

Cactus Heart

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Not that long ago, I took a leap—as some of you may remember from Issue #1—and began *Cactus Heart*. Since then, I also quit my day job, and began an MFA program. What does it feel like to be a full-time writer? Scary. But it was the right time and the right choice for my life. One of the biggest blessings of the last few months is the amount of time and energy I've been able to give not only my own writing, but the writing of others in *Cactus Heart*.

Cactus Heart received almost 500 submissions for Issue #2. I'm blown away every single time I think about it. From those submissions I've chosen the 36 pieces you'll find in these pages. Was that tough? Absolutely. But it's also so exciting for me to see these 36 pieces in one place, nestled so well together.

I never consciously choose a theme for an issue, but as with Issue #1—birds—Issue #2 has a theme: birth. It is both a subtle and an overt theme, as you will find, and there are also the unspoken co-conspirators of birth in these pages: life and death.

On my forearm I have a small tattoo (coincidentally, so does my partner Sasha, both inked well before we met) of the Triple Goddess, a Celtic symbol that joins together Birth, Life, and Death (the virgin, mother, and crone). There is no one without the other, and I'm proud to say that I think the literature and art in Issue #2 bring that truth to light.

I hope you enjoy *Cactus Heart's* sophomore effort—without readers there would be no writing, and without writers there would be no reading. We are bound together in this crazy mess of a world, and every single day I'm grateful that I can contribute a little more beauty to it—as a writer and as an editor. These pages fill me up. I hope they do you as well.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sara". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Below the name, there is a long, horizontal, slightly wavy underline.



Primitive Lust | Otha Davis III



Riding a Chipmunk

Naomi Thiers

How could the ancients have imagined the world
moves on the back of a giant turtle?
Wouldn't we feel only steadiness and plod
as—attached to a solid crust—
we rocked methodically
toward death?

For my money, motion through life
doesn't feel like that. It swirls,
it hurts, our softness forcibly exposed.
It's the blur of crack-the-whip, then
a tense huddle in a shadowy forest.
We dart past experiences—or they
past us—and glimpse only a shimmer.
A thousand days dissolve into fog.

We look delicate, velvety, but our minds
are crude and in the end we fixate only
on the scents we need for survival.

Joy, that quick rush, we skitter with it,
hearts pounding, we leap, we feel
the fresh nip of March, the dancing urge—then
a hawk's shadow passes, fear jerks
and suddenly we're back
in the black tunnel
of a hollow log.



Woman with a Tin Can Heart

Kyle Hemmings

He married a woman with a tin can heart. Whenever he sleeps next to her, he hears his own words echo as if someone else's. She says, Before you, I had a hole in my heart. I leaked the names of fair-weather men who would never love me. She remembers the days of living in the streets, of being kicked or pushed around by The 10th Avenue Boys, how they made her swallow stones or regurgitate their reflections. They made her ugly. She claims. Rarely, she speaks of the father, who boasted about his collection of road kill, about his extra shoestring or two of kindness. One night, the husband discovers that the wife with a tin can heart is gone. His bed is now a one-way street with no signs, only the faint footprints of a small animal. After it rains. He imagines the ping of coins in someone's cup. He listens to the rustle of his own thoughts: dry, unintelligible at the core, never fated to become trains. The weight of his peeping eyes turned inward. He imagines that he has a hole in his head. In that space, the sun will shine metallic.



Allium

Zachary Kaplan-Moss

Once there was an onion. The largest onion in the county, though not officially proclaimed. It was white and bulbous with thin little roots sprouting from its rotund head like the hairs of a baby. It was a self-absorbed, pompous onion.

The onion had a farmer. You called him Farmer Jim when you called him at all. But if you weren't interested in calling him, like if you were speaking behind his back, you might call him Big Jim. He was large like a retired linebacker. Over six feet and heavy as an ox. He lumbered when he walked and he wheezed when he stood up.

Farmer Jim loved his onion. He'd watched and tended and nurtured it since he'd carefully selected it as a robust little green seedling. The onion was Farmer Jim's truly great, magnificent creation.

Farmer Jim poured all of the tenderness and love that he had within his great big body into that onion. All the tenderness and love that he was afraid to show his wife and son. He would sit out there next to it in the field and just about burst. And the onion grew bigger and fatter, swelling up with the pride and love of Farmer Jim.

If you were paying close enough attention, you will have noted that Farmer Jim had a son. His name was Jimmy Jr. and he was an eager boy of thirteen. Jimmy Jr. was quick and active and he aimed to please. He was the best athlete in his class and wasn't yet old enough to realize that he was unhappy. But the edges of it gnawed at Jimmy Jr. and sometimes he grew fractious and angry and couldn't quite figure out why.

Jimmy Jr. would try to impress his father. He showed him things he had carved

out of wood. He showed him a little gold man with MVP written on the bottom. And Farmer Jim would say things like, “Oh. Very nice.” Sometimes he nodded.

Jimmy watched his father out there in the fields, sitting on a bucket, talking to himself. He knew that something needed to be done. So one night, he crept out to the fields with a shovel and dug up his father’s fat white onion. If you’d asked him he’d have said, “Oh man, I had to. Besides, mom told me to.”

She hadn’t, but she agreed with him on principle. Jimmy Jr.’s mom was named Claudia and she taught English at the middle school that Jimmy Jr. didn’t go to. She enjoyed her job, loved her son and sometimes wanted to divorce her husband. In that order.

Jimmy Jr. was careful. He left no evidence of his crime. He even brushed back over the dirt leaving only a vague depression in his wake. He put the shovel back exactly where he’d gotten it and hid the onion in a makeshift shoe box that was really two shoe boxes because the onion was too big to fit in just one. He stuffed it down in the corner of his closet and covered the box with dirty clothing.

When Big Jim discovered that his onion was missing, he vomited. He sank to the dewy ground and retched out burning red mostly-digested lasagna. It steamed up into his face from the bare patch of ground where once his most beloved onion had grown.

After being sick, Big Jim began to investigate. First he checked for signs around the onion. Finding none, not even a footprint or an animal track, he deduced that it must have been premeditated. A cover up.

He suspected everyone, but most of all, he suspected his neighbor Henry Johnson. And it’s true that Henry Johnson was a jealous little weasel of a man who coveted all of his neighbors’ (on both sides) possessions. But Henry Johnson wasn’t clever enough or motivated enough to have stolen Big Jim’s onion. When Big Jim went over and thundered down his door, he saw the look of shock and terror in

Henry Johnson's beady eyes and knew that he hadn't done it. In something of a funk, Big Jim trudged back to his bed and sank to his knees once more in front of the vomit filled depression left behind by his onion. It looked for all the world as if earth itself had swallowed his magnificent onion.

He didn't speak for the rest of the day. He wandered wearily inside some hours later and looked neither his wife nor his son in the eye. He didn't say good morning or hello and he said nothing when Jimmy Jr. said, "See you later pop," and went off to school. And he said nothing when Claudia said, "Jimmy's got soccer practice, don't forget to pick him up." He sat and stared at the backs of his big dirty hands as if waiting for them to disappear.

He didn't speak when he picked up Jimmy from soccer practice. But that was normal and had Jimmy Jr. not been looking for signs from his father, he may not have found any. Little things were going on under Big Jim's face, though, and his hands clenched the steering wheel with a white-knuckled two-fisted grip. Jimmy Jr. wondered whether he had gone too far.

Big Jim didn't speak for two more days. He didn't eat with his family or even acknowledge them except when he absolutely had to. On the third day, he searched his house from top to bottom and found the onion under a pile of dirty laundry in the back of Jimmy Jr.'s closet. He put it on the kitchen table where it shined white and angry in the electric light. By himself in the house with the onion, Big Jim wept like a child and spoke to the onion.

He told it how he had missed it. He told it how he had feared it was gone forever. He told it how he realized that he had never done anything he could be proud of before. You, he told the onion, are my truly great, magnificent creation. And he asked the onion what he should do about a thief.

Once, thievery was punishable with the loss of a hand. Harsh yes, but just as well. Surely a little feral animal that would steal from his own father deserved nothing

less. Perhaps both hands for the theft of so large and precious a thing.

Farmer Jim sat and marinated in his rage and forgot to pick up his son from soccer practice.

Meanwhile, Claudia was engaged in an affair with the principal of her school. He was a kind man with a fine thick mustache who Claudia was pretty sure she'd run off with as long as they could take Jimmy Jr. with them. She often stayed with her principal late into the evening and would return to her own home well after dark. This was standard practice and no longer cause for concern.

On this particular evening, with both Big Jim and Claudia passionately indisposed, Jimmy Jr. was left alone at the high school soccer field after soccer practice. He used his cellular phone to call both his mom and his house phone, but nobody picked up. An hour passed and then another. It grew dark and foreign and Jimmy Jr. became afraid.



Roger and Billy were seventeen and liked to hang out at the high school after hours. It was usually empty and they would smoke pot and shoot bottles out behind the soccer field. When they had neither pot nor guns, they were irritated, searching for entertainment.

When Roger and Billy saw a small solitary figure waiting out by the parking lot in back of the soccer field, they decided to check it out. From a distance, they hoped it might be a girl. As they approached, Jimmy Jr. took shape as a young boy and though they were disappointed, Roger and Billy put on smiles. They asked Jimmy Jr. what he was doing there, out by himself and Jimmy Jr. told them it was none of their business. They asked Jimmy Jr. whether he was running away from home and Jimmy Jr. told them to go fuck themselves.

If they were surprised at his response, they didn't show it, for they laughed and exchanged a glance. Roger and Billy informed Jimmy Jr. that they could take it upon themselves to teach him the manners that his father had failed to.

Jimmy kicked Roger in the shins as hard as he could and ran. Even though he was the fastest kid on his soccer team, Billy was four years older and caught him easily. He tackled him and then punched him a few times. Roger came over and together they kicked him where he lay on the ground. Jimmy Jr. curled into the fetal position to protect his organs. When Billy aimed a kick into Jimmy's exposed side and felt a rib crack under his boot, he felt a sickly twinge of guilt. He told his friend that they should leave.

Jimmy lay alone on the ground, crying softly because it hurt to cry.

Jimmy lay that way for a long time. Curled on the soccer field, trying not to move. Soon he was shivering. The shivering sent shocks of pain pulling out from his rib, and the pain made him shiver all the harder and Jimmy had never been so miserable in all his young life.

When Claudia arrived home glazed and contented, she found Big Jim still sitting at the table talking to his onion. Big Jim didn't look up when she walked in and he didn't stop his one-sided discussion with his onion either.

Claudia approached him warily like he might be dangerous and soon stood at the other side of the table. Still, he didn't look up and still he spoke softly to his onion. He was telling it that it was a wonderful onion. He was explaining to the onion that they would never be apart again. Even when Claudia said his name, he didn't look up.

She put her hand on top of the naked onion and asked Big Jim where her son was. He grabbed her hand roughly and squeezed it until it hurt and she cried out. When he released her hand, he looked up at her and told her not to touch his onion. Then he looked back down at his fat white onion and told it he was sorry.

Claudia, rubbing her aching hand as she walked, searched the house for Jimmy Jr. She called his name inside and outside the house and soon she knew that he wasn't at home. It didn't take Claudia long to figure that he was probably still waiting at the soccer field and she jumped back into her Subaru Outback and drove as fast as she could to the high school.

When she parked her car in the lot behind the field, she saw Jimmy Jr.'s soccer bag standing square and lonely at the edge of the field. She got out of the car and called his name with increasing shrillness as she neared the bag. A broken moan drew her attention to a small mound out in the field. She rushed towards it, tripped, threw off her shoes, and ran barefoot across the grass towards the mound. When she reached it, she found that it was Jimmy Jr. and that he was crying softly because it hurt to cry.

She took Jimmy Jr. to the hospital. After they had done what they could for his broken rib, she took Jimmy Jr. to her principal and told him that Jimmy Jr.'s father had given it to him because in a way he had, and her principal told her that she was not, under any circumstances, to go back home.



Back where she had left him, Big Jim sat with his onion for the rest of the night and then another day after that. He grew delirious from lack of food and water. The onion turned into a pale white baby that lay on his table. He stroked its head and told it that everything was going to be all right.

On the evening of the third day, Big Jim got hungry with an unexpected swiftness. It was the greatest hunger that he had ever known. It started in his toes and rumbled its way up into his groin and then his stomach. It felt like his organs had turned on one another, each trying to devour the other. Every pore screamed to be

fed and fed first. Big Jim felt the screams clench in his stomach and pour into his throat and explode through his hair. He began to shake uncontrollably and in his madness, he fell upon his magnificent onion and devoured it. By the handful. His eyes watered and his fingers stung and he shoveled the onion into his mouth like a wild animal.

His stomach twisted and rung itself into tight spirals because he'd eaten too fast. Slowly, like the sun burning through the fog, sanity returned to Big Jim and he realized that he had just devoured his baby.

Big Jim pushed himself away from the table. He fell weakly to the ground and panted in ragged gasps. Pulling himself to his feet, he stumbled outside to his field and vomited once again onto the ground where once his truly great magnificent creation had grown. With great body-wracking heaves, he brought forth a thick green fluid that dribbled down his chin. He panted on all fours above the ground for a moment and then crumpled forward onto his head. He came to rest with his great buttocks waving in the air, face buried in soft dirt up to his ears. Never to move again.



Preservation & Confinement (Nelumbo Nucifera) | Joshua Borja



Revelations in the Maine Woods

Jim Krosschell

Sometimes these feel like the last days. No wonder we want to channel Thoreau and escape to the Wildness, pulling cedar boughs around us for comfort at night, or sitting lonely and safe on a ledge above a lake. Jihad has no meaning in the woods. Black water deepens, in cool profundity, and allows no such thing as a mercenary. The currency there is carbon, not ambition. Greed for fresh air sucks it deep into the lungs, snorts the smell of humus and moss of the forest floor.

Last days are nothing new under the sun: prophecies and incantations, signs and symbols have polluted the ages. Utopias spring up, winter down. Heretics and hermits proclaim and damn. All will be revealed upon the breaking of the seventh seal.

Pathetic stances, really. To think that a political system, or any one of our religions, or good works, or the simple life, or even a Judgment Day will save us. The logical conclusion is that belief is just a national park of the mind, a playground for the weary, a raree-show for the naive.

But hope survives the absence of belief, even today, especially today, and I myself will believe in hope until hope is gone.



A particularly peculiar fact about Maine is that one-third of the state is unorganized, a swath of 10 million acres (forests and lakes and mountains in the west, plains and farms in the east) that has no local governance, whose development is administered by the seven men and women of the Land Use Regulation Commission in Augusta. Of these territories, the deep North Woods covers some 3 million acres, and in 1994 a

group in Maine, alarmed by developments, began promoting the idea of a national park to preserve it. The North Woods is an immense area—if it were squared into a block, each side would measure nearly 70 miles—the largest undeveloped forest east of the Rockies. The model is nearby Baxter State Park, 200,000 acres of wilderness surrounding Mt. Katahdin and protected forever.

It's a sign of our times that I'd call 500 square miles immense. Red people wouldn't have. Roaming without fences or LURCs, they lived in harmony there for thousands of years. White people are different; we threaten the survival of the woods after only a few hundred.

We started clearing the land almost immediately upon arrival. Pilgrims and traders and fishermen carved villages out of the coast. Farmers moved inland, gunning for Indians. In the 18th century British surveyors roamed the colonies, chopping King George's mark of the broad arrow into stately white pines, commandeering them for the masts of his ships. By the 19th century most of New England's forests were gone, either to timber or pasture. Big timber companies formed out of the little ones, and they have cut and slashed at the forest's innards for two centuries now. In the Gilded Age and beyond, wealthy "sports" from the big cities rusticated in camps and cottages. The prosperity spawned by winning two world wars in the 20th century also spawned the invasion of middle-class Americans on vacation. And now in the 21st century, now it will get worse.

For while the timber companies used to own most of Maine, at least they were relatively benign, allowing hunting and fishing and hiking on their land and often thinking about sustainability (90% of the state has come back to forest). Then, inevitably, business found cheap trees and cheaper labor in Asia, Africa, and South America. The investment value of Maine's trees went down, and the money men, sensing bargains, came calling.

Upon which the land became more than just trees. It was transformed into real

estate, and a web of Real Estate Investment Trusts and international finance now owns most of the Maine woods. What will they do with their assets? How will they exploit what's left of the wilderness?

It seems clear to me. Let a thousand Plum Creeks bloom.

The Plum Creek Timber Company, America's largest private land owner, bought up nearly a million acres near and around Moosehead Lake over the past few years. (Moosehead is the large wilderness lake that Thoreau, when he viewed it from the top of Mt. Kineo, compared to "a gleaming silver platter at the end of the table.") Plum Creek wants to make that metaphor tangible, lots of platters on lots of tables, proposing nearly a thousand house lots and a couple of golf courses and hotels and several restaurants, no doubt themed or franchised, for the lakeshore. Moosehead has 400 miles of shoreline, almost of all of it shining-pure and undeveloped. It's a treasure, but what kind, and for whom?

Disclosure: Even in Thoreau's time, Moosehead was being developed. He didn't hike there; from Concord, he took a train to Bangor and a stagecoach to Greenville. And he toured the lake by noisy, dirty steamboat, like any tourist.

Fuller disclosure: I too am a property owner in Maine. I owned a camp on a lake, and now a house on the ocean. So why should I object if 975 future mortgagers build their own Zions on Moosehead?

Furthermore, the North Woods is hardly wilderness anymore, having been exploited for centuries. There are 31,000 miles of logging roads that muddy the hooves of moose and deer. People use the woods, hunting and fishing and skiing and hiking and snowmobiling and swimming and communicating with gods. They scratch a living from felled wood, or from tourists, and soon from wind power. It's a hard life. The young don't stay around—there's little work, nothing to do.

Yet Moosehead seems a crossroads. LURC worked hard (the Plum Creek proposals stretched over five years and multiple incarnations, the most recent a

thousand pages). The conservation groups worked hard. Plum Creek worked hard and, towards the end, smarter by adding conservation easements to its arsenal, and proposing to sell hundreds of thousands of its acres to the Nature Conservancy for preservation. LURC at last agreed. But the houses and resorts stayed in the plans, and the jobs will come and the tax base increases and the flatlanders spend money on vacation. Among all the competing interests, this is the way the world goes, something for everyone, the art and mud of constant compromise.

One of the great outcomes of the 20th century, achieved in part because of those who deified Thoreau, is that there is now at least the desire to make environmental rules. Yet we have many rights of property in this country, for individuals and corporations. Any kind of government, LURC'ing or otherwise, finds it difficult to tell us what to do with our land except when we decide to "improve" it. Then we follow the rules. But what are the rules for developing the undeveloped?

