



Spring 2010

The Forum: Spring 2010

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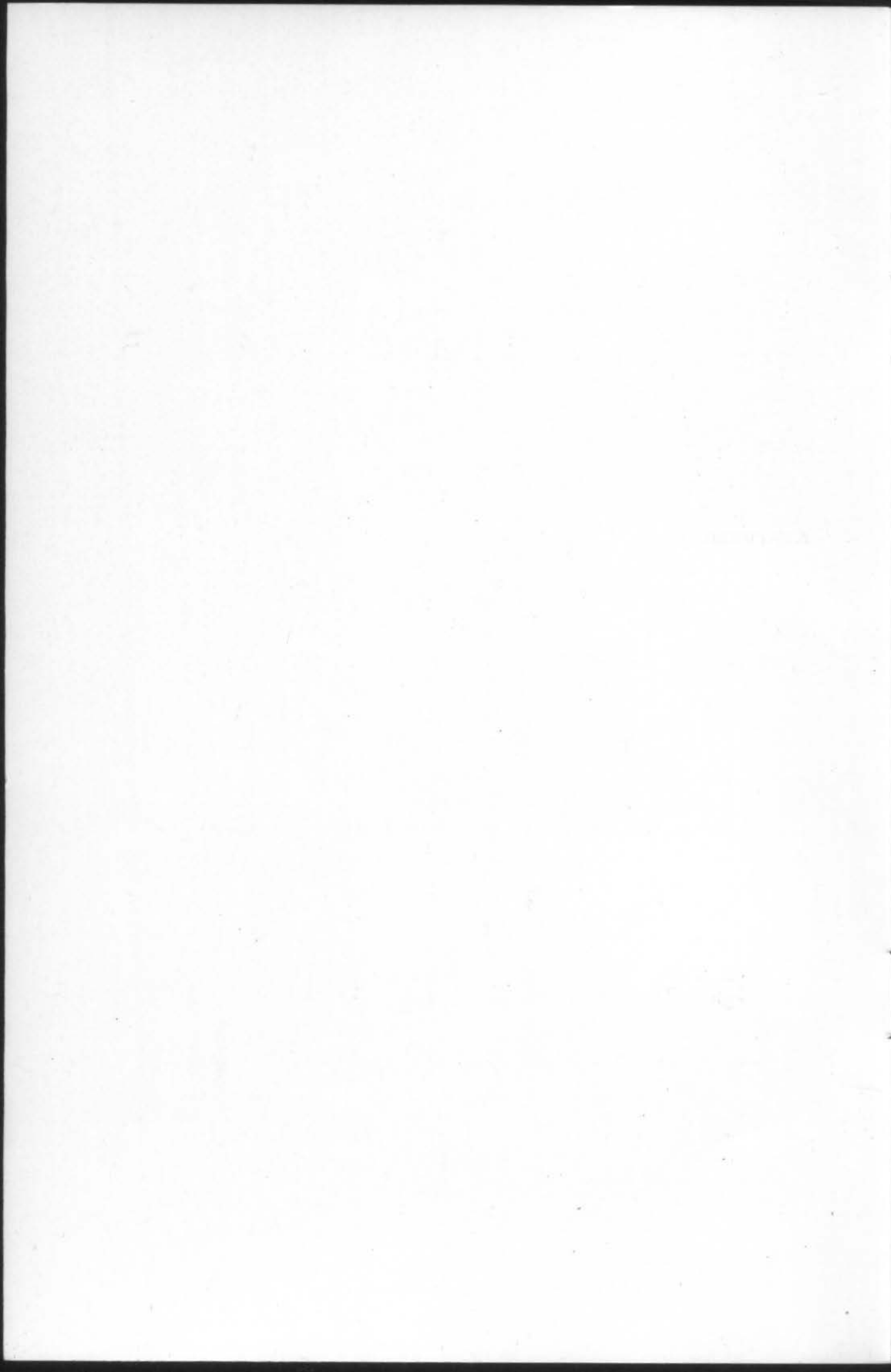
Spring 2010



