

Issue One

Winter 2012

# Wilde Magazine

A Magazine of Art and Literature with a *Queer* Edge





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# become an inflection

*Aimee Herman*

where do tongues go at night.  
how to starve obesity.  
how to imitate chaos.  
are you a mailbox.  
how true is this body.  
can I write without humiliation.  
what about Shirley your mother the father character.  
what is the difference.  
if I set myself on fire will you donate your skin.  
which is worse.  
is that your orgasm.  
do you drink enough water.  
do you have a passport drinking problem fetish for redheads.  
how nude is quiet or how quiet is nudity.  
can breasts be perverts.  
can gender be removed like the seeds in cucumbers or cantaloupes.  
is de kooning erotic or distracted.  
are you naked enough.  
when was the last time you gargled with semen.  
can you victimize your love for me.  
where is bahrain.  
where is the lump in your breast.  
how dark is your plasma.  
what was your longest relationship and when it ended how many pills did you prescribe to your medicine cabinet.  
how much do you owe in student loans and what rhymes with university.  
when was the last time you were tested.  
do you get dressed in the dark make love in the dark snort memories in the dark.  
can you measure your yawn.  
how bored is your brain on cocaine and claustrophobia.  
can I get a refund for this class.  
did Jesus waste time with sit-ups and salutations.  
can you influence my shadow to glow in the dark.  
where are my people.  
if breasts were detachable would I leave them behind.  
can one refuse mornings like second helpings or receipts.  
how polite is war.  
where did that stain come from.  
why do you carry so many condoms in your pockets.  
would you prefer bleach to hand soap.

Yes *Kelly Blevins*



# They'll say we never married

*Amber Shockley*

It was just like you to  
bum-rush me with a kiss,

hand me a cup of coffee that  
cold day we met at the pier,  
my toes itching for the water,  
dangling like ten beheaded worms  
from the ledges of my legs.

I had dropped a line,  
a small seed I planted in the  
wet earth of water.

You'd already been up an hour  
before me, had breakfasted on  
oats with raisins, and cider,  
the steam of your morning  
rising up and touching your face  
like the fingers of the sun on the lake.

You'd donned your thick, black boots,  
your rubber suit and waded up to  
your waist, into the cold tar that was the mud-sludge  
at the bottom, a fine silt  
of floating jet, small dead fish, and sand.

Your dog had bounded gleefully into  
the mass that sparkled, and back out again,  
the gold curls under her belly dripping  
remind me of her teats last spring  
when she had those puppies,

birthed them on the rug where you  
wipe your shoes, licked them as  
carefully as you do gruffly wipe  
your soles, all that grim and gory  
embedded there, the sweet smell

of it, like the nicotine on your  
skin when you cornered me  
in the cove one early morning,  
dropped to a wood-knobbed and  
knocked knee to ask if I might  
marry you, as if I could help it  
after all these years.

An owl gave a hoot, like a snort  
or a tisk, tisk – the fools these  
wise ones suffer.

That was before the summer  
you got sick, took ill like a man  
picking up his briefcase on his  
way to work – that casual and  
sudden, as if expected. And isn't it,

in a way? The down side, that hidden,  
coming slope, the worse of better,  
as if there were a price to pay  
for all those perfectly rendered pies,  
or dinners of salmon in a light lemon sauce,  
or Sunday mornings when words  
came and went between us easy as breath, even  
the crossword puzzle was completed  
in a miracle we marveled at as proof  
of the glory of the day. We tacked it  
to the refrigerator, where we would've  
the small drawings from our children,  
had we had them.

I wrapped work around my heart the  
way a man does time in his jail.  
I placed tabs on the calendar from  
the country store that hung over the  
tin of starchy, blonde pasta.  
There were the visits to the oncologist,  
and rehab – you hated her in particular,  
but you went, and rose, and softly patted  
each step to the door, coughing just a little.

When I was a fresh and shiny-faced teen,  
buxom and brunette, with rouge,  
there was a sheen to your cheek and gleam  
in your eye that I knew I put there, sure  
as a lighthouse, and it was my pride but  
those last weeks of your treatments,  
not I nor your old, faithful friend  
could wake you, your eyelids stubborn  
and fluttered, your mouth slack. I kept  
a pod of blankets around you, a kettle filled.

I wanted to sue the doctors, the air, the God  
that filled your lungs the very first time.  
Instead, we do what we can. You  
taught me that. I go out, break down  
an abandoned dam. Home-making.







# Baptism

*Rachel Mann*

Gasping he steps in    lets it grasp  
ankles waist   shoulders   neck  
feels it cut his throat

wiggles and pulses  
scatters skin in papery coils  
glassy slough

flexes limbs    cracks knuckles  
winces    searches for new things  
sinks beneath

runs hands round the curve of hips  
pinches skin    squeezes fat  
slides a finger deeper in

opens her eyes  
sees for the first time.

# After Amorsolo's *Woman Cooking in the Kitchen*

*Rina Angela Corpus*

The master painter received brickbats  
posthumously. Not from present-day  
modernists of Edades' lineage but  
from known assailants armed with  
the feminist, if not Marxist stance. Why render  
the *dalagang bukid* as delicate, pristine, fair  
when she labored hard in the house,  
and got sun-burnt in the farms?  
It happened after a war that sent  
the men scurrying in extreme  
directions: the boondocks as rebels,  
or the cities in search for factory jobs.

But in one work he rendered her,  
squatting low, totally taken  
in the act of stoking fire embers  
in front of her an earthenware stove.  
Her rosy brown face lost  
in the industry of managing concoctions  
in her kitchen, in the *bahay kubo*  
where she remains – with or without a male denizen

--

its most protective,  
its most masterful presence.

# Five Years

*Amy Gall*

You want her to stop working and have sex with you. She is reading a book about osteology, or Proust, or some other topic you have no interest in. You are supposed to be reading too, but you've been busy tracing penises on the frost-covered, library windows. You want her to see what you're doing, to point and laugh, but her mouth is set in a deep frown and her fingers are busy dragging a highlighter across every word she's just read. You reach under the table and tickle the side of her knee, your hand still wet with melted ice. She flinches a little, smiles, but doesn't look up from her book.

"Let's take a break," you say, feeling the solidness of her hamstring under the skin. You imagine that you are a pilot, a ship's captain, someone who steers and maneuvers, someone who can always find a place to land.

"We can't." Her smile widens, the creases in her forehead soften. "My paper is due in five hours, and besides—" Your hand wiggles into the crook of her knee and she squeezes the muscle against your fingers.

"—we already took a break."

"Fifteen minutes," you offer.

She puts her highlighter in the gutter between two pages, closes her book. "I'm going downstairs to get some coffee."

You watch her leave, the slight wiggle of her hips causing her shirt to bunch up and expose a sliver of her lower back. You feel possessed by the possibility of her skin, so new to you and already so well known. You grab a pen and begin to write.

"You don't know me, but I know you. I've been watching you. I want to suck the tongue right out of your throat. It will be dark in the room I take you to, and you won't be allowed to speak." You add a lot of other things to this note, especially the word pussy because you are young enough to think that word sounds sexy and dangerous.

You try to disguise your hand writing, but you're nervous, so the note comes out written in your looping, easily recognizable scrawl. There is barely enough time to remember not to sign your name.

When she comes back with her coffee you nod in the direction of the note. "What could that be?" you say, and turn back to the window, the testicles now just streaks of water, in order to hide your smile.

She raises her eyebrows, unfolds the note and looks at it with the same intensity she gives to chapters on calcium deficiency. You watch as her mouth opens and then contorts as if she's in pain, as if someone has just thrust their elbow between her shoulder blades. She lays her hand across her forehead, and then, just as quickly, flops it back onto lap.

You laugh, an embarrassed, terrified laugh. "What?"

She looks at your face like you're a stranger. She shakes her head, her face burning crimson against the white flash of her teeth. She leans over the table. The book she's been reading is caught in her movement

Tightrope Identity *Thomas Chambers*



and collapses to the floor.

"Let's take a break," she says, and her wet breath goes all the way through your ear, down your spine, and into your crotch where it mingles with the fluids that are already collecting there.

You want her to come home and have sex with you. She comes home. The apartment door groans open and the cacophony of restaurant smells rush in: braised beef, pickled cherries, duck pate, crudités, dirty dishwater. She is home and you are angry because you've been alone all day, half-heartedly looking for jobs, consuming large quantities of chocolate, floating.

"How was it?" you say, less interested in the answer than the weight of her body next to you on the couch.

She waves her hands in the air like an angry preacher. "John had me take on three five spot tables all by myself, and of course they all want the tasting menu." Tasting is punctuated by her red clogs slamming against the wall. "And one of them pulled me aside afterwards to complain about the cruelty of foie gras," She stalks towards the bathroom and you ease off the couch to follow her. She pees with the door open, her chin resting against her fists. "It's like, then why did you order it, idiot?"

You stand in the doorway, your arms folded against your chest, sighing heavily as you speak. "Did John tell you that you did a good job?"

Her pee stops mid-stream. "Yeah," she says, and her voice is suddenly all cream and butter, like the béarnaise sauce that stains the thighs of her pants. "He did."

She continues peeing. You don't look at her face because you don't know what you'll find there, but you go into the bathroom and kiss her hair and try to press her head against the paunch of your belly. "Don't," she says, twitching away from you, her hands clawing for the toilet paper.

"All right." You hold your hands out in front of you and walk backwards out of the bathroom. You sit down on the couch, and when she flushes the toilet you whisper "Fuck you," under your breath.

She walks back into the living room. "I'm going to sleep," she says and you trail behind her because you are no longer angry, just very, very scared.

You climb into bed and watch her undress. Her brown pants and button up shirt wilt unceremoniously off of her body. You try to study her nakedness, memorize the fullness of her breasts, their stark whiteness, the brown nipples that harden against the cold. But she covers herself quickly, almost desperately, reaching for one of your old college t-shirts and yanking it over her head. You position yourself at the edge of the bed so that she has to crawl over you to get to her side, and she does this quickly too, mechanically swinging her legs across your torso as if you were a fence post. As she turns to face the wall you reach out and touch the knuckles of her spine with the back of your hand. She says I love you in a whisper that sounds like a warning. You roll over and turn off the light.

You want her to come back and have sex with you. But you don't have a place to go back to. You have her mini-van, parked sideways in an abandoned lot where there are no trees to protect you from the July sun. There is also no time to roll down the windows, because there are other yous and hers who don't know that you're here, sweating and struggling inside of each other. These new, trusting partners think you're eating breakfast sandwiches, maybe sharing a cup of coffee, and that *was* how the morning started. But now she is squished up against the driver's side door, her vulva, pink and weeping, her heel digging into the dashboard that is almost too hot to touch.

"Please," she begs, in a voice so vulnerable that you feel the need to say something dramatic like, "No."

But she grabs for you, yanks you down by your nipples, pulling you down to her core until all you feel is lightning bolts of pain. You taste her and watch her strain, the corded muscles of her inner thighs flexing and releasing like waves. Everything aches because the stick shift is digging into your hip, and because you have to keep your neck up so you can watch her as you suck on her clit. You see that she is moaning but she is also looking around, her blue eyes wildly searching for something that is clearly not in the car. And again you feel the sharp need to run away, to deny her what is building.

But then she puts her hand down your pants. Her fingers push into the spongy wetness of your vagina and you think: we never should have broken up. Her other hand grabs at the slippery skin on your lower back and you think: *congeal, congeal, coagulate*. She is slapping your back, tightening her legs, rocketing forward, and this time you don't think anything, you just watch the engine of her mouth and her seeking eyes as they bulge wide and finally close.



# Types

*Jonathan Flike*

Sweetheart,  
this thing of ours  
can't feed off of  
chocolate and kisses.  
Hershey never hurt like I need.  
Where's the pain,  
the tugs, the dirty names  
that make me really feel?  
Take the porcelain parts  
beneath these clothes  
and splinter me down  
crack me open  
into pieces jagged  
not so precious.  
Pick at scabs  
so the marks scar over,  
little spaces hair and fingers  
abandon for unmarked pastures.  
Your love—  
just the type  
made for that idealized moment:  
scented candles  
gentle touching with  
Aimee Mann's whispers  
in the dark.  
It's just your type  
It's just the type  
I don't really need.



Harvey Milk Street

*Timothy Bruehl*

# Lesbians on TV

*Andrea Dulanto*

I've been watching the O.C. for a few weeks now  
since they introduced a teenage lesbian relationship into their Californian cantaloupe lives—  
let's just say there aren't enough lesbian relationships on TV  
and I'm waiting to see how they fuck this one up—  
she'll go homicidal, or worse straight—  
but I like the parts right before that,  
the way they look at each other, share each others clothes, get matching tattoos—  
is everyone else blind? Seth, Ryan, Summer— none of those Mouseketeers gets it—  
this is a courtship, you losers—

no one notices.

The adults pound Chivas, embroiled in their own sex scandals. The teenagers,  
hormone-tastic.

Does anyone use the word “fantastic” anymore?

Maybe if you're a substitute teacher living alone in Idaho, your hands on some freaky-fresh stack of special-order magazines from Tokyo, because apparently Japan isn't prudish as apple pie,  
unless you're the pie in the film *American Pie*.

That pie is a dedicated slut, working the porn circuit, addicted to crystal meth.

He had a horrible childhood  
but he tells the funniest jokes— all G-rated.

We need more sex scandals,  
we need more sex.

And I'm 33, and everyone who is my age or older talks about their car problems,  
or problems with work, or problems with school,  
or how hard it is trying to have a creative life with the kids, and the cooking and cleaning—  
and I think: *why not let them wallow in their own filth* —  
which is one of the reasons I'm not a parent and have no desire to be—  
so I say nothing.

They will bitch about being parents, then these tired-where-am-I sighs  
and to steal a phrase (shit do I need copyright permission) from comic Wanda Sykes,  
these parents will sigh and say:  
“but it's worth it.”

Part of me wants to delve into my theory that parents are born liars—  
but I tell my composition students

think of your audience.

& do I want parents to stop listening at this point?

Honestly, even I've kind of already left the building, clinging to Elvis' rhinestone belt.

“What are you doing there little lady?”

I'm about Lisa Marie's age, a bit younger.



“Don’t your parents know where you are?”

If I’m clinging to Elvis’ belt, I obviously don’t care where my parents are.

“They probably miss you.”

Elvis is all bees-knees to get back to the limo, his pill stash, his slosh of Bourbon.

So that’s why I’m like “but Elvis honey.”

& I turn into a world-class skank, Studio 54 polyester low-cut dress, strappy high heels— I look like a sexy eggplant and Elvis is partial to food, anything that reminds him of food, so he lets me inside.

He doesn’t ask a lot of questions. He doesn’t ask about my parents anymore.

“Can you suck a mean cock?”

Unzipping Elvis: *I’ll have to write about this someday.*

I woke up on his grave surrounded by American flags and teddy bears.

This poem will now be interrupted by the feminists in the attic, the women inside the wallpaper:

*Q: If you’re such a lesbian, why are you writing about giving Elvis a blow job?*

*A: Maybe I’m bisexual, a possibility often erased from our collective psyche, but the truth is I am a lesbian, I’m into girls.*

*Yet I think I was ready to suck Elvis’ dick,  
not because I was into dick but because he was,  
you know,  
Elvis.*

*I admit it— I gave in too easily.*

*It’s the plight of a lot of women— this giving in.*

We now return you to the rest of the poem.

I was so fucked up that night, maybe he was one of Elvis’ cousins— one of his doubles.

Stranded in Vegas, spring 2001—an Elvis impersonator and I was the Studio 54 impersonator, dancing inside replicas of cities not brought down to ruin yet.

What happens in Vegas...stays...

which is bullshit because someone always takes pictures—  
evidence, blackmail, office gossip—  
Vegas is on closed-circuit TV—  
even before terrorism and high alerts,

Vegas was watching us,

*my mind on my money, my money on my mind—  
shit, another copyright?*

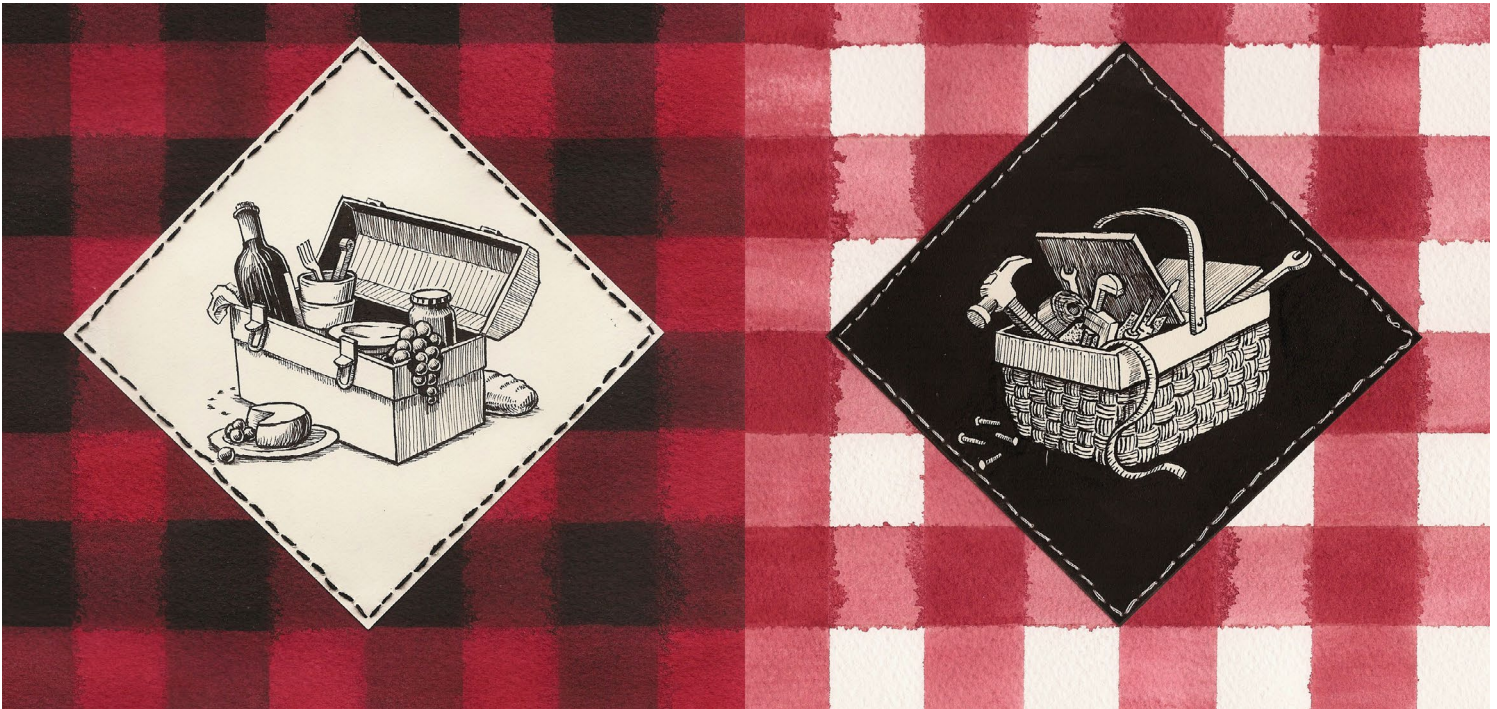
Nothing is free.

