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## Westview: Vol. 30, Iss. 2 (Summer 2014)

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A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA

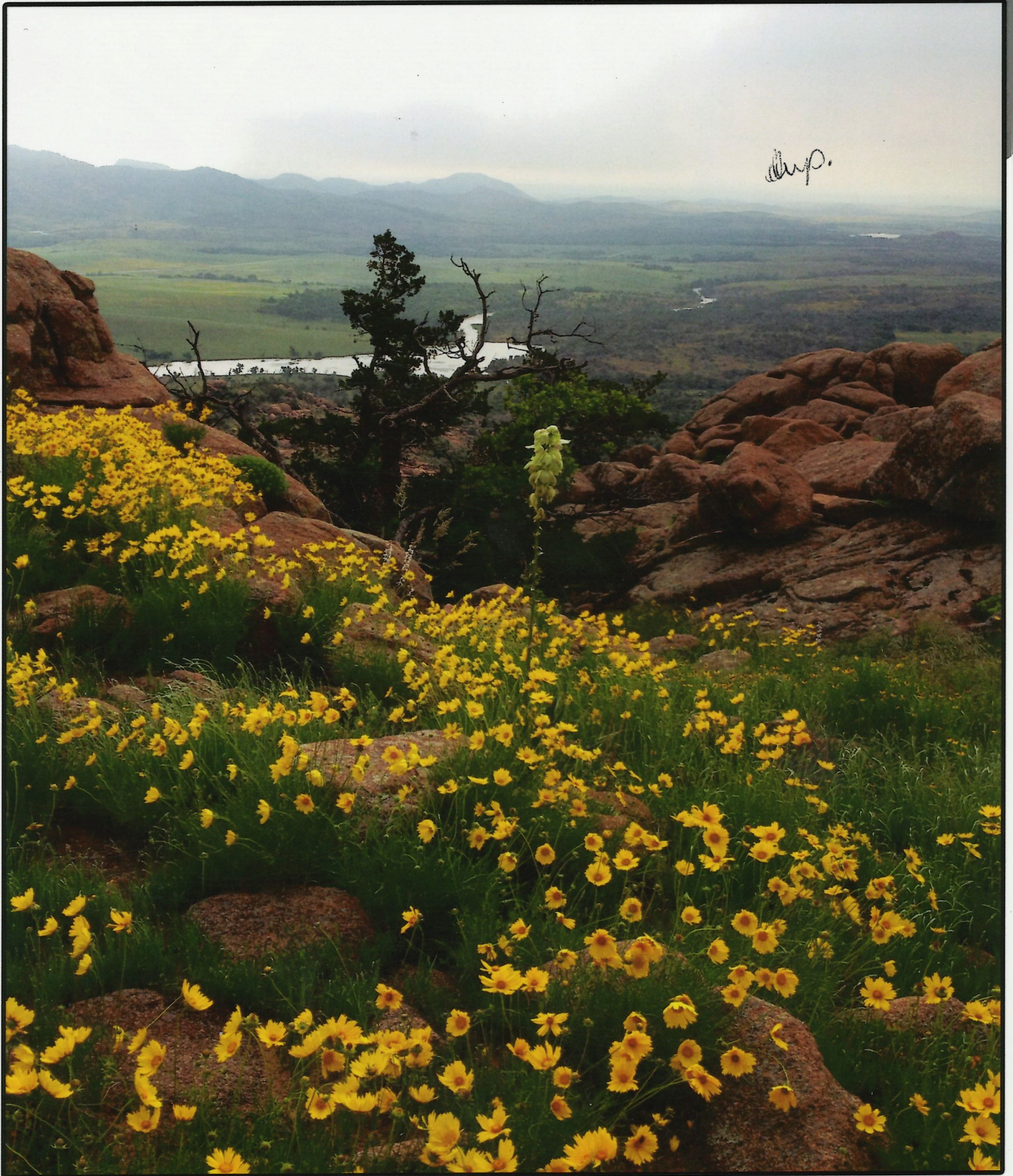
# Westview

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# West View

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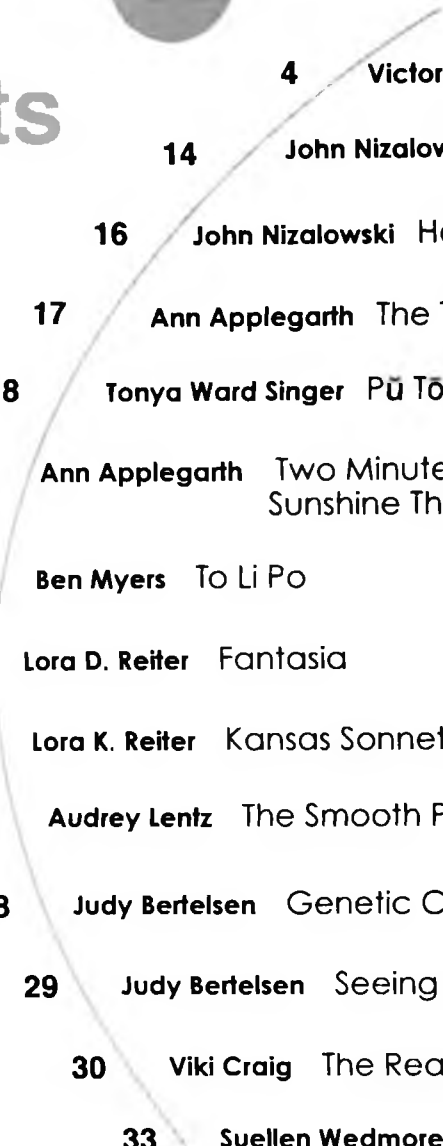
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5. Submissions and correspondence may be sent to Amanda Smith at [westview@swosu.edu](mailto:westview@swosu.edu).  
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# Static Vortex