STORIES • POEMS • ESSAYS • ART

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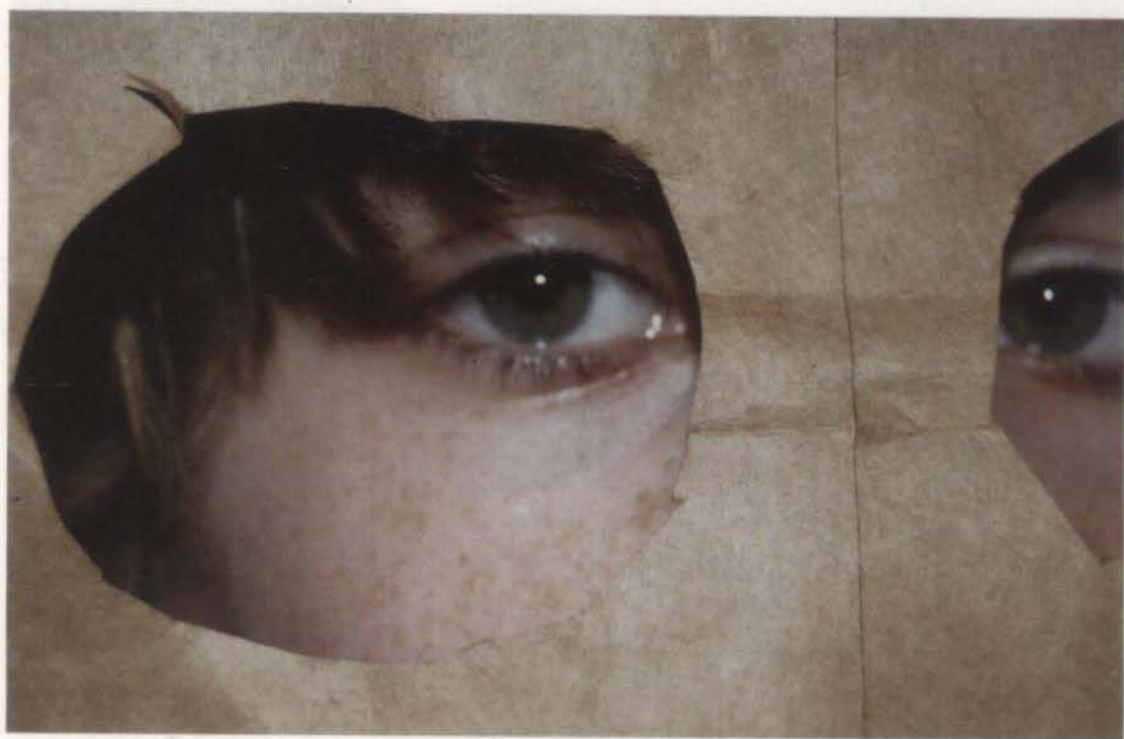


Jessica Skroch

Charles McHenry

A Poem

It happened once in our day



Hannah Halvorson

Charles McCrary

A Poem

It happened twice in one day

The first time woke me up,
Like a kick drum the first time it's tested
And the microphone is way too hot.
A bassy, punchy thud
Against the streak-free shiny window.
The beak obviously hit first
Because it had smashed through
The back of the skull.
Both wings were snapped
And the whole thing lay there,
A pile on my patio.

The second time was briefly distracting,
Like the footsteps of my neighbor I've never met
Heard faintly through a wall.
A subtle, dampened thud
Against the streak-free shiny window.
The beak probably hit first
Because a few tiny feathers had flown
From the face and stuck there on the glass.
The bird looked around, confused,
And flew away.
It was probably just fine.

But I don't know which one
I'd rather be like.
At least the first one
Thought he was going somewhere.



Hannah Halvorson

Charles McCrary

A Poem

It happened once in our life



When the sun and moon were in the sky,
The sun looked angry, and the
And the moon
It was probably just a star.