# Toys of the Future

*Jessy Randall*

Cookie-Baking Gun  
Fashion Mutant  
Transgender Transformer  
Camouflage Barbie  
Pink Light Saber  
My Little Robot Pony  
Slinky

Content *Brian Britigan*





# Driving Into Sunsets

*Alison Stine*

I pretend Kansas is Iowa. The flat plains are low hills. The sorghum is corn. Cows remain cows. I am twenty-two and on my way to school. Or, I am on my way to New York, to act. I am on my way to something, some city, some life. I go through in my head all the lives I could have had, all the choices I could have made, and I come down to this one: another chance. I am driving across the country with my books and my papers and some sweaters and a camera—for what? A chance to start over.

Stepping into the wind is like opening an oven of gas. There's no one around. Men at the filling station stare at my jeans shorts. There's nothing else to look at.

There are fields and fields of sunflowers, miles of sunflowers, all their black crowns turned to the ground. If I had come earlier, they might have been facing up.

Kansas is a fever dream. Kansas is yellow corn and endless and I love it, in its way. It is *The Wizard of Oz*. It makes me miss my friend from Kansas City, Lindsay in her Homecoming dress: frizzy and wild. It makes me miss my friend from Oklahoma, Duncan, a poet from a reservation, who moved to D.C. and rode the metro for hours—and I'm gone from both their lives, and it's my own fault. I don't write back.

Kansas makes me want to write back.

Kansas reminds me of being sick with bronchitis, what I used to think in my bed: how I would get out of this place, once I could get up. How I would find a new world. A new world: Colorado.

Colorado is cities rising out of dust, rising out of nowhere. They frighten me with their suddenness, their haze and traffic, instant windows and sidewalks and speeding lanes. Then just as quickly, Denver, Fort Collins, are gone back into the ground.

Then cows again, and dirt.

Colorado is a list of mostly animals: big-horned sheep in the grass next to motorcycles, goats on rocks, elk in fields and in the purple meadows—so close, even the horned bulls—antelope everywhere, their pronged heads like white sprigs of wildflowers. People lined the roads in Rocky Mountain State Park with binoculars and blankets, looking for the elk. They have been there all day. I slow the car, and I tell them where to go. I tell them I have seen three bulls.

"You must be a good luck charm," I am told.

I forgot to mention: in Missouri, the monarch butterflies cut across my path on their way to Mexico, orange and black flags. Tell them to fly higher. Tell them to go faster.

"You can't avoid a butterfly," I am told, but I try.

\*\*\*

"Hi honey," the woman behind the register says when I come in the door. Everyone—meaning men in the diesel line—turns. I buy my gas and my gum and my postcards.

"Do me a favor, honey," the cashier says. "Be careful out there."

"I will," I promise.

In the parking lot, I lean against the car, checking the map. In the sky, I see a gold eagle, swooning, close. A trucker points it out to me. "Most people go through their whole lives without seeing what you've seen."

But I have made a promise. I get in my car and go.

\*\*\*

Tonight, for once, is spent in an expensive hotel. When I unlock the door to the room, it is lovely, comfortable, and familiar, too familiar. It makes me instantly, deeply sad: the neat bed, the angled white pillows, the window opening into sky and brief city lights... How much love was lost here?

Dinner in the deserted downtown. The street lights flash red and green but no one goes. No one's there.

Dinner is bean and bacon soup, retro red ale, chicken pie, a tiny perfect cup of yellow custard with fresh red blackberries on top. The place and the dessert are recommendations from my friend. Wyoming makes me think of her, where she came from. I am going through your old towns, friends, and I miss you, and now I know a little bit more how you became you, what shaped you—what made you want to leave. I can

see you driving to the limits, not looking back. There is dust on your truck and I love you.

In the hotel bathroom, I'm washing my face, and the pale face in the mirror startles me, looks at once like a stranger: the cloud of dark hair, the flannel shirt, tank top, sweater, jeans. The glass pendant of my necklace clunks against my collarbone, an empty sound like a role against a pole. The water is cold.

I think tonight I will get no sleep.

Tonight I sleep in Laramie.

\*\*\*

Wyoming lasted a long time.

It was Wyoming when it should have been something else. On my way out of town, I looked for the place where Matthew Sheppard was killed, for a cross or a wreath, for a marker, but there was nothing—only miles and miles of orange snow fence, antelope, yellow stone and sky.

Then the lone coyote, standing at the edge of a field of antelope on a hill, looking off the crest of it, down the road and into the distance. His ears pricked. His body tensed, waiting.

On the road out of Wyoming, I see jackrabbits or hares. Many magpies, in the air and on the ground. I forgot to mention marmots, fluffy gray creatures who poke their heads out of stones, who peer up at my camera, so like groundhogs, my favorite animal. My *totem animal*, a friend said, because I see them everywhere. I look for them standing, fat guardians of highways. Once, one followed me home.

In Wyoming, a tumbleweed skitters under the tires as I drive. It is fast and thin, brittle and brown, smaller than I would have expected, and so quick. It is not like a tumbleweed at all, not like the cartoons would have you believe. It is more like the skeleton of a snowflake, the model of an atom my brother made in elementary science class from toothpicks and wire. When I hit the tumbleweed, I think I have killed something, something big. I scream—and then I see the pieces behind me scatter in the mirror, so breakable, crumbling, dust going back to road and dust.

\*\*\*

I almost understand heaven.

It is immediate, the difference in the landscape. It happens almost exactly at the state line. The ground rises up. The peaks have layers and trees and the trees have colors, and I want to believe—I think I believe—the colors are for me. Because I will miss them, because I will not see trees change again for a year or more, because fall has always been a promise: You can start again, and I need a promise now. I need to start again now.

The colors are orange and red and yellow, not the yellow of Colorado, not the aspens crisping, but a deep burn, bottomed with brown earth. Also green and blue.

Also we fly in Utah, fly in the car down the mountain. A truck is burning through his brakes. I see the smoke rising from the tires, smell the arid rubber and fumes. I get far behind him. There are truck breakaway lanes every few feet down the mountain, inclined driveways of gravel off the right shoulder of the road. I have never seen a truck use one, and this truck keeps going. He's not giving up today.

After the mountain is a city, and after the city is a lake, laid out exactly as I had imagined it, though I did not, until this moment, realize I had imagined it: pink mountains in the distance, shouldered with blue, the white crust, the silver water. It is like a dream I forgot I had dreamed.

I walk out on the water, though it is not water. It is salt, and I sink a little. Someone takes my picture. Someone is swimming, a little ways off, a man. I creep closer, salt crunching under my shoes. He is not swimming, the man, not trying at all. He's just floating there, up and down, buoyant, and alone.

I want to swim. I find two stones and put them in my pocket.

I am lonely, but I know I will not always be lonely.

Later, driving through the Salt Flats, I see the words people have left in the white expanse of dried salt. Rocks spell out names. Shapes: clovers, crosses, and hearts. Ring after ring of beer bottles, a fossilized tire, black candles—all are offerings.

A paper wreath whips away from its post, sails under my tires like the tumbleweed, sun-bleached and piñata-thin. I do not know what it marked. I do not know who *Harvey* and *Rita* and *Jill* and *Adrienne* and *You* are, and why they left their names in the salt, what compelled them. Who did they love? What did

they want? What were they trying to say?

I keep seeing messages meant for other people, and I will remember them; I will pass them along, I swear, if someone will please send a message for me.

\*\*\*

In which our heroine finds herself in a \$29.00 hotel room at The Tarnation Inn and Casino just over the state line with a \$5 chip in her pocket and a half-empty tube of lipstick in her hand.

She eats the \$13.00 prime rib.

She pulls gulf shrimp from their shells.

She has no idea what time it is.

She takes one bite of chocolate cupcake, one bite of subpar bread pudding, one bite of caramel crisp. She takes a picture of the rotating pie case while the cashier laughs and laughs.

She narrowly avoids Disaster in the elevator. Disaster is wearing a wife beater and has a friend and has been drinking, but Disaster is short. And Disaster backs off.

In the room, which looks over the dark atrium, the strains of the casino can just be heard, muffled, good songs from Bob Dylan and Patty Griffin.

Dylan is singing, *It's not dark yet*.

In the room, she scrubs out the deep, round tub because it is frightening, and takes a bath, spills the free shampoo into the water and pretends the silver sheen is bubbles. She wishes the tub were heart-shaped and clean. She wishes the bed were heart-shaped. She considers her face in the mirror: heart-shaped, purple circles. Her cheeks are sun burnt a little now. She wonders how old she looks. She's beginning to realize she is no longer a girl. She's beginning to realize she will not, will never, it will not, it will never, be the same.

\*\*\*

In Winnemucca, people are wearing cowboy hats without irony. This began in Colorado. Secretly, you want cowboy boots. You lust for them: red leather, stubby-heeled cowboy boots like boys wore playing dress up in the first grade, but you are trying to hold out and hold onto your cash.

Nevada smells like sage brush, which is the smell of the cooking herb, but stronger, like thick, wet, nettles. Lunch is at the gas station/casino/hotel/truck stop/gift shop/Mexican restaurant. Inside, there are no windows. There is no daylight anywhere. No clocks. No time. You are the only one speaking English, though you are not speaking. Language fills in around you, happy, indistinct.

You order pork stewed in green tamales. When the food comes, the waiter looks worried. Everything runs together on the hot white plate, a soup of cheese, beans, rice, potatoes, pink meat.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asks.

"I've never had it before," you say. "But I want to."

"All right, buddy," he smiles.

He calls you *buddy*, which is a nice change from *honey*.

\*\*\*

It's early. It's been called an early day. The day has been called.

It's a tourist town, but the tourists aren't here yet, or, maybe they have already left. There's no heat and there's not yet snow. It's crisp, a little chilly by the beach. It stays light for a long time.

It's California.

I took a picture at the state line sign: a blue sign with yellow flowers.

Lake Tahoe is perfect, as Utah was perfect, as Kansas was perfect. They are each their own thing. They are each the thing they are supposed to be, which is a thing I have never seen before, and do not know. They are each full of people living their lives, lives I can only guess at, think I could do, if only I was given entrance. I was trained as a mimic, and every town I try on like the actress I was. Every town means hope.

In Tahoe City, I check into a little room, not much from the outside, but inside, a surprise: remodeled like The Great Northern from *Twin Peaks* with light pine furniture, iron fixtures, coffee mugs, quilts—all the

trappings of winter.

Winter is, after all, waiting.

The bathroom has slate floors and a high window that overlooks the Sierras, piney-topped trees and a soccer field. Aspens blaze and pale to yellow. Children are playing on the field, watched by parents with blankets and lawn chairs.

I take a shower in the middle of the afternoon. Light spills over the water. It's bright and I leave the window cracked. The shouts of children fill the waves of my hair.

I eat in a real restaurant with real food and real art on the walls, and real red wine in a real glass. And it is good, and I am so relieved. Everything tastes good. I know how to do this. I know where I am, though I have never been where I am.

I have been traveling for so long, I have almost forgotten why I left, where I am going. Leaving seemed like enough. Paring down my things, giving away my furniture, sealing my letters into boxes, shipping my books in the mail—it seemed like the end, seemed like the answer. I forgot I had somewhere to be, something to do, something waiting for me at the other end. It's not just the ocean waiting, though that too I have forgotten, not just the distance stretching between me and the Midwest.

That is what I feel more than anything: the distance, threading thicker and thicker like a pipe. I'm close to San Francisco, but I'm afraid to go further. That is what I feel more than anything.

I have been thinking the last few years, what do I want from my life? What do I need to be happy? Not very much, I think. Trees, I think. Stars.

Soon I add: a mountain.

I need trees. I need stars. I need friends. I need a mountain, and I need somewhere, somewhere, children, calling out to each other across a field: *Good try. Good try. Good try.*



# The First Time I Had No Words

*Judy Bankman*

In my kitchen, a dead  
Gerber daisy  
propped up in an old  
Riesling bottle, its limp, brown  
petals like a drooping  
lion's mane.

You said it looked great  
that way, as if it should have  
been born dead.

...

The first time I saw your bed,  
it was a mess, and I laughed.  
I asked where your fitted sheet was.  
You asked *what* a fitted sheet was.

So we fucked on an almost-bare  
mattress, your hand in my cunt  
at my throat

*Sweet Jude*  
you called me, and you  
looked like such a boy  
from the waist up.

...

Every morning the light  
from your small square window  
throws shapes onto the  
handprints on your wall,

the time when you wake me  
with words and under  
the canvas of your ink-  
stained sheets:

*You are like the forest floor,*  
and you, the part where the light  
gets in, radiant.

...

The first time I saw your chest,  
it was scarred, and I cried.  
*I was trying to get to my heart.*  
I am speechless and  
there you are behind a screen  
onstage and how you toyed

with death and me, in a  
dark audience, barely blinking.  
The sound of your voice swells  
the room, swirls like tumbling pollen  
and then you show your face,  
radiant.

...

In February when the air is dry  
as chalk we walk quickly  
up and down these littered blocks  
that smell like piss and cigarettes.  
You talk a mile a minute:  
the queers of Winnipeg, your mother  
who hates you (do I believe this?);  
how every scar was an attempt  
at bravery, every tattoo  
a safety measure. Sometimes I don't  
know what to say.

It is always your voice, always  
speaking, crying, laughing,  
whispering while fucking me,  
*shut the fuck up* like a clamp  
against my temples and I can't  
speak. And suddenly your voice  
turns cold as the first layer  
of soil under grass in the spring  
and finally you say I shamed you,  
like the rest of the world.

...

This June air – still dry but  
a heat has blanketed the city  
and these streets that all  
reflect your face. At last I feel my  
own voice rise up through  
this chest, past this heart that  
never stops pumping no matter  
how much you made me think  
about dying.

If you could hear me these days,  
I would say one thing:

Because I had no words,  
maybe my face told lies.  
I was never ashamed.

# Carrion

Wes Jamison

I have been lying about the ravens. It seems I am always lying about them. I say I see them all around me and that I think they are following me, but I do not. To tell the truth, as close as I can come to it, I noticed three or four perched outside my window; they have since disappeared, but there is still an index of them in the white excrement covering the lower branches of that tree. After I noticed them two nights in a row, I began to look for them in that tree from that same window. I took two reddened-night photos, intending to track them, discover if they remain in the same posturing, position, location. But I never compared the photos. There were only two, because on the fifth night I expected the ravens to be there, they were absent and have been since.

I am still lying: there are no ravens in the Midwest. What I see, what we see when we see large black birds that are not blackbirds, are crows. I call them ravens, because I do not like the word *crow*; I would prefer them to be *ravens*, prefer them to be literal, actual, real ravens.

I do not see ravens all around me. I see them—and we must simply accept that the name I give them and the entities themselves are not consubstantial; that words deform reality, no matter the word I use; that calling a thing *a thing* does not make it *a thing* at all, but merely a thing that I call *a thing* that you may call anything else—but aside from those that perched themselves outside my window, their appearance is only occasional. I have noticed one atop the lightning rod jutting from the Germanesque turret on the building almost catty-corner from mine. I have noticed one in the large grassy lot that I walk past on my way from the train. Once, I noticed one near the park next to my apartment carrying an abandoned Ziploc bag of Cheez-Its.

Whenever I encounter them, my reaction has always been severe and visceral. I recall happening upon one perched on a handrail maybe three years ago: it did not move, it was larger than any other I had seen, and it was so close that I could distinguish, for the first and final time, individual oily feathers, see through them to the calamus, the quill. This image of it made it prehistoric, aged in a way that pulls gums from teeth, cold in a way that tightens flesh around hair follicle, distressed and malnourished the way we become ribbed and essential. The implied violence, its proximity, its lack of perceivable alarm at my closeness immediately frightened me. I stopped walking, because I recognized that I could have reached out and grabbed it and that it could have easily attacked me. I did not want to be attacked, but realizing that I might be in danger, I froze.

I thought of those quills as pungent. They seemed to me so uncannily similar to the roots of teeth: I was twenty-one and had just experienced my first wisdom-teeth pains. I had recently extracted from an x-ray that, despite developing for those twenty-one years, the roots of my teeth were not yet complete, still open at the ends. As they broke the gums, I could smell them, like rot in a previously unreached landscape of my mouth. They smelled not because they were rotten, but because they were newly exposed, the way I am sure our viscera do, never before encountering nitrogen, oxygen, argon.

The pain, that terrible pressure forcing itself along my entire jaw and ear and gums and tongue and eye—this was a sign that these could not comfortably coexist with the others. They needed to be removed. I have yet to undergo this procedure. I don't want to. They are mine and always have been. Despite how common wisdom-teeth-removal is, and despite the fact that we all lose our first set of teeth, we are each born with these, our teeth, and to remove them—to rip or cut or break them out instead of letting our bodies naturally reject that which is no longer useful—is to no longer be our original, whole, complete selves. I have known my adult teeth longer than I have not known them; the first were so short lived, growing in before memory had kicked in and falling out before I could ever really grow attached. But I know these teeth—this version of my body.

Newly missing teeth, our bodies become fragmented; we suddenly have only a part of it to use to confront truth, to tell the truth, to discover what is actual. Because that is what bodies are for: looking at what must not be looked at, at what would prevent us from existing, from continuing our ordinary, domestic lives—*the truth*. You are your teeth, as I am mine, in part, and we use not only our hands and feet but also our legs, our abdomen, our back, lungs, heart, brain, mind, keratin, our carbon, our teeth to climb the mountain from

which we can look straight at god—and then most likely flee, come running down the mountain in fear.

That raven showed me my progress despite my incomplete status, slow growth and change.

That raven forced an eruption of the Real in my consciousness: the horror of it was the sudden realization that I am in need, constantly needing—food, shelter, water, interpersonal contact, close as well as distant relationships, medication, transportation, hobby, occupation, money, limbs and digits, iron, to expel waste. We need these things, these things that are so apparent to others in our neo-natal state, so that we may not die. Our entire existence, it seems, is based on a need to not die and to produce descendants, and children and animals—they are the ones whose lives of need are not censored. We cannot consciously live as they do: we cannot afford or literally are unable to tell each other *I need to live*—and again, you must simply trust that words are deforming all of this, for when I write *I need to live* I am merely using the words to designate that which we designate as coming closest to the desired meaning, but that meaning is not the actual. Words cannot capture a mating call or the cry of an infant without reducing them to *mating call* or *cry*. There is no vocal cord there. Words are unable to capture, no matter how well-tempered they may be, the look of my grandfather's eyes when we found them still open and the oxygen machine still running and Animal Planet still showing when we found him dead. There is no eighty-one year old body with twenty minutes of decomposition already set in there. I need to live.

