissato de mandolino,
 acqua il fruscio scorrente, il tuo profondo
 respiro vino.

(Arrowsmith)

I no longer feed on looking only,
 as once, at my whistle, you leaned out
 and I could hardly see you. A rock, a
 funneling
 furrow, the black flight of a swallow
 a lid on the world...

That velvet bud unclosing
 over a mandolin glissando is bread for
 me,
 my water the flowing rustle, your deep
 breathing wine.

(Galassi)

Now I feast not just my eyes
 as when I whistled, you leaned out,
 and I barely could see you. A rock,
 narrowing
 furrow, the black flight of a swallow,
 a cover over the world...

And it's bread to me, this bud of velvet
 unfurling to a trill of mandolin,
 its fluent whispering is water,
 your deep breathing wine.

The arrival of this second full-dress Montale in English suggests to me that it is time to stop translating him, at least for now. The effort that one translator puts forth to avoid the gestures made by his strongest antecedents begins to obtrude itself. Let me illustrate by way of "Hitler Spring" from *The Storm, Etc.* The *golfo mistico acceso / e pavesato di croci*, into which Hitler and Mussolini vanish in their auto cavalcade through Florence,

WORKSHOPISM

The Poet's Companion. Edited by Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux.
Norton. 1997.

George Held

As poetry workshops proliferate, so do poetry handbooks. A species of the genus the “how to” book, the poetry handbook shows its readers how to write a poem, and in the case of *The Poet's Companion* that poem is the generic autobiographical one that is the staple of most workshops and too many poetry journals. The *Companion's* authors, Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux, are themselves the products and teachers of workshops, and both have published many autobiographical poems.

Their “Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry,” as they have subtitled their book, thus focuses on the pleasures of versifying about the self. Accordingly, in the first part of their book, entitled “Subjects for Writing,” the second of its seven chapters is called “The Family: Inspiration and Obstacle.” And the first illustrative poem offered in this chapter is Carolyn Forché’s “The Morning Baking.” While this poem represents one of the more successful examples of the subspecies the grandmother poem, some readers of poetry devoutly wish to avoid another of these as much as another sestina. Indeed, *The Chariton Review*, in its entry in *Poet's Market* (1997), rules out the submission of “more ‘relativism’:...poetry centered around relatives.” And *The Ledge*, which I co-edit, awarded second prize in its 1995 poetry contest to Bob Dial’s satiric “No More Grandmothers,” which laments “All these damned grandmothers,/given a second chance at life”:

once out,
they knit and cook and dust
with a vicious abandon they never
knew before.

Having read Dial, one can never read Forché’s opening lines with a straight face: “Grandma come back, I forgot/How much lard for these rolls?”

In the opening chapter, “Writing and Knowing,” *The Poet's Companion* encourages readers to trust the value of their everyday experience as fit subject for their poems. On its face, this advice is sound, but it is not the quotidian itself that justifies writing about it, but rather the originality with

which one treats it, an idea that this book needs to emphasize. For instance, in the first paragraph of this chapter, the authors offhandedly refer to Keats as one who “wrote to a nightingale, an urn, a season. Simple, everyday things that he knew.” But in each of the great odes referred to, Keats treats his subject, not as something “everyday,” but as an object of wonder, which transports him to the sublime. That urn, after all, was a museum artifact, not something Keats had about the house, and our poetry learners might better see in Keats an example of a poet who went afield to find his subjects as much as he mined his own life.

Further, he found suitable forms for his odes and composed them with an artistry that has inspired poets ever since. Yet the subject of poetic form comes up in *The Poet's Companion* only in chapter thirteen, “Meter, Rhyme, and Form.” One doesn't have to be a formalist to wonder how students inexperienced with poetry can write about even themselves without being given any instruction in form. In chapter ten, “The Music of the Line,” readers are told, “There are no real rules for line breaks...[T]hink of line breaks as effects.” But good poets create their own rules for breaking lines, especially in free verse, or the utter randomness of line breaks results in what Edmund Wilson called “shredded prose.” While logic seems to dictate that the discussion of the line would be linked with that of form, two chapters intervene, one on “Voice and Style” and one entitled “Stop Making Sense: Dreams and Experiments.”