But I don't know which one
I'd rather be like.
At least I know
Thoughts are going everywhere.

Amelia Klaus

Empty Beach

1994



Andrea Dickason

Emily Burkland

Soup

EILEEN: It was Wednesday. The featured soup was vegetarian chili, which was the only reason I had come down for lunch at all. Yet, the Highman Building Cafeteria dry-erase menu posted at the end of the long line boasted a snobby New England clam chowder instead. But it was Wednesday. So, I knew they would be serving vegetarian chili as they had all other Wednesdays since my office had transferred to this building, since I had moved in with Brad to shorten my new commute, since I had started pretending to love him.

"Cup of chili and a side salad," I challenged the frizzy, dripping fifty-something behind the sneeze guard.

With blank brown eyes, she gave the menu at the back of the line a pointed stare. "Our menu rotation's changed," she said to the distant dry-erase board. "Only soup today is clam chowder, unless you want a sandwich, or..." she trailed off, fixated on the menu.

"Okay," I snapped. I wasn't sure what I was agreeing to, the chowder or a sandwich or a lobotomy. Too pissed to leave without food, and too self-conscious to leave the long line, I stared into the vast, empty pools of the cafeteria worker's eyes. It didn't seem like she even saw me.

* * *

SUSAN: I stared at the bowl of steaming soup, waging a silent war. Impatiently, I pushed my meager blonde hair behind my ears and grasped the plastic spoon with a sweaty palm. At least try a few bites, that's enough for today, I told myself. I mechanically listed the reasons I needed to eat. *Because the doctor said it would help me keep my strength up, because I'm not supposed to talk my medication on an empty stomach, because it's the only thing that's keeping me from disappearing altogether.*

I was seated in the corner, where it seemed I was ending up a lot lately, facing the wall and ignoring the buzzing crowd of suited insects behind me. I had done everything possible to put off what my stomach couldn't handle: carefully arranged the contents of my tray, mixed the sugar into my coffee with scientific precision, checked my phone for messages three times. (None, except the self-reminder I had set this morning to take my medicine. As if I would forget.) I gave one more weary, self-deprecating sigh and grabbed a small bit of thick soup with the edge of my spoon. As I brought it past my lips, I noticed something. The same pair of sensible black pumps had been occupying the same square of orange tile for the last three minutes. I replaced the bit of soup back into the bowl and followed the legs, then the body attached to the black pumps until I came to a face. A face, it seemed, that was waiting for me to do something.

"You're not almost done, are you?" the black pumps accused me.

Mute, I waited.

"It's just that every other chair in this place is occupied except that one," she gestured theatrically towards the one opposite me at my corner table. "My break's almost over, and they didn't have my vegetarian chili today, and -"

A desperate spark was building behind her eyes, so I interrupted her with a nod, more of an awkward vibration of my head than an affirmation. I pulled my tray, a neatly organized city of a meal, closer to my edge of the table, and she sat. She kept scanning the tables around us, though, as if lost or searching for an escape. I scanned the lovely perpendicular streets and gently curved cul-de-sacs I had created within the confines of the plastic edges of my tray.

"I wasn't even going to come down today," she said quickly and too loudly, simultaneously frustrated and embarrassed.

"It's okay," I said quietly, more to myself than to her.

* * *

EILEEN: Of all the ways to spend my lunch break, sharing it with some sloping, slouching secretary barricaded into the corner of the cafeteria was not one of my favorites, especially not with this slopping bowl of gelatinous clam chowder. I always eat lunch alone. Alone, mostly because my breakfasts are silence littered with Brad's attempts at opinions, and dinners are more of the same. I enjoy the secure, silent boundaries I draw around myself at lunchtime, sitting at my own table with soup and a book; no one asks me questions and I sure as hell don't answer any.

I looked down into my soup. It depressed me, so I looked into my lunchmate's face instead. It disarmed me, the whiteness. She had the air of constant sickness, a permanent swell of nausea lurking just behind her eyes. Her hair was thin and light, like white seaweed fanned out underwater. I looked back down into my sea of soup.