All ravens have since become symbol. I have found in all ravens that which I found in that first: I am growing, I am aging, I am dying, will die, and this progress, this growth, is painful. I will leave here neither whole nor unscathed. That pain, the pain I had to simply suffer through for weeks, that I could in no way curb or suppress, through which I simply had to cry, and that fear, the fear of being attacked, of confronting something prehistoric and base: proof that we are mortal, our bodies transient.

This is tricky, this project, as I am circling the waters of the prelapsarian. But perhaps this is why I continue to write about these birds, for the simple fact that I know that I cannot do so rightly, as I will forever be postlapsarian, fallen, exiled from Eden, always cursed by the burden of language and its distortion.

My mind is so often occupied by this and any other threat of annihilation: roots remembered by *aves*, by HIV remembered by antiretroviral therapy, remembered by having to disclose my aggressive mortality before I even know the person I tell.

Mortality has everything to do with the body, bodies, the concept of *the body*. To say *I am dying* or *I feel like dying* or *I will die*—it's all meaningless, as they are words, and words do not capture reality, but rather each word is merely a symbol. But the body—the body can certainly *feel* or *know* or, in a way, *trust* that it will become inanimate, decompose, become something else to be used by something else. I am lucky, because I can no longer escape mortality: not in relationships, not in sex, not in health, not in tattoos, rarely in other people. For so long, since early in my youth, I dreaded contracting HIV. The fear of complications—that is, of the deaths that are caused by HIV—still persists, but the dread is gone: my body that wanted HIV got it. More than twenty-five individual viruses were accepted in to my bloodstream and could not be killed fast enough; the ejaculate stayed in me long enough to let it seep; my body created and then refused to close a bleeding open wound, attracting those more than twenty-five viruses like a shark. I no longer dread what may come, for it has already entered my blood and replicated itself through my white blood cells, ripping them from the inside out and leaving only sheathes of procreation. And though I might outlive complications, one cannot deny that we have been taught that HIV is a death sentence, and one cannot deny that, without medication, the body crumples in on itself from its lack of immune system. Illness—chronic illness must be the only way to confront, accept, trust in our bodies' fleetingness. Chronic or sudden sickness with short gestation, resulting in short life expectancy; that which causes pain or waste or discomfort. Only when we see our blood leave us in seven purple vials—and only when those are moved from our elbows to our own palms, holding our own heat. Yes—I think we can only know mortality if we are violently thrust into it, or if it is violently thrust into us.

If our lungs or liver or knuckles or scapula or nerve endings or sphincter are not suffering, or we do not know that we are, the ravens return to remind us.

My response to each and every raven, that is, crow, proves they are more to me than their simple corporeality. When encountered, I am not seeing or hearing feathers and carbon but myth, archetype, metaphor. I have never been in the habit of writing purely observationally, and my response is so much more than reactionary; perhaps had it been otherwise, I would never have begun writing about them. But they are large and metaphysical, outside of temporality and existing in, inhabiting more than their own bodies.

When confronted with something so outside language, so outside perception, we interrogate it, because it is not immediately easily comprehensible. I want to comprehend, and I want to share the comprehension at which I arrive.

I try to write the raven, the symbol and the body of the raven, but I cannot, because I have lapsed into language, and words only wrap themselves around and function as index of that which is material. But I sense that one must confront that which frightens him in order to come to truth. And transience, mortality, and the body frighten me. So I learn about it, I read about it, I create about it. And confrontation becomes easier when you are dealing with a manifestation or representation of something metaphysical. So I do not make much attempt at discovering what happens in a rotting body, a twenty-minute-dead body, but instead attempt to discover that which makes a raven not a crow and makes a raven fly and why a raven circles in flight and just how smart are they. It is easier to learn, but it all means the same thing: *I need to live/I am dying*.

I write about ravens repeatedly, *knowing* that I cannot in this way come close to them. I never do: I never get any closer to appropriately describing their bodies or that which they represent. Language is futile, because it is the body that matters—the body, not the language we use to describe a body, that holds meaning. But each attempt, in accumulation, has purpose: I begin to circuit them, circle through currents of hot air, waiting to get high enough before I proceed, only to fall, then circle and rise again.

I want to outline them, provide silhouette, draw their perimeters, their limits; I want to wrap words around their mitochondria, their throat and crop, their crown, their mantle and flank, their secondaries and tertiaries, ribs and trachea, around their anterior-facing digits if no words may actually fill their void on this page. This is as close as I can come: if I may not *write* them, I'd like to *imply* them in this way.

No one attempt feels this way: each time, each time I circle, each time I prod at the corpse of a raven, I feel like I have found the heart of the matter, arrived at the center of the matter. In order to get past the first sentence, in order to leave that first sentence intact, we must trust that if we are not there, at the center, then we are at least one sentence closer. Of course, if the goal of writing is to confront that which frightens us—as seems to be the call-to-arms, the project of so many—if we got there in one sentence, we would be too scared to continue. Each attempt of writing beyond a first, single sentence, is admission that we are not there, but trying.

If we could say exactly what we mean, provide solid, singular truths, we would not need second, third, eighteenth sentences; we would not need to compose a single truth as a book. Art is the repeated attempt at reaching that which is impossible.

If we are genuinely fearful, we make multiple attempts.

I write that they are following me, that I am special to them; but they are not, and I am not. Instead, after I write this, I convince myself of it, because I feel as though I have come as close as I can to the truth. The truths I write, in this way, are preemptive. *Seeing this raven, here, now, and having seen one however many days ago is proof that they are surrounding me*. But I write again, because I realize that this is not true.

I wanted them to think I am special. I wanted them to need me. I wanted them to fall out of the sky without me. I wanted to be the object of their affection, their only and biggest carrion, their sun. But I am not. Not theirs. Even if they were temporarily mine, if I happen to be the one to notice their presence, I would merely be a short-term gallows-keeper, yet another hanged man to them. But my possession would certainly be brief. I would be replaced. Yes, we all want to be the object of affection, but affection, desire, is discretionless, merely seeking place-holders, fillers. This is how desire functions: we do not desire *x*, we simply *desire*. Once we obtain *x*, we do not stop desiring—we find something else to desire. There are so many



objects, states, statuses, stations we do not have, and, as long as we continue to not have them, it does not matter which we desire the most.

I need—I desire—to live. It is not this simple. Were that accurate enough, four words would tell the whole of the truth.

I avoid the possibility that ravens are anything other than singularly meaningful. To do so goes against the very theory I've already employed to discuss them: there is symbol, and symbols are largely commonly understood by individuals. I do not often admit to myself that ravens mean only the exact same to me as they do for every other person who grew up or learned to understand them as manifestations of death, dying, disease. They are. Because they feed on carrion, because they spread bacteria and viruses, because they historically and mythically guard gallows, because they are black and black is, to a large population, representative of death, because their Latin calls warn us of *tomorrow, tomorrow*—and that is something we intellectually recognize we are not promised. For Westerners—those influenced by a probably-singular world-view, probably spurred by stemming from a single cultural entity and further aggravated by a large, forceful theology—they are always future, blood, death, Shadow, punishment, pestilence, illness, unmatched intelligence. My rational side denies all this, affording my emotional side to think that my relationship with these birds is special, unique, personally important. I allow myself to think that I am particularly, unusually haunted by them. Because I allow myself to think that I am particularly, unusually aware of my body and my transience. Because I am constantly, daily reminded of it. Because my body contracted HIV. And I tell myself that this is so, because my body wanted to tell me that it will die. Because my body needed to have that relationship with the other parts of my self.\_

I may only notice ravens because I am in a unique position to do so. Because I have HIV. And these three letters are yet another symbol, for punishment, pestilence, sin, blood, death. Its existing in my body and not solely in a collective unconscious makes me more aware of my mortality, my transience, of death than others. Ravens are Jungian symbols; I don't think HIV would be, since we do not often culturally encounter the actual image of it. But I wonder—and I cannot know—if we only recognize the raven's symbol once we are made aware of transience, once it is otherwise real. I wonder if ravens are death and illness to me because they are to everyone, or because I recognize that which I already know in them.

This is what ravens become, if you try to understand, were you ever to tune in: the fact that I will soon die, and there is the possibility that they will eat my tendons, ligaments, fascia, fat, synovial membranes, muscles, blood vessels.

I used to want to be cremated—have my body laid out for viewing and then pushed by my loved ones into two-thousand degree fires where my body would crumble and split and char and break and continue to evaporate and oxidize and break and peel and divide and blacken until only four and three-quarters pounds of calcium and carbon remained. I used to want my ashes buried with the seed of a tree that would use some of my carbon to grow and produce fruit that would be consumed by animals that would release my nutrients by way of excrement elsewhere to be used by something else; or the fruit to drop to the earth and rot and be cannibalistically reused by the tree for nourishment.

I had been seeking union with the Other in this desire—not *an* other, but all others, the *big other*—so that I could live without language, without knowledge of good and evil, without banishment from the garden; without being *dying* or only *HIV* before simply existing—desired having bodies trump language, not the other way around.

Neurosis is the desire to be prelapsarian. I desired more than I do now a sense of eternity, a feeling of limitlessness, of being unbounded; I wanted to locate an oceanic feeling in myself; I wanted to float, be suspended and completely encapsulated, as if in the womb again. This is the wish fulfillment of a child, our egoistic need for protection and singularity—to again be one with Mother. Cremation seems to me now to be a very clear attempt to climb back into the womb by way of becoming one with everything. If I am separate from nothing, I cannot be separate from her, from you. All need is automatically met, for there is not resource, no object that is not already a part of me. I would, in fact, cease to desire.

I have reconsidered. I now desire an air burial: I want my corpse thrown onto the edge of a cliff, thrown onto a boulder and made vulnerable to the birds like Prometheus—though more than my liver would be consumed, and I would not regenerate. No healing, no chains, no fighting or screaming—just a dead body, just a stone, just the wind, and just the birds. Just carrion. I am not sure how long my body would remain there on that stone, but eventually the birds, perhaps hungry and perhaps all at once, would remove my liver, my eyes, my veins, tongue and flesh. Everything soft would disappear into the maws of these birds while only my skeleton stubbornly remained. The birds would consume me almost entirely and rise in warm airs and fly over parched lands and defecate onto parched roots and foliage, transferring my basest energy—simple atoms—to them. I would become part of, used by, the birds and the plants and the fruit and the whole entirety of everything, eventually, just as I would be were I cremated.

But this is not why air burials exist: Tibetans are not deathly neurotic the same way Western Judeochristians are. For them, there is no afterlife—only after life, only energy consumption. They are practical, scientific in this way. Air burials, unlike how I used to think of cremation, is about conservation of energy, not becoming one with the collective, the Other: nothing is to be wasted. Our carbon must not be boxed up and thrown into, though separated from, the earth; we must feed those who cannot easily find food. Our death is a charity in this outlook, not selfish reunion with our mothers.

Regardless, my anatomical, chemical, physical body would not be consumed by plant life or rodents or worms; my physical self—after all other parts of my self would cease to exist—would be consumed by birds, by black hideous ancient dry birds that only feed on the dead.

This is what bodies become: food.

My dying, scarred, svelte, pierced, tattooed, hairy, freckled, HIV-ridden body would be only energy in such a discarding of it, no longer connected to my consciousness, my emotional self—thus finally demonstrating that I am neither *wholly* nor *only* my dying body. There is an equation for this: I am (partially) my body and my body is energy and energy is consumed and energy is never lost and energy is only ever transmuted.

Dispose of my body however you wish. The fact is that I will not only die but also be consumed, reused, transmuted, but never fully lost. My consciousness will have ended, but my energy never will, despite the fact that my macro-materiality will perish. In micro-, we all carry on, just as Y-chromosomal Adam and Mitochondrial Eve did: dead large body, the smallest parts continuing on almost seemingly unchanged, giving rise to duplicates, parasiting themselves in other bodies.

There is no loss of energy. Except in illness. This is how illness is defined: a loss of energy. Things, parts of us, decompose and become separate from us. We lose our own energies.

And this, I think, is the reason why I am writing any of this at all: I find it hard to believe that my body, *the body*, notices much difference between giving its energy to a bird and giving its energy to a virus—deceased and reused or crumbling and in a position where an outside entity slowly reduces my corporeality to *thought* and *memory*.

I am dying; I am becoming fodder only for a virus or only for *corvidae*.





Consoled *Martha Brouwer*



# White Creek

*Mary Meriam*

Your pale body in the garden makes me weep  
as does everything. Is it beauty,

the pure water, my lips that finally fill out  
and sing? You bring water to me

in every form. I cry for days,  
a horse you ride with broken reins.

The skies are milky, the stars  
and your eyes, obscure. Out of summer

and what we have, a hoe, a hammock,  
mossy woods, and marshes of lilies,

what will we be able to save?  
Will memory be the green earth?



## Sushi and Sex

*Abbie Leavens*

She likes the way my collarbones  
Jut through my cotton tee, runs  
Her slender fingers along the crevice—  
Gently scrapes her nails to let me know  
She could hurt me if she wanted to.

Says she likes the way the words  
Come out of my mouth, watches  
The way my lips move when I say  
Anything. And I mean anything.

My hands miss lacing her jet black hair  
—how it's left scattered across the bed  
How she moves. And feels.  
I need to hear her too-loud laugh

Ripping through the quiet restaurant  
When she asks will this be enough  
Or should we order more?  
And it's always and never enough.

# His shape in glimpses

*Padri Veum*

I

It was no pressure  
inviting himself in  
and I was hunting for  
the smell of a man  
on my skin. The taste  
of a stranger -  
to swallow or spit.

II

What skin my skin has known,  
pressed together-folds of satin;  
what skin  
I have tasted, remembering  
promises that have flown with  
birds and jet streams; words  
carried in minds and pages  
with quick good byes. Now  
I stand alone and longing  
while my lover with his lover lies.

III

Your mouth moves across me like  
wind across the prairie - every blade of grass  
grateful, prostrating,  
every bloom turning to follow your  
orbit.

My nipples rise like sunflowers-  
stalking your fire,

following your touch like  
ripples chasing a breeze across water.





JV/2012

# Fortysomething Years Ago

*Steven Cordova*

There were always those ads  
filling the last few pages of comic books,  
garish dénouements of brightly colored copy  
promising to make you the recipient  
of an almost miraculous device—  
a pair of x-ray glasses

that would allow you to see through  
a man's clothes or a pen that was really  
a camera. All you had to do was fill in  
and cut out the conveniently printed  
order form—snip-snip: name, address,  
zip code—then be sure to enclose

a money order for some amount so piddling  
your grandmother would happily give it you.  
Next came the wait. And though sometimes  
the gadget never arrived, period,  
you'd check the mailbox every day, reaching  
up like clockwork to touch its hot metal,

knowing its contents would most likely be another  
disappointment, a fragile toy you could never grow  
to love, something you (or your grandmother)  
would soon enough throw away.  
Yet you always moved on  
to the next ad, licking your lips

as you applied your childish script  
to another envelope, careful not  
to forget a return address, careful  
not to fill yourself with hope, yet hoping  
that the next gadget would be the one,  
the X that would lift you out of yourself,

allowing you to see through more than just  
a man's clothes, but through all the things  
that loomed before you—your fear, for instance,  
of the boys who made your everyday a hell—  
or a the camera that would capture the silly love  
you felt for those boys all the same, snapping

shut your long days of waiting, of waiting and waiting.

# Fishing Lessons

*William Reichard*

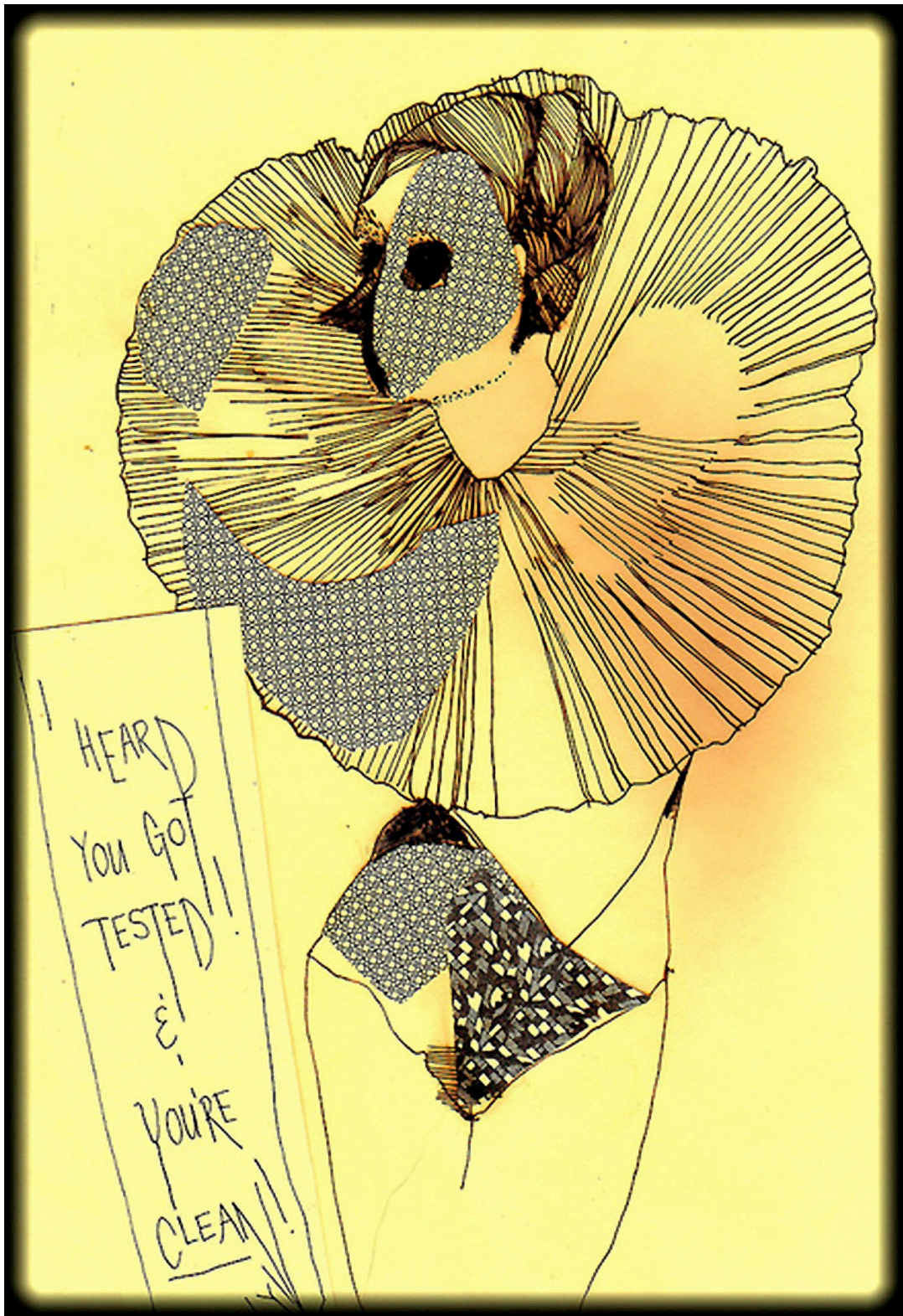
## *I. Lake Elysian*

Our father took us fishing on the footbridge  
of the dam that fed the shallow lake.  
My brother and I knew nothing about fish,  
rods or lines. I would not thread the worm  
onto the hook. I would not touch a fish  
if I caught one. I would not be that boy.  
We filled a bucket with bullheads,  
those bottom-feeders whose flesh tastes,  
I'm told, like mud. Our father gutted  
and cleaned them. My brother and I  
could never be his boys. We wouldn't eat  
those things. Fish have tiny bones,  
our mother said. She was afraid we'd choke.

