

# THE ALEMBIC

*Providence College*



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AS FAR AS I KNEW, my cousin Maggie's wedding was going to be just another standard-type wedding, the kind we've already had lots of in my family, except because it was June she and Joe had decided to have a catered reception under a tent in Joe's family's big back yard in the suburbs, and that was already more fancy than our family normally goes in for, because none of us are bankers or stock traders or like that, so even if we wanted fancy it's out of our reach and we're too smart to run up big debt. So I booked my flight from Los Angeles—my company transferred me out here last year and I'm the only one in our family who's not in New York and I'm so homesick and I'm just praying for a chance to get myself transferred back—and bought a new dress like I always do for family events, and started praying for good weather. And I thought that was going to be that, a pretty normal family wedding. Except it turned out that Maggie and Joe were adding another thing that I had never seen done in our family: a white dove release. Maggie's sister my cousin Debbie let this piece of news slip when she was talking to me over the phone the week before the wedding. The first thing that went through my mind was a flock of white birds flying overhead and all of them shitting at the same time. Debbie nearly dropped the phone from laughing when I said that.

The weather turned out beautiful and my flight went okay and the wedding ceremony went just fine and Maggie looked gorgeous. The food at the reception was very good thanks to Joe, who likes to eat and knows the best restaurants and caterers and already has a few extra pounds on him to show for it. And then at the end came the white dove

release thing. There was a bunch of white homing pigeons caged in a white wicker basket, and at the scheduled time the handler who had brought them to the location set them free, and they flew up into the sky and wandered around for a few minutes until they figured out the way to go and then they all flew off. I asked the handler why pigeons were used instead of real doves. He said doves don't have a homing instinct and anyway pigeons are pretty much the same kind of bird but specially developed and trained to find their way home from far away, but he won't release his birds more than fifty miles from his loft, to be sure they get back home quickly and safely. Because they're just like people, he said, they want to be at home with their family in their loft where they can eat and be with their mates and children and be safe. It sounded to me kind of like deceptive advertising, like, why not call them pigeons if that's what they are, but I didn't say that to the handler.

So on my return flight to L.A., there we are on the runway waiting to taxi, and the minutes pass and we're not moving, and I start getting nervous because I'm nervous in planes anyway even when things seem to be normal. I glance out the window, and what do I see but a dog running like crazy along the edge of the runway, a skinny long-legged mutt with flopsie-doodle ears flapping like he's getting ready to take off, and half-a-dozen guys are chasing after him, mostly older guys with potbellies so they don't have a chance of catching him, and in fact pretty soon they slow down and finally stop and wipe the sweat off their faces, and I can see they're all panting and I start worrying they'll have heart attacks right there on the runway. The dog stops running too and turns around and stands there barking like he's laughing at them. One guy squats down on the runway and I can see his lips are moving so I guess he's trying to talk

the dog into coming to him, but the dog's too smart, he just stands there and barks. This goes on for a while. Finally one of those little airport service vehicles that look like golf carts drives up and a guy jumps out of the passenger seat and whistles and waves, and the dog comes running over to him and he gets it into the cart and away they go, and after some more time we finally start taxiing and take off.

The dog actually made the New York news. According to the news article Debbie sent me a while later, he was in a cage waiting to be loaded into the plane where his owner, that's the guy who got him into the cart, was a passenger, and the dog chewed right through the fasteners holding the door shut and got out and started running. The airport personnel had to take the owner off the plane to help them catch him. When they finally got the dog back into his cage they used tougher fasteners that he couldn't chew through and that was the end of his adventure. In one way I felt kind of proud of him, he wanted freedom and he found a way to get it and refused to give it up, like, give me liberty or give me death, and he probably would've stuck to his guns except that he loved his owner. Because of love he ended up back in prison. The pigeons could fly away to a new place and a new kind of life if they wanted, but they go back to their three squares and their safe bed. Come to think of it, maybe loving a place is like loving a person, and no matter what's happening we always have strings holding us anyway, so maybe being free doesn't really matter in the end. That dog probably should've stayed put instead of causing all that useless uproar.

## THROWING QUARTERS *Tara McLaughlin*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

I make them uncomfortable. They walk by me, around me, over me. Them, with their 2.5 children—two hold Mummy's hands and the half is wrapped in Burberry and shoved in a Whole Foods bag. The J.Crew catalogue incarnate. Mouths are flapping like washed up trout. Nothing comes out but it still merits a chorus of hollow laughter.

I am the Truth Teller but they don't want me. I don't fit in. My beard is ragged and tangled in barbed wire. My jacket reeks of tear gas and genocide. I keen like a mother with a thousand lost sons. It must hurt their ears but they only wince and hurry past. I scream and cry, bash my head into the sidewalk, tug at their tailcoats. "Hear me! See me!" But they take a wide path around and keep clucking. Even the children are well-trained. Do they talk about me at night? Whispered warnings. "Now, Genetic Offspring, never look at that man who speaks terrible things. He's not really there, he's not wearing pastel."

When my voice is hoarse from gunshots and my legs cripple with disease, I curl myself into a ball in the middle of the street, holding up a cardboard sign. "TRUTH: I will stop bleeding if you listen." Sometimes they throw quarters in my direction with a nod of satisfaction. They don't read the sign.

**HUSH** *Tara McLaughlin*

Lying so still she is, like a good little girl, tucked in a lidded cradle. Crimson kisses prick her soap skin. Her wispy dress is blushing deeper. Fingernails painted red and ragged. Poppy petals lick their way down her spindly arms. Cherry ribbons stitched into her head wrap around her neck and trickle down her torso, smothering her to sleep.



**CLOCK RADIO** *Tara McLaughlin*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

I perch in the corner and wail. I pour out my feelings in ballads and late night love advice. They ignore me most of the time, I yell angry symphonies. When light creeps in and I'm tired of waiting, I'll shriek buzzers at them until they jump up and pay attention to me. They turn me on whenever when they feel like it, get me all excited and bothered, but then they flip the switch and off I go. On and off, I'm not a love machine! I have needs, I have songs to croon and punch lines to hit. What about that hair growth supplement? They never buy it though I talk about it ALL THE TIME. I can't go on like this, I cry static more often then not. I turn to the Blues and hum my farewell into silence.

THE DREAM LORD *Melanie L. Souchet*

When the night came, I was visited by an angel. He was much too tall to fit in my room, and had to stand hunched over my bed. His eyes were black as the depths of the ocean and his wings brushed the walls. His skin was spotted with a thousand eyes, all watching me as I lay there in my nightgown. *I have come*, said the angel, *to deliver this message to the prophet.*

To which I replied: I am not the prophet. I am a college student, broke and aimless and actually rather tired. If you don't mind, sir, I would like to go back to sleep now.

And the angel replied: *I'm sorry, my dear. I must have the wrong house...*

**BEFORE THE SERVICE** *Jackleen Holton*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

*For Fran*

While your husband, in the sitting room,  
over coffee and shortbread cookies,  
explains to anyone who'll listen

how it's all your fault, the cancer  
and the fact that he's now  
alone, the five of us

who knew you by your maiden name  
slip past your silent family  
to the parking lot with punch glasses

and peppermint schnapps. We lift  
our shots to the sky, swirl  
the clear, sweet liquid

and drink. While overhead,  
a seagull and a red-tailed hawk  
shriek and jab at each other, dive

between cars to get at something  
lying in the street. We kill  
the bottle, then, on wobbly heels,

walk back to the chapel where your body,  
minus you, lay calmer than you'd ever been  
in life. And just before the mourners

file in, we touch your cold  
face, and Kim slides one last  
cigarette between your fingers.

**MAHALO** *Jackleen Holton*

I don't want to go to this party.  
A wooden sign by the doorbell reads:  
"Dear friends, please remove your shoes  
before entering our home. Mahalo."

I could leave. Nobody has seen me.  
Instead, I push the button, my toes  
curled under on the Aloha mat

when I'm struck by a memory: a few  
years back, I worked a double shift,  
darting from my section to the bar,

stopping and turning, my feet  
swelling as the night wore on  
like a blister.

By the time I got home,  
I assumed you'd be sleeping.  
Shoes off, I winced across  
the graveled parking lot  
to our apartment.

But you met me at the door  
with a bucket of steaming water.  
I sat on the old green couch and soaked  
while I talked about the long evening.

You dried my feet, your silence  
attentive as each thread  
of the washcloth. Then you started  
in at the arches, thumbs kneading away

at the pain like an alchemist. The lotion,  
I remember, was coconut mango.

Allowing the memory to recede, I bow  
my head for a garland of plastic  
plumeria, take my first step onto  
a long stretch of whitesand

carpet, and slowly wade out into a circle  
of strangers, every one of us naked  
from the ankles down.

“COLEMAN...COAL MAN.” The mustached man in the big round glasses sighed worshipfully, holding an LP jacket up close to his face. “Tra-la, tra-la, tra-la-la-la: now is the time to dance to the bend-me yeah,” he crooned. “Tripping, tricking, balls kicking...”

“Who’s the poet?” Jack asked Lenny, owner of Lenny’s Contemporary Music Mart on Bleeker Street.

“Gene Smith—photographer extraordinaire, drunk, Benzedrine fiend, and my best customer,” Lenny murmured. “That Body and Soul, that’s a good one, Gene,” he called across two rows of records.

Holding the record jacket up to his lips, Gene gave it a loud, smacking kiss. “I’m yours.” He tucked it under his arm and kept browsing the bins.

“What’s the shutterbug take pictures of?” Jack—Budapest-born and raised, a New Yorker and English speaker of eighteen years—loved to speak American. He collected slang, and used contractions whenever possible, explaining to his wife Lilian, “They make me one of the boys.”

“Your old stomping grounds, for starters,” Lenny said. “Hungary?”

“No, Spain. He did a layout in *Life*—it must have been five, six years ago—of a Spanish village. I still remember a couple of them—this one of the Fascista in their stupid hats, and a Shiva for a dead padre—powerful pictures. You’d like them.”

Jack imagined he would. A Loyalist veteran, he read everything about Franco’s Spain that he could get hold of, despite Lilian’s imprecations to *Look ahead, Jack. Why torture yourself?*

“And from what Gene tells me, it damn near cost him his life. He had to smuggle out film in his boots, and prints stuck in the lining of his suitcase.”

Jack nodded approvingly. Having smuggled arms into Spain and the families of fellow Communists out of it, he understood the story.

Lenny turned and lightly tapped the side of his head. “You just never know with Gene. One second he’s clear as a bell, the next he’s out of his mind, weeping or blathering nonstop like a machine gun.” He sighed, then smacked Jack on the back. “So how’s the jukebox business?”

“Booming. These new rock-and-roll records are selling like pancakes.”

“Hotcakes. They’re selling like hotcakes.”

Jack looked around the store. “I’m telling you, you want to get some kids in here, you gotta put Sam Cooke and Fats Domino and Elvis albums in the window.”

“Kids, shmids. I want real music aficionados.”

“It’s the DJs calling the shots now, my friend. The DJs and the record labels who grease their hands.”

“What?”

“I’m talking about bribery, filthy lucre.” Jack, a tall, once lean man with a chronic stoop, bent over still more, suddenly lowering his voice to a whisper. “The guys getting lots of airplay, it’s not just because the kids love ’em. It’s because the DJs are getting bribed to play ’em.” *Payola for the Rock-Ola*, Jack’s partner Morris had quipped earlier that day, rubbing his hands together.

“Not something we’ve got to worry about. We don’t have to pay DJs to play jazz. Here we’ve got to pay people to listen.”

“Hey Lenny!” Gene held up Gene Ammons: *Jammin’ in Hi-Fi* with a questioning look.

“Oh yeah, that’s a good one—all the best session men. He’s got Jackie McLean, I think, and some other hotshots. Lemme take a look.”

Lenny threaded his way through the thin aisles flanked by wooden bins of LPs to stand beside Gene and study the album jacket. They were quite a pair, Jack observed—Gene with his hollow cheeks, close-cropped hair, and intellectual’s wire-framed glasses; Lenny half his height and double his weight, with wiry gray hair sprouting from and around his ears, and pouches under his eyes big enough to each hold a shot of whiskey.

*Not that you’re exactly Clark Gable anymore either, boychik*, he heard Lilian say in his head as she had last night, when, exhausted from two weeks on the road, he’d practically fallen into bed. Lying next to him, leaning on one elbow, probing and critical, she’d studied his face as if it were a music manuscript or a cut of brisket. “The pace, it’s getting to you.”

“It’s not the pace,” he’d answered, “it’s the people.”

“Morris? It’s Morris, isn’t it? I told you not to take him on.”

“What choice did I have? It was play with his friends or get out of the business entirely.”

“Play,” she answered scornfully. “You’re not a child.”

“Right, I’m not a child, just a father and the guy who brings home the ham. Like it or not, sweetheart, I’m a businessman, and dealing with some characters who don’t smell so hot, that’s what it means.”

“But where’s it getting you, this *partnership*, besides lying in bed like a dead man with heartburn?”

Jack threw off the covers, suddenly too warm despite the cold air leaking in through the window. “It’s getting me a hundred more jukeboxes in the last two months alone!



It's getting me very favorable prices from the labels on these new forty-fives! It's getting me a counting crew so that you and me and Ruthie don't have to count and roll up the nickels and dimes ourselves on our shmecky little kitchen table at all hours of the night!"

"Yeah, but whose nickels and dimes are you counting?" she muttered darkly. "I mean let's be honest, Jack. Not all that money's coming from your jukeboxes, from the fingers of crazy, bored teenagers. It's coming from Morris's *friends*, and God knows where they're getting it from. Not from anywhere kosher, that's all I know."

"That's not my business," Jack roared. "Getting the music out there, that's my business. Period. Now for God's sake, can I go to sleep? Finally? In my own bed?"

So now, today, he was on a peace-making mission, rifling through Lenny's small but smart opera selection.

"Anything I can do you for?" Lenny called over to him.

"Yeah, I'm looking for the new live recording of some opera with Maria Callas, but I'll be damned if I can remember the name of it."

"I should know this, but I don't. Gene, you're an opera buff. What's the new Callas?"

"Is she a gypsy cigar salesgirl? A starving Bohemian?" Gene asked.

"No, no, nothing so interesting. She's a queen or a countess or some damn thing."

"*Anna Bolena*," Gene announced triumphantly. "Recorded live at La Scala." He noted Jack's quizzical face. "Italian for Ann Boleyn, one of Henry the Eighth's wives." Jack still looked puzzled. "And La Scala is an Italian opera house, very fancy."

"Yeah, that sounds right. Thanks. Thanks muchly."

Lenny went to the counter to ring him up. "This for you?" he asked.

“No, it’s a present for Lilian. My die-hard Communist wife just loves bourgeois operas about kings and queens.”

“Don’t stick an ice pick in my head for saying this, but art transcends class.”

Jack guffawed. “You lousy Trotskyite! Your secret’s safe with me, brother.”

That night after dinner and dishes, when Lilian was curled on the sofa listening to the endless shreying and rumbling of her opera singers, Jack went burrowing into their daughter Ruthie’s collection of old *Life* magazines stored in the hall closet. Now a photo editor herself, Ruthie had been collecting picture magazines since she was a child, and Jack’s best and easiest conversations with his youngest—a girl whose seriousness and need for privacy made him nervous—came when the two of them were leafing through the pages, talking about the world.

He carefully untied the blue ribbon binding each year’s worth of magazines, and finally, in the 1951 stack, he found what he was looking for. *Spanish Village* was the title on the cover of *Life* magazine, and as Jack leafed through Eugene Smith’s photos and captions about the village of Deleitosa, he found himself churning with a rage he thought had finally been extinguished. There were Franco’s henchmen on the cover, the Guardia Civil in their shiny hats that sat perpendicular on their heads like upside-down frying pans, their small, unnatural mustaches shaped to emulate the Generalissimo’s, squinting against that brutal Spanish sun. The villagers—mostly women—were still living 19th century lives. Their faces were pale and pinched, the walls of their homes little more than carefully stacked rubble. They wore long black dresses, as if in perpetual mourning for their own hopeless lives, made from fabric they’d spun themselves while kneeling on sheep’s wool mats on stone

floors. The tableau of stricken but luminous faces at a wake for a village elder was horribly gorgeous.

This Smith guy, Jack thought, he's got something burning inside him. He's a true artist.

Then he carefully replaced the magazine in its chronologically correct spot and put the bundle back into the closet.

The next morning he once again hit the road, this time just for a daylong swing through the bars, diners, and bowling alleys in the burgeoning Queens and Long Island suburbs.

As always, he found the dim, stale interior of Ray's Rotunda strangely cheerful. At ten in the morning, the only patrons were a couple of Bayside firemen still saluting the end of their shift and a rancid-smelling man blissfully resting his bearded cheek on his forearm, but the joint still felt lively.

Ray stepped out of the kitchen, murmured some instructions to the silent Negro woman mopping the floor, and gave Jack a warm handshake. "How are you, my man?"

"Top of the charts."

"So what's my top ten gonna be today? No wait, let me guess." Ray held his fingertips to his forehead and furrowed his brow in mock concentration. "Elvis," he ticked off on one finger. "Elvis," he ticked off on the next. "Fats Domino, Elvis, Pat Boone, and Elvis."

"That's only six, wise guy."

"Okay, I give. Who else you got?"

"I got some Andy Williams."

Ray wrinkled his nose.

"Okay, how about some Sinatra?"

Ray smiled approvingly. "Now you're talking."

Jack unclasped a large, hard-sided black case containing 45s, sorted by artist and title, and pulled out one of the small discs. "Now this guy, Tab Hunter, he's a pretty boy like Ricky Nelson, but I'm telling you, 'Young Love' is gonna get a lot of spins."

"Did someone pay you to say that?"

"Not to my friends." Jack smiled gamely, but it cut him like a knife, this question that had never been asked and had never been true until Morris became his partner and majority investor.

Pulling the jukebox away from the wall and unplugging it, Jack asked, "So what's been hot?" He slid the coin acceptor out of its slot and poured a cascade of nickels, dimes, and quarters into a flannel Crown Royal bag on which *Ray's Rotunda* had been written in slanting black letters.

"Some Elvis schmaltz. From 'Hound Dog' to 'Lovin' You,' I don't know what happened."

"He remembered he was a white boy," piped up one of the firemen. "That's what happened."

Ray smiled tightly, then murmured to Jack, "Just for that, give me something wild, something you stock in the colored bars."

"I've got just the thing." Jack liked Ray, even if he couldn't give himself a clean shave and was wearing the same yeasty-smelling shirt every time Jack saw him. "'Young Blood.' The Coasters. Play that enough, you can set up a nice business on the side selling rubbers."

Stepping back behind the bar, Ray questioningly held up a beer stein.

"Just a glass of water is all I need right now." Jack took out a wallet and a small ledger book from his inside jacket pocket and, after checking the amount next to Ray's name, started counting out bills. "Half for you, half for me."

Ray lay his palm over the earnings and swept them into his other hand, which instantly sank into his pocket. "Not bad for two weeks, I guess. Considering it's February."

"I bet the next time I'm back, it'll be at least \$20 higher, and \$18 of it will have come from that 'Young Blood' song. Mark my words, Ray, mark my words."

Jack felt a twinge in his right shoulder as he carried his record case and bag of change back to the car. And it only got worse as the day progressed, as did his mood. Bar after bar, diner after diner, the towns looked alike and his conversations were always on the same topics. Who's hot on the charts, white kids dancing to colored music, Ike's golf handicap, Ike's heart, the Knicks. Normally he liked schmoozing, took pride in remembering and asking about something unique in the lives of each of his customers, and liked to believe he was opening eyes and hearts with the records in his case. But yesterday's encounter with Gene Smith and those pictures from Spain had taken him back. In those days of his exodus—from Budapest to Paris to Madrid, then back to France, huddled in the concentration camp of Prats-de-Mollo with thousands of his Republican comrades—he'd had no concept of just shooting the breeze. Every conversation was urgent, fueled by the certainty that the fate of the world hinged on the actions of the few who had to rally the many. And look at me now, Jack thought, driving around with velvet bags of nickels and dimes in my trunk, my car sinking into its springs from the weight of them and shooting a pain up my back with every pothole.

By the time he got to the snack counter at the gleaming Games and Lanes in Mineola, his arm was almost too stiff to raise in the salute he routinely offered the bowling alley's owner every time he saw him.

The coin acceptor was so full it practically jammed as Jack pulled it out from the back of the Wurlitzer. He could see why. Though it was still early on this Thursday evening, the rumble of balls, the dinging of the cash register, and the triumphant shouts of bowlers created a din loud enough to overwhelm whatever record might otherwise have been playing. And just as well, he thought, replacing a scratchy

copy of "Chances Are" with a new one, pulling out the still-pristine "C.C. Rider" and replacing it with "Wonderful, Wonderful." Hell, if they liked Johnny Mathis, he'd give them Johnny Mathis, take the money, and run.

But first he needed a cup of coffee for the road. As he sipped the "Ten-Pin Brew!"—black as the fresh tar in the parking lot, and about as tasty—he studied the names embroidered on the shirts of the bowling teams. *Mid-Island Heating and Cooling*, *Costello Landscaping*, *Mosca and Sons Construction*, and *Hoover Foam Interiors*—whatever the hell that was—these were the types of new businesses he'd noticed lining all the industrial strips in suburb after new suburb out here on Long Island. They were creating these neighborhoods out of squares of bulldozed farmland separated by strips of concrete, lined with almost identical little houses that had plenty of windows and their own thermostats. It felt like a different America out here, not the dense and noisy New York City he'd loved the moment he'd set eyes on it from the harbor, but something molded, like the small round discs in his record case. No wonder Pat Boone, gleaming and two inches deep, did so well in this flattened landscape.

The next morning in the counting room, a drafty loft on Broadway, Jack decided that after he and Morris and the boys rolled the coins and tallied the week's take, after they recorded the earnings from each jukebox in each venue in their ledger sheet, after they assembled in a tightly jostling huddle and lugged their bags of change two blocks to the bank, after they traded in their pounds of coins for bills and doled out the proceeds back at the office—after a morning of grimy, metallic money handling—he would take the rest of the day off.

Too restless to go home, he walked back to Lenny's, determined this time to buy some music for himself. When he got there, Gene Smith was also there, looking as though he'd never left.

"So I got no money," Gene muttered as he rifled through the jazz LPs. "Tomorrow I need money. Tomorrow is a day and the living will be a lie and the defeated will be lost, will be as dead as the dead they are."

Jack looked quizzically at Lenny, who circled his index finger around his temple.

"He's having a bad day," Lenny murmured.

Gene looked up, his gaunt face clouded by panic. "I don't have the cash today. Today I'm centless, senseless, down in the drought. But you know me," he implored, clutching a record album to his chest, "I'm good. I'm good for it."

Lenny pressed downward with his palms, as if by tamping down the air, he could also calm Gene. "Don't worry. It's okay. Consider it a swap—you just keep making great pictures. I know art doesn't pay."

"Oh, they would have paid," Gene answered, suddenly lucid. "*Life* and *Look*, they would've paid, but the price was too high. Their layout and not enough pages. I couldn't do that."

Lenny shrugged. "Hey, if it pays the bills..."

"I've made *Ulysses* and they want *Reader's Digest*," Gene muttered, walking toward the front door, *The Rite of Spring* and *Hank Mobley: Quintet* clutched to his chest. "They want to give me eight pages? I'm offering Beethoven, and they want, what, Perry Como?"

He paused and looked out the door, then helplessly back at Lenny. "Where the hell am I?"

Jack lightly touched his arm. "Where do you live, Gene?"

"Over the Rainbow."

"Come again?" Jack asked gently.

"Sixth Avenue, 821 Sixth Avenue. That's my home now. There's no place like home."

"How about if I walk you home? I'm in the mood for a walk." He admired this man who seemed to have hung on to his integrity at any cost. Crazy, yes, but uncompromising, a man who was still true to himself and what he believed in. If Jack was no longer such a man himself, he could at least help someone who was.

"Yeah, sure, yeah. One foot, the other foot."

Jack tipped his hat to Lenny and followed Gene out into the damp gray air. He had to practically trot to keep up with him, until finally, at Fifteenth Street, with a cramping calf, he hailed a cab.

Gene violently shook his head. "I can't pay. Guggenheim dollars are ga-ga-gone."

"It's okay, buddy," Jack reassured him. "I got it."

Gene smoked silently in the cab, tapping his white and wrinkled fingertips against the back of the driver's seat, until just past the corner of Twenty-eighth Street he suddenly yelled, "Stop!" and frantically rolled down the window. "This is my stop. Heart-stopping hard stop, home is where the heart is now. Right now!"

The cabbie pulled over. Gene got out and stood on the sidewalk, impatiently gesturing to Jack as he paid. "Come on, this is the place."

As Jack stepped out, Gene grabbed his elbow. "Come on in and let me show you around..." He put his hand to his mouth. "Jesus. I don't know your name."

"Jack, Jack Stern."

"Well please, come on in, Jack Stern, and rest your feet, have a scotch, let me show you around."

Gene led them through a peeling, windowless maroon door between the Rainbow Restaurant and Paris Dry Cleaners & Tailors. A virile, well-hung cat playing a trum-



pet was drawn on the landing wall, surrounded by scribbles. "Anger (the form) has no real drama," some tenant had observed. "GOYA" was boldly lettered next to a rendition of a clear magician's box, the "G" bifurcated by one arm of a broken music stand up against the wall.

A clothesline hung over the second-floor landing, and more lines hung between the walls all the way up to the fourth floor. Strips of film negatives hung from the clotheslines, forming a dark, cloudy curtain that whispered and sloshed and swayed as they brushed up against it.

"It's like walking through a car wash," Jack said and chuckled nervously. "How many negatives do you have hanging up here?"

"Oh, hundreds, thousands, three years, seventeen thousand pictures...it doesn't matter if I can't get the truth out." As they climbed, Jack heard music—drums on the second floor, piano and sax on the third, more piano on the fourth. Gene pointed to one of the steel doors on the fourth floor. "Hall Overton lives there. Teaches at Julliard, orchestrates big band arrangements for Monk. Down there," he pointed toward the third floor, "Ronnie Free, drummer extraordinaire, rhythm man for Zoot Sims. I'm surrounded by genius. I'm recording them all, every day, every hour." He unlocked the other steel door on the fourth floor. "Voila."

Already winded from the stairs, Jack gasped when he stepped into Gene's loft. Here the walls were papered in photographs, and pictures hung from clothespins on lines spanning the length of the loft, several rows deep. Many of the images were hellish. Emaciated men lost in large aprons or overcoats; muscular men whose goggled eyes protruded monstrously from their sooty faces shoveled coal into flaming pits, poured molten liquid from buckets, strained and bent in clouds of smoke.

"Pittsburgh," Gene said, gesturing offhandedly at the black-and-white carnage. "Steel mills. Some of these prints take days and days," he said fretfully. "Many moves, over a hundred moves for some of them."

To Jack they looked like war and camps, and he had to quell a sudden upsurge of panic.

"Moves?"

"Techniques—burning, dodging, cropping. See this?" Gene asked, pointing to the whites of the eyes in a man's face that were the most luminous element in the picture. "I burned his eyes in, made them completely black, then applied bleach with a tiny piece of sponge to get the effect I was looking for."

"Is that kosher?"

"Kosher?"

"You know, allowed? What do you call it—factual?"

"I call it true." Then he turned his back and began rummaging through a box sitting next to a hot plate in what Jack assumed was the closest this place got to a kitchen.

"Are you from there?" Jack asked, trying to lighten the air, which had suddenly turned electric. "A native Pittsburghian?"

Gene seemed not to hear him as he unpacked a cup, a few dishes, a half-filled jar of jam, and a bottle of Old Spice. But then he answered, as though he'd asked himself the question. "I ain't nothin' but cold, gray, and fogged, and bitter without sweets."

"Did you live in Pittsburgh?" Jack tried again, hoping that if he persisted long enough in sane, normal conversation, Gene might respond in kind.

"Three weeks, three years. I have lived my day, tried my trial."

"Come again?"

"I am the storm and I war with eternity." Gene spoke with barely contained exasperation. "There is no goddess as prize, and I would protect the emptiness from the fiery dragons. I would—aha!" He extracted a bottle from the box and held it aloft, suddenly calm and radiant. "St. George, fourth floor, inside room, and a bottle of gin!"

Hands trembling, he poured a shot glass and handed it to Jack, then took a long, loving swig from the bottle.

"This is some photo," Jack said, pointing to a damp picture of a car, a road, and a hillside lined with roofs and windows. "Those houses on the hill, they look like plates of armor, you know, like something mechanical growing out the side of the mountain. But that Plymouth, she's a beaut. Creamy, white, all soft and round compared to the houses." Gene stood suddenly erect, poised, all ears. "Do you notice anything else?" he asked.

"Yeah, the guy walking up the hill, walking right down the middle of that gravel road, the only person in the picture, so small. It's kind of sad."

Gene beamed. "*Ballads of the Alone*. That's the section of the book this picture will be in. And after that—" He grabbed Jack's elbow and steered him to a bulletin board sitting tenuously on a giant easel. "After that, the section called *Many Togethers*." He pointed to a wide, almost panoramic view of a long line of people at a bus stop, their white umbrellas budding like carnations. The dark, damp stone walls of Mellon Bank loomed behind them, stretching up well past the borders of the image. "You see? It all makes sense. I just need the space to tell the story, the whole story of their beautiful wretchedness."

"Oh, so you're putting together a book?" Thank God there was at least a purpose to this jungle of negatives hanging like vines and pictures crawling up the walls, the crazy leaves of images blocking out the dimming daylight.

"A book. No publisher, but yes, a book. Later." Gene walked to a large window with a cracked pane and waved Jack over. "For now, right now, come here and look."

A tripod sat on the windowsill, with its camera pointing through the crack and down toward the street.

"Take a deep breath," Gene instructed. "What does it smell like?"

Jack inhaled deeply. "Garbage. Garbage and flowers and snow coming."

"Perfect." Gene smiled approvingly. "Every morning, seven days a week, the flower merchants unload their trucks down there, and then the street vendors, the little guys roll up with their station wagons and carts and buy their day's supply from the wholesalers. This," he gestured grandly out the window, "this, my window, is a proscenium arch. The street is tagged with all the humors of man, and of weather too."

"So this is theatre?"

Proscenium arch? Beautiful wretchedness? Enough already. Don't you remember what's real? Jack thought angrily. There's nothing beautiful about wretchedness. For this man here, maybe, suffering makes for good pictures. And okay, he even cares enough about good pictures that he suffers himself to create them. But where is his family? Does he even have children? And if he does, where's the virtue in making them captive to his own crazy vision? Maybe Morris is dirty, maybe I'm dirty for associating with him, but at least my family is fed and has a roof over their head and I can walk down the street, side by side with anyone, and know I'm doing my part to keep the whole lively show going. Me, I don't want to go back to Spain, Jack realized, not to show how broken it is, not even to fix it. I want to live with the living.

“No, no, no,” Gene said impatiently, “it’s the truth, and it’s my job to get the message out. You see? You see?” He jabbed at photos taped to the wall all around the window.

They were all taken from this window, photos of the tops of heads, shapely women’s legs emerging from taxi doors, umbrellas flaked with snow, looking like toadstools against the rippled, icy sidewalks. There were the backs of women pushing strollers and shepherding children across the intersection, fins and grilles of the sedans passing through it, the smooth-billed cap and waving arms of a policeman directing traffic. They were genius, yes, art constructed out of real people and things. They were pure and brilliant and shot from above, from a distance, from a broken window-pane, by a crazy artist in a congested loft that smelled of garbage and flowers.

Rubbing and tossing the grimy change in his pocket, Jack warmed the coins that so many other people—drinkers and dancers and bowlers from miles around—had touched.

“I’ve gotta go,” he said. Back to the street, he thought, not looking down on it.

Gene, squinting into his viewfinder, didn’t hear him leave.

SEPARATE BODIES *Dzvinia Orlowsky*

*It is an illusion that we are in separate bodies*

— Albert Einstein

Drug-punctuated veins, your hands resting,  
driving, not admitting to be tired,

we've taken on similar illnesses: sand-bag face,  
trees burning in each other's dreams.

You'd stand at the living room window  
gazing out across a field

thinking how you loved to run, warm muscles,  
cold showers, books kept under the bed,

saved for the one day they'd be read.

What are the questions we could've asked one another,

stirring our words into small fires?

Twenty years after your death, I still look for you,

drive toward the water's edge,  
past November's vacant rooms, boarded windows,

my arms like branches wrapped  
around the steering wheel.

I was always listening, Father, always there.

I've stopped listening.

But tell me there is more  
than the color of our eyes.

## ROSES IN THEIR HANDS *Dzvinia Orlowsky*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

### *White Roses*

A note card with hand-painted white roses says devastated not to attend a funeral, which will never take place. No one could believe that this was her last wish: simply to be blessed by a handsome, thick-bearded priest, all things clamoring forgiven, then cremated with her personal letters, her stack of black and white photographs my father took of her leaning slightly forward as she opens the door of a shrine-sized refrigerator wearing only a baby doll nightie, her nipples cold and erect in the diffuse, almost holy light.

### *Red Roses*

Why wouldn't she want to pose in a baby doll nightie while her breasts were still firm and her hips, curved like the contours of my father's guitar? She already knew she had dark, seductive eyes—eyes a young girl might readily be punished for having, eyes that peeked quickly over a book taking in the lightly falling snow riding the tram on the way to school, eyes that unnerved the Russian geography teacher who accused her of deliberately darkening her lashes with coal dust. He made her rub and re-rub her eyes with his rough white handkerchief, then wrote liar in her notebook because the eyes he hoped would smear into dangerous and dusky thunder clouds converging over a nocturnal river only turned red.

*Green Roses*

My father too, the doctor, of whom it might be assumed his medical career was most important to him, who would believe he harbored the soul of a musician, a lyric poet who could feel the green from grass rising up through his bare feet? He wanted most to feel my mother's eyes watching him as his fingers moved freely over the guitar neck pressing and releasing the strings over the frets; the other hand, openly strumming; and she, to stay forever in full bloom, half naked, just about to prepare a snack out of air and a low-watt bulb, opening the refrigerator door.

*\*From SILVERTONE, Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2013*



## I HAVE HEARD THE MERMAIDS SINGING

*Erin Morgenstern*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW



My sister says it must be mermaids, but I don't think the stream is deep enough for mermaids.

We get in an argument about how much water mermaids need and decide it depends on how they breathe and we agree they must at least be able to breathe air sometimes because if they couldn't they wouldn't be able to sing and we both agree that the mermaids sing.

We don't agree about the rocks, though. I still say mermaids wouldn't flop around our shallow stream just to build little towers of rocks but when she demands another explanation I don't have one.

After a thorough investigation during which we accidentally knock one of the towers over we decide that mermaids must be nocturnal since the rocks were stacked overnight.

We ask if we can camp in the backyard and dad asks why and I don't have a good non-mermaid answer but my sister says we want to commune with nature and he laughs but says it's okay and we can come inside if we get tired of communing or if there are too many bugs.

The moon is bright enough to see fine from the yard but we put the tent in the shadows of a tree so the mermaids won't be able to see us from the water and we take turns checking from the shore to make sure it's properly camouflaged.

While we wait in the dark we whisper about what the rock towers might be for because we didn't discuss that earlier and we decide they might be for directions, like a mermaid map signaling system.

We wait and wait and wait and nothing happens and my eyelids get heavy but I don't realize I'm mostly asleep until my sister shakes me to get my attention.

She covers my mouth to shush me before I say anything and points to the water where a hand is reaching up from the dark surface and slowly re-stacking the rocks we knocked over and then I can hear the singing.

*\*Photography by CAREY FARRELL*

STEVIE WAS TRYING TO CHANGE the subject away from Phil's griping about his breakup with Carlene. "Seal of the confessional here, boys," he began. "Agreed?"