## Victor Wolf

A storm moved in on Weatherford, flashing hundreds of times every minute and churning out a constant rumble of thunder. It was a warm May afternoon. Wallace Mikell and his six-year-old son, Rod, stood on their porch a mile east of town and watched the advancing supercell.

"Do you think I'll get struck?" Rod asked.

"By lightning?"

Rod nodded. He looked grave.

*Probably not*, Wallace thought.

"Certainly not," Wallace said. "Lightning takes the easiest path to the ground: tall things. That's why trees and telephone poles get hit so much."

He looked up at his house, hoping that the rogue electricity wouldn't think his whirling attic turbine was the easiest path possible. The place was somewhat dilapidated—needed new paint and shutters, not to mention the property itself hadn't been maintained (let alone farmed) for twenty-eight years.

"But lightning hits people, too."

"Sometimes, but not when they're safe under a porch. We'd better get inside anyway. It's gonna pour soon."

Mary Mikell was in the kitchen cooking dinner: mashed potatoes and a crock-pot chicken that had been simmering all day. Rod ran up to his room to his Legos, and Wallace walked into the warm kitchen.

"I'm really worried about this one," he said.

"The storm?"

"Yeah. There's a strong cool front. That's never good."

Mary hugged him. "It's fine, honey. How many thunderstorms pelt our house each year?"

"A lot."

"So calm down," she said, kissing him on the cheek.

Wallace retreated back to the living room and turned on the weather radio. His fears weren't pacified as easily as Rod's. There was a change in air pressure outside, the kind that had made Wallace's stomach hurt with worry for as long as he could remember. So he sat and listened to the weather radio's mechanical voice.

"...chance of up to quarter-sized hail. Violent thunderstorms are capable of producing tornadoes without warning..."

After a few minutes of robot chatter, the lights flickered and went out.

"Of all the days to use the crock-pot when we have a damn gas stove," yelled Mary from the kitchen.

The comforting hum of the central heat and air was gone, and the radio's battery was dead, leaving only the wind, rain, and thunder. Mary lit a candle and quietly cursed the power company. Rod carefully creaked down the stairs, guided by the little flashlight that he used for reading in bed.

Since dinner and TV were both on the fritz, they all went outside to watch the show, sinking into ancient wicker chairs that Wallace's father had built.

The jagged streaks of lightning blasting the prairie were the primary source of light. The storm was almost upon them, and the flashes allowed glimpses of low-hanging tails in the cloud.

"I think we'd better get in the cellar," Wallace said, and no one argued. This one was a monster.

Rod guided the family down the stairs with his flashlight. Wallace told him to turn it off to conserve the battery, and the damp cellar went black. The din of the wind and thunder grew louder still.

*Straight winds, please let it just be really strong straight winds.* But in no time, there was a roaring train sound that grew louder still, until it mocked a jet engine. Safe in the musty cellar, the Mikell family prayed that their house would still exist when silence came.

\*\*\*

Wallace had never heard any wind so hellishly loud, but it had to be straight winds; there was no other explanation for it. The wind had been roaring, shrieking, for twenty minutes.

Wallace held up a hand to his frightened wife and son and cracked open the cellar door. A little over a mile away a black screaming vortex was in the grassy fields where his grandfather had once grown wheat. A monstrous, beautiful tornado twisted into the dirt. It was a stovepipe: vertical edges of black cloud reached up into the storm. It was locked in place.

\*\*\*

They had been in the cellar for over an hour. Wallace peeked again, even though he knew from the sound that the tornado would still be there.

As if it were Wallace's fault that the tornado remained, Mary said, "I don't want to sleep down here."

"I don't wanna stay down here, either," said Rod.

Another forty minutes went by. Wallace cracked the cellar door open again, judging the distance to the house.

"We're trapped," said Mary. She was hysterical, and they were all dehydrated.

"It's not moving. You two stay here. I'll make a break for the house and grab some bottled waters and snacks, and then I'll come back to the cellar. The twister looks like it's too far north to hit the house even if it *were* moving."

"Are you crazy? We should just wait it out."

But Wallace was determined. And besides, it really *did* look too far north. He kissed her on the head.