## *II. Lake Eden*

A man and his small sons are fishing  
on an island in the middle of the lake.  
It's joined to the shore by a delicate bridge  
that looks like something from an antique  
Japanese landscape. One boy reels in  
a fish and screams in delight. His father  
helps him with the catch. Their movements,  
from where I sit, look so careful.  
What soul is so light that it can  
cross such a bridge and not cause  
the fragile footboards to crack?





I Heard You Got Tested *Lisa Bauer*



# Drag

*Darrel Alejandro Holmes*

I always promised I'd never do drag.  
You liked me as *straight* as a man  
in love with another could ever be,  
and I did too. But you also loved  
women, how their backs widen  
where hips appear, how their necks  
swerved like swans swallowing water  
when they called your name,  
their long hair stroking your face  
as they wake up from nestling  
your chest the morning after.  
So here I am wearing the wig I made  
in the image of the blondes you preferred  
but said could never love, applying eyeliner  
but giving it no place to run. *I could never love him again,*  
I fearlessly announce to the mirror  
as if one could ever fall out of the hero's arms  
and not back into peril. Tonight,  
for the first time, I dance to save myself  
from distress, becoming the one woman  
you'll never have instead. Tonight,  
I'm distance. The closest I ever came  
to drag before was when I was crowned prom king  
but chose instead the queen's tiara;  
cubic zirconia somehow closer  
to real than the king's cardboard cut-out crown.  
And tonight I sync my lips to the Whitney record  
and declare myself the Queen of the Night,  
sashay-shantae-strut shimmy shine on stage,  
dunk it like an Oreo, make the masses  
shake they asses at the command  
of the scepter firmly in hand. A king,  
I queen so hard my earth-quaking rule  
breaks the laws of nature; flesh colored spanx  
and control top leggings tuck away  
the snake where the sun doesn't shine;  
a black lace-up corset covers the missing rib  
but lets the rest of me soak up applause  
from an audience who love this boy dressed as girl,  
boy dressed as girly man, boy dressed as man  
enough to drag, man dragging on,  
man moving on, man gone.

# On Reading Jeanette Winterson

*Megan Obourn*

Write me with your wings a story of the salty flesh behind the jaw. Write me a love with no ending. Then write me an ending. Then keep writing. Write until we are nothing but bones and the scent of neck kisses in the morning. Blow the story of us out in smoke signals. Burn us into your palms. Turn me inside out like a soft shirt. Lick stones covered in the Braille of our bare feet. Sign us with your strong hands. Hold us in a dust jacket between covers. Let this book be our wedding vows. Read aloud to me. Say my name then say yours. Then say every word that has ever been screamed from a woman's throat. Record them in my pores. Let my sweat speak our sickness. Diagnose us with your tongue. Dissect us with your teeth. Write me a prescription in blood. Write our organs into old age, with us still like a memory of a tree. Tell me the story. Then tell it to me again. Write me and I will lap beneath your words like water.



An Imaginary Meeting *Javi Pop*

## Sometimes Marie de France

*Kenneth Pobo*

knocks at the screen door  
and asks if I'd like to take

a walk. I don't speak French  
but we manage. She tells stories

of talking beasts. Dead,  
she tires easily, so we rest

by the creek. She claims gurgling  
water is like death so I should

get my feet wet. Not yet, I say.  
We rise and go on our way.

# He Doesn't Touch The Blood

*Molly Anderson*

At Concordia Language Camp, Matthew had fascinated Thomas with his tooth-brushing technique; he stood four feet from the washbowl, one slender hand in the hip pocket of his black jeans, and forced a perfect, arced jet of aqua-mint from his lips into the basin. Thomas had stood next to slim, tall Matthew, toothbrush dangling from his dumb mouth, watching him, dressed himself in what mother had said was a dignified men's robe, but reminded everyone in Boy's Deutsch Cabin Six of Hugh Hefner. They were fourteen.

*Zahnbürste.*

Matthew had mastered the German word for Toothbrush. He ran his tongue over his teeth and said it to the mirror from where he leaned in the bathroom doorway.

Being epileptic made him more exotic. Thomas wasn't sure what it even meant until another kid asked Matthew why he wasn't in a wheelchair like the rest of Jerry's Kids.

*I'm not a cripple," he said. I have seizures.*

*Like this?* The kid banged one limp hand against his chest and moaned.

*No, retard,* Matthew had said, *like this,* and dropped to the mess-hall floor and demonstrated.

*Bacon,* they'd cried. Thomas watched in rapt attention, and when it went on a bit too long, started wringing his hands. As his bunk mate, Matthew gave Thomas sole knowledge of what his prescription bottles were for, and what to do if he began to seize. *Hold my head, but don't restrain me. Make sure I'm facing up, and don't stick anything in my mouth.* Thomas tensed, about to drop to his knees, but Matthew had smiled, stopped sizzling, and everyone had laughed.

*Wunderbar,* Thomas had said, and immediately felt stupid. He wished he hadn't told Matthew that he was afraid of the dark, and to leave the nightlight on in their room.

Later, watching Matthew brush his teeth, he stopped himself from saying it again.

*Zahnbürste,* Matthew repeated, until it sounded like something of his own delicate tongue.

Ten years later Matthew sat perched on the bedroom bureau with a book in his hand and watched Thomas dress for work.

*It's not even all the cunts,* he said. *I don't mind vulgarity. I even like the word. It's that I don't know what he's talking about most of the time. They were in a hotel or something at the beginning, right? Bunch of artsy pricks.*

He threw the yellowed copy of *Tropic of Cancer* on the floor and crossed his arms.

*He keeps dropping in these French phrases to make me feel stupid,* Matthew said. *I take it personally. I don't speak French.* He looked at Thomas. *Apparently we wasted all that time at German camp.* He flopped onto the bed.

*Please get your shoes off my quilt.*

Matthew balked. *Sorry I'm so uncouth.* He scratched the part in his black hair.

*Did you take your medication today?*

*No mom, I didn't.*

*That's dangerous,* Thomas said. *That ups your risk for—*

*Let it go.* Matthew said. *I haven't seized in months. I'm fine. Besides,* he said, *I can't find it.*

*You can't find it?* Thomas zipped his fly.

*I've no idea where it's gone.*

*All of it?*

Matthew kicked his shoes off and they dropped loudly on the floor, flaking dried mud onto the carpet. *All of it. Anyway, how long were we there?*

*Where?*

*German camp.*

*Three years,* Thomas said, yanking his silver vest out from under Matthew's thigh. *And it wasn't called German Camp—it was Concordia Language Village. You make it sound like we were in Auschwitz.*

*Auschwitz is in Poland. I'm not an idiot.* He picked the book up again and bopped it on his knee. *But I do like books with pictures. I hate your books. However,* he said, thumbing through the stained pages, *if this book did have pictures, I wouldn't want to look at them.*

Thomas, vested, stood on his tip-toes and adjusted his silver bowtie in the high-hung mirror. High, because Matthew had hung it.

*You only remember the dirty words,* he said, tugging the imitation silk at his throat.

*They're the only ones that matter,* Matthew said. He threw the book across the room. *I ought to choke you with that*



*thing. You're six minutes late already.*

*I'm gone, Thomas said, throwing his coat on. Please look for your pills tonight.*

In winter, Thomas found it impossible to make it to work on time even if he could get his bowtie right. It was a twenty-minute walk to the Silver Dragon in summertime—now, with streets of red and ochre like leaves pressed under glass, dusted over with snow, he could only slide along in his loafers so fast. It was dark after five o'clock, and the rush-hour traffic rarely saw him, cloaked in his charcoal overcoat, hands shoved in pockets, head down—a glimpse of jaw visible between his collar and hair—a rumpled phantom negotiating a path between curb and sidewalk where traction was best.

Matthew didn't appreciate the humble nobility of serving Lo-Mein for five dollars an hour—nor could he make sense of driving Thomas five blocks to work when the Dragon was *right there, just go, sissy, you could use the exercise. That shiny stripe down your pant leg doesn't have the slimming effect that it used to. Maybe if you stopped eating Rangoons on your break you'd be able to sprint there.*

Thomas could never afford camp. Year one: a gift from a Grandma Schultz, who underestimated the four-week tuition, made the promise, and then was too embarrassed to pull out. Year two: begged out in her memory and paid for with a chunk of his inheritance. Year three was paid for by Matthew's parents—a move that angered and shamed his own. After that, he dared not speak German around them.

*Papa owns Papenfus Packing, Matthew had said during Beginner's Archery in the Märchenwald—the Fairy Tale Forest. He drew his arrow back tight. He doesn't touch the blood, and he never smells like raw meat—he sits at his desk with pictures of us on it, and sometimes plays golf in his office.* Matthew let go; his arrow zipped into the center of the target, the bowstring still humming. *He doesn't work there, he owns there.*

Thomas drew his own arrow taut several times but his arm shook, and he laid the bow down on the grass.

It's like an ice rink out here, Thomas thought. The whole city's frozen over. He'd forgotten his hat and the pain picked into his ears. Even with his collar pulled up the chill blasted him on all sides, whipping off rooftops, pushing him into a half-buried city garbagelap on the curb.

He remembered being with Matthew, early on, in places his memory no longer recognized; a house, its roof under two feet of snow, in a blue room, the television flickering. Some others around, transplants, maybe; community college students, locals, dealers, someone's mother—it was anyone's guess then. He sat with his knees out, pressed against the rickety arms of an old recliner, upholstered in orange blossom velour, and Matthew flopped like a limpet across his lap.

*I think your boyfriend's dead, someone had said, but Thomas knew that it was best when Matthew was still—as long as he was breathing, and not seizing. The bony ragdoll draped over his thighs said that he was in the right place—even with all these people who he wouldn't know in a year, who he wouldn't even think to look at in the street—at the time, he was twenty-one and awash in a haze of apathy—old enough to decide his own fate but young enough not to care if someone else was hijacking it.*

Matthew told him once that in the dorms, he'd been dressed by some girls in a blouse and skirt, and makeup, and done a full cartwheel in front of some boys they'd brought over; half rednecks and half Rez-kids, and nobody had known—not even suspected.

*My name was Cara, Matthew said.*

*Who picked that?*

*I don't know, he said. That name must have been in then.*

*I've never known a single Cara, Thomas said.*

But Cara had garnered the attention of one particular Rez-kid named Jimmy with a teardrop tattoo.

*He was nineteen, Matthew said. What kind of nineteen year old has that? That's like a "twenty years in the Crips" type of thing, he said. There were no Crips or Bloods in Brainerd, Minnesota in the late nineties; only a few meth-heads jacking Hondas and some amateur strippers with knives in their boots.*

Thomas had stayed out of gymnastics at Concordia as he thought it was for girls. Matthew grew too tall to be successful past turning cartwheels in the park, but still did just that for anyone who would watch. In summer his hands were perpetually stained with dandelion.

*And what of Jimmy?*

*He went to prison, Matthew said. And surveying his surroundings suddenly recognized that he'd been thrust into a world of low-paying jobs and two-year tech programs. He wondered out loud why—his parents were wealthy. Dating a waiter, for more years than he cared to count—had he been slipped something? Forgotten to take his medication and seized himself into an alternate reality where this was satisfactory, even desirable?*

*How did I end up here?* He asked Thomas.

Thomas shrugged. *Your parents are from here.*  
Matthew nodded.  
*I'm from here,* Thomas said. *I've always been here.*  
Again, Matthew nodded.  
*I've always been here too,* he said.

Thomas jogged into the Silver Dragon, nearly half an hour late, bonked open the swinging gate with his hip and made his way into the kitchen. MSG and green onion. Hot fryers, bean curd, bamboo shoots. Greasy, fragrant, Hmong accented English sharply shouted across brushed titanium countertops, hissing sprouts, and tough, chewy chicken. *Where have you been? We've been calling you.* He filled his apron pocket with chopsticks. *I'm right here,* he said.

Thomas sometimes pined to sleep in bags. He craved the clandestine sound of the zipper in the dark, the *shhhp* of his toenails on the synthetic fabric. Some kids had mummy bags—they made him claustrophobic. He had to move his feet. Had to paddle them against Matthew's smooth soles—so smooth like he'd never walked, like he'd glided, across land and probably water. Untouched, fleshy arches. He'd fitted his small toes in the space above the balls of Matthew's feet.

I don't know why you let me, he thought. My dirty feet, my jagged nails.

*Speak German to me.* He would say into Matthew's spine.

*No. Be quiet.*

*One word?*

*Nein.*

*One more.*

*Zahnbürste,* Matthew said, and they laughed, breaking the cricket-less silence in the cabin.

Seven-thirty birthed a party of businessmen who were appalled that no alcohol was served. Thomas tried to explain that Sake was Japanese, and was shouted down. He placated them with a flaming entrée. Eight o'clock dragged by, a tipless lull, but nine-thirty picked up with six orders of General's Tso's Chicken. Thomas did not know who General Tso was, or whether he had ever felt sadness in his inability to lead his men to victory. At ten o'clock Bethany laughed at the sweet and sour smudge across the bridge of Thomas's nose. *You push up your glasses so much,* she said. *I don't know what it is you want to see here anyway.*

He shrugged. He'd seen it all—the statue of Buddha in the foyer with its palms full of pennies, the relief mural of Qingming on the bridge, small tips and discarded fortunes. He didn't understand how people could throw away the future like that.

At eleven thirty he counted his tips.

It had angered him—Matthew letting those girls dress him up like that, doing a cartwheel, his false grace on display for some pimply pork-rind eating slobs in toques—that's what they had to be; everyone around Matthew, even Thomas, became that. Sloppy, thick-accented dopes with veins full of dirty snow and motor oil. Horking their Kodiak on the sidewalks.

Once, a million years ago, Thomas let Matthew drive his Corolla, drunk, in a blizzard at three in the morning, in a thatch of woods neither knew well. Matthew, who was used to being hauled around in his father's Lincoln and had no license, hit a patch of black ice and swept them into a deep ditch. Thomas pulled boughs from nearby pines for traction under his bald tires while Matthew stood, arms folded, trying to make rings with his breath.

*You can only do that with smoke,* Thomas had said.

*I can do whatever I want,* Matthew had replied.

He'd napped off his buzz in the car while Thomas trudged through knee-deep drifts to a nearby house and begged a couple of cabin-dwellers who were coming down off mushrooms for their phone. Upon return to the Toyota to wait for a tow, he found Matthew wide awake and rifling through the glove-box. He wanted to know if the couple gave Thomas any free samples.

*No.*

*I bet you didn't even ask. Useless.*

And Thomas had said *I love you.* Too much menthol chill in his blood, he was overtired, and scared. The desolate darkness of a January morning had crippled his brain.

Matthew blew air through his lips. *You let me freeze to death in a crappy car in the middle of nowhere—*

And Thomas had lunged across the driver's seat to kiss him, only to get his top lip battered into his teeth with Matthew's class ring.

When the tow truck driver let Matthew out of his cab, he'd said, "Be careful miss, it's a big step down," and

Matthew had giggled and thanked him in an unnaturally high pitch. Not even dressed in a skirt, Thomas thought. No cartwheels needed.

He'd left once. Left Brainerd and school and Matthew and the Silver Dragon and his bow tie and apron and the solid ice. He fully expected Matthew to be gone when he came back. Instead, the first person he saw when he returned to town broke and sorry was Matthew, standing pale and thin against the corner of the Blue Ox Bar, blabbing into the city's only cell-phone.

*Here's the only exercise you get,* Matthew said once, curling a twelve-ounce brown bottle to his sternum.

*Not true,* Thomas said, taking a drink.

*And running down to the liquor store,* he added. *They know your name down there yet?*

Thomas wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing the list he'd inked there: eggs, batteries, beer.

*Where are my cigarettes?*

Thomas fumbled a pack of Kamel Reds out of his jacket and threw them at Matthew's head. Matthew packed them on his palm. He packed more than he smoked.

*Let's play chess already,* Thomas said, slumping into a chair. *I'm ready.*

Matthew squinted, smeared his vision until Thomas was a blur of blonde and white. A smudge of nothingness. A waiter. He lit one finger on the knight and pulled it back.

*I've already got you beat,* he said.

Thomas sat, blinking. *We haven't even started yet,* he said. *I go first. I'm white.*

*I go first,* Matthew said. *Smoke before fire.*

*Right—smoke is white. White goes first.*

*No—fire is white hot. Smoke is black.*

*Jesus,* Thomas said. *Do what you want.* And Matthew did. He wanted to go first and he wanted to win. He won, made Kool-Aid, and went to bed as if beating Thomas in chess thirty-seven times in a row was as yawn-inducing as brushing his teeth.

Recently he'd come home to find Matthew curled up in bed with *The Tropic of Cancer*.

*I thought you hated it,* he said.

*I'm trying,* Matthew said. He looked small and needy with his limbs pulled in and his chin in his palm. *Maybe you'll think more of me if I read stuff like this.*

*What do you mean, think more of you?*

Matthew shrugged, and mumbled something Thomas couldn't hear.

*What?*

*I said you think I'm shallow and stupid.*

Thomas breathed out through his nose. *So how do you like it?*

*I don't think I like anything anymore,* Matthew said.

*I know how you feel.*

Matthew glared up at him from behind the pages.

*What's that supposed to mean?*

Thomas didn't answer. He tossed his tips at Matthew's feet—two cold lumps under Grandma Schultz's quilt.