To their credit, once Addonizio and Laux address meter, rhyme, and form, they endorse their value, even for poets who choose to write free verse. But because our authors devote only three pages to “traditional forms” and then discuss only the sonnet, they leave the impression that they are making only an obligatory bow to formal poetry. They themselves, after all, write free verse, and they probably had to make a quick study of forms, so quick that they repeatedly refer to the “octet,” rather than the “octave,” of the Italian sonnet. (Another sign of the times is that their Norton editors don't know the difference, either.)

In the “Ideas for Writing”—a feature that concludes each chapter—in form, one suggestion concerns blank verse. Readers are advised first to “read a lot” of it, and are given the examples of “Shakespeare's plays,” *Paradise Lost*, and a few twentieth-century blank-verse poems, before being admonished, “*Don't write anything* until you've spent at least half an hour reading.” The notion that anyone could so quickly absorb the music and technique of blank verse as to then be able to write it, only underscores the book's fundamental devaluation of form. So does the instruction to write “a limerick (you remember limericks, don't you?).” Since this is the only

reference to the limerick in the book, the authors now expect their inexperienced reader somehow to be familiar with a complex form and its prosody.

In a later chapter on the villanelle, pantoum, and sestina, they ignore the triolet, a much shorter form that could serve as an introduction to its formal sisters the villanelle and the pantoum. Also ignored here are the haiku and the cinquain, which have the additional virtue for beginners of being unrhymed. These brief forms would be more in keeping with “the pleasures of writing poetry” than the long, formally complex sestina, which they illustrate with Dana Gioia’s feebly satiric, prosy “My Confessional Sestina.” It’s worth noting that Marilyn Hacker recently wrote of her displeasure, when editing *The Kenyon Review*, at receiving loads of bad sestinas from students of poetry workshops. Since probably fewer memorable sestinas have been written than excellent poems in any other fixed form, workshop teachers and handbook writers would be wise to mention this sad truth about the sestina and leave it at that.

Another cause for concern is the low level at which *The Poet’s Companion* is pitched. The authors presumably address an audience with no literary background at all. As a result, they speak of “Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy,” “writer Raymond Carver,” and “the psychologist Carl Jung.” Somehow the tag “the English Romantic poet” is omitted before Keats’s name. More important, only two lines of Keats’s poetry are quoted. (His name does not appear in the index.) And when *The Poet’s Companion* does quote an entire poem, any analysis of it tends to be superficial. Thus after presenting Patricia Smith’s “Skinhead” as an example of “Voice and Style,” the book observes about its bigoted speaker that “we can hear and feel his hate and anger” but offers no insight into how the poet’s language evokes these emotions. Moreover, all examples are drawn from living poets. Addonizio and Laux pay only lip service to the value of earlier poets, like Keats or Dickinson, and like many writers of their generation (born in the ’50s), they espouse “presentism,” a belief in the superiority of contemporary art and a shunning of the master works of earlier times.

In their presentism, their devotion to free verse at the expense of form, and their focus on the autobiographical poem, Addonizio and Laux reveal their faith in “workshopism.” This is the belief that poetry is not an art but a craft that can be taught, like carpentry or knitting, though the product rarely achieves the value of a well-made cabinet or sweater. Yet a workshopped Keats would be a very different poet from the one who merits at least a mention in *The Poet’s Companion*.

Though he took workshops at Stanford, Robert Stone, who now teaches a fiction workshop at Yale, learned to write “the old-fashioned

way...from reading,” among other masters, Conrad and Dos Passos. “Unfortunately,” he says, “you can’t teach anyone to write. It comes from God” (*The New York Times*, 26 May 1998).

But if Norton, the powerhouse textbook publisher, has its way, and hundreds of creative writing teachers adopt *The Poet’s Companion*, it will become the Word of the Church of Workshopism. In the long run, however, the book and its disciples will have little if any impact on poetry, which will remain an art to which poets who are willing to learn by reading are called, not made in workshops.

HOTEL MALABAR

Diane Mehta

Brendan Galvin. University of Iowa Press. 1998.