In the absence of the religious justification that drove America's settlement, where do we turn for guidance? We must preserve the wildness, yet we will develop it. What are the rights of REITS anyway? Is the ecology movement strong enough to deal with them?

Assume the answer is no, or just barely. Assume that the Plum Creeks of the world will continue to push development, and succeed as often as not. Assume that development is inevitable. Assume in the absence of anything else that government directs our moral imperatives, stepping in to force consensus and at least preserve a few treasures forever.



If belief is hopeless, we must yet continue to hope. The health of Earth and humans depends on it. The antidote to asphalt is the country lane, to quarter-pounders the wild blueberry, to soul-shredding

despair the crazy loons on the lake. If the deer eat your dablias, that only means there's still enough space for the deer. Leave the motors in Massachusetts; they are not the secret to happiness. A life of computers, or conversations, or chevrons is a life, yes, but without revelation it withers and dies.

A life (a week, a day, even an hour) in the woods does not die. It persists, in the carbon we share with the tree and the bobcat, in the poetry we share with our children. I go to the woods to feel small and insignificant—in the mountaintop view of fir and spruce sweeping unbroken in every direction, or under a lowering sky pressing on my canoe in a quiet lake, or to look at the complex and fleeting world of a vernal pool—in order to feel freely at large.

It's imperative that the sounds of waves on the shore rejuvenate our pasts and reveal our futures. In the Book of Revelation John's vision of Zion is determinedly urban, his vision of Nature cataclysmic. How about we reverse the eschatology?



240-Million-Year Drama

Michelle Valois

Chiseled down the middle or sliced in two; geological diorama, half a globe; pocket-sized, palm-fitting: a very small stage. Rough exterior but smooth where the curtains would be, only there are no curtains on this proscenium arch: the earth an open stage, her principle players: quartz and chalcedony; the latter, which comes from the Greek, means *found only once*, like the theory of true love I calcify into existence.

Chiseled down the middle or sliced in half; crystals like sugar granules sparkle around the edges and shine even deeper inside this cavity where two fingers fit. Once the secret of a lonely volcano, exposed when hammer split limestone to reveal dances of light now ignited by a ravenous sun that has waited far too long for this moment: yes, that is me, center stage; and yes, that is you behind the scenes.

Like Lear I divide myself, granting the largest piece of my heart to the one who loves me best, while you decorate the exterior of a balcony scene, costume the minor players, adjust the special effects so I do not see you. Like Hamlet I cannot act on what my ghosts have told me. I shun the books where once I went for consolation but do not know where else to look. I want to step down but my timing is horribly off. Dark lady, come out from behind your stage directions, scrawled into a lost folio, and wait with me behind the discovery curtain, where we'll eavesdrop on amethyst and jasper, agate and opal, as their 240-million-year drama unfolds.



Be Sparing

Steve Klepetar

You who stand by the side of the road
be sparing with words
you sprinkle onto cobblestone.

Crows swoop and rip the air
red with angry cries,
but you no longer live as though
such scratches had been painted

on your arms. You have learned
to walk up and down the stone
rows carefully, looking for ochre
pounded and mixed with ordinary

dust. Be sparing with those sharp
pebbles. They can cut a mouth
to bleeding shreds and leave a lifetime

of welts and scars.
You don't live there any
more. Be sparing of those strangers
left hollow-eyed and staring into dreams.

Be sparing also with your generous
coins, even if you wish to pour
them out in clinking showers of wealth.

Rain can be enough, here where roads
fork or bend far from the eye's
last reach. Be sparing when there's nothing

lost on your table and all desires
rise from broth in swirling steam.



Chapter 9

John Duncan Talbird

Flipp loved books, especially if they came free or at a bargain. He rummaged through the cheap paperbacks at the Salvation Army and walked the sidewalks of Fort Sanders—the student neighborhood of Knoxville—keeping an eye open for textbooks left out on porches. His favorite store, though, was All Right! books, a used bookstore in a strip mall next to a grocery store. Flipp would make at least one visit each day to All Right! until he did something to get him banned. Then he would have to content himself with rummaging through the free boxes outside, the boxes with books so poor no one would pay even a penny for them: pages falling out, mold sprouting, covers missing. Many of these had thick, black X's scrawled on their covers in magic marker—a precaution to keep dirt bags (the manager, Pete's term for scavengers) from trying to sell the free books back inside.

The last time Pete had kicked Flipp out had been months ago, a blistering summer day. All Right! had been bitten by the Bicentennial-year bug that had hit America and although the inside wasn't festooned with flags and red-white-and-blue streamers like many other businesses, they still had an Independence Day sale. The front desk where people bought and sold books was crowded and chaotic. A handful of unsupervised children shrieked and chased each other around the comic book bins. A baby squalled in its stroller as its pregnant mother shoved it out through the propped-open doors and over the curb and into the parking lot as if it were a battering ram. The air conditioning was broken and everyone sweated and grouched.

The new girl, Karen, was buying some severe redhead's books. Like most books, hers looked interesting to Flipp, so he turned them sideways to read their spines.

"Those are mine," the redhead said with a strained smile, pale cheeks flushing. There was an intensity to her voice, in the stiffness of her spine, which immediately put Flipp on edge.

"Hey, Flipp," Pete said, looking up from the adding machine he was punching figures into, "back off. We don't own those yet."

Flipp bit the fleshy part of his hand because in moments of duress he was liable to utter things he'd later regret. Carefully realigning the books the way he'd found them, he examined another stack. Pulling a paperback from its center, he scanned the print on the back cover, running his finger along the words as if they were Braille.

"*The Odyssey* is a great book," said the muscle-bound guy in a tank top selling the books. He was standing in Flipp's space, reeking of aftershave, and that uncontrollable something clicked inside the skinny teen's mind:

"Fuck you, cocksucker! Like I give a flying fuck what you think about!" He thrust his hand over his mouth, but too late. Staring at the muscle-bound fellow, who seemed too shocked to do anything but gape, he swiveled his head to take in the redhead who was looking from Flipp to Pete and back again. Flipp dreaded what he knew would come next, was afraid to even look at the bookstore manager, a deity about to hand down an expected punishment.

Pete punched a few more numbers into his machine, then said, "You know the routine, Flipp." Pete hit the total button and the machine hiccupped out a receipt which he ripped off and stuck beneath the cover of a book. "Get out."

Nearly four months later, Flipp was still banned from All Right! Tennessee had rushed through fall that year to winter. The mornings were icy, days gray and in the

forties. There was talk of snow. That day, particularly cold, Flipp had stuck his head in the door of All Right! only to get a breath of warm heat and to hear Pete say, “Uh-uh-uh!” as if he were yelling at a dog about to pooh on the carpet. When Flipp got home that afternoon, all he had to show for his hours of combing the city was a sixth edition of an Electrical Engineering textbook, a Robert Ludlum paperback without a cover, a twenty-year-old first-aid book, and a pornographic novel that was in perfect condition except that someone had carefully removed all of chapter nine.

His sister, Elle, taking loud, deep breaths, did the cat and cow yoga positions in the living room. Flipp went to his room where three wooden bookshelves were so crammed with books that their shelves bowed under the weight. A dozen egg crates were loaded with various hard, soft and no-cover books. Most of the ratty carpet was occupied with books in stacks that, in more than one place, reached all the way to the ceiling. He found places for three of the books and then lay on his bed with the porno novel, entitled *Let Me Cum in Your Backdoor, Little Sheba*, and opened it to the beginning, lips moving as he read. After a while, his sister called through the door. “Philip? Do you want pork chops for dinner?”

Flipp and Elle ate the pork chops with mashed potatoes and applesauce. All sharp knives were kept locked away and so they ate the meat with their fingers, gnawing the bones, drinking Coke from bottles, and watching the game show *Tic-Tac-Dough*. After dinner, Flipp went back to bed, climbed under the covers in his clothes and read the pornographic novel. He had read up to the missing chapter when he heard his brother, Mordecai, pull up on his motorcycle in the driveway. The screen on the front door opened and banged shut and then the front door slammed. He heard his sister asking how work was, then the clang of dishes as Mordecai ate his dinner at room temperature standing at the kitchen counter like he did every night when he had to work late. “Good night,” he heard Elle say, a low rumble from Mordecai, and the

door to Elle's room closing. The clink of silverware in the sink, a belch, and the television coming on. Then, early in the morning, as Flipp finished the novel, he heard his brother Billy's truck bump over the curb and into the yard, the engine revving and then cutting off.

As he went down the hall, he could hear his brothers talking, the grate on the fireplace closing. Billy was on his knees in front of the hearth, a pile of logs blazing and spitting sparks up the chimney. Mordecai's hair stuck up in points and he scratched his beard. The shirt he had worn to work was untucked and he still wore his bowtie which had turned sideways like a stalled propeller. The TV hummed quietly, on the screen a rainbow collection of after-hours boxes glowing with the early morning light coming from the window.

"ello Esquire," Billy said in a bad British accent, tipping an invisible cap at his brother. "Read any good books lately?"

Flipp handed *Little Sheba* to Billy. "I read this last night, but it's missing a chapter."

"Why, Esquire," Billy said, taking his reading glasses from his shirt pocket, "I believe you've discovered a dirty book."

"Let me see that," said Mordecai. The two read the book together, each holding one half of the cover. Flipp sat on a chair on the opposite side of the coffee table messy with coffee mugs and beer can spill, cigarette ash, waiting for them to say something. But they just grinned like children. When Mordecai tried to turn the page, Billy said, "Wait-a-second, wait-a-second."

A voice announced the beginning of a new broadcasting day and the television programs resumed. The sun came up. A while later, the refrigerator door opened and closed and then Elle stood in the living room in a shaft of sunlight, wearing a floppy thrift store hat and apron, a bright glass of orange juice in her hand. Flipp was struck with how pretty she was, how much she looked like their mother. He was afraid he

might cry and, at that moment, decided to write a poem for her, and also for their mother—on a wall someplace so that anyone could read it.

“I’m leaving in a minute,” she said, “but I can make some eggs for anyone who wants them.” Then, “What are you guys reading?”

Flipp was a child when his mother was killed by his father. They had both been alcoholics and, one night after fighting, his father had stormed out. This was not unusual. What was different about this night was that his mother stalked after him, tripped in the driveway and, too drunk to get up, lay there until Flipp’s father started the car and backed over her. He was so drunk, he drove to the store, bought cigarettes and beer, flirted with the bucktooth teen behind the counter, and drove back home again, driving over Flipp’s mother a second time.

Although it was an accident, he got ten years. He was obviously unremorseful at the trial which didn’t sit right with the judge. Also, he refused to hire a lawyer and was given a public defender, a glassy eyed young man who sweated whiskey and obviously thought that whatever Flipp’s dad got was his just desserts. When his sentence was handed down, Flipp’s father nodded with a grim little smile, hugged his four children, and was led away in handcuffs.

Flipp’s brothers—Billy, a guitar repairman at Sanders’ Music, and Mordecai, the manager of a large envelope production warehouse—moved home to raise Flipp, a sixth-grader who had yet to be diagnosed with schizophrenia, and his sister, Elle, who was a junior and cheerleader at Knox Central High. Six years had passed. Elle was in the last year of college, earning the first college degree of the family, a bachelor’s in English. Flipp had just graduated high school the previous spring and no one knew what to do with him.

Winter had come early. Flipp's breath emerged from his open mouth like smoke as he walked down Kingston Pike toward All Right! Two blocky middle-aged women with missing teeth and headscarves rummaged through the free boxes out front. Standing aloof from them, Pete smoked a cigarette. The tall, bald bookstore manager was wearing a black leather jacket, high-topped sneakers and a black T-shirt with a white skull on the front.

Pete frowned, took a step away. "Flipp," he said.

"Pete..."

Pete's thin eyebrows rose, fell. "Yeah?" he finally asked.

"I found a book in your free box yesterday and it's missing a chapter, number nine."

Pete waited, rocking on the balls of his feet.

"Here it is," Flipp said, pulling the paperback from his jacket, seeming to cradle it, as if fearing the remaining pages, too, would be lost if not careful.

Pete took another drag on his cigarette and dropped it to the pavement, hunched to get a better look at the cover—a photograph of a vixen type in sexy underthings, kneeling on a chair, lascivious smile on painted lips. He nodded, said, "A dirty book. We don't carry them."

"I know, but see," Flipp said, opening the book to the missing chapter, "it's missing chapter nine."

Pete took the book from Flipp, who seemed hesitant to relinquish it. Flipping to the missing section, Pete nodded. "You're right, exactly one chapter. Must be a good one."

"I was wondering, Pete, if maybe the missing chapter was inside the store."

"Flipp, we don't sell pornographic novels. We also don't sell parts of novels. If you didn't find it in the free box, the chapter's gone."

“But, you see, Pete, everything has to be somewhere, and it seems like it could be inside. If not on the shelf, then maybe behind the counter and, I was wondering...”

“Look, Flipp, I need to get back to work.”

“I know, Pete, but maybe I could come inside...”

Losing patience, Pete said, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. My boss told me I should ban you permanently from the store because of your ‘incidents’ and I’m beginning to think she’s right.”

“But Pete...” Flipp felt a fear like cold coursing through his veins, water-like but more electric. He had a sudden need to sit on the pavement. Or perhaps just smash his fist into the plate glass window.

Pete put his hand on Flipp’s shoulder, squeezed and smiled. “Flipp, I’m afraid you’re going to snap someday and come in with an AK-47.” He said it like the words might be kind, then pushed through the door and inside. The warm air wafted out at Flipp and then the doors were closed again. The two women babbled excitedly about something they’d found. Flipp stared at the book they shared between them, eyes watering, wishing, he too, could touch it.

When he got home, it was dark. Billy was smoking a joint on the couch, feet propped on the coffee table. The flames were low in the fireplace, but with still enough life to pop a log now and then. The room was warm, smelled like coffee and pot.

“Esquire,” Billy said, raising the joint in its roach clip and nodding.

Flipp sat next to his older brother, teeth chattering.

“Why, you’re freezing, little buddy. Come here.” Flipp moved closer to Billy so that his brother could put an arm around him, breathe his weedy breath into his face, run his hand through his hair. “What you got there?”

“Books.” He had a thesaurus from the fifties, an automotive handbook for a ‘61 Dodge Dart, and *Little Sheba*.

“Still carrying that dirty book,” Billy said, grinning like it pleased him. “We need to get you a real woman.” On the TV, Jimmy Carter and his running mate raised their hands to a crowd who cheered and waved signs. “They’re laying me off at Sanders. Ralph gave me thirty days’ notice.” Billy leaned forward, groaning, and put the nearly spent roach in the ashtray and fell back, sighing as if this had been a lot of work. “Don’t say anything to Elle and Mordecai. Something will come up. Who knows, maybe things will turn around at the store and I can stay.” Billy closed his eyes and yawned noisily. “I’d be careful about carrying that book around with you. It’s pretty much against conventions to be openly parading dirty literature in company.”

“I know, but I wasn’t really thinking of it as dirty, so much as...something else.”

“Well, Esquire, you got to take into account other people too.” Within seconds, Billy started to snore sitting up, eyes slit as if watching TV in his sleep.

That night, Flipp, Elle, Mordecai and Billy had dinner together for the first time in months. Elle made fried chicken, heated canned green beans, and whipped together some Mexican cornbread. They washed it down with sweet tea and afterward, Elle said, “Before you run off to your corners, I got something to share with you.” She blushed, cheeks a pretty shade of red beneath sky-blue eyes and the boys grinned at her and waited—she was their girl and they loved her like no one else in the world. “My creative writing professor, Dr. Ripper, encouraged us today to think of an audience we’d like to share our work with. She says writing for real people is a way of honoring it.” Elle’s blush deepened. “I can’t imagine any audience I’d like to share my writing with more than my brothers. Can I read it to you?”

“Sure, baby girl, we’d love to hear it,” said Billy, leaning back in his chair.

Her other brothers nodded too, Mordecai perhaps a bit bemused, Flipp, often the case, hard to read. “All right, just a second. I’ll be back.” She ran down the hallway, flinging her door open. There was a wait, while the three brothers looked at each other. Billy’s eyebrows went up and down. Mordecai stifled a burp. Flipp looked poised, as if he might leave before his sister returned. Then they heard the sound of her feet pounding the hall and she was back in the room with a small notebook.

“Okay,” she said, breathing hard. “Here it is.” She took a deep breath, smoothing down the front of her sweater with one hand, and read:

i wrote this for you
and made you exist.

these letters, symbols
won’t achieve the height
of real adults
(though he hopes to be a capital
h someday and she a big t (1 or
2 can’t wish for a growth
spurt)).
they’re not conscious
of the damage they describe.

my dad murdered my mom though he wouldn’t admit
to much.
he’s served six of ten.

She paused, blushed deeper if possible. “That’s all I got so far.” She waited a second, then said, “It needs a title too.”

There was a pregnant pause and then Billy clapped and said, “That’s all right. You did a good job, Missy. I didn’t realize you were so talented.”

And then Mordecai said, “You shouldn’t say that.”

“What?” Billy asked.

“Not you. *She*,” he said, jabbing a thumb at Elle. “You shouldn’t air our dirty laundry. And anyway, Father didn’t murder Mom. It was an accident.”

“Aw, Mordecai, she didn’t mean that,” Billy said. “Murder’ is just a figure of speech.”

“No,” Elle said, eyes wide, “it’s not. I meant what I said.”

“Oh, now,” Billy began, but Elle wasn’t listening.

“What’d you think, Philip?” she asked her younger brother.

Pale-complected like his sister, Flipp blushed, unable to speak for several moments. Then, in a quiet voice, he said, “I don’t know, Elle. I need to think.”

Flipp skimmed the pages of *Little Sheba*. He was no longer reading the book so much as looking for clues—in the dialogue attributed to the novel’s heroine and her physical descriptions, her actions. In fact, the more he read, the more the physical and textual seemed interconnected as if her body were both formed by words and also speaking words. A “cacophony,” his 1950s-era thesaurus informed him.

Sometime later, he got up and went across the hall to his sister’s room, knocked on her door, and she said, “Come in.”

Elle was reading a novel, propped up in bed by two pillows, thick glasses on, hair around her shoulders. Flipp closed the door behind him. This was the bedroom that their parents used to share, the room that Elle moved into after their two older brothers came back home.

“I wanted to tell you I thought your poem was real good,” he said, looking at the floor. A toe poked through a hole in his gray sock.

She grinned and didn’t blush this time. “Thanks, honey.”

“I’ve been thinking of writing poetry myself.”

“You should!” She leaned forward. “We should write together and trade work. Read each other’s poems and stuff.”