At eleven forty-seven Bethany asked Thomas if he was alright. He shrugged and said yes. She offered a sofa to sleep on; he declined. Bethany was a nice girl and looked good in a bow-tie. Born to usher, to smile amicably, to slide fat tips off the side of the table with one deft palm-edge. She was good for business, good for the world. Thomas hung his apron on the designated hook and bade her goodnight.

Matthew felt the aura. His eyeballs hurt, his blood buzzed. Grand mal, he thought. It sounded so beautiful—everything in French sounded beautiful.

Bethany accosted Thomas in the foyer.

*You're still here?*

He was holding his bag open, staring down.

*What's wrong?*

He reached into the bag with one hand and came up with two orange cylinders. The other hand dove in, and emerged with two more. Matthew's pills.



A Note on this Translation

Now the lines of my portrait do not go unaltered, although they do change and vary. The world is but an unending movement. All things in it—the earth, the cliffs of the Caucasus, the pyramids of Egypt—are in constant motion, both with the motion common to all things in nature and their own motion. Stability itself is nothing but a mere languid motion.

I cannot be my subject still. It staggers about, confused, with a kind of natural dumbness. I take it in this condition, as it is, at the very moment I bend over to study it. I do not portray being. I depict a pausing; not a passage from one age to another, or as people say, from seven states to seven states, but a pausing, a standing still, a standing still, a standing still. My own history must be lived up with the pausing moment. I myself must change lives, one moment to the next, not only by chance, but by intent. Mine is a record of varied into changeable events, of immediate as well as incontinent ones, depending on whether I have changed or whether my age has changed. I am not a person, I am a person, I am a person, I am not a person, now and then; but in my truth, as Demeter would say, I never contradict myself. And could stand firm.

A translation is an effort to somehow move at one end and modify at the other tongue. It is a hard job and often when we do it creatively, we can never pretend to anything resembling a faithful, objective version. Our ideas change as we read something a second, a third, a fourth time, so that the previous link beyond research another translation emerges like its own purpose. Indeed, to say that translations are interpretive disagreements is to the merits of doing so. Translations are interpretive disagreements and all this is as it should be. When we have one translation of an important work, and only one, that gives us a false sense of security. It is used to interpret.

One of  
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where, the  
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bedition of  
in keeping  
this essay,  
experts like  
that there  
was a  
that led to it. They were eager to be read and appreciated as  
attestations of a foreign master of another culture. But while  
I felt the average reader would have no objection to consulting

[illegible][illegible]

...the only measure of time is years. The world has been using this measure for so many centuries and yet we still have not succeeded in assigning that unit a precise length. We

I have indeed that most of the students consider me the master that it is time to die when life is more evil than good, and that to cling to life when it is but pain and suffering is to fly in the face of the laws of nature, as the old counsel points out:

To live without pain or die is key. It is good to die when life brings misery. Not to live is better than to live unhappily.

But to vary the concept of death to the point of using it as a means of winning oneself from history, dignifies an orderliness and grade that we never find in life. It is hard enough even for man to accomplish this. And I have seen some actors, or even indeed or practiced, who I imagined on it is a passion of Seneca. In advancing Lucilia, a powerful means of minister of the emperor, to minimize the entanglements and passions and wisdom from the architecture of this world is a solitary, true, and philosophical. "I made the following remark to some objections of Lucilia: 'I am of the opinion,' he said, 'that you should either quit your mode of living or quit life altogether; and I urge you to follow the more useful way, and, since rather than break what you have made, you should rather break what you have made.'"

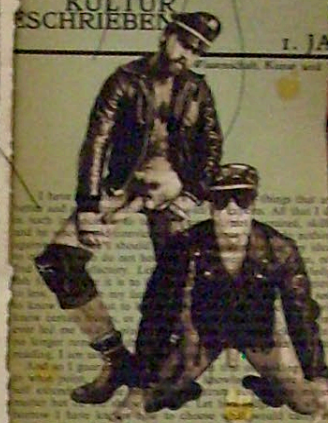


...the city of Sais in Egypt that of old before the Flood, there was a great island called Atlantis right at the mouth of the

DAS URIN  
FUEHRUNG  
KULTUR  
GESCHRIEBEN

Glenn said that to philosophize is no more than to probe oneself for death. This is so because study and assimilation to some extent draw our mind out of us and keep a body independently of the body—in a sense, a body without a body and a semblance of death. Or perhaps this is so because all the wisdom and knowledge of the world come down to this; they teach us not to fear death. In truth, either reason or faith has our commitment as its end. All its work in the long run must be to free the will and, as Holy Scripture says, at our ease. All the operations of the intellect are, at this pleasure is our end, although we find suffering ways to it. Who would listen—indeed, we would throw them out—to any who claimed that pain and suffering were our

The debates among philosophers in this respect are vexatious. "Let us quickly pass over these vast subtleties." There are more important and abstruse than among philosophers than beliefs such a sacred profession. Yet whatever role must be played by the abstract principles of the same time. The philosophers may say, even with respect to virtue itself, our ultimate goal is voluptuousness. I enjoy striking them with this word, which goes so against their grain. The word indicates some supreme pleasure and great joy, but even this is due above all to the belief that virtue goes in. This voluptuousness is all the more voluptuousness being more

[illegible]

On August 10, 1991

As I watched a painter I had commissioned at work, the thought of painting him occurred to me. He chooses the best spot, the most prominent, the most interesting aspect of us in their vast studio, the things of our bodies, the things we are not aware of. He chooses the best place to paint, the most interesting, the most prominent, the most interesting aspect of us in their vast studio, the things of our bodies, the things we are not aware of.

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## Introduction

It is quite common to see good intentions, when carried out with a lack of moderation, lead to some very serious consequences. In this present controversy, for example, what has led France to civil war, there can be no doubt that the best and soundest party is that of the old religion and the old authorities. Among the good men on this side, however, I find a few who are in favor of those who are in the wrong, with which I carry out their own vendetta, or further this point, or who favor with principle, I am speaking of those who adhere to their faith out of true zeal and a holy love for their country, among such people, I say, we have seen many people of great education and great talents, devoted to religion, violent and even reckless conduct.

There is no doubt that in the first centuries were the truest of our religion began to acquire the authority of law, the nominal Christians against all sorts of pagan books and monuments of letters thereby suffered a very severe loss. I believe that these excesses did more harm to letters than all the benefits of the humanists. Cornelius Tacitus in a good case speaks for himself, and in the same manner, the Christian, by the emperor's order forbidden all the books in the world were burnt. He has not one single complete copy of them, except the fragments which of these out to destroy them. He would not have been so ungrateful to preserve them, had he not been so ungrateful to preserve them.

and that when we are in a dangerous place—we are immediately beset by real and potent dangers. With unflinching fortitude they lead us to suspect (and they are often quite right) that on our own we have really nothing to



Campers marched through the woods in the dark, linked palm to palm. Thomas's hand sweated inside of Matthew's. His fingers cramped, holding tight to keep up with Matthew's long stride, straining to stay within his loose grip. They were the last in line. Thomas could see nothing up ahead but the occasional glint of moonlight off an oak leaf, a stone, someone's glasses, their braces, the whites of their eyes. No one spoke. They seemed to walk for hours.

Finally, in a clearing by the lake, they stopped. Thomas's heart leapt to life with the spark of the first torch, then another. Soon five hooded figures stood before the campers with torches ablaze, chanting low. The campers dropped hands—but Thomas could not let go. He held fast, his pulse racing, his thumb pushing into the heart of Matthew's palm.

In the daylight the Märchenwald lacked that dangerous magic. Thomas wrote his name in calligraphy, made a shoddy leather belt he would never wear, and watched but did not participate in fencing. *I want to go back in the dark*, he told Matthew. *With flashlights*. Two more words lay dormant on the tip of his tongue: Just us. His palms itched.

*We will*, Matthew had said.

*Someone will see us.*

No one saw them. No one came at all, after Matthew had taken a wicked wrong turn on purpose and headed towards a soupy peat bog—the Zwergensumpf. Dwarf Swamp. He told Thomas to close his eyes and count to twenty, and was gone. No one came looking for him. He cowered there until fear flattened his tired body into sleep, and even in the morning, as he sat, his joints sore and cold from cringing in the wet grass, no one came.

Matthew lay on the floor between the sofa and coffee table, one arm extended, the other curled into his ear, his tongue a piece of meat, bitten and bloodied. Thomas's book, the one they'd both failed to read, lay open on his sternum.

*Artemis*. He thought. Or was he speaking? Sounds came from a wet spot in his lungs, gurgled up his throat and exploded from his lips. *Cupid? Diana? I don't know anymore. Sagittarius, that's it. I'm smarter than he thinks, and when he comes home, I'll tell him that.*

He convulsed. His breath was spiraling down, into an unreachable place within his chest, locked away in the dark.

*He'll say I just read horoscopes.*

It was then a term came to him. An acronym. In a book, in pamphlets, on his doctor's and his mother's tongues.

SUDEP.

Sudden.

Epileptic.

Death—it didn't make sense. For the first time he realized the order was wrong, there was something missing—he wasn't sure. It just didn't seem right at all.

He clutched at the book, bucking, and managed to bring it to his bloodied lips.

*SUDEP.*

It sounded to Matthew like a Hindu God. Or a constellation. The Archer. He aims for the hottest white stars, to bring them down and—what? Hold them, just look at them, or crush them to dust—however their fragility persuades his whim. Yes, that was nice—he'd tell Thomas when he got home, that he was smart and could appreciate beautiful words, and he'd try and to read his book again. To remind himself, he marked the page with a red kiss.

Thomas declined Bethany's offer for a ride—six minutes by car—and began the walk home. A thaw had come while he worked and stripped ice from the city like meat from bone—now water ran down the streets inches deep and slipped into storm drains. He could make better time on wet sidewalks, but he went slow, filling his lungs with clean air. He stopped once near the old empty water tower—he'd called it Paul Bunyan's cup like everyone else since he was a kid—and stood a long time looking up. He imagined it once again full, and tipping ever forward to spill and re-coat the town in a new layer of ice. When he was finally sure that it wouldn't happen, he took in a breath and walked on.



Armor (Amor) *Jenelle Esparza*



# smoke & mirrors

*Christine Locker*

**I...**

i am not like you  
but i would kill for a cigarette  
and if there is one thing  
in this whole bloody world  
that both you & i can understand  
it is the beauty of nicotine flooding our veins  
making hearts race  
& lungs struggle  
as the act of breathing itself  
becomes something glorious

**You...**

you are not like me  
(myamericanbeautybaby)  
but i'll take whatever i can get  
and pretty girl  
today  
i'll take you  
so slice me open  
& let me stain your lips crimson  
with love-lust-sex  
(and everything in between)  
then the world will know that  
**you were once mine**

**We...**

we have nothing in common  
but pounding / starving hearts  
(in hollow aching chests)  
and smoke trailing from pale lips  
into the indigo skies  
so give me that cigarette baby  
& i'll take you for a ride

**6.4.11**

# Too Late for the South

*Tatjana Debeljacki*

It seems that we're late.

There was no need to hurry.

The branch was thin and it shook all down to the trunk. The cars rushed down under. The snow covered everything. All of a sudden, a turtle-dove moved as if about to fly, and then it fell down under the wheels of a limo.

The frozen male swayed on the branch

Broken Bond *BiJian Fan*





# Power Animal Mine

*Shae Savoy*

The faintest wiggle of blood  
and fin is on the slice.  
How cold it can be  
in the ocean's slippery innards.

When my girlfriend and I fished  
through the collection of shark  
documentaries at Video on 15th  
we couldn't find any that didn't  
cast the shark as villain.  
Nothing about their grace, their perfect  
design, the hum of their motors, their lack  
of a swim bladder, their ancient  
accumulated expertise.

Just bits about chewed-off arms  
and crescent-scarred thighs, just blurbs  
from survivors of shark, just the pink  
newscaster, the beach, scarf blown  
wide, a tight little  
face, crisp words, these waters  
are dangerous.

What about shark families?  
Are there tribes? Tell me about the  
feeding frenzy. Tell me about how  
sharks don't sleep, never stop  
moving, attuned to the threads trailing  
the water, immune to fishing rods,  
circling the deep, sending out missives  
in blood-ink. Are they solitary.  
Do they dream.

Do I have to be solitary.  
My girlfriend didn't want to be  
reminded of the shark's ugly.  
Reached instead for the whales  
two shelves over, arcing gracefully,  
the sun setting behind, a perfect jet  
of water rising,  
so civilized.

# What Waits Behind the Red Curtain

*Charlie Riccardelli*

The photograph: Stewart Wainwright in a compromising position with another man. Wrapped up in the soiled bed sheets of a dank Greenwich Village hotel. They struggle to rock that bed to life, but it's difficult when management has bolted the headboard to the wall. The room is bare. No mirror. One wobbly nightstand. No copy of Gideon's Bible.

That young stranger...Stewart never caught his name...too busy watching him splayed out across the mattress, dominating, exploiting a young body. Stewart hovers over him, the stranger's mouth swallowing his penis...his head is rolled up to the ceiling...near climax. A series of black and white glossies commemorate the experience, focusing in on the act at its most lurid and scandalous. Those are the images that sell best to the public.

Stewart would wonder, had he moved his attention away from that beautiful stranger, maybe turned his gaze from the water stains on the ceiling to the fire escape outside the window, might he have seen the photographer in the harshly lit alley that evening? Crouched down, his trousers sticking to the damp, freezing bars of the railings. Changing rolls of film frantically to get every thrust, every stroke, every groan.

The photographer could have been following Stewart throughout the day for all he knew, while that famous young actor dined Chinese with some Actors Studio friends or maybe as he emerged from a matinee production of *The Desperate Hours*. Maybe that photographer walked in stride a few paces behind that star, his hands stuffed deep inside his pockets, caressing the shutter of his camera, anticipating the moment he would catch Stewart in the act.

For years to come, Stewart would make himself feel the presence of someone following him no matter where he went: to a restaurant, a movie set, the backyard. That afternoon in New York he felt too calm, an abandon that allowed him to go roaming in a city not as familiar as it once was, with a profile higher than he had in the past. What if the photographer walked throughout downtown sniffing at his heels, ready for him to meet the stranger – any stranger – inside The Red Curtain or a back room or some other dive for meeting other men? What if he both of them were setting him up? Did it matter now to ask such questions?

Stewart felt lonely during the entirety of the New York City press tour for his picture, itching for a little companionship with no one around to share it. Manhattan at Christmas-time. Families filing in line for "Peter Pan" and "Oklahoma!", Teenagers snaking around the corner outside of Radio City Music Hall to nab tickets for a Bill Haley and the Comets concert. His famous face went unrecognized amidst the throngs of people, even with his picture immortalized on a fifty-foot billboard for a new movie with Grace Kelly and Montgomery Clift only a few stories above the crowds. People were distracted by the lights, the Rockefeller tree, and the shopping to be had. Such anonymity he craved, but he didn't want his star to just burn out of the sky.

Stewart held the flaps of his overcoat to the sides of his face, trying to fight the sharp crosscurrents blowing across Eighth Avenue. A mix of snow and rain started to fall, sending people into stores and bars, stranding more under overhangs. He quickened his pace, finding his destination, The Red Curtain, a few blocks away, tucked down a flight of stairs below an apartment building.

There didn't seem to be a rhyme or reason to call the place The Red Curtain, what with the puke green color filling the room, from the drapes and wallpaper to the booths and barstools lined up down the narrow space of the place. A bell jingled above the door as he entered. No one seemed to take notice. Still thirty minutes before happy hour. These men filling up the place were the souses, the unemployed, the nightshift workers. Every customer kept their coats on their backs instead of hooked underneath the bar in case the vice squad came in to crack some skulls.

Stewart knew the place. Well, places like it. A little shoddy, put together in haste. It didn't matter that the walls lacked any decoration besides a mirror behind the bar or any sort of entertainment like a dartboard, only a beaten jukebox half stocked with odds and ends, leftovers from personal collections, maybe flea market purchases by the employees to flavor up the joint with a timely sound. The owners had you in a place like The Red Curtain. A city like New York, built for a few million, and they knew you only had a half dozen places to be yourself. That earned them the right to overprice their watered-down wares in basements, meat lockers, and storerooms, wherever they could afford the space.

He looked to the patrons, four or five men hunched against the counter, a few eyes glancing over him from head to toe, wondering if Stewart might happen to be the man they thought him to be. He could tell what they were: not worth any of his time. Before Stewart left Los Angeles, he had promised Martin that he wouldn't get with any stranger on the East Coast, no prowling the hot spots of the city for theatre queers and the like. He promised him, and gave Martin a gentle squeeze on his right hand the way he did whenever he left town. Martin brushed his hand along Stewart's back, his timid excuse for an embrace before they walked out the door of Martin's bungalow, not ready to say goodbye for the week. Martin asked, "You think you can stop in at the Sloan Hospital for Women and say hello to my sister?" You know, she's working as a nurse in maternity and you'd give her a real thrill if your promotional tour could breeze by her way. The nurses get a gander at you'll and it won't only be the newborns screaming in that place, believe you me."

"I'll see what I can do," Stewart promised in the way he always did, eyes kept away, his voice low, as if the words might miss his lover's ears, thus alleviating him of the request. Martin held onto Stewart's hand a few moments longer, eyes full of melancholy as they sunk down to his feet, the exaggerated gestures of a young actor who treated his life like an audience always existed just out of sight, judging his performance. Martin's mind raced with overblown yarns worth of a top-tier Hollywood screenwriter, with New York the sight of many late night indiscretions and overblown parties. People more charming than himself, Martin feared.

This paranoia was spurred on by Martin's own drunken one night stand with a Scandinavian bohunk he met in casting on the MGM lot several months back, the innocent request of rehearsing deteriorating into an evening of personal shame. Martin's grief over what he had done nearly destroyed him in the days after as he pleaded his lover for forgiveness, something Stewart never asked for. Truth told, Stewart couldn't resist the fruit himself when the branch hung right in front of him, not as though Martin knew of that. Still, Stewart assured him anyway, knowing full well he'd likely welch for whatever reason he concocted. Of course, the talent at The Red Curtain suggested that this would not be the place where it happened.

They met two years ago on the set of a western Stewart had been filming, *A Country Like No Other*. Stewart was cast to play a California doctor forced to return home to New Mexico and support the family ranch after the doctor's father had a stroke. Martin was hired to play a ranch hand helping in the birthing of a calf. The director thought he looked right for the part: no more than twenty-one, wavy brown hair that shimmered a shade of gold in the California sun, a fine build touched off with a handsome stubble. He swayed naturally in his chaps and boots, looking like a real cowboy. In between setups, Martin spread out across the ground of the studio backlot, Stetson tipped over his eyes. He told everyone he'd spent the summers of his childhood on a horse ranch in Montana, while in reality those years had been dedicated to selling the New York Herald Tribune on the street corners of Washington Heights. He never ventured outside the city limits before coming to Hollywood.