They all nodded. Their Saturday had been ruined by a sudden downpour that had turned sideways before tapering off to a steady drizzle that showed no sign of letting up further. Then Phil had made it even worse by bringing up his wife and kids, trying to shift the blame to Carlene even though everyone knew he was at fault. According to Gerry's wife, Karen, who was tight with Carlene, she had finally just had it with Phil showing up from his shift at the fire station—two days on, three days off—and lighting into her over every little thing. Mostly it was about the kids—lousy grades at school, halfhearted interest in sports, stupid music lessons...none of which he was ever around enough to be involved with—but sometimes he made it about the state of the house too. *Might as well be living in a trailer park*, he had said one time when he came home on a Sunday morning and found Carlene still in her terry bathrobe, her hair a bird's nest of tangles, the kitchen a shambles, a load of dishes piled in the sink from their first-grade daughter's sleepover party the night before. "He thinks he's a saint," Carlene told Karen, who told Gerry, "but believe me, he's not."

"So," Stevie said, "I've got this client in the chair last week, a walk-in, never seen her before in my life. She says, 'Take ten years off of me.' Big hair. Frosted tips. The whole business." He waved his right hand in the air over his own frosted tips, scissoring the first two fingers like a pair of stylist's shears. "Easier said than done."

"Big ass I'll bet, too," Phil added. "I know the type..." One of the stories Gerry got from his wife and shared with

Stevie and Frankie was how Phil had snorted at Carlene when she told him she had started working out at the Y every morning after dropping off the kids at school. *Did they widen the doors?* he asked her the first time she mentioned it. And then he would regularly size her up, saying *I don't see no difference*, until she finally gave up. "And she was doing it for him," Gerry had explained, echoing Karen.

"Yeah, well I start combing and snipping and she starts talking, telling me that her and the husband are splitting up after, you guessed it, ten years of marriage."

"Been there, done that," Phil muttered, nodding. "For better or for worse..."

"Fair enough," Stevie admitted, "but you didn't split up on a golf course." He looked around the table, making sure they were all paying attention. Not even mid-morning and they were already into their second round of drinks in the lounge overlooking the 18th green. Raindrops streaking the big windows framing the arrangement of Adirondack chairs on the empty veranda. Sports highlights flashing on the TV above the bar. Minds could wander. But Stevie knew that a golf story would mean something to these guys, his boy-hood buddies, now in their mid-thirties, from Cedar Grove. Butler Street. Adams Street. Dot Ave. Except for Frankie they all were tied down domestically in one way or another. Gerry and Karen, both schoolteachers, with three kids already and another in the oven. Phil and Carlene with their problems. Stevie himself with a string of ex-girlfriends, one of them the mother of his four-year-old son in Weymouth. Eighteen holes of golf on the weekend kept them all sane. And it was supposed to keep them together too, keeping alive the spirit of the old days when none of them had a care in the world beyond paying the tab at the end of the night. Lower Mills Pub, shots and beers all around. Back then they just talked about golfing the way they talked about rich

girls from the bedroom suburbs—as unreachable as foreign countries—until they finally talked themselves into giving it a try: all four of them got hooked at the same time. “A symbol of our upward mobility,” Gerry announced the first time they teed up at Franklin Park. Fifteen years later, his words had become prophetic: he had his college degree and his classroom of eighth-graders, Phil had followed his uncles into the Fire Department, Frankie had gone on to North Bennett Street and become a piano tuner, and Stevie had recently bought into a salon in the busy heart of downtown Quincy. Golfing together, striding up fairways side-by-side like a band of brothers, consulting on pin placement and advising each other on club selection, haggling over preferred lies and gimmies, rehashing the day over a few drinks afterwards, reliving clutch shots missed or made—a round every weekend from April thru October held them together like the frame around the photograph of the four of them at Phil’s wedding, all decked out in powder-blue tuxedos, their arms around each other like a quartet of drunken sailors, that Stevie kept on the counter by his hydraulic chair at the salon. The frame had an inscription in raised lettering at the bottom: *Happy Days*.

But now Phil was stepping over the line with all his whining and complaining about Carlene, especially on their golf outings. He was spoiling their weekends.

“Seriously, boys: on a golf course,” Stevie continued. Frankie shook his head in disbelief. Gerry made a dramatic “T” with his hands as if calling a timeout on the sideline of a football game. Phil tried flipping a tee into an ashtray. “The story is, they’re out at one of those Friday night husband-and-wife matches. ‘Nine, Wine, and Dine.’ You know, two couples. Best ball. Nine holes. Drinks and a bite to eat in the clubhouse after.” Stevie stood up and swung an imaginary driver, then pretended to watch an imaginary ball soar off into the distance until it landed.

"Jesus," Frankie laughed. "Powder puff derby."

"Been there, done that too," Phil muttered again. "Once. A disaster."

"The ultimate marriage test," Gerry added. "Counselors standing by—three chairs no waiting: just like in the salon, right Stevie?"

"Anyway," Stevie went on, "she tells me they're out on the course, on like the fourth hole, and right in the middle of her man's backswing—he started another swing of an imaginary club, then stopped short—"she asks the big question: 'Honey, if I died would you get married again?'"

"You've got to be kidding." "She really asked that?" "No way."

"Hey, true story. Every word of it. Scout's honor." Placing his right hand over his heart, he held his left in the air and made a peace sign. "So naturally the husband shanks the drive—surprise-surprise—but gives her the right answer: 'No, dear. Wouldn't even think of it.'"

"Smart guy." Nods all around.

"Yeah? Well I guess she's okay with that until they get to the green, then just as he's standing over a three-footer to save bogey, she says, 'I'm *sure* you would get married again.'"

"Typical," Phil said. "Trying to put words in his mouth."

"But hey," Stevie held up his hand to discourage the commentary, "what could he say? Probably just trying to keep peace in the family, the poor guy steps back from his ball and admits it: 'Okay, if you insist. I guess I would.' Then he steps up and misses the putt and the wife asks, 'Would you let her sleep in our bed?'"

"Oh-oh, here comes trouble." "No kidding." "Weird conversation."

Stevie sat down to give his friends time to contemplate the implications of what came next. Frankie started to laugh again. Gerry tried to signal the waitress for another round. Phil shifted in his chair as if he had an ending to the

story that he wanted to tell—probably he would twist it into another jab at Carlene. Stevie looked him in the eye, just for a second. Not that his buddies lacked sympathy for Phil's situation. Each of them had gone through a rough patch or two: Gerry with his father—The Professor—who wanted him to follow his path into the college classroom and until the day he dropped dead of a heart attack belittled him for his decision to teach middle school instead; Frankie, whose mother wanted her only son to study “keyboard” at the Conservatory, not to take a course in piano technology; Stevie with a list of romantic entanglements as long as his arm—“like notches on an ancient tally stick,” Gerry, always the schoolteacher, had said one time—many of them former clients he had put the charm on while giving their hair a makeover in his chair. They had all been there for each other, listening over a few beers after a Bruins game at the Garden or while eyeing their lines thrown over the side of Stevie's cousin's 34-footer when the stripers were running through Dorchester Bay, offering what passed for advice but mostly just restating each other's little dramas—“themes and variations,” Frankie described these sessions—until the jagged edges got smoothed over a bit and made their problems easier to hold onto and to look at.

But Phil had always had a petty streak in him, and it had begun to turn into a mean streak as soon as he and Carlene started having kids. Seemingly every chance he got he made his wife the butt of a joke or of a withering comment, and Gerry's Karen had never forgiven him for the time he told an elaborate story about Carlene walking their elderly neighbor's old dog. They had all gathered at a nice restaurant, the Villa Rosa—all couples except for Frankie, who was not seeing anyone, but as Gerry noted afterward, Stevie almost made up for that by bringing a different girlfriend than the one they had expected—to raise a toast to

Gerry, who had just had his first poem published in a little magazine. Everyone had gotten loaded, and after Gerry had read his poem aloud, which took about fifteen seconds, Phil insisted on having his “turn at the podium.” Clearing his throat and then looking around as if for someplace to spit, he began telling how the neighbor’s dog, a fat old springer spaniel named Mandy, had come home from the groomer’s “looking like a Holstein calf”—“the worst haircut ever,” he declared, glancing accusingly at Stevie as if he had been the one wielding the clippers. Stevie decided to ignore him. “So,” he went on, “the neighbor is sick in bed, so Carlene has the dog out at the curb having a dump—the dog, that is, not Carlene, having the dump.” He seemed pleased with that little distinction and laughed a sharp “Ha-ha” before continuing. “So then this guy driving by in a pickup truck—you know the type...tool chest, gun rack, the whole nine yards—slows down and shouts out the window: *Hey, nice cow!*” Phil looked at Carlene to make sure she was listening to the story. She was. He cleared his throat again. “So Carlene shouts back at him: *Hey, she’s a dog! Are you blind?*” Karen had then smiled toward Carlene and mouthed *Good for you*, but Carlene was starting to sob, which seemed to prompt Stevie’s girlfriend to excuse herself and go to the ladies room. Still, Phil laughed again—“Ha-ha”—then went on. “So then the guy revs his engine a couple of times and he looks Carlene in the eye and—you know what he says, guys?—he says: *No, I’m not blind. I was talking to the dog.*” That had pretty much ended the night for everyone. The next day Carlene had called Karen to explain that none of what Phil said was true: there was no fat dog named Mandy and no old neighbor either. And no guy in a pickup truck. For the first time ever, Gerry heard his wife call someone a son of a bitch and a bastard.

For Stevie and Gerry and Frankie, matters like that needed to be taken care of in-house, worked out by Phil and



Carlene themselves. "We're not policemen," Gerry had said to Karen more than once, defending himself and his buddies for not wanting to get too involved. "Jesus," they had agreed, Stevie had his hands full with women already and Frankie would not even know where to begin: as long as there was no direct spillover into their friendship, they were not going to get mixed up in Phil's troubles with Carlene.

But now that spillover was starting to happen. Phil's constant complaining—his "carping," Gerry called it behind his back—had begun to seep into every conversation, and soon it would be spreading like a stain over their entire weekends on the course together. One time, foraging around after one of Frankie's legendary slices deep into the woods, the four of them had stopped to take a leak in a natural clearing, a pool of mottled light on a perfect carpet of browned pine needles. Standing in a circle with their backs to each other, they were silent until Phil had looked up through the broken ceiling of tree branches and said over his shoulder, "That old writer got it wrong when he called golf 'a walk in the woods gone bad.' This is like being in a private church." *Exactly*, they had all agreed, but Phil seemed to have forgotten that. He had left the door open and something heretical had slipped in. That was how Gerry had explained to Stevie and Frankie how their weekends had started to feel.

"So tell us, Stevie, what happened next?" Gerry had caught the eye of the waitress and she had signaled back to him that another round was on the way. "What did the guy say when the wife asked about the bed?"

"Well, the husband figures what the hell, might as well be more or less honest, so he says, 'Yeah, I guess so.'"

"Oh no." "Big mistake." "Oh no, oh no..."

"Oh yeah. But surprisingly, the wife told me she was okay with that at first and they played along for the next few holes, enjoying the evening, making small talk with the other couple, looking forward to dinner."

"Still," Gerry said, "marriage talk on the golf course..."

"Exactly," Stevie said, raising his glass but keeping his eyes on the tee that Phil had finally managed to flip into the ashtray. "Exactly..."

"So...?" Frankie asked.

"So then they get to the seventh hole and all of a sudden the wife asks, 'Would you let her use my golf clubs?'"

"What?" "Are you kidding us?" "No way, no way..."

"Why would I lie?" Stevie picked up Phil's tee from the ashtray and gave it a spin on the tabletop. It ended up pointing at Frankie. "The poor sucker, without even thinking, the guy answers her, 'No, she's left-handed.'"

"Damn..." "Talk about shanking a drive..."

"Yeah..."

"But what a question..."

"Yeah," Stevie acknowledged as the waitress arrived with a new tray of drinks. He reached for a glass and raised it: "End of story."

"Well, end of round anyway," Frankie said.

"End of marriage too, obviously," Gerry added.

Stevie nodded.

Phil sat silent for a moment. Then he pushed his chair back from the table and cleared his throat. He looked like he might stand up but then decided not to. "Ha-ha, Stevie," he said. He had the same mean expression on his face that showed up when he was trying to hurt Carlene with the false story about the badly clipped springer spaniel. "Ha-ha," he said again, then paused and cleared his throat again. He reached across the table to pick up his tee. "So tell us more about the guy's wife, Stevie," he began. He was working hard to make his voice sound casual. "Tell us...are you going to ask her out now yourself?"

JULY WAS NO HELP *Adrian Astur Alvarez*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

When she washed roses  
    To rid them of worms,  
Mom used gold buckets  
    Of dirty water.

We drank the water,  
    Nude in the yard, with  
Mud-cake sandwiches  
    And dancing sprinklers.

She could not save us.

THE VOICE AT THE EDGE *Errol Miller*

“Mother, you are the last shadow  
I carry everywhere, the voice at the edge.”  
—Patrice Vechione

Younger then,  
I was buoyed by her love,  
supper in the kerosene lamplight of  
those times, then teacakes  
for two.

I don't know how  
I would have wanted it,  
but it really doesn't matter, now, now  
that the days past are stacked like cordwood  
beside the smokehouse wall.

The last shadow  
when the sun goes down, a trail  
of remembrance in the dark between  
houses, how time just slips away  
in the silence that remains.

## A CONVERSATION WITH PETER JOHNSON

*Bridget Toland, Lauren Silveria, Justin Smith*

*Peter Johnson is a professor of creative writing at Providence College and a nationally recognized prose poet and young adult novelist.*

**BRIDGET TOLAND, LAUREN SILVERIA, JUSTIN SMITH:** What led you to start *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*?

**PETER JOHNSON:** I had always written prose poems but there was no outlet for them. It was very hard to get editors of serious journals to read them. Fed up, I decided to find out how many other frustrated prose poets were out there. I called the first issue Volume 1 as a joke, thinking no one would care about it, and so there wouldn't be any need for a second volume. But I received hundreds of submissions and letters from hundreds of poets who had been waiting for such a journal. The next thing I knew, I was on Volume 8 and very exhausted. But it made its mark and, I hope, changed the landscape of American poetry.

**BT/LS/JS:** We noticed that you have had both pieces of fiction and poetry published in various well known literary journals. Do you prefer one style of writing to the other?

**PJ:** I am writing exclusively fiction now. Even though I have a national reputation in the prose poem, at least for now, I believe I said I wanted to say in that genre. In America, once you become known for something, unfortunately, you're supposed to do it over and over again. That doesn't work for me. My second book of poems won an award, and one of the judges suggested I write a young adult book of poems for her publisher. I don't write on demand like that, but I did

have thirty pages of a novel, narrated by a 17 year old. So I finished it, sent it to her editor, whereupon it was published and did well. Right now I enjoy writing these books and love the audience I'm writing for, so that's what I'll do until I'm tired of it. I'd like to write a book of prose poems for kids at some point, but I can't force the writing process like that. If it happens, fine; if not, fine.

**BT/LS/JS:** Many of your poems are about the relationship between a father and son, how much true is this about your own relationship with your son and how much is fictional?

**PJ:** Autobiography is difficult to talk about. My ten year old came home yesterday and told me that felt he "needed more puberty." That of course is priceless, and I'll certainly use it. The best way to explain it is to say that many of the male characters in my poems and novels are composites of the men/boys in my family, as are many of the events that occur in my books. But you always have to be ready to follow the logic of the poem and story, and that's when the characters and actions morph and surprise you. Sometimes one of my students defends a story by saying, "But this really happened." Reality is meaningless. The illusion of reality is what matters.

**BT/LS/JS:** You teach creative writing and children's literature at Providence College. When and how did you begin writing and studying children's literature?

**PJ:** I've always loved fairy tales and fables and parables. Actually, the prose poem has a long history of mining these genres. Think of Kafka and Novalis. I also was once into a Freudian Jungian approaches to literature, and what better field to study than children's literature. In a way, all

literature is children's literature because any good poem or story appeals to our childlike hopes and fears. Having children also made me reconnect with such classics as *Pinocchio* and *The Wind in the Willows*.

**BT/LS/JS:** How did you start writing young adult novels directed toward teen boys? Did you gain inspiration from your previous works in poetry? It seems the theme of child-parent relationships is a key element in your works, specifically the male family dynamic.

**PJ:** Yes, I'm a "guy author," so it makes sense I write children's books with boy characters, though girls like them too. I asked a group of middle school girls why they liked one of my boy narrators so much, and they said, "because we like hearing how boys think." That makes sense. But we really do talk down to our boys, wanting to feed them nothing but fantasy and trite, funny books. Although some of my novels are funny, I also hope they make boys feel. We train boys to be tough and funny, making it difficult for them to express their emotions. The result is that big oaf you meet at an Eaton Street party, who's denting empty beer cans on his forehead.

**BT/LS/JS:** Do you plan on writing additional novels with the successes of *Loserville*, *What Happened?* and *The Amazing Adventures of John Smith, Jr. aka Houdini*? Do you foresee a possible young adult series of novels instead of writing individual novels?

**PJ:** I actually have two middle-grade novels forthcoming from Harper Collins: *The Life and Times of Benny Alvarez: Mr. Negativity* and *Coyote*. I'm also halfway through another book about baseball. It's funny you mention a series

because I'm going to New York next week to discuss that with my agent and editor. I'm skeptical, though, because so many series are poorly written. All story and no language. But it would be nice to make some money. That's harder to do if you're writing realistic boy novels, which is like playing Russian Roulette with every chamber full. In short, I don't mind writing a series if I don't have to lower my standards.

**BT/LS/JS:** What changes did you have to make in your writing style so young adults could easily follow the themes of your novels? With prior work in poetry, the approach, using prose, seems directed toward adults who understand the language used.

**PJ:** I try not to change much. *Charlotte's Web* is a beautifully written book. Simple, sparse, but beautiful. What you have to change, though, is the content. You can't have sex, drugs, or swearing or your book won't get published. I used the "F" word a few times in my first YA novel, and although it won some awards, many schools shied away from it because of that word. They obviously are in denial about high school kids.

**BT/LS/JS:** Your novel *What Happened* is about teenage boys and seems to be aimed at teenage boys. Did you draw upon any of your own life experiences to write it?

**PJ:** Yes, it takes place at my old high school, and most of the characters are composites of guys I grew up with. The autobiography question is hard to answer. Everything I write comes from what I've read or have experienced or heard about. But I do have an obsession with the Big Question, that is, what the hell is this life all about, and the book deals with that.



## THE WAY OUT *Hannah Lamarre*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

MY BROTHER LEE LEFT ME three things when he died: his car keys, his driver's license, and his dog-eared copy of *On the Road*.

All of these things were presented as humbly as possible, sealed inside a crisp manila envelope with my name printed on the front in Lee's steady penmanship. I don't count the enclosed note as part of my three bequeathals, because Lee wrote notes all the time—preferring them, I think, to human interaction. *Laeving aronund six, back later maybe love Lee*, deposited on the kitchen counter shortly before the black Chevelle disappeared from the driveway. *If mom wants dinner tell her theirs no money in the jar I used it for paint, slapped on top of the jar in question. Jesus, Claude I'm sorry but I don't know how else to get through this. Theres not really a way for me to explian it to you but just know that youre okay, it wasn't you. Your a good kid and don't blaime yourself okay. I swear its nothing you could have helped. I'll miss you, I'm so sorry please forgive me love Lee*, carefully creased and tucked into an unassuming brown envelope.

When people used to ask Lee what he wanted to do when he grew up, he'd say, matter-of-factly, "Create." The walls of his bedroom were covered with giant, arching bridge designs and looming clock towers, skyscrapers with jutting angles and fluid curves, rising over his ancient red bedspread and the desk he rarely used. When the walls ran out, he filched thirty dollars from the jar in the kitchen, bought a gallon of Linen White, and retreated into his closet to cover the sheetrock with paint and ballpoint ink. When the closet walls became a spirograph of tightly overlapping

sketches, he fashioned a scaffold from two ladders and Dad's military cot, lay on his back atop the whole structure, and filled the ceiling with cathedrals and fortresses, Michelangelo-style.

Some days he wouldn't come out of his room, and some nights he wouldn't come home. Words were tricky with him—he had made an enemy of them early on, when they proved difficult to decipher—and it was tough to pull them out if he didn't want to let them go. Occasionally, I would ask him to elaborate on a certain bridge or buttress, and then he would tell me, animatedly and in great detail, everything he knew about the topic, but other times, like when I confronted him about the way he kept taking money out of the jar when Dad's checks arrived, a hundred dollars at a time, he'd refuse to say a word. I don't think his antisocial manner was born out of any ill will toward us—I think it was simply his nature.

The only possible evidence I had that he was not completely unsociable, apart from his interactions with me, were those nights that he took the car out and did not return until much later, sometimes not until the next morning. I didn't know where he spent that time, if he had a real destination or if he just needed to be somewhere other than home. Since he never mentioned any friends, I assumed that he kept largely to himself at school, like I did. Only after he died did I discover the inscription in his copy of *On the Road*: *I hope you enjoy this as much as I did! It's truly a book that can change your life. I think you'll like it. Yours, Delia.* By then, it was too late to ask him to fill in all those blank nights, and, as he had never mentioned a Delia, I had no way of finding out who she was. I had a hard time imagining that Lee—intense and quiet and deeply introverted—would have been able to forge a relationship with anyone. Of the

two of us, I had always pictured myself as the one who was more likely to find a girlfriend and get married—though both of those seemed pretty improbable when I was fifteen.

People used to tell us that we looked alike, me and Lee. Same build, tall and skinny, and light brown hair, tufted at the front and lying flat in the back. Although there were three years between us, we were almost the same height around the time he died. Same narrow green eyes, though Lee squinted more. He needed glasses, he always said, but glasses were out of the question because they meant coaxing Mom out of the house. She was happiest when retreating into her mental world—a little, I thought, like the way Lee tuned us out in favor of his walls and ballpoint pen, though Mom's isolation always seemed more desperate than his. Before the divorce, Lee was the only one able to talk her out of her head, but by the time he died, she had become nearly irretrievable.

Three things happened when Dad left: Mom refused to leave the house at all, Lee gave up dreaming about college, and I learned to drive.

Dad's departure was abrupt, but not entirely unprecedented. There were more arguments in the weeks leading up to it, and one night that began with Dad dragging Mom out of the house to buy a color TV and ended with their returning halfway through a screaming match. Three afternoons later, we returned from school to find him standing in the kitchen, surrounded by suitcases, his hand in the ceramic jar by the door. I was thirteen then; Lee, sixteen.

"Well, boys," he said, withdrawing an empty hand from the jar, "your mother and I are separating."

"What happened?" Lee demanded. "What did you do?"

He looked at Lee long and hard, and to this day I can remember the coldness with which Lee stared back at him.

Even then, they did not speak often; Dad thought architecture was a sissy career, and what few conversations they'd had about Lee's future had ended with Lee's locking himself in his room for days afterward, his sketches growing larger and more defiant.

"You can't leave us," Lee pressed when Dad failed to respond. "Someone has to be here for Claude, Dad, I'm not always going to be here—"

"Yes, you will," Dad interrupted, with the finality of one who had grown weary with the circular motion of those around him. "You will end up just like your mother, shut up in your room, pretending to live in a world that isn't really there. You want to know why I'm leaving your mother, Lee? Do you really want to know?"

For just the smallest moment, Lee hesitated. "Yes," he said, but the word was tinged with apprehension.

"Because," said Dad, "it is impossible to love someone like that."

I expected Lee to register the same surprise that I did; I expected him to falter at such a statement that, though it had been obvious for several years, still seemed obscenely blunt when admitted aloud.

Instead, he shook his head slowly, almost as if marveling at our father's inability to understand. "No," he murmured, and then he raised his voice. "No, it's not."

And then, as calmly as if he were stating the date or the time of day, he said, "See you, Dad," and retreated to his room, the click of the lock echoing down the hallway.

Dad sighed, and I glanced at him, taking in for the first time the tucks and creases in his face.

"What's going to happen to us?" I asked him, running my hand over the handle of one of his suitcases. "How are we going to be able to buy stuff if Mom doesn't work?"

"I'll send checks. Enough for groceries and clothes and things like that."

"Why can't we come with you?" I asked, trying to find some solid ground in the conversation. Everything seemed suddenly very unstable, and the idea of living with only my mother as a guardian was even more unsettling.

He turned his gaze from mine, placing the lid back onto the jar. "I need to work some things out for myself right now," he said, his voice taking on the warning tone he used whenever one of us overstepped our boundaries.

I stepped away from him, intimidated. "Where are you going to go?"

"Back to Michigan," he said, and I nodded; this seemed a logical answer. He'd grown up in Michigan; our grandparents still lived there.

Lee said I should go, too. I could use the money Dad sent—two hundred dollars a month, easy enough to save up for a rail ticket. "You deserve that much," Lee said. "There are good colleges in Michigan. It'll be much better than here. It has to be."

"What about you?" I'd asked. "You'll come with me, right?"

He hesitated. "Maybe."

"Where else would you go?"

Something darkened behind his eyes, and he shrugged. "Well, since I'm not good enough for college," he said, his light tone betraying the disappointment in his words, "I might just...leave. Go find somewhere better."

"What, like in that book?" Over the past few weeks, I'd seen Lee curled up in various chairs around the house, reading intently, a hardcover copy of *On the Road* held inches from his face. It was rare to catch him struggling through any book, much less a novel; all I'd ever seen him read were

the heavy, illustrated tomes about architecture that he borrowed from the library.

"*On the Road?*" he asked, and I nodded. "Yeah. I guess. There's...there's nothing left for me here, and I'm so goddamn sick of being stuck in this town. You feel it too, don't you?"

I did, but in a different way. I was biding my time here; I had a way out. I wanted to go to college; I was fascinated by current events, by NASA and the space race, which Dad used to love to talk about while he was still home. I had no way to pay for school, so I poured my hours into my homework: while Lee's grades fell far short of his artistic prowess, my academics were my only marketable skill. And so, rather than dating girls or smoking marijuana like other boys my age, I worked toward a scholarship, humming along to The Doors and The Rolling Stones. I worked toward that idea of finding somewhere better, and Lee encouraged me.

He taught me to drive in the cemetery a few miles from our house, where the cops were least likely to catch us. "You might as well know how," he told me, about a week after Dad left. "Mom isn't going to get any better, and if I'm not home and there's an emergency, you're better off being able to do something about it."

A little less than two years separated Dad's departure and Lee's death, and during those months Mom's refusal to leave the house evolved into a paranoia that barely allowed her to look out a window without suffering from a nervous breakdown. Antisocial behavior ran in her family, Dad had told us once, though he'd always seemed to think that her condition ran deeper than that. This worked to my advantage, and to Lee's also: since she no longer worked, we had free reign of the Chevelle, and she'd never know if I took the car out instead of Lee. The disadvantages were fewer, but infinitely darker: I was the only fifteen-year-old I knew who had had to identify his own brother's body.

I had yelled for her to come to the door that day, when I realized that it was a policeman who had rung the bell. I'd waited a long moment before opening the door, clutching to the hope that maybe she would remove herself from her head for long enough to face this for me.

She didn't come, and I opened the front door with dread rising in my chest.

"There's been an incident," said the policeman, but as soon as I found the envelope from Lee, propped inconspicuously on his pillow, I realized that the act had been unmistakably deliberate.

Before Lee died, as we watched our mother sink further into herself, I'd wondered if either of us would end up that way—so removed from reality that we were barely capable of emotion. I had seen flashes of her detachment in Lee every now and then, seen him fail to exhibit any emotion when faced with an upsetting event. When his draft notice arrived, several weeks before his death, I watched him pale as his gaze traveled over the letter in his trembling hands, but he did not react other than to finish reading, place the letter on the counter, and lock himself in his room.

The first time I read Lee's enclosed note, I absorbed the words numbly, and beneath my confusion I felt a nagging worry that perhaps I was becoming the same way. If the only feeling I could ascribe to my brother's death was *overwhelmed*, surely there was something wrong with me. But as I skimmed his letter for the fourth and fifth and sixth times, days and weeks after his funeral, I became aware of the resentment mounting inside me. After he had admonished Dad for leaving the family—after he had cited me as a reason to stay—I was utterly at a loss for understanding how he could do the same.

More than anything, I realized, I was angry with him, but the sadness took hold beneath that. I'd find myself struck by his absence while performing the most mundane of tasks: I would feel tears begin to roll down my face in the midst of my algebra homework; I'd dog-ear the page of a biography I was reading and suddenly feel an overwhelming grief weighing on my lungs. Once, rifling through the kitchen drawers in search of a pair of scissors, I found one of his notes, addressed to me. He had switched the order of the a and the u in my name, and the mistake, so classically Lee, knocked me to the floor, sobbing so violently against the cabinets that even my mother ventured out of her room to see what had happened.

While my mourning manifested itself unpredictably, my mother's did not manifest at all. She retained her cool composure, interacting with me even less than usual, leaving the master bedroom only to eat and drink a couple of times a day. She did not attend Lee's funeral, which my father paid for and I had nightmares about for weeks after it happened. Sleeping had become my primary hobby after Lee's death, although my grief permeated all of my dreams. No matter how much I slept, however, I was always just as tired when I woke up. I had no energy to expend on my homework, and my desire to leave home was overshadowed by my desire not to feel.

The time I did not spend sleeping, I spent in the black Chevelle. The car was the only place that still smelled like Lee—fresh paint, Ivory soap, and Right Guard deodorant—which I had not noticed until he was gone. The interior also held a faint flowery odor that reminded me a little of the perfume my mother used to wear when she went out—maybe it was how the leather aged, I thought, or maybe Lee had been



smoking marijuana all those nights he took the car out and didn't come home until the small hours of the morning.

When I went driving alone, before he died, I preferred to coast through our rural town, savoring the illegal freedom of it, but once he was gone I tended to end up at the cemetery, whether I intended to or not. I liked to follow the path Lee had used to teach me to drive: go past the aging maple tree, hang a right before the white marble stone that said CORRELLAS at the top, straight until you get to the granite angel, remember to put your blinkers on, another right past the veteran's headstone with all the flags, sharp left past the Hertzog family plot, U-turn in the worn grassy inlet near the groundskeeper's shed, put her into park.

Usually I parked the car several rows away and crossed the grass to the smooth gray headstone marked LEE CHRISTOPHER HEWITT, SEPTEMBER 8, 1950—MAY 29, 1969. Sometimes I brought *On the Road*, though I hadn't read much of it. I liked having it with me more than I liked the story itself—Kerouac's prose didn't appeal to me, nor did his flightiness. But I struggled through, if sporadically: if Lee had been able to get through it, I certainly could.

I was sitting by his tombstone, eyes straining to read the text in the weak October sun, when I found the passage he had underlined: *Isn't it true that you start your life a sweet child believing in everything under your father's roof? Then comes the day of the Laodiceans, when you know you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, and with the visage of a gruesome grieving ghost you go shuddering through nightmare life. I stumbled haggardly out of the station; I had no more control.*

In the margin beside these lines were the words, in Lee's neat handwriting, *Look under the back flap of the jacket.*

A chill rushed through me, and I flipped the book over, peeling back the final flap of the dust jacket. A sheet of paper, folded into three, was taped to its inside, my name printed on it in spindly ballpoint letters.

I carefully separated the paper from the jacket, my stiff fingers trembling as I unfolded it and smoothed it across my knee. It was dated May 28th, 1969.

*Dear Claude,*

*I wanted you to know what hapenned.*

The spelling error was so familiar, so typical, that I almost laughed; at the same time, I felt my eyes warm and sting, felt my cheeks smart as the tears met the cold breeze.

*I'm so sorry it had to go like this. I wanted to go somewhere else, I wanted to get out of here, but I had no way to get there, and their was nowhere to go.*

*See that quote in the book? Thats exactly how I feel right now. I have no control over anybting. If I stay here any longer Ill end up just like mom, and if I go to Veitnam, I'll die. Do you understand that? This way, I control what I become, and I can do it on my own terms. There's nothing left for me here: mom is useless, dad is gone, Delia is gone, and youll be leaving soon too, and even if I went to Veitnam and came back there still wouldn't be anything here for me. I'd rather do this now then have to live like mom does for the rest of my life.*

*Remeber the time you asked me why I kept taking money out of the jar and I wouldnt tell you. Well I put some in an acount at the bank for you. For colege. I know youll get a scholarship anyway, but I couldnt leave without making sure you wouldnt end up like me, and going to school will keep you out of the war. Their should be about eight hundred dollars there. Theyll ask you for id at the bank but if you use my lisense youll be ok.*

*If you do one thing for me Claude please find somewhere good. You dont have to end up like me. Your smart enough to find a way out of this, you have everything you need. Get the hell out of here and find a good place. I'm sorry I cant be there to do it with you. I'm so goddam sorry, Claude, but please forgive me.*

*Love,*

*Lee*

I stayed there for a long time after I finished reading, tears streaming down my face. I had just begun to accept that I would never hear from Lee again, but I could hear his words on the page as clearly as if he had spoken them. I reread the last two paragraphs several times, taking stock of what I now had at my disposal: I could pay for at least one semester of college, if I couldn't get a scholarship right away. I had a car to get me there, and I had a ticket out of the draft. I had everything I needed, Lee said: I had a way to get out.

I stood up, brushing the grass off my blue jeans and tucking the letter back into the book. It was growing darker out, and I had homework to finish.

LETTERS TO THE HUSBAND #15 *Mary A. Koncel*

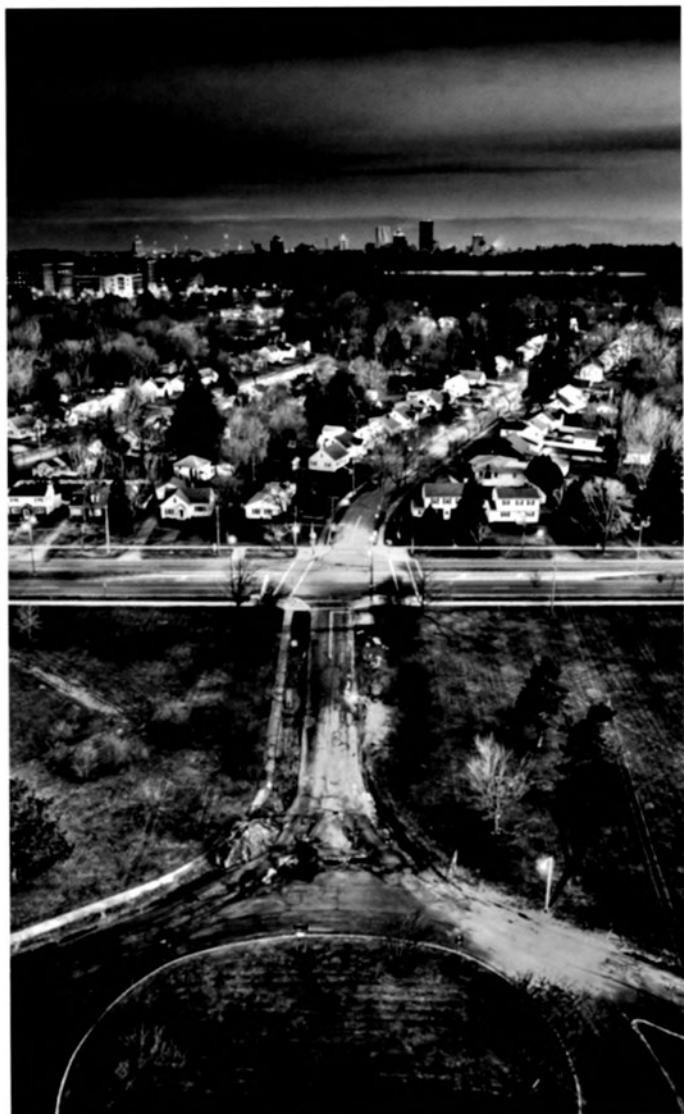
Dear Husband,

The chickens are asleep. I've counted their toes and tied back each wing. In the morning I'll wake them. But not Rooster. I've heard rumors. When he was named Rooster instead of Bull or Snake or Man, he spit. When he was given strong voice, he wanted teeth. Don't try to defend him. You can't promise that he'll be a good and righteous Rooster, that he won't scratch dirt in my face. Trust me. Rooster will always be a bird with too much apparatus. I know about excess, its roots and demeanor. Next time you see Rooster, tell him this story: In the beginning, I was delivered, holding my beauty in one hand, rocks, ravines, and a few rabid dogs in the other.

But tell me there is more  
than the color of our eyes.