"They changed the menu rotation." I didn't know what else to say to this waifish stranger, clad a tented cardigan and a magnetic nametag claiming the name Susan.

"I'm Susan," she offered.

"I know," I yelped. Too loud. "Your nametag..." I trailed off, abashed at my own rudeness. My eyes dove back into the soup. I groped about for blinders, but only came up with a flimsy plastic spoon.

* * *

SUSAN: Could I really have forgotten how to be around people? Two bowls of slowly cooling clam chowder and a several miles of cold silence sat between us. I couldn't decide what to do, so I defiantly shoved a spoonful of chowder into my mouth and gulped. "What floor do you work on?" I mumbled quickly as I grabbed my water.

A pause. She swallowed. "Eleventh." Another pause. "I'm an accountant."

I was far too polite to spout off my ideas of how boring and uptight accountants all were, so I muttered something generic about the economy. That's what they do, isn't it?

"I wouldn't know," she said coolly. She was precisely stabbing her salad with a plastic fork, trapping a romaine heart, a cherry tomato, and cucumber. Crushing a crouton. Taking no prisoners.

I wanted to ask her name, but only allowed myself to after forcing another bite of chowder. "What did you say your name was, again?"

She looked up from maiming her salad. "Eileen."

"Nice to meet you, Eileen." I offered her a smile and emphasizing the long vowels in her name. She was still staring at me, so I kept talking, unsure. "I work on fifth floor, just administrative work, you know, a receptionist. I guess they keep me around just for my great phone voice." I gave a dry laugh, more of an exhalation than a cackle.

A glance at the clock, 12:23. Although I hated to do it in front of a stranger, it was past time for my medication. I jabbed another spoonful of soup into my mouth before I dug into the bottom of my sagging, flaking faux leather purse. Trying to keep it hidden inside the bag, I unscrewed the top and removed the pills, maggots in my palm. I nearly tossed them down my throat, as if the more quickly I moved, the less visible I became. A gulp of water and another morsel of soup, and she was still staring.

"I'm sick," I shrugged.

* * *

EILEEN: I didn't realize I was staring. She, Susan from the fifth floor, was getting annoyed. I could tell. She was going to leave soon, probably, which made me angry because I invited myself to this table and I hate being left to eat alone after I've been eating with someone else. I always eat lunch alone but I hate starting out with someone and then they walk away, on their own terms and not on mine.

"Sorry." I transferred my staring over to my salad, having made up my mind to shun the chowder out of simple self-respect.

"Are you married?" Susan asked in her polite, quiet voice.

The question saved a lone surviving tomato from a painful death as my fork froze in midair. "I'm never getting married again. What does it matter anyways?"

"You were married before, though?"

I felt like a bulls-eye in target practice, exasperated and panicky. Powerless. "Yeah, it was terrible. I would never go through that hell again for anything. I have a boyfriend now, yeah, but that's different. I won't get married again, never." I burned holes into my salad with my gaze, like that child's game where they can't see you if you can't see them. My panic was slowly growing, feeding off itself like a vicious cannibal, engorging itself into sheer anger. How dare she? I wasn't asking this bitch about her petty secretarial life, and yet it was all she could do to take her dull shovel of a soup spoon and stab me right in the heart. When I sat down in this empty chair, I was not asking for a book club.

"I've never been married," the quiet voice nearly whispered in the kind of voice that holds more tears than a heart ever could.

* * *

SUSAN: My medication always made me weepy. I sipped my water and thought for a moment. She was unhappy, Eileen. I envied her. It had been so long, a decade probably, since I had felt anything but physical pain, this sickness that consumed my entire life. And in the meantime, apparently, she had been feeling everything else, pain of an entirely different sort.