One afternoon, Stewart found Martin curled up against a fencepost on the lot, waiting for the next shot to begin as soon as the lighting was right. Martin pulled a book from out of his back pocket, Raymond Chandler's *The Little Sister*, wetting his thumb every other page as he breezed through the novel for his place, the corner of his mouth twitching with each lick.

"That may be my favorite book," Stewart said to Martin, kicking up dust around them both as he moved in closer. "I bought the rights to make that book, but nobody thinks I can play detective. They say detectives are out and cops are in. Detectives are for skid row studios, they say. It's all Jack Webb. I don't know, maybe they're right."

Martin tipped his hat back, left cheek cricked up in a half smile, eyes squinting in the afternoon sun. "That's a shame. You'd make a good Phillip Marlowe. I get the impression people are always underestimating you, too, huh? Like they don't know there are two sides to every coin. You're Lincoln, but when they flip you over expecting to find laurels, you've got Honest Abe staring back at you."

Stewart smiled. "I don't think they care if I'm pennies, nickels, or dimes, just as long as there are a lot of me."

They palled around the set throughout the entirety of Martin's fifteen days on the picture, getting lunch at the commissary, sometimes practicing their quick draw like Montgomery Clift and John Ireland in *Red River*. For several weeks after his part finished, Martin would find excuses to visit the lot, to speak with friends he made from lighting or wardrobe, finding sly ways to bump into Stewart, checking to see that he hadn't been replaced with someone else.

Both men went out for drinks after work and a couple of nights later found themselves back at Martin's



home, wound together on the living room floor. They talked through the night of acting on stage and their past history of women before life changed.

"I had my first man in Central Park when I was seventeen. I knew who those men were whenever I walked by because they glanced at me like they were hoping to get my attention. Regular perverts, they never made eye contact, far too embarrassed. One day a saw a man there, handsome, silver-haired gentleman and I...stopped. That was it. How bout you?"

"My guy? I knew him. Billy Ingram. We did summer rep together in Chicago. I was dating this girl at the time, she was playing opposite me in some...some stage comedy...I can't remember which one. And she was my girl while we lived there, but she couldn't stand me 'going out with my drinking buddy' all the time. I'd knock back a few belts of bourbon before I went back to her bed to keep up the charade. Or at least to keep her off me. I wanted to repel her, get her to leave me alone."

Stewart later found out that Martin carried a copy *The Little Sister* from his first day on the set to get his attention, knowing from an interview in *Photoplay* that this novel had been a recent favorite of Stewart's. Martin read the book three times on the set hoping it might garner conversation. "I wanted to know you, but more than anything I wanted you to know me" was his explanation.

The thrill he found in those words diminished in time. Stewart missed the pleasures of the prow, no matter what his feelings were for Martin. Like his parents who turned to booze and cards, he needed to be out cruising, a quick fix to nix all that self-doubt, lust, and testosterone.

"Hey you, shut the door, will ya, for Christ's sake?" A man called out to Stewart, throwing off his thoughts. "Come on, snap to. It's freezing in here. Go on." Stewart followed the voice to a balding, middle-aged man at the end of the bar, tucked down on his elbows, the glow of his Winston tipped up, letting those small, smoldering embers form a glow around his puffy cheeks. "Fucking tourists'll ruin this city, you watch. Out-of-towners too curious for their own good, thinking about what they've been missing out on in Palookaville nowhere, but they don't know nothing. They don't know nothing about it." The man shouted to no one in particular, his diatribe adding an extra stink to the room's sour mood. He sipped a scotch, brushing his knuckles against his lips, licking whatever booze he detected on those digits of his.

Stewart took the man's gaze, passing up several empty seats on his way down to the end of the bar. His feet dragged their heavy heels across the damp carpet. The drunk poked his face between his forearm to stare Stewart down, letting his smoke crumble to a ruffle in his raincoat sleeve. In his left hand he sloshed around the remainder of another scotch, letting most of it spill out. People didn't talk to Stewart in this manner, especially no two-bit stinking lush of a man poured out along the counter like one of the many drinks he knocked over in an afternoon.

Stewart moved in between the drunk and the man to his right, gesturing to the bartender. "What kind of bourbon do you have?"

"The kind to get you drunk."

He rapped his knuckles on the edge of the polished booth. "Thanks for narrowing the selection. Get a double with no ice." While the bartender poured, Stewart stole a glance at the surly drunk: clean shaven for a day of warming barstool, his coat crusted in dried snot from a leaky nose with nowhere else to drain. Hidden beneath the days old clothing and unkempt hair might be the remainder of a man who worked and loved and had a family, but who could tell for sure through that soused visage.

"The fuck you looking at?" snarled the drunk. "I look better up close? Look like a fucking painting, right? I'm a Monet. One of those lilypad pictures. I'm the dead son of a bitch sunk at the bottom of the lake. And I'd still look better than you, shitkicker."

Stewart reached his left hand into his coat pocket digging, searching around after his wallet, sure to swing his arm once it was found, knocking an elbow into the side of the drunk man. The collision of Stewart's elbow against his temple made the drunk's face contort.

"Watch it," the drunk called out, scooting back on his stool, catching the counter before he went stumbling backwards against the splintered floor. His glass tipped over, a stream of whiskey and melted ice flowing behind the bar.

"Ah, shit," the bartender said, setting down a bottle of bourbon, snatching a rag into his hands, quick to clean up the mess before he could bother to help the man from up off the floor. He mumbled obscenities under his breath.

"Are you okay?" Stewart asked grabbing the drunk man by the arm, hand squeezing tight around his wrist like a parent grabbing hold of a hysterical child. Stewart plucked the man's smoke from his hand, still

smoldering, coating the knuckles of his fingers ashen grey.

"My smoke," the drunk said as soon as it disappeared from his hand, Stewart throwing it to the carpet, letting it burn through a moment before crushing it out.

"Be careful with your cigarette, huh mister? You're liable to set this whole place ablaze."

"Look what you did to me," the bald man said, gazing up at Stewart. He steadied his trembling hands, his breathing, his mind. "I want a new drink and a new smoke, asshole. And I want a hand up. You help me up now...no...wait...don't help me up...just get me my refresher. And a smoke."

"Listen, pal," Stewart started, backing away with his hands in the air, trying to suggest to the rest of the bar that he felt intimidated. "I don't know why you wanna go ahead and blame me. I think maybe you've had a bit too much to drink. You think anyone who's probably seen you in your condition would contest otherwise? Anyone?" His words came loud and clear, projecting for the cheap seats. He knew the best well to sell his role as the bullied customer. "Come on mister, know your limit. You're too old to be making this kind of spectacle out of yourself."

"My limit? Yeah, well I'm beyond my limit with you, asshole," he said, the last of his words drooling over his lips. He wiped his hand across his mouth. "I want my drink and I want my smoke. Order up!" He moved back to his seat, thumb hitched in Stewart's direction. "This one's on him. Any...any sense of decency in him and he'll cover the whole tab...instead of just looking at me cockeyed."

"Jerry, get the hell out of my bar, whydontchya?" said the bartender, hurling a rag at the drunk man. "Wipe your face, then get the hell out of here. Your soggy mug will blister out in this weather."

"This is my bar," the bald man pleaded, back on his feet. He didn't know who to direct his anger at, Stewart or the bartender. "Where else am I gonna go?"

"That ain't my problem anymore," the bartender said, a scowl cutting across his face. "I'm sure there's a dozen more places in this city that would be happy to throw you out on your ass every night. Do my back some good, huh? I won't need to carry your sloppy self out the front door at the end of the night no more."

"But this place is mine just as much as it is yours."

"Yeah, then show me that on the lease." He snatched back the rag which hadn't reached very far, never making it across the counter. "Ah the hell with this. Waste of a perfectly good rag."

The drunk man began to sob, his alcohol soaked hands digging into his eyes, leaving them red, squeezed tight. He began his lame march, slow steps out of The Red Curtain, turning his head back in hopes of a reprieve.

"Ah, what do I need any of you fairies for anyway?" the bald man shouted, halfway out the door. "Whatdoya fairies ever do for me but make me feel worse 'bout myself anyway. I don't need you."

The bartender ignored the spectacle, pouring Stewart drink. "You wanted a double of bourbon, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Stewart said, pulling up a clean stool, grabbing the rag to clean up the liquor running along the bar.

"Oh hey, don't worry yourself with that." The bartender took the rag, doing his best to tidy the mess. "That's not your problem." He pushed the drink forward. "And this one, it's on me. Just let me know how much of a mess he left over there if you could," he said peeking over the bar to search for wet spots. He washed the counter, sweeping up soaked nuts and ash into a small trash can, checking Stewart out the whole time. It wasn't the look of attraction, more of recognition. The bartender studied his face, biting the inside of his lip as he struggled to come up with an appropriate question to ask, seeing if the actor might in fact be the man he'd seen in a great many films.

"I loved you in *The Sky Beneath Forever*," was his attempt at fishing for information, the words said with apprehension. The bartender found a new mess to clean up, deciding whether to keep talking or wait for the actor's reply. He drew first on the conversation, overexcited at the appearance of a celebrity in his place of business. "Sorry. I'm not used to seeing a famous face here is all. We get writers sometimes, mostly poets, but nothing like an actor. At least not a famous one."

Stewart pulled a five dollar bill from his wallet, pushing it towards the bartender. "What, Abe Lincoln isn't well known in these parts? Enjoy it, huh?" He flashed a fortune in capped teeth.

"Thank you, but it's not necessary."

"I want you to keep me in drinks the whole night. I think it's plenty necessary."

Stewart stepped away from the bar, his drink in hand as he zigzagged to the jukebox, humming out a hymn of Elvis Presley. He found a nice home for his drink on top of its wood paneling, giving himself a

chance to grab a cigarette. He patted his pockets in search of a light, but came up short, probably left on the bedside table of his hotel. "Hey," he called out to the bartender. "You got a..." he mimed striking a match, a few quick swipes across his palm.

"Fresh out," the bartender said, arms raised in the air, innocence proven.

Stewart scanned the bar looking for a friendly face among the damned. The stranger came out from a booth cupping a lit match in his hands. "Here you go," he said, easing the flame in front of Stewart, his lips rounded, a smile lurking behind them. "Me and this little piece of timber are generating all the heat in this room."

Stewart dipped his cigarette in the flame, sizing up this stranger whose gaze roamed across his face, eyes fluttering, barely able to keep himself composed. "Some line you have there," Stewart said, unresponsive to this anxious young man. "Bet you wait around in bars all day looking for the chance to use it."

"Ah, c'mon, mister," the stranger said, blushing, swatting out his match. He was all limbs, twisting his body, clapping his hands to his chest in elation. He smiled at the attention he was receiving, half buried into his sleeve. "I'm just saying I'm not cold. Have a high tolerance for the winter. Comes from growing up in Toronto. B'sides, I only save it for the handsome men." He fired up a cigarette for himself, ditching it into an empty glass. The stranger wiped a few flecks of ash off on his jeans, hands brushing back into his thick blonde hair, straightening out the cuffs of his white shirt. He twisted up on his toes, showing off for Stewart. With the baby fat on his face you he might be pegged for no more than nineteen. Stewart was not fooled by the confidence in which was approached, all ignorance, like some seasoned hustler swirling bad things in a mark's head.

Stewart missed the recklessness of a young lover. 'Oh Martin,' he thought, 'what you'd think if you could see me now.'

The stranger and Stewart lingered around the jukebox, swaying to a Johnny Mathis tune. That young man fiddled with the buttons on his shirt, in and out, toying for attention. He nodded in Stewart's direction, smiling, stepping in closer, confidence in his own charm and sexual bravado getting in the way of his innocent act. The recognition scored to music had him tripping the life fantastic.

"I saw him last time he came to town," the stranger said, pointing in the direction of the jukebox, Mathis singing, 'Chances are cause I wear a silly grin/the moment you come into view.' He moves to the song, head adrift, eyes floating. "Brought a date to see Mathis at the Garden, really craved the way he croons. Did you catch him when he was in town?"

Stewart shook my head. "Can't say that I did."

The stranger tapped his head, laughing, spinning around in circles. "Stupid question, stupid question. I should have known looking at you..."

"Looking at me?"

"...That you're an out-of-town kinda cat." He brushed two fingers along the sleeve of Stewart's shirt, catching his eyes staring. "This...shirt, this tie. A little formal for The Curtain. You look a long way from home. Far from your element. Maybe...far from your...wife? Does she know you came here to see all us good folk in Greenwich? Tell me something, what might your Mrs. say if she saw you hanging out with the like of moi? It'd probably getting up her skirt the way nothing has since her first grope." The stranger slowed his fingers up Stewart's arm, brushing them back and forth, soft, pale skin against a rough, tanned arm, his manicured nails tickling every hair they brushed against.

Stewart teased his hands along the stranger's, quick brushes being all it took to get a response, before he squeezed his hand tight around the stranger's arm. At first the stranger pulled back. Maybe instincts, a few too many passes on guys who didn't want it. A few more who wanted it worse than he knew how to give. The stranger felt Stewart's grip relax, catching his cool, like it was one more game to play. "You sure do know how to get a fella's heart pounding like a punch. You must be full of surprises."

"C'mon kid," Stewart told him, relaxing his grip, "I don't want you playing games with me the whole night. I don't need your reassurance or your sarcasm and I don't think you want me to stand here just taking it. You want something a little more commanding, don't you, not the dicking around you get with every halfwit you meet. Ever get the direct approach or do you dance around it like everyone's a song on the jukebox?"

The stranger's gaze widened. His mouth turned up. "That's where your wrong, mister. It ain't just dicking around when you're with me. See, listen to me here. I could tell from the way you came in, looking the way you do, moving in that...Midwestern kind of way a Midwestern person does..."



"You mean with one foot in front of the other?"

"If that's the way you want to describe it, mister. Man, I bet you could anchor in any port and pick yourself up some sailors, couldn't you? It sure is something else to see a man come into a place he's never been before and decide he'll sink it between his fingers and squeeze its nuts until they turn purple. Look at the way you handled that old, bald-o..."

"I handled nothing..."

"..A regular shakedown artist you are." The stranger extended his cigarette, smiling, bumping his hips against the side of the jukebox. "I know what it is to shake down a man. The best thing about the old, bald-o is, the whole rest of the night, last call drowning at the bottom of a bottle misery whatever, he'll be thinking about you. Before, during, and after. And he'll know you had it in for him. He'll tell every soused soul in whatever dive that you played him, but in the back of his mind he'll be wondering if he did it to himself all along. That kind of power. That kind of mindfuck, it'd get your rocks off better than the hardest booze or the purest dope."

"You've got me pegged, huh?"

The stranger bowed. "What can I say? I can read people like all their words are printed on the cover." He got giddy, pinching the side of Stewart's waist. "Whatdoya say? Your place or mine?"

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The elicited photographs of Stewart found their way into the hand of a magazine editor, David Barrister, a slinger of swill for a confidential rag, his office filled with file drawers on celebrities, politicians, public figures. Nothing was alphabetized by a subject's name, only by his or her scandalous offense which David has memorized. He collected snapshots of adultery from window peeping photographers. Two cabinets contained dossiers on red sympathizers, subpoenaed by the Feds for the third time that year. He dug dirt on kiddie molesters, wife beaters, cross-dressers, and dope smokers. Barrister knew all the celebrity screws, the sexual mishaps, and the vacations to the abortionist. The stories filtered out to his five magazines, the same tales trumped up with new twists. It made for great copy.

During the meeting over the photographs, Barrister let Stewart's envelope rest atop the desk, seal ripped open, the star's name scrolled across the front in black marker, contents all but spilling out. Framed photographs sat around the desk and on the walls for all to admire: a presidential candidate consumed by carnality, a post-premiere heroin craving by one of Hollywood's biggest movers and shakers. Barrister's has snapshots circling the desk, his face lost behind it. The material could be sold to a major press for good money, or Barrister could put the kybosh on it for extra money. His displayed photos served as reminders of those who saw fit to trade. The only record of their indiscretions erased, their faces scratched out with a pen knife.

Stewart's agent had the bribe cut in half when he offered another of his clients up for trade, some B-star who served nine months for armed robbery at age fifteen. The troubled past always made for a good read. Stewart sat there watching his money fold into the pocket of this huckster, trying to keep composure and not swing at the son of a bitch for calling him a limp-wristed queer.

His agent tried to assuage the pain over lunch at the Brown Derby, all chatter moved from the meeting to the future. The success of Stewart's new picture. An extension of his contract at the studio. Even now his passion project of the Chandler novel looked like a possibility thanks to a regime change at the head office. The tide appeared to be turning, but Stewart brushed away his silver lining as easily as he did the setbacks of his day. He liquored himself up good and proper, preparing for that drive back to Mulholland Drive where two days ago he found the photographs nailed to his front door, delivered to Martin's home by mistake because Stewart's name was on the lease. The broken-hearted lover etched across the bottom in an uneasy scrawl "we're even".





# Hymns to Him

*Stephen Mead*

In everyone, in each & each,  
remember there's a little idiot,  
a bit of the dope, & also a small god,  
so charity, forgiveness, intensity  
can stem beyond the flesh, beyond  
the face, those things which move  
us when love comes on playing the  
fool or turning any spirit into one.

This guy thinks it ain't gonna happen, not to him.  
This other guy hopes & millions more are strands  
strung along variations of the very same theme.  
Some rationalize, say: hey, it's only wild oats sown.  
Some scoff, say: baby, got important stuff going down.  
What about revolutions? What about careers?  
What about clothes, the Jacuzzi credit?  
Some go: looks aren't important.  
Some go: have a straight appearance,  
corporate connections, & be hot in the sack.  
Some go: tra la la. Some go: fuck that shit.  
Some go: boom boom boom.  
Some diss women. Some live with women.  
Some do both.  
Some want just the right color, the right creed,  
the right cut.  
Some save the earth (or try to) but can't  
even find the soles of their shoes.  
Some do both.

Save the earth! Save your shoes! Your soul!  
This poem, the poems men write to men, women to women, love to love to love &...  
(Who's out there hissing?)  
Somebody right now, having a snack, watching the set, cleaning the john, is also scrib-  
bling & might not know though the breaths at it, the head, the chest  
(Who's throwing rocks?)  
The flowers out of a topaz sky, a sky-written heart,  
that valentine jet, a big pen over a march, a parade, a picnic  
(Who's bashing who now?)