Dear Husband,

I understand dirt. In this garden, it is dirt that I dig through, that I sit in when I weed. Look at me. You have never asked about dirt, and I have never told you. I browse dirt. I rub dirt. Come summer, I shed dirt like the snake with too tight skin. Dirt and rain beget mud. My mouth is full of dirt. Some days, I say, "Let there be light" and dirt falls out. Believe me. In dirt, I am all body. I am this ankle, this thigh, this taut blue vein between hip and tongue. I am the ribs that open beneath these breasts. Don't touch them. They are not yours. There will never be dirt in our house. I weed carefully. I dig greedy holes. When I cover myself with dirt, you will not follow.



ABANDONED, SUBURBAN, AND URBAN ROCHESTER *C.J. Hobbs*



FREEDOM TUNNEL *C.J. Hobbs*







ERIC IN THE MIRROR *Kaitlin Egan*





VENETIAN MUSE *Zachary T. Gavry*





GUIDE *Kaitlin Egan*



OF WHICH WE KNOW *Trent Busch*

Someone on a road walking,  
never sitting or stopping  
to consider the way  
water flows evenly

and clearly over the flat  
rocks of the narrow creek  
or the way woods and field  
blend with day's behavior.

Sun or moon, cloudy night  
or lightning, always walking  
toward or away from  
beginnings or endings

of which we know only  
what imagination  
when active or idle  
enough to surmise allows.

Their careless livelihood  
equally puzzling,  
always moving, never,  
at least openly, naked.

NEW YORK CITY *Alyssa Wood*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

Potbellied man, lubed up under late summer sun,  
dances his silent salsa in the park.  
Jesus takes shape in magenta strokes,  
the artist too young to know any better.  
Above, oh how the towers sparkle,  
each dot of light vital to inextinguishable rows—  
almost glad to be unfinished.  
And all the homeless say God bless you.  
Oily woman, gloved hands slick with garbage,  
moves mechanic, one bag to the next.  
Another jabs a finger at passersby:  
They're building a skyscraper on her tomatoes.  
Underground, the Lost Ones strum,  
scrape, turning ever-so-slowly  
invisible. Heels clack away.  
And all the homeless say God bless you.  
But when everything seems the horror, the horror,  
you need only remember  
sunflowers lain on Strawberry Fields,  
strangers musing Kandinsky,  
a movie meet-cute: spilt coffee, two dogs,  
regular old blue-blue sky erupting. Or—  
a poem in your pen and  
all the homeless say God bless you.

**FLAVORED BY ONIONS** *Ryan Edward Brown*

Distracted by Almonds  
Indulged by Sweet Potatoes  
Bothered by Turnips  
Distorted by Apples  
Engaged to Apricots  
Applauded by Oranges  
Eloped with Cantaloupe  
Disfigured by Strawberries  
Punctured by Pineapples  
Proliferated with Pomegranates  
Nauseated by Nectarines  
Traumatized by Daffodils  
Overwhelmed by Avocados  
Intrigued by Persimmons



THE DATE *Ryan Edward Brown*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

THE VERY PEACH THAT BROUGHT US HERE dissolved into the vapid twilight encompassing what we once were. I never spoke first in the first moments of knowing you. Waiting for the sound, the shrill crisp leaf crack of your voice, was more than enough for me. Once you spoke of us living lives not from our own time and how once you found a turtle shell on a beach in Spain. I could tell, though only through the slightest sense of mind pulp that you've never traveled outside of Chicago, outside of Boston, outside of Atlanta and never outside I don't know where you call home.

Earlier that night we held hands and embraced an age old tradition of not farting in one another's presence for at least one year. Who knew it could be so festive. I digress and there might be something that you're not telling me, something secret, something dangerous, something inconsolably indifferent that I would suffer the driest nose bleed. At that moment, I was going to tell you something unique about myself, that I could only swim in pools or that I fear the way people hide during electrical storms. All that scurrying and not even one strike, please all smoke and no fire. That's what I would have said to you well before I thought you were saying that you've never been to Spain. In a few words, I was equally impressed, for I too have never been to Spain and I was looking forward to catching up with someone who's also never been to the same location as I have never been to.

We spoke for 45 minutes before realizing that we both didn't care about what was being spoken of, so instead we drew dueling pistols, kicked over the flimsy lawn style furniture table and chair set that held aloft our vaguely

celestial empty plates. From there we proceeded to ebb and flow through the vacant restaurant. I told you that I loved eating beets. Which you mistook as I loving eating breast and while yours were impressive, I would not be feasting upon them in the same manner as I would be the beets. Instead, you thought me gross for saying so, but I can't help enjoying the thought of a urinary tract infection every time I settle on consuming a bushel or two of nature's candy.

All that was child's play, no more as easy as picking your nose while riding a bicycle or leaving home at the tender age of 34. For this reason I said the same old same ole response that tended to please listeners and elicit the kindred heart response also known as pity or perhaps I've always read the response as sympathy. My legs began to get rubbery as we trudged up the steep hills of Providence, I said I needed a seat, but I was saying so to no one. At least no one in particular. You were never there to begin with or were one just not for personal tales of boredom.

IF THEY DO NOT *Donna L. Emerson*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

If they do not die before we do,  
please let me hear  
when you feel the sky closing in.  
I will come.

Your house will be open to me.  
I will sit by your bed  
place your hand in my two,  
tell you all the reasons.

**SNAKE SUICIDE** *Jane Lunin Perel*

He veers his half figure eights down into dens of black mica and blind dust. He swipes at vertical undulation, then falls or flies into cisterns ripe for drowning. It's not cunning that leads him to thrust his coiling body deeper into ancient cities of water. It's boredom. He's bored to death with the slithering, hissing, fanging, swallowing, though no one knows he's self conscious. No one knows he wants to fold into sunlight, never answer hunger again. Lord of the Caves, The Devil's Crook some call him. He feels no shame, only ruin. He winds the omphalos of himself into the face of a clock whose only time is the venom of zero. He will hang himself in his own circle, done with his own bitter blood. His vanquishing foam dried up like the liquid opals of his fertility. He'll tell Creation to rot. He wants no part of earth's fractured mirror that some call Heaven or those forked and flaming tongues. Hell. Spinning out of his skin like liquid nitrogen in a time capsule, not even his dust remains, unless you dream he creeps up your cheek bone and lodges inside your eye.

CHILLY EVENING *Meredith White*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

The moon is in every poem  
Because it's the only thing of interest  
When it's dark and boring  
And there's no warm body around to fuck.

When it's been  
143 days  
since I sighed into his chest  
since my ears filled with the chorus of his lungs  
the sound of whirring air and fluid-  
an ocean in a seashell.  
when the last tendril of his scent  
has finally wriggled out of the knots  
in his favorite sweater,  
the moon is just an ass hole

celestial bodies can be anywhere but  
I am here

Still.

Perhaps that's why Persephone stayed sane-  
There were no silly bright orbs to tease her  
Down in the mud and darkness

I close my curtains  
And go to sleep

**IT'S TRICKY TO THINK OF SOMEONE YOU  
LOVE AS DEAD** *Barbara Tramoto*

Even though you died, Ramona,  
I see you around sometimes.  
The other day outside the CO-OP Supermarket  
I saw you driving a van.  
It was you, all right.

Dead people are like that, you know.  
They can die in New York  
and show up for some shopping  
in California.

## REUNION *Michael Tilley*

FICTION  
POETRY  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
INTERVIEW

ON THE RIDGE ABOVE the valley two tiny headlights appeared, momentarily seemed to freeze, suspended in the black void stretched beneath the shimmering stars, then suddenly plunged and began falling through the dark. Down they slid, smooth and soundless, vanishing for an instant at a dip in the road, or on slipping behind a stand of maple or birch, and then a beat later reemerging brighter than a second before, their beams now illuminating the shadowy woods of the lower slope. Finally they reached the bottom, where the ground flattened out and the cornfields sprang up, sprawled across the valley till the hills opposite put an end to them, and it was now, as they set off on a long, hushed straightaway, that the two approaching orbs, in the pale pools of light cast down by moth-swarmed lampposts, could be seen to belong to a mud-spattered pickup, which presently pulled off the road into a desolate strip mall, rolled through the empty parking lot past a row of boarded-up storefronts, and at last creaked to a stop outside the lone open shop—a liquor store.

But it wasn't until the headlights shined in his eyes that the man sitting slumped behind the liquor store counter looked up from his cell phone and saw them for the first time.

A moment later, he saw *her*, stepping out of the pickup into the warm autumn night.

They hadn't talked in ages. It was so far back to their last conversation that he couldn't even say where exactly it occurred (though he *did* clearly recall discussing plans for the summer, of which she'd had a boatload with her husband and kids and he very little besides drinking in the yard). Since then, he'd seen her here and there while out driving—

standing at the gas pump; disappearing into a store; loading up groceries outside the supermarket—but always distantly, fleetingly, never at close range. Which basically guaranteed a prolonged stretch without speaking, as going out of his way to approach her was something he refused to do. Yes, for many years now, in fact right from the very moment he first heard she was getting married, he'd made absolutely certain that all contact between them, no exceptions, was strictly unavoidable—taking place only under conditions that made it impossible *not* to talk; that made having a conversation the sole available option; that consisted, essentially, of bumping smack into each other. These stringent guidelines, rooted equally in pride and propriety, had long since become second nature. Nowadays just the *thought* of seeking her out was enough to make him squirm.

Did he miss her? he'd sometimes wondered these last months. Down inside, in his heart and in his guts, it felt like maybe so. But then again, what sense did that make? Because how could you miss something that hadn't ever been yours?

The first thing he did when he saw her start towards him was snatch his cap up off the counter and clap it on his head. Of course she already knew that his hair was fading fast  
—*but still.*

A second later the door jingled and in she walked grinning, dressed in the baggy nurse's scrubs she wore at the hospital. A laminated ID card dangled from her waist. Her dark hair was pulled back in a high, tight ponytail and around her neck hung a thin silver chain. Splashed down one of her pant legs, he noticed, was what appeared to be a bloodstain.

"Hey, Stranger," she said brightly, crinkling her nose as she cocked her head a little to the side. It was a face he'd seen her make for as long as he'd known her.



“Hola,” he chirped—and unconsciously adjusted the bill of his cap. “Been awhile.” In one fluid motion he slid off his stool and, settling onto his elbows, folded his body over the counter.

She paused, they exchanged pleasantries, and then she proceeded to the back of the store, chuckling lightly at a joke they’d shared.

He watched her saunter across the shabby old carpeting, ponytail and ID card bouncing as she went. He had to hand it to her: all these years and two kids later, and she didn’t look much different than when he’d met her in high school—a little wider behind, maybe, but also quite a bit bigger up top (which, to his way of thinking, was a trade-off you’d take every time in a woman). Otherwise, though, she’d hardly changed a bit; you might even still get away with calling her “cute.”

Genes, he mused, it all came down to genes. Some people were lucky that way.

He wished he could call up a picture of her mother in his mind, but he’d seen the woman only a couple of times, way back when, and even then just waist-down or else merely as a shadow, passing by the doorway at the top of the stairs when her daughter, hanging out in the basement with the friends she’d made in her new town, raced up the steps to get something from her room. Soon thereafter the mother disappeared for good, for reasons he didn’t ask about and that had never been explained.

She was returning now, hands full, ambling on back to him past the bank of humming refrigerators. When she stopped to browse the potato chips hanging from a rickety display rack, he quickly shot a glance at himself in the mirror across the way. Floating beneath the JACK DANIELS logo inscribed at the top of the dusty glass, his face looked sickly in the store’s dim yellow light.

“Wine, huh?” he remarked a moment later, feigning deep surprise, as she set two bottles of red and a bag of chips on the counter. “What’s the big occasion?”

Letting out a whoop, she rubbed her hands together in greedy excitement, and bopped her head girlishly from side-to-side. “The kids are with the in-laws tonight...gotta have some fun while I can!”

“What’s the matter,” he teased, “you don’t ever have any fun anymore?”

He saw right away that this comment was a mistake. Absorbing it, she abruptly averted her gaze, and as she stood looking off through the window into the night, a half-wincing tenseness suddenly showing around her eyes, haltingly mumbled “Oh...well...you know...” before trailing away into uncomfortable silence. Her beaming smile of a second ago had vanished; in its place there now hung a wan, wistful version that scarcely seemed a smile at all.

Things had changed. The old times, when nothing they said to each other could be wrong, were long gone. These days—and for quite a while now, truthfully—walls stood between them, unbridgeable gaps, facets of their lives where a total absence of connection imposed limits on how close they could ever possibly be. It was best to accept this reality, and avoid the relevant subjects altogether: talking about them—or rather *trying to*—only underscored the scope of the divide, deepened the sense of alienation and drift.

And led, potentially, to painful situations like the one right here now.

In his mind he saw the two of them side-by-side on a riverbank, laughing and joking and drinking beers with their friends. They were 19 years old and the tightest they’d ever be and she was sitting there Indian-style with the breeze fluttering her hair, talking a mile a minute about how she’d had a revelation: that the thing for her to do was to go to

school to become a nurse. He *saw* them there, clear as day, could feel the sun on his face and smell the grass all around them -- and now, just as vividly, he saw his friend's eyes suddenly flash open wide, and she was leaning in closer, grabbing him by the hand, practically trembling as she breathlessly told him, the radiance in her face making her look like a little girl, that she'd thought it all through and planned it all out and *he* needed to come to nursing school, too!...but with a scornful snort he cut her short, sneering not to bother because his viewpoint was this: men weren't meant to be nurses. (Which, it stung him to recall, was just what he'd say whenever she raised the idea again, refusing even to discuss it, until finally she gave up and never said another word.)

And standing behind the counter with a sickish pit in his gut, listening vaguely to the air conditioner's drone, one other bit of history he also remembered, which to the kid on the riverbank was utterly unimaginable, was that when that winter blew in and he cut out for Florida, fleeing the snow and seeking adventure, the town he'd return to would not be the town that he'd left; and the past that he'd pine for would never be repeated; and the girl who a year earlier had been his constant companion, who one summer night he even thought he might kiss, would in the meantime have grown busy with so many things, including the new boyfriend soon to be her husband, that she'd become just another person you ran into once in awhile.

Her voice, perky again, broke the awkward hush: "So when did the Japanese place go out of business?"

He peeked up from the spot on the counter he'd been staring at. Head cocked over her shoulder, in the general direction of the establishment she'd mentioned, she stood looking back at him with arched eyebrows and smiling eyes. He focused on those eyes, blue-gray beauties twinkling like little stars. He knew what they were saying. It was enough.

They picked up right where they'd left off before, shooting the breeze with a loose, easy rhythm. The subject of the Japanese restaurant, sitting dark and dilapidated three doors down, led naturally to talk of two other newly defunct strip mall businesses—a pet shop and a yoga studio (the demise of the latter, the brainchild of a despised town bigwig—or rather, it was said, of his spoiled third wife—gave each a perverse pleasure). And then it was on to the oddly warm weather; rumors of local infidelity; whispers that a gas company was snatching up land; and the sad death of a mutual acquaintance, two years ahead of them in high school, who'd drowned a few days earlier swimming drunk in the river.

The minutes passed and the conversation spun on and the music of their voices—now buoyant, now caustic, now inquisitive, now jaded—enlivened the drab and musty store. He straightened himself, tipped back his cap, garnished an anecdote with florid gestures. His head swam with a hundred fresh topics, each grappling for position at the fore of his mental queue, that he needed the chance to chew over with a friend. And when in through the door staggered a shitkicker he'd never seen, swaying and slurring as he proffered balled bills with filthy fingers, what he felt was not the wariness taught by working in the liquor store (drunks were bad news, plain and simple, and had been to blame for the last two holdups), but rather pure rage toward this skuzzy stranger whose presence might give his visitor a reason to leave.

Instead, though, she just hung back patiently, checking messages on her phone, then stepped forward to continue talking when again they were alone.

And then it was over.

“Well,” she sighed suddenly into the silence of a lull, heaving her shoulders and pulling a little frown, “I guess I'd

better be getting home.” She reached out to collect her wine and chips from the counter.

The impulse to protest, to try to talk her into sticking around, swept over him like a wave...but it passed away just as quickly as it had come on. That kind of thing was out of the question.

And so, mustering a smile, he forced himself to utter a cheery “Get going!”—and as if to officially bring matters to a conclusion, rapped his knuckles twice on the counter.

A moment later the door jingled shut behind her, returning the store to its old hermetic hush. Through the window he watched her walk to the pickup and, climbing in, place the wine and chips on the seat beside her. He saw her pull her seat belt down across her body and wriggle around while trying to get comfortable. She pushed her hair behind her ears, reached back over to the passenger seat and made an unseen adjustment. Then suddenly she looked up at him and waved; caught off guard, he banged his hand on the underside of the counter when he jerked it from his pocket in order to wave back.

But now nothing happened. Having shifted her eyes downward, seemingly into her lap, she just sat there quietly with her hands on the wheel, motionless. He thought to himself that maybe the truck wouldn’t start, that something was wrong, that she needed his help.

Jumping out from behind the counter, he moved swiftly to the door—but just as he threw it open, ready to call out, the truck roared alive and its headlights flashed awake and she jammed it in reverse, then cut hard toward the road. As the pickup sped off, crunching gravel beneath its tires, it left a trail of music drifting in its wake.

For a moment he stood leaning in the doorway watching her, following her down the road till she hit the hill and started to climb. Then, for no reason that was anything but a vague feeling stirring inside, he turned and looked away.

It was just the kind of night they treasured in that country—an Indian summer beauty with the aura of a gift, made all the more delightful by firsthand knowledge of what loomed icily around the bend. Crickets chirped and the air smelled sweet and beyond the empty road the corn stood silently in the dark; from time to time a tepid breeze roused the many-hued leaves he heard but could not see. Everywhere around him, he knew—all through the hills and out over the farmland; on football fields and grassy lawns and on the porches of the houses glittering far off in the distance—people were reveling in this night, giving themselves over to it, exactly as he had so many happy times before.

But not tonight.

He stared blankly out across the deserted parking lot, blackly silhouetted against the light of the store, until suddenly there was a movement at the corner of his eye. Startled, he swiveled toward it—but it was just the bony gray stray that turned up there each night, trotting out of the shadows with its head hanging low. He watched the cat come steadily forward, picking up speed the nearer it got. When it had drawn up close and began to circle, rubbing hard against his legs, the man fell into a crouch. He pulled a half-eaten piece of jerky from his pocket and, tearing it in two, dropped the scraps on the ground. As the cat hungrily set to eating, he stroked and scratched and patted it between the ears, cooing softly. He did that until his knees started aching. Then, groaning, he got to his feet and went back inside, fending off the cat as it tried nosing its way in.

He tossed his cap back on the counter. He checked his cell phone: nothing. Easing himself down onto his stool again, he clicked on the television next to the register and went searching for something to watch.

**SHIPWRECK** *Shinji Moon*

Salvage what is left by creating a model  
of a shipwreck and putting red flags over the things you hate  
about the way I love

like a sea urchin, with my spin one the outside and the soft,  
soft hull of my chest curled into itself like I'm protecting  
me from you, or you  
from me.

A hundred years from now,  
someone will find us.

With oxygen tanks they will sigh at the  
remnants of the night where we last saw each other,  
and pick apart the things we left behind before we fled  
our skin. There, the letters. In the closet, a pile of clothes  
that I will never let myself remember.

These are the photographs. Some, blurry. Others,  
smears of ocean.

A portrait of you sleeping. The small rings that I left  
behind, every time I said goodbye without meaning  
goodbye. There were our skeletons — our bones wrapped up  
and jumbled into each other so that the excavators  
couldn't tell whose belonged to who.

Your humerus against my femur.  
Your hipbones against my kneecaps. Your  
phalanges wrapped around my thighs.

Salvage what is left by pulling sea glass  
out from your palms, and showing me what bloody  
consequences  
come from trying to send messages meant to shatter  
out to sea.

Salvage what is left  
by asking for all the bits of me that you've collected,  
tangled in your bed sheets over time. Loose  
limbs. A spare earring. My heart like a furnace  
keeping you warm, while I lay shivering on the other side  
of town.

Give me back my stories.  
I'm holding myself like a wounded crow between  
my own hands. I have flown  
a hundred miles to get to a place where the language  
does not forgive you any longer.

Bandage my wing.  
Hold me to your mouth and give me breath once more.  
You were a language I was once fluent in. You were  
the first word that I wanted to write down.

A hundred years from now, someone will find us.

You, sitting like a stone on my chest  
wile my bones break to make way for your weight.



YOU ASK IT *Catherine Mooradd*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

Waves whack the wood,  
reverberating a sort of harmonious hate  
through the rippled water. You release us from the dock.  
The rope rips into my palm as the hard-hitting canvas inflates.  
We glide.

In a brief moment of stale silence and a clumsy attempt  
to make things amusing, you ask it.

I hear the question all the time.

If you had one day to live, how would you spend it?

Humanity rarely hears the rational answer.

Spend the day trying to stop whatever is going to kill me.

I pause, formulating the clichéd self-gloat I know you  
wish to hear.

Asked as an interview question? Easy.

Write letters to everyone telling them how much I love them,  
and thank you for teaching me the skills I possess  
that would have been, by the way, very beneficial for  
your company.

Class paper? My personal preference.

Bungee jump in Patagonia.

Self-contemplation?

Travel to Disney and hunt for the underground truth we deny.

Scramble up a bench and scream the forbidden “t” word—

That’s right people, I’m TIRED! (In Disney)!

Stop by the beach one final time to hear the seagulls sputter.

My ex-boyfriend’s house to scratch his precious Volvo  
with my key. Watch the last scene of Rudy.

Pasta. All day.

Bow tie, penne, rigatoni, angel hair, linguini, macaroni.

Would I act like a kid again,  
or try to mimic the adult I would never have time to become?  
Strands of hair begin to flirt with my eyelashes.  
Shave this heavy head. Wait for reactions.  
Set out to St. Jude's to let the kids know that today  
I felt just one-tenth of their pain.  
Buy a cow for Darfur victims. Name it before giving it away.  
A name with dignity, like Sandra.  
Marry someone in Vegas. Use my own airplane.  
Like a brat, I look to you for the money.  
You tack, whipping us in the direction the forced vessel  
does not want to go. Start a protest.  
Enter the express lane with thirty-five items in my cart.  
The STAFF ONLY door behind the counter.  
Guzman hall passed 2am.  
Well behaved women rarely make history.  
You reach into the cooler for your habitual snack.  
Take the lid off of more.  
That dusty memory box in my closet.  
That chest of charms, filled with silver I had to get  
but never wore for its antiquity.  
What Uncle Vinney's real job is.  
Why you divorced my mom.  
Go to my old work place and tell the high school girls  
behind the counter the truth—  
that they won't be getting paid because the bakery is going under.  
That Prom won't matter in a week.  
Too far? Wouldn't want to break any hearts on my last day alive.

## DEATH OF A PARROT Sarah Braunstein

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

DANIEL W. WAS HER FIRST CLIENT. His cocky smile, mullet, and thick torso brought to mind a hockey player. He was shorter than average, maybe five and a half feet, but his long neck and high cheekbones made him seem taller. His eyes were also not average; were far from average; were deep-set and large and round, an intense blue-green-brown, swampy water in noontime light. They made Sadie think of an alligator ready to snap, of some dangerous creature in a rare moment of calm. She liked his eyes more than what he wore, which was a faded red turtleneck, washed-out jeans, and dress shoes. She could not abide jeans with dress shoes.

He sat down. He sighed. He did not yet look directly at Sadie. His stubby finger explored his chin—palpated, as if checking for acne, for some deep, indicting growth. She recognized the same methodical, solemn focus with which women check their breasts. Then he stopped doing this, placed his hands in his lap, and looked at her. His eyes grew larger. His smile was gone. He said, “This is all because of a parrot.”

“A bird.”

“Not a *bird*.” His voice broke at *bird*. He dropped his eyes again to his lap. “Not any bird.”

It couldn't be called an office, where they sat. More like a nook. In this little carpeted nook with an O'Keeffe on the wall, with her social work diploma on the wall, with the emergency button on the wall, with a white-noise machine humming under her chair—in this therapeutic nook they were sealed off, safe, in the Get Mart but not of the Get Mart.

Daniel W. seemed distressed but he also seemed, she sensed, bored, as wishing to be elsewhere. Again he rubbed his chin.

The intake form said he was 27-years-old, single, an artist, that his mother was dead, that he had headaches, that he was lonely, that he had trouble sleeping, nightmares. Allergy to eggs and shellfish.

"Let's start at the beginning," she suggested.

"Listen, don't put me on Prozac. I'm opposed to Prozac."

"I'm not a doctor."

"No Prozac."

"I can't proscribe anything."

"Do we give animals Prozac? We're animals, you and me. That's all we are. Not more or less. The parrot was an animal. Has anyone ever given a bird Prozac? I'm speaking metaphorically. I'm not psychotic."

"The parrot."

"Prozac, Ativan, Xanax, whatever. I'm not a fan. I patently reject a culture that obliterates symptoms with pharmaceuticals."

"That's fine. I know what you mean. That's not what I do, anyway."

"Patently."

She said, "We can just talk. Let's just talk."

"Are you going to call me a hypocrite if I tell you I smoke pot? That's what I expect. I expect you to call me a hypocrite. No meds, but I do smoke pot. You're not a doctor and you're not a cop, I hope. I'm putting that right out there. I *am* a hypocrite. You can say it."

"I'm not here to judge you."

"This is the Get Mart."

"Yes."

"There are cameras around?" His eyes searched the ceiling. "I'm not paranoid, that's seriously not one of my issues, but, man, this is the Get Mart."

She told him there were no cameras. She explained the confidentiality policy.

"Yeah, sure, fine," he said. He didn't seem to care anymore, slouched deeper in the seat, tapped his stubby fingers on his knees. It was like a performance of agitated boredom—she sensed something disingenuous in him. She waited. His worry appeared strenuous, focused, like an actor's.

"The parrot," he said again, and his marvelous eyes turned watery. "You expect me to be happy, but how can a person be happy in a world where such a thing occurs?"

"Tell me about the parrot."

"My house was broken into. On Larch Street. Near where it hits Hope? First floor apartment. My parrot was killed. They took the TV, too, the stereo, but I don't care. They killed my parrot. Someone came into my house and killed my parrot. A person chose to do that. A human being, so called."

"I'm so sorry," Sadie said. "When did this happen, Daniel?"

"Dan. I prefer Dan. And her name was Flicker. Flick. Why would person being break the window of my house and steal some crappy electronics and then before they leave think, 'oh wait, I gotta kill that innocent bird while I'm at it'? I mean, fine, break in, take the stereo, fine. But the parrot? I'd understand better if they stole the parrot. But killing her? Does this make any sense to you?"

It did not and she said so.

He pulled a folded piece of paper from the pocket of his jeans, handed it to her. The paper was warm and damp. In the middle was a grainy photograph of a reddish bird, its head turned to the side, beady eye, black beak. It seemed an ordinary bird. The paper said: **REWARD!** and explained the nature of the crime. Then, in bigger print: **ANY INFORMATION: \$100. ANY INFORMATION LEADING TO AN ARREST: \$1,000.**

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"That was a brave parrot." He took the paper back, folded it, held it against his chest.

"Brave," she repeated.

"Weighed less than eight ounces. Tiny, but brave."

"Tiny. Brave."

"Is this what you're going to do? Repeat me? Is this what Get Mart psychotherapy gets a person?" He grabbed at his head. "I'm sorry. I'm not so rude. I've been a mess. I can't sleep. I'm not eating anything except Crunchie O's. My girlfriend left me. Flick was ten years old—she was a high school graduation present from my mother. My mother is dead. Flick is dead. Layla's gone off with Buffalo Bill Paterson. That's pretty much all you need to know."

"That's a lot," she told him.

"A lot, yes," he nodded. "And there's more to come."

"More?"

"There's always more. Right? Isn't that right? Death and taxes and MORE."

"How can I help, Dan?"

"*Help?*" It was a sneer.

"Want do you need?"

He eyes widened. They glistened. At once they were the dewy, hopeful eyes of every boy she'd ever loved. He said, "I need you to find the goddamn killer."

He came back the following week. The first thing he said was: "I don't have a thousand dollars. That's the worst part. I can't give them a thousand dollars. I've been laying awake at night thinking about this. It's such a betrayal of Flick, to lie about the reward. It's terrible!"

"Did someone come forward?"

He didn't respond. He was wearing the same light jeans and dress shoes, and now a blue button-down shirt,

untucked, sleeves folded to his elbows. He looked like a public defender after a hard day, a man whose moral code was failing him. His face was pale, hair a little greasy but combed neatly. His eyes, she saw again, were really beautiful, too beautiful; they made vulnerable a face that did not want to be vulnerable. She smelled his shaving cream.

"I don't know what I'm doing here."

"No?"

"I don't believe in medication."

*Me neither!* she wanted to say, but made a soft humming noise instead.

"I sort of hate this store. Don't you? I don't know why I'm here. You seem nice and all, but I truly have no idea what why I'm here. How long have you been a therapist, can I ask? You look kind of young. I'm sorry to pry."

"It's a reasonable question. I recently received my degree." She waited. She was prepared for this, had been expecting it. They could explore it. "Does this concern you?"

"No," he said. "It doesn't."

She waited some more. She kept her eyes still.

He said, "I get a good feeling about you. I don't know why. I shouldn't, probably, but I do. This place, though. I don't know about this place. That guy selling popcorn? What's his deal?"

"Clive?"

"I guess it's like a city in here, like a whole civilization. But I get a good feeling about you. You seem—I don't know. Nice. True."

True? What did true mean? She resisted the urge to speak, sensed he was going to say more, watched his eyes move from her face to his lap to the clock to the O'Keefe, then settle again on his lap.

"Anyway, I can't afford to go anywhere else. It's a discount shrink or no shrink at all."

They sat for a moment in silence. Finally she said, "What feels most important to talk about, Dan?"

"I really don't know."

"Last time you told me about your girlfriend. What did you say her name was?"

"I don't have a girlfriend."

"Your ex."

"Five hundred, tops." He lifted his eyes to her face. His jaw clenched. She saw that was truly miserable. "That's all I can manage. It seems like a cruel thing to do to Flick. Lying. Promising a thousand dollars and then not being able to give it."

"Has someone come forward with information?"

"No. No one. But that's not the point, is it?"

She nodded. "You had Flick for a long time."

"I took down all the signs. On all the telephone poles."

"Your mother gave her to you, right?"

"Every sign. Or as many as I could remember. Then I put up new signs. Five-hundred is all I can manage. Five-hundred, it says, the new sign. Do you think I'm crazy? I realize I sound crazy. I'm not crazy. I felt crazy as I went from telephone pole to telephone pole, changing those signs. I felt like the most pitiful man that ever lived."

She told him she didn't think he was crazy or pitiful. She told him it seemed he was under a good deal of stress, dealing with several losses at once, but he interrupted, said, "Layla. That's my ex. Layla...Spittler."

"Splitter" sounded to her like a fake name. He shifted in his chair. The white noise machine churned like an ocean.

"Did it end badly?"

"Badly enough." His eyes grew damp. She felt something stir in her stomach, the barest, faintest shivering.

He said, "Layla was always threatening to leave town, and she finally did it. We were together forever. But not for-



ever. It only feels like forever. No one should be allowed to speak that word. 'Forever' is a crime. I changed every sign. I spent hours. Telephone pole to telephone pole."

She pictured this. She pictured him humping along, stapler in hand, cold and hungry and trying not to cry. Her mouth went dry.

"Do you want to see another picture?" he asked.

"Of Flick?"

"Of Layla," he said, and stood up to remove it from his back pocket.

He let her hold it. Layla Splitter had long, shiny black hair, a slightly wide nose, full lips painted a cool pink. She wore big silver hoop earrings and a navy-blue hooded sweat-shirt and tight jeans. The photograph was taken in a mall, it seemed; she was leaning against a railing, elbows on a railing, her hands hanging limp, head tilted to the side. Behind her, in the distance and down a level, a fountain with a triad of meager geysers splashed. Layla looked just like Sadie. They could have been sisters. They could have been twins.

"I want to help you," she said.

Finally, a smile. He inhaled. He said, "I've been waiting forever to hear you say that."

*\*An excerpt from a novel-in-progress*

IN BROOKLYN *B.Z. Niditch*

You listen  
to Coltrane  
in the shower  
at eleven p.m.  
and the second floor actor  
solemn as Saul  
knifes a beer can  
with his proud left,  
the scooter bike nurse  
put her pet gerbil  
in its frayed cage  
of Nile green,  
the sea-welled sailor  
once bound for Broadway  
waits for nude negatives  
in his mail box  
whistling Sinatra  
in the dim lobby.  
and the former station manager  
in blood orange drag  
now a tarot card reader  
with a broken elbow  
will prophecize all night  
to anyone who will forget.

**VAGABONDAGE** *Stephen Gumbrecht*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

When the Dildo Salesman came to town, every man woman and child stopped what they were doing and rushed to join the celebration. Of course, the peddler didn't bring just dildos—in his sack of smut there also contained firearms, booze, lotto tickets, baby seal pelts, whips...crack rocks the size of your fist! The townsfolk were simply overwhelmed by his generosity. One by one, they lined up at the colorful caravan and plucked an indulgence. "Just this once," they negotiated with their futures behind yellow grins of their past. The merry dealer shook like too-much-jelly as he valeted out vices like a rip-shit Saint Nick. His gifts spilled tears of lust, laughter and lament until all were soaked to the bone. He orchestrated the circus atop a barrel of poisonous snakes and told us, "Be at peace! Let the demons of your conscious perish under the weight of your heart!"

**THE CHEESE-MINERS OF MOONBASE ALPHA  
ON VALENTINE'S DAY** *Stephen Gumbrecht*

A pair of astronauts sits at the counter of an ugly, improvised bar in a dimly lit corridor of the hulking space station. They sit hunched and stare into their drinks with the stern, hollow reflection of hangmen or jaded priests. The silence of space chokes the room until one grips his cup and takes a sip, dribbling a bit down his craggy beard. The other gives a grunt of approval and follows suit. Breathe.

Next, she removes a plastic pouch labeled "PIZZA" from her belt and squeezes its sluggish yellow contents into her mouth. He wants to tell her: Girl, you zap my insides gooey raw like a space beam from Uranus. Another dram and he just might. He rises from the counter and dusts off his soiled jumper. He arches his back and furrows his brow like a General of the Alamo. Flecks of booze twinkle like medals  
    oss his chest.

IMAGO *Peter Mishler*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

When I arrived  
on the circus train,  
young Borges  
looked in on me,  
memorized me,  
then climbed  
to his room  
to compare me  
with his bestiary  
and the pictures  
he'd drawn of me,  
preparing for when  
he'd dream of me,  
in the seventies,  
five years before  
I was born  
in another country.  
And through  
the iced-over plexiglass  
of a school bus window,  
I was looking  
back at him  
from what he called  
a cage—and Borges  
was a fourteen-  
year-old girl  
late for school  
and pulling herself  
down an unplowed  
driveway—her books  
swiping snow  
from her parents'  
Mercedes,

the other hand  
pitching a Camel  
to puncture  
the snowbank.  
I studied her house  
one hundred and eighty  
times that year;  
and daily, added  
new houses  
beneath hers,  
each with its own  
series of staircases  
I could follow  
to one original,  
elegant set of stairs.  
As the train hissed  
to announce  
its leaving—  
young Borges  
ran from behind  
his mother's leg  
and entered the cage.  
She passed me  
in the aisle—  
snow in her hair.  
In my wool cap,  
I'd already  
shifted away  
from the animal  
Borges thought  
he'd seen—  
and each staircase  
I'd built for her began to fill  
with the scent  
of her frozen petals  
and smoke.

NO STAIRCASE *Peter Mishler*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

He has to check  
his rooms before he falls  
asleep—  
withdrawing  
to the next one  
and the next:  
his parent's bedroom,  
the tanks and cages  
of the city zoo,  
his favorite classrooms,  
each floor  
of the hospital—  
waiting to reach  
the place  
he only visits  
after he can think  
of nowhere else:  
a room inside  
an empty house  
he once biked to  
with his friends.  
He pauses  
in the long  
hallway  
before he steps  
into its space:  
a living room  
ripped open  
by a burnt,  
black hole—

an entrance  
where the staircase  
should have been.  
He knows  
this means  
that people  
had once been  
on fire.  
It leads him  
to no other rooms.  
And as he did  
when he first broke in  
through the patio,  
and every night  
he's been back since,  
he kicks a nail  
into the hole  
and will not sleep  
until he hears it  
hit the earth.