I was exhausted. Not the kind of exhausted the tail end of a mid-day lunch break brings, or even the kind brought on by long years of battling a disease with a hopeless cause. I was exhausted with loneliness. Tired of being all things to only myself. And here, miraculously, was someone who for the first time in ten years felt exactly the way I did. She may have a partner, someone warming the other side of the bed, but somehow, after feeling so much, she felt nothing anymore. Apparently it was possible to use a living, breathing mannequin as a shield for one's own loneliness. I could tell, with the kind of intuition slowly dying invalids have.

"You should –" I stopped.

"I should what? What should I do?" she snapped.

I took one of those deep, shuddering breaths and looked carefully between her eyes, at the bridge of her nose, as if I was aiming straight for the back of her brain, laser-like and precise.

"You should think about it," I said to the bridge of the nose.

"I already told you, I'm never getting married again." She was beginning to clean up her things irritably, knocking an empty paper cup afar with a stray wrist, gathering utensils and paper and trash, dead or alive.

"No." My forcefulness surprised even me. "You should think about leaving him."

"I just – what? No. Who do you think you are? What are you..." She snatched her purse off the floor, clutching her tray as if I would steal it away, and stood up. "Thank you for sharing your table with me." A mere formality, the words were spoken more like an accusation. She was clearly relieved to be going, unless she was just scared. Scared of me, or what I said. Ever since I've been sick, honesty has always been an appalling habit of mine.

I looked at the clock. 12:29. I tossed the soup, halfway gone; I left the cafeteria exactly the way I came.

* * *

EILEEN: I tossed my still-brimming bowl of soup and what was left of my salad on the way out the door. The pasty chowder splashed against the black garbage liner, a tide coming in. I wanted to get as far away as possible, far from Susan the secretary and her all-knowing bullshit. I made it to my car, fumbling for my keys in the bottom of my purse. I sat, sweating but still cold. As a reflex, I had put the keys in the ignition. They were swinging there, mocking me. Swinging left, you end it, swinging right, you don't. I stared until there were no decisions left, until the keys hung exactly in the middle, gravity dragging them towards the molten, soupy core of the earth. Hanging in the middle, exactly like Susan with her pills and her exquisite phone voice, an island among secretaries. But I'm an accountant, and when we do math, we would rather end at a hundred than at zero, neutral. When I measured the figures, staring at those keys swinging back and forth, we arrived at a sum of zero. Although better than negative, the accountant in me sees room for improvement.



Diane Kinney

Kirby Land

Masterspiece Writing on a Sunday Night

Walking a winding path by the ocean
Talked about my writing with others there
The atmosphere was all



Jessica Skroch



Hannah Halvorson

Kirby Lund

Masterpiece Writing on a Saturday Night

Writing a sonnet was my one intent
This Saturday evening with no one home.
The philosophical ideas all roamed—
I am a form without any content.
The television lets out its high whine
To make its presence known. My writer's block
(Did I just hear the door's deadbolt unlock?)
Has gotten the best of my now refined
Mental status, where I prepare to make
My masterpiece, my requiem mass poem,
The only work I'd ever truly own—
Writing that would make my genius awake.

A moment where I was truly inspired—
I put down my pen and simply retired.

Kirby Land

Masterpiece Writing on a Saturday Night

Writing a novel was the main
The Saturday evening was the
The following day, the



Amelia Klaus

Emily Burkland

Cottonmouth

I want you to say something new.
Something no one has ever spoken before.
Take the cotton from behind the fat of your cheeks
And let your tongue dance.