To undertake a long narrative poem, or a novel in verse, is a challenge even for a poet like Brendan Galvin, who has written twelve books of poems. We expect a best-of-both-worlds tale that blends rhythm, sound, plot, and character in ways that are both meaningful and entertaining. That Galvin's latest book is a poem is clear by its line breaks, its below-the-surface questions, and its stop-and-start syntax that succeeds in making a long story short; that it's a story is warranted by its matter-of-fact tone and the linear plot concerning an FBI investigation of a Central American-German wartime conspiracy. Galvin's sentences are so plainspoken they're practically prose, though on occasion he measures his speech in iambic hexameters. And the book is no less shrewd or philosophical for being a quick read.

The tale begins in 1976 at Hotel Malabar in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Parlin, a Yankee under suspicion for his past role as a manager of United Fruit (a banana plantation in Central America), is being tape-recorded by Sheila, an FBI agent whom Parlin imagines as the wife he betrayed years earlier. The cast includes two other FBI agents—Gorencamp and Mac—and Fermin, an Indian medicine man who accompanied Parlin north after World War II. All the characters narrate the story in turn, in their own way, with the most evasive being Parlin. We're never sure whether he's lying about his past or simply constructing his own truths. This is significant because detective fiction typically begins with an unsolved mystery and slowly fills in the pieces, but with poetry the opposite is the case: the mystery is the language and the emotions conveyed, which the narrative evokes. The central trope of the poem—and what gives it range—is the interplay and balance between these two approaches.

A few parts don't fit together as well as they could. For example, the agent Mac contributes little to the action. And the tone of Parlin's lush, heart-of-darkness descriptions of the Central American jungle ("leaves bursting out in shapes the evil mind/ of that thing deems necessary that very day:/ murderous smells, iguanas ugly as an *aguardiente* nightmare, and about as long as you are tall.") seems incongruous with his practical-minded epigrams: "Mouth shut, eyes and ears open./ Sow sympathy, reap dollars. And depreciate/ nobody, as any man can do you harm." Yet these truisms

reveal Parlin to be a practical man—a seemingly credible, if unsophisticated, narrator.

Should we trust Parlin? Like the cat brier that Parlin attempted to prune from his mother's cottage as a child, and about which he continues to obsess, *Hotel Malabar's* plot twists end up more tangled than trimmed. Galvin contributes no hard facts, only clues. He even muddies the time period in which the action occurs: the Germans were "rattling around" in Mexico City during World War I, and according to agent Gorencamp, they "built a slew of airports in striking distance of the canal." Yet references to J. Edgar Hoover, Hitler's secretary Borman, and Hitler's successor Karl Donitz, convince us that it's activities during World War II that are under investigation.

Terms like "The Bolivar Network" and acronyms like "SCADTA" and "ARCO" steer us into an ever-evasive world of espionage. Were the Germans transmitting short waves from Parlin's banana farm? Did the farm become a "Nazi spy nest" during World War II? Is Parlin a spy or simply an old, malarial fuddy duddy? Parlin appears to be working for the American government, which, in exchange for political influence, develops ports, schools, and hospitals, and offers vaccines. Yet Parlin chooses to commit treason by secretly helping the Germans. The money he makes for helping Borman escape eventually funds the hotel he builds on Cape Cod.

Treason and the pursuit of justice—whether it's Parlin or Borman that Gorencamp is after—are secondary to Galvin's more contemplative themes. Which of our memories are real and which do we revise? Why do we betray our country or our spouse? And once we learn the truth, what does it change?

As verse, the book brings these questions to the surface quicker than prose. Written entirely in dramatic monologues, Galvin's slangy, broken sentences serve two purposes. First, the narrative gaps—which would be disastrous in fiction, but which in verse work to the story's advantage—encourage us to focus on ideas, not plot. Second, because monologues resemble ordinary speech, they're a credible format for the story's tape-recorded conversations and commentaries. Although this keeps the story moving, it has a downside: the verse itself lacks music. (Another mystery: is it prose or verse?) Galvin seems inattentive to the rhythm: the lines seem fast-forwarded by the plot, and the acoustics of stress and duration are largely ignored. Because the verse never turns lyrical, it fails to rouse our emotions.