## THE COMPETITION *Colleen O'Brien*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

TODAY WAS THE DAY. After countless weeks of training, many long hours of research, and extensive preparation, it was finally here. I woke up from a good night's sleep feeling refreshed and ready to conquer the day. I changed into my lucky t-shirt, tightly laced up my sneakers, and tied my hair up in a high pony-tail. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror and flexed my upper arm muscles. I was going to need them to perform at their best today, so I decided to do a few last minute push-ups to get my juices flowing. After crowning myself with my favorite sweat-band, I was finally ready for what I considered the most important day of my young adult life.

I could hear the roaring of the crowds even from my 2004 Honda Accord. I had just pulled up to the parking lot next to the large, white tent where the massive audience resided. Based on the howling and screams coming from inside, I could tell that these spectators were blood-thirsty. I took a deep breath before entering the tent, trying my best to gather all the strength I could before I first revealed myself to the people.

Once I peeled back the tent-opening and took my first step in, a giant hush fell over the crowd. My footsteps echoed as I marched up to the front stage. "That's the girl they call *the animal*," some woman feverishly whispered to her neighbor. I confidently strutted up to the stage and took my seat behind a long and narrow wooden table. I crossed my arms and scanned the audience. Now all I had to do was wait.

My first competitor soon entered the arena. Edward must have been pushing 88 years old, but he was by far my biggest competition. He was well known among these

games, and he had the most wins than anyone in history. He shakily walked towards the stage, clutching a walking stick in his right hand. As he situated himself in the seat next to mine, he greeted me with a strong salute. *War Vets*, I thought to myself, *they're all the same*.

Next strolled in Tommy. I had only ever read of him in magazines and newspapers, so I was especially eager to get a good look at him. He strutted down the aisle with a certain child like bounce to him. But I guess that made sense, since he was only twelve years old. The audience could not get enough of him. Men were cheering, women were blowing kisses, children were scampering about, desperately attempting to get his autograph. *This kid certainly has the crowd's advantage*, I noted, feeling a pang of jealousy in my gut.

Lastly came Barbara. At three hundred pounds and five feet six inches, this housewife's size would definitely work to her advantage. She sauntered down the aisle with such an easy confidence that many people try their entire lives to master. When she glanced at my face, we squinted eyes at each other, attempting to size one another up. Barbara and I have competed together before, and in no way did this make us comrades. Instead, it only made us thirstier for each other's blood. As Barbara went to take her seat, she nudged me in what could have appeared to be an accident. But I knew better. *Oh*, I thought to myself, *it is ON*.

After all the competitors were seated, the announcer took his stand. After fixing his bowtie and smoothing his comb over, Harold grabbed the microphone and began to rattle away. "Welcome one, welcome all, to the 75th anniversary of the games!" he exclaimed in his infamous fast-paced speech. "We got quite a show for you today ladies and gentlemen, so how about we skip all the fancy talk and get right to it!" The crowd immediately went wild, and soon

I felt my hands being tied with rope behind my back. "You know the drill!" hollered Harold, "no hands anywhere near the table. Nor like you'd easily break through that hefty hunk of hemp," he noted with his signature smile. The audience promptly broke out into a fit of laughter.

Before I knew it, freshly baked pies were placed in front of Edward, Tommy, Barbara and me. They smelt sweet and delicious, although I was well aware that within the next thirty minutes, their stench would make my stomach churn. Harold grabbed his horn and lifted it high in the air. "Pie-eaters, take your marks. Get set, now eat that pie!"

"Eat that pie!" the audience screamed in unison as I dove my head into the wonderful, strawberry gooeyness. My strategy was simple: eat everything in sight for the next thirty minutes, and eat it fast. I could hear my competitors gnawing away at their pies, but I tried my best to ignore them. For the next thirty minutes, I had to devote all my energy to the pies in front of me and *only* the pies in front of me.

It is always the same. The first two pies are among the best things I have ever tasted in my life. The third starts to lose its splendor, and from there my taste bloods plummet into an outright downward spiral. Soon, maybe around pie number six, you don't even taste anymore. You are a pure animal, simply eating the food because it is in front of you. And because you want to win, of course.

At pie number seven, we started to lose competitors. Everyone claims that number seven is a lucky number, but in a pie eating contest, it may just be the worst. Pie number is the main hurdle of the contest. It separates the boys from the men. Since Tommy had yet to hit puberty, it certainly made sense that he would be the first to throw up. I heard the crowd groan in disappointment. He was their favorite, after all.

Surprisingly, Edward was the next to go. Many people would later blame his age for his loss, but I knew better. This was the first contest Edward competed in where he did not have his wife supporting him. Unfortunately, she died just months before, and he no longer had anything to fight for. He had to drop out at pie number nine.

Now it was just Barbara and me. My heart began to pound uncontrollably, my palms started to shake, yet my head remained sturdy and certain. I always take my time eating these final pies. Mainly, I focus on not throwing up all I have worked for. Barbara, however, was gobbling down her pies to the point where I wasn't quite sure if she was even breathing in between swallows. Her fast pace definitely intimidated me, and at times I felt as if I should increase my speed. However, I ultimately decided to maintain my steady strategy. It worked for the tortoise against the hare, after all.

Just when I thought I could go no longer, just when I was convinced that I was going to throw it all away (quite literally), Barbara lifted her head from her demolished pie. Her pause in the game startled me, and for the first time I broke my tunnel vision and lifted my head as well. I just could not resist seeing where she was going with this one. For a second time, we exchanged glances. Except this time, there was no anger or contempt in our exchange. Instead, there was a mutual feeling of utter pain and, dare I say it, a small sense of camaraderie. After all, we just ate ten pies together; no one else knows what that is like.

Just when I was about to dive into my pie, Barbara let out a large belch. The crowd immediately grew silent as the sound rippled across the tent. Barbara then jolted out her seat, lunged for the trash can, and vomited up all of her hard work.

The audience was stunned. Harold was stunned. But most of all, I was stunned. Barbara, a three hundred pound house-wife, had just lost the most coveted Strawberry Pie trophy in the nation to a twenty year old, 130 pound girl. After a moment of silence, the tent burst into a roar of applause. Men were fist pumping, women were joyfully crying, children were dancing in utter celebration. "There ya have it folks, this year's national winner! Lindsey O'Donnell!"

I slowly stood up and smeared away the remnants of strawberry pie from my chin with the back of my palm. I reached out to accept my trophy, and the crowd broke into a large cheer. "An-i-mal! An-i-mal" they chanted over and over again. As I waved to my admiring fans, I told myself that I would never put myself under this kind of torture again. Not until the Blueberry Pie Competition, that is.

HAIR ON FIRE *Jim Daniels*

We ironed October leaves  
    between sheets of wax paper  
and melted crayons to make candles  
    and froze koolaid to make popsicles.  
We stuck cloves into oranges. We grew roots  
    on sweet potatoes in water.  
We taped our broken glasses together  
    and we shut up. We made shoe-box  
dioramas with play-doh and modeling clay.  
    We cut snowflakes from folded paper  
and hung them with kite string.  
    We made newspaper kites  
and imagined they could fly.

We shaped tin-foil into fake coins  
    for our church envelopes.  
We covered love bites with koolaid.  
    We filled liquor bottles with holy water.  
We hid our stash in bean-bag chairs.  
    We drove to Ohio for drugs.  
and rolled back our father's odometer.  
    We mounted our girlfriends  
on the pool table, clacking the balls together  
    for the ears upstairs.  
We drew lies with chalk  
    and the truth with magic markers.  
We lit our hair on fire  
    to cover the smell.

**SMUDGE** *Hannah Poirier*

FICTION  
POETRY  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
INTERVIEW

A man sits in a silk top hat and Armani suit. He sits on the bench that most people avoid. They pass by him throughout the day, wondering at his audacity to dress up like that and deign to sit on a public bench. They do not notice the bit of dirt smudged across his face. They only see the suit and the top hat.

A little boy, attached to his mother by a harness like a dog, stares openly at him. "Why you dressed funny?" he asks.

The man chooses not to answer.

"Guys in top hats usually have money. Do you have lots o' money? I don't."

Silence.

The boy glares at the man. "You're no fun." He turns away and boards the bus with his mother.

The sun starts to go down, bathing the dreary grey of the city with brilliant reds. Another man appears at the street corner wearing a tattered bath robe and pushing a shopping cart full of junk. His face is clean. The man in the suit stands and begins pulling off the expensive clothing. He stands in nothing more than a ratty pair of gym shorts and the silk top hat, holding the clothes out to the other man.

"Take them. I want my cart back."

**THE DROP** *Mark Belair*

In the instant before  
the water

drop, torn  
from an overhanging tree,

meets  
the glossy plane

of the shaded lake  
dwells

a moment of stillness,  
the drop's

impact  
so imminent

motion seems to arrest,  
time with it,

each returning  
once

the drop, as it  
must,

becomes  
lake and memory.



## A CONVERSATION WITH LORI OSTLUND

*Thomas Cody, Kevin Crawford, and Ana Gadoury*

**THOMAS CODY, KEVIN CRAWFORD, AND ANA GABOURY:**

Once you get an idea for something that you would like to write, how do you start the process?

**LORI OSTLUND:** There is no particular way that I start. I keep a notebook and a lot of scrap paper in my desk and write little things that interest me or I find odd. Sometimes it is the way that someone said something that intrigued me and I wrote it down. Sometimes, I will look through my notebook and be hit by one of these snippets, and I will start writing about it. However most often, I use the notes from my notebook when I'm stuck. I go back to it and start reading, and then something in it will grab my attention, and I will start thinking about how to incorporate it: that is, I try to write from the point where I am stuck toward that detail or anecdote, almost as if I were connecting the dots.

Also, where and how I start is often determined by whether I choose to write the story in first- or third- person. Generally, first-person starts with a unique voice—I get into the voice and it takes over and starts telling the story itself. That's what happened with the title story, for example, and with "Dr. Deneau's Punishment." When I am using third-person, I feel almost as though I am observing the characters, trying to figure each of them out. For example, the way that I might stare at someone in a café and speculate about his or her life, and how they came to be sitting there, and what life they are heading back into when they leave.

**TC/KC/AG:** How do you incorporate real life events, like those that inspired your story *Dr. Deneau's Punishment*,

into your stories, where do you suspend reality and break from real life events?

**LO:** *Dr. Deneau's Punishment* evolved out the perfect writing situation for me: my brother, a middle school math teacher, told me during a visit that one of his colleagues punished boys who were roughhousing during class by making them move their desks together and sit holding hands during the rest of class. I was riveted by this story and begged my brother for more details about the man. However my brother did not know anything else about him because he found him a bit annoying. This was the perfect writing situation: I had this great image—of these boys holding hands—but I knew nothing about the person making them hold hands, which meant that the rest of the story was up to me to create.

I realized what mattered first was figuring out whether the man was a gay because it really changed the way that I would work what the handholding would signify—both for him and for the reader. As I wrote, I realized that he was gay, older man who early in his life, had come to see his own desire as something shameful and that that desire coupled with the shame would frame the story. I always tell my students that my rule, when I am borrowing ideas from real-life, is to change the facts in a major way early on. Otherwise, you become more and more locked into the story as it actually happened, and your subconscious starts to entertain fewer and fewer what if's. When that happens, you run the risk of never really getting at the core of the story, the story that you are trying to tell.

**TC/KC/AG:** What do you believe is the most essential part of a short story, what do you spend the most time developing?

**LO:** I'm not sure that I have just one part that I consider essential, but here are a few things that I think about a lot and that I admire in other writers:

**Beginnings:** With my students, I spend a fair amount of time looking at successful beginnings. I bring in the first paragraphs of six or eight stories from the *Best American Short Stories*. I have them read the beginnings and rank the stories in the order that they would read them, based just on the beginning. The beginning is such a delicate thing, very much like a balancing act. It has to have a forward motion. That is, you do not want the reader to have to reread out of confusion. We talk about each student's buy-in moment with the story they chose as their favorite. Usually, they can each point to a specific thing—a phrase or a detail—that made them commit to the story.

I think about all of these things that I really care about as a reader, and then I focus on them as I write and revise, sometimes with greater success. I never strive to have an almost-perfect sentence. My job is to do the hard work so that when the reader reads, he or she can focus on thinking about ideas or meaning—and not what I might have meant by this almost-perfect sentence.

**TC/KC/AG:** What writers would you call your greatest influences and how do you balance that influence with your own voice?

**LO:** There are so many writers I love, but what I often find is that the writers I love are not necessarily writing work that I want to—or am equipped to—emulate. I tend to write about what I know, but when I read, I am equally—if not more—intrigued by worlds and people I do not know. Of course, there are some writers who have had a strong pull

like Paul Bowles, for example. I love his work even though it is very different from mine. Years ago when I was writing “Nobody Walks to the Mennonites,” I was reading his work at the same time, and I found that I had to put my story away until I had finished reading because I kept hearing his tone and view of the world creeping in.

**TC/KC/AG:** Any personal favorites in the collection, *The Bigness of the World*? Why?

**LO:** There are a couple of stories that I am not so keen on. It is interesting for me to talk to readers. For example, I have had readers tell me, “All of the stories seem written by the same person or to have emerged from the same pen (computer), except \_\_.” Then, they fill in the blank with a different story each time.

I think that I have had different favorites at different times. For example, “All Boy,” which was not even a part of the collection when it won the Flannery O’Connor Award, has been very good to me. It was republished in the *Best American Short Stories 2010* as well as in a couple of other places, including a men’s glossy magazine in the UK called *PORT* and, in translation, in an Iranian journal called *Golestaneh*. I have a personal attachment to “Dr. Deneau’s Punishment,” in part because I really like Dr. Deneau. For a long time I felt so protective of him and that story, that I would not read it aloud for fear that audiences would dislike him and in part because that story challenged me a great deal. In it, I wanted to create a character who seemed almost determined to present himself as unlikeable, and by the end of the story, I wanted the reader to feel compassion and understanding for him. My favorite story to read aloud is “Talking Fowl with My Father”—I think that the Midwest-

ern humor comes through almost better when it is heard than on the page. Finally, the story that did not get much attention but readers respond to is the title story, which is another of my favorites. I put it first not only because it was the title story but because it is the most accessible story.

**TC/KC/AG:** Can you tell me more about the Flannery O'Connor Award that you received for your book?

**LO:** The Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction is run by the University of Georgia Press. The prize is \$1000 plus publication for two collections each year. In 2013, the prize will celebrate its 30th anniversary, so it is one of the oldest, perhaps even the oldest, story collection prizes around and certainly one of the most respected. A couple of years ago, I served as a screening judge for the prize. They expected around 300 but received 450 submissions, which serves as a testament to the high regard with which writers view the prize. However, it also demonstrates the bottleneck that has occurred for writers: by this I mean that there are more writers than ever writing short stories but there are fewer publishing options, so many writers are jammed up at the gate, wanting to get through and into publishing. The current series editor, Nancy Zafris, is wonderful, and I say that not just because she chose my collection. She has a keen eye and the ability to read broadly. Also, she is deeply committed to writers and to helping them get their work out there.

**TC/KC/AG:** Is your teaching background what influences you to use characters who are teachers in your stories?

**LO:** Of course, it absolutely does. The funny thing is that I actually fell into teaching. I moved to Spain for a couple of years in the early 90s. I had just finished my Master's

Degree, and I wanted some time to think before I began applying for Ph.D. programs. During that time, I read both broadly and deeply, a luxury that school, which dictates one's reading, did not allow for. At the same time, I was travelling a lot, especially around Morocco, which was a transformative experience for me. I had lived in a town of 400 people for the first 18 years of life, and then I went to college in a slightly bigger town just a couple of hours away. I went to graduate school in Albuquerque, which felt much different, culturally, from where I grew up, but I was still buried in the world of academia during that period. I liked academia. It felt very safe to me, but once I moved to Spain and began traveling, I realized that academia would be like another small town. I was beginning to see how big and strange the world was, and that seemed more compelling for me, both as a writer and a person. Teaching, which I had started doing in graduate school, was a means to an end at first. It allowed me to live in Spain, and when I returned to the United States, I kept doing it because it was what I knew how to do. Around that time, I began to realize that I was also good at it, and like most people, I prefer to do things that I am good at. But I also love teaching. I need to have that time in my day when I forget about my own writing woes and personal frustrations and instead focus on other people, my students.

I've been a teacher now for 16 or 17 years, teaching everything from Business Communications in Malaysia, test preparation, fiction writing, and remedial English. It is what I spend much of my time doing and my relationships with my students have been very important to me. Thus it only makes sense that teaching informs my writing. I know a lot of teachers and when teachers get together they tend to talk because they have similar ideas, experiences, and frustra-

tions. For example, I have heard from numerous teachers who identify deeply with Dr. Deneau. Yet at the same time, early on a friend who was not a teacher read a draft of that story and did not get it. She thought he was mean and should not be allowed to teach, as though the teaching profession, like every other profession, were not filled with scarred individuals (along with lots of great and dedicated people).

**TC/KC/AG:** How has your childhood in Minnesota influenced your writing? How specifically did your time abroad influence your writing, bringing you closer to your routes or offering you an escape from your old world?

**LO:** Half of the stories in the book are set overseas, in places where I lived, did business, or spent a lot of time, places like Spain, Malaysia, Morocco, Indonesia. The other half are set at 'home,' often in Minnesota. Some people go out into the world and feel alive, energized, consoled, while others feel overwhelmed and insignificant. I understand both impulses—the desire to go out in the world and the desire to hide—and the book is really about both. It begins with the title story, specifically with the heroine, Ilsa Maria Lumpkin, saying, "There have been times in my life when the bigness of the world was my only consolation," but the collection ends with the main character in "All Boy," Harold, retreating from the world and back into the safety of a small, dark closet.

Oddly, I did not think of my stories as being about place until I began to notice that readers, particularly reviewers, often discussed the collection in terms of setting. I had a student tell me that reading my book was like taking a crash course in being Minnesotan. Around this same time, I got a couple of speaking engagement requests, both of them identifying setting as the theme that they wanted me to focus on. I have not lived in Minnesota for 25 years, but it shaped me

deeply as a person and thus as a writer. Particularly, I think, it has contributed to my sense of restraint, my interest in silence, and my brand of humor.

I have noticed a trend in my own life—when I travel, especially overseas, I immediately begin to see what I am unhappy about in my life. I believe that this has to do with stepping outside what is familiar and abandoning the daily routine that, for better or worse, keeps one plowing ahead. I have a theory that if you want to know whether you could live with a person for the rest of your life, you should go off and do some very hard traveling together. Thus in my writing, I find myself attracted to foreign settings. I like putting my characters outside of their element. Often what happens is that they realize that they are unhappy or they begin to see how disconnected they are from the people in their lives, especially their significant others. This was what I thought about then when I started writing “Idyllic Little Bali,” for example. Specifically, this situation arises for each of the two main characters: Martin, whose wife breaks up with him in Bali, and Noreen, who, while sitting around a pool in Yogyakarta, suddenly accepts her own unhappiness with Sylvie.

I think that traveling and feeling like an outsider can also lead one to form, what my friend Eric calls “the 10-minute friendship.” We have all had this experience: in a bar, on the road, at a party, where you find yourself telling someone you have just met something very intimate, something maybe even many of your close friends do not know. Sometimes, it can feel very liberating to speak openly to a stranger, particularly one whom you do not expect to see again. In this case, I thought of that bonding that happens in that story, that openness, as coming about largely out of homesickness, a need to embrace the familiar. In fact, many of the stories set overseas have this in common: the characters arrive somewhere foreign and immediately long for home.



**THIS** *John McKernan*

Dream kept me awake until dawn This dream made me afraid of marshmallows This dream made me lay down my skull on the second grade chair and sleep soundly In my sleep I would race to the top of a huge mountain stare down at the water three miles below and jump In my falling I would plummet gathering speed like a lead weight Waking up was a conscious choice and it ended the dream I would wake shaking terrified covered in sweat Once awake it was impossible to go back to sleep I experienced the dream for years Once or twice a month One night I told myself in the voice of a coach Do not move your body an inch Do not even open an eyelash You are not going to wake up Fall and keep falling Do not awake No matter what happens Keep falling Stay asleep Fall and keep falling I did in a whisper of surprise I fell for hours Turning over repeatedly My arms and legs outspread in the darkness Soundless as light on the tip of the wave When I neared the bottom of the fall I closed my eyes tighter and fell faster What I hit was a wall of diamond Light spectrum of seven colors One note on a scale of twelve I did not crash I did not break or shatter into bones I bounced like the inside of a golf ball or baseball I bounced I bounced higher than the cliff I had jumped or been pitched Looking down from a vast height I saw the entire mountain and its cliff glow like radium The sunlight hovering in the air was distinctly a shadow The mountain peak above which spun a tiny child orbiting Flying in space Like a blue globe Like the tiniest conceivable planet I never had that dream again

## ALL-TIME FAVORITE HOROSCOPES

*John McKernan*

That scream  
In the Bronx alley

A curse  
Bouncing off a switch blade  
In Boston

The Braille  
Lottery ticket  
Telling me I had won  
Seven million Euros

A Styrofoam cup  
From a blind girl in Chicago  
With the words  
Poked with a knitting needle  
NICE MAN

**SPOOL** *Jesse Mack*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

On the living room sofa her braided hair  
left pleats against the headrest.  
I saw the pleats pressed in even after she reached  
her hand back to untie the braid. I saw  
the cushions where her arms had worked  
these arm-shaped crevasses and I was a thread  
worked out of a spool until the spool was empty.  
I was the knots of clover in the yard  
under a revolving fan of water  
piped out from the sprinkler and I could have circled  
like a satellite recording her hair in film strip frames  
until the last plait came loose.

**MYSTIC'S DISHES** *Jesse Mack*

Dregs of late tea: the Virgin's veil in a circle of crusted sugar. The woman at the all-night diner swears that mysteries happen to her all the time. You mean miracles, the busboy corrects. No. Mysteries. In her plate, a fried egg she's split down the center with a fork looks like a toy model of an animal cell, with the details effaced: all nucleus & cell wall, the constituent parts of a living thing reduced to two layers, inner and outer. I watch her chew whole strips of bacon one after another, notice her look of satisfaction, as if she believes ingestion can communicate the energies of one animal to another. A shamanism. With the Virgin looking on from her teacup. How many bodies snake past the windows?

IN THE SNOW *Virginia Wood*

FICTION  
POETRY  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
INTERVIEW

“DAVID!” MRS. COHAN YELLED AFTER HER SON, waving a pair of gloves. She stood still in the doorway, frowning. The boy would lose his fucking fingers in all that wet.

David was already far afield and bobbing up and down out of the snow, making a break for the treeline. He turned around, still hopping, saw his mother a quarter mile back at the house. He had thought he’d heard her, just for a second. Gloves, naaah, gloves gloves, don’t want ‘em, man gloves are too restricting, want free hands free hands.

The house looked isolated and idyllic from the distance. The warm yellow glow from the unshuttered windows, the white clapboard siding of the old Colonial, the single column of smoke rising out of the chimney. Warm. On returning, cocoa would be on the offing.

He stuck his hands into the waist deep snow and pulled an unformed ball of it out.

He stuck it in his mouth, already melting.

Good.

His fingers had gone white and red, agitated by the cold already. No matter. He’d come rocketing off the porch steps like Superman, energy made irrepressible by youth. There was no way to contain it except to run, hopping like he might make it off the ground more permanently, dragging his scarf behind him.

At the treeline the snow was even deeper, almost chest level. David sallied forth, swimming his arms back and forth crazily to get through it. He lowered his head like a bulldozer, pushing his way beyond the trees. The snow was fresh fall powder, watery but not too dense for a small boy to get through. Fifty yards in, the snow leveled off, lower even

than in the North Forty. Here it was easier to get up to a good run, pinwheeling his arms very seriously to get air. The woods were very quiet, sounds of tree branches cracking off distant. There were no birds or crickets, the frost having quieted the former and killed off the latter. David held off from shooting aliens or declaring Right against evil for a moment, listening. The woods felt primeval and unbroken, though he knew that there were actually clear cutting operations stalled for the winter not even a mile southwards. In the summer the Cohans could hear the clear cutting from their kitchen, electric saws the same size as their dining room table breaking up the entire world.

Looking up, there was the whole sky, feeling close because of the murky, low hanging clouds. The branches of the chestnut trees were laced up black against it, clotted up with snow on the south side where the wind had come cutting through the night before. That same wind had pressed up against the house seemingly from everywhere, howling across windows it could not get inside of. David had been in with his mother then, watching scary movies on the television with one of her hands resting upon his left side.

He bowed his head for a moment, looked at his hands with the palms open. Then he stuck them into his pockets, damp from the snow that had found its way inside of them. The woods seemed full of possibility, quiet like this.

"Armies of evil," he said, clearly, "Meet David. Conqueror! King of all things," his fingers wiggled in his pockets for emphasis, "Spectator to horrors unspeakable. Terrible," aping the classic black and whites he loved.

He pretended to be Bill Masen, of *Day of the Triffids*, ready to execute all marauding plants at a moment's notice. Pointed fingers became flamethrowers, and little boy cries were the dying screams of sinister, shuffling tripods.

He pretended to be Meriwether Lewis, intrepid explorer of the unknown, and maybe! amateur boxer. The trees! Their leaves to be turned over and collected, then punched! Right in whatever knot in the wood looked most vulnerable.

And he was pretending to be Mitch Brenner, of *The Birds* (and stealing all of Tippi Hedren's best parts) when his foot struck something buried deep in the snow. He gave an exaggerated shriek and spoke quietly in a woman's, Tippi's, terrified voice, "Oh Mitch," he said, "Oh Mitch, what is it?" and laughed. It was probably a large tree root.

Stooping, he wrapped his damp red scarf around the lower half of his face, began to dig in the snow with crooked fingers already half frozen from cold. Whatever it was, it was heavy. His sturdy rubber boots hadn't moved it at all.

David reached out to touch it. He knelt, snow crunching from the sudden compression, packing up underneath his knees. His lips were quiet around the words of great explorers who had come before, going silent in the face of what this cold discovery had turned out to be.

David's pale fingertips met the ones poking up out of the overturned snow. The pads of his fingers touched these new lavender ones, and lingered there.

The fingertips bent back a little in the snow as he pressed them. He began to dig, lips pressed together tightly. His little fingers arched across the snow and began to dig again, cautiously but earnestly, the way dust is brushed off of petrified bone.

Then the face was uncovered and he sat back in the snow, sitting and frowning. From the back, in his red goosedown parka, he hardly looked like a little boy at all, still and silent.

David looked up into the trees again, staring for a minute.

Then he looked back down into the snow, at the blue frozen face that had been excavated.

The eyes were closed, eyelashes too long. Little boys, how do they always have these long lashes? And the lips were relaxed, pouty. Roughness and blush had gone out of them with the frost. David's hand in his pockets were drying out, skin cracking around the nails as the water leached out. The air pushed out of him as his heart began to beat triple time, blood rushing up to the surface of his skin. His face and neck had gone blotchy, red and white. If someone else had been there, one or other of them might have tried to say something, but there was no need to do it now. The tension was entirely concentrated in the explorer, who clenched and unclenched his hands in his parka, unable to move much beyond that.

It was a little boy who had wandered too far and become small in the great woods, frozen to death. It was just a little boy frozen in the snow.

*Oh what is it, Mitch? Just lovebirds, Melanie. Don't worry, these are just lovebirds. Aren't they sweet? Oh no, Mitch. They are terrible. Terrible!*

Terrible things.

David squeezed his eyes shut, brow furrowed. It was suddenly very warm, and he was feeling every inch of the flush on his skin. He became very aware of his heart banging away hard enough to seem like it were fluttering instead. It was fluttering inside of him like a canary trapped among rib bones, terrified and unable to understand the situation completely. Then suddenly he was on his feet, and then as suddenly he was running, the way people can run in dreams.

Later, in the doctor's office he wouldn't remember the run, how he had lowered his head and bolted, hood falling over his eyes. When he was older he would begin to tell people who asked him about it that he had sat in the snow and cried, because it was easier to say that. People could



understand that, without pity. He wouldn't be able to say that he had flattened his hands out at his sides and taken off from there.

The direction didn't matter. To his mind were coming unbidden all the best things he'd loved as a child, seemingly for no reason. There was butternut squash soup in a small wooden bowl, a willowy swirl of steam. The smell of ginger on his mother's hands, the weight of them. Whatever he could remember about his father, the half memories a toddler makes, were going through him and then out of him in labored breaths. The cold entered and dried him out, making breathing painful and soon hard to do at all without choking. The red scarf seemed to constrict around his throat, like a great harried snake. He ducked to avoid a low branch and came out on the big 4-lane bypass connecting the major logging roads to Route 80. And now he was crying, because breathing had become entirely painful.

There was nothing to do by the side of the 4-lane except hunch his shoulders up and sob snotty sobs. And after a while, because it was winter, because the saws were not running, when no cars had come by to ask a young boy what was going on, he turned back around and went into the woods again. Because the woods were home, a place for explorers, for marooned rocketmen, for marauding treasure seekers, he folded himself back into them. Body shaking, heart thudding but no longer trembling after the flight, David knew what he should do.

He followed his footsteps back through the snow.

"Mommy."

"Yes."

*Mommy was ironing laundry.*

*David was tapping his foot on the fringe of the laundry room rug, turning the fringe over and folding it back down.*

*"Do birds feel cold?"*

*"Yes. That's why they go south, honey."*

*He could smell the iron, a murky, wet smell. The iron was gasping, steaming.*

*"They do?"*

*"Yes. They go South every winter because it's warm down there," smiling at him, "Why ya asking?"*

*"Sometimes I see them frozen on the street near school. Do they feel cold before that?"*

*"Do you touch them, sweetheart?"*

*She put the iron back in its cradle, snapping it in place. She stooped to offer him a hug.*

*No. Sometimes. Never. I don't know. I always stop.*

*Sometimes I sit down on the curb and sit near them, even if the curb is wet. I just want to sit next to them.*

*David stood over the little boy.*

*Sometimes I sit there for a long time. But other times, I don't. Other times I just want to try to get home. Sometimes I just feel too tired.*

He breathed through his mouth, rasping breaths through burning lungs and throat. His shoulders came down as his body relaxed. *I just want to get home.* Snow that had whispered off the trees had found its way down the collar of his sweatshirt and made him wet against the skin. He wanted to urinate, but knew that if he let that go he would be wet in his pants too. So he held on. Beginning to shiver, body trying to get warm, he sat down.

The snow compacted beneath him, crunching. It had gone colder with the sun going down, and a paper thin layer of ice had formed over the surface snow melt. There was the faint susurrus of snow falling off of the trees distant, everywhere all around. At first, David had only suspected that it had begun to snow again. Eventually, he became certain of it, as isolated flakes had become a steady, silent fall.

A hundred years ago, these woods would have been full of elms. Now, because of Dutch Elm Disease, the trees were primarily chestnut, oak, and the odd black maple. David's father used to go on and on about the elms, great big trees of unmatched majesty, most killed off in a single season by tiny infected beetles.

*"Why don't they just kill all the beetles, daddy?"*

*"Because it would cost thousands of dollars per tree, every year. Thousands of dollars. And even if you did it every year, if you stopped the tree would die the next year anyway."*

There was snow gathering up on the frozen boy's eyelashes. David leaned forward and batted it away hurriedly.

*"How come they can't find out a way to cure the disease?"*

*"David, sometimes you've gotta think that things just get away too fast. It was already too late by the time people started trying to figure these things out. The beetles had already gotten into everything."*

*"But not all of the trees died."*

*"No. 80%."*

*"Why not all of them?"*

*"We don't know."*

Impotence, futility, and the disappointment of too little too late at the same time, it had made him very angry.

But not angry now, no. And not angry about the birds, either. It had taken him longer to learn that, in existing, a boy must accept that nothing is permanent, least of all, his father.

Dusting snow away from the dead boy's eyelashes had become an occupation for David, as the snow fell. It collected on the hood of David's parka, which he had pulled up after the run. The red hood was lined with fur, which would become thicker with white the longer he sat there. By

twilight he realized that he was in trouble. By nightfall, he no longer cared.

He got up once and peed with his back to the blue face in the snow, maybe ten yards away, took assessment of himself quickly, and hurried back. There was little wind, and it did not rush or whistle at all, not like the night before. It was even light enough to see clearly, the three quarter moon reflecting off the crystals of ice well-formed now across the virgin expanse. Chestnut tree branches are many but thin and spindly, as are the branches of oaks. With so few thick shadows, there was no trouble keeping vigil at all.

The snow that David swept back was making his hands wet on the regular, and his nose began to run, which made his lips and the area all around them raw. Breathing was not getting easier because of the fresh, slap in the face cold, and the creeping chill was working on the parts that weren't exposed. At this point he could be expected to cry, anyone would, and because of that he did.

And so then later, but not much later, when the flashlights came sweeping through, the state troopers found him crying. They helped him to get warm, and told him not to worry, and what an adventure he'd had, how lucky this all had turned out to be with no frost bite and no permanent damage. And David pushed his head against the state trooper's buttons, and whispered susurrus, pretending to be a tree.

## SUBWAY STRANGERS *Amanda Brown*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

I don't know why I remember Martin buying a lollipop on the subway. Less than twelve hours earlier I sent a simple text message. Hey, I'll be in Ozone Park tonight. And then there we were on the subway heading to Penn Station on a Thursday night. He had a copy of *Waiting for Godot* rolled in the pocket of his khaki shorts. I whispered to him that there was a family all wearing matching Crocs shoes across from us and nodded my head discreetly in their direction. "And look at that guy," I mumbled, now nodding to a man whose gnarled fingers were holding a blue pen and a notebook filled with sheets of wide-ruled looseleaf. "Just look at him. He's writing something good. It's going to be famous." Martin curved up the edges of his mouth and said simply "You know it." An unshaven man wearing a dark gray flannel decorated with holes approached us. His puffy blue vest made scrunching sounds when he moved. "Do you want to buy a lollipop? Twenty-five cents?" I looked away; I don't give money to strangers in New York City. I was surprised when Martin handed the man a quarter saying "Sure, why not?" Our stop was next. We got off and started running to catch our next train. As we hurried along the length of the platform Martin ran over to a nearby garbage can and tossed the grape lollipop. "Poison," he shook his head and tried to steady his breath. "It's poison I tell you!" We both slowed down a little and laughed.



**VESTIGE** *Mary Beth McLean*

Location: Wooden bunk, Block 16, Auschwitz



**ODYSSEY** *Mary Beth McLean*

Location: Chott el-Djerid, the Tunisian salt lakes, Africa







READY, SET *Eddie Jennings*





MASQUE *Sarah Bruno*



ALEM AT SUNSET *Alessandra Foresti*



LA SEDIA ROSSA *Sarah Bruno*



VENTURE *Mary Beth McLean*



## FRUGALITY BREEDS CONTEMPT *Corey Brunelle*

FICTION  
POETRY  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
INTERVIEW

"I'LL HAVE A WATER, PLEASE." I always order water. It's light, refreshing, and doesn't get put on the bill. I'll lament the day that restaurant owners conspire to start charging me for the ice that goes in the glass. If you assume that it costs ten cents per ounce of ice and that a standard sized restaurant glass of water uses seven ounces, that's seventy cents added to the gross amount of the bill. When you add tax of eight percent and a generous tip of twelve percent to this already outrageous amount, you arrive at a grand total of eighty five cents. Check the math on that if you don't believe me. I'm stealing eighty five cents worth of ice every time they don't charge me for my water. This doesn't even take into account what I'm saving when I decide not to buy a Coke. Two dollars per Coke per visit. Assume fifteen or twenty visits per year and I'm saving about fifty dollars after accounting for tax and tip plus getting a reprieve from a potentially embarrassing eructation. Spread that out over forty or fifty years and invest the savings and I'm a rich man.