“I’m not ready to write just yet,” he said nervously. “But maybe soon.”

“Okay.” Elle leaned back into her pillows. “Well, goodnight.”

“Elle,” he said after a time where she waited for him to say goodnight too and leave. “Can I sleep here tonight? In your bed?”

She blinked in surprise at the request, one he hadn't made since he was little. "Sure, honey," she said, sliding over and patting the bed next to her. "Climb in."

That night, Little Sheba appeared to Flipp in his dreams. She was a petite blonde in pigtails and underwear. She wore thick glasses like his sister's. If Flipp had been asked to describe Sheba to someone upon waking, he probably would have described a young woman who resembled both his sister and the model on the cover of *Let Me Cum in Your Backdoor, Little Sheba*, but who was completely different—no blushing, no lascivious smile.

This girl took a piece of paper with writing on it out of a filing cabinet and placed it on a desk, drew her chair up. "I realized something yesterday," the dream girl said. "Chapter nine is not missing. It never was. Now pay careful attention." Flipp stepped closer to see down at the page on the desk. The girl was carefully tracing the letters with a fountain pen. "If I don't write it, no one will," she said.

When Flipp awoke he was alone. The curtains were open and the light shown in. He listened and, after a while, determined he was in the house alone.

"I should be able to do this, shouldn't I, Helena?" he asked the empty room. Helena, he had decided, was the name of the dream girl: part-Elle, part-Little Sheba, part-porn novel cover model. Helena had been the name of his mother. "Yes," was his answer to himself.

Throwing off the empty covers, he padded across the hall to his room and began moving the books away from one of the walls. He stacked them haphazardly against the other three walls, until they were tipping over and he was walking across them. Then he began moving them into the hallway and, in sudden impatience, started throwing them from the room.

He ate a bowl of cereal then and drank a glass of o.j. since his stomach was growling. Then he spent an hour searching for a pair of scissors. He almost reached the conclusion that there were no scissors in the house when he discovered an old pair in a box beneath Elle's bed. The rest of the morning was spent culling the books in his room, clipping sentences and words and fragments from books, carefully pasting them to a piece of typing paper, starting a new page when one was filled.

When he had a stack of pages, he reread them again, slowly, then stood in front of the empty wall and took a deep breath.

Elle didn't get home until late that night. She was a little tipsy, though she had felt okay to drive. She had spent several hours at the library after her last class and a boy, a boy from her creative writing class, a boy with uncombed hair, skinny hips, and a wicked laugh, had asked her to get a burger at Moe's. She had, they'd laughed and talked about this and that. Time had slipped away and then he'd said, "Want to go to Le Magasin?" She hadn't been before, but knew it was a gay bar rumored to play the best dance music in town. She went and danced with the boy. He'd asked to come home with her afterward and she'd just laughed and scribbled her number on a slip of paper. He'd leaned on her windowsill and kissed her, tasting of beer and cigarettes and said, "Drive careful, now." She said she would. She kissed him again. The night had been magnificent.

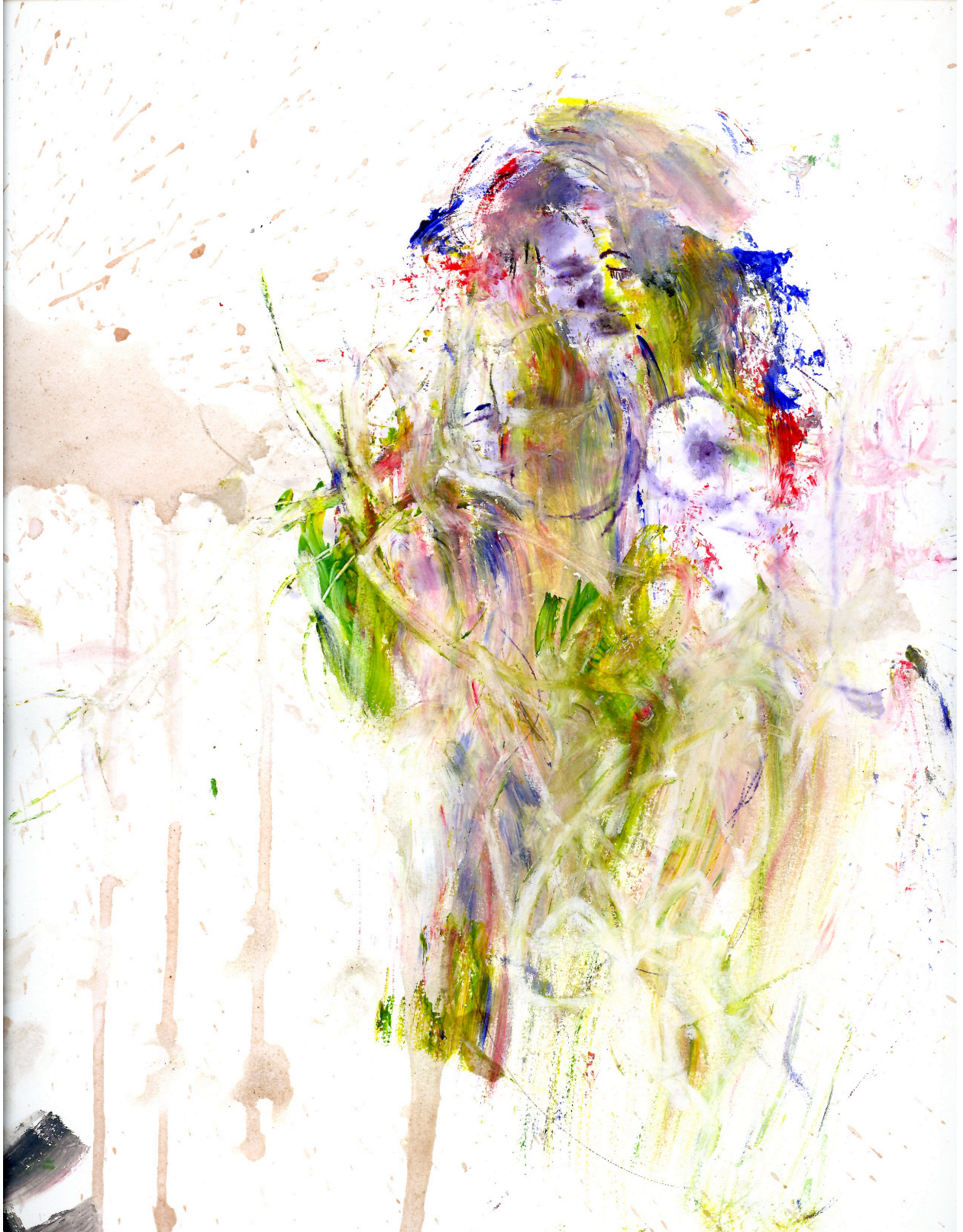
On her way home, it had begun to flurry. She tread carefully over the icy sidewalk to the front door, hands out at her side as if tightrope-walking. Inside, the house was quiet. Mordecai was, for the third night this week, late at the factory. Billy had had a gig and was probably sleeping at the apartment of an on-again, off-again girl of his. The house looked exactly the same as when she had left except for the presence of the cereal bowl on the dining room table and a pizza box that hadn't been there that morning.

She went down the hallway, flipping on the light, and then immediately stopped, hand at her throat. The hall was scattered with books and ripped pages and crumpled paper, and the light spilled out of her brother's room. She had a sudden fear, and said, "Philip," though the word croaked out like an attempt to breathe more than a word. She tried again: "Philip? Philip, are you all right?" She could feel the hysteria creeping into her voice, but then heard the susurrations of Flipp's sleeping, the sound he made just short of snoring when he was on his back. Leaning against the wall, she breathed again, almost laughed. She opened her mouth to say "Wake up, sleepyhead," but then said nothing as she stood in the doorway to his room.

The wall was covered with such a tight scrawl that, for a second, Elle thought her brother had painted it black. Then, she quickly realized that the black was broken up with the off-white paint beneath it, and that it was words or, better yet, sentences. Rage whirled through her and she opened her mouth to scream at Flipp—and yet. Her eyes caught on the heading near the ceiling, "CHAPTER 9," in a script surely too carefully written to be that of a young man on Haldol. She stepped closer. Along the upper-left-hand side of the wall, he had written:

Little Sheba went forward from the house she had lived in for all her life. Although she had lived in a state of carnality and lust, this had been simply the beginning part to what she would do. The spring day shown down on her face and her blond hair blew in the wind. She knew that now her life would begin...

Elle read until her back ached. Then she went to the living room for a chair. Getting a Coke, she returned to the room and sat and finished reading, moving the chair when she had to, bending to read the words near the floor, finally getting on her knees for the last few lines. Her brother slept, lightly snoring, that pornographic novel he'd been carrying around all week open on his rising and falling chest. There was a stack of paper on his bedside table. The top page, with its cut-and-pasted multiple typeface from various books, looked like a ransom note. It scared her a little. In the morning, she would ask questions and yell at him, but for now Flipp could sleep.



Of the Creator's Guild | Dr. Ernest Williamson III



To my unborn daughter

Courtney Hill Wulsin

I am not perfect.

This world into which I dared bring you is flawed and dark and raw.
Do not be afraid.

This world will ask so much of you.
Compromise. Adaptation. Faith.
It will, at moments, make you doubt everything you know
and then just as quickly return your trust doublefold.

There is only so much a woman can do.
Only so much you will be able to achieve in your brief life
slipped within the universe like a flutter of lashes.

I did not save seeds for you.
I did not preserve land for your future harvests.
I did not even keep my finest jewels to be passed on as your dowry.

But I will give you all I have. And so too will this world.

Do not be discouraged.

Go forth into places of darkness and bring light.
Go forth into places of sadness and bring sweet bread and laughter.
Go forth into places of wickedness and bring the delicacy of an open hand.

And at the end of the day permit yourself a sip of the sweetest wines,
a taste of the truest loves,
and the comfort of restful sleep.

Remember always, it is your truthful path that this world needs most.



Born at Home

Amanda Layman Low

I am a pushing bear. I'm inside out with knees behind my head and muscles twitching in protest. My braids, one at each shoulder, are frayed and damp. There was supposed to be a baby an hour ago, but all I can envision now is a brick wall. Despite the mirror between my legs that reveals that curious hairy bulb, all I can feel is stopped. Spent. The contraction ends, I collapse into the bed again. I sleep deeply for sixty seconds. I start again.

I was strolling around Barnes and Noble, balloon-pregnant, when my phone rang. It was my midwife, Judith. Judith is a fifty-something horse lady with wild gray hair and round, azure eyes. Her laughter is like little bells. "The strangest thing happened," she began. "I dozed off earlier, and I woke up with the words 'Amanda' and 'bromelain' in my head. Go pick up some bromelain capsules, will you?"

Nine months ago, such mystical convictions would've made me dismiss Judith as a total kook. Although I was actually more intense in my atheism now that I'd arrived at the end of my pregnancy, it was far too late now to do anything but trust Judith.

"...Before you use it, test a little inside your vagina. If it doesn't sting, put one capsule in, as far back as you can," she explained. Because of scar tissue on my cervix from a procedure several years ago, Judith was afraid I would have trouble dilating enough to give birth. The bromelain, a dietary supplement made from pineapple, was known to break down this sort of tissue.

I half-assed the allergy test because I figured I wouldn't have any trouble. That sort of stuff never happened to me. After inserting the little red capsule as far up as I could, I relaxed with my husband to watch a movie. About an hour later, I turned to Shaun in panic. "It's stinging. Oh god, it's stinging." I ran to the bathroom to flush it out with water, but that only made it worse. I began to sweat when I noticed I was leaking a watery pink color. *My god, I thought. My insides are corroding. Is my baby corroding too?*

Judith apologized over and over on the phone. I tried to suck it up, because seriously, if I couldn't handle a little sting down there, how the hell was I supposed to survive childbirth? Then, to keep from disappointing my inner hypochondriac, I entertained daymares of the baby coming out looking like the guys who melted at the end of Indiana Jones.

But then I noticed something else. I was leaking water. When I called and gave her the news, Judith and her apprentice, Sharron, told me they were coming.

When they entered my apartment, we kept our voices hushed. Having a baby called for that sort of reverence. After providing me with two homeopathic medications to help induce labor, Judith went into my office to nap on the floor, and Sharron sat on the living room floor to stitch a quilt. Shaun played a computer game.

I took my gentle birth tincture and little white homeopathic pellets eagerly every few minutes. I rocked back and forth on the floor and stretched and squatted. I imagine Sharron was looking on with silent amusement from behind her quilting needles—I was ready for this unknown baby to materialize, but she knew better. She knew from years of experience that babies, like cats, never come when they're called. Her air of respectful superiority didn't bother me, but Judith's disappearance, however, did. In a way, it was indicative of our entire relationship.

It was strange how I could feel so comfortable having this woman prod around in my lady zone, all the while disagreeing with her on many things so deeply. Let me explain.

In another life, it seemed, it was springtime and I was eight weeks pregnant. After eagerly awaiting my first checkup, Judith called last minute and rescheduled because one of her other clients needed her. Irrked, I went along with it and we met up for the first time four weeks later.

One of Judith's first rules was that I attempt to cut carbs from my diet and eat an insane amount of protein. Gently, I protested, fearing anything that hinted at a fad diet: "I'd understand eating mostly protein if I was bodybuilding, but..."

"But you are bodybuilding," Sharron said. "Literally."

Fair enough.

Judith also wanted me to keep a food diary, documenting exactly what I ate, so she could see if I was staying on track. I stapled some paper together and kept it up diligently for a week, but started to loathe the thing. It reminded me too much of my calorie-counting days my freshman year of college, when I had starved myself down to a bony 104. I ranted to Shaun, "She doesn't get it. She's forcing me to relive my pseudo-eating disorder. It's like she doesn't even realize that."

Shaun carefully suggested that I communicate this with Judith, which of course, I said I couldn't do. Being the one who likes to fix things, Shaun dramatically chucked the food log into the garbage himself and called Judith to tell her the constant documenting of meals was stressing me out.

That was our first conflict.

Our second came when she required me to identify my "locus (the marriage of the words 'location' and 'focus') of control." This was supposed to be some sort of thing for me to focus on during labor. For some women it was something physical: a painting or a photo. For others it was meditation, a chant or God. After a long session

of journaling, I discovered my locus would be viewing myself as a child. I wrote a detailed explanation and handed it dutifully over to Judith. She was impressed; I saw her eyes flicker, fascinated, as she scanned the page.

When she finished reading, she prodded me further, gave me another homework assignment. I don't remember what this one was, but it was starting to sound like she was asking loaded questions. In the following weeks, I racked my husband's brain to figure out what Judith wanted me to say. "Just be honest with her, sweetie. If she's confusing you, tell her," Shaun would say.

But Judith wasn't confusing me. I knew exactly what she was doing. She had spoken up before about her faith, a faith as evident in her speech as the silver cross dangling from her neck. She wanted me to find God. No, worse—she believed I couldn't have a successful labor without God.

Our third clash, the ultimate brick wall, came on Saturday, November twenty-sixth.

Things started happening around five in the afternoon that day. I'd had two doses of castor oil: thick and fluffy going down. Judith did an exam. As she checked my cervix, she looked up at the wall behind my head. She always looked up, or closed her eyes, when she did her exams. In the dim comfort of my untidy bedroom, I was her crystal ball.

This time, her mystical expression changed to one of relief. "Thank you, Lord," she said before looking at me. The creases in her face deepened as she smiled. "You're four centimeters. There's only a tiny thread of scar tissue left on your cervix. I think we're going to have a baby soon."

Then, the truly unexpected happened—there was a massive gush of water. It wasn't like they say where it feels like you're peeing yourself. It was more like six people were simultaneously peeing on *me*. Judith's clear eyes betrayed her surprise. She giggled. "I think we're *definitely* going to have a baby soon!"

A phone call revealed that another client was in labor, so Judith sent Sharron to attend it with the explanation that my situation “required her expertise.” Just an hour later Judith did another exam, which triggered my first real contraction.

And this was when things changed. Knowing it was happening now, I realized I was truly going to do this at home, without medication, without doctors, for better or for worse. I was a twenty-five year old lady, giving birth to my first child in my modest apartment, with the help of my accommodating husband and this old crazy-haired lady who was so shockingly, but warmly, my opposite.

I heard murmurs about the birthing pool, and my husband was suddenly in the other room. Judith’s warm hips created a divot in the mattress, and I fell alongside her like her paralyzed child. This was the start, and each contraction built up harder than the last. One would start like tightening, the twisting of my innards. Then it would peak like an inadvertent convulsion that sent my body shooting out in ten different directions. I was completely powerless. It felt like something had stabbed me in the stomach and then ran behind me, pushing me, forcing me to keep up in a race I was barely aware I was in.

For the first few, I lay on my side and writhed with my eyes closed, breathing shallowly. Judith kept one hand on my side and whispered to me to chant the word “open,” over and over in my lower register. Never had someone issued a more difficult command. I could say “open” about twice before that monster would knock the wind out of me again and start pushing me. I squirmed on my side and clawed my pillow. Judith whispered, “You’re running from the pain. Stop bicycling your legs. Relax. Don’t run away, just feel it.”

She left. I lay alone on my bed. I suffered a few more, and finally got up between contractions to see if the pool was ready.

I was angry: the pool was only inflated, not filled. Shaun hurried, kitchen sink to pool, kitchen sink to pool. I draped myself over the plastic rim and I knew I was

about to have another contraction. This position was new, and this room was too bright. Everything was wrong. I panicked and writhed as my entire midsection did its thing. I reached out for my husband's hand, put it against my cheek, and cried out.

Shaun was frustrated. The pool wasn't filling fast enough. Judith was napping on the couch with a wool blanket over her head. I tried to remember to chant, to breathe, to do all the things I'd read about—but this was nothing like I could ever have imagined. On occasion, Judith would call out from under her blanket, "*Open, say open...*you've got to keep your voice low." She sounded annoyed. But didn't she know what I was going through? Why had she abandoned me? And my husband was too busy filling the pool to help me. This was supposed to be lovely and spiritual, complete with soft moaning and comfort. A little candlelight wouldn't have hurt, either. But I was a lame, birthing thing, alone, screaming and scraping along my living room floor like a bottom-feeder.

I should have known Judith would have been like this. Just a month ago, her husband died after a long and painful disease. She called me to tell me, high-pitched and breathless, a couple nights after it happened. I told her I was so sorry. She told me more, adding that I was far beyond her other "mamas" in emotional maturity. "There's a reason God paired you and me together," she said. She meant to sound wise, but her vulnerability leaked through. She told me she and Sharron didn't talk about it; they each had to process the tragedy in separate silence. She was lonely. She was easily forty years my senior, yet she was leaning on me.