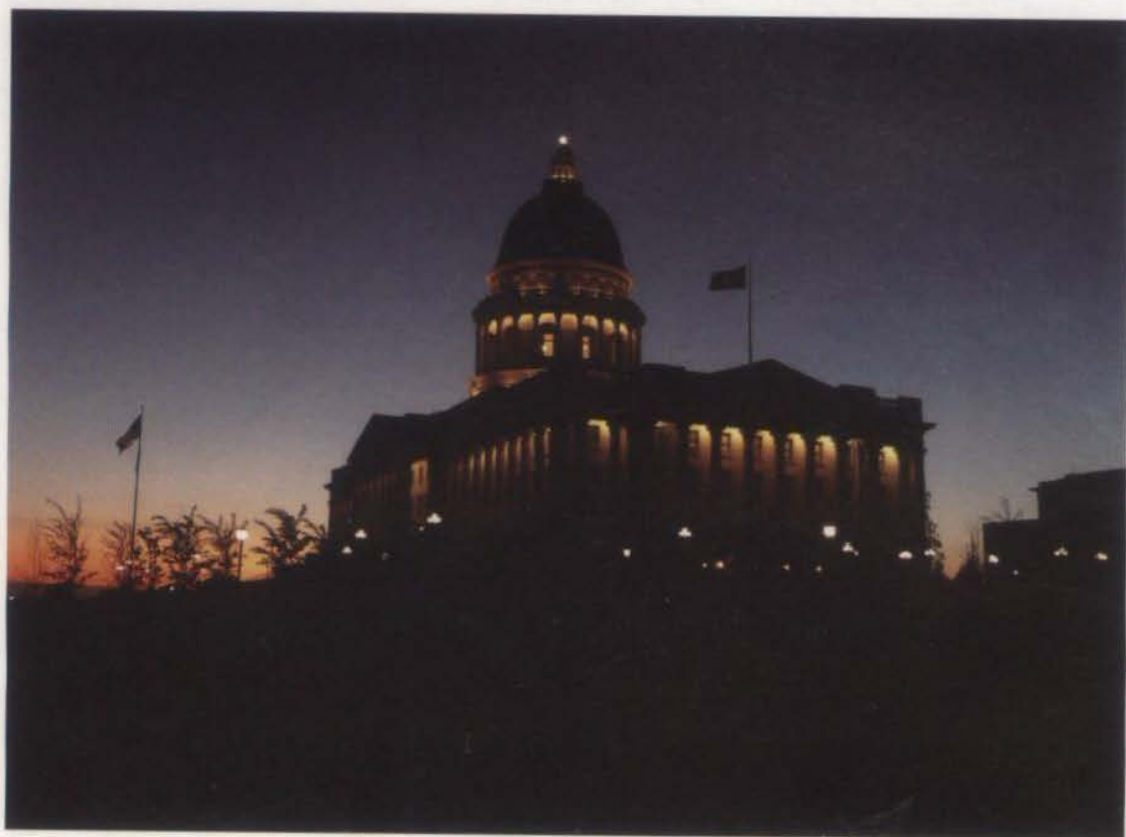
No, you've already said that.
So has he. I want you
To cajole me, regale me,
Surprise and sequester me
With your lips, forming consonants and vowels
Like a lover. Let the soft, thick walls
The inside of your cheeks rise and fall.
Let that wet pink flesh
Salivate, form soft shapes that
Squish and smack. Delicious.
I want words, luscious and long,
Difficult. Send handsome ideas to
Intoxicate my mind, stimulating.
This is what I want, what I need.
When you can conjure a novel idea,
Sending fireworks spiraling through my ears,
Then, then I will consider you.

Emily Burkland

Commitment

I want you to say something new
Something no one has ever said before

The better you know me the better you know me



Andrea Dickason

Kirby Lund

Whiskey-Induced Identity Disorder

Last night,
Jack Daniels called my high school crush
As he laid down in the bathroom
For fear of vomiting on the living room carpet.
She responded well to Jack—
She never talked that way to me.
Jack talked with her for nearly an hour;
It took just that long for him to pour out his feelings
(everything I fought and feared to say to her).
All my articulated thoughts of love for her
Staggered and stumbled past his numb teeth,
Like drunken dreams and lullabies,
When, all at once, Jack Daniels passed the phone
To a friend and prayed to the porcelain.

I woke up on the bathroom floor at 8:00 in the morning
Wondering where Jack Daniels had gone.

Whiskey-Induced Identity Disorder
Kitty Faust



Jessica Skroch

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Thank you,
The Forum Editorial Board

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