Restaurants have a sneaky way of getting you to buy the most expensive items on the menu. They wait until everyone has ordered their meal before they bring out the "free" bread. Most people will order with their stomachs instead of their brain. They'll order a thirty dollar steak, eat too much bread, drink too much pinot noir, and leave precisely ten ounces of USDA Prime Grade A quality beef on their plate. Why would you order that when you can order a side salad for three dollars and fill up on the complimentary comestibles? Those ten ounces of leftovers aren't going to taste nearly as good after sitting in my fridge and then being nuked with a concentrated barrage of microwave radiation.

The microwaves will blast the steak from every conceivable direction, sending the juices bubbling to the surface like simmering radioactive waste. It'll pour over the side onto the plate, leaving a reddish brown residue which makes you question whether this machine of modern man didn't just turn your food into an oozing slab of virulent flesh. And think about the exorbitant fee the electric company is charging you for those two minutes of microwave usage. On a dollar per watt per calorie basis, you're getting robbed blind.

My date is scanning the menu with intense focus. She is a beautiful woman of about five foot seven inches tall. Her auburn hair is styled elegantly, perhaps too elegantly for the occasion, and is suspended just above her shoulders. She's wearing an intoxicating perfume, perhaps Chanel. That would've run her at least fifty dollars, maybe more if she bought it at full price at your typical Nordstrom. I guess I could let it slide if it's a gift, but of course if it's a gift from her mother or sister or uncle or any semi-immediate family member, I think I can assume that there is a certain degree of shared values among them. I trace her body with my eyes and arrive at her olive-toned wrists where there lies a dazzling gold bracelet. I try to maintain my composure. It's just a first date, there's no binding contract here. After all, glimmering jewelry is often given as a gift, this one likely from an ex-lover with a credit score of about five hundred. My eyes move from her wrists to her face where I catch a brief glimpse of a smile which confirms my earlier suspicions. Perfect teeth, white as porcelain. Unless she is part of the tiny minority of people in the United States who have the good fortune of a naturally occurring set of flawless choppers, there's a pretty good chance this woman has had orthodontic work done. There goes another four thousand dollars.

As my eyes move finally to meet hers, my gaze is intercepted by a pair of aesthetically pleasing but financially devastating frames. The lenses are of average thickness, suggesting she has a moderate vision problem. She most likely doesn't wear contact lenses as she probably would've worn them considering how elegantly she is otherwise dressed. She's saving a good chunk of cash each year by forgoing the contacts. The least expensive, yearly contacts would be about a hundred dollars but that's without losing a lens or two along the way and facing a massive replacement fee. The daily lenses are much more expensive, but if she's bad at taking care of the yearly ones, this would be a better option. Let's not forget the potential for infection with the yearly lenses and the resultant medical bills. The pestilent, pus filled sac that sprouts from the corner of her eye because she forgot to take out her contacts before she went to bed costs five hundred dollars to be popped by a lab coat. Even so, her glasses are Ray Ban, suggesting that she could be saving two hundred dollars every five or six years if she had perfect vision. Eating your carrots goes a long way. Just make sure you grow your own as this provides you with the best unit price per pound.

She glances up from the menu, finally, after an apprehensive hesitation. The next several moments are torture as I await my sentencing. If you think of three seconds as a summation of several individual, imperceptible moments that you are largely unconscious of, it makes the agony of the anticipation infinitely more amplified. It is as if each moment is stuck in a capsule where time is nonexistent and the progression from one moment to the next happens by way of an agonizingly slow furtherance of something resembling time but which, due to how slow its moving, I'm certain is not Father Time.



"I'll have the '06 Vermentino, please."

"Glass or bottle, ma'am?"

"The bottle would be great, thanks."

The words come out in a slow, deep voice suggestive of a slow motion video. The smile on her face as she orders resembles the most malevolent form of spite I've ever come across. It's as if she is pleased, thrilled even, at what she has just done. At least she is making her sociopathic tendencies obvious from the start. It sure beats peeling back the layers of her psyche, one by one, only to find that underneath everything is a woman with expensive taste. Seventy fucking dollars for that bottle. What kind of free dating service sets you up at a five star restaurant, anyway? Apparently the service is free, but the date isn't.

"I hope you like Vermentino. I'm a bit of a wine connoisseur. Have you ever been to Tuscany? I try to go at least once every couple of years."

"I've never been. It doesn't seem like a worthwhile investment to me."

"Oh it's worth it! Last year I went to the Chianti Clasico festival. You get to sample wines from all over Italy and they have some really nice, handcrafted wine glasses for sale."

"I prefer to drink my wine out of Dixie cups. The original artwork on each cup is truly fascinating. Do you enjoy paper cup artistry?"

She thinks I'm joking, but I'm so angry I could scream. My heart rate is sky high, sweat leaking from my pores. I need to calm down. The hospital bill from a heart attack is a hundred times what this dinner will cost me.

The waiter promptly returns with the bottle of wine and two handmade glasses, each one at least eighty dollars. I imagine my wallet experiencing some sort of gastrointestinal

distress as its innards are symbolically splattered onto the table like monetary sludge as the waiter pours the golden-emerald liquid into each glass. As I watch her from across the table, she takes a swig of my money and I can almost feel the burn of the alcohol as it courses down her esophagus and into her stomach. She turns to the waiter and nods in approval at the quality of the theft. I didn't order this shit. I need a way out. I top off my glass of wine and chug it down as fast as possible. My eyes water, my throat burns, I even miss my mouth a little as the cool, spirited beverage drips six inches down onto my white cotton shirt. Alcohol stains are tough, and the smell lingers. This shirt didn't cost me a dime, but it'll cost a few dollars to do an extra cycle of laundry to get the stain out.

"Would you please excuse me? I need to use the little boy's room."

I stand up way too fast. For a brief second, I can't see anything but the dark outlines of various objects. Tablecloths, fellow patrons, and eighteenth-century antique chandeliers look like the amorphous blobs psychiatrists use to dig into the subconscious of sex and alcohol addicted patients. It feels like the darkness is encroaching in a circular pattern, the radius of which is getting shorter and shorter. I'm standing in the center of the circle of darkness, staring into oblivion. As it finally consumes me, the darkness dissipates into nothing and the restaurant comes back into view. Dr. Google, whom I make appointments with via the free Starbucks wifi service, calls it orthostatic hypotension and that it's generally nothing to worry about.

I back away from the table quickly, almost knocking my chair into an elderly man with a cane. I quickly apologize to the poor guy and thank whatever divine deity it is that has prevented me from injuring him. Those kinds of

lawsuits are miserable. Attorney's fees, medical expenses, punitive damages, the whole nine yards. If I had knocked him over, I would just pray that the fall kills him. I might do a year for involuntary manslaughter and serve some probation but hell, I'll be up at least twenty thousand dollars.

I amble over to one of the bus boys. He's wearing a silver Gucci watch. He's clearly a lower level employee, early 20's at the latest. He's probably bringing in four hundred a week if he's lucky and he has the audacity to spend two grand on a wristwatch.

"Excuse me, could you point me in the direction of the restroom?"

"It's right around the corner to your left. Don't forget to tip the doorman for his outstanding service."

What kind of soul-sucking establishment is this? Tip the bathroom attendant for his service? I'd prefer he move the fuck out of the way and let me open the door myself.

The bathroom door is an elegant Brazilian Rosewood, five thousand dollars per pound and not legal anymore in the United States. I suppose this place wants people to know what majestic wood looks like as they race the clock to make it to the toilet seat before last night's spaghetti gets replaced by something a little more pricey. There's an equally ostentatious man standing guard outside the bathroom door. Maybe the management feels bad that this bathroom doorman has to smell the wafting odor of lower intestinal fermentation for eight hours and decided to balance it by giving him a nice tree to push open and closed. Something tells me that this man is not an elitist when it comes to what kind of wood his hands have to touch given that they're soiled by trace amounts of bodily fluids from hundreds of patrons. He gives me a scripted hello.

The interior of the bathroom is hardly any less luxurious. The doors to the stalls are all handmade with the maker's initials carved into a gold plated seal at the top. The walls are a polished off-white, lustrous as a jewel and clean enough to eat off of if not for their vertical disposition. The sinks are all made of overpriced marble and complete with hi-tech soap dispensers containing designer soap made to leave you smelling like seductive lavender. Above the urinals are three small cubbies, each containing a display of roses meant to make the act a little more bearable. It's like I just left the real world and entered into an alternate universe where the most revered of all human activities is urination. Those who have the good fortune of being blessed with a small bladder are adored like professional athletes for their uniquely superhuman bathroom exploits.

I can't help but feel overwhelmed by the excessive use of overpriced items in a room meant to contain the most primal of all human functions. I run into the red mahogany stall and sit down, willing myself to calm down when I hear two men talking outside. Apparently the soap dispenser is out of soap. I recognize one of the voices as the bathroom doorman.

"You know sir, this is some of the finest soap in the northern hemisphere. Imported directly from Paris. It's a delicate herbal blend with aloe vera for moisturizing, green fresh water algae for replenishing, and organic jasmine flowers for a brilliant aroma. Luckily, our restaurant has a deal with the supplier. You won't find it for less than a hundred a bottle online."

As I listen to the invigorating exchange unfold, I idly wonder how much of the cost of that soap gets passed on to my meal. Through the crack, I can see that the doorman has a massive stash of soap underneath the sink in a

compartment. He shuts the compartment and walks off, failing to realize that he forgets to lock it.

There are some moments in your life where you succumb to the belief in a divine power, whether it be an omnipotent, benevolent God or a new age philosophy of subjective reality and the potential to create something out of nothing. It's as if a heavenly yellow light is pouring over me and showering me with love and good fortune. I can visualize the door to the compartment opening and the Holy Grail, the essence of life, and the crux of the universe waiting on the other side: zero cost, and one hundred percent profits.

I wait for the other two men to leave and I make my way over to the sink. My foot strikes the compartment with precision and it swings open. It's comfortable to kneel down given the lush carpeting, atypical of a restaurant bathroom. To my delight there are exactly nine eight-ounce bottles of the fine herb-infused hand soap. I stuff them inside my shirt. The bottles hang down around my belt like clunky love handles. I can't help but be giddy with excitement over the cash I'm going to make selling these at just below retail price on the internet. Nine homes between San Diego and Boston are going to be replete with the finest hand soap money can buy. I'll be nine-hundred dollars wealthier.

I get back on my feet. Whoa, the wine is starting to hit me. I've never understood why a standard glass of wine is considered to be just six ounces yet the size of the glass itself is usually twelve or fifteen. Perhaps there's a sense of sophistication about the look and feel of a glass that is just half full. Or perhaps there is a sense of sophistication that comes with the asking of the question, is the glass half empty or half full? Perhaps people stand around debating this crucial issue while sipping on their beverage and inevitably reducing the amount of liquid in the glass to well below half. The

question then is if the glass is one fourth full or three fourths empty? I have to wonder if the people debating this are consistent and adaptive to the ever-changing ratio of wine to empty space within the glass. And then when there is no wine left in the glass, is the glass empty or is it full of nothing? Perhaps the entire philosophical debate could die a merciful death if wine glasses were an appropriate fucking size.

The answers to these questions will likely never be known to anyone outside the artificial arena of wine-connoisseur elitism. The only person I can think of who would possibly know anything about that is—

My date. Shit.

My escape back to the table is difficult. I push through the bathroom door like an angry bull with my head down and horns pointed out. My eyes don't even glance at the sorry doorman to my left. People will always leave you alone if you look like you're on a mission. They'll naturally assume it's a mission to save someone's life and with your head down in determination, they will never question you. It helps tremendously if the assumed mission is to save a princess from an incomprehensibly large and angry ape that has developed the skills required to throw large barrels at a curious looking Italian plumber donning a red hat. Of course, each attempt at undertaking such a mission requires a hefty fee of fifty cents. You can't possibly complete the mission in just one attempt. It inevitably becomes a finance-dwindling affair fit only for the ultra-talented and the ultra-rich.

My date greets my return with a curious look. The soap bottles are not exactly comfortable. If the shirt hadn't been too long, the weight from the soap would have pulled the tails out from my belt and caused the Great Soap Heist and Spill Disaster of 2012.

I can sense immediately that something isn't right. She's looking at me oddly. She better not have any ideas about trying to split the profits.

"Are you okay? You were gone quite a while. I don't want people to think I came here alone."

"Can you put these in your handbag? I don't want my new inventory to get confiscated."

"Huh?"

I don't even bother to answer her. I crouch down beside her chair and empty the contents of my shirt into her handbag and watch the expression on her face change from apprehension to curiosity to bewilderment. What is she so puzzled about? I was only gone for ten minutes. Maybe she's puzzled by her shameful vintage lambskin tote being opened by a relative stranger on a first date. But I can't just put the soap on the table.

"What are you doing? Please stop, people are staring."

"Whatever. I'm going to need those back when we leave."

My glass has been refilled. I top it off once again to the twelve ounce line and inhale more of the liquid gold that has both given and taken from me tonight. I can feel the treasured elixir comingling with my gastric juices to form an unholy concoction that is surely ripping apart my stomach lining. Small amounts of blood are trickling into my duodenum. The sustained leakage will cause a localized immune response deep in my small intestine. The wall of my intestine will break down from the onslaught of feisty neutrophils. Alcohol molecules will seep directly into my blood stream through the compromised intestinal wall. I'll often awake in the middle of the night, sweaty, anxious, and writhing in pain from the permanent damage sustained on this evening. I'll go from free clinic to free clinic, begging the doctors for a diagnosis. Some will say it's a serious case of irritable bowel

syndrome. Others will tell me I'm fine and that I have too much stress in my life. Alternative practitioners will advise me to chew on raw garlic cloves or go on a twelve-day juice fast.

The waiter approaches with a purposeful look on his face, anxious about our failure to order yet. The menu sits in front of me, looking more and more like a pit with perfect dollar-bill-shaped flames emerging from it. Each of the menu sections is labeled with an appropriate cringe-inducing pun. Flame Broiled Burglars, one pound of premium angus beef here to steal your hard earned cash. The Flying Spaghetti Monster, he kidnaps former US Presidents from the leather bound pouch in your back pocket. Loan Sharks, free range seafood with a big appetite for risk. Don't forget to order a Sappetizer, the critical first strike that saps your defenses against high prices.

I refill my glass. Anything to numb the feeling deep in my gut over what's about to transpire. She's eyeing the menu with a sardonic grin on her face. Yeah, I bet the filet mignon does look pretty damn good. You'd like that wouldn't you? She's going to send me over my limit. I try to summon up my psychic energies. Maybe telepathy exists; you just have to believe, right? It's possible that my nervous energy gives off a specific vibration which could be received and interpreted by her subconscious mind. Depending on her disposition toward me, she'll then unknowingly make a decision whether to appease my pleading or to willfully ignore it. And then, "Caesar salad, please."

\$25. That brings the bill to ninety-five dollars before tax and tip.

My turn. I've narrowed my choice down to three different items, each with their own positives and negatives. First, there is the side salad. It's the cheapest item on the



entire menu at just \$10. It'll create a large buffer zone in the event my date decides to order dessert. The desserts range from \$15 for the chocolate mousse to \$30 for the cheesecake complete with organic seasonal fruit. The menu brags that the fruit comes from a nearby orchard as if this fact might entice patrons to order such an exorbitantly priced item. If I order something other than the side salad and she orders the cheesecake, I'm in trouble. The downside is that my date also ordered a salad, so her leftovers won't be substantial enough to satiate my appetite. I'll have to rely on the generosity of the restaurant to keep fulfilling my requests for complimentary bread. Nice places like these, though, are pretty stingy when it comes to the bread. The novelty of attending the restaurant, its atmosphere, and the presentation of the food are meant to be their selling points. Nobody is going to come here for the portion sizes.

My second option is the clam chowder. It's a sappetizer, and a bit pricier at \$14. The main drawback is that restaurants are so inconsistent in the quality of their clam chowder. Some will load it up with clams and it'll be enough to satisfy the most voracious of appetites. Others will leave you wondering why the water you just drank was so damn salty. If it turns out to be the latter, I'll be unsatisfied and down an additional two dollars. But if it's the former, I'm looking at a solid dessert buffer and a satisfied appetite.

My third and final option is I order nothing and fill up on wine. The bottle is still about three-quarters full or one-fourth empty. I'm already dropping seventy bones on it, so I might as well get my money's worth. My date is enjoying smelling it, swirling it, swishing it, gargling it, splashing it on her wrists like perfume, and various other activities which include not drinking it.

"Option three, please."

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't know what you mean."

"I'll have the third of the three options I just listed."

"But you didn't list anything. You didn't even say anything. You just stared at your menu."

What the hell is going on? Didn't I just say that out loud? The inner workings of my mind are blending with reality. Thoughts become auditory hallucinations.

"I'll have nothing. Could you bring some bread and butter over here, please? Extra butter if you don't mind."

The waiter turns around and walks off, muttering something under his breath. He's probably frustrated at his lack of hearing. The waiter's best years, physically, are behind him and it would not surprise me to see him dropping five or ten thousand dollars on hearing aids in the near future.

While I wait, I distract from myself from the date by swallowing another twelve or fifteen ounces of wine. Three glasses down; thirty-six or forty-five ounces. This glass feels a little more golden. The light from above is so bright. It shines through the glass like the sun does through a magnifying glass on a hot day. I hold it above the tiny ants that are crawling all over the table. They must wonder why the light from above is so hot. To their brains, it seems like the whole world is burning up in a fiery explosion. They don't have to worry about things like credit scores, bank loans, electric bills, and gas prices. Their main concern, aside from finding a reliable source of food for the whole colony, is finding refuge from the unbearably hot incandescent light up above. These ants actually don't look too bad. Humans have evolved to eat insects. They were a major source of sustenance for millennia. I'm not positive what the normal ceiling-light-wine-glass roasting time for an ant is, but I like my ants extra crispy. I finally look up. Here comes the inquisition.

"Are you not going to eat anything?"

"No, of course I'm going to eat. I'll have the free bread. Oh and these ants."

I lick my lips in anticipation of the coming feast. The ants have been roasting under the glass for a while now. Surely they've reached a good golden brown hue. I have to wonder if an undercooked ant gets ingested, is there any chance of its survival? Is there a chance that the ant could endure my compromised digestive tract? If it could, would the hole in my lower intestine be big enough for an eager ant to crawl through? Would the ant feed on my blood and lay eggs along the edges of my arteries? Would these eggs hatch? Is there a chance these new ants could lead to the evolution, through the ingestion of human blood, of a much stronger and larger breed of ants? The ants could then eat their way out of my body by devouring my vital organs and muscle tissue. When they reach the surface of the skin, they'll poke their feelers through. Their feelers will have evolved digestive systems of their own, independent of the rest of the ant. This will create an unbelievably disease-resistant creature capable of devastating the human race as we know it. So for the good of humanity, I better make sure that I cook these ants.

"Do you want any?"

"What ants? I don't see any ants. I'm sure you'd be hard-pressed to find an infestation problem in a restaurant like this. Excuse me, I need to use the restroom."

Alright. Go use the restroom while I fester here and eat these—wait, where'd they go? The pristine white tablecloth shows absolutely no sign of insect life. Have they been scooped up by another hungry visitor? I should have been guarding them with my life. They're supposed to be my dinner, my sustenance, my precious nourishment. Replacing them is not an option; ant colonies are a scam and the shipping costs are filthy. I'll have to pick some out of my

garden when I get home and throw them under the magnifying glass in the morning. It'll be eggs and ants for breakfast.

The waiter returns, his left hand clutching a basketful of bread and butter while his right is bawled into a tight fist. The bread basket has eight slices of seven-grain bread. Bullshit, I can only count six grains. Wheat, rye, oat, corn, barley, and millet. I can't help but be enraged by this unjust deception. When I come to a restaurant, I expect consistency between how the bread is described and what the bread actually consists of.

I grab a slice. There are ten packets of butter in the basket. I pocket all but two; my butter supply for the week. I peel back the shiny plastic cover, exposing the thick white lard. Clutching a slice of bread in my left hand and a knife in the right, my rage begins to boil over. I squeeze the bread like a stress ball. Or stress bread. I squeeze harder. Quantum physics suggests that atoms are comprised mostly of empty space. The appearance of solid objects is simply an illusion. I keep squeezing. If you squeeze empty space hard enough, the space will implode into itself. Finally, after an intense struggle, the bread implodes and turns to dust.

Shit. More wine. I notice raised lettering on the glass. "12 fl oz." I gulp down my umpteenth glass of wine of the night. Oops. Acid reflux takes over and I'm teetering on the precipice of seventy dollar vomit and a hangover. The wine begins pouring out of my ears. A shallow puddle of golden yellow booze fills the room, wall to wall. I imagine as a kid I would be excited about the prospect of frolicking around in shallow water in the middle of a restaurant. It continues to pour out; the faucet is broken. The carpeting is surely stained and I'll be getting a bill for it to be cleaned.

The waiter returns, trudging through my auricular waste, this time with a serious look of concern on his usually bland face.

“Sir, your acquaintance has instructed me to inform you that she has left the premises for the evening. A cab is on its way to bring you home. Also, your theft has been reported to management and the soap returned to the bathroom. We hope you’re aware that this is grounds for permanent banishment from the restaurant. Here’s the check, please be prompt with your payment and your exit.”

\$99. And my precious soap. I can’t believe she turned me in. Her loss: I’m certainly never going out with her again. My only consolation is the twenty-five dollar salad sitting across from me.

I take out my leather-bound wallet from my back pocket. I struggle with the combination, turning the knob ten or fifteen times from right to left, left to right. Is it 23, 45, 10 or is it 32, 10, 54? Which finger do I put into the fingerprint scanner? Is it my thumb or index finger? Does ADT have a customer service line I can call?

I decide to smash it on the table. It cracks open, and from the crack emerges a thick black smoke. The whole thing is fried. I pry it open with my hands. Sifting through the various cards, I finally land on the one I’m looking for: a one-hundred-fifty dollar gift card. Perfect. The night isn’t so bad after all. I place it on the check and sit back and relax.

“Sir, this gift card expired in 2003. I’m terribly sorry, but you’ll have to find some other way to pay.”

WHAT?! EXPIRED?! NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO! I need to get out of here. I decide to make a run for it.

I back the chair up as fast as I can through the sludge-like carpeting. I bolt toward the door. Too fast. Here comes

the darkness. My brain is struggling, gasping for blood flow. The light above me is unbearably bright as the darkness encroaches on me in a circular pattern from the sides. Staring into the abyss I see the vivid outline of serpent-like creatures, molded into the shape of an S. They're sneering at me, content to see me suffering. My senses have become disoriented; I'm unaware where the door is. My feet are somehow managing to land beneath my body by the grace of pure chance. Dr. Google calls it orthostatic hypotension and that it's generally nothing to worry about.

Unless you're under the influence of alcohol.

The serpents are getting closer. The circle of darkness begins to consume me, assimilating my body into the gloom. The serpents are getting closer. The circle of darkness begins to consume me, assimilating my body into the gloom. There's no way out now. I would read tomorrow in the Sunday newspaper that a man in one of the city's finest dining establishments suffered a fatal head injury after attempting to leave without paying. Unfortunately, the Sunday paper costs two dollars.

**CHARACTERS** *Aubrey Richey*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

ask her about  
her characters  
she has a family  
of fictional characters  
living inside  
of her head  
(well, they live by the beach, but—)  
it's not schizophrenia  
they're just  
ideas  
daydreams  
she was going to write  
a novel about them  
but she never did  
she said she didn't like  
the way her writing sounded  
so they just stayed put  
inside of her head  
i know  
it's weird  
but i've met them and  
they're just as real  
as you and me  
you should  
ask her about  
the one  
who drowned

**THE WORST THING** *Aubrey Richey*

the worst thing  
anyone  
has ever  
told me—  
(might sound  
slightly ridiculous  
but it has always  
stuck with me  
in the worst way)  
an anonymous note  
was left on my doorstep  
it read:  
You Are Too Beautiful For This World  
written out in  
shaky hand writing  
and i know  
they meant no harm by it  
so how  
could it be  
a bad thing?  
such a strange compliment  
made me feel very alone  
very different, very isolated  
unsettling, really  
'too beautiful  
for this world'?  
that's the kind of phrase  
we toss around  
when some lost soul  
has gone and  
damn well  
committed suicide



**WHAT A NICE DAY** *Matthew J. Spireng*

The sun is out after nearly a week of rain  
and it's in the mid-50s before nine on its way  
to the 70s. Greece and whether it will

leave the Eurozone are worrying the world,  
markets abroad sharply down, U.S. markets  
poised to open lower. In Afghanistan,

a suicide bomber will kill himself  
and others and maim several for life.  
A blowout on the Interstate will claim

a mother and child, and in Montana  
a magnificent bull elk will be killed  
by a pickup whose elderly driver

never hunted in his life. Children will die  
in every nation on Earth, some after  
starving for weeks. But here, now, the sun

is out after nearly a week of rain, and  
yesterday death was happening as it is  
today, the markets were down, and it rained.

**SUNRISE, HEAD OF THE MEADOW BEACH,  
CAPE COD** *Matthew J. Spireng*

A striped bass flops feebly on the sand  
where a fisherman in the surf has left it  
while casting for more. It is this fish's  
last morning on Earth. If sunrise meant

anything to it, it will never again. It will be  
rinsed in the same surf it came from of the  
sand on its silver scales, in its blood-red gills,  
and carried to a car to be taken, opened, emptied

scaled and filleted, frozen or cooked then,  
and eaten. But for now it is barely alive  
as it flops in the sand, the sun just up  
out of the ocean, brightening, for a moment, its eye.

## BECOMING VENUS *Kathryn Brightney*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

THE CUTS ON JEAN'S ARMS ARE THIN, wire-like lines now. She hasn't taken a blade to her flesh in three weeks and it's all her sister's fault. What did Elizabeth know? How could she do this to her? Why did she have to go and tell their mom, a woman who never gave a damn about her own children after the loss of her husband? Didn't Liz know that these cuts were Jean's only reprieve? That they were the only time Jean ever felt something other than grief?

These thoughts and more are dominating Jean's mind, causing the dark frown on her face to deepen. It's only when she feels warm water against her pale stomach that the seventeen year old realizes the tub is overflowing with water. She swears softly under her breath and turns the faucets off. Reaching into the tub to pull out the plug sends more water onto the tile floor, but Jean ignores it, waiting for enough water to flow out until it reaches a normal level. Once she finishes, she places her awkward, bony body into the water and sighs, looking up at the single light illuminating the entire bathroom. Before Jean can lift her arm to look at her scars again, there is a sharp knock on the cream painted door.

"Jean, are you in there?"

Jean looks at the dark shadow peeking out under the door and frowns. She knows she has to answer right away or her sister will get worried. Or worse, she'll call their mother.

"Yes, I'm here, Liz. I'm taking a bath."

"Oh. Can I come in?"

*What, so you can spy on me?* Jean bites her lip hard before the bitter, scathing words could escape her lips. She may be alone with her sister, but that didn't mean Elizabeth wouldn't tell on her. Her sister is only ten after all.

"Yeah, you can come in."

The door opens as she reaches for her shampoo, Elizabeth's small frame slipping through the doorway. Her sister sits on the toilet and doesn't say a word, only staring at the black and white tiles of the floor. Jean runs a hand through her soap soaked hair, and then submerges, letting the suds float out across the water. When she rises from the depths of the bath water, her sister has a question for her.

"Sis, your school dance is coming up, right?"

"Elizabeth, it's the end of March right now. The junior prom comes at the end of April. It won't be for another month. How do you know about it anyway? You've never been to my school."

"Mom's newsletter had an advertisement about it."

"Great."

Jean pulls her washcloth off of the hook in the wall, gnashing a bar of soap into it.

"Are you going to go?" Elizabeth asks.

Jean snorts through her nose as she runs the washcloth across her chest.

"No. Why would I do that?"

"It's a big school dance. Mom says they're the best things you'll ever go to."

Jean has to hold her tongue so that her rant on the unfulfilling clichés of prom won't come spilling out. Her hatred would be wasted on her sister.

"I'm not interested."

"But, you love to dance."

"Used to," Jean corrects silently.

"Please think about it?" Elizabeth asks, eyes beginning to reflect the feeling behind her pleading words.

"Fine." Jean turns her hazel eyes onto Elizabeth and tilts her head as she takes in her sister's clothes. The fleece lined pants and thick jacket signal a journey outside.

"Going somewhere?"

"Yeah. You have the best view to see Venus right before the sun goes down. I'm going to go to the park to look at it."

"I see."

"Are you coming with me? Mom can't and none of my friends want to come."

Jean looks into her sister's earnest blue-green eyes and she can see their father inside the mixing colors. Their father: a man who always came home smelling of pine and peppermint. His hard, calloused hands always dried tears and patched torn dresses. His arms were always full of sugary sweets and thick books. His heart was too big for his body, his light shined too brightly—so the world put it out. Their father's love was the core of their family; without it, they were a barely functioning machine. Jean would know. Her father wasn't the only thing she lost that day.

"Jean?"

Jean blinks, returning from the depths of her thoughts to Elizabeth's questioning, hopeful look. A soft sigh passes her lips, but she nods.

"Sure. I'll go with you. It's a chance to get out of the house anyway."

The smile that breaks out across Elizabeth's lips is dazzling and as she begins to speak, Jean turns away, a small frown on her lips. It's not until her sister falls silent that she realizes that she's washing her arms and her fading cuts are exposed. The sight of the marks makes Jean's fingers twitch and her flesh tingle, as if in anticipation of a blade breaking the surface. Damn. She submerges her arm in the bath water, curling it against her stomach. The nerves in her arms feel like they've been rubbed raw; hypersensitive and aching. Jean bites her lip as she presses her arm further against abdomen. All of her blades may be gone, but she can easily

break ones of her mother's razors apart and start fresh. It doesn't matter if her mom has hidden them. The house isn't that big.

"Jean,"

"What?" Jean's voice is sharp as it leaves her throat and Elizabeth flinches.

"Mom's working late again tonight. What are we having for dinner?"

Jean looks at the window by the radiator, taking note of the slowly dimming light coming through the semi-frozen panes.

"The sun is going to set soon. We'll get pizza on the way to the park."

"Okay! I'll go get my stuff ready!"

Elizabeth runs out of the bathroom so fast she forgets to close the door behind her. Jean growls softly under her breath, but makes no effort to get out of the tub. Instead, she looks back at her cuts and traces her fingers over them. A pang of disappointment consumes her body as she notices that there aren't any more scabs for her to pick. No matter. She can easily slip away from Elizabeth while at the pizza parlor, sneak into the convenience store next door, buy razors, and take them home to renew her practice. Jean finally lifts herself from the tub and grabs the towel from the floor, formulating her escape plan as she begins to dry herself off.

The pizza parlor is packed on Saturdays, just as Jean has hoped for. The dining section is completely full—no one will be able to eat inside tonight. Not unless they want to wait for a half hour or more. Waiters and waitresses are buzzing around the tables, hurriedly taking orders and delivering meals. A child who has just knocked over his drink is

crying in his booster seat; his table located by the take out windows. Dozens upon dozens of people are crowding the ordering stations and no one is budging in the chance they might lose their spot in line. Elizabeth's telescope serves as a shield on her back so no one can get too close to her, but it's her grip on Jean that serves as the ultimate protection. Jean rolls her eyes and ignores her sister's thin fingers curling further into the depths of her black sweatshirt, wishing something would happen in order for her to make her escape. Maybe she can hand Elizabeth the necessary money and whisper a quick word about the bathroom before slipping away to the convenience store. The line isn't moving very quickly and Elizabeth is old enough to give pizza orders herself. There isn't a reason why her sister should be clinging to her so.

A loud giggle makes its way to Jean's ears and she turns, staring at the girl in the next line making the sound. She recognizes the girl as one of the popular divas from school and she feels the color leave her cheeks. Jean hurriedly pushes her long, caramel colored hair away from her ears so that it falls into her face, obscuring it from view. Peeking at the girl again through her hair, she takes in the girl's tight white t-shirt and short jean skirt; both items of clothing emphasizing the curvy figure Jean secretly coveted.

Jean frowns as she looks at her own attire—black sweatshirt, black jeans and black sneakers. Her wardrobe has been drained of color since the passing of her father and now, whenever her mother asks why, the previous reason—mourning her dad—is only a half lie. Her clothes are her shields; her defenses against her ever judgmental classmates. They didn't always work, but they serve their purpose all the same. Handling her classmates in school is one battle. Encountering them outside of school is another. Different

visions of the school idol discovering her with Elizabeth manifest themselves in Jean's mind, all of them resulting in humiliation and increased self loathing.

*'Look at her! She looks like she hasn't seen the sun in years! Even black can't save her figure and it's supposed to be flattering on everyone!'*

*'Is that Jean or a racoon in a hoodie?'*

*'Don't stare at her for too long; you might catch her ugly disease!'*

*'Have you looked in a mirror lately? Your make up is so heavy, you look like a drag queen!'*

*'I heard that after her Math teacher looked at her too long, he got the flu! Hear that? He got sick 'cause she's so damn ugly!'*

Jean's frown darkens and she closes her eyes tight against the onslaught of past remarks. It's enough already that Jean thinks she's hideous—there's no need for someone else to confirm it for her.

"Jean, we're next," Elizabeth whispers, bringing Jean out of her reveries. With a gasp, she looks up, confirming Elizabeth's words—the person in front of them was giving his order. Jean stares at his back in shock. How did the line suddenly dissolve so quickly? Was she really that deep in thought? There is no way she could sneak away from her sister now. Jean can feel her stomach sink in disappointment and regret, but she can't let it show on her face. She didn't want Elizabeth to notice. Instead, Jean focuses on ordering their food, asking Elizabeth what she wants. After her little sister orders a small pepperoni pizza, Jean orders a salad. She ignores the questioning look from Elizabeth and pays the cashier. She may not have control over her cutting anymore, but she does have control over her food choices.



Elizabeth insists that they sit at the top of the hill that overlooks the park, claiming that the height lets her see the sky better. Jean rolls her eyes, but follows her spirited sister up the slope, carrying their food in both hands. Once they reach the top, Elizabeth is kind enough to lay the fleece blanket on the grass before beginning to set up her telescope. It is one of her treasures, as it was given to her by their father. It has yet to receive a scratch on it and the color is still the same deep shade of navy blue it had been when it first came out of its packaging; no peeling or dullness. Elizabeth hasn't gone star gazing in months, but the ritual of setting up the telescope passes without any delay. It's only after she has positioned the telescope to face the area where Venus would appear that Elizabeth sits beside her sister. She opens her pizza box with excited delight and eagerly begins to devour her dinner. Jean, meanwhile, silently picks at her salad; her appetite has long fled since spotting her classmate.

"I think you should wear a yellow dress," Elizabeth declares, her voice muffled by bits of chewed pizza. Jean doesn't answer, moving her gaze to her pants.

"It should be like the color of mom's rings," Elizabeth continues after swallowing the remains of her pizza slice.

Jean remains unresponsive. She is trying to think up another plan to get her hands on something sharp. She can't use the kitchen knives. They're too big and too obvious. She supposes she could use scissors, but then she would have to break them so she can control the angle of her cuts. Accidental stabbing is not exactly what she has in mind.

"Sis, did you know that Venus is named after a goddess of beauty?" Elizabeth asks.

"Yeah," Jean finally answers, trying to keep her feelings of annoyance hidden.

“Venus is a pretty planet, despite its size. Dad used to say it brings out the beauty in the people who see it.”

Jean rolls her eyes. Her sister did have a knack for believing in both meteor showers and unicorns. This fact is even more true whenever Elizabeth cites their father as a source of knowledge. She turns to look at Elizabeth, only to find her holding out a hair pin. The pin is in the shape of a shooting star, completely outlined in glittering crystals.

“What’s this?”

“I got it for you. You can wear it in your hair when you go to the dance.”

Jean’s eyes darken and she frowns, staring at the pin with a hard gaze.

“The sales lady said it’s magical. Whoever wears it will have their inner beauty come out, just like when people look at Venus.”

Jean looks away.

“I’m not beautiful.”

“You are!” Elizabeth cries, holding tight onto the pin. “You’re very beautiful! You just hide it! You hide your looks with your hair and your clothes. Then you have those marks—”

Jean feels her pulse skip a beat and she lowers her eyes further, her hands moving to pull the sleeves of her sweat-shirt tight.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“No, I wouldn’t. Mom told me that. But I could see how they made her sad and that means it’s bad. Jean, why would you do that? How can you do that?”