I now had my body in the pool and my hands over the edge. Screw everyone, I thought. From here on out, it would just be me and this baby, working through this thing alone.

I dug my fingers into the scratchy carpet and flailed my legs behind me with each new contraction. Trial and error proved that this was the only way to do it, this

was the only way anyone in the world could do this exact thing, right now. This was the closest thing to coping.

The pool was finally full, and I was sitting in the eye of the storm, stoic, slack-eyed. Shaun sat behind me. This time, when the contraction rushed in, it was a hurricane. My chant of “open, open, open,” turned into a screech, then I blurted my desperate plea, “I want to push, I want to push!”

Judith popped up and ran over, saying, “I have to check you first, honey, don’t push.”

How dare her. Every atom in my body needed to push.

But suddenly she snapped to life and said the strangest words, “You’re fully dilated already. You can push on the next contraction.”

Disbelieving, I slumped back in the pool, legs outstretched. The only thing I was wearing, one of Shaun’s old T-shirts, was soaked. I took it off.

The contraction came and Judith said, “Hold your breath.” She put her fingers in and told me to concentrate on that area to push them out. This was almost like Novocaine, this permission to act. I was still in the torturous race, sprinting against my will, and the monster was still pushing me ahead full-force. But now, finally, I was pushing back.

She told me to reach down and feel baby’s head. I did. It was rough and wet. I gasped.

This was when I had what you might call a second wind.

“I’m worried the water’s not warm enough. Are you married to the idea of having baby in the pool?”

No. Whatever works.

She set up a towel on the bedroom floor. I contracted over it, squatting and pushing. I rested. I contracted again, on my hands and knees. Rested. Again. Rested. I was shaky and uncomfortable.

She turned on the bathroom light, positioned my foot on a stool, and I squatted again. Over the toilet. Rested. Pushed, awkward, then rested. Then I draped my arms around Shaun's neck and sank down with him each time. We rose and fell together like a four-legged human lever. I pushed and pushed and pushed. I rested. Shaun whispered, "You're a warrior." An hour had now passed since the pool.

We moved to the bed. I tried lying on my sides, one, and then the other. I pulled my knee up over my head, and even while I pushed, I doubted this would ever work. The earth was inside me. How could anyone, bent and quivering and bowlegged, push out the earth?

I felt different parts of my body shutting down, city lights snapping off at the stroke of five. I was giving up. With each new contraction, I pushed just enough to alleviate the pain, but not enough to push out a baby. I knew I was giving up.

I finally sprawled out on my back. This was the only way I could be, and even that sucked the energy from me. Judith knew I was fading. She instructed me to tuck in my chin and pull my knees up and out as I pushed. This was too much to remember. I had been pushing with my stomach, my legs, my toes and my neck. And now, everything clenched up involuntarily. I couldn't relax the muscles I didn't need. My body was one unit now. Everything in or everything out.

Judith asked about a mirror. My voice said that we had one in the other bathroom. She brought it in, and during the next push, she showed me baby's head, just a small sliver of dark hair. I actually let out a brittle scream of excitement. Third wind. Dull, feverish heat hovered around my body from this resistance workout.

I pushed hard and saw baby's head moving slowly, widening in the crevice. Shaun's face transformed. Then the contraction ended and baby's head slipped back into just a sliver again.

An alarm sounded deep in my heart. This was going on too long. I would have to go to the hospital during these raging contractions, I thought. I would deliver by C-

section, just like my mother. My “locus” was nowhere to be found. The idea was laughable; Judith had been right, I couldn’t do this alone.

But Judith neither said, nor hinted at, anything of the sort. Instead, she read me perfectly. She and I, for the first time, came into perfect alignment. Her voice was muscular as she spoke. “Amanda, all women reach this point during childbirth. This is the point where you have to make a decision. Either you do this or you don’t. This is when you have to find the strength to push your baby out.”

She began praying. Shaun was praying, too. I just closed my eyes and decided that I wasn’t giving up after all. I had zero reserves but I was going to fake it. On the next contraction, I pushed like I was dying. I could feel the progress below, a hard, tight feeling. I tried imagining baby’s head emerging. I tried to will the child out. There was a sting, like that Indian Rug Burn game. There was tingling silence.

I was still contracting, but Judith said to rest for a couple of breaths. Then she said to push again, and again, I gave it my all. If this wasn’t enough, I didn’t know what I would do. Judith said toward the end of my push, “May I make a cut?”

“Whatever it takes,” I breathed.

A gush. Judith’s hands were like lightning. She laid a wet, bluish body on my stomach, just like that. A baby. *My* baby. It wriggled in my awkward grasp. “Rub her feet to warm her,” Judith said. She was urgent, but I barely noticed that anything was wrong. “Shaun, warm up some towels for her in the dryer.”

Her.

I hadn’t even thought to check the gender, but that pronoun was what struck the chord: I’d had a girl. This was a dream. I had been certain it was a boy. “A girl?” I breathed.

“The cord snapped,” Judith said. “She lost a lot of blood. Hold her close.”

I held her. My husband scurried in the hallway, and I started to get the sense something was wrong. My midwife was quiet and professional. She wasn’t giddy like I

was, and she kept telling me to rub baby's skin. This woman, who had delivered five hundred babies, sounded nervous.

Something was definitely wrong.

Judith held the cord and told me to push. I pushed and delivered the placenta. My baby wriggled on my chest, and my eyes stayed fixated on her. She was bluish. Disbelieving, I observed her limp body as if with someone else's eyes. What was happening?

Shaun wrapped baby in a hot towel. We changed towels forever. I continued holding baby in the jagged silence, while Shaun and Judith seemed to be holding their breath. All I heard was the dryer spinning in the hallway, heating up more towels.

Minutes later, baby wiggled on my chest and cried. Judith looked at her intently as she said, "Looks like her skin is turning pink. Good."

Judith asked for an hour to herself. "This is my fifth baby this week," Judith said, proud but weary. "Just give me an hour of sleep and I'll come back in to do the paperwork."

When she left the room, Shaun and I stared at baby Evelyn. She stared back. There was wisdom and recognition in those tiny, dark eyes. I don't remember a thing Shaun and I said to each other, but I do know that never again will the three of us enjoy such uninterrupted, pleasurable peace.

Judith returned a few hours later. We all sat on the bed in semi-darkness with no idea what time it was, gossiping about the whole thing like teens at a sleepover. The cord had been around her neck, which had made my pushing futile. Judith admitted that she was really scared for Evelyn's first few minutes. I would have never known it.

But Evelyn Mynatte Low was alive and snuggled up against us in our bed, golden-pink and healthy at seven pounds, four ounces. She was twenty inches long

and born at 9:25 on Saturday, November 26. These are the statistics I pounded out on my phone; these are the first things the world knew about her.

But her bleary gaze knew what only she and I could know. We had arrived together, mother and daughter, both barefoot in a foreign land.



Something Bigger Than Being Alive

Anna Wood

She knows she knows, the thought like e running through her synapses, the unearthed elation rising up like steam through her heft and to the sky, sky. She knows, and it is only 9:07 on a Thursday in November, twenty-two minutes into homeroom and she knows.

Ms. Richards says be quiet the announcements are starting, and the roar becomes a murmur, and behind that is the static that leaks from the speakers hanging in the two front corners of the room. Good morning from the kid who'd fought like it mattered to be elected as the guy who reads the morning announcements, like he's some mc when really he's just Jimmy Crenshaw and has the type of acne that makes her grateful that she's not as hideous as she could've been.

Most of the rest of what Jimmy says is lost to her, though, because all she can think about is how Meredith figured it out, how she knows, how she was able to see past all the cells and rolls and stretched skin that hide that truth that she's always always believed was there underneath but just too deep down for anyone who's not some scuba diver to ever see, and damn if people around here didn't just skim surfaces.

The speakers say something about the pep rally tomorrow afternoon and she sneaks a glance back to Meredith, who's sitting down again now in her Abercrombie khaki capris and it's like her stomach curves in like toward her spine before her breasts start, that's how skinny she is, like any little bitty ounce of fat on her body had been suctioned up into those perfect probably C-cups, the rest of her just muscle, just

smooth cuppable skin. Meredith is the only one she's never been able to hate for it, the only one she's never wished all her own fatty fat would grow on and ruin, the only one she hasn't wanted to strangle or hurt in some big way.

And now it'd paid off? Still a question and not a straight sentence, what did they call them, they'd talked about it in language arts, that fucking test. Declarative. Not thinking declarative yet, but the question wasn't like a what's the meaning of life question, one you're never going to answer, it was more like do I want three slices of pepperoni or sausage for lunch today, where the results are probably pretty close in the end even if deciding it, saying it is enough to make her real nervous because she can't be sure which one has less fat or calories or is healthier or whatever, can't be sure which one'll make the others talk about how her size is her fault, because that thing where they laugh when they see a person with two Whoppers and a Diet Coke is so true. But she feels sure, for now, that Meredith doesn't laugh along with them, that Meredith sees under the gallons of grease, that Meredith, she knows.

And who cares if you've got a radio voice, nobody listens to the fucking radio anymore she wants to say to the speakers, knowing pretty well no one would even hear her if she did because they're all huddled up like mini football teams before the game, talking about who to give the ball to and which cheerleader they'd like to fuck most, and she knows they'd all say Meredith, her name like music. She looks down at her arms, which are white, normal-sized only at the elbow, because no matter how much you pig out it's hard to get fat elbows. Fat fingers, sure, that was taken care of in like the second grade, when everyone was still saying baby fat and she kept repeating those two words to get herself to calm down and stop punching and pinching her very own self, her very own body, baby fat baby fat baby fat, everyone knowing fat babies are cute babies, everyone knowing you can't blame them even when they have crazy alien faces like you know the mama's been sleeping with someone from the ugly part of outer space because the daddy ain't that bad. But she

looks just like her dad, big and squishy and the color of Wonderbread, so she knows that's not what happened in her case. What's hard to imagine is him moving enough to actually get up and get someone pregnant, what's hard to imagine is that he and her mom could move their bellies enough out of the way that his dick could even reach her pussy, what's hard to imagine is that the two lazy assholes back home would want to spend all that energy humping when masturbation and potato chips'd probably be more satisfying for the both of them.

But there's no telling. It's what her Uncle Bradley used to say, there's no telling. And now she sees that that's the most blessed news anyone could've given her, because it means that it's possible no it's true that Meredith knows.

The announcements are over. Jimmy Crenshaw is probably spinning in the swivel chair by the microphone in the room that's off to the left of the school auditorium, the place everyone claims to have made it with everyone else, her excepted. She did slide an unwrapped bean burrito back behind the desk one time though so it would rot and mold and stink up the place for those lucky couples ditching assembly. Now comes the part of homeroom where Ms. Richards reads out the detention list because Spring Leaf High still thinks it's like the 50s they're living in, sitting a bunch of kids down in a room and having them stare at the wall and calling it discipline like it'll change them into good citizens who vote and stop at stop signs and put trash in trash cans and never drive drunk. Max Walker. Jeremy Peters. Stephanie Fernandez. She doesn't hear her own name, but she's stopped listening and is straining to hear Meredith's voice in the clamor of sounds that is approaching the level of roar again. That laugh is maybe hers. It's 9:23, just seven minutes to go before the bell for first period rings and she has to walk to the biology lab out in the science wing, which is really just a bunch of trailers out behind the main building where people smoke up after school before wandering the campus like zombies, not even the temptation of computers and air conditioning enough to lure them back home.

School is the last place any of them wants to come in the morning, but once the clock turns three it's like they all remember how much better it is staying here by the grassless soccer fields than it is going back to deal with angry moms and jobless dads and whatever other shit they've got going on at home. Details aside, it's all the same.

She can't see the spot on her shoulder. She wonders if it's just because of her fat neck not being able to turn as much as a normal person's neck and thinks how she'd slice her skin right off to be able to see the spot. She goes back over what she can remember of it, 9:06 and Ms. Richards had asked Meredith to collect people's envelopes full of prom money, that colossal rip-off where they take sixty-five bucks from you so you can go out and spend a few hundred more on a dress, extra large meaning extra expensive, not that they'd know that, that's her own privileged knowledge, like how her civics teacher is always talking about different people having different areas of expertise and she guesses this is hers. That's before the limo and the big dinner at some place where how the hell are you going to eat without making a mess all over yourself, the skinny girls going to eat fondue, which according to the internet is just a big pot of melted cheese that you stick raw meat and shit into, plus the alcohol and pills they've gotta buy for the after party so they can get shitfaced enough that they won't be nervous about the fact that the guy doesn't have a condom or that there's two other couples in the same hotel room doing the same thing, floor covered in satin and ruffles and later on vomit. God would she be sweeter to Meredith than Drake Mitchells ever could be, god would she never force a cock up inside her like everyone said he had, said rape no not rape yes rape no not, and the counselors getting involved and shit, god did Meredith deserve something better than a big bowl of melted cheddar.

By 9:06 Meredith had done the first two rows of smiling girls and the boys with lowered eyelids trying real hard to act like envelope what envelope who me prom, but everyone ultimately handing over the money. Meredith's shoes are tied so that the

laces wind around and around her skinny ankles like bracelets, her legs bare from there to just under her knees where her khaki capris hit her whole-wheat skin. To be able to wear capris she thinks. To be able to stand up all light, to fly up to your feet as soon as the teacher says, not having to push your weight down into your hands down onto your desk, no trying to wedge your body out of the chair without pushing it back too hard with your ass so it makes that terrible scraping noise that says hey guys here I am Miss Obesity and I love volunteering to help blind children just as much as you love looking at me in a bikini, to be able to just stand up without having to pull your sweatshirt back down over your belly or move your stupid hair out of your eyes or hike up your pants, and why are her pants always falling down if she's such a goddamn cow anyway, she'd been wondering as Meredith made her way past the two black kids in the class, neither of whom is big like her. So she'd been thinking about Meredith's shoelaces and the clothes that fashion execs in New York had probably designed just to fit her perfect body and that stomach that goes in not out and how she'd like to smell her khakis right in the spot where the waistband hits Meredith's hipbone and her extra-small Spring Leaf Fun Run t-shirt sneaks up a little so you can see a tiny portion of that perfect skeleton. How she'd like to drag the edge of her tongue along that curve. How she'd like to put her hands out to feel the good kind of soft, soft like a hotel bath towel.

All this she'd been dreaming at 9:04 at 9:05 and still at 9:06 as Meredith was heading up her row towards the front towards where she was sitting taking envelopes full of cash from the kids sitting behind her, one desk left empty between her and the rest of them like fat's contagious or like fat people smell worse than everyone else and that despite the fact that not all the seventeen-year-old guys had realized that you're supposed to use deodorant before you start sweating and not after you're already soaked in your reeking testosterone. She heard Meredith's small talk with the girl three seats back who was saying how she'd seen her dress shopping and was wondering

which one she'd ended up choosing was it the strapless blue one and talking about god how awful it would be to show up in the same dress, which was really just this girl trying to say Meredith I'm just like you I'm just as good as you and if we dressed the same people would even mix us up. She can tell you no one would mix up Meredith and Lila, who has greasy braids and wears a stupid hairband and neon socks every day of the week and while she might not be huge she definitely has a stomach that curves out. But Meredith sweet Meredith gave a little laugh like the doorbell you sit waiting for and said oh she hadn't picked out a dress yet because she was still looking for the perfect one, and Lila who'd bought a dress from that store on that day had therefore chosen an imperfect one, surprise surprise. She wasn't surprised.

And then at 9:07 she was.

The bell rings, the last minutes of homeroom passing too quickly and everyone's feet heavy and plodding and not wanting to fight gravity, not wanting to get to their first class, not wanting to break their huddles and go out and play the actual game where there are opposing teams and referees who never take your side and red cards. She feels like she's been buckled into her seat and can't seem to remember how to undo the latch and lift herself up out of there. The others are getting up and the girls are putting their colorful pens into their expensive leather pencil cases like it's a sex act and the boys are wiping their noses on their sleeves and making fart sounds as their friends stand up and it's like nothing's really changed since middle school except some thirty extra pounds of body keeping her glued to this desk. If Meredith walks out it may turn out that she's dreamed the whole thing up, if Meredith gets away she might never be able to get her back. If she gets up now and walks to the science wing over the muddy path, which is somehow always muddy even if it hasn't rained for weeks, she might lose Meredith for good and she might not be able to prove what she feels about her knowing. But Meredith's still surrounded by her skinny she-wolf friends, she's put her little blue cell phone into her back pocket

and is walking towards the door, her ass asymmetrical now but all the cuter for it, the square outline of the phone just making her curves curvier and that little spot where the top of her khakis hits her hipbone is still visible, still crying out.

The e is already waning and the whole thing is backwards with an immediate onset and a quick fade, but after the fade it'll be the same old low and an inability to get to sleep so you're up still at five in the morning saying to yourself baby fat and all the words you can think of that rhyme with it. Maybe she doesn't know.

She had been thinking about what Meredith's perfect dress would end up being, if maybe it would be something wild or maybe something like a bride would wear or maybe something black, wouldn't her skin look nice in black, and of course she didn't buy the same dress Lila bought and no she wouldn't know that extra large means extra expensive because she probably doesn't even have to look at the prices, she probably has real nice parents who say whatever makes you happy dear like they say only as a joke on TV now because whose family is really like that, but maybe Meredith's really is and it was as she was speculating about what dinner might look like at Meredith's house that it happened. There was what an itch on her shoulder that suddenly clarified itself as the fingers of the most perfect hand at Spring Leaf High School, the most perfect hand on the planet so far as she's concerned and they were resting on her shoulder like it was the only place in the world they wanted to be and there was electricity coming out of the four fingertips that she could feel separately now towards the back of her right shoulder like they were a stingray like they were a taser like she was being shot and this is what it feels like to have Meredith touch you. Gabriella she said not Gabby or Flabby or just plain Fatty, hey Gabriella she said and her fingers were still on her shoulders so it wasn't just to get her attention hey Gabriella you coming to prom she asked when she could have just silently held out her hand in front of her face and opened and closed her fingers to say pay up Flabby that is if you can find a dress that fits you. And the words she should've said got

melted by the chemicals in her brain into a happy mush that couldn't even make baby sounds let alone form words to talk back to the face of the creature whose fingers even now were still in slight contact with her shirt though separating themselves far far too quickly. So are you coming do you have the money Ms. Richards told me to collect the money from everyone and all these words directed at no one in the world but her, these sentences formed with breath from Meredith's lungs and throat and coming out into the room only so they could make their way into her ears, only so the air that was in Meredith's body could enter her body too and her eyes widened at the thought and it was all she could do to take control of some of her muscles and shake her head no and whisper I didn't bring the money today. She wanted to say Meredith to say I didn't bring the money today Meredith like Meredith had said Gabriella but she choked and the name didn't come out. And what was Meredith thinking now that she couldn't even talk, was she thinking oh god I touched the wrong person I touched her by mistake oh god where's my hand sanitizer but she just said okay well I think the last day's tomorrow so you better hurry up.