Maybe your 10th anniversary  
Maybe your 1st date  
Maybe your 1st bar  
Maybe your 100th  
Maybe you're in counseling  
Maybe you're hiding  
Maybe you have to  
(Who's on our side?)  
Do you  
(Somebody must be.)  
I did. Why?  
(Why?)  
Why maybe I should just set down this pen, kneel,  
(Everybody) (Hymns)  
Pray, praise & celebrate  
(Please rise.) (Hymns & hands)  
THANK YOU THANK YOU



# Genesis

*C.B. Anderson*

The figures cloaked in sacred mystery  
count less than those from ancient history,  
and Sappho's much more credible than Eve  
(apologies to folks who still believe  
that old creation myth). We're fairly sure  
the latter woman yielded to the lure  
of serpents—that's the way the story goes—  
but for the record, no one really knows  
what happened in the Garden. As the fable  
develops, Cain did in his brother, Abel,  
and sometime after that, along came Seth.

Fast-forward now to when Elizabeth,  
a cousin of the virgin known as Mary,  
gave birth to John (of Baptist fame) with nary  
a word from Zacharias. Well, in lieu  
of evidence of whether this was true  
or not, we have a simple story line  
that scientific minds might not be fine  
with. Gray Elizabeth is not a cause  
for doubting our belief in natural laws,  
but Mary's case is really rather queer,  
because an angel made it amply clear  
(although the scientists whom we annoy  
will say it never should have been a boy)  
she could expect parthenogenesis.

By all accounts, the special benefice  
accorded Lesbos made the absence of  
a male component in an act of love  
quotidian. How children might arise  
on such an island.... If we may surmise,  
there's much we still don't know about genetics,  
and more that we've forgot about aesthetics—  
two realms where frequent miracles transpire.

Reluctant though we are to play with fire,  
we've read enough to know how Sappho burned!  
Connecting dots... if nothing else, we've learned  
that prospects of miraculous events  
deserve a myriad gay experiments.

# My Dearest Mountain, Living Memory & Master, My Text, *Chelsea Kachman*

"A later development of the idea of a secret Torah asserted that each of the 600,000 souls that stood at Sinai had its own special portion of Torah that only that soul could understand."  
-- Judith Plaskow, *Jewish Memory from a Feminist Perspective*

"When she comes out of the ritual bath----"  
& I am not Ruth----not Esther----not Elizabeth  
not Rachel----nor Leah, nor Sarah----  
"By attaching ourselves to the voices of our grandmothers  
we can become whole----"<sup>1</sup>

my middle name is Rebekah  
& I am not that black fire on white fire  
come to beg before you----

in-scripting your knees of the land----  
living memory----tongues of flame----your story multiple----  
unfolding----three glowing visitors to feed----

"What befalls the Earth befalls  
the people of the Earth----"

please... me / mine / my / matri: midrash  
I am hymn----membrane----everything  
passing through & in & out of me, so please....

"Daughter of the Earth, O!  
Mother of our Nations----"

We wear these texts as garments----ink  
as 600,000 ornaments----eternally present----  
This is my keening tkhine----reconnecting that

"I have plucked a rose from the Holy Tongue----"  
severed limb: my emuna----

& I overheard Moses warn them away from me  
on that third day of the exodus, but here  
you are, banning me----still

you let my teeth mouth your neck, raw milk  
in a cup of offering----marrow of calves I pound  
out as brown, slipping prayers onto the white

of your blinding palms:  
I will never be some

"pretty tkhine to say on the Sabbath with great devotion"

1. Weissler, Chava. "Mizvot Built into the Body: Tkhines for Niddah, Pregnancy, and Childbirth", in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, ed., *People of the Body*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1992.

# Magnetic Field

*J.R. Kangas*

In a Chicago bar, in my 20s, I learned  
to prop myself up for half the night, nurse  
two drinks maybe, stare at anyone I thought  
I might love, leave, if lucky, with an evening

star for the Farwell Beach playground, say,  
for a little--communion. We might seesaw,  
swing, stick our feet in the water, go round  
& round the simple carousel (hinging of course

on his playfulness) till the sun rose  
over the lake like a ruddy lover. Somehow,  
looking back, that part seems the best. I was  
always hungry; he seemed, always, beautiful.

Then, when finally our hopeful bodies  
begged us for deliverance, I'd sometimes push  
to exchange the next move for a number  
which, if I dialed it later, might bring

back that magic ache (the ache  
of two magnets held a bare millimeter apart),  
denial the weird force holding us  
in a kind of union.



# Powers Make You Free

*Caroline Haughton*

Everyone has special powers and everyone has a secret. I found my powers, hiding behind Aunt Dolly's skirt. You see, my pops, he was always looking for me, the boy who stole glitter eye shadow, instead of toy cars. I see him walking towards me and I'm frozen. The sight of his belt is like kryptonite (I know not Greek mythology but you get the point). I just stand there. His belt made of pale yellow leather; I call his belt the Thunder Bolt. When he hits me, when the belt slaps me hard, I can see white light. He always follows with his fist which moves fast like lightning, electricity. One day after school my pops came looking for me. As I crouched down behind Aunt Dolly, the ruffles of her skirt were like a million red tongues, speaking one little word that would change my life, they whispered, run.

You'll never catch me walking. I don't hide my power. I run everywhere. My feet fly, like Hermes, messenger of the gods. I run with invisible wings on my no-name tennis shoes. I run so fast the concrete looks like clouds. And my pops, he can't catch me. Never.

A few weeks ago Aunt Dolly left a note, for me to help her around the house, after school. How could I say no? She helped me discover my powers. And she knows I can keep a secret. I hate being home anyway. I wish I was normal, like my baby brother. He can make everybody laugh; telling jokes about a *puta* so big you could wear it like a *sombrero*. The family is too scared to mess with my sister. My sister, Sibyl, is crazy, a *bruja* in the making. You can find her practicing invisibility, staking alley shadows at dusk.

I run away from my family. Darting quick and fast, away from everyone's shiny black eyes and mouths that have become flat, forgetting how to speak the language of our ancestors, Español and Patois. My family, they mouth an English curse, pointing five ugly syllables at me. This word, I cannot escape no matter how fast I run. Ho-mo-sex-u-al.

Aunt Dolly is kind to me. She is the only person my winged feet pause for. When my brother's friends taunt me or throw rocks, the kids chase me out of the cafeteria with flying clumps of mashed potatoes, or my sister ignores my tears, because she is, after all, becoming invisible: I go to her, my Aunt Dolly. She slices open Aloe Vera and ground up charcoal and makes a poultice for my infected wounds. She rubs Bay Rum on my feet, which ache from running, always running, away. The scent of her palms comforts me. I catch wafts of hand rolled tobacco; she carried, all the way from the Caribbean to *Gringolandia*. I like the way she touches me. Her fingers fluttering fast, like little pink and brown birds pulling away heat and pain.

I ask her why we left the island. She forms her hands into a machine gun and closes her eyes tight, shooting invisible bullets at all the people she watched die. She points her finger at a photograph of her son. In the picture he is laughing, holding a green coconut, and I know he too is dead. She shakes her head and holds the picture to her heart. She does not speak the English. She cannot speak at all. Cancer has eaten away her voice box. As she wheezes and coughs, she moves her small delicate hands to form words that only I could understand.

Every day after school I go to her. I run so fast, my feet do not even touch the ground. I arrive breathless at her door. I wash the floors with warm water and linseed oil, open all the windows and dump over flowing ash trays into the toilet. I hook the IV into her arm. I blend whisky into her crab soup, adding lime juice, white pepper and Worcestershire sauce for flavor, which she sucks down with a straw. Before she nods off, she wheels over to the phonograph, playing records from WWII – the Andrews Sisters and Louis Armstrong. Her blood shot eyes get that far away look. We sit together. I have a tiny glass of whisky, and try not to let cigarette ash fall on my blue Sacred Heart uniform.

I slip away, once her white lashes touch the blue spider veins traveling across her cheeks. Going into her room, I undress before the large vanity. My pubescent boy body looks alien to me. I wonder why the gods, gave me that thing dangling between my legs, instead of a little slit like my sister. I reach into Aunt Dolly's bureau, and pull out the tangerine silk panties she keeps wrapped in perfume scented tissue paper. The panties feel so soft between my legs. I touch my flat bird chest, praying to the goddess Aphrodite, for big double D *tetas*. I put on Aunt Dolly's peach lace baw which I stuff with paper towels and tissues, imagining how all the boys will whistle when they see me walking down the block and all the girls will be so jealous, wishing they had *guanabanas* big as me.

I put a scarf on my head, to cover up my tiny helmet afro. I dance in front of Aunt Dolly's mirror. Whirling in front of her wheel chair, my secret and my powers collide. This must be what Hermaphroditus feels like. The body of a

man and woman merge and unite, into one superme being! Hermaphroditus! Son of Hermes's daughter of Aphrodite! On Olympus, you can be anything you want. I close the curtains. My hood is no Olympus. All neighbors see is a twelve-year-old *pato* playing dress up in some old lady clothes.

Moving around the house on tip-toes, I can almost see the wings at my heels, fluttering, waiting to take off. In her sleeping presence, I forget I am a boy wanting to be a girl. I think of all the things I can do when I grow up; get a sex change, get some big *tetas*, wear perfume and red lipstick every day, get some sanitary napkins for when the monthly female stigmata arrives, get hair that shakes, a blond wig, a red wig, a pink wig, an American boyfriend who takes me to Paris and calls me *sweetie*, oh and Lee Press on Nails from the Dollar Tree.

I undress before Aunt Dolly wakes up. And put on my no-name sneakers and blue Sacred Heart uniform. I carry Aunt Dolly to bed, making sure I snub out the cigarette. You never can be too careful, think of all the people who die from smoking in bed. I put her in a cotton night gown. She likes when I take care of her because she knows I will keep her secret, I won't tell anyone she doesn't wear a girdle, or has a stash of cigarettes in Grandfather's urn next to the bed. I won't tell anyone her cough keeps getting worse or that she leaves the stove on and can't remember why. Before I leave, she opens her eyes and points to my head and smiles. I smile back, pulling the scarf off of my head. My secret is safe with her too.

The minute I step outside I begin running. My head filled with whisky. My skin covered in the warm scent of her tobacco. I run and cut down an alley, to avoid the gangster wanna be kids who are the same age as me, pushing dope to buy kicks and gold chains because they know no college will ever take them, unless they can play ball like Jordan or speak English like Oprah. I run fast because the Jehova Witness peeps are everywhere. They have no problem throwing knives at my ass, to get rid of the *pato*, in the neighborhood. As if I have something they can catch.

I run past Wig Villa wanting to stop in so bad, run past the beauty supply store knowing a pair of fake lashes would make my night. When I run the kid gangsters become harpies. Where Jason and them Argonauts be when you need them? I run past the home girls on the block. They are almost prostitutes, home-girls who are, too old for juvie, but too cool for school. They look like sirens, wailing for sailors. The sailors they seek are searching, not for fish or sea demons, but for a way to survive life in the Bronx. I speed past them. I am immune to their enchantment.

I run and run all the way home. Today I will face my father. I no longer want to be afraid of the secret hidden deep inside me. My mother always says, a man never really wants to know what a woman is thinking. But I have to tell him. I have to tell him, because he is going to kill me with his thunderbolt anyway.

I step inside the house which is swimming in the scent of rice, beans, and *platanos*. A soccer match playing on a television. Our television's not one of those fancy flat screens. This shit still has dials and knobs instead of a remote and buttons. My father sits there with a Milwaukee Lite. He stares at my face saying, "The school called today." I check my mouth, no lipstick. I look at my father. The knuckles are not white, and his hand, far from his belt, rests on his knee.

"Yeah, what did I do this time?" My voice trembles in my throat. I wonder how I am going to let my truth out.

"When do you ever do anything?" You're the one son on the block who never gets in trouble." He lights a cigarette and blows the smoke in my face.

"Dad, I have to tell you something." I tense every muscle in my body.

"The school already told me." My father smiles so big, I can see his missing teeth.

"They did?"

"Yeah, why you gotta hide secrets from your father?" He reaches out and pulls me toward him. Holding me in the crook of his arm, he kisses the top of my head.

"It's just that, I think, you hate me."

"Why would I hate you? You're on the track team, and you could have saved yourself a beating long ago if you had told me this. I know that ho-mo-sex-u-als don't play sports."

"Dad," I say, searching his eyes.

"Son, I am proud of you, and I am sorry for beating your ass. I just thought you were *afeminado*. I didn't want you to be a *pato*."

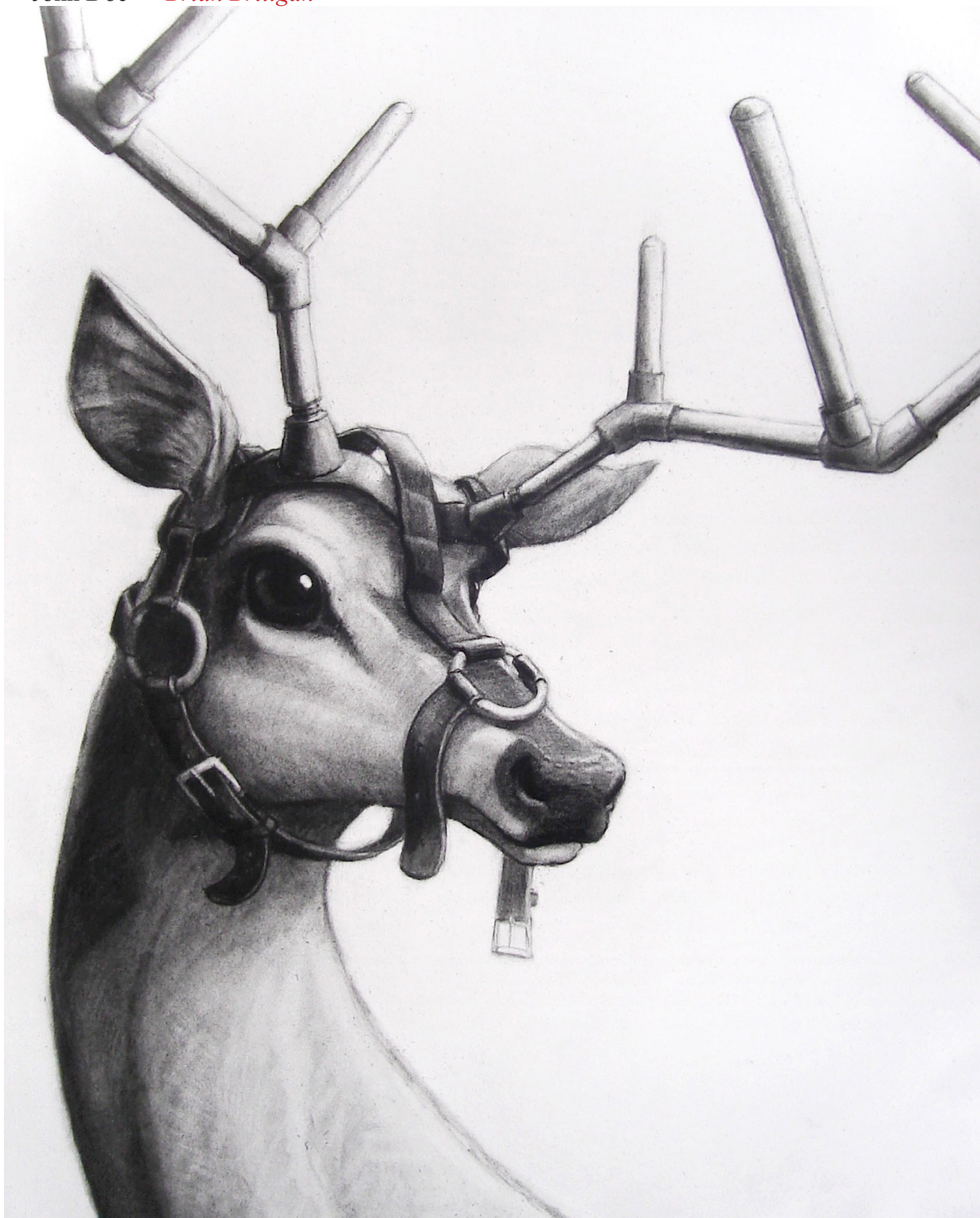
I walk into my room, and my sister is on my bed. I sit down and don't say anything, in case she is practicing, her invisibility.





Blemishes of Love     *Otha Davis III*





# Cut Shapes From Shadows

*Jessie Nash*

She cut a male shadow out of the dark  
and favoured a quiff tonight, just to pretend,  
stopped wearing bras for the most part  
six months gone, and wishes to be flat

just flat, just flat,

cuts a queer shadow in the opening alley,  
longing for someone to ask her name  
so she can try out Jamie or Jackson,  
giving a pulse to her straight male state,

so she goes to a bar, all button-downs and binders  
and she hangs on a beer all lonesome and flat,  
feeling the absence that hangs in the gap,  
the boys-shorts unfilled and her shoulders too slack,

she's eyeing the girls who laugh in the corner,  
they're eighteen if that, and she - so clean shaven  
and young-looking, unthreatening,  
a shy male shadow cut out of the dark.

# Honeydew

*Peter LaBerge*

*After Elizabeth Bishop.*

Saturday nights in my basement, I used to  
suck honeydew from the dry rinds  
of other girls' lips.

In those days, honeydew was all  
that you felt when you inhaled and exhaled  
slowly, rising and falling, a sweet tide against

your lips, until your eyes slid shut and you  
felt  
just two bodies breathing,  
yours against another's.

This is the moment  
we would always choose  
to spit the honeydew out.

But one night, I kept  
the sweetness for myself  
into the night, into that

Sunday morning when I sang in  
the church pew, the honeydew tucked  
under my tongue, a stowaway's baggage

stolen from God himself. I felt you,  
an inner-cavern dance in the citrus  
prick of the fruit, haunting

like a fossil dug up and dusty  
amidst the hymnal's echoing refrain that  
somebody, somewhere loves us all.



# The End of Our Broadcast Day

*Thomas Kearnes*

A deep orange Oriental fan spanned across the living room wall. Black mold festered inside the air ducts. A nude Barbie doll with teased, wild hair overlooked the courtyard from the kitchen. Every Wednesday, the maids stole loose change, soda, clothes. Soothing silk sheets wrapped the bed. Two weeks ago, roaches invaded the bathroom. Dexter Wilcox paid these things no mind. His apartment's internal war between kitsch and decay was no more remarkable than heat in August.

He jiggled with anticipation for the series finale of "The Golden Girls" to begin. Dexter had learned of his great fortune from the channel guide that afternoon. He cried every time Dorothy last embraced the girls. He planned to let his phone click over to voicemail until he checked the called ID.

Beverly called often during Dexter's first few months in rehab. As winter tumbled into spring, however, she accused her brother of using Sacred Promises to hide from life. Dexter insisted his alcoholism required care longer than the customary ninety days. After all, he reminded her, he'd lived at the bottom of a bottle for thirty years. He praised God she didn't mention Morris.

"I found some apartments right there in Houston," she said. "You could visit them easy."

"It might be smarter to wait for a definite discharge date."

Beverly sighed. "You still don't know?"

"Asking too much makes the therapists suspicious."

"Jesus, Dex, that place is a roach motel."