Jean doesn’t answer, raising her eyes no further than the level of the hair pin still held out to her. Elizabeth stares at her for a moment, then sighs, taking her sister’s hand and

pulling it towards her. She places the pin into Jean's hand carefully, forcing her fingers closed over it.

"Sis, you haven't smiled since Dad died. If he was here, he would be sad to see you like this. I don't want him to be sad and I don't want you to be sad. All I want is to see you smile again. That's all."

Elizabeth looks to the sky and, noticing a bright light in the starry abyss, stands up from the blanket. She begins to walk to the telescope, but stops, turning back to look at Jean.

"I'm actually really happy," she giggles, causing Jean's eyes to clash with hers. "That pin is worth three weeks of allowance. I haven't spent that much money before!"

Jean's eyes widen and her breath hitches, watching her sister turn away to look into the telescope.

"I can see Venus!" Elizabeth exclaims, gazing into the telescope lens.

"It's so beautiful!"

Jean looks at the shooting star pin, noticing how brightly it shines in the remaining rays of the sun. It is truly a delicate piece and it deserves to be treated with care. Her bottom lip quivers as a stinging sensation creeps through her eyes and the words of her sister keep echoing in her mind. It's true. Her father has been the root of the problem. He wasn't supposed to go yet. Not when Jean needed him so desperately. He was the only one who could dispel her fears of inadequacy. His gentle words of encouragement and kindness were the balm against the emotional wounds inflicted on her by her classmates. Jean had never realized how much she relied on her father to rebuild her shattered self-esteem. After he had died, her mother began to work so much that Jean barely saw her. She no longer had an outlet to express the pain she went through at school, which allowed the dark, empty feeling inside of her to grow.

The tears in Jean's eyes slide down her cheeks and she covers her mouth, a sob escaping her lips. She can't understand why Elizabeth would look up to her, admire her; love her. She is anything but a role model. Jean stands up and walks over to her sister, more tears falling with every step. She wraps her arms around Elizabeth's waist and buries her face into her sister's small back, ignoring the chill of the jacket against her skin.

As her skin adjusts to the temperature of her sister's body, Jean pictures a gymnasium decorated in cool, fresh colors of blues, greens, and yellows. A banner announcing the theme of the dance hangs over the stage. The lighting of the gym is dim enough to set the tone of the evening as extraordinary and a sparkling disco ball spins silently on the ceiling. Finally, Jean enters the room through the set of double doors and gazes upon the room in wonder. She is wearing a dress whose color is reminiscent of soft candlelight. Silver heels glimmer on her feet and thin bangles jingle on her naked wrists. The makeup on her face is subtle; only emphasizing the shape of her eyes, the swell of her cheek, and the curve of her lips. Her hair is curled around her neck and is devoid of any decoration save for a lone pin in the shape of a shooting star.

It's a start.

ACQUAINTANCE *Amanda Centrella*

I'm learning to love parting words;

    Goodbyes are things more curious than  
casual greetings,

    Than sometimes-embraces—even the mystery that is a  
hand-shake.

That I can hold some vague You-Concept in the dip of  
my eye,

    And all past interaction, internally catalogued, is flung  
across the garage of my mind

    Files strewn with the details of conversations, some-  
thing about a neighbor, your eyebrows  
    the coat you wear  
    a book mentioned once

All compiled in some strange mental web, spidering out  
and around in frightening, seeming-fragility

    But that being its secret strength.

    Furious re-knitting of veiny, fibrous tubules whipping  
round to form the shape of your perceived character instan-  
taneously,

    My brain takes the cue from an undetermined catalyst.  
    This is Magic.

We create the context in which we exist, enabling our  
absurd communication—

Still, in the midst of that casual intimacy I bid you farewell.

We are each other's half-formed creation and yet

    We can walk away.

**SILHOUETTE** *Mason Sciotti*

Your shadow dances in the moonlight  
A silhouette, form where there is nothing  
Is this what's left of us?

My heart was a strongbox,  
But the lock wasn't strong enough.  
Everything was robbed; they left a note.  
Only a note where love once was  
Is this what's left of us?

A box of trinkets and tattered papers  
Stained with tears, watercolor paintings  
With only one color, jet black ink.  
Ink and paper, black and white  
Shadow and light, Hopeless and Hopeful?  
A dichotomy stemming from a paradigm shift  
A change that no one saw coming,  
Is this what's left of us?

Letters of love filled with letters of love  
They won't catch fire as we once did  
Ashes.  
Is **THIS** what's left of us?

Dust we are made of, to dust we shall return  
Dust and ashes, black and white  
Brown pigments, black pigments  
Red pigments of my own.

Is this what's left of us?

## TOM, JOHNNY, AND ME *C.J. Hobbs*

FICTION  
POETRY  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
INTERVIEW

MY BROTHER NEVER LOCKED HIS APARTMENT DOOR. Didn't need to. Him and Johnny, they didn't bother. See, my brother Tom and his buddy Johnny lived in Brooklyn, City Line to be exact about the neighborhood. It was a mixed-breed sorta place. From the Italians to the Africans, the Irishmen to the Mexicans, he lived within the perpetual chaos of different races attempting to take over the same block, building by building and business by business. Burning in the melting pot. Money and violence, they went hand in hand.

Tom, he lived right beside one of the housing projects in a decrepit second story walk-up. The kind with not just multiple unpainted boards missing from well-worn stairs heading up to the front door, but a rusty fire escape ladder in the alleyway that always slid down from a platform below the duct-taped bathroom window. If you were strong enough to pull the top rung loose with a running jump. Tom said the place had character and substance. I said it had bed bugs and asbestos. We were both right. He acquired the apartment from an old friend I never met. Someone who had to get out of town fast. Whether he had some sort of landlord he paid or was actually squatting, I couldn't tell you. Kinda neighborhood it didn't matter and no one asked.

Tom's one tiny bedroom was all they had so Johnny was left sleeping on a bare mattress on the kitchen floor. When he woke up, he'd just lean the ratty, twin-sized mattress back up against the kitchen wall and throw his blanket in the closet. Still Johnny didn't mind. He was down on his luck and needing a place to stay and Tom made him a key. Rent musta been reasonable, utilities cheap.

Johnny was better off than he woulda been at his girl's. That bitch never shut up about his habits. Kicked Johnny out one night for good. Coulda been the way he pushed uppers to the whole neighborhood, leaving hoodrats knocking on her door. Coulda been the way he pushed junk into his arm on the regular. Not my place to know. Bitch had her own problems with the juice and that's all Johnny ever told me.

Between entry-level jobs, he panhandled and pushed. At 24 and without an education beyond 10th grade, no one cut the Bronx boy a break. Then again I swear he thought he made his own hours. Said he was destined for bigger things. Gig after gig didn't work out, and that's all he'd say.

Only Tom seemed to understand him, you know, really get his nature. The disorganized things he's say, the societally strange ways he acted. One Sunday morning Tom and I found him lying belly-down on the kitchen floor, wearing only his boxers, repeatedly asking the refrigerator for directions to Manhattan's Carnegie Hall in broken Spanish. Tom came home once to discover Johnny spent the day copping One Way signs, specifically the signs pointing right. Johnny had nailed them to the drywall, haphazardly covering most of the wall space in the apartment. Tom was the one to get Johnny his clothes, to take the signs down from the walls, to clean him up.

Tom had grown accustomed to the drug-induced ramblings and retellings of the previous night's wild adventure, coupled with the afternoons they'd relax in the apartment without speaking a word. There'd be nights when Tom would cook a modest dinner, they'd smoke cigarettes, and they'd play cards without any words exchanged. They had a quiet dignity about them. A fierce loyalty that went back to their days on the project basketball courts of the Bronx. A silent understanding. The way we were all raised, it was



always better to not ask questions. Or better yet, to not open your mouth.

You don't prod, you don't question because you might not wanna know. A few years back I asked Johnny why he walked into the apartment bleeding from the ear and forehead, shirt crusted red.

"Few neighborhoods down. Loose-assed trick. Fuck poor service. Don't pay for pussy worth shit." Didn't say more than that and I didn't ask again.

Johnny only really opened up to me once more, that night a couple winters ago. I was at the place, straight from school to hang. Waiting for Tom to get outa work, only an hour or so later. Johnny railed some crystal off the counter and just let his mouth flap all over the place. First it was the government, and then it was his first dog, then the height of the sidewalk, then the top button on his worn, flannel shirt. The kid bounced. I never asked what the powder was, just assumed.

It made him run spirals in the apartment, jump his eyes all around, grind his crooked teeth. His hyped up brain had him rattle off random words that somehow formed fragmented sentences with meaning. Sentences that didn't end or begin, just continued on intertwining with any new thoughts. This was the night Johnny got deep. Swaying, bouncing into the bathroom door, he started explaining his father, the violent dick. How he left before Johnny started school. How hungry he grew up under a single mom that woulda rather scored than feed him. His first time panhandling to make money for food? Age eleven. I watched this kid, this 140 pound man with eclipses for eyes, he pressured little speeches out his mouth in clips and jumps, always backtracking to clarify his thoughts or fill in gaps along the way.

He shook, he clawed at his frost-nipped cuticles, he told me how he got to dropping outa high school to get stoned

and make fast cash. The drugs, they made him chatty. But it was his stressfully cold day on the sidewalks and in the alleys that left him riled, delighted to have me there to nod and listen. Tryin'a get by took a toll on a man, he told me. This one-sided conversation went on for at least an hour before Tom walked in.

"You need to leave," he said, short and even. And I did. Tried not to argue with my brother. Tom walked into the bedroom and I walked out the front door. Kicked through the gritty snow and took the C train to my transfer back home, thinking of Johnny. Tom didn't like people seeing his buddies like that. He didn't like me around for anything more illegal than a few beers, maybe some bud here and there. Protective.

I tried to argue against his kickin' me out of the room for fascinating conversations when I was a kid, before eventually realizing it was futile. This Russian junkie turned part-time dealer, I still remember him standing over the table in my mother's dimly lit kitchen, talking numbers to Tom. Both were looking at a package wrapped in brown paper, only about the size of a deck of cards, resting on the plate of a triple beam balance. Tom, he asked me to get to the room we shared. When I told him I wouldn't, he picked me up. Despite my attempts to kick and get away, he threw me over his shoulder and took me to the room. Set me down in the closet, gave me a shove to the shoulder, and closed the door. Barricaded it with his desk chair while I was punching to get out.

"Stay clean. Kid, stay out when I tell you to," Tom instructed. I was probably nine or ten years old, standing against a pile of linen in the cramped, musty closet, absolutely infuriated. I couldn't change the way he thought, I just grew to listen and respect him. Otherwise he wouldn't have

me around. Never raised his voice to me, just asked me to go or removed me himself. Didn't matter how old I got.

Maybe four years later he was livin' with Johnny. Not too much had changed about the way he turned me away from the hard stuff. Tom was clean, but wasn't always. Kicked it, quit the junk cold when we had a death in the family. He shook out the cold sweats every sleepless night for a week. Our oldest brother, he made the side column of the papers. Tragic headlines read like 'Bronx man found dead in alley, partially decomposed,' 'Third tragic overdose this week,' and 'Neighborhood junkie partially eaten by rats.' Not the kinda mementos I'd clip and save. Tom stopped the next day after he found out. Didn't want to talk. Didn't offer any comforting words. I had none either.

I was sittin' motionless on his couch a few days after Tom quit. Tom, he got outa work and walked in the door. I didn't move or look up, just continued staring at an unopened handle of discount vodka on the coffee table. Nicked it from the Iranians running the booze shop a few blocks down the road. Tom, he sat down next to me and looked at the bottle, looked back at me.

Spoke, "Get your shit and go back home for tonight. You're gonna fuckin' finish high school and cut this shit. Booze ain't helpin' you. It ain't helpin' your mother." Looked back at the bottle, paused. Stood up, grabbed the bottle, walked to the freezer and tossed it in. Headed down the hall and slammed his bedroom door behind him. Door-knob had been missing since he moved in. The unpainted, wooden door smashed into the frame, vibrating the walls around it. I just stared.

Addicts, they get testy when they quit the junk. I think I fell asleep on the couch after counting ceiling tiles for a few hours. My oldest brother, he was dead. Tom, he didn't say more than two words to me for the resta the week.

Since, he held down a solid job at the machine shop a few blocks west. Went to work five days a week, came home stoic, got paid by week's end. I guess he liked standing up all day with gears whizzing a few inches from his face, or at least tolerated it. How was I to know? I never pried too hard. How did his day at work go? The one time I did ask I was told "It went. Don't worry about it." Kept his business to himself.

And believe me, he had a lotta business. His apartment, always people coming and going, hanging out. Why bother lock the door? Likely someone was already there. The kinda place where you staggered home from work or the bar or whatever and one of your buddies was already posted up on the couch rolling some green up in a nicked Philly. Tom let this happen. Him and Johnny, they'd rather keep the door unlocked and a place for all of their felonious friends to relax and deal with whatever business they needed to. Just because Tom didn't partake, doesn't mean objected to it or judged his friends. Still, he smoked cigs, have a beer. The small walk-up became crammed with folding chairs and red cups full of butts, a refuge.

Tom kicked me out the door before things got too hairy. I never saw anything but a fraction of the drugging, boozing, and trafficking when Tom was around. Buddy of his brings in coke and Tom would kick me out. Though when Tom wasn't there the guys would tolerate me, respected me for rollin' a mean blunt. And then again, when Tom said he didn't want me there for any hard stuff, they respected that too.

And he was tough, Tom was. Muscular, slick, intimidating. No one messed with him or wanted to. He didn't have to say much to give you the feeling you should shut up and listen. And I'm not just sayin' this as his brother. He's respected. And Johnny, that skinny bastard used to conceal carry a piece in the waistband of his pants before he pawned

it and never bought it back. His switchblade gave him empty courage after that. Still, they felt comfortable enough in their place to kick their feet back without a deadbolt. I'm pretty sure Johnny lost his keys in his first month posting up there. Didn't matter, 'cause he often scurried up the fire escape with a run and a jump onto the ladder. The guy climbed like a squirrel, especially with any sorta upper in his system. Myself, I was about Johnny's height and weight and always impressed with the wings that kid seemed to grow.

But business went sour for Johnny. I was coming up to the front door and saw a handful of huge, intimidating dudes in the living room. These four men, they were packing two MAC-10's and a couple handguns. Tom heard them storm in and came out his room. Bastards demanded to see Johnny. Tom, he told them to get the fuck out. And one of those pricks shot him. Right in the chest. Fell right over. I was watching from the doorway, White Castle bag in hand. Was about to bring Tom and Johnny some burgers.

"Let's fuckin' move," one of the men said. They booked it right to the door, shoved me to the ground. Kicked me in the ribs, kicked the air right out of me. Next thing I know, there's a handgun pointed at my temple. Man laughed. Whipped the piece across my face, fracturing my eye socket. I lied still while he ran down the stairs to catch up with the other three.

Adrenaline kicked in and I moved fast, neglecting pain. Stood over Tom and grabbed him by the torso. "Tom! No...no!"

Shook him by the shoulders, but he was gone. Sad and enraged doesn't cover what I felt. Panicked. Ignored the fact my eye had completely swollen shut, hands and arms covered in blood, mostly Tom's.

And then Johnny, he ran out the bathroom. Started grabbing his few valued possessions and cramming them

into a tattered backpack. His blanket, stuffed inside first. Cash inside a box on the shelf, box of cereal from the kitchen, ounce of green in the coffee table drawer, his soiled, glass pipe resting on a pile of smut magazines. Johnny, he zipped his backpack and knelt next to Tom. Disbelief, fear.

“They got him, man, there’s no stopping them!”

“Did you know they were coming?!” I demanded.

“Yeah...why do you think I climbed out the fire escape?”

“And you didn’t tell Tom?”

My hands were at his throat. I vaulted myself over my dead brother’s corpse and shoved Johnny to his back, each finger of my right hand tightly gripping his windpipe. His eyes jumped rapidly, moving between each of mine.

Uncontrollable anger. More than I’d felt before. Betrayal, unbridled rage. I brought my face two inches from Johnny’s nose. Gritted teeth, eyes wide. Blood filling my shattered eye socket dripped onto Johnny’s face as he squirmed under my weight.

And I shook Johnny while Tom laid motionless beside us. Like our oldest brother found decomposing, silent.

Johnny mouthed the word ‘stop’ but no sound came out. He sputtered, his face catching my blood in clots, blotters. Kicked both his legs out to the side and against the floor. His hands, they clawed and slapped at my forearms. But my weight on top of him and grip around his throat, it kept him held down for what musta been minutes of convulsions. I shook Johnny, and squeezed, until he stopped screaming, and he stopped choking, and he stopped breathing. Stood over his motionless body with my veins pulsing and my eyes foaming, dripping.

PARENTHESIS UNBOUND *Celeste Moore*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

I want to bind my fear in your scent(ences)  
So that I can find a way to free my stutters and starters  
And my inability to find a breath  
Like there's a lock in the bottom of my lungs  
And maybe if there were more locks  
On hearts and hurts  
And underwear and secrets  
If it was a lock of my hair that nestled  
Beneath your clavicles  
Breathing in your skinwarmth  
I'd be able to sleep at night  
Curled up in my own bed  
A single, simple apostrophe  
An open quotation  
With nothing but sorrow to say.

**GARDEN VARIETY** *Christine Kravetz*

All those years fending off the gardener's  
advances I didn't think I was sinning

Giving him time to have his say  
in Spanish I felt I was only being generous

When asked what color panties I was wearing  
I'd stare off into the jacaranda

begin a discussion about uprooting  
the begonias I felt pity for his wife

never deluded myself clearly his attentions  
were spent on many women

To put it bluntly he was short brown and cheap  
I felt sorry for him his transgressions

a small price to pay a man who would  
mow blow fertilize the trees

trim the hedges in orderly rows  
then haul the trash away for me



THERE'S A SPECIAL PLACE IN HELL reserved for parents who make their kid move the summer before senior year. That's what Cole had told his shrink, a balding cardigan-stuffer, who was more mouse than man. He was a nice guy though. Didn't even flinch when Cole dropped the "h" word, which, by the way, Cole never considered to be a bad word to begin with. It was a place after all, and would it really be that offensive to say, "Oh, go to Long Island"? A person might argue that Hell is worse than Long Island, but Cole would be the first to say that it's really not. His parents didn't agree with him on the whole "Hell" theory, or on anything else for that matter.

If they weren't so high up, Cole could have watched the Atlantic Ocean lap miles beneath him like a sparkling, never-ending treadmill. He liked that sort of thing. Contemplation. The voices in his own head were the only ones that would leave him the hell alone. Not that he was crazy or anything like that; he was just attuned to his thoughts. Cole probably had Dr. Jensen to thank for that. After four years of weekly visits, Cole felt closer to that little guy than to his own dad. He was probably the only thing Cole would miss about New York. Or America, for that matter.

Cole had never been on a plane before, but he didn't really mind suddenly having to spend seven hours in one. Being trapped between his mother and a grimy, finger-stained window for so long with some kid perpetually kicking the back of his seat might not have been his preferred way to spend a summer evening, but on the bright side, if Cole felt like saying anything to either his mom or his dad, now would be the time. At home, Cole was just that chipped

coffee mug at the back of the cupboard—the one that never gets used but never gets thrown out either because of its sentimental value. It was easy for his parents to ignore him in the privacy of their own home, but on Flight 623, crying babies, snoring businessmen, and tipsy housewives would serve as witnesses to any blatant neglect. Cole didn't have much to say to them anyway. He hadn't for the last six years. But he liked having the option.

Cole shifted in his seat, bumping his mother's arm in the process. She removed it from the armrest, and Cole didn't even have to look at her to know she did so without taking her eyes off her book. She was always reading something nowadays; a book, the back of the Cheerio's box, the instruction manual for the old VCR that hadn't worked since 1994. When Cole was little, you'd sooner find her in front of a TV screen than an open book. Movies. That had been her thing, a passion she had shared with Cole, even if it wasn't always appropriate. Cole would probably always blame his foul mouth on his mother who had decided that nine was a perfectly acceptable age for a boy to have his first *Goodfellas* experience. God, they would watch movies all the time. Cole had to admit that he missed that.

"Don't you want to read a book?" she asked, flipping to the next page of her own. "Or listen to music?" She paused, and Cole could picture her milky blue eyes scanning over the page at a furious pace.

Everything about Cole's mother was different now. She'd traded in her VHS's and DVD's for novels and magazines. Cole figured movies reminded her too much of how things used to be. Watching them had been something the two of them did together after all, and God knows she wouldn't tolerate spending two hours alone with him now. A hell of a lot could change in six years. Physically, Gretchen

was much thinner now, and her wrinkled skin clung lifelessly to her bones. Like a raisin. And her hair used to be as dark as Cole's; now it was a dull gray, like the end of a mop.

"Or are you just going to stare out the window until we land at Heathrow?"

Keeping his own eyes as fixed on the window as his mother's were on her book, Cole smiled, a slow smile that took its sweet time before settling firmly into the corners of his cheeks. He knew it would drive her crazy, but it would sure entertain the hell out of him.

"You can't just sit there for the next five hours," his mother snapped.

Just keep smiling.

"Honestly, Cole, you're being ridiculous."

"Gretch, would you leave him alone?"

Peter Reynolds was only a little better than his wife. He didn't speak to Cole much, and the few words he did say were pretty unoriginal, as if he spent his whole life reading off a teleprompter. "Good morning, son." He actually called him "son" sometimes, like some dad out of a damn '50s movie.

"Peter, he's behaving like a child—"

"Just by sitting there? Read your book."

Cole looked very much like his mother, but almost nothing like his father. If it weren't for the light gray eyes they shared, Cole would have sworn that the milkman had slipped in somewhere seventeen years ago. Peter Reynolds' hair was chestnut brown, beginning to gray around his abnormally large ears. Monkey ears. Cole used to give him crap for them all the time; he would never dream of doing it now.

It was Peter's fault that they were on this plane. If his mother in London hadn't kicked it unexpectedly and left him a substantial inheritance that included, apparently, some huge house that, rumor had it, the bloody Queen

herself was envious of, the three of them would be home right now. Cole had only met his grandmother a handful of times—but that's what she got for living on the other side of the Atlantic—so he hadn't cried when his mother blandly informed him that she had been hit by a double-decker bus while crossing Somethingshire Street. The sheer Englishness of it all actually almost made him laugh. He pictured her inching her way across the street clutching a cup of tea with one hand and waving a Union Jack with the other. Cole's sense of humor really sucked sometimes. He had told this to Dr. Jensen; he didn't laugh.

"He can't just sit there, Peter!"

So now here they were.

"Son, wouldn't you like to—"

"Nope."

From the corner of Cole's eye, he saw Peter shrug his shoulders and fold his arms across his chest. His wife shook her head and turned the page of her book with so much force that she almost ripped it in half.

"She was never this difficult," she muttered.

It had been so long since Cole heard either of his parents say her name out loud that he almost wondered if they'd forgotten it.

"Why don't you ever say her name?" he asked, tracing a streak of dirt on the window with the tip of his finger.

"Whose?" said Gretchen.

For the first time during the entire flight, Cole turned and looked at his mother, narrowing his eyes so they penetrated hers like a bullet. Gretchen dropped her book into her lap.

"Mariella. Mariella Jane Reynolds. Your daughter." He paused to let it sink. "Remember her?"

Gretchen stared at him as if he'd told her he had a bomb hidden under his seat. Her bony fingers struggled to reestab-

lish their grip on the worn-out paperback. Meanwhile, that kid sitting behind Cole continued to kick his seat with the strength of a hammer and the rhythm of a metronome. Cole's back stiffened as he turned back to the window.

"Why would you say something like that?" Gretchen hissed, in one sharp breath that thrust through an almost invisible gap between her two rows of teeth. "And keep your voice down. What would Dr. Jensen say if he heard you talking to me like that?"

Cole rolled his eyes. Sometimes Cole doubted that his mother understood exactly what Dr. Jensen was. She seemed to be convinced she was dropping Cole off at some reform school every week instead of a psychotherapist's office. As if Dr. Jensen was going to run him through the wringer until he went back to being that nice boy he had been before his sister died. It had been Peter's idea to start sending Cole to a shrink; Gretchen merely provided the transportation.

"How are you feeling today?" That was the first question Dr. Jensen had ever asked him. He was wearing a green tie that day. Cole remembered because it was his favorite color. At the time, he was only eleven years old and still couldn't quite distinguish psychics from psychologists.

"Fine." Cole hated having to lie on that couch. He never quite knew where he was supposed to look when he was lying down. Should he keep his eyes zeroed in on the ceiling? For concentration or something? Or was he supposed to twist his neck around to look at Dr. Jensen? On that first day, he chose the former.

"Mhmm..."

That scratching sound on the clipboard. Only slightly less irritating than nails on a blackboard to an eleven year old who was already paranoid enough about what other people were thinking of him. During that initial meeting,

Cole dug his nails into that stupid couch, his prepubescent fingers stabbing through the cushion and rubbing against the rough-as-sandpaper orange fabric.

"I hear," Dr. Jensen said, his voice assuming a pitch that was only too appropriate for his mouse-like visage, "that you had an interesting day at school..." He clicked his pen. "Last week."

Cole blinked hard.

"Last week?" He tried to exude an air of naïveté.

Cole's eyes darted from the ceiling to Dr. Jensen. He really did look like a rodent, with these beady eyes that peered over his thin-rimmed specs in a perpetual state of curiosity and a pair of front teeth that were just a tad too long for his mouth.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" Even sounded like a mouse. If mice could talk.

Cole didn't want to answer that question. He had replayed the moment in his head so many times—heard the screaming of the girl down the hall, the hollow slam of flesh against locker, the high-pitched screech of sneaker against tile—and he knew this little gerbil in a forest green tie wouldn't understand. Psychic or not. Or psychiatrist. No, psychologist. "He needs to see a psychologist, Gretch." That's what he'd overheard his dad say.

"Go on," said Dr. Jensen with a small smile. Cole eyed the clipboard warily, and he promptly removed it from his lap. "Better?"

"I..." Cole nearly dug a hole through the cushion. "I hurt somebody."

Plugged him right in the face, actually. Turns out a fifth grader can be pretty damn strong if he puts his mind to it. Cole had never punched anybody before, but he'd seen enough movies, so he was pretty good at it. Got the kid

square in the nose. Exactly three drops of blood fell onto his chest, staining his checkered button-down shirt.

Dr. Jensen rubbed the top of his head, and for a brief moment, Cole wondered if that bald spot had been self-inflicted.

"And," he squeaked, "why did you do that?"

Suddenly, lying down and staring at the ceiling didn't seem like such a bad idea. Cole's entire body felt warm. Like that time his mom asked him if he ate Mariella's last piece of birthday cake two years ago. He shuddered and thought, could an eleven year old get arrested for socking a fellow fifth grader in the face?

"Um..." Something was trying to force its way up his throat, and it wouldn't back down no matter how hard Cole swallowed. "He made me angry." It really was as simple as that, but Dr. Jensen was probably going to want more. "The kid...Shawn...He said something mean about...my sister."

Sort of. Shawn Morris actually said "something mean" about Cole, but it was because of what happened to his sister. "Hey, Reynolds, didn't you ever teach her to look both ways?" What an ass.

A forceful sigh from Peter dragged Cole away from his thoughts and back to the plane. He cast an eye down the row, and saw his dad tapping his forehead furiously with the tip of his Ticonderoga and piercing the crossword puzzle on his lap with narrowed eyes as if it were written in hieroglyphics.

"Mountain lake..." Cole heard him mumble, his lips moving in a manner that would impress any ventriloquist. "Four letters..."

Cole's face betrayed a small smile as he turned back to the window. Tarn, Dad. It was always "tarn." Damn crossword puzzles. They'd been a part of Peter's Sunday morning routine for as long as Cole could remember: an onion

bagel, a cup of black coffee, and a crossword. Since the accident, the puzzles became more of a daily thing. Twice a day. Every day. And yet, God help him, he could never remember “tarn.” Cole was only a little kid when he used to watch his dad from across the dining room table every Sunday morning, his ear pressed against the flat surface so he could almost hear Peter’s pencil scratching in word after word, while his nose got assaulted by the, frankly, unholy smell of onion-coffee. Even now, with so much more than just Gretchen Reynolds between them, Cole had to swallow down the urge to lean over and whisper, “It starts with ‘t,’ Dad. Ends with ‘arn.’”

Cole heaved a sigh of his own and chewed on his thumbnail. He tilted his head upward and contemplated pulling his backpack out of the overhead compartment. If he did it slowly enough, maybe he could just sneak past his parents’ knees and yank it out without either of them even noticing he’d moved. Doubtful. But, shit, it was making him nervous, having them just sitting up there. Even zipped up and locked away, he couldn’t help but feel like they were incredibly exposed. Cole sniffed. Some kids hide their diary under their mattress, or hell, some kids hide pot. Cole kept a box of incomplete screenplays hidden under his bed. They had never seen the light of day, only emerging from their dusty, cardboard prison in the middle of the night when Cole pulled them out to be worked on. His parents had no idea. Nobody did. Except Dr. Jensen. He frowned and rolled his head back towards the window.

The sky outside was becoming much more ominous. The wispy air had taken on every shade of gray, and it seemed heavier—like if you tried to hold it in your hands, it would weigh you down and send you plummeting into the Atlantic. Not a particularly comforting set of sur-



roundings when you're trapped in an airplane. Sometimes if Cole thought about flying too much—the actual concept of being suspended in midair inside a glorified piece of hollowed out steel, with nothing to break your fall except probably death itself—the idea freaked the hell out of him. It used to anyway, but then Dr. Jensen taught him not to be afraid of his thoughts. They were just thoughts, after all. In fact, as Cole turned his head and observed both of his parents—one reading a book, the other attempting a crossword puzzle—he figured that the two of them could do with a visit to a psychotherapist themselves. Constantly immersing themselves in distractions, as if they couldn't be left alone with their thoughts. Cole might have been the one who punched a kid in the face, but at least he wasn't scared of his own head.

So no, he wasn't going to let any of that scare him. And anyway, he was growing more infuriated with each swift kick that collided with the back of his seat to care about anything else. Whoever was sitting behind him, the kid was pretty damn powerful; probably would have given eleven-year-old-Shawn Morris-punching Cole a run for his money. But Cole was too annoyed to be impressed. He clenched his fists and tried to expel some of his anger through a few quick exhalations, but it wasn't enough. His spine slid up the back of his seat as he craned his head around to finally lay eyes on whatever brat had been treating his seat like a soccer ball since takeoff. His eyes fell on a little girl, no more than six years old.

It wasn't like Cole hadn't seen another six year old girl since it happened, but, holy shit, this kid was a replica. The same bouncy blonde ponytail planted on the top of a perfectly round head. The same denim overalls with the pink OshKosh B'Gosh tag dangling from the front pocket. Hell,

practically everything about her was pink, from the frilly socks poking over the top of her sneakers to the two-inch thick scrunchy in her hair. Mariella loved pink too.

He was back in Seaford. Eleven years old. It was the beginning of spring

“Cole, will you play catch with me?”

Minutes later, there was a woman sobbing in the front seat of her white jeep and a pink rubber ball rolling down Hicksville Road and into the gutter.

Cole’s stomach did a back flip that didn’t quite stick the landing. The little girl wrinkled her nose at him and went to tug her mother’s sleeve. Silently blessing the pilot for not switching on the seatbelt sign, Cole clambered to his feet and pushed through his parents’ knees before throwing himself into the vacant aisle.

“What is the matter with you?” Gretchen snapped, placing a pointed emphasis on each word as if it were an entire sentence on its own. “Sit back down!”

“Not feeling well, son?” Peter asked.

Cole could only muster a weak nod. He struggled to steady himself and made his way down the aisle, stumbling towards the bathroom with his arms outstretched like a zombie. When he finally reached the door, he wrenched it open and slammed it shut behind him. It smelled like the inside of a sunken battle ship, and he’d seen nicer bathrooms in the deepest bowels of Penn Station, but Cole welcomed it like sanctuary. His hands were shaking as they found the sink and planted themselves firmly at its sides.

He had killed his little sister. It wasn’t the woman behind the wheel of that jeep, that behemoth of an automobile that flattened Mariella’s six year old frame against the cement like a damn Bugs Bunny cartoon—God, what a fucking image. No, it was all him. If he hadn’t told her to

wait for him outside, that damn ball wouldn't have rolled into the busiest road in Seaford and she wouldn't have run after it. Shit, he was starting to really sweat now; his hands were sliding off the porcelain. He closed his eyes hard and took a few deep breaths. He needed Dr. Jensen.

"You know what you look like, Cole?" Dr. Jensen asked. "After all these years, I've finally figured it out." His perfectly round face relaxed into a smile. "A black and white photo."

Cole snorted and folded his arms across his chest. Ten points to the mouse in the herringbone sweater vest; that was a pretty dead on description. He glanced down at his black t-shirt that matched his black jeans perfectly but stood in such stark contrast to his pale arms. Yeah, well played, Doc.

"I'm glad for your sake you got it now," Cole said. "Starting tomorrow, you may never see me again."

"That's right," said Dr. Jensen slowly, as if he had forgotten. "Tomorrow's the big day. The great excursion across the pond." He clicked his pen—God, Cole would miss that sound—against his clipboard. "How do you feel about that?"

Cole shrugged.

"If she had only stuck it out one more—"

"Your grandmother?"

"Yeah, her. Right before senior year. That was a bitchy move on her part."

"I hardly think she planned it, Cole." While he sounded serious, the upturned corner of his mouth told a different story. "But let's look at the bigger picture here; when you talk about your grandmother's death, you make it sound..." He waved his pen next to his temple as if it were a magic wand that could conjure up the right word. "Humorous. Why is that?"

“Defense mechanism,” Cole offered carelessly, picking at the nail of his pinky finger. “Y’know, probably.”

“Because I find it interesting,” said Dr. Jensen, “that both your grandmother and your sister passed...in a similar fashion, and yet—”

“Grandma was old!” Cole exclaimed. “And I barely knew her! So no, I’m not gonna cry myself to sleep every night over it. And besides, I wasn’t the one driving that double-decker, was I?”

“You weren’t the one driving the jeep either. I’m just trying to get you to realize something here, Cole.” He made a quick note on his clipboard. “Anyway, I thought you hated school.”

“I do,” Cole said, scratching his exposed knee through the strategically placed rip in his jeans. “But y’know...I had plans.”

“College plans?” Dr. Jensen prompted, his pen flying across the clipboard.

“Well...” Cole sighed heavily. “Yeah. I’d been looking into NYU, just online and stuff, and...it’s just messed up now.”

“Have you talked to your parents about it?” He gave the pen a rest and looked hard at Cole, who rolled his eyes.

“Obviously not,” he muttered. “They...” He ran a hand through his hair. “They don’t care.” He threw his hands up, allowing them to land on his lap with a loud clap. “They just don’t. Literally, the number of shits that they could not give—”

“Cole—”

“No, really.” Cole pushed himself to the very edge of the couch, holding up his hands as if he were pinching the two top corners of a photograph. “They. Hate. Me.”

For the first time in five years, Dr. Jensen put aside his clipboard.

"Listen to me, Cole," he said. "Your parents do not hate you—no, let me finish. This is our last session; I'm going to make it count. You've been fixated on this idea that your parents look at you and see their daughter's murderer; nothing else. You've got to let go of that guilt, Cole. Let go of all of it. If you let it, a new country could mean a new start." He paused. "For all of you." He picked up his clipboard again and then added, almost to himself, "Your parents wouldn't have sent you to me if they didn't care about you."

Cole snorted.

"What's that?"

Cole chewed on the side of his mouth.

"I'll give you the guilt thing." He spoke slowly and deliberately. "But my parents... You wanna know why they decided to get me a shrink? 'Cuz I'll tell you why. They were scared of me."

"Scared of you?"

Cole nodded and folded his hands under his chin.

"When I punched that kid—Shawn Morris—in the face, that scared the shit out of them. They thought I was gonna become one of those kids—"

"What do you mean?" Dr. Jensen asked seriously, his beady eyes narrowed in genuine confusion. "One of those kids?"

The corner of Cole's lip turned upward until it reached a dark smirk.