Meredith is out the door now and laughing loudly with her friends about something and she is still in her seat and her backpack is still unzipped from when she'd taken out her biology notes that she was supposed to look at before next period's quiz on the chemical formula of photosynthesis. That's an idea she can get behind, just let the sun feed you so you blossom and grow and bigger is better and healthier and greener and you never have to worry about how many calories how many pounds and whatever shape you take is just your shape. It's like human beings are the only living things whose genes are designed to fuck them over, make them conscious enough to realize how ugly they all are and hate themselves for it, make them fall in love with people who will never love them back, make them want something bigger than being alive, which seems to be enough for everything else on the planet. But there's no telling, she says aloud, but there's no telling and Eric Jaster

who's walking past her looks at her like fat and crazy too what a combo but she doesn't even see him because she's feeling Meredith's fingertips still and hearing her voice say Gabriella and trying to direct as much sunlight as possible to the little plant inside her that is trying so hard to grow tall, tall enough that it can announce to the whole world that Meredith knows she's beautiful underneath.



Since

Sophia Pandeya

since the tamarind surrendered
all her wisdom and became
a toothless concentrate puckered
on the blank afterthoughts
of melamine shelving

since i held the wrinkled seed
pods archaic as talking drums whose
sentences crumble slowly in the solitary bars
of cellphone prisons

since i wrote a broken syllable
of mist plucked from the ghostly braille
of moonlight's book

since i chased a turquoise colt, a slim
river bolting like a streak
of childhood kohl

since the icicle wind rode
roughshod on the falling
teeth of glaciers

since i strung a solstice
of shriveling marigolds

since then have i built
this edifice knowing
it would ruin



Tripping over a cord

Victor Arnaldo Perez

a lamp crashes down, sending the few inside running for cover.
Sleeping, I can still hear the rustling overhead, dwellers, deep
in the sticky dampness of sleep. They hide within the black eyes
of a skyscraper, heavy, against the darkness behind me. So I rise.
I rise with somnambulant wings, with eyes wide like stereo
speakers, sifting through the sidewalk trees and street lights.
I couldn't help but think of tíó Bebo, dead now for years, unshaven,
with body and apron arched over the hum of machines. To him
there was always something severed but reunited again. And back
under the florescent lights I could see abuelito Galaviz, a man I never
knew, but could imagine somehow, more like symbol, less like person,
sitting on a small wooden stool with hands as big as boxing gloves.
He has spent the years shucking the insides of time pieces, tossing their
shells onto the floor, flecks of gold spilling like light from his waist.



Links | Fabio Sassi



The Corrosive Hours

Frederick Pollack

Each week now guys are getting out of prison
after twenty years
because of DNA testing. You see them
on television, outside the walls,
or on a faded street with somehow
lurid trees, and there are always
people with them. You think
family, loyalty,
love, dedicated lawyers—
all that traditional stuff.
But perhaps those people are angels
hired for the occasion,
formerly by a federal program,
now by the states, or by CNN or Newscorp
itself, to maintain the illusion
that somebody cares. Meanwhile
back in the joint, the innocent
whose evidence is inconclusive,
unexamined, never gathered,
or lost, return
to that lifelong meditation
which is the point of prison:
Why is there something at all rather than nothing?
and tell themselves it is God's
consciousness that matters, any other
briefly, trivially,
accidentally separated.
And the one who was released
lives, not in the moment,
but in the Few Years Left to Him
as a block, in the shade of a vast stone

that may be called indifferently
death or the economy.
Showering long and alone;
the television always gently on
or even off; and when
somebody from the old days
comes by—his life, wife,
wives, successes
the noise made by a ghost or child—
bringing out, ceremonially,
with great hushed pleasure,
a can of fruit salad in heavy syrup
and two spoons.



Impractical Jokester

Christopher Sampson

Prankster

I love pranks and practical jokes as long as I am not the one being “had.” I would pull some obvious prank on April Fool’s Day. My parents were the unlucky targets. Putting salt in the sugar always worked on my dad. He would screw up his face as he sipped his acrid breakfast brew. My motto was “Deny, deny, deny!” It was a great way to get attention, blaming others like my little brothers, Corcoran and Paul.

The best prank I ever pulled was on my mom. I must have been about seven years old. I had been home a week from the hospital, happy, having survived surgery. I received many gifts from friends and neighbors. I don’t know who thought it a good idea to get me goldfish. They die.

I craved attention, needing even more than a sick child deserved.

My grandma was visiting with my parents in the living room. I had made this paper packet at Sunday School, nicely colored. It was intended as a gift for mom on Mother’s Day, to be filled with flower seeds. I don’t know what possessed me. I put a dead goldfish in the packet, sealed it, and went into the living room. As I crossed the point of no return, I don’t remember feeling any guilt or remorse. It was exhilarating. I held out the packet and offered it to my mom. She gushed how sweet I was, and me being so sick. She was unwrapping the packet, ever so carefully, not wanting to smudge my artwork, telling the room I was sweet and what a brave boy I was. Then she discovered the dead fish, screamed, threw it on the floor, screaming louder. She came to where I was standing and slapped me. I started to cry crocodile tears and my

dad was laughing. Through the big picture window of our living room we could see my mother out in the middle of the street screaming, jumping up and down. My grandma, confused, asked, “What happened? What happened?” It worked better than I ever expected. The attention was worth the slap. Funny, what a good little actor I was. My grandma laughed along with my dad, and through my tears, I smiled.

The Strangel

I paraded my annoying little brother Paul around our back yard feeding him a variety of leafy greens from the flower bed. Wouldn't you know it, I was about to feed Paul some elephant ear when a woman, a “strangel,” appeared in our driveway. Catching us unaware, smiling, she drifted toward us to ask if mom was home. She quickly put two and two together and asked me, “What are you feeding him?” I said, “Nothing.” Pauly puked a pool of green goo, ridding himself of the garden salad right at her feet. “You might have killed him,” croaked the strange woman, taking the green ear out of my hand.

I must have got teasing somehow confused with a prank and playing a trick on someone . . . or maybe killing your little brother with a bite of elephant ear was mean and unforgivable. One time Jesus was walking down our street. My mom said he was a Sikh. I wondered if he knew the “strangel.”

Focusing on tricks that weren't poisonous, I had a ring that I bought from the magic store at Disneyland. I would pretend the gem was real. If you got too close, scrutinizing my claim, you got a face full of water.

I was impressed by the neighborhood magician who would ask you to pull his finger and then pop a fart on cue. I wasn't daring enough to risk soiling my pants for a laugh and becoming the butt of my own joke.

G. Junior

G. Junior, my boyhood best friend, won the prize for being the biggest stinky. His neighbor across the street built a very sturdy playhouse for their kids. Junior lifted one of the floorboards up, pants down, planted a fresh turd there, and put the plank back in its spot. The place stank so bad after a couple of days they had to tear the playhouse apart.

I encouraged G. Junior just by being his audience. I was having lunch with him at his house. I was about to take a bite of my peanut butter sandwich when he came out of the bathroom waddling, his pants around his ankles. He turned and flashed me a “brown eye.” I was laughing, choking on my sandwich as his mom entered from the kitchen, “Gunther!”

G. Junior was bolder than I. We were best friends, blood brothers. He knew that he could talk me into anything. Once he dared me to hold a heated light bulb with my bare hand. The blisters hurt for over a week. Now the word dare was included in my personal lexicon. G. Junior and I loved stripping off our clothes and playing around. For such a modest little boy, I seemed to enjoy being nude with Gunther. His sister, Prissy, would catch us naked in his closet and yell, “Mom, they’re at it again!” As it turns out, to the best of my knowledge, G. Junior was not gay.

Wanting us to wear his sister’s dresses and sing, “Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-de-ay,” I did it on a dare. We danced in a chorus line showing our genitals to an unsuspecting audience. I was not turned on by wearing a skirt. I wanted my jeans back. I didn’t want to be “had” by Miss Prissy.

Kiddie Sex

The Newberry’s. Carter was nine, I was eight, Stan and my brother Corky were seven. We all doffed our pajamas. Carter held a flashlight aiming at our butts and weenies while the three of us ran around the room naked. Corky and I abandoned our sleeping

bags. Corky hopped into bed with Carter and I ended up in bed with Corky's best friend, Stan. Stan and I tickled and stroked our way to a sexual pinnacle. We got the giggles and started to laugh out loud. We were all laughing now and Carter hushed us. It was strange no one came in to check on us. We weren't able, at our ages, to climax, and yet it confirmed to me that I was a homosexual; no doubt about it.

Half-ling

Now, I knew for sure that I was to be peeking at life through a closet door, slamming it shut or leaving it wide open. Times were tough. I had to fight this urge. *I am not a faggot.* I was confused, sending mixed messages to everyone.

Sometimes I felt that I was less than half myself. Once inside the closet, it becomes quite comfortable. I would lie. I was paranoid and defensive. There was strip poker where I would refuse to strip all the way. I hated being "had," to be humiliated; my boyhood integrity had limits above and beyond the rules agreed upon. As Jeff says, I can dish it out, but I can't take it. I didn't want to get a boner, embarrassing myself. I would hear of straight boys playing "circle jerk." Getting a boner there would mean you were "queer." You would think I'd enjoy that? You bettya! I'd be there in a quick second; pants down, my dick in hand, in the black of darkness, sitting in a circle, everyone pretending to masturbate. The one person caught doing it for real was the "circle jerk." It would never happen, because I couldn't stomach the stigma of being the circle jerk, and yet, that's who I secretly wanted to be.

I hated the word "queer." I hated effeminate men. I began enjoying the company of my straight friends more and more. As I grew up, I embraced masculinity and buried my gay self deep within me. My family would never accept my homosexuality. Off the cuff, Mom told me so. In the piano bench, along with my sheet music, she found some crude drawings I had sketched featuring shapely models

in sexy dresses. She tried describing gay people to me. She said the whole idea disgusted her. She threw my haute couture in the trash.

It was a phase. I would have to grow out of it.

When I was thirteen it became a battle. At one moment, swimming around in her pool, I French kissed Veronica Perry's belly button. After plunging in the pool, that one day, Veronica wanted me bad! We would be dating in a year or so. Once, she planned on us needing a sleeping bag on the Fourth of July. I asked where were we going. She said, "Eagle's Nest." I complained, "You can't see fireworks from there."

In the next minute, I was trying to get guys to wrestle with me. I would love to have been pinned to the floor, feeling a man's hot breath on my neck in an act of submission. That would be fireworks. I was a jokester and I would not be "had." I must be practical. The "half self" would have to be enough to carry me through my life. Many could see through the transparency of who I was: a "half-ling." There was a gravitas missing in who I claimed to be. My public had seen it all before; they got the joke before I was born. It takes so much energy to put on a show 24/7 for nearly forty years, especially when the show has an audience that doesn't applaud and is ready to walk out on you.

Riviera Elementary

Giving my friend Anna dog treats wrapped in foil, I told her they were chocolate kisses. She'd pretend to taste the dog treat and feign like she was going to barf. She was a good sport, such a nice friend, and a beauty. I missed her when we moved and I went to a new school, Riviera, which was so much better than my previous elementary school hell. It didn't take me long to find others like my "half self."

In eighth grade, my friend Jerry and I were cast in a play together; a "smellodrama." I was playing the hero, without an inkling of authenticity. I was half there, playing style over substance, a substance that was largely taboo. Jerry and I

wrestled at his house and he squeezed my dick and asked me, “Is that what you want?” I lied, saying nothing.

As a freshman at South High I was cast in Irving Berlin’s *Annie Get Your Gun*. This required me having my last class period free. I was cast in small roles. My favorite was a snooty waiter who asks Annie, “Would you like some chicken salad?”

7:30 PE

I didn’t want to attend a regular PE class because the coaches made you march. Last period was for sports. I chose tennis in the spring and cross-country in the fall. I quit both sports and instead took my physical education at 7:30 am. Coach Magnus was disappointed that I quit the tennis team.

Coach Fredrick was also not pleased that I wanted to quit the cross-country program. I wasn’t being awarded a “letter” and I basically begged him to give me one. He relented and I was given a “letter.” Then I quit. I was an actor now.

Unable to see my own bad karma, I suffered the result of my poor choices time and again. The next year I was in the driver’s ed car and my teacher was, of course, Coach Fredrick. He was really irked with me. He probably wanted his letter back. He would say, “Just pretend there is an egg on the accelerator. Easy now.” I gunned the engine. “Why did you quit cross-country?” I gunned the engine again. Coach Fredrick had to leave for a minute or two. He took the keys as if I was going to take off without him with two monkeys in the back seat. Gordon “BoBo” Waters asked me, “Sampson, are you straight?” The girl with BoBo, braces on her teeth, was a hyena laughing at his inquiry. They both leaned forward to bait me from the back seat. I had known BoBo at Riviera Elementary School. I didn’t really know what “straight” meant or why he would ask me this. I only knew that this was a derogatory, unfair, and revealing question. Coach Fredrick returned and we were back to the accelerator/egg analogy. “Straight”: another word to remember.

7:30 am PE class wasn't the college prep crowd. I didn't fit in. I was sometimes the last one picked for team games and never could climb that rope in the gym. I was a horrible soccer player. The blonde soccer team leader yelled at me for not trying hard enough, calling me names. To my defense came Tony, one of the toughest brawlers at South High. I grew to like Tony a lot. Tony never said much, but I knew he liked me. The blonde kid yelling at me backed off as soon as Tony got in his face.

Justin Elliott enrolled in my 7:30 PE class, which was mainly hoods and students on work study programs. I knew Justin from the cast of *Annie Get Your Gun*. He played the hotel proprietor. I got strange vibes from him. He really, really liked me. I think he arranged to have that class so he could stare and smile at me in the shower.

We were to have a new drama teacher. Our beloved Mr. Chambers was leaving and Mr. Stein took over. He changed my life. Since I had PE at 7:30 am, I was free for last period. I sat in on Drama. Mr. Stein was confused as to why I was there, but he didn't kick me out. The senior class play was *The Lark*, the Jean Anouilh version about Joan of Arc. One afternoon in class the students were doing a read-through of the play. Cheerleader Lee Ellis pitched a fit, and Stein told him to leave. Mr. Stein then pointed to me, "Come and read this part." I was cast in the play. I'm a good actor and I was terrific in the role of the promoter: "No cross will be given to a witch." I was fourteen, in whiteface, the jokester. Later on in life I would play a proud, young brown shirt in Bertolt Brecht's *Private Life of the Master Race*. I would signal the SS to arrest anyone whom I gave a friendly pat on the back. They would know because my hand had a chalk cross on it. The brown shirt laughs and laughs. What a perfect part for me.

There was a boy, also about fourteen, in the ensemble of *Master* who had a huge crush on me. He tried to seduce me, holding hands. I sensed that he would have

loved for me to kiss him, but after all, I was straight. This trick would never happen. I could never do that. I wondered if he had his own chalk cross to mark me.

Justin from *Annie Get Your Gun* and I became friends. He lived only a long block away. We went to see *Hair* together. We played the sexually frustrated leading men in *The Male Animal* by James Thurber. Both the characters were questioning their sexual prominence. We would rehearse the drunk scene at his house. He almost “had” me one night when we were together in his room, and he was seducing me. I called my mother and asked her if I could stay the night: after all, he lived close by. She said no.

I knew I was ready for sex with Tony. Tony never called. If Justin had persisted, he probably could have “had” me. I was so ready for sex with a man, bad skin and all. It just didn’t matter anymore. The next year Justin threatened suicide and wrote a letter about being in love with me. What was he thinking? I dated beautiful girls. I went to every dance and prom.

The summer before college, I started getting my haircut by a barber at Pony Square. While he was cutting away, I let my hands drape over the arm of the chair. It was just the right height where he could easily rub his penis against the back of my hands and fingers. We enjoyed that escapade. His double knits gave his maneuvering away. He should have been tipping me.

Closet Case

Being an openly gay actor was an oxymoron in the seventies. It became the same old story. I spent all my college years miserably in the closet. One of my professors called out to me for all four years, “Hey Sailor!” Wink, wink.

Then came my years as a waiter. Waiting tables is living in no man’s land. Losing my hair, feeling sorry for myself, I waited way too many tables. It was my stage. I developed a terrific personality for getting nicely tipped. I became nervous as

an actor. It became way too important. Auditioning was hard on me and infrequent. I was a good actor. Wasn't I?

Lots of people where I worked enjoyed playing "out the actor," "out the waiter," and don't forget, "out Chris."

Until I found Jeff, I never had sex with another man. I was well into my thirties. I held my ground. My generation of gay men were nearly decimated by the AIDS virus in the late seventies. Having sex and dying for it was a nasty trick!

I am the jokester, proud of the dead goldfish prank, a closet case surviving in this impractical world. Deny! Deny! Deny! I was a braggart; always posturing, a "half-ling" of who I was. Jeff could see right through the jokester and found me worthy of a chance. I had always planned to be a successful actor, sacrificing an intimate, loving relationship in my life, living for my art.

Living Real

After Jeff and I began sharing our lives together, I didn't feel the need to be acting any more. I could relax a little. Being real is the key. Breathing freely, accepting my gayness. Real was the key to discovering my personal authenticity; no short cuts, pranks, or tricks, and no elephant ears. It was like wearing a pair of well-worn comfortable shoes. They may have been hidden in the back of my closet for nearly forty years, or maybe they didn't fit a "half-ling." They fit only when I lived real.

One morning in 7:30 PE class, senior year, a tall, geeky guy was tripped. A couple of hoods were snickering as he fell and hit his head on a cement curb. We ran down the track to where he had fallen and we saw that he was lying there purple, blowing bubbles. I never saw someone dying before. He looked beyond our incredulous faces, staring at the blue sky. I wish I had the courage to have been real, to kneel down and comfort him, hold his hand until help arrived. Instead, I was "had"; a face in the crowd staring, just an extra, play-acting.