The poem, ironically, is about not having. Gorencamp's quest for literal truth mirrors a more subjective one: "whenever it looks like you have

everything/ you may be closest to having zip.” The FBI doesn’t have facts, Parlin doesn’t have an accurate memory of his past or a wife to love, and Gorencamp, because of his job, no longer has a wife.

Fermin, however, has cures. When his herbal medicines heal Gorencamp of an ailment, perhaps Galvin is telling us that government-sanctioned medicines—or in this case, official prosecutions—aren’t the only way to heal society’s ailments. The narrative ends without a verdict, and with Gorencamp wondering whether to drop his investigation. Perhaps Parlin simply had malaria, and “was in way over/ his corney bow tie and that sad floating/ panama hat.” There are no right or wrong ways, after all, to reconcile our memories, only ways of amending them that suffice.

MOST WAY HOME

Kevin Young. William Morrow & Co. 1995. Quill Paperback. 1997.

Kevin Young's debut book of poetry, *Most Way Home*, earned him a National Poetry Series selection by Lucille Clifton in 1995 when he was just twenty-four. It now has been issued in paperback and should, one hopes, garner even more praise and attention for Young's metric. Not that Young is lacking in fans: last year *Swing Magazine* named him one of the "Thirty Most Powerful People in Their Twenties."

Most Way Home's migratory tone and structure recall the plight of the African American who, not unlike the Native American, is forced into a peripatetic existence. The movement in *Most Way Home* is from deep South to, in the final poem, "Letters from the North Star," a celestial height of contemplation. This meditative poem is the culmination of all the back-breaking slave-labour recounted with vivid exactness throughout the book: the narrator's father, a farmer, "returned/ pounds heavier/ from those thirsty fields/ he was even cooler/ losing each soaked/ woolen skin/ to the floor, dropping/ naked rain in his/ wife's earthen arms."

The rain-quest for the good of the land (in the lines above) is a subtheme which begins with a parched waste-land of farm: "*rain that asks for/ more rain rain that can't help but/ answer what you*

are looking for/ must fall." This recurrent prayer for rain, however, is answered late in the book not by a rainstorm, but a blizzard: "my mind's stuttering storm—/ it slows, turns thunder then/ effortless, suffocating snow." Answered prayers bring calamity, while unanswered prayers (especially in part III, "Getting Religion") bring more reality, as the narrator remarks, "how you prayed that week/ your knees turning into/ the hard-backed pews of early/ service."

What is remarkable throughout *Most Way Home* is Young's control of line—and temper. What easily could have slipped into a screech, or worse, diatribe, becomes a highly refined and methodical treatment of reality and remembrance. In "The Works," for example, a crew of white swindlers try to buy an African-American's farmland to drill for oil:

Told those reps from Love
Petroleum Works to leave—
but like bad dreams or good
dogs they came back, wanting
to put up a fence, like a fight,
& dig.

Young's exact enjambments pull the eye and ear down with the interlinking lines which, when read aloud, recall the metrical precision of Williams, Zukofsky and Creeley.

The long poem entitled "The Spectacle" takes the reader into the marginalized lot of circus freaks that lend so much amusement to African

Americans who, like “Able/ and Cane the Siamese/ Twins” or “The Escape Artist,” are a liminalized group looking at themselves in an unfunny funhouse mirror. The circus scenes which remind one of album covers by Bob Dylan (“The Basement Tapes”) and Tom Waites (“Swordfishtrombones”) are a sort of fragmented statement, declaiming “*like the spectacle/ they whipped me/ inside out..*”

In 1996, Young traveled with a retrospective of Jean Basquiat’s work, writing poems on museum walls to complement the late controversial artist’s graphics. Basquiat, who lived in urban squalor until his “discovery” by Andy Warhol, is a spiritual father of sorts to Young, whose take on poverty—whether in the country or city—is concisely captured in the lines: “Bored, what was that?! We were too busy being poor.” Young’s first book deserves all the praise it received and makes one anticipate the new work this twenty-seven-year-old has in store.