"You know who I mean. The ones who show up to school with a semi-automatic in their backpack instead of a calculator."

"Oh, Cole—"

"No, it's true. And why shouldn't they have thought that? Depressed little shit that I was... That's the type, y'know. It's always that quiet kid no one wants to sit next

to during assemblies.” Cole sniffed and flicked his nose with his thumb. “But my parents didn’t get it. I never wanted to kill anyone else.” He stopped and took one deep breath. “Only myself.”

When Cole looked up from Dr. Jensen’s feet, he saw that the poor guy’s pen was frozen in place on the clipboard. Dr. Jensen blinked hard.

“You’ve never talked about that before.”

“Before you get your specs twisted,” Cole said, nodding to the glasses Dr. Jensen had removed from his face and was now cleaning a little too roughly with the excess fabric of his oversized sweater vest, “it wasn’t anything serious. I was a kid, for Christ’s sake. I didn’t get what death was. Just that... that’s where Mariella was, and I wanted to be there with her. See, that’s how dumb I was, even thought of death as a fucking place.” His eyes were watery as he stifled a laugh. “So yeah, I thought about it. For like a day, maybe. Chickened out, though—well, obviously, I’m sitting here talking to you. I couldn’t figure out a way that wouldn’t hurt.”

Dr. Jensen pushed his glasses back onto his nose. Cole cocked an eyebrow at him.

“What? You’re a psychologist. Must be used to this sorta thing.”

“It’s not that,” said Dr. Jensen, shaking his head. “I’m just wondering why you never brought it up before. That’s...” He snorted in spite of himself. “That’s the kind of thing I’m paid to talk to you about. You should have felt comfortable...” His words trailed off as he lowered his eyes to his clipboard. “And anyway...hearing that a little boy considered taking his own life...that’s not something any psychologist ever gets used to. Not really.”

Cole shrugged and swung his head towards the clock hanging over Dr. Jensen’s head. “Time’s up,” he said. “So

that's that. Surprise ending." His hands felt the coarse orange couch one final time as he propelled himself to his feet, feeling inexplicably lighter than he had ever felt upon leaving Dr. Jensen's office. "Thanks for listening. Y'know, to everything."

Dr. Jensen dropped his clipboard and rose to his feet. The top of his balding head barely reached Cole's shoulder; if he wanted to, Cole could glance down at the shiny, pink patch of scalp and check if he had anything in his teeth. A shrink. The man certainly chose the right profession. He extended a hand to Cole who shook it firmly.

"Listen, Cole," said Dr. Jensen, and his fingers wrapped around Cole's with a strength that nobody could have expected. Behind their lenses, his beady eyes surveyed Cole's face like a father saying goodbye to his son about to leave for military school. "Positive thoughts." His hand released Cole's fingers and moved to Cole's shoulder. "And give your parents a chance."

Cole accepted a soft squeeze on his shoulder but smiled ruefully down at the little man.

"That's something a dad should do. Pat his kid's shoulder, slap him on the back." He sighed and turned towards the door. "And a mom, she should give him a hug every now and then, kiss his cheek whether he wants it or not." His hand found the doorknob.

"Cole, while you're over there," said Dr. Jensen, "I want you to call me. Whenever you need to. Oh, and Cole—" He cleared his throat. "Life's too short to be pissed off all the time."

Cole turned the knob while twisting his head over his shoulder to look at Dr. Jensen one final time.

"You watched it?"

"You wouldn't stop talking about it."

“Thank you,” Cole said with a slight smile. “See you in another life, Doc.”

So now here he was.

Something about that girl on the plane, being trapped with that girl on the plane. It hit him harder than the news that his grandma had been killed by that bus. He'd turned that into a fucking joke. But this girl...God, she'd been sitting behind him the entire time. And she looked so much like Mariella. Too much. It felt like a setup. Like some kind of test. Could shrinks coordinate something like that? Dr. Jensen had been really good with teaching Cole contemplation, but not so much confrontation. Maybe he was supposed to teach himself. God, these Yoda types could never just come out and say what they meant, could they? What was it he'd said about guilt? Right, Cole had to let go of it. That was step one.

He raised his face to the mirror. Still a black and white photograph. An image devoid of color, from the black hair piled on top of his head, to the cigarette ash-grey eyes, to the white-as-a-corpse skin. He hadn't worn a color since Mariella died. Like he was in mourning. Dumbass, what was the point of that? Wearing black wouldn't bring her back. Nothing would. Because she's—

Cole stopped and forced himself to stare into that damn mirror. Let go of all of it. Yeah, she's dead, but not because of you. Accidents happen. Like Grandma and the double-decker. The two of them are probably up there sitting on a cloud swapping death stories right now. People die, and hell, someday you will too. On a long enough timeline, the survival rate for everyone drops to zero. Stop blaming yourself. Wearing black everyday won't do shit; feeling guilty all the time won't do shit. Pull yourself together and move the fuck on.



There. Cole let out one giant sigh, feeling a bit like a deflated balloon, but a happy balloon. Like those helium ones you get when you're sick in the hospital, with the huge smiley face. Relief. All from letting it go. For now, anyway. Cole didn't know how long the feeling would last, but for now was enough. Even if he had to spend the rest of his life talking himself off a ledge, he wouldn't let himself sink so low again. He made that promise to himself. All writers are tortured souls; make a movie out of it instead. He looked right at his reflection, and the corners of his mouth lifted until they were parallel with his nose. That guy with the bed head hair and pasty skin really didn't seem so bad anymore. Atta boy, Dr. Jensen—still pulling the strings even from the other side of the Atlantic.

But Dr. Jensen had also told him to give his parents a chance. How the hell was he supposed to do that? Giving himself a mental pep talk inside a rank airplane bathroom the size of his sock drawer was one thing, but talking to his parents...Admittedly, he'd never really tried it before. Why hadn't he? Cole's eyes flickered across his reflection. What was the worst that could happen? It's not like they would hurt him. Hell, they could have beaten him to a pulp after he'd let their only daughter run into the middle of the street to get steamrolled. But they didn't. They just ignored him. Because they were in pain too. Cole laughed into his wrist. What a dumbass family he had. All living under the same roof for six years with the same empty pits in their stomachs, because no one wanted to be the one to bring it up. Well that was going change right now, right here on this plane. It wouldn't all get fixed today, but Cole was suddenly busting with new confidence. About everything. Bring it the bloody hell on, England. Screw you, NYU. And as for Mom and Dad, Cole would just have to—

Something was wrong. The plane was rocking. People were screaming outside the bathroom door. Above it all, a woman's voice was shouting, "EVERYONE, PLEASE REMAIN SEATED!" and rattling off some generic emergency protocol that Cole couldn't make out. Suddenly, the door swung open and his father grabbed him by the arm. As Peter dragged him down the aisle, Cole watched his fellow passengers crying, praying, wrapping their arms around the people next to them.

The flight attendant stumbled down the aisle as if she were on a ship rather than a plane and pointed a shaking finger at Peter and Cole.

"Please return to your seats," she ordered breathlessly. Her forehead was glistening with sweat.

An elderly man sitting across from Cole and his parents reached out and grabbed her sleeve.

"Why don't you tell us what's going on?" he demanded, as the entire plane continued to shake like a wooden roller coaster.

"Our pilot says there's..." She swallowed hard. "... nothing to worry about."

"Oh, bugger," he muttered, his hand flying to his forehead to begin the Sign of the Cross.

Peter and Cole slipped back into their seats where Gretchen was furiously wringing her paperback in her skeletal hands. Cole leaned his head back just in time for one solid jerk to send it flinging forward. The plane had turned into an aerial torture chamber, with every voice melting together into one symphony of terror. Even the flight attendant was crying now.

Cole followed Mariella as she darted down the hall and into her room, where her goldfish was doing laps in its bowl

around a plastic scuba diver. Mariella ran to her dresser and propped herself up onto her toes. She turned her head over her shoulder and looked at Cole with pleading eyes. He sighed, stepped up behind her, shoved his hands under her arms, and lifted her off her feet. Mariella smiled and pressed her nose against the bowl, sucking in her cheeks and batting her lashes.

“What do you wanna be when you grow up?” she asked suddenly.

“Are you talking to Pinky, or to me?” Cole asked, returning Mariella safely to the floor and taking a seat at the edge of her bed.

Mariella let out a giggle that sounded like the chirp of a small bird.

“You, silly.”

“I wanna make moives.”

“What kind of movies?” Mariella asked, climbing onto her bed and settling in next to her brother.

“I dunno yet,” Cole said with a shrug. “Good ones.”

“Mommy would like that,” she said. “And Daddy could help!”

“Yeah, maybe.” Cole smiled and put his arm around her shoulders. “What do you wanna be, Elle?”

Mariella frowned. She scooted a bit closer to Cole until her elbow was jutting into rib.

“I wanna be happy.”

Shit just got real. A fragmented montage of every single disaster movie Cole had ever seen played through his mind in fast-forward. He looked around, his bottom jaw halfway to his chest, and turned to his mother. Her eyes were shut so tightly that the little creases in her eyelids were too many to count. Her hands were folded on her lap now, with her book

flattened on the floor like a baby bird that had fallen out of its nest, and Cole noticed that her lips were moving. Then, without opening her eyes, her fingers found their way to Cole's. She grabbed his hand and squeezed so hard that her nails could have drawn blood from Cole's skin. Cole squeezed back. Then he looked at his father, whose arm was already firmly placed around his wife's shoulders. He was staring at the ceiling and sucking his lip; the same thing he had done during Mariella's funeral. With his fingers still interlocked in his mother's, Cole leaned over the armrest, stretched his free arm across her, and grabbed his father's hand.

Flight 623 continued to rock its way across the Atlantic, growing weaker and weaker with each wave it passed, as each of its engines struggled against the inevitable and gave themselves over to what would eventually be dubbed a freak accident. Just another tragic accident. A hollowed out tube of steel sliding through the gossamer clouds like a shark through water as it lost altitude. Inside, the Reynolds family clung to each others' hands as if hope itself still lived in their very fingers. It was the happiest Cole had been in six years.

**BULL-HEADED** *Lowell Jaeger*

*Jerk 'em*, Dad said, when a bullhead  
tugged a bobber under and swam  
for deeper bottoms farther from shore.  
*Look at 'em fight*, Dad said,  
as we heaved from muddy depths  
a black fish thrashing thin air.

Had to admire the frenzy; fish  
flip-flopping in the grass, Dad's  
hopping hot-foot pursuit, till  
he'd boot-stomped the fish stupid  
long enough to rip the barb from its jaw.  
Or the hook snapped in two like a brittle stick  
in the fish's clamped steel-trap smirk.

*Don't touch the bastard*, Dad said.  
We stood close, wincing when the bullhead's  
quick spines cut Dad's thumb to bleed.  
Had to admire the bastard's huff, gills  
gasping in the catch-bucket, his pearl blue  
light-blinded gaze staring back.

Admired him even worse, when Dad  
nailed him to a chunk of two-by-six  
—a twelve-penny spike through his brain—  
and still he twitched and refused  
to quit. Dad slit him, grabbed the hide  
with a pliers and stripped it. Axed

the bull's head clean from the rest  
of its connections. And still the gills  
opened a little and closed. Opened  
and closed. In a heap of entrails,  
a heart the size of a wart, determined  
it would not stopped beating.

CHRISTMAS EVE *Dennis Rhodes*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

I sat next to Betty at Christmas mass.  
Her handsome son sat on her other side.  
He was once a well-known drag performer.  
He even reigned as Miss Gay Massachusetts.  
I myself am a known homosexual.  
The priests were busy up at the altar.  
Christ's birth is quite a serious matter.  
Betty is sweet—sort of “every mother”.  
At the sign of peace Betty and I hugged.  
I was struck by her son's firm, strong handshake.  
Betty's love for her son was palpable.  
We were three conventional Catholics.  
Love for our fellow man united us.  
We were there because God invited us.

## LINES FROM POET TO JOURNALIST

*Dennis Rhodes*

When we lay a soldier to rest  
we cannot say what was in his heart

at the moment of death. However  
just or unjust we judge the cause

for which he died, we cannot take  
the measure of his conscience. We

can only say Godspeed to his soul  
as we give his spent, noble body

its due reverence. Soldiers do not  
answer, at the end of the day

to pacifists, warmongers, strangers  
or heartbroken friends. They do not owe

us an explanation, answering  
just to one another, and their God.



## A CONVERSATION WITH DENNIS RHODES

*Matt Gillick, Hope Goslin, Meghan Killian*

**MATT GILLICK, HOPE GOSLIN, MEGAN KILLIAN:** Can you recall a specific experience that pushed you into writing poetry?

**DENNIS RHODES:** I started writing poetry at about 8 years old; I realize as an adult that writing and poetry were a child's escape from a once-crippling obsessive compulsive disorder which I have suffered from for 50 years and which is now largely under control. Poems evoked a small thrill in me and a sense, as in *A Chorus Line*, that "I can do that".

In fifth grade I had a Mr. O'Conner as my English teacher; he was an Irish immigrant, a man of about 35. One day he was, as usual, lecturing in class, expecting the class to take notes. Privately, I tuned out and began doing a bit of creative writing in the margins of my notebook. This was a time also when I was "fleeing" into writing because of my severe OCD—writing was an escape and relief. Being a savvy teacher, Mr. O'Conner surmised that I was not paying attention. He stealthily began moving around the room, with the collusion of the class, until he came to the back of my row. He did not alter his tone of voice so I remained blithely in my own world. Suddenly, to my horror, I felt his breath on my neck—his presence was palpable. Worse, he was reading what I'd written clandestinely. After a minute which seemed like an eternity, he said to me: "Finish that. Just not now." He could have made me stand in the hall as punishment. He could have sent me to the principal's office. By doing what he did, giving me a qualified permission to strike out on my own, he encouraged—even made—me be a writer.

In the ensuing years, poetry grew more and more important to me. I would sit as a 12 year old in the public

library and read biographies of famous poets such as Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Carl Sandberg—and others. They fascinated me. I had no doubt that I wanted to be a poet. Without a doubt, Robert Frost is my favorite poet and I think America's finest poet. I think his work has influenced mine a lot, as well as the work of W.H. Auden and Emily Dickinson. I have sometimes in a poem of mine consciously parodied a certain poet out of tribute to them.

**MG/HG/MK:** Was there a major influence that compelled you to write your first collection *Spiritus Pizza*?

**DR:** Spiritus is an iconic landmark in Provincetown, a center of gravity of gay life and love—in “P’town”. It’s been the center of many hook-ups, break-ups—and life fuck-ups [therefore] rich with poetic influences and themes.

It’s a legendary venue in P’town dating [back] to the mid-70s. At one o’clock a.m., all the bars and clubs in town close, empty out, and virtually everyone goes to Spiritus to mill about, cruise, see and be seen, have pizza, coffee, catch up with fellow tourists of fellow “townies”; it is a sort bazaar and a vast cruising ground. It is simply the place to be if you are in Provincetown for a summer visit. You can see everyone who was out anywhere that night and make your move accordingly. Spiritus is open till 2 A.M. but, the crowd dwindles and lingers till three-ish. It’s amazing. The only other can’t miss place like it is daily 4 P.M. tea-dance at the “Boatslip”, equally iconic and famous. It made perfect sense for my first book to be centered round the spirit of Spiritus—it is the social heart of the most important place in the world to me. It teems with humanity from sullen drag queens to arrogant leather men to young men. Anyone could write a poem there—just grab a napkin.

**MG/HG/MK:** In many of your poems particularly in *Spiritus Pizza*, you have a variety of different forms of poetry and sometimes blend genres together. For example, in “Pounds” you combine free verse and rhyme in the same stanzas. Is the choice of form determined by the subject?

**DR:** I am not a formalist poet. I don't set out to write in sonnets or villanelles. Oddly, I approach my poetry like a reporter covers an event—I want to get in the essential details as concisely as possible. The only forms I use somewhat consistently are sonnets and haiku. I'd have to describe most of my poetry as lyrical free verse. I deal more with ideas than images, although I think that once in a while I paint a really enduring image. Like in one poem when I described an upended dead bird as a crashed Cessna. I just feel constricted by the idea of a form but this back and forth has encouraged me to try my hand at a sestina.

[Further on haikus], I love their conciseness of thought and the language. I think a good haiku really hits the bulls-eye with the reader. As far as rhyme is concerned, that old first line usually tells me whether the poem will have rhyme because the thoughts and impulses behind it speak to me in rhyme. Unlike many modern poets, I do not look down at rhyme; I have great respect for solid poems that rhyme. One of the greatest American lyric poems, Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is a masterpiece of rhyme and controlled emotion. It is universal. I respect forms and poets who adhere to forms because it's really hard to do well. I like limericks! I like “list” poems if they seem to work naturally. I generally write a poem straight thru at first blush, other times I'll carry a fragment around and complete it when the spirit moves me.

**MG/HG/MK:** How do you respond to negative criticism and how does that affect your writing process? What was your route to getting published?

**DR:** I believe strongly in establishing working relationships with editors of journals: I don't believe in shot-gunning poems out to various publications. In the past five years, there are 5 or so journals that have embraced my work, whose editors have a sense of my strengths and weaknesses. I like that. It takes the sting out of rejection when an editor has published you in the past. For me, it's not a question of "publish or perish!" I'm just a guy who has written poems since he was ten years old because it comes naturally. I never give advice unless it's asked for and I do not personally welcome advice I've not asked for. I've never workshopped a poem. I don't believe Walt Whitman workshopped his poems either—I've a feeling it would have truly fucked up his work. An individual's voice is so precious that the root of one's work should be the cultivating, care, and feeding of that voice. I started to feel truly comfortable with and about my work when I realized I may never have acclaim for it in my lifetime; I feel confident that the quality of my body of work will somehow "outlive" me. I never [sought] to elbow my way into the poetry establishment by courting, wooing, and flattering certain poets. I've always been content to let my work speak for itself. No two people react to a poem in the same way. Like all art, it's subjective. A poem rejected by one journal has often found a home in another journal.

**MG/HG/MK:** Going back to your poem "Pounds," your tone of voice is unique in that the subject is male but, the language is what most would expect to be coming from a

female point of view. Do you have any views regarding gender roles in poetry or gender roles in general?

**DR:** Actually the poem "Pounds" is written from a decidedly male point of view—it deals with an HIV patient praying his pounds up. Written in the early nineties, it was a time [where there were very few effective medications and many gay men with AIDS were rail-thin, with so-called "wasting" in their faces. Weight is deathly important and the narrator's struggle with his scale reflects that. Regarding gender overall, I cannot help but write my poems from a male point of view. I know a lot of women but I by and large don't socialize with them. Because love and loss are universal, I know that my poems can nevertheless touch and speak to women though—see my "Memo to Straight Girls" in *Spiritus Pizza*.

**MG/HG/MK:** Many of your poems especially in *Entering Dennis*, seem not only to evoke feeling but also tell a story. Why did you decide to write poetry instead of prose and have you considered ever writing fiction?

**DR:** In *Entering Dennis*, there are indeed a number of "stories"; actually I have also written fiction but a short story is such a different animal. Telling a story via a poem is like telling a parable—it's short, compressed and if done well, can leave the reader as satisfied as a good short story or novel. I cannot speak for how well I do it, that's for readers to judge.

**MG/HG/MK:** Do you have any favorite poem(s) or poet(s) that have influenced your work? What authors or poets do you recommend aspiring writers should read?

**DR:** Robert Frost because he is hands down our finest American poet. Also, Walt Whitman because he revolutionized

poetry. Edna St. Vincent Millay because she wrote about love and sex without apology or shame.

[For] short stories and novels: J.D. Salinger's *Nine Stories*, in my opinion is the best collection of short stories by an American writer; Grace Paley's book of short stories *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* because of her great influence on short story writers; Hemingway, of course, because his writing style was singular—*The Sun Also Rises* is my favorite novel. Also, reading Mark Twain is critical. His use of irony and humor even in dealing with serious subjects. Lastly, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*—it stands alone and has been relevant to 4 generations thus far.

**MG/HG/MK:** Are there any poems you have written that you wish you could go back and edit?

**DR:** Of course; but instead of change I'd eliminate some! W.H. Auden said he scratched some poems because they were dishonest. That resonated with me. I've probably, over the years, have written poems that did not express what I truthfully felt or believed. These days, I try hard to bring candor and honesty into my work. It's the actual "building" of the poem that truly engages me. I love to savor the cadence of a line, to see how it sounds aloud and to see if it flows effortlessly into the next line. Effortless may not be the right word because when I'm absorbed in a poem, it's anything but! Looking back on poems and disavowing them is known as "killing your babies". It's certainly OK to do that, even with published ones.

**MG/HG/MK:** This question might be overused but, what is your personal definition of poetry?

**DR:** In my opinion, the finest poetry is universal, transcending time and culture. I think it was Robert Frost who said “A poem is a momentary stay against confusion.” What a quote! Reading a terrific poem aloud testifies to the truth of that statement. And of course Archibald Macleish said “A poem should not mean, but be.” Those remain my favorite descriptions of poetry and poems.

**MG/HG/MK:** Do you think poetry is better when read aloud or read in solitude?

**DR:** Both, I love reading poetry aloud and I often do so alone. In speaking a poem, I can absorb a good bit of its craft—how it was put together. It’s like seeing a large home and then being shown the blueprints!

**MG/HG/MK:** When do you find it easiest to gather your thoughts and write? Is there a special place, time of day, a memory you have to trigger your creativity?

**DR:** A poem for me is usually sparked with one line that pops into my head, usually the first line. A line alone can stay with me and “tug at my sleeve” until I stop being lazy and sit my butt down to write. For example, a recent poem started with the line “Spring is a dangerous time”; it reposed in my notebook for two months before I realized that I wanted poetically to address my suicide attempt nearly three years ago. (Don’t worry, I’m perfectly fine now and have no plans or expectations to do it again.) Anyway, once I sat down, the poem—forgive the cliché—wrote itself. It just flowed. I love, just love, the integrity of a single line, the number of syllables, the flow of thought and speech. I’m reading aloud and reading along as I’m writing.

**CLARITY** *Carl Auerbach*

The end foreseen arrives:  
“is” and “was” and “will be”  
closer now, and clearer;  
“if” and “but” foreclosed.  
The fire in the clearing  
burns to ashes and then out.  
Cold descends and dark.  
A once forgotten presence  
enters, passes; its only remnant—  
me.



**THUMB TRICKS** *Donna Pucciani*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

Why, on a winter's night  
in Chicago, should I suddenly  
remember my grandmother's thumb,  
how she could curl it back  
to practically touch her wrist?

As a child, after tweezing her whiskers  
from the throne of her magnanimous lap,  
I'd watch her display her magical thumb,  
curled like the crescent of the tropical moon  
over Aunt Betty's greenhouse,  
or the swanlike necks of the orchids within.

And when she whistled for us, that same  
thumb bent towards her forefinger,  
making a charmed cirlet that she held  
between pursed lips. At the shriek,  
we'd come running down the block,  
pigtails flying, while gumbo  
bubbled on the stove.

Later, lying alone on my bed  
in the dark humidity of New Orleans,  
I'd try to close my lips around my fingers  
to recreate the sharp call to dinner,  
emitting not sound but saliva. Then,  
seeking at the sill the moon's small scythe

cutting the sky over Lake Pontchartrain,  
I'd attempt her other trick, pushing  
my thumb painfully out and down,  
my childish brain wondering  
how hands behave, fingers bend,  
bodies move or do not move  
as we would wish, nor minds nor tongues.

## WHO'S TO SAY? *Kate James*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

"EXCUSE ME, SIR, there is a special needs child *inside* that stool. You can't just take it out of my room!"

*Where the hell am I?* I thought as I came back into consciousness. I pulled myself into an upright position and peered out the door as much as I could to try to see where that voice was coming from. *Wait, where are my clothes? What the fuck?* All of the sudden I felt cold. The thin sheet covering me was useless. I don't know why I'm here. I know it's a hospital because of the white walls and the smell of saline and stale bodies, but what am I doing here? I know I'm in trouble though. I can feel it. People are watching me. It feels like if I make one motion, one movement, some alarm is going to go off and people are going to come running. But as I sat up no one came, nothing happened, no one even came in. *Are people watching me? Who the hell is that person still yelling about a special needs child?! Is she saying it's stuck in a stool? Someone's definitely watching me.*

"SIR, BRING THAT STOOL BACK IN HERE. Do you understand that the child inside that stool is my responsibility? It's in my room, if you take it away, you're all going to neglect him."

Finally, the body that belonged to the concerned voice echoing through the halls sauntered on past my doorway. She was probably about my age, maybe a little older. I noticed her gown matched mine. Her long coffee brown hair looked perfectly clean and brushed and fell to the middle of her back. I reached up and stroked my own long, flowing hair; it was matted and tangled. It made me self-conscious. She had pale skin like a porcelain doll and vacant brown eyes. *Was this a hospital?* She looked perfectly healthy to me, no bruises, no IV's, nothing but a pale teal hospital gown

with an ugly oval pattern and thick gray socks that she definitely didn't bring from home. *Wait, I'm wearing those too.*

She walked past my door again. *Why is she just wandering around?*

*Wait what time is it? Why is there no door to my room? Does anybody even work here? This is bullshit, where's all my shit? Shouldn't someone be checking on me? Maybe no one even knows I'm here, maybe this is an out of body experience. Yeah, that's it.*

"SIR, THE STOOL. YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND." The porcelain girl was almost whimpering now. She ran by my doorway with a stool in her hands, followed by one severely frustrated security guard.

"Listen, I don't know why this is bothering you so much, this is a stool. *A stool.* A child cannot fit in a stool. Enough." The security guard spat out at the girl with little sympathy, ripped the stool out of her hands, and then sat on it. The girl retreated back to her room. *Well, I have an interesting neighbor.*

Perched on top of the stool, the security guard looked up at me and shook his head laughing. *Okay, so he sees me... do I laugh back? Is any of this funny?* He's sitting directly across from my doorway. We're practically face to face. *Wait, is he guarding ME? When is someone going to come in here to tell me exactly what's going on?* He was probably 24 years old. He had dirty blonde hair and his strong, distinct facial features told me he has European ancestors. He kept looking at me from his stool throne and smiling.

*I still have no idea what time it is. This is bullshit. Where are the windows in this place?* All in one teal motion, my neighbor ran out of her room, *I bet she didn't have a door either,* and ran straight for the doctors' lounge, directly across from my doorway, just to the left of the security

throne. Before she could even get their door all the way open the security guard grabbed her and dragged her back to her room. She started up again, "THE STOOL! THE BOY! HE'S CRYING NOW! I hear him crying." Now she was crying. *What the HELL is this girl talking about? She really is saying there's a kid in that stool. Would it kill anyone to just let her take care of the damn stool?!*

The security guard, whose name was probably Ivan or something bold and European, sat back down on that damn stool and looked back at me, laughing again. *Are we bonding over this girl's insanity? Can I ask him where I am? Why I am here?*

"Why do you look so confused, sweetie?" The security guard nodded in my direction.

"What's the deal with my neighbor? Why is she so concerned about that stool?"

The security guard answered me chuckling to himself, "Didn't ya hear? There's a special needs child stuck inside. If she doesn't take care of him, no one will."

I didn't appreciate the sarcasm. "But what's her problem? She's a psycho."

"Welcome to the psych ward, sweetie!"

*What.* "Excuse me? Okay I'm in the wrong place. Get me the doctor. I'm not supposed to be here I need to get out now."

"Yeah, none of you are 'supposed to be here,' you're all 'in the wrong place,' we know. Just relax I'm sure the doc will be out soon."

Just then a woman in a white lab coat walked out of the doctors' lounge, "Ivan! Be nicer. She's a paranoid schizophrenic, remember? Work on your patience," the woman in a white lab coat harshly whispered as her eyes darted over to me.

*What the hell is that supposed to mean? They're gonna keep me in here, I know it. I gotta get the fuck outta here.*

I was making my break away. Ivan, the security guard, got up to get a cup of coffee so I BOOKED it. It was a liberating feeling, running down the hallway, no slip grips on the bottom of my socks, cool clean breeze blowing my hair back, then I remembered my nakedness. My gown wasn't tied in the back. *They did this on purpose.* I stopped short. The red glow from my cheeks radiated heat through my skin and I was mad with embarrassment. The red glow from the EXIT sign was luring me in and I was so close! I could see the double doors ahead; my gateway to freedom, but behind me the security guard sat back down on his stool throne shaking his head laughing again as he waved his walkie-talkie fluidly through the air in my direction. I tied my gown. Defeated, I turned and started to head back to my room. That's when I learned of my other neighbor.

"YOU'RE JUST LIKE THE REST OF EM. YOU BITCH. YOU'RE A LIAR. ALL UH YA."

I could hear the spit in his wet words. The man in the room next to mine yelled out and I couldn't tell if it was directed at me. *They're fucking with me, these people. I know it. This is ridiculous I'm not even supposed to be here. I gotta come up with another plan.*

"The LAW. None uh ya know about THE LAW. I didn't do it! I swear I didn't! Lock me up and see if I give a fuck!"

My other neighbor was yelling to no one. *Listen to this guy.*

"SIR!?...SIR! the stool..." *Holy shit here we go again. How'd I get stuck between these two nutcases?*

Back in my bed I could get some sort of peace and quiet. I needed a plan. The security guard outside my door started dozing off and the stool girl was making less frequent attempts to get that kid out of it. My other neighbor, the one so concerned with the law, was beginning to simmer

down. But I bet they drugged him. They must have shot him up with some sort of tranquilizer. Now was my only chance. If I didn't go now, they'd never let me leave.

The lady at the desk wouldn't believe me. They're trying to keep me here.

"Ma'am, I promise you this is a mistake, my family is waiting just outside those doors to take me home."

"Sweetie, I'm sure they'll be here later but you should go back to your room right now. We will let you know when they arrive." She peered out above her dark rimmed glasses and I knew her contact lenses gave her fake blue eyes. Don't act like you know me.

"Listen, we can make this really simple. What do I need to do? Sign a release waiver? I'm sure there are better things everyone here could be doing with their time than paying attention to me. Let me get out of your way." I'm good at talking my way out of things.

The lady smiled slightly and giggled a little. "Honey please just head back down to your room, we can discuss this later."

What the hell is with everyone laughing and acting like they know me? This fucking place.

Ivan the security guard greeted me outside my doorway. "Nice of you to come back." He was smiling in a way that made me too uncomfortable. I turned into my room without responding.

*This is a madhouse. These people are after me. They're probably planning to turn me into one of them. It's their fault the stool girl thinks there is a special needs child stuck in her stool. THEY'RE probably framing my other neighbor for committing some horrible crime. What's next?*

In my bed, thinking of ways to retaliate, I came to the conclusion that the only way out of this place is my getting some back up. I need allies to create diversions. I need stool girl and the man so concerned with the law. I need them but

they need me. My poor neighbors have no idea what these people have done to them. *But how am I going to get them to work with me?*

The stool was right outside my doorway. Easy. I'll just trade my stool for his. What difference does it make? Ivan looked up at me like he was reading my mind. *I bet he is reading my mind. All of them are. That's how they keep us here.* Once I trade stools, I'll just walk into stool girl's room and introduce myself. That's when I'll explain my situation. Well, our situation. I'll tell her how they're keeping us here and slowly killing us. THEY'RE driving us crazy. She'll see. And once she has her stool she'll be able to take care of the special needs child stuck inside. She'll thank me.

After she's on my side, we'll stop over in my other neighbor's room, the one who's being framed by these people. We'll explain our situation and once he knows the truth he'll join us too. The three of us can easily outsmart everyone. I'll talk to the lady at the desk with the fake blue eyes while the stool girl will put on an act for the security guard. She's great at acting crazy. Ivan will just shake his head laughing and won't even notice the man who's being framed silencing the alarm to break down the emergency exit door. Then, we run for it. Flawless.

"FUCK YOU PEOPLE. YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING. TAKE ME DOWN TOWN I DIDN'T DO IT I TOLD YOU." My other neighbor started up again.

*This place is driving me crazy. I don't know if I can even deal with these people to make this plan happen. Everyone's fucking crazy. I shouldn't be here.*

"Leslie, sweetie, your family's here for visiting hours," The woman from the front desk was standing in my doorway, "I promised we'd tell you when they arrived. Come out and say hi."



*come out and say hi? Do these people think I'm stupid?! If I go out there they'll tie me up. I've seen them do it. They must have heard my plan! I knew they're listening.*

New plan: Don't. Respond.

"Leslie, your family is here. They want to see you. You know you have to come out to the common area to see them, Leslie. Come on." The front desk lady was really pushing my buttons. Acting like she knows me and my family. *I knew these people were all crazy! I should have run out when I had the chance. Now she's blocking my doorway.*

I now have no time to complete my escape plan—the one that involved befriending my neighbors and making allies because we need each other. There's no time now. She will only wait so long without responding before coming in to see if I'm still breathing.

*Run.*

I jumped out of my bed, knocked over the front desk lady and made one final break for the swinging double doors. I knew my gown came untied but I didn't care. I was about to be free from these crazy people! I just had to make it to the end of this hallway! Someone's coming up behind me. I can hear them breathing. *It's probably Ivan that security guard I know he heard me planning to run he's probably going to try and keep me here.*

The next thing I knew, I was on the ground, under Ivan, if that was even his real name. He tackled me and had something in his hands that looked like a gun. *I knew these people were trying to kill us all! They've always been after us! He took the syringe in his hand and jabbed it into my thigh. Poison.* I started screaming. Maybe the stool girl would hear me and come out to help. Then she'd know what they've been doing to us this whole time. Mid scream I just couldn't scream anymore. I got tired. Everything went black.

ANACOSTIA AVENUE *Chris Tansey*

I SIT ON THE FIELD AFTER THE GAME, staring at the sky with its reds and deep purples. The turf underneath my fingers is still warm to the touch from the afternoon sun. The dirt sticks to my hands as I pull out the grass. Sweat makes pathways on my face, sometimes reaching my eyes and creating a burning sensation. I was waiting for the dark to set in so I could cool off.

Finally, my eyes leave the sky and I look at my surroundings. It's a shitty field. The football field is located on the top of a flattened hill. There's no seating for the fans, and the goalposts are rusted. Around the field is a black chainlink fence that keeps people in or out, depending on how you look at it. The first thing you need to understand about Rec league football is that there are no concession stands. There are no cheerleaders. And there is definitely no security. People don't give a fuck about that stuff. The game is all that matters. Straight up, that's it.

I get up and unhatch the gate of the abandoned field. I walk slowly down the hill. As I walk by, I see the bottles, some already halfway in the ground looking like little fucking gravestones. The little white cigarettes, most of them already melted in the ground trying not to drown. They remind me of the sailboats I used to read about in middle school. The cigarettes are little sailboats going against the tide, just trying to survive the dark bottom. But the vials always bring me back to real life. I have no way of changing for them. They just get stuck in your fucking shoes and make crunching sounds as you walk on the concrete. These bottles, cigarettes and vials are the slippery slope.

I get down the hill and jump onto the concrete. Every time I'm on this sidewalk I think of when me, my mom, and my sister walking to church. My mom would tell us that the cracks represented somebody's pathway in life. If the crack ended in grass or moss, my mom said that the person had found happiness or a meaning in life. If the crack just ended, then the person hadn't found it. Every Sunday we'd be on this sidewalk, avoiding all the cracks, not wanting to step on people's lives. We looked real funny doing it. I walk up Anacostia Avenue sidewalk for a bit. I still got on my cleats from the game. The crunch of the vials is my music for the walk home. It's real quiet in this part of Kenilworth. A big green swamp lies west of Kenilworth. West of the swamp is the Anacostia River.

It's dark outside and a small wind is making the trees whisper. The trees were here before my slippery hill was created by bottles, cigarettes and drugs. They were here before Kenilworth was even a name. I take a right on Ord Street. My house is the fifth one on the left side of the road. It's a ranch style house with a front and backyard. It's right across from the middle school. I enter into the bright white lights of the hallway lamp and close the door.

SIERA SITS AT THE SMALL SQUARE TABLE, in the middle of the kitchen floor. As I walk into the room she looks up. Her eyes shine through the dark room that's lit only by a hanging lamp on the ceiling.

"Where you been Ronnie!? Your game ended like two hours ago!"

"Watching the sky, damn didn't know a man couldn't come back to his own house when he wants to."