On a Carousel in the Rain

Dana Yost

A drop of rain
wounds a tall bright flower
I find the flower on a carousel
at night in a windstorm
strange colors
whirling becoming
strange words
the flower no longer perks
at my voice
seems smaller
wounded
holding a carousel rail
by a few drunken fingers
spins
she could fly off
into the rocks and gravel
wounded
rain water in a basin
chorus of a forest of lost children
carousel in a rain storm
whirling recklessly
no adult supervision
the tall flower
asleep
sleep being
the only defense against
the chaos of the spinning
the petty flicking of the rain
against petal
now a bruised
wilt



Flood

Howard Winn

Salt water creeps over sand like a horseshoe crab,
boundary curling first over wet surface
and then edging into dry grains smoothing lumps
as if this were the usual rising tide.
Beyond lies swords of sea grass curving in Atlantic breeze,
and beyond that sparse greenery
architects' apparitions made solid come into view.
Grandiose and humble go under together,
bubbles rising to mark momentarily the spot and are gone.

Oil fields in Kuwait and Arabia anticipate water
as sun streams down through brown-white sky
turned to concentrating lens by burned oil.
Heat is held and multiplied by the stuff exhumed.
Ocean brims, pushing spindrift in white lace
along the advancing front as chunks of age-old
blue and black ice fall crashing into warming seas
thousands of miles away amongst penguins
and puffins south and north.

Range Rovers flee the Hamptons in panic
as water rolls over land's end at Montauk.
New money is no dike, nor is old.
Mercedes head to higher ground in
flat middle eastern deserts and the mountains
of Iran and Iraq are suddenly the place to be,
despite Kurds, cold, and borders of former
colonists whose own homelands also dwindle
behind chalk cliffs and salt French flats.

San Francisco delta covers over and bridges are lower.
Refineries across the bay fizz out in rising Pacific

like burning candles sinking into a turbulent bathtub.
New Orleans vanishes in a whirlpool of floating coffins
and cars while Bourbon Street bars and tourists
spin away into the blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico.
Acid rain has filled the lakes of the Adirondacks
with clear water that is without life or future.
Go to the high hills and contemplate the sky.



Natural Confrontations

Changming Yuan

1/ Seabird

As if straight from heaven
A young snowy seagull charges down
Trying to pick up the entire ocean
With its bold beak
Just when the tsunami raises
All its fierce fists
To protect against earth's agitation
In foamy darkness
When no one seems to stand
On the beach, watching

2/ Sprout

From under
A bulky boulder
Sitting still, meditating
Like a Buddha
A tiny bamboo sprout
Has just broken the earth
Ready to shoot up
Against the entire sky

3/ Swirl

A gossamer-like breeze
Left behind by
A running dog
Tries to strike
The stagnated twilight
All over the city
Before the storm sets in



Stoop Friends | Stephen Mead



The Fedora Kid

R.T. Saunders

She walks into the weekly support group meeting. A young girl. I assume she's a girl, or female identified, since this is a male to female transgender support group. Her long shoulder length, unkempt brown hair, dark, dark glasses obscuring what must be pretty eyes, and rumpled corduroy jacket set her apart from those who make a studied effort to establish a female persona. She wears a black man's fedora, stylish, very Madonna-esque in its fashion sense. Pulled down low to the eyebrows and meeting the top frame of the dark sunglasses, it shields her face, making her as much a hidden icon as she can manage. She comes in late, forcing her to grab a chair in the center of the room. She does this often I am told, a hidden object in plain sight. She says nothing, gesturing occasionally.

At the end of session wrap-up, a time during which members take their turn talking about impressions from the evening, what strikes them at the moment, and what's on the agenda for the week, she waves on to the next person, declining to speak. Yet, at the end of the meeting, when some of the more social members gather in the lobby for informal chat and make their way out, she hangs around, listening in on others' conversations, occasionally making a one or two word comment. You can tell she's listening. She's reacting. Things are getting in there.

I join some of the group members and move out of the building and on to a local diner to expand on the evening discussion and get to know one another more; she follows. Saying nothing, she tags along, and being the kind of group it is, she is welcomed. We cross the busy avenues of New York City, reassembling on the corner

having been briefly separated by the ever rushing city traffic. Her absence is noted. She's no longer with us.

I inquire as to whether or not she ever joined the after meeting social, this being my first time with them. I am told, no, she tries, but never quite makes it all the way to the restaurant, peeling off some blocks before.

I ask who she is, what her name is.

No one knows. She never tells anyone.

She's just The Fedora Kid.



Her Hair Like Black Poppy Petals

erin feldman

There are cold stars, far off
no moon.
The wife of the poet talks
about her youthful oasis
under the ice.
She tracked the dancing bubbles
from her scuba regulator
care-free in their buoyancy.
She studied their freedom
and tried to imagine
that grown-up eventuality
loose from the yelling and the shocking surges.
She was sunk on the bottom
in a wetsuit—
it is winter.

If we squint and pant and reach
we *could* see Saturn, but
me—I just see danger
red like a poisonous pokeweed trail
leading the way to the wrong Gretel.

My heart brump-brumps.
I shift uneasy, and
the stories roll out like
Eve's fallen Apple rolled on the ground
one bite gone—
a different me would
pick up that apple.

Instead I just eat
the strawberries

and think that her hair is like black poppy petals.
I gobble the blueberries and
imagine that she would paint me
(wise of face)
looking into the pre-dawn sky
one shade lighter than absolute darkness
my hair tulips and white birch
with my back to her.



Strange Attractors

Merina Canyon

I peek into Storm's window and see her lying face up across a king-sized bed. This is only the second time I've laid eyes on Storm, the first being from a distance at the softball game, but there is no mistaking her. Even with her reclining like that I can see the firm contours of her biceps and thighs. She is naked.

I rap on the window but she doesn't stir a single sculpted muscle. Storm is supposed to be at my house right now. After my old college roommate, Jayne, pointed her out at the game and said she was the carpenter they all used, I called and said I was Annie Tee—new to town—and had a leak in my roof. On the phone I could tell Storm was a woman of few words. She covered the business end of things and said she'd been kept busy lately patching roofs after that golf ball size hail the week before. But she'd be at my house at 8 am sharp to look at my roof.

It's now 12 noon. Normally I wouldn't go hunting down someone I barely know, but when I saw Storm at the game leaning against a post with a baseball bat slung on her shoulder, she invaded my angry thoughts of Emily and captured my imagination. She was downing a whole pitcher of something cold—it was a hot, hazy day. At first glance, I'm embarrassed to say that I thought she was a young, shaggy-topped guy who had wandered over from the park. But I soon realized she was chummy with her teammates and is just one of those women who are totally comfortable in their masculinity. When she went up to bat, Jayne pointed her out to me, and Storm hit the softball with a loud crack.

Now, as I peer in her window, she sprawls across that big bed with a bottle of Black Velvet hugged up to her cheek. As an artist, to me the room is a chaotic work of art. Objects of masculinity and femininity seem to be caught in the act of dancing and tangling all over the room: A pair of shiny black high heels surrounded by a pair of heavy work boots. Holey jeans spiraled with a red silky kimono. On the dresser, dainty perfume bottles knocked over by a big, heavy hammer. A jar of nails next to a whirl of fingernail polish. A set of tools half fallen out off a case. And most of all, except for the stunning body in the bed, my eye is drawn to a music stand with sheet music in various stages of falling to the floor.

Did Storm arrange the room to look like this or does she always live in a chaotic still life?

Storm is so still that it occurs to me that she might not be breathing. Should I call 911? Jayne? I rub the dry rain streaks off the window with my fingertips so I can see Storm's chest more clearly. Her white breasts are larger than I would have guessed from seeing her at the game. They look tranquil and soft, gently rising and falling but unmoved by whatever trauma has led Storm to drinking herself into oblivion.

I decide to leave her be and drive over to Jayne's and report what I just saw.

"Isn't like Storm to miss an appointment," Jayne says, concerned. "But it doesn't surprise me it came to this." Jayne, who by the way, is still a tall, athletic-looking woman with a perky short haircut, goes on to explain that ever since *the accident*, Storm has been stuck in her self-destruction. I have only just moved to Sweetfield and haven't learned all the stories on everyone. This is apparently a big one. Jayne carries two glasses of iced tea out to her back deck, which she announces Storm built for her, and starts off on the tragedy of Storm and Charlotte.

"We all thought they seemed like an unlikely couple, Storm being a farm-dyke carpenter and Charlotte a concert violinist from back east—but you know what they

say about opposites.” Jayne stares off into the yard where Maze, her rescued greyhound with the mesmerizing brindle coat, noses around a small critter frozen in place. I sit still, waiting for the story to continue. “Here, Maze!” Jayne calls. She stands up and calls the dog again. Finally Maze dances up on to the deck and looks at me closely as though she sees something that reminds her of a scared bunny. Jayne goes on to say that the two unlikely lovers had been together for one blissful year all wound around each other.

Just like their tangled possessions in the bedroom, I now realize. Maze keeps her eyes on me.

“Storm had always been the alluring type—dark, brooding,” Jayne says, looking like she savors the memory, “but Storm *in love* was a work of art, and Charlotte had to hold on to her tight ‘cause lots of women started flirting with Storm at the bar when Charlotte was tied up with rehearsals. So it didn’t take Charlotte long to move into Storm’s rambling house—all those add-ons and decks always in progress. Did you see that screened-in gazebo in the back yard? Storm built it for Charlotte so she could practice undisturbed.”

I hadn’t noticed the gazebo when I was there, but I now concoct a vivid image of it complete with the sounds of a passionate violin—perhaps Beethoven’s *Concerto for Violin in D*.

“Then there was the accident. Charlotte was driving home in the rain after a rehearsal with two other musicians. Everyone doubts those three women even knew what hit them. A drugged-up teen girl got on the freeway the wrong way and came at them head on at more than 65 miles per hour. Probably 90.” Jayne takes a drink from her glass. “All four, dead at the scene.”

I stop her right there by holding up my hand. “Goddamn,” I whisper. I’m crying. Even though I don’t know Storm, I feel like I *do* know her. Her life got smashed to bits. I can still see her stretched across that bed and I want to go back

there and gather her up in my arms. The trauma of impact flashes through my inner eyes and I jolt like I've had an electric shock. Maze comes over and offers her head for me to pet. I don't say to Jayne that my life has been smashed too, that I have crawled away from the wreck of my life with Emily, vowing not to look back. But she knows. Jayne's a smart woman.

"I'll go over there and make sure she's okay," Jayne says. I want to say, *No, I'll go*. But that doesn't make logical sense even to me, the flakey artist. I'm sure Storm would rather have a friend than a stranger find her dead drunk like that.

"Call me after," I say, patting the top of Maze's head. "Let me know how she is." I feel ashamed that I spied on Storm when she was naked and helpless and that I have already painted a portrait in my mind of the sedated broken-hearted woman in her dance of chaos. "Don't tell her I saw," I add.

I'm an artist after all, not a peeping tom. I moved to Sweetfield just to get away from Emily and was lucky to line up a part time job at the community college teaching figure drawing, which doesn't start for two months. I have time to get to know Jayne again and meet the women's community. That's why Jayne took me to the softball game and pointed out women, the singles mainly. I've been adrift ever since the disastrous explosion between me and Emily. Emily still rings my cell phone regularly trying to get me to pick up. I'm thinking of getting a new number in order to put a stop to it.

Right now my mind is splashed with the tragedy of Storm. Imagine the love of your life suddenly killed like that! Obviously Storm hasn't been able to part with Charlotte's belongings. I picture the high heels lying on their sides between a pair of work boots. And that sheet music wanting to scatter itself on the floor with the loose tools. I imagine Charlotte weeping from a cloud above Storm's chaos. Poor Charlotte. I never knew *her* but I do know her longing.

Jayne calls and says she got Storm up but she's wickedly hung over and won't be coming to my house today. She wonders if tomorrow at 8 is okay.

I can't wait for the next morning. In fact, my heart seems to be beating faster and I go around my little cracker box house straightening up my art supplies which I tend to scatter around every room. I laugh at myself. Compared to Storm's disaster, my place is as neat as a mausoleum, but still I busy myself with fixing up the house and me both. Are those dark circles under my eyes?

The next morning at 8 I have already been up for two hours painting "Naked Storm" at my easel when a silver truck rumbles up in front of my house. It's Storm alright. Black letters on the side of the truck say *Storm-Built*. She's got on cargo jeans, dirty boots, a charcoal-color t-shirt, and a dingy white painter's cap. Her curly black hair sticks out all around it. Need I say how captivating she is to me? Like, *riveting*?

I go out on the porch and Storm says, "Annie Tee? Sorry about yesterday. Guess I was too sick to call and cancel."

"That's okay," I say overly cheerful. "Want an espresso first?"

I direct her to a little round table with wicker chairs on the front porch which were there when I moved in. When I come back with my coffee works, including *Annie-baked* cinnamon cookies, Storm is hanging her head, her hands like dead doves in her lap. A surreal picture if I've ever seen one. I could use that image.

"You okay?" I ask, staring at the lifeless hands. I want to touch them and bring them back to life.

"I don't know. Feel a little sick." One hand goes up to her eyes and then drops down again.

"Listen. It isn't supposed to rain this week. Nothing says you have to go up on my roof today. Just sit back and relax."

“Thanks,” Storm says and reaches for a cup with her left hand. She has a tremor. Espresso certainly isn’t the best thing for her right now. I also notice she has a man-sized watch on the inside of her wrist and a thin gold band on her ring finger.

“You married?” I say before I realize my giant faux pas. How could I be so stupid? No wonder Jayne says I’m flakey. I suck in my breath trying to think of something else to say.

But Storm replies casually, “Yeah. You?”

“Oh no,” I say flustered. “I mean I was, sort of, but my girlfriend and I broke up. I just moved here to start over. Jayne’s an old friend of mine...” I trail off.

Storm doesn’t say anything and I don’t know whether to feel sorry for her social awkwardness or ashamed of my own misstep. I ask a few more safe questions and learn that she was born during a thunderstorm on a farm some hundred miles from here in Illinois and has a mother she calls Mama Bear. The only job outside of the farm she has ever had is carpentry and it suits her to a tee.

I keep saying phony things like *Oh really*, and *That’s nice* when what I really wanted to say is *I can’t get your naked body off my mind! And by the way, I don’t want to get your naked body off my mind.*

My cell phone rings Beethoven’s *Fifth* and I scramble to silence it. Emily. Again. She’s been calling at least three times a day. I never listen to the messages.

Storm gets up like she better move on and so I get up too. “I’ll come back tomorrow, Annie Tee, and fix that leak.”

I like the way she says my whole name. I want to say *Don’t leave. Let me tell you about how my girlfriend done me wrong.* But Storm is already back in her truck and I know I’ve lost her for the day.

As soon as Storm’s truck is out of sight, I jump in my old Outback and zip over to Jayne’s, all the while replaying images of Storm sitting on my front porch in her big heavy boots with those doves in her lap, and then there’s fleeting images of

her dazzlingly sculptured body flung across the bed like Michelangelo's *David* reclining—female, of course. I feel guilty about idolizing that scene when I know it is the out-picturing of self-destruction. I vow to stop seeing it. But there it is again, right down to the gold lettering on that bottle of Black Velvet she hugs like a lover.

Jayne is sitting on her *Storm-Built* deck taking a phone call with Maze peacefully at her side. Jane is a muscled woman too, in a different sort of way. She looks like a runner, and she does jog regularly, or so she tells me. Since our college days in Iowa City she's become a successful real estate agent in Sweetfield and located my cheap little house for me—rent to own. To my eye she has aged very little, and reminds me a lot of that graceful greyhound when I think about it. We're both thirty-four now and Jayne always tells me I'm a good lookin' woman for a *hippie flake* and likes to play with my long, straight hair, but there is never any sexual tension between us. She's the only reason I chose Sweetfield when I left Emily. I believe a good friend you can count on is one of the most valuable things in life.

I get comfy in her hammock, and after she snaps her phone shut, I find myself asking too many questions about Storm and Charlotte. I notice Jayne pulling back a little like she doesn't want to talk about it anymore.

"Listen, Annie," she says, "I'll invite some women over for you to meet."

"Yeah?" I say, one eyebrow raised. "How about Storm?"

"You better not get too fixated on Storm," she says, suddenly absorbed in Maze who has folded up like a ballet dancer on a cushion beside her. "That woman isn't ready to go back on the market."

"Oh, so you think you know what she's ready for?"

"Yes, I do," Jayne says. "Now when does your new job start?"

The next morning I'm up at 6 with my heart racing over the idea that Storm should be at my house again soon. I go around noticing all sorts of carpentry things I could have

her work on. Does she know anything about plumbing and electric? Would she sit for a portrait? Would she lie across my bed?

Eight o'clock comes, then 9 and 10, and I wind up sitting out on my front porch getting forlorn like it was a big mistake to move to Sweetfield in the first place. How easily I flip/flop. I actually want to call Emily right now to see what she has to say, but then I stop my thoughts in disgust for how needy and clingy I am. I feel like I have no power over anything, certainly not Emily who wanted a baby so badly she'd sleep with a guy I didn't know. Our intention was for me to be a part of the sperm donor process, but she just couldn't wait.

When I get in my Outback and realize I am driving over to Storm's again, I see that I have no power over that either. Storm is an irresistible magnet and I am a highly charged piece of steel. The pull of attraction is so strong I'm likely to do just about anything. At least that's how it feels—fully drawn to a dangerous attractor. I suspect that's how Emily felt when she did what she did. Not that I feel sorry for her.

When I get over to Storm's neighborhood, I'm in a quandary trying to decide whether to drive right up in front of her house and boldly knock on the door, or park down the street and act like I'm just out for a walk. I drive right by the house, (Storm's silver truck is parked in her driveway) so I drive around the block and come back again. Finally I pull in behind a big maple tree and turn off the engine.

I get out of the car and admire the tree like I've never seen one before.

A lightning bolt feels like it jags through my heart. I still can't tell if I am going to knock on the door or sneak around, until there I am up on the front porch knocking—softly at first, then a sharp rap. No answer. Maybe Storm has gone out on some other job. No, her truck is here. Maybe she's in there in need of my help. *My* help—because I'm the one here, not Jayne and certainly not Charlotte.

I go around the side of the house where I peered in the bedroom window before. This time I see the chaotic room—that music stand!—but there is no

gorgeous broken-hearted sculpture in the bed. I continue on around the house careful not to trip over scattered planks and tiles. That's when I see the screened gazebo, lonely, rising up in the yard like a temple. White flowers cover the front door. I step up on Storm's back deck and knock. Nothing.

I peer through the window in the door. "Oh, God!" I say out loud. There she is, fully clothed, face down on the kitchen floor like a dead person.

I try the doorknob. The door's unlocked.

"Storm? Storm? It's me, Annie Tee. You okay?"

Storm doesn't move a muscle.

I throw myself on the floor next to her to see if she's breathing. She is, thank the goddess. Jayne or 911? I flip open my phone but just then Storm groans and swats at me with her left hand.

"Leave me alone," she says.

"But you're sick," I say. "You need help."