—Kevin Di Camillo

IDENTITY

Milan Kundera. Harpercollins, 1998. 160pp. \$23

Missing persons is the topic for Milan Kundera’s new novel. Kundera, with microscopic scrutiny, shows us how, through several episodes over a few weeks in the lives of his characters, a loved one can be lost to us even without

actually disappearing. This absenteeism in love is a sign of the other, the unknowable that is the distance between people. Kundera’s novel also touches on memory and the use of friends; as a corollary to the missing we get the force of anonymity; there is a remarkable discussion of the different interpretations of the blinking eye running throughout the book.

For all of the talent shown in this novel, however, this is not Kundera’s best. It reads like an intriguing and expanded story from *Laughable Loves*, but lacks the bolstering that comes from being part of a collection. It does not have the power of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* or *The Farewell Waltz*, and in comparison, the characters of *Identity* are stock. Their flatness may be due, almost contrary to common sense, to the fact that Kundera focuses almost exclusively on the two main characters. The reader sees perhaps too obviously the reactions that one character sets off in the other.

Nonetheless, it is a Kundera novel. Faithful readers of Kundera will not be surprised by the narrator’s entrance at the conclusion of the story, though they may notice his absence in the body of it. Here he returns his narrator’s voice to the peripheral margin he occupied in earlier works (after his experiment in *Immortality* in which he brought the narrator to center-stage). The narrator’s placement is perfect, considering the novel’s theme of absence.

—Stacy Cartledge

EDITORS SELECT

Michael Anania, *In Natural Light*. Asphodel Press, 1999. Anania's most recent volume of poetry contains two major poems first published in *NDR*, "A Place That's Known" and "Fifty-two Definite Articles." It also contains an excellently recorded CD of the author reading poems from the book. This is the first volume of new work by Anania since his *Selected Poems* of 1994.

William Logan, *Vain Empires*. Penguin, 1998. *NDR* contributor William Logan has collected a range of recent poems that shuttle back and forth between Florida, where he teaches in the University of Florida's creative writing program, and Cambridge, England, where he spends a good deal of his actual writing time. The poems engaging a British or European subject matter, sometimes in a manner reminiscent of Geoffrey Hill (on whose work he writes with great insight) are particularly impressive.

Suzanne Paola, *Bardo*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. Winner of the Brittingham Prize in poetry, Paola's book includes both "Tenure at Forty" and "Christ in the World of Matter" which first appeared in *NDR*. Paola's Prologue explains the title: "The bardo in Tibetan means an intermediate state, most specifically the one after death when your soul wanders through the heavens and hells, trying to avoid

rebirth into samsara—the realm of the material—and achieve nirvana or Buddhahood..." The *Bardo Thostrol*, or *Book of Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State*, was written as a guide. It's read to the corpse for a few days after death (when the soul's in a state of confusion, unaware that it has died), and read by the living. Like everything the bardo journey takes place both inside you and outside. Like everything it's both a metaphor and not."

Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain, editors, *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970*. Wesleyan University Press, 1999. This anthology represents strictly experimental, "alternative," or marginalized British and Irish poets. No Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Eavan Boland, or Craig Raine. Covering some of the same territory as Iain Sinclair's *Conductors of Chaos*, which was an earlier *NDR* Editors Select recommendation, it has the great advantage of having an American publisher. American readers may know the names of Brian Coffey, Ken Edwards, Roy Fisher, Tom Raworth, Denise Riley, Gael Turnbull and others among the Others here collected, but this anthology probably represents the first opportunity many have had to read their work in a book easily found at the local Barnes and Noble.

Keith Tuma, *Fishing By Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers*. Northwestern

University, 1999. Tuma's book is the best available introduction to both the texts and contexts of poets working in the tradition represented by the Caddell/Quartermain anthology. The book is both a history and a critical study. The historical sections make clear why American readers are almost totally ignorant of some of the best British writing of the last fifty years. The critical sections examine such diverse works as Gordon Macleod's *The Ecliptic*, Mina Loy's *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*, Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, Roy Fisher's *A Furnace*, Peter Riley's *Distant Points*, and Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *X / Self*.