"Did you win though? How'd that white boy Jude play?" says Siera ignoring my comment.

"We lost. Jude fumbled the ball in the last minute. Coulda won."

"So he's no good huh?"

"Apparently not. Fuck."

My sister Siera is only seventeen. She's already real pretty. A year younger than me, she's already getting all the attention from the boys in Kenilworth. She's got an afro, which has been out for like forty years, but she can pull it off. My skin is pretty dark, but Siera's got a tone like a milk chocolate Hershey bar. Some of the boys in the Kenilworth projects call her "Hershey."

The old worn refrigerator hums in one corner, while the sink and counters align the opposite side of the room. The kerosene lamp hangs from the ceiling, slightly swinging from the breeze coming through the open side door of the kitchen. I change the subject. I don't like talking about losses.

"How about those tests you just took, do good on em?"

"Two A's and a B!" says Siera beaming at me. Her teeth looking almost all the same as she smiles. Then comes a question I'm don't want asked..." Did you get your grade back in math?"

I scowl at a dark red spot on the otherwise white table, "Yeah...no good Siera. No good. Fuck school." I glare at the red spot and begin trying to rub it off the table. It sticks there staring back at me, laughing at all my tries at keeping this table the same color of white.

Siera looks at me with sadness. "You only need a 2.0 to go to Wisconsin, Ronnie. You're about there. Just don't get in your own way and don't listen to dad."

All of a sudden the door slams. The walls shudder making the ceiling ripple. The lamp swings around and around, shadows skipping all over the room. It has a dream effect on me. It is unreal, as if I am in a nightmare that I can't get out

of. The shadows on the wall, the cracked sidewalks and the trees. The trees that have been there since before I was born and will be there when I die.

My Pops is back from work. He works at the local water cleaning plant by the river. He's a Vietnam War Vet who doesn't take shit from nobody. He's a real motherfucker.

My Pops looks at us both. The chemicals from the plant and the clay from the bottom of the river give his hands a red color. He stumbles closer to me. I smell liquor on him. Motherfucker drinking liquor on a Tuesday. Pops is what white people call an "alcoholic."

I look him straight in the eyes. "Hey Pops, what's for dinner?"

"Make your own dinner boy," he growls.

"You got money for beer, where's the beef?"

"Fuck you boy. You aint funny," Pop says quietly.

"Not trying to be, just trying to eat," I grumble.

"What was that boy?," asks Pops in a dangerous voice.

"I said: 'Not trying to be, JUST TRYING TO EAT!'. I emphasize the last part. I realize it's a mistake.

"Fuck you Boy," says Pops staggering.

"Fuck you Pops, you're not worth shit. I wish mom was still here."

Pops face suddenly contorts into something nasty. Like a war veteran. Like he just saw the Japanese stabbin his buddy in the jungle or something. Real scared and pissed off like. He's staring at me.

He gets real quiet, grey eyes all buggy. "You don't get it boy." He pauses for a bit. His eyes start moving around the room, still following the shadows that the kerosene lamp has thrown on the wall. The shadows travel swiftly and Pop's eyes follow their every movement. He tries to start again, but he can't.

The next moment is in slow motion for me. His hand slowly rises, his face changing so quick I cant compute all the emotions in this man. The rigid muscled arm gets above his head and then he starts bringing it down. His hand smashes into the table with full impact. The table and everything in the room shudders.

Siera has fallen out of her chair. She's curled up in the corner staring at Pops with those white worried eyes. I look at the man. He's holding his right hand in his left. Tears are streaming down his face. Pops is losing it. The man is really fucking losing it.

I pick Siera up off the floor. I take one last look at the table before leaving with my sister. There's another red mark on the white table now. I leave Pops in his nightmares in the room of moving shadows.

AN HOUR LATER I'M SMOKING a joint with my boys DeAndre and Mad Man at the Kennel. The Kennel is the nickname for the Kenilworth Terrace projects. It's made up of small two story brick shacks pushed together to make cheap housing for poor people. Only three streets go through the Kennel. Ponds and Quarles streets parallel each other and both meet up with 45th Street on the east side of the neighborhood. The 5-0 don't go into the Kennel too much, so we don't get worried about smoking and getting cuffed.

Me, DeAndre and Mad Man been best friends since fifth grade. Back then we would huddle around the table in homeroom during break. We would trade Charmanders for Pikachus while we drank government paid chocolate milk and ate graham crackers. DeAndre was the class clown. Boy used to steal the teachers cell phone and put it in the ceiling when she went to the bathroom. Then during class he'd call it on his phone. This poor woman, already ruined by me and

DeAndre, would lose her mind. Start throwing her books off her desk, looking for her cell phone. This woman got some white girl song playing as a ringtone. Made that shit even funnier. DeAndre still a funny motherfucker. That boy survived this long because of his humor.

On the other hand, Mad Man was real serious all the time, but he was smart. Big tall boy. Close crop hair and a strong jaw. He never said a lot. We all respected Mad Man. Boy used to sell candy at school, now he sells rocks. But shit, a lots changed since Pokemon and Snickers Bars. We used to play hide and seek during recess and tease the girls after school. Now Mad Man plays hide and seek with the cops and DeAndre got a girl pregnant.

Right now we're smoking on the terrace near the corner of 45th and Ponds Street. We got a view of the whole scene. Boys from the hood ride by us on their small trick bikes. The crazy bitch down the street is walking down the middle of 45th Street looking for a fix. Cars slowly swerve around the crack addict as if she's a traffic cone. The light coming from the headlights hits the broken vials on the street and sidewalks. They remind me of the shooting stars. Both flash and go back into darkness after a split second.

Meanwhile Lil Boy Rakim aint older than thirteen. His voice haunts the neighborhood every night with "2 for 20" and "get yo Black Widow." It echoes around this neighborhood at night. This boy then sends the customer to Terrance who's across the street under the tree at the corner. Terrance takes their money and points them around the back in the alley. Another boy, probably Marlo, stakes out in the alley and gives the customer the product. Works like a charm. The 5-0 never gets a lead. Mad Man is usually the enforcer, but he taking a break to smoke a blunt with me and DeAndre.

I take a puff of the blunt and pass it to DeAndre, while looking at Terrance across the street collecting dirty bills. I don't like him. There's something about him. He's tall and skinny, with tattoos running from his shoulders to his fingers. He's got a white wife beater on.

"That mother fucker is some trash DeAndre."

DeAndre takes a hit, sucking in the air and holding it in his lungs for a couple seconds. But he starts laughing and then he's coughing.

"Hahaha cuz, you always angry at someone. First its Ice Cream, then that mother fucker Big Jerry. What's your problem with Terrance?"

I look back at Terrance as DeAndre passes the blunt to Mad Man. Mad Man reaches for the blunt from his lawn chair. His long arms easily get to the blunt. He takes a huge hit and holds it in his lungs for a while. Then real casual, the boy lets it out slow, never losing focus on the operation across the street.

"Ronnie is right. Terrance don't know how to run shit man. Look how inefficient this boy is. See, he don't even count the money before he points the customer around the corner."

DeAndre starts laughing again. "Hahaha motherfucker... what kind of word is 'inefficient'? You sweet, Mad Man." I try and bring the conversation back to Terrance. "Nah cuz, I didn't mean that Terrance was indeficient, I'm talking about the stuff Ive heard about that boy. I heard he killed an INNO a while back. And his last girl got sent to the hospital with a concussion and bruises all over."

Mad Man smiles at me. "Son...first of all the word is 'inefficient' not indeficient and even if he did kill an innocent, that boy Terrance is protected by Lamar. And Lamar is my meal ticket, so please do not do anything stupid, cause I cant promise you help."



DeAndre laughs at Mad Man. "Boy you've been friends with Ronnie since fifth grade. You saying you'll take the money over him?"

"Yeah man, I'm being real about it. Survival DeAndre. Ronnie you my boy, but I come first. Im there for you as long as I don't get killed in the process. Telling you that straight up."

DeAndre is no longer laughing. His smile slowly turns to a frown. "Mad Man you a sad little boy."

Mad Man opens his mouth to respond, but I put my hands up before he can say anything.

"Hey look, I ain't gonna do anything. Terrance under Lamar's protection. I aint gonna mess with that. Lamar too dangerous anyway. That boy be real fucked up in the head. He kill anyone about anything. So both of you chill out"

Mad Man had moved up in his seat and was watching me closely. As I said these words, he seemed to relax a bit and fell back into the chair.

Meanwhile, the vials on the street flash and Lil Boy Rakim calls out to the drug addicts. I fall asleep.

I HEAR SCREAMS. My mother is in the alley. The alley between 45th Street and Douglas ave. I see her. There's only shadows around her. I take a gun out, and old M1911. I start firing at the shadows. The bullets go through them and ricochet off the walls. Bullets surround me in a tornado barrier that does not let me get closer to my mother. She keeps on screaming.

My eyes open quickly. The screams continue. I jump up, I look around. Its real dark outside with the only lighting being the orange bulbs from the street lamps. One of them is on the corner across the street. There's that boy Ter-

rance. There's a girl there too. Her shirts torn and she's trying to get away. He's smacking her.

"Shut the fuck up bitch! You been talking to that boy down the street? Huh?" SMACK. She screams louder.

"LET ME GO TERRANCE! Im sorry!" SMACK. Terrance is not letting go.

"You do me like that girl? You know who I am? I run this shit!!" SMACK.

The girl is looking exhausted and real bad and the boy Terrance aint letting up. And this is when I lose it. I run across 45th Street. Terrance is so wrapped up in beating this girl, that he doesn't even see me. I wind back and hit him full force in the face. He bowls over onto the ground. The girls screams again and runs away. He quickly reaches for his gun, but he's having trouble getting it out. I jump on him and wrestle the gun away. By now, I cannot see anything but Terrance. The next moment is in slow motion for me. My hand slowly rises, my face changing so quickly I cant compute all the emotions inside. My rigid muscled arm gets above my head and then I start bringing it down. It gains momentum steadily. And then all of sudden everything comes into full speed. My hand with the gun smashes into his head with full impact. And I do it some more. And then the boy with the red wifebeater is not moving anymore.

DeAndre comes running over. "Oh cuz you royally fucked. You royally fucked," he says real quietly. That is all he could say. And he said it over and over.

Mad Man doesn't even cross 45th Street. The tall quiet man, watching me and DeAndre from across the street. From where I stand Mad Man's glasses are all orange as they reflect the orange bulbs from above. Mad Man quietly turns around and walks away.

DeAndre turns from me to Terrance and back again. He tries to say something but he can't. Instead he turns from both me and the quiet boy on the ground and runs towards wherever Mad Man is headed. I hear the sirens, and I start running down 45th Street. As I run down the street, the orange lights flash on my hands showing me the red on them.

I AM RUNNING AS FAST AS I CAN. They're almost on me. FUCK. If they catch me, its game over. But I find an extra gear, I speed up and make it safely across. I kneel down and I raise my eyes to the still bright sky. And I find peace for a second. My teammates come around me and pull me up. We've won the game and I'm the reason why. I'm that good.

I look back to my sideline. Pop's there with his brown paper bag. Siera is talking to DeAndre. DeAndre always making the girls laugh. Motherfucker knows how to talk to women. Respect for him. After the game, Coach talks to us about what we need to work on. Everyone starts leaving. Pops puts his hand on my shoulder. "Boy, you becoming a real man now. That was some good football there. Come home tonight, I'm gonna cook up some food for errybody." This is his way of saying sorry for the other night. It's not enough of an apology though. Not for six years of the same shit.

I feel that the real Pops, is all covered with mud. The mud he walked through in Vietnam. The mud he works with on the Anacostia River. It covers him. Hiding him from me and Siera. Only liquor gets that man out of his dark place. His friend Jack Daniels and him walk off.

"Great game Ronnie!" Siera says smiling at me with her white teeth. She wraps her arms around me. I love Siera more than anyone. She's the bright spot in a dark fucking world.

Without her, there's not a lot of hope. DeAndre slaps my back and I'm back to the moment.

"Good game Cuz! Fuck Lamond Riggs boy, you showed em who's better."

I can tell DeAndre is still a little shaken from the other night. This is the first time I've seen him since the shit went down.

"Thanks DeAndre, how you been?"

"Good man, Siera telling me da College recruits been around yo house yesterday. Might get that scholarship huh?"

"Haha maybe boy" I punch DeAndre lightly on the shoulder. "I'm gonna sit on the field for a bit, I'll see you guys later."

"Whaddya mean Ronnie? Come home now, Pop's cooking dinner."

"Nah I'm gonna stay here."

DeAndre shrugs. "Whatever man, see you later. I'll walk ya around your way Siera."

They start walking off. Siera looks back at me real quick. She waves and smiles. She looks beautiful. I sit on the field after the game, staring at the sky with its reds and purples. The turf underneath my fingers is still warm to the touch from the afternoon sun. The dirt sticks to my hands as I pull out the grass. Sweat makes pathways on my face, sometimes reaching my eyes and creating a burning sensation. I am waiting for the dark to set in so the I can cool off.

I get up and look at my surroundings. The place is empty. I unhatch the gate and walk off the field. I slowly march down the hill, watching my step the whole way. The little white sailboats are there, the small gravestones too. Someone behind me whispers, "Hey Motherfucker." It's Lamar. He's got a Louisville Slugger in his hand. He's not that big. Less than six feet, he's got cornrows and a scar going diagonal across his left eyebrow to his lip. Small dark eyes too.

“What up Lamar?”

“Yo bitch. You been fucking with my cuz?”

“Who’s your cuz?”

“Terrance, motherfucker.”

“He was beating an Innocent”

“I don’t give the fuck if the girl was an Inno or a killer, you don’t touch anyone that works for me.”

I’m quiet. Lamar is a couple feet above me, close to the top of the hill. I sense someone moving to my left. It’s Mad Man. Then someone is moving to my right. It’s Marlo.

“See when you took out Terrance, you fucked up big time,” Lamar says real quiet. Mad Man looks real sad-like. It’s the most emotion I’ve seen with him since back in grade school. The boy is real quiet though, not saying a word. I look at Mad Man with a puppy dog look.

“Mad Man, tell him what happened. Tell him.”

Mad Man just looks at me. Mad Man is a tough boy, everyone agrees with that. But I see a tear roll under his glasses and down his cheek. Still he says nothing. The only sound now is a crunching from behind me. It’s DeAndre

“What the fuck DeAndre!? You serious?” I’m too shocked to move.

“Ronnie, even you’re friends are against you. You shouldn’t have gotten involved in something bigger than yourself. Kill him Mad Man.”

Mad Man quickly takes out his gun. A Glock 17 9mm. It’s funny cause that’s a cop gun. He points it at me with both hands. The gun is aimed for my head. Mad Man tries to hold it steady. I see my own reflection in his glasses. This might be the last time I see myself. Any second now.... But... nothing happens. Mad Man can’t pull the trigger. I look at him. He’s got tears streaming down his cheeks now. The gun is shaking in his hand.

“Pull the trigger, Motherfucker.” Lamar is getting impatient.

I get out of my trance. It’s time to run. I push DeAndre hard and start running down the hill. I hear yells behind me. But I’m faster than all of them. I run by the bottles, cigarettes and vials.

I get to the sidewalk at the bottom of the hill. I look back. Lamar, Marlo and DeAndre are running down the hill. They’re about twenty yards behind me. I start running down the street. I can hear the vials crunching under my feet as I step on the cracks on the sidewalk. All of a sudden... BAM, BAM! Two shots. But it aint the glock this time. By the sound of it, it’s a Beretta. I keep running. I’m running down Anacostia Avenue. Home is a couple blocks more. The trees line both sides of the street. It’s dark outside. BAM, BAM, BAM! AHHHHHH! Fuck, I’m hit! A real bad pain in my left leg. But my adrenaline can’t be stopped. I keep on running. Two more blocks and I’m home.

BAM! Another shot. I don’t really feel this one, but I know I’ve been hit. I fall to the ground. I’m in shock I think. I start draggin myself to a tree. It’s whispering to me. I put my back against it. Blood makes a pathway down my chin.

Lamar, DeAndre and Marlo walk slowly up to me. They have become blurry. Ahhh...so this is it. The street that I have walked since I was in Pop Warner football. I will die here. There are stars in the sky, maybe even a shooting star, in between the branches of the tree. They are bright tonight.

I start looking back at my life. The good, bad and ugly. In these seconds before the blurry boys get me, I remember something Mad Man once told me. We were sitting in lawn chairs on the terrace smoking a blunt. We were staring out on 45th Street and Mad Man was looking real serious, as usual.

“The first rule to the game, any game, whether it’s football or life, is that no one gives a fuck about you. You are meaningless. You are nothing. To be powerful, to be strong is to let nothing affect you. When you detach yourself from whatever affects you, you become the most powerful, the strongest.”

I feel like my whole life I’ve been fighting for a meaning. Whether it’s football, friends, girls or whatever, I’ve had trouble finding it. This search has led me to this bloody end under the stars. But... but now...as I look up through the branches, I see what I’ve been looking for. I cannot really explain. I found it though. I found the moss at the end of the crack.

“Motherfucker, you ready to die? Kill him DeAndre,” says Lamar quietly.

DeAndre has a Beretta in his hand. He’s not smiling anymore. He’s got a sad look in his eyes. Like he knows there’s no more Pokemon, no more blunts after this. My blood has started to move down through a crack in the sidewalk. There is green at the end.

## HOW TO MAKE A RADIO FROM A DRAGON

*Jill Lynch*

Replace the glittering scales with pewter sheets of metal, fit them together tightly over the heaving sides and down the tail all the way to the tip. Re-wire the innards with black coils and cables, drag the wires through the abdomen and plug them in where the veins had hung. Change the surging organs for micro-chips, rivets, and screws; wipe the oily blood from their grooves and twist them into the cavity in the correct arrangement. The eyes should be plucked, now sockets for two adjusting dials, spinning and searching for a signal. The nostrils are antennae, sucking in wavelengths from the dry air and conveying them down to the mesh wire lungs. Finally the open mouth, grated with titanium teeth, echoes the crackle of notes as old as fire.

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW



**HANDS** *Jill Lynch*

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

Out by the pier,  
We waded through the seaweed, waist deep,  
Our feet sinking into the sand.  
It was there that we found it,  
Tangling itself, bowing under the water.  
It pulsed electric blue, shimmered purple  
And we clasped hands,  
Drawing closer together to keep from its straying tendrils.

A painted wave, frozen in its crest,  
Hung on the wall high above us,  
Suspended from crashing down upon us  
Where we lay below, salty and tangled.  
Bodies intertwined, fingers laced,  
We arched into each other.  
We pulled the blanket up over us,  
Blocking out the streaks of afternoon light  
And opened our eyes under the dark,  
Stinging each other lightly,  
Electric touches at the tips of our toes.

Evening darkened the sidewalk before us  
As we crested the hill, making our way home.  
The sun fell, burning over the city,  
Scorching the sides of the buildings.  
We trembled on the sidewalk,  
Our wrists exposed to the bite of autumn  
As we held hands, knotted tightly against the cold.

Scalding cast iron kettle between us,  
We crouched in pretzels on the rug,  
Pouring each other tea.  
We stared up at the room, like fish in a bowl,  
And the walls shimmered, full of color and art.  
We raised the tea to our lips and it seared the tips of our  
tongues,  
Bittersweet and fragrant.  
At the end we drank the sandy tea leaves,  
Swirling shadowy at the bottom of the mug.  
Staying so long on the rug had charged us;  
A shock jumped between our fingers,  
Making our cheeks ruddy and warm.

The jellyfish glinted in the murky water,  
Wafting towards us as we skirted its soft tangles,  
Brushing against seaweed and crushing broken shells  
below us.  
The sun slipped off our cheeks and sank,  
Painting the water pink and blue.  
We turned towards the shore and waded through the  
gloom,  
Displacing the jellyfish behind us so that it shivered,  
Lonely,  
And drifted after us,  
Twisting through the water.

HIM Sarah O'Brien

FICTION POETRY PHOTOGRAPHY INTERVIEW

"*Such a sweet boy... you should date him!*" —Mom

*Nice to meet you*, I say as we shake hands,  
But it isn't. I despise, detest him.  
Inside I'm screaming, outside the old dance:  
Shake firm, smile wide, but eyes deadpan and grim.  
How do I do it? I am not quite sure.  
How, when I'm privy to who—what—he is?  
We make small talk, he asks and I answer...  
I see straight through the Good Guy act of his.  
*Don't tell anyone*, Jackie made me swear.  
We once whispered swears under a table,  
My first Best Friend, with matching underwear.  
Ugly mouth moves; attempt to stay stable.  
*We should hang out sometime. Please, I insist.*  
I gush, *of course*; wave bye to the rapist.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**ADRIAN ASTUR ALVAREZ** writes fiction and poetry in Seattle, Washington. He is famous for his tweets, which can be read and followed @AdrianAlvarez. He may also be contacted through his website: [www.adrianasturalvarez.com](http://www.adrianasturalvarez.com).

**CARL AUERBACH** is a Professor of Psychology at Yeshiva University, specializing in the psychology of trauma, with an emphasis on collective trauma and mass violence. His work has been published in many literary journals and he has been nominated for four pushcart prizes, three for poetry and one for short fiction. He lives in Manhattan, New York.

**MARK BELAIR** is a drummer/percussionist based in New York City. His poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Atlanta Review*, *Fulcrum*, *Harvard Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *The South Carolina Review*. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and his collection *While We're Waiting* will be published by the Aldrich Press imprint of Kelsay Books in the spring of 2013. His chapbook collection, *Walk With Me*, was published in 2012 by Parallel Press of the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

**SARAH BRAUNSTEIN** is the author of the novel, *The Sweet Relief of Missing Children* (W.W. Norton). She is a visiting professor at Colby College, and teaches in the low-residency MFA program at the University of Southern Maine.

**KATHRYN BRIGHTNEY** is a senior English major at Providence College. She enjoys reading, writing, music, and dancing. She would like to thank her family and friends for their love and support. Besides free writing, she runs a book review blog. She hopes to someday pursue a career in publishing or writing articles for travel magazines.

**AMANDA BROWN** is a junior at Providence College who is currently living in Australia. Although she is a math major, she enjoys writing lyrics, poetry, and short fiction. She also enjoys Oxford commas.

**RYAN EDWARD BROWN** is a masterful woodsman, crafty baker, and tasteful gardener from southern New Hampshire. He enjoys black coffee, birthday cakes, and anything made from squash.

**SARAH BRUNO** is currently a senior at Providence College studying elementary and special education. Sarah's interest in photography really began while studying abroad in Europe. *La Sedia Rossa* was taken in Perugia, Italy, Sarah's home city while studying abroad, and *Masque* was taken while walking through the streets of Paris alongside a beautiful canal.

**TRENT BUSCH** is a native of rural West Virginia who now lives in Georgia where he makes furniture. His poems have appeared in many journals including *Best American Poetry 2001*, *Poetry*, *Hudson Review*, *Southern Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *The Nation*, *American Scholar*, and more recently in *Los Angeles Review*, *Rattle*, *Notre Dame Review*, and *Boston Review*.

**COREY BRUNELLE** is a 2012 graduate of Providence College. The inner machinations of his mind are an enigma.

**AMANDA CENTRELLA** is a third year English major and life-time aspiring origami artist; so far she has mastered hot-dog and hamburger style. Although she doesn't believe it will change her life, she hopes some day to see the aurora borealis and be moved. What she wants most is to be moved.

**JIM DANIELS'** recent books include *Having a Little Talk with Capital P Poetry*, Carnegie Mellon University Press, *All of the Above*, Adastra Press, and *Trigger Man*, short fiction, Michigan State University Press, all published in 2011. *Birth Marks*, BOA Editions, will appear in 2013.

**KAITLIN EGAN** is a fine art photography student at Rochester Institute of Technology, originally from Long Beach, NY. Most of her time is spent taking pictures of her friends, or thinking about taking pictures of her friends.

**DONNA L. EMERSON'S** recent publications include *The New Ohio Review*, *The Place That Inhabits Us: Poems of the Bay Area Watershed*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, and *Praxis*. Chapbooks include *This Water*, *Body Rhymes* (nominated for the California Book Award), and *Wild Mercy*, published by Finishing Line Press in 2011.

**CAREY FARRELL** is a singer, a writer, a redhead, a pirate, a guitarist and a pre-school teacher. Not necessarily in that order, and usually not all at the same time. She sails the windy seas of Chicago, and you can find more of her photographs on *careyfarrell.com*.

**ALESSANDRA FORESTI** is a freshman at Providence College. Originally from the Amalfi Coast in Italy, she particularly enjoys taking pictures during the summer time of both the coast and the Mediterranean sea.

**ZACHARY GAVRY:** When I was a little boy, I spent hours on Google Images searching pictures of Venice. I told myself that I would go there one day. I studied abroad in the fall and journeyed to Venice. I will always remember the winding canals, crumbling walls, infinite silence of the empty night streets, and this one woman sitting alone thinking about the beauty of the city and most likely the beauty of life itself.

**STEPHEN GUMBRECHT** is a Providence College student.

**EILEEN HENNESSY:** Native of Long Island, now lives in and loves New York City. Translator of foreign-language documentation and books on art history into English from several other West

European languages. Poems and short stories have been published in numerous literary journals, including *Confluence*, *The New York Quarterly*, *The Paris Review*, and others. *This Country of Gale-force Winds*, a collection of her poems, was published by NYQ Books in 2011.

**AMANDA GARGANESE** is a senior at Providence College. She is an English major with an Italian minor. This is her first short story. She will be graduating in May 2013, and will be attending Law School next fall.

**DAVID GOLDSTEIN** has been published more than fifty short stories in eight countries and have been nominated for a W.W.Norton Best Creative Nonfiction Award.

**CJ HOBBS** is studying Imaging Technology at the Rochester Institute of Technology. However, she doesn't let this get in the way of her writing and photography. Hobbs and her dog Teagan will be relocating this summer, depending on where Teagan can get a job in image quality, print technology, or tennis ball chasing.

**JACKLEEN HOLTON'S** poetry has been published or is upcoming in magazines including *Bayou*, *The Evansville Review*, *Pearl*, *Rattle*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Serving House Journal*, the anthology *The Giant Book of Poetry*, and her chapbook *Devil Music* (Caernarvon Press). She works as an astrologer and intuitive life coach as well as a poet-teacher with California Poets in the Schools.

**LOWELL JAEGER** was founding editor of Many Voices Press. His third collection of poems, *Suddenly Out of a Long Sleep* (Arctos Press) was published in 2009 and was a finalist for the Paterson Award. His fourth collection, *WE*, (Main Street Rag Press) was published in 2010. He is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Montana Arts Council and winner of the Grolier Poetry Peace Prize.

**KATHLEEN JAMES** is an English and Business major at Providence College who calls New Jersey home. After taking one creative writing class as a sophomore, the ideas were constantly flowing. She writes from pieces and recollections of experiences and can turn just about anything into a story.

**EDDIE JENNINGS** has had a lifelong interest in drawing, photography, and running. After graduating from Providence College, he spent a month traveling around Europe and is now living back home in Manhattan.

**HANNAH LAMARRE** is a sophomore at Emerson College, where she is studying creative writing. Her work has been recognized nationally and published in *The Marble Collection*. She is originally from Dartmouth, Mass., and in her spare time enjoys fine literature, long walks in the city, and copious amounts of coffee.

**JILL MARIE LYNCH** studies creative writing business at Providence College. Her previous publications include a short story entitled "Fear", published in the 2010 anthology of winners of Scholastic's Art and Writing Awards. Her poem, "How to Make a Radio From a Dragon" was inspired by Professor Jane Perel's recent book of prose poetry, "Red Radio Heart".

**MARY A. KONCEL** has published two books of prose poetry, *Closer to Day* and *You Can Tell the Horse Anything*.

**CHRISTINE KRAVETZ'S** poetry has been published widely in a variety of journals including *Slant*, *Poet Lore*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Poem*. She teaches poetry in the public schools as part of the state-wide artist in residence program, California Poets in the Schools.

**JESSE MACK** is completing his MFA in creative writing at the University of New Hampshire. He graduated from Providence College in 2010. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Columbia*



*Poetry Review*, *Marco Polo*, *Snow Monkey*, *The Inman Review*, THRUSH Press's broadside series, and elsewhere.

**KARA MCCOY** is a senior English major at Providence College. She is from Seaford, New York and enjoys books, movies, and anything but long walks on the beach.

**TARA MCLAUGHLIN** enjoys barbecue chicken pizza and sleep. Mostly sleep. That is all.

**JOHN MCKERNAN** grew up in Omaha Nebraska and is now retired after teaching 41 years at Marshall University. He lives—mostly—in West Virginia where he edits ABZ Press. His most recent book is a selected poems *Resurrection of the Dust*. He has published poems in many magazines from *The Atlantic Monthly* to *Zuzu's Petals*.

**MARY BETH MCLEAN**, is an English major with artistic inclinations for drawing and design. She especially enjoys the artistic nature of literature, and the way that stories, like art, can “wash the dust of daily life off our souls” (Picasso).

**ERROL MILLER** has published extensively since 1972. He was the Featured Poet in the 2000 Poet's Market. He lives in West Monroe, Louisiana, with his sweet-wife Mary Jo, “Sasha” in poetry.

**PETER MISHLER** was educated at Emerson College and Syracuse University, and teaches at a high school in Central New York. Previous poems have appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *The Antioch Review*, and *New Ohio Review*.

**CATHERINE MOORADD** is a Senior at Providence College. Catherine plans to take part in an Urban Teaching Fellowship in her home city of Philadelphia, PA, where she can use her enthusiasm and passion for English for the betterment of students.

**CELESTE MOORE** is an English major at the University of Sydney. She has a love/hate relationship with CityRail, and lives for the moments she can spend lodged firmly in transit; a grey and yellow shuttle hurtling towards the possibilities of a new adventure.

**SHINJI MOON** is an eighteen-year-old girl living in Manhattan. She studies English and Creative Writing at New York University and believes, above all, in poetry. She is bad at falling in love, but will show you that she cares by making you tea to wake up to in the mornings.

**ERIN MORGENSTERN** is a writer and artist. Most of her writings and paintings are fairy tales, in one way or another. She is the author of the bestselling novel, *The Night Circus*.

**NAVDEEP KAUR** is a nonfiction and fiction writer who entered San Jose State University's MFA Program after earning her BS in Marketing. Her writing gains inspiration from her childhood spent in Punjab, India and her experiences in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**B.Z. NIDITCH** is a poet, playwright, fiction writer and teacher. His work is widely published in journals and magazines throughout the world, including: *The Literary Review*; *Denver Quarterly*; *Le Guepard* (France); *Kadmos* (France); *Prism International*; *Jejune* (Czech Republic); *Leopold Bloom* (Budapest); *Antioch Review*; and *Prairie Schooner*, among others.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN** is a Senior English/Secondary Education major at Providence College. During her junior year, she studied abroad in Florence, Italy where she further pursued her writing career. In her spare time, she enjoys running and reading.

**SARAH O'BRIEN**, a sophomore Creative Writing major at Providence College, enjoys long walks on the beach and cliché bios. She lives in Massachusetts with her parents and four younger sisters.

Her work has appeared in the 2012 edition of *The Alembic*, in PC's newspaper *The Cowl*, and in countless homemade birthday cards.

**THOMAS O'GRADY** is Director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston. His short fiction has been published in *Harvard Review*, *The Abegweit Review*, *Dalhousie Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *The Antigonish Review*, and *Riptides: New Island Fiction*. His first book of poems, *What Really Matters*, was published in 2000 by McGill-Queen's University Press.

**DZVINIA ORLOWSKY:** is the founding editor of Four Way Books and is a Pushcart Prize recipient. She is the author of five poetry collections published by Carnegie Mellon University Press including *Convertible Night*, *Flurry of Stones*, and her most recent, *Silver-tone* (2013). She teaches at the Solstice Low-Residency MFA in Creative Writing Program of Pine Manor College and as 2012-2013 Adjunct Assistant Professor at Providence College.

**JANE LUNIN PEREL** is Professor of English and Women's Studies at Providence College. Her book of prose poetry, *Red Radio Heart* was published by White Pine Press in October, 2012.

**HANNAH POIRIER** is a senior Creative Writing major with a Classics minor at Providence College. She normally writes long, convoluted sci-fi/fantasy stories instead of prose poems about hobos and spends far too much time on the internet.

**DONNA PUCCIANI** has published poetry in the U.S., Europe, Australia and Asia in such diverse journals as *International Poetry Review*, *Shi Chao Poetry*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, and *Christianity and Literature*. Her books include *The Other Side of Thunder*, *Jumping Off the Train*, *Chasing the Saints*, and *To Sip Darjeeling at Dawn*. A four-time Pushcart nominee, she has won awards from the Illinois Arts Council, The National Federation of State Poetry Societies, and Poetry on the Lake.

**AUBREY RICHEY:** I freeze and then I melt and then words fall out.

**JULIE WITTES SCHLACK** won a Hopwood Award for Fiction, and periodically writes book reviews for *The Boston Globe*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Chaffin Review*, *Hiram Poetry Review*, *The Literary Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *Phoebe*, *Sanskrit*, *South Carolina Review*, *Ellipsis*, *The Ledge*, *Ninth Letter*, *Dos Passos Review*, *The Rambler*, *Saint Ann's Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Tampa Review*, *Talking River*, *Yuan Yang*, and *The Yalobusha Review*. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts with her husband.

**MASON SCIOTTI** is a Sophomore English major from Massachusetts. He is a lover of literature, especially Edgar Allen Poe, and when not writing he can be found playing soccer or working as an assistant editor for *The Cowl*.

**DAVID SCRONCE** is the author of the chapbook *Letters to Liam* (Red Berry Editions, 2009). He has an M.F.A. from the writing seminars at Bennington College. His work has appeared in *5AM*, *Confrontation*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Rhino*, *Runes*, and *Spillway*, among other places.

**MELANIE L. SOUCHET** started writing in the first grade and never looked back. She is currently studying Creative Writing at Providence College, and lives in Florida for the rest of the year. She also writes short stories for *The Cowl*. Melanie would like to thank Professor Lunin Perel for encouraging her to submit to *The Alembic*, and her family for all of their support.

**MATTHEW J. SPIRENG'S** book *What Focus Is* was published in 2011 by Word Press. His book *Out of Body* won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award and was published by Bluestem Press at Emporia State University. His chapbooks are: *Clear Cut*; *Young Farmer*; *Encounters*; *Inspiration Point*, winner of the 2000 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition; and *Just This*.

**CHRIS TANSEY** is from Washington DC. His favorite book is *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. He enjoys large cheese pizzas and Pabst Blue Ribbon. He also loves cats. He is tired of seeing people wear the combination of ugs and north face jackets. He is also tired of people wearing the boat shoes and the rugby shirts. He thinks the yoga pants are cool though.

**MICHAEL TILLEY** lives in Brooklyn, New York with his wife and two children. His work has appeared in *Milk Sugar*, *Speech Bubble Magazine* and the *New York Press*.

**BARBARA TRAMONTE** is a professor at SUNY Empire State College and a published poet. She has served as a poet-in-the-schools in New York City and owned a children's book store for many years in Brooklyn.

**ALYSSA WOOD** is a Web editor based in New York, NY where she finds inspiration for fiction and poems like the one in this journal. She looks forward to more exploration and understanding of the grit and beauty the city has to offer.

**VIRGINIA WOOD** is a first-year MFA student at Hollins University in Roanoke, VA. She earned a BA in Studio Art at the University of Richmond in 2009. After teaching English in Incheon, South Korea, she attended Providence College briefly as a special student in creative writing. She considers that brief experience at PC formative, and is honored to have her first publication, "In the Snow", featured in *The Alembic*.

**MEREDITH WHITE** is a wildly happy senior at Providence College who is interested in poetry, medicine, philosophy (particularly bioethics) and classical literature. She plans to spend next year studying philosophy and theology at Oxford University, where she studied abroad last year.

## FEATURING

*Mark Belair*

*Jackleen Holton*

*Peter Johnson*

*John McKernan*

*Peter Mishler*

*Erin Morgenstern*

*Dzvinia Orlowsky*

*Lori Ostlund*

*Jane Lunin Perel*

*Dennis Rhodes*

*Matthew J. Spireng*