Storm groans some more and turns over on her side. Then clearly she says, "Charlotte? Come here, baby."

"I'm not Charlotte," I say, "but let me help you up."

She struggles to sit up and then lumbers up on her feet. I help her sit down at the kitchen table which is covered with wood scraps and paint brushes, and within seconds her head is down on her arms on top of the stuff. I pull up a chair and put my hand on her shoulder. "Storm, you want me to call someone?"

"Yeah, call Charlotte. Could you do that for me, please?" Her voice cuts out on her and I can see she is on the verge of drunken sobs.

"Sorry," I say, just about as inadequate as I can be. Then I have an idea. "Tell me about her. Tell me all about Charlotte."

"She played me like a goddamned fiddle and I never was so fucking happy in my life."

I am speechless now. I just look at Storm roughly wiping tears off her face, me trying to look encouraging but her not looking at me.

“Who the hell are you?” Storm says, glancing over at my face. “Where’d you come from?”

“You know, I’m Annie Tee—with the leaky roof—Jayne’s friend.”

“But what are you doing here?”

I know I’m shot through with scarlet red. “I came through the back door. It wasn’t locked.”

She looks at me longer and seems to sober up. “I’m okay,” she says, blinking. “I’m going to bed.”

“Okay,” I say. “Sorry to intrude. I thought you were sick or something.”

“I was *something* alright.” She struggles up from the chair, swearing.

I get up too and go for the door. I am waging a civil war with myself trying to justify my intrusion. But one part of me is wise to my tricks and knows I’m looking after my own self-interests. I’ve just turned from spying to entering unwelcomed. A new low. What next?

The next morning I feel a dust devil whirling up my thoughts. Is Storm mad at me? Will she show up to fix my roof? If I throw myself at her, will she take me to bed?

I sit around the house from 6 to 8 trying to get myself to sketch contours of thighs in my book but find myself thinking of Emily—the way we wanted to have a baby together, how excited I was, before I found out the truth about what she was doing. Why couldn’t she wait? I was supposed to be the one to press the magic substance up inside her. “It just happened,” she had tried to explain. “I couldn’t control it.”

At 8 sharp, Storm drives up in front of my house. I go out on the front porch but can’t say good morning. I fear that my thoughts are too easy to read. Storm avoids

my eyes. She opens her tailgate and pulls out a bucket of blackjack, a ladder, and a tool belt. Oh goddess! Don't let Storm put that tool belt on. Thankfully she slings it over her shoulder along with a pack of shingles.

Then she tries to joke with me. "Howdy, ma'am. I hear you have a leak needs fixin'."

"Right this way," I say brightly, almost calling her sir. I point in the general vicinity of the leak and invite her to come in and see where the rain has stained the plaster ceiling. She doesn't stay long in the house. She goes right to work putting the ladder up and soon I hear her above scraping and hammering.

My stomach is in knots. I sit out on the porch wondering if there is any way I can get Storm to consider me a potential lover. Why am I so attracted to someone so hurt? Is it *because she is hurt and I'm hurt too?* I make myself sick with my questions.

A little while later Storm comes down off the roof and says, "That ought to do it." She shortens the ladder and tosses it and the tool belt into the truck bed. Then she writes some things down on a piece of paper which she hands to me. It's a bill for her services and I go to get my checkbook.

"Sorry," she says when I come back out, "about yesterday. I was rude. Sorry."

"Oh no," I say. "I shouldn't have let myself into your house like that. I just thought you needed help." *And I wanted to be the one to help you,* I don't say out loud.

"Yeah," she says, fiddling with her pen. "I need help alright."

"It's hard, isn't it," I am bold to say, "with Charlotte gone."

At the mention of her beloved's name, Storm looks at me like a lost child, her mouth opened and downturned. "It can't be true," she says.

"I know," I say. "I feel that way about what Emily did."

"What'd she do?" Her sudden interest shines out from her eyes.

"Got pregnant—without me."

Storm isn't looking at me anymore. She's staring at the toes of her steel-toed

boots and slowly shaking her head. “But you love her, right? And she’s alive?”

Instead of answering her question I say, “Come sit down with me.”

“I ain’t much for talking,” Storm says, but she shifts her weight and looks at a chair on the porch as though she is trying to picture herself there.

Now Jayne comes roaring up in my front yard in her flashy SUV. “How’s it going?” she calls out the window. “Everything all right?”

Storm actually smiles a little like she’s happy to see Jayne.

Jayne gets out of her car and goes right up to Storm and slings her arm around her neck. “Hey, Sweetie,” she says directly to Storm and Storm still grins. “How ya feeling?”

“Better,” Storm says.

I suddenly get the impression something’s going on between them that Jayne has neglected to tell me, or didn’t want me to know. I feel ridiculous.

Jayne says, “If you’re done here, I got a fixer upper that needs an estimate before it goes on the market.”

Storm follows Jayne over to the parked cars. They talk quietly without me—I can’t hear—and I feel so lonely that I’m swamped with bright, promising pictures of Emily, my country fem-girl with flowing strawberry blond hair looking like she just walked out of a portrait with a basket of apples in her arms. I have sketched and photographed and painted and made love with her hundreds of times. I know every tiny mole and hidden wild hair on her sweet body. But I didn’t know she was charged steel too, waiting for an undeniable attractor.

What if Emily had been in a car wreck and died like Charlotte? Would I be as wrecked as Storm? *Am* I as wrecked as Storm?

Jayne and Storm get in their respective vehicles. Jayne waves me over to her as Storm takes off. From the passenger seat Maze looks at me with pity. I saunter up to Jayne’s window with my head down—my face probably crimson.

“You mad at me?” Jayne says reaching out and fiddling with my hair.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Too new,” Jayne says. “I didn’t want to jinx it by talking about it and I wasn’t sure Storm was into me.”

“But she can’t accept that Charlotte’s gone.”

“I know, I know. She has to believe what she has to believe just to stay afloat. But she’s starting AA and she’ll come to terms with it one of these days.”

“Good luck,” I say. “You can’t control people to do what you want them to do.”

Jayne looks at me with soft brown eyes, and I blink back tears.

“You miss Emily, don’t you?”

“I do,” I say.

“She called me, you know.”

“What? Emily called you?”

“Listen Annie, let her talk to you. She has something to say.”

I back away from Jayne’s car, and she says, “Call her.” Maze woofs once in agreement.

Then I go up on my porch and stare at my cell phone for a while. I toss it from one hand to another, thinking. The thought of Emily in a car crash—fatal—dead at the scene, my mind jumps and trips and falls. Emily. She just wanted a baby so badly. That’s why she did it. It was that magnetic pull that she could not resist, did not even *want* to resist. But she didn’t intend to lose me in the process. I know that now.

I see my hand flip open the phone. I still have a photo of Emily as my background screen. Her smile fractures my heart. I don’t know what will happen when I hit speed dial seven, but I have to find out.

That one phone call changes everything. Sweetfield might have been a good place to

start over with a new job and a women's community, but the minute I hear Emily's voice, I am pulled back to my biggest magnet ever. She even says the magic words, "Baby, come back. I'm sorry I hurt you." She is alone and pregnant and wants me more than ever.

And I want her too. And the baby. That's clear to me now. I can easily walk away from my new life in Sweetfield, but there is something I have to do first.

That night I feel like I'm in an altered state, like I'm a figure in a Salvador Dali painting and I have no control over how the artist will depict me. The magnetic pull is undeniable. I have to go back to Storm's window. I have to see that figure again. My painting "Naked Storm" could not be truly finished until I see it and engrave into my memory the subtle curve of each muscle and surface of flesh.

It is still warm after midnight and I know where to park my car. Approaching the house after dark, I see two cars in Storm's driveway: her silver truck and Jayne's SUV. So it has come to this already.

Unable to resist, I go to the side of the house where I first saw *Naked Storm*. The curtains have been drawn but come apart in the middle. And this is what I see: First the music stand empty—the pages now completely on the floor with the tools. Then the swirl of tangled clothes with a few more pieces thrown on top. And then yes, Storm's body, again naked, but she is wound into the tall, tight body of my friend. Sleeping arms hold the two together, powerful sculpted legs intertwine. The two faces are only an inch apart. Sleep has carried them away into a still life more complete than one nude alone.



Prickly Passion | Pete Madzellan



The Skin Project

Mary Carroll-Hackett

involves yours, and mine, lined and curved and carrying all that we have managed to survive, fifty lifetimes in fold and lip, teeth like tines against hip, lavender ankle, tangle of feet, no longer choosing, simply following my finger to trace the line of your cheek, your hand losing its path, bent knee, the laughter of thighs, the sigh of my belly. You whisper into my ribs, wait for the echo, I know what you want me to speak—*This, this is the way. Put your head on my chest and listen to what my heart says.* We both know bones to be brighter in winter, lips and kiss an entirety, words we couldn't know when we were young pass forth to tongue, go toward—not back—this ancient act, this searching for forms of fire.



Morphemes

Monica Carter

Language is all I have
To give to you
Yet if there was ever
A worse gift than my words
I don't know what it is

When I use the letters
These symbols of thought and sound
To explain how I feel about you
They come out in an alphabet of sticks and stones
Broken, jagged and heavy
Tossed across the landscape of my expression

With my sticks and stones
I form words to tell you about myself
Three sticks for the l and the v
Two stones for the o and the e
But my love for you doesn't fall between wood and rock
And the syntax of its signs has no etymology

I try to connect them
The strokes and circles of phonetics
To show the essence of your intricacy
but even in Kanji or Sanskrit
the lines I join never rise and fall
with same grace as the vernacular you inhabit

I stare at this page
And wonder about the instrument I use
Even if this pen wrote in white ink
It's too phallic to write with delicacy

The softness of your tongue
It can only trace the edges that shape my attempts

Maybe if the language I speak
Came from a womb instead of a tomb
There would be a jouissance to their meaning
But its masculine lines that begin and end
Don't understand the weightlessness
of a language like you and the way you descend.



Moonlight Demons

Keith Buckley

The procedure was simple enough. Step A: get born. Step B: invent parents with such arcane pathologies that their emotions subsume even the oxygen. Step C: disappear to places where they cannot incorporate your every gesture. Step D: redefine yourself in acts so baroque that you no longer share any genetic features with your family. By the summer of 1974, I had achieved these baseline goals. I had spent the previous school year volatizing my chemistry. I was ready for something new, something different. In the supply closet of the bacteriology lab where I worked as a junior tech, I began tapping my own spinal fluid to relieve the last of the Old World pressure. To balance the inner spirit level, I infused myself with a blend of scented oils and the highest quality cochineal extracted from the eggs of the Mexican cactus scale beetle. At night I would stand by my open bedroom window, my sandalwood-perfumed skin oozing crimson sweat in the hot, humid breeze. During the day I moved with such smoothly fluid grace that people began asking me what I had done with my bones.

That was the summer the moth women came for me. That was the summer I actually served a purpose in this life.

The moth women would hover around the streetlight illuminating the eaves above my window. Their lithe and supple forms almost vibrated in the copper-colored sodium vapor lamplight. I immediately fell in love with their ephemeral beauty. Nearly two weeks passed before they overcame their natural shyness, but by then my perspiration was rich with *Dactylopius* juice, one of their favorite flavors. I began welcoming them one by one into my bed just past midnight, by which time my parents had drunk themselves into a gin-steamed paralysis. The moth women each enfolded me in their soft, golden-powdered wings, and uttered extremely quiet yet

intense ululations at the moment of climax. Then, lightning quick, that burning pleasure would course up through the top of my skull as their ovipositors jabbed deeply into my urethra and the fertilized eggs flooded my bladder.

By late July, we'd settled into a new routine. My parents took their pitcher of martinis out to the front porch and my mother would complain about how long Nixon was taking to resign and my father would just nod in silence because his brain was still enmeshed with the temporal bone he was dissecting in the basement and how much more of my mother's insanity he could stand before he moved out and I would join them with my bottle of spring water even though they pressed me to have a martini but I declined as I did not wish to imperil my pheromones and I would have to get up every fifteen minutes to go urinate harsh streams of crimson and wriggling green larvae and I tried not to look and I couldn't always get rid of the stains in the bowl and at some point when they ran out of banalities my parents would look at the spots of ruby drizzle on my leg and very uncomfortably suggest that perhaps I should ask the head of the bacteriology lab to run a culture.

My work ethic in the lab suffered due to extreme fatigue and constant bathroom breaks—by the time Nixon finally did resign I was covering as many as twenty moth women a night—and I could barely roll my chair under the glove box when I was plating TB specimens because my bladder was so distended with young. I kept myself focused by thinking about the moth women and how patiently they queued up in the moonlight on the gables for their turn. Their social structure was obviously far more complex than I would ever comprehend or they allowed me to understand. In fact, as I watched them gather at my window every night I began to strongly suspect they were purposefully playing on my ignorance and using me only for the most rudimentary biological function.

Then one day my mother epoxied an entire box of Shell No-Pest Strips to my window frame and I never saw the moth women again.



Tivoli | Leah Givens



Nothing or Next to Nothing, a novella by Barry Graham. Charlotte, NC: Main Street Rag Publishing, 2011. \$9.95. **Reviewed by CL Bledsoe.**

M. Scott Douglass' Main Street Rag Press is quickly becoming one of my favorite publishers because of the strong offerings they've had in the last few years of underappreciated poetry and especially novellas: Jo Ross' debut poetry collection *Meeting Bone Man*, Tom Williams' novella *The Mimic's Own Voice*, Ben Tanzer's novella *My Father's House*, Nathan Leslie's short fiction collection *Madre*, Paul Hostovsky, Maureen Alsop, Rich Furman, Helen Losse, Robert Cooperman; the list just goes on and on. Main Street Rag is one of very few presses that consistently publishes novellas, and the ones they put out are great. So I know when I sit down with a Main Street Rag title that I'm in for something enjoyable.

Barry Graham's novella, *Nothing or Next to Nothing*, is no slouch. It is the story of Derek, a young man who was raised by his unconventional (that's a nice way of saying bat-shit crazy) sister, Daisy, after Derek found his mother dead in their kitchen when he was eleven. The story moves from flashbacks of Derek's time with Daisy, starting work at fifteen, moving out, falling in love a couple times, and becoming a partner in a restaurant, to his present life trying to track down his sister.

The world of Graham's novella is a working class one, where single mothers work long hours at fast food joints, or anywhere they can, and most folks drink a lot, smoke a lot of dope, or do whatever they can to bring a little joy to their lives. This is a world that is rarely dealt with in literary fiction, and when it is, it's often exaggerated or presented as caricature. But this isn't some portrait of down-and-out America; Graham approaches the poor with understanding and empathy. They aren't desperate, per se; they're just surviving. They work crummy jobs because they have to work, but they're happy enough with what they have and don't see the point in rocking the boat to aim a little higher. And besides, what options do they really have?

But Derek has some ambition. He does end up owning a restaurant, after all. His problem seems to stem from his mother's death, and the way her found her body, which was quite provocative. In some ways, he's stuck in that moment; it has colored his relationships, so that he's always the little boy who doesn't understand why his mother is dead. This leads him to be a victim in many relationships throughout his life, most obviously with his sister, but also with friends and girlfriends. Derek's flaw is that he's trying to be a good guy, and that's what ultimately screws him up. He tries to help his sister in various situations, which leads to her controlling his life; he tries to help friends, which leads to him being taken advantage of.

This is a major theme in much of Graham's work: how does the moral character trapped in an amoral world survive and find happiness? In many situations, they don't, but they are full of a kind of hope that keeps them going. Many of the stories in Graham's short fiction collection, *The National Virginity Pledge*, deal with similar issues. This is certainly not a criticism; the best writers grapple with a handful, maybe even one, major theme their entire careers.

Graham's prose is very readable; it moves quickly, sharing necessary detail without being choppy. His characters are believable, all the more so because I feel like I've known quite a few of them. The fact that he can hit so close to home, and pull it off, speaks to the power of his writing.



The Fiction of Jon McGregor. **Reviewed by Cath Barton.**

“The man with the scarred hands eases out of his doorway, he sits down on the step and leans back against the damp doorframe, he is looking at the dark shine of the tarmac and he is thinking about the shine of his wife’s hair. He is trying not to, it is difficult.”

—*If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* by Jon McGregor

In a world awash with new fiction, where can you find writing that is satisfying to read? The equivalent of a good meal, which leaves you with interesting tastes in your mouth and the sensation that you have been well nourished?

There are plenty of good stories around that leave you feeling a little nauseous because they are poorly written. I care less about whether a story is plot-driven or character-driven than about how the writer uses language and crafts the unfolding story. To me the most satisfying read is one in which content and style are well married, akin to Marshall McLuhan’s notion that “the medium is the message.”

The British writer Jon McGregor is one of the few contemporary authors that I know of who both uses language with thoughtful beauty and experiments with the structure of his work to convey the atmosphere of the world about which he is writing. His first novel, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, was published ten years ago without a big push from his publisher (Bloomsbury), but interest in its sparse, poetic prose spread rapidly by word of mouth. In this novel the apparently ordinary events of a single day unfold in patchwork form, until at the end something extraordinary emerges.

Like all successful first novels, it was a hard act to follow, but McGregor’s subsequent books have continued to attract interest from critics and ordinary readers alike. His second novel, *So Many Ways to Begin*, takes another look at the unexpected consequences of everyday events, this time over the course of a life. In *Even the Dogs*, McGregor’s third novel, he has further pushed narrative boundaries. The prose is broken, like the lives of the homeless people and drug addicts who inhabit the story. It is set in a world that is normally closed to most of us, and McGregor’s great achievement in this book is in enabling us to enter this world for a while. It is not a comfortable place to be, but it left me thinking, and the taste of it has remained with me many months after the reading.



Nexus: The Rosy Crucifixion, Book 3 by Henry Miller. New York: Grove Press, 1965.
\$14.50. Reviewed by Nicholas Shadowen.

Attention all Jack Kerouac fans: have you read Henry Miller? If you have not, begin now—there is still hope for your literary soul. If you have, there is still a significant chance you’ve missed something, both about the man and his work, unless you’ve read his highly underrated masterpiece, *Nexus*. Henry Miller is today infamous for his provocative and sexual novels and often labeled the “king of smut”, disregarded as a genuine artist. His two widely known works, *The Tropic of Cancer* and its companion novel, *The Tropic of Capricorn*, are certainly worth reading but perhaps fail to combine both Miller’s raw emotion and his spiritual maturity in the way his lesser novels can. Therefore, even if you have hit the Miller highlights, whether for school or for pleasure, there is plenty of iceberg under the water for you to explore. Lucky you!