"We're very sick people."

"Okay, fine. When will you get better?"

Dexter clicked the volume button. "Thank You for Being a Friend" blasted from the speakers. *Your heart is true. You're a pal and a confidant.* He felt Beverly's question was too ridiculous to warrant an answer.

She waited a moment. "Dex, you've seen every damn episode of that geriatric wet dream."

"C'mon, Beverly, sing."

"No way."

"For me?"

"Not even for Mama."

It was late, especially given the early hour the residents took the bus to Sacred Promises each day. Even as a boy, Dexter required only four or five hours of sleep. The knock at the door startled him.

"Mr. Wilcox," Tanya called as she opened the door. Residents were forbidden from locking their apartments, even at night. "Welcome our new resident."

Dexter told his sister about the new arrival and promised they'd soon talk again.

"Maybe he's the man of your dreams." Beverly didn't hide her sarcasm. She didn't say goodbye.

Tanya entered, fussing under her breath as she carried stuffed garbage bags in each hand. His new roommate carried only a duffel bag. Tanya said, "Please welcome—"

The stranger zipped inside and offered Dexter his hand. "Guy Peterson. Professional speed freak. You ever been to Fort Worth?"

Dexter took Guy's hand. Amazed, he watched Guy grin and slap his free hand over their knot of fingers. To touch a man so sublime filled Dexter with a warmth he hadn't known for thirty years—before he lost Morris.

"I have a sister in Dallas," Dexter replied. This was a lie. He wanted to hear Guy's gravelly voice again.

"I don't know many women there." Guy laughed, flashing his white teeth. "Never has much use for them."

Guy was so tall, it surprised Dexter he hadn't bumped his head on the doorframe. His lightly muscled chest complemented his broad shoulders. He wore khaki slacks and a short-sleeved buttoned shirt boasting a Japanese design: a dragon perched atop a yin-yang symbol. His blue eyes darted like goldfish, taking in the eccentric décor. Finally showcasing his apartment overjoyed Dexter. The complex didn't allow guests at any time, regardless of gender. This included fellow residents.

Tanya sighed heavily. "Mr. Wilcox, Mr. Peterson. I'm sure you'll figure out what comes next. See you boys in the

morning.” She dropped the two garbage bags without ceremony and left.

Dexter had entirely forgotten “The Golden Girls.” Only the roar of canned laughter brought him back to the room he desperately tried to disguise. On the screen, Blanche’s uncle bewitched Dorothy over a crab dinner. Dexter no longer felt compelled to mouth the actors’ lines until the girls’ tearful farewell.

“Do you watch this show?” Dexter asked.

“My grandma did when I was a kid.”

“Isn’t it sublime?”

Guy’s lips puckered in distaste. “Horny old woman disturb me.

Dexter bowed his head, embarrassed. Maybe Guy was straight after all. Maybe I should slink away, crank the volume and forget the world, he thought.

“C’mon, old man,” Guy said, slapping Dexter’s ass. “I wanna know about that weird-ass Barbie doll.”

\* \* \*

Dexter informed Guy of the many, many rules that governed Winter Elms Apartments, home to the patients of Sacred Promises. No exchanging cash for goods, no sex, no provocative clothing—Dexter had no doubt he’d forgotten several more. Incredulity washed over Guy’s face; he compared the complex to a prison. No, he continued, at least you get laid in prison. Dexter knew he should laugh, forge an illicit kinship, but Guy’s narrowed eyes and set jaw spooked him. Sacred Promises ejected at least ten patients each month. Dexter feared his time with Guy Peterson might end shortly.

Later that night, while Guy became acquainted with the shower that spit a puny spray, Dexter wandered into the bedroom the two men would share. Guy had yet to unpack; the two garbage bags and duffel rested upon a bare mattress. Dexter looked behind to see if Guy approached despite still hearing the shower. Satisfied he was alone, he opened one of the garbage bags and peered inside. Upon a nest of clothes in a rainbow of bright colors, Dexter found a stuffed Tigger doll the size of a bread loaf. At that moment, he felt a spasm of true affection, perhaps love, for this man who might spend the next few months sleeping across the room. He took the Tigger from the bag, mashing his fingers into the plush. *Morris*, he thought, my life has ended. It ended so long ago. The water had stopped without Dexter’s notice. He shoved the doll back inside the bag moments before Guy entered, drying his hair with Dexter’s towel. Dexter offered to help Guy unpack, but he simply grinned like he’d heard a wicked punchline. Trying to peek at my delicacies, he asked. He kept grinning, the sort of smile that turns ghoulish if glimpsed too long.

After slipping into lounge pants dotted with outlines of wild game, his smooth chest bare and shiny, Guy surveyed the fridge. Hovering at the kitchen entrance, Dexter wanted to offer apologies, explanations. Instead, he remained still, his jaw slack. Why not toss the boxes after the Cokes are gone, Guy asked. Dexter fumbled for a reason, finally threw his hands in the air and admitted housekeeping was a difficult concept for him. Guy sighed and clicked his teeth, glided past Dexter. His skin brushed Dexter’s shirt sleeve. Dexter didn’t move until he heard a door shut followed by running water.

Dexter stayed up late, later than usual. He drifted into oblivion shortly after two, his last memory consisting of an aging supermodel hawking moisturizer. He clicked off the television, plunging the room into darkness. He squealed after colliding into a wall. He then held out his arms like a mummy until he reached the bedroom; luckily, Guy had left the door open. It was too dark to discern his new roommate’s form in any detail. Still, Dexter stared, breathing deeply as if he wore a paper sack over his face. After a few minutes, Guy turned, and the amber light from the streetlamp fell like dust upon his face. Dexter vowed to watch him until sleep again snuffed his desire.

\* \* \*

The kitchen window provided Dexter with a daily crash course in the chaotic social politics of Winter Elms. He noted which residents embraced and which merely nodded to say good morning. He observed who asked for cigarettes, who obliged and who refused.

Dexter called for Guy to join him, tired of gossiping with himself. He’d assumed Guy was in the bathroom since the door was closed when he woke. Dexter, however, soon discovered himself alone. Crushed, he shuffled to his bed for a few more minutes of sleep only to halt and gaze unblinking at Guy’s side of the room. All the outlandish shirts hung in the closet. Far too many pairs of shoes lined up like soldiers beneath the bed. The Tigger doll presided over Guy’s crisply made bed, propped up by two pillows so full and soft, he surely brought them from home. Dexter flopped onto

his bed, all the tickling excitement from moments before condensed and heavy like a cannonball in his gut. Somehow, he summoned the optimism to return to his feet.

Dexter couldn't help feeling a perverse pride when he glimpsed Guy shaking hands and laughing with one new neighbor after another. He wore a long-sleeved jersey with a racecar and checkered flag stitched on the front. His wavy blonde hair glistened in the morning light. Guy's eagerness to mingle allowed Dexter to moon over him undetected. It was far more welcome than the scripted flirtations between the two anchors on the morning newscast. Of course, Beverly found a way to burst his meager joy like a soap bubble.

"I have wonderful news." She loudly sipped a drink; Dexter recoiled from his phone.

"You know not to call till after three."

"It couldn't wait."

"Then teach it patience." Dexter kept his vigil at the kitchen window. Guy seemed distracted by someone tucked beyond Dexter's view. Perhaps it was Finn. He hadn't thought about the little slut since Guy's arrival. Dexter doubted Guy could resist Finn's charisma and deep brown eyes; Dexter certainly couldn't.

"Trent cashed in his frequent flier miles," Beverly said. "I can't imagine where else we'd go."

How about to hell, Dexter thought. "This is rather...um, when? The therapists don't like surprise."

"Actually, I thought you and I could have a powwow with whoever decides things there."

"What for?"

"Dexter, your life won't wait forever."

"This *is* my life."

Beverly went silent then replied in a hard voice. "I will not accept that."

Dexter slumped helpless against the window as Finn Worsnop giggled at Guy's antics. Finn carried a paperback novel; he informed anyone with ears he intended to catch up on the classics. The only time he'd been inside Dexter's apartment, he brought *Wuthering Heights*. After Finn sucked Dexter's dick two months ago, the older man tossed him a carton of menthols, holding up the bargain struck on the bus home.

"You're interfering with my recovery, Bev."

"You're interfering with my bills, baby brother. Sobriety ain't cheap."

"Don't do this," Dexter whined.

"You think Morris would put up with this crap?"

That bitch, he thought. She brought out the big guns at the first resistance. "When?"

"Monday afternoon."

"It's been too long, Bev." He hoped he sounded sincere.

As his shameless sister rattled off her itinerary, Dexter spied on Guy and Finn chatting, touching more frequently the longer they spoke. Worst of all, both men sipped Cokes. Dexter's fridge was empty; he knew who had supplied refreshments. Finn often ran out of cigarettes but never soda pop.

The staff of Sacred Promises graciously allowed patients fifteen minutes to smoke after each group therapy session. Patients could gossip, ridicule and malign with impunity. From his position on a bench at the far edge of the smoke deck, Dexter watched Guy maneuver among all the addicts desperate to befriend the handsome, stylish stranger. Guy slipped away, however, and joined Dexter on the bench. No one followed. The patients' enthusiasm for Guy couldn't overcome their aversion to Dexter.

"Finn tells me you two are old friends," Guy whispered despite their seclusion. This spooked Dexter; surely Finn's indiscretion had its limit.

"We did some business a while back."

"Oh my. Sounds shady."

"Some are sicker than others."

Guy lifted his wraparound shades, left them perched atop his head. "I want that man's dick in my mouth."

"You move fast." Dexter lit a Winston.

"About that..." Guy patted Dexter's knee, his hand remaining there once still. Dexter knew the gesture was calculated, but he felt a flutter in his stomach anyway. "I know it's tacky to ask a favor. I've been here less than a day—"

Dexter spit smoke, asked Guy what he needed. He wondered if this was the fate of middle-aged fags: to sit like



wallflowers until a beautiful man calls our name so we may rise like a phoenix—until he forgets us again.

“Just ten minutes, long enough to work out our frustrations.”

“Where?”

“Our bedroom.”

“Why not his?”

“Finn’s roommate is some redneck asshole. He’d squeal in a second.”

“Where will I go?”

Guy’s cheeks flushed. Dexter braced himself for greater impositions. A tech ordered the patients back inside. Guy spoke quickly and softly, his voice oddly calming if divorced from the message it carried. Guy asked Dexter to wait outside the front door and dial Guy’s cell phone, letting it ring three times, if a staff member approached.

Dexter wanted to inform Guy that Finn didn’t require such subterfuge. Dexter was watching “The Facts of Life” while Finn sucked him off. All he needed was one commercial break.

“Sex is against the rules, Guy.”

“Baby, I’m a junkie. Rules don’t impress me.”

Dexter sighed. Defeat loses its sting if you forget the narcotic rush of triumph. “When’s the little shit coming in for a landing?”

Guy divulged more details. He didn’t finish until he and Dexter sat alone on the smoke deck, perhaps forgotten by the staff.

\* \* \*

Finn swept into Dexter’s apartment without knocking, without a hello. The blank look he gave Dexter led the host to believe Finn, too, found Guy’s plan far from ideal.

“Where is he?” Finn asked. “The staff might notice I’m gone.”

Dexter watched a rerun of “The Jeffersons.” It was an older episode; Zara Cully still played George’s hard-drinking mother. He cut Finn an empty gaze. “Can’t you hear the water? He’s in the shower.”

“Ugh!” Finn threw himself onto the corduroy sofa. “Why must queers always groom to excess?”

“You don’t have that problem.”

Finn wore a plain white tee two sizes too large, pinstriped trousers cut at the calves like Capri pants, and rubber flip-flops. He opened *The Good Earth* and never replied. Dexter’s relief was short-lived.

“Look, Dex,” Finn said. “I feel awkward, too, but a secret loses its power if no one discusses it.”

On the screen, the audience howled after Mother Jefferson insulted Louise. “You were an embryo when this first aired,” Dexter said.

“TV is for losers with no imagination.”

Before Dexter could absorb the rudeness of Finn’s comment, Gary chirped for his guest to race into the bedroom and strip down to his smile. Finn, agile and petite, bolted from cushions and crossed the room. He stopped.

“Real life doesn’t take place in front of a live studio audience,” Finn said. “No one’s laughing now.”

Dexter felt Finn had dumped ice water in his lap. He tried to concentrate on the show, but Guy’s moans and Finn’s throaty laughter made it impossible. He never left the recliner. No fool would stand like a post in the cruel August sun so a stranger and a shithead could get laid. He and Morris had risked discovery every time they met nude in the small hours of the morning all those years ago. True intimacy requires courage, he believed.

Both Guy and Finn gaped at Dexter upon leaving the bedroom. Dexter refused to speak, waiting to be approached for his negligence. A powerful thirst invaded his throat. Water wouldn’t do, he required flavor.

“I’ll meet you downstairs with the Coke,” Finn called over his shoulder.

“Terrific,” Guy said. “We earned one.”

“Pervert,” Finn replied.

Dexter wasn’t sure what he expected—consideration, mercy, maybe a moment of simple pity. He knew he’d earned one.

“Can you grab one for me, too?” he asked Finn.

Louise Jefferson screeched on the screen after discovering George’s latest hare-brained scheme. Dexter couldn’t

remember a time Finn had looked so unsure.

"Man, I'm sorry," Finn mumbled. "I shouldn't even let Guy have one. Gotta ration them now."

"I'll give you a dollar."

Finn swallowed and slapped his paperback against his thigh. "I really can't, Dexter. Sorry."

The older man smiled like a salesman and nodded. This gesture put Finn at ease. Dexter realized in that moment Finn was a boy: naïve, arrogant and no match for an experienced man.

After Finn left, Guy shuffled past Dexter, minus his peacock's pride and easy manner. "Sorry," he muttered.

"What are you sorry for?"

Guy froze at the door. "For whatever just happened?"

"Not your fault."

"Do you want my Coke?"

"No," Dexter said, liking this foreign emotion filling his chest: confidence. "I want a Coke from that fucker who just left."

\* \* \*

Dexter and Morris had a signal when it was time to meet in the dormitory's community shower. This was the infancy of Ronald Reagan's command, a time without cable, without infomercials, without hundreds of channels airing absurdity all through the night. Both boys waited in their rooms for KMOH to end its run at one in the morning. That station flashed a montage of nature shots, happy children, a bald eagle and the American flag flapping proudly. *KMOH proudly salutes our loyal viewers at the end of our broadcast day.* After that station switched to a test pattern, Dexter and Morris knew it was time to touch, to taste, to explore under a gentle spray of warmth. They never risked more than ten minutes. They had no idea what consequences loomed if they were caught; this fear of the unknown carried its own erotic charge.

Their nightly trysts in the last stall on the third floor of Rosenbaum Hall merely brought a sexual component to the intense, consuming friendship that formed like a thunderhead beginning their first week on campus. Morris played guitar while Dexter sang melodies so haunting that other residents stopped in the hall to listen. Dexter read sonnets while Morris proofread their essays. Morris stifled his giggles while Dexter tried and tried to break up with his high school sweetheart. The time chugged forward except when it froze, the two boys suspended in bliss.

One night, however, Morris never arrived. Dexter waited twenty minutes for him, his toes and fingertips puckering in the spray. He didn't dare knock on Morris's door; his roommate awoke if a feather hit the floor. Dexter padded back to his room and solemnly slid beneath the covers. Tomorrow, he told himself. We'll be together tomorrow.

As Dexter dressed for class the next morning, a knock startled him. Morris? Their schedules didn't sync up until lunch. The detective waiting in the hall didn't bother with tact. With his stubble and fedora, he reminded Dexter of a hood lifted from those black-and-white crime films Morris adored. Dexter shook so fiercely he had to grab the doorframe.

"Did you know your neighbor, Morris Becker?"

"He's my best friend."

"When did you last see him?"

"What happened?"

"Was he depressed?"

"What happened?"

"Did you know Mr. Becker was a homosexual?"

"Answer me!"

"He left a note. We found his car in the ravine earlier this morning. Sorry, kid."

Two weeks earlier, Dexter finished reading a sonnet, dreamy with metaphors and promises. Morris looked up from his desk. "One day, I'll write you something that beautiful," he said.

"You don't have to."

"That's why I will."

Dexter wanted to say he loved Morris, but he stopped himself. They had time. They were young. Yes, so much time.

The day after Finn refused Dexter a Coke, Guy again sought his roommate during a smoke break. He never lifted his gaze from his loafers, even after sitting beside Dexter in the blazing sun. "I feel like a prick asking this, but—"

"Then don't."

"What happened to you? Was it pod people?" Guy popped his knuckles, looked around as if a third party might intervene. "I thought you were cool."

Dexter crushed a cigarette on the bench. "If you get busted, so do I."

"We'll be careful."

"I'll be more careful."

Defeated, Guy watched the crowd. Finn soon emerged as several women retreated inside. Sipping a can of Coke, he stared frankly at the two men on the bench.

Dexter slapped Guy's thigh and stood. "Time to break the bad news," he said, stretching.

"When do you graduate?" Guy demanded in a nasty tone.

Dexter smiled sadly, dared a glimpse at the sun sliding from behind a cloud.

\* \* \*

Just because he decided to surprise Beverly with a phone call, it didn't mean Dexter would miss an instant of the nightly "Golden Girls" mini-marathon. First up, Blanche gets jealous when Dorothy hijacks all the male attention at Blanche's favorite bar.

"My goodness, Dex. Did someone die?"

"Real death or spiritual death?"

"You're quite a card tonight."

The Snickers ad aired featuring Betty White playing football in the mud. Dexter broke in a wide, joyous grin. He hoped Betty White would live forever.

"Did you keep the info on those apartments?" he asked.

"I mailed you a copy yesterday."

"You can't hold my hand forever, Bev."

"Just a little longer, honey."

"Guess what's coming next?"

"That singing dog from YouTube?"

"Sing, Bev."

"Oh Lord."

Beverly had been a fixture in the church choir since her teen years. Her breathy soprano brought tears to the faithful and comfort to the lost. If she hadn't been so busy cleaning up my shit, Dexter thought, she could've been a star.

"It's almost time," he said.

"I can hear the TV, Dex. Goodness, do you need it that loud?"

"Hit it, Bev." He switched the call to speakerphone.

Beverly knew "Thank You for Being a Friend" like their mother's face. Her golden tone entranced Dexter. The song ended too soon.

She cleared her throat. "How did I do?"

Dexter started to answer but sensed Guy standing behind him, bare-chested and wearing the animal-print lounge pants. He seemed baffled, as if plucked from a dream.

"Dex," Beverly said. "You there?"

"Just a minute."

"I heard singing," Guy said. "It wasn't on TV."

Dexter laughed. "The best things never are."





Reflection Self-Portrait in Rockport, MA Cottage

*Jared Torello*

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