Irini Spanidou, *Fear*. Knopf, 1999. *Fear* continues the tale Spanidou began with her remarkable first book, *God's Snake*, charting young Anna Karystinou's life and development in post-war Greece. Anna is now thirteen and her fear of the world she encounters and is propelled through is both external and internal, recreated with a delicate fierceness and luminous clarity. *Fear* is a triumphant coming of age novel, stripped of sentimentality, singular in its steely, unyielding, brilliant sensibility.

Susan Choi, *The Foreign Student*. HarperCollins, 1998. Susan Choi eschews the typical first novel's concerns in her admirable fiction debut and creates a clash of cultures in sleepy Sewanee, Tennessee, during the mid-fifties, with the appearance of a Korean Korean War veteran as a new student on

campus. Choi's accomplished story of interracial romance exposes secrets of the heart and of the nation.

Hazard Adams, *Many Pretty Toys*. SUNY Press, 1999. Adams' new novel is, in many appealing ways, an update of Lionel Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey*. Adams does for the tumultuous time of Vietnam-era protest on college campuses what Trilling's novel did for the same milieu during the radical thirties. The competing voices in *Many Pretty Toys* both critique and create an academic novel of generous heart and admirable substance.

Emer Martin, *More Bread or I'll Appear*. Houghton Mifflin, 1999. Award-winning first novelist (for *Breakfast in Babylon*), Irish writer Emer Martin's second novel, a portion of which appeared in *NDR #7*, is another fascinating dissection (and vivisection) of contemporary culture both here and abroad. A mordant portrait of our times inspired by, "a trinity evident from birth: television, history, and the church."



CONTRIBUTORS

Jan Lee Ande lives in La Jolla, California, and teaches at The Union Institute. Her poetry has appeared in *New Letters*, *Image*, *Mississippi Review*, and *Nimrod*—for which she was a Pablo Neruda Prize finalist. Poems are forthcoming in the anthology *The Community of Saints* (Story Line Press). **Neil Azevedo** lives in New York City with his wife, Holly and their two boys, Myles and Owen. **Sean Brendan-Brown** is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a former poetry editor for the *Georgetown Review*. He received an NEA in '97 and has published with *The Madison Review*, *Confrontation*, *Barnabe Mountain Review*, *Maryland Review*, *Nightsun*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, and the anthology *Community of Saints* (to be released by Texas A&M Press). **Yanbing Chen** obtained his MFA in fiction writing at Notre Dame. In recent years he has become well known as a translator of Bei Dao and other contemporary Chinese poets. He is now a graduate student in the translation program at the University of Iowa. **Sharon Cournoyer** is a graduate student at Villanova University, living in Pennsylvania. This is her first appearance in print. **Robert Crawford's** collections of poems include *A Scottish Assembly* (Chatto, 1990), *Talkies* (Chatto, 1992), *Masculinity* (Cape, 1996), and *Spirit Machines* (Cape, 1999). With Simon Armitage he co-edited *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* (1998). He is Professor of Modern Scottish Literature at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. **Kevin Di Camillo** is doctoral research fellow in English literature at Saint John's University, New York City. His books of poetry *Why I Drive Alfa Romeos & Other Excuses* and *Of The Hours* were both published in 1997. He lives in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. **John Engels'** latest collections are *Big Waters* (1994) and *Sinking Creek* (1997), both by Lyons Books. New work is forthcoming in *Kenyon Review* and *Sewanee Review*. A new collection, *Exiles*, is in progress and includes "Heron" and "The Orders." **Rob Faivre** is a graduate of the University of Vermont and Syracuse University. He has taught in the English Division and the Developmental Studies and College Survival programs at Adirondack Community College since 1993. **Ed Falco's** most recent collection of stories won the Richard Sullivan Prize from the University of Notre Dame. His stories have been included in the *Best American Short Stories* and the *Pushcart Prize* annuals, and have been published widely in journals including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Playboy* and *Triquarterly*. **Robert Hahn** is the author of *All Clear* (University of South Carolina Press, 1997) and is president of Johnson State College in Vermont. His poetry appears widely and may also be found in recent or forthcoming issues of *Shenandoah*, *Southwest Review*, *Partisan Review*, and *Yale*

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