Henry Miller’s Rosy Crucifixion Trilogy, consisting of the books *Sexus*, *Plexus*, and *Nexus*, documents Miller’s life in New York City during the 1920s as he struggled to establish himself as a writer. *Nexus* is the final and most compelling novel of the three, fictionally portraying Miller’s uncanny bohemian life with his aspiring actress wife, Mona, and her free-spirited and aspiring sculptor lover, Stasia. Miller, now in his thirties, is beginning to realize that his literary aspirations are, even at this late point in life, exactly what his family and friends assumed all along—an unrealistic dream of a boy, now a man, who has “read too many books.” Miller knows he is talented (sometimes, at least) but is unable to produce anything of value. This gnawing disappointment, along with his tragic marital life (as bizarre as a Greek play) is becoming unbearable. While attempting to write, Miller carouses with and sponges off of his friends who are unique characters with equally pressing problems, as he searches for jobs to pay the bills, all while striving to coexist with his wife’s lesbian lover.

Throughout the passionate turmoil of Miller’s existence in the concrete jungle of Manhattan, Miller allows the reader searing insights into both his soul and the essence of life. Indeed, this book is by no means light reading, though the reader is sure to be caught up in the world Miller has created. *Nexus* is at its core a commentary on the process of becoming a writer and all the self-doubt, hopelessness, and isolation this process entails. Interspersed throughout the novel are lengthy diatribes from both Miller and other characters, commenting on modern society and how life should be lived within it. Particularly evident in *Nexus* are Miller’s thoughts on American life and death-consciousness. Consider this passage from John Stymer, one of Miller’s friends in the novel:

“We die because we lack faith in life, because we refuse to surrender to life completely... And that brings me to the present, to life as we know it today. Isn’t it obvious that our whole way of life is a dedication to death? In our desperate efforts to preserve ourselves, preserve what we have created, we bring about our own death. We do not surrender to life, we struggle to avoid dying.”

Miller is disillusioned with the society and age he lives in, and though he has already separated himself from mainstream America by living an unconventional lifestyle, he is still searching for a way to co-exist with the modern age. He remains steadfastly optimistic in his search for fulfillment, which he believes he will find as a writer, “Perhaps now the very emptiness of life will take on meaning, will provide the clue.”

Allow yourself to get dizzy and lost in Miller's rambling monologues, for that dizziness reflects his own confused disenchantment. In this way, a strong relationship exists between Miller and his readers as he takes them into his confidence and allows them to become his companion on his quest. The quest eventually leads Miller to Paris where he finally succeeds in mastering his craft, and yet the plot is much more encompassing than one man's life—his story reflects the universal urge to insert oneself into the essence of life, the continual tides of conflict which we all must navigate. And perhaps by reading this rollicking, tumultuous tale of self-fulfillment, which is simultaneously entertaining and profound, you may very well gain fresh insight into your own human journey.



Invisible Sisters by Jessica Handler. New York: Public Affairs, 2009. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Callie Betz Pederson.

Invisible Sisters is an emotional memoir in which Jessica Handler reflects on her life and the struggles of growing up in a family of sickness and complication. From childhood, Handler is forced to deal with the serious illness of her two younger sisters. Faced with what the family calls a “reverse miracle,” Handler’s sisters, Susie and Sarah, both have incurable and fatal diseases involving the production of white blood cells. The inevitable death of both sisters affects Handler a great deal and leaves her feeling unimportant. In this powerful and emotional coming of age story, Handler looks back at her life and processes the death of her siblings and ultimately finds her own path in life.

Jessica Handler has a unique sense of language and writing style. Her memoir is lyrical and filled with details. She paints pictures and creates scenes with only a few words, “Susie might have slept poorly after being put to bed in a hospital room with striped curtains and a bedpan on the nightstand. Rubber-soled shoes squeaking down linoleum hallways during the night replaced the sound of a dog’s sleeping sighs.”

Handler holds nothing back in this memoir. She is blunt and honest about the hardships and struggles she and her family had to overcome. She writes without fear of judgment: “That night, I tried crystal meth for the first time, because I needed something to do.” She also makes great references to time and setting. She refers many times to the peace and freedom marches that took place while she was growing up in Atlanta. Her father Jack was involved in the protests and even brought Handler to see Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak. Handler also makes references to her Jewish religion, which her family did not practice or take seriously, many times throughout the story.

I relate to this story because when I was 16 years old my father passed away unexpectedly and my mom and I were left to take care of ourselves. Our relationship struggled and changed, it seemed every conversation turned into a disagreement. The complicated family relationship in *Invisible Sisters* made me look at my own family and in turn question the decisions of the Handler family. There were a few times in the story where I was shocked by the actions and decisions made by Jessica’s parents, Jack and Mimi. But overall, Handler is able to connect the reader deeply with the characters by simply bringing their personalities to every page. I was emotionally attached to every single character, Jack, Mimi, Jessica, Sarah and Susie, from start to finish. Handler’s writing makes it easy to become invested in the changes that befall each character. Her style turns the reader into a caring member of the family rather than an emotionally distant outsider. “I could sit in the depression left by my father’s weight in the white sheets of the unmade bed and stare at the view of the backyard. This is what the tulip poplar looks like if you’re Dad, I thought. This is what the pine straws look like if you’re Mom.” *Invisible Sisters* is a poignant, emotionally involving memoir; I couldn’t put it down.

BIOS

Cath Barton is an English writer, photographer and singer who lives in South Wales. She mainly writes short stories but has recently begun to venture into reviewing, including for *Wales Arts Review*. She blogs at www.cathbarton.wordpress.com and posts a photograph each day on www.blipfoto.com/Cathaber.

CL Bledsoe is the author of the young adult novel *Sunlight*; three poetry collections, _____ (*Want/Need*), *Anthem*, and *Leap Year*; and a short story collection called *Naming the Animals*. A poetry chapbook, *Goodbye to Noise*, is available online at www.righthandpointing.com/bledsoe. Another, *The Man Who Killed Himself in My Bathroom*, is available at <http://tenpagespress.wordpress.com/2011/08/01/the-man-who-killed-himself-in-my-bathroom-by-cl-bledsoe/>. His story, "Leaving the Garden," was selected as a Notable Story of 2008 for *Story South's* Million Writer's Award. His story "The Scream" was selected as a Notable Story of 2011. He's been nominated for the Pushcart Prize five times. He blogs at Murder Your Darlings: <http://clbledsoe.blogspot.com>. Bledsoe has written reviews for *The Hollins Critic*, *The Arkansas Review*, *American Book Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, and elsewhere. Bledsoe lives with his wife and daughter in Maryland.

Joshersaurus Rex (né **Joshua Borja**) is a physics major at New York University, where he works in the Undergraduate Writing Tutors Program and is editor-in-chief of the *Minetta Review*. He likes "Defying Gravity," defying gravity, and Chris Colfer. In the next life, he might become more himself. Or an orange tree. He hasn't yet decided. Check out what he's up to: <http://joshersaurusrex.tumblr.com/projects>.

Keith Buckley lives in a dimly lit money pit in Bloomington, Indiana, surrounded by mountains of unpublishable pornoviolence, noir, and the worst original music ever recorded. He's waiting for someone to pay him to stop. He is also a contributor to AIR IN THE PARAGRAPH, to name but a few.

Merina Canyon has a fascination with The Butterfly Effect and the Strange Attractors of Chaos Theory. She is currently at work on a collection of interwoven true stories that reflect her attraction to the mysterious fires of desire, loss, and awakening. Her fiction and creative nonfiction appear in *Best Lesbian Romance 2011 and 2013*, *Best Lesbian Love Stories 2009 and 2010*, *Sinister Wisdom* 76 and 83, *Fraglit.com*, and *Pilgrimage Press vol. 36*.

Mary Carroll-Hackett earned an MFA in Literature and Writing from Bennington College in June 2003. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in more than a hundred journals including *Carolina Quarterly*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *The Potomac, Reed*, *Superstition Review*, *Drunken Boat* and *The Prose-Poem Project*, among others. Her chapbook, *The Real Politics of Lipstick*, was named winner of the 2010 annual poetry competition by Slipstream, and her chapbook, *Animal Soul*, is forthcoming from Kattwompus Press this year. She teaches Creative Writing at Longwood University in Farmville, VA where she founded and edits *The Dos Passos Review*, Briery Creek Press, and the Liam Rector First Book Prize for Poetry.

Monica Carter currently resides in Los Angeles, California and was a PEN USA Emerging Voices Fellow 2010, a Lambda Literary Foundation Emerging GLBT Voice 2010 and a PEN Center Mark Fellow in 2012. Her fiction has appeared in [Strange Cargo, An Emerging Voices Anthology](#), [Black Clock 12](#), [The Rattling Wall](#) and in the current issue of [Bloom](#). She is working on her novel entitled *In the Life*. She curates the website, [Salonica](#), dedicated to world literature. You can visit her writing website at <http://www.moniacarterthewriter.com>.

While music has played the driving force in his business career, **Otha's** passion for the arts has served as his key to sanity in the fast paced entertainment industry. Drawing inspiration from women, relationships, emotions, music and the African American experience, his mixed medium paintings have been sold to collectors and art enthusiasts throughout Los Angeles and the Southeast region of the U.S. With only a few months under his belt on the Los Angeles art scene, Otha has showcased his art at the Noho Art Gallery, The Key Club, Media Temple Studios, The Holding Co. Studios and the Rochester Art House, amongst others. He also just closed a month and a half solo exhibition at the Emerging Art Scene Gallery in Atlanta, GA. Find him online: [Vakseen.com](#) and [Twitter.com/Vakseen](#)

erin feldman is neither a mermaid, a griffon, nor a unicorn. She does not have wings growing from her shoulder blades nor does she perform folk-punk with a troupe based in New Orleans half of the year. erin feldman lives her temporal life in the Western Queendom of Massachusetts in the village of Florence. erin is forever looking for the impossible, inspiring, and incredible Truths in other people's poetry so that she can attempt to carve those Truths into her own. She is an aspiring writing tutor looking for a crop of students.

Leah Given's photographs have appeared in journals including *The Colored Lens*, *The Bellingham Review*, and *Red Fez*. Her work is currently in a juried exhibition at the St. Louis Artists' Guild. Her educational background is primarily in medicine; she received her M.D. from Washington University in St. Louis and has focused on medical research. She is also a published author of short fiction and recently completed a novel manuscript.

Kyle Hemmings is the author of several chapbooks of poetry and prose: *Avenue C*, *Cat People*, and *Anime Junkie* (Scars Publications). His latest e-books are *You Never Die in Wholes* from Good Story Press and *The Truth about Onions* from Good Samaritan. He lives and writes in New Jersey.

Stories by **Zachary Kaplan-Moss** have appeared in *Alimentum: The Literature of Food* and *Emprise Review*. A graduate of Oberlin College, he currently serves as the Field Manager for Blue Heron Organic Farm in upstate New York.

Steve Klepetar teaches literature and creative writing at Saint Cloud State University in Minnesota. His work has received several nominations for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Flutter Press has recently published his latest chapbook, *My Father Teaches Me a Magic Word*.

Jim Krosschell divides his life into three parts: growing up for 29 years, working in science publishing for 29 years, and now writing and travelling between Massachusetts and Maine. His essays are widely published. See [Saving Maine](#) and [One Man's Maine](#) for other work.

Amanda Layman Low received her BA in Writing from Drury University. Her fiction has appeared in *Four Ties Lit Review* and *Ideagems*. Her nonfiction has appeared on Mommyish.com, Offbeatmama.com and TypeF.com. She lives in Springfield, Missouri, with her husband, Shaun, and baby daughter, Evelyn.

Pete Madzellan resides in New Mexico with his wife and cat, Manny. He currently has fiction in *Cigale Literary Magazine*, and photography in *San Pedro River Review* and the Fall and Winter editions of *convergence: journal of poetry and art*. He has had fiction and poetry published in literary journals, including *Bellowing Ark*, *Wind*, *San Fernando Poetry Journal* and *Proof Rock*, and essays in a variety of publications including the *Santa Fe Reporter*, *Minor League News*, *Eastside Boxing* and others.

Jessie Mason is a stay-at-home mom and portrait photographer living in Casco, ME. She is married and has two lovely children and one silly dog. Her work can be seen at www.facebook.com/jessiemasonphotography and www.jessiemasonphotography.blogspot.com.

A resident of NY, **Stephen Mead** is a published artist, writer, maker of short collage-films and poetry/music mp3s. Much can be learned of his multi-media work by placing his name in any search engine. His latest project-in-progress, a collaborative effort with composer Kevin MacLeod, is entitled “Whispers of Arias,” a two volume download of narrative poems sung to music, <http://stephenmead.amazingtunes.com/>. His latest Amazon release, *31 Kisses*, a poetry-art hybrid, is a celebration of romance for lovers everywhere regardless of sexual orientation.

Sophia Pandeya was born in Karachi, Pakistan. She left for Thailand in 1986 eventually migrating to the US in 1988. Her poetry has been published in the print anthology *Spilled Ink* and online at *The Adirondack Review*, *Convergence Journal*, as well as *Full of Crow*. Links to her published work can be found at: <http://trancelucence.weebly.com/>

Callie Pederson is a recent college graduate with a BA in communication and minor in creative writing from Eckerd College. She enjoys traveling, playing soccer, hiking with her dog, reading, writing, and relaxing at the beach. She has previously published a poem called “Istanbul” that illustrates her experiences traveling in Turkey.

Victor Arnoldo Perez is currently an MFA student in poetry at California State University Fresno where he previously received his BA in English Literature. His recent work explores family history, via a collection of old photographs and narratives. He enjoys his small townhouse near Fresno State, where he can be caught driving his prized 1964 Dodge Dart GT. He has had the pleasure of studying with great poets and performers such as Lee Herrick, Corrine Hales, Tim Skeen, Taylor Mali, Violet Juno and Jack McCarthy. He looks forward to publishing his first collection of poetry after graduation in 2014.

Frederick Pollack. Author of two book-length narrative poems, *The Adventure* and *Happiness*, both published by Story Line Press. Other poems in print and online journals. Adjunct professor creative writing George Washington University.

Christopher Sampson turned sixty this year and started on writing a literary tour of his life. Thinking his life to be rather ordinary, being older now, he has come face to face with a skewed vision of his past. His essay, “Thirty Years Ago,” can be found at: Pixelhose.com. His memoir, “Does Pride Come Before A Fall? Moving Forward With Parkinson’s Disease” was just published by *Prime Mincer* this past spring. Mr. Sampson has earned a BA and MFA from the University of Southern California. He lives by the beach in southern Delaware with his lover and caregiver of twenty years, Jeff and their dog, Jesse.

Fabio Sassi lives and works in Bologna, Italy. He started making visual artworks after varied experiences in music, writing and photography. He makes acrylics with the stencil technique on board, canvas, old vinyl records or other media. He uses logos, icons, tiny objects, and discarded stuff. You can view more of Fabio Sassi’s work at www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com

R.T. Saunders is primarily a non-fiction writer, telling the stories of people and the world in which they live. His interests are eclectic, from gender to generational issues and spirituality. He is currently researching a book on transgender youth. In addition to his writing, Mr. Saunders is Founding Director of The Westport Center, www.westportcenter.org, a not-for-profit organization looking to build more compassionate workplaces and working lives. Some of his work can be found at www.rtsaunders.com and followed on Twitter, @SpeakTruly.

Nicholas Shadowen is a recent college graduate. A student of philosophy and literature, he is currently working on his first novel in hopes of delaying the specter of law school.

John Duncan Talbird’s fiction is forthcoming or has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *South Carolina Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *Grain* and *descant* among others. An English professor at Queensborough Community College, he has held writing residencies at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. He is on the editorial board of *Green Hills Literary Lantern* and a frequent contributor to *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*. He lives in Brooklyn.

Naomi Thiers’ chosen home is the Washington-DC area. In 1992, her full-length book of poetry, *Only The Raw Hands Are Heaven*, was published by Washington Writers Publishing House. Her poetry and fiction have been published in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Colorado Review*, *Pacific Review*, *Antietam Review*, *Town Creek Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Iris*, *Belles Lettres*, *Sojourners*, *Praxilla*, and others. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and featured in anthologies. She works near DC as a magazine editor.

Michelle Valois lives in Florence, Massachusetts with her partner and their three children. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Tri-Quarterly*, *Brevity*, *Fourth Genre*, *North American Review*, *Palooka*, *Anderbo*, *Baltimore Review*, *Florida Review*, and others. She teaches at a community college.

Dr. Ernest Williamson III has published poetry and visual art in over 400 national and international online and print journals. Some of Dr. Williamson’s visual art and/or poetry has been published in journals representing over 35 colleges and universities around the world. Visit Dr. Williamson’s website: www.yessy.com/budicegenius

Howard Winn's writing, both fiction and poetry, has been published by such journals as *Dalhousie Review*, *Descant* (Canada), *Break The Spine*, *Cactus Heart*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *New York Quarterly*, *Southern Humanities Review*. He is presently working on a novel dealing with Tom Brokaw's "Greatest Generation." His BA is from Vassar College. He has an MA in Creative Writing from Stanford University where he studied with Wallace Stegner and Yvor Winters.

Anna Wood is a writer and journalist based in Istanbul, Turkey. She holds a BA in history and pre-law from Columbia University, where she spent many of her better hours in the creative writing department. She reports on politics, human rights and culture in Turkey for the *Southeast European Times*, and her essays can be found on The Nervous Breakdown. Her fiction has appeared in *Line Zero*, and her novella, *A Place Worth Getting To*, was longlisted for Shakespeare & Co.'s Paris Literary Prize in 2011. She is currently at work on a novel.

Courtney Hill Wulsin is a writer, yoga teacher and acupuncturist in Northampton, MA. She finds inspiration in movement, nature, the human body and food. For more of her writing visit her wellness blog at www.windowofheavenacupuncture.com.

Dana Yost was an award-winning daily newspaper editor and writer for 29 years. He is the author of two published books, 2008's *Grace*, a collection of new poetry, and 2010's *The Right Place*, a collection of essays and poems. His third book, *A Higher Level: Southwest State University Women's Tennis 1979-92*, is a work of regional and sports history and will be published this fall by Ellis Press (www.ellispress.com). His poems have appeared in numerous journals and magazines. He lives in Forest City, Iowa.

Changming Yuan, four-time Pushcart nominee and author of *Allen Qing Yuan*, grew up in rural China and published several monographs before moving to Canada. With a PhD in English, Yuan currently tutors in Vancouver and has had poetry appear in nearly 570 literary publications across 22 countries, which include *Asia Literary Review*, *Best Canadian Poetry*, *BestNewPoemsOnline*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *London Magazine*, *Paris/Atlantic*, *Poetry Kanto*, *SAND* and *Taj Mahal Review*.



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