"I'll be right back."

He was soaked before he made it twenty feet and was worried about the frequent lightning, but adrenaline had taken over. The roar was deafening outside and barely tolerable once he closed the front door of the house.

He threw his suitcase open and piled dry clothes into it, then sprinted into Rod's room and did the same. The adrenaline was wearing off, and the roaring seemed to be getting louder, as if the monster outside was coming for him. He grabbed his wallet and keys from the top of the dresser and went back into the thick of the storm.

\*\*\*

Wallace kept checking on the storm over the next few hours, each time coming back down the stone cellar stairs slowly shaking his head. Not that anyone was really hopeful that it'd be gone; the roar was omnipresent.

Eventually, they all fell asleep. The cellar was furnished with an old wooden bench that couldn't fit them all, so Wallace slept slumped against the concrete wall.

The tornado endured when the Mikells woke up. They were sore all over.

"What do you think it *is*?" Mary asked.

"Probably just a freak of nature. One in a trillion thing, you know," Wallace said, but he wasn't sure he believed it.

When the tornado still hadn't moved by late morning, Mary was fed up. "Let's get out of here," she said. "We'll sprint to the truck: you can carry Rod. We need to go to a hotel. You said yourself it's too far north, right?"

Wallace didn't like leaving, but the ache in his back urged him on.

\*\*\*

They got stuck in the mud only once; the dirt roads closer to town were bone dry. There were only two hotels in Weatherford: the ever-shady Rayfield Inn and a shabby (but passable) Best Western. They headed to the latter and entered the lobby.

"Y'all are soaked!" said the twenty-something working the desk. He glanced over their shoulders. "Is it raining out?" he asked, although he could see plainly that it wasn't.

"No," said Wallace, "Not around here."

\*\*\*

Wallace awoke to the sound of a news broadcast. He sat up in bed and saw that his wife and son were already up, watching a weatherman who stood at the edge of a violent storm. In the distance behind him were the Mikell house and, farther back, the tornado. It was impossible, but behind the talking head on the Sanyo, there it was. The spinning cloud was persistence personified.

"...never seen anything like it, Ted. Top meteorologists are studying the phenomenon on Doppler and will soon be on site..."

"Oh my God," said Wallace, causing Mary and Rod to jump.

"Oh, you're up," said Mary. "Let's go down and get some breakfast. It's complimentary." She said all of this cheerily but then began to cry. Rod started to cry, too. Wallace edged out of bed to hug them.

After he comforted Mary and Rod, they went downstairs for breakfast, and it exceeded expectations. Or maybe they were just starving. They stuffed themselves before retiring to the lounge.

Rod was tracing patterns on the wallpaper absently with his finger, and Wallace felt sure his son would have worry lines before he was twenty.

Mary looked at Wallace. "So what now?" There was more color in her cheeks after the meal, but she was still haggard.

"I don't know, exactly. I think we should go back home and check on things at least," Wallace said, shrugging.

"I'm not going back, especially with Rod. It's so damn loud and dark out there. I don't think you should either."



"Our house isn't 'out there,'" he said. "It's home."

"Doesn't much feel like home with a deadly storm camped out on top of it," Mary said.

Wallace ignored her. "It'll be fine. I'll make sure everything's turned off in case the power comes back on and get us some more clothes. We hardly brought anything with us." It was 10:00 AM, and he already felt exhausted.

"All right. Be quick for Christ's sake. If you think that thing's gonna move, you'd better move first. I love you, and be *careful*."

\*\*\*

The road near the house was sludge, so Wallace stopped at the storm's edge and walked the remaining mile.

He stood on the porch for a while and just watched the tornado. He'd always been fascinated yet terrified by them as a kid. The thing was beautiful, but its influence on him hadn't diminished over the years. It felt more and more like some living entity. The howling jet-engine sound of it was abominable.

*Why the hell was it still here?*

Wallace was methodical in gathering more clothes and checking that all the appliances were turned off. The power was still out, and he operated clumsily by lightning flashes, until he located a flashlight. Once he had everything, he marched back to his truck.

\*\*\*

Two more nights in the hotel, and the storm was still raging in the same spot. Wallace was sure that everything had been an insane dream for the first few seconds every morning.

He was growing anxious as they watched the news; the National Guard created a mile-wide perimeter around the tornado, and a crowd began to form. At first it was mostly meteorologists, but eventually there were more citizens than scientists. No tourists had yet arrived on the scene. Wallace figured they would soon enough.

Wallace was frightened, too, that someone would vandalize their house or it would burn down in a fire started by lightning. Mary didn't share in his fears; she was already toying with the idea of moving, maybe to a suburb out of state. Rod was bored; Wallace had only retrieved a couple of toys for him.

After watching more and more footage of his own property from a hotel room, his thoughts of vandals grew to obsession.

"You wanna know what I think?" he asked his wife on the fourth night, after having a few too many drinks. Rod was in the adjacent lobby playing with Legos that the manager had brought for him.

"Hmm?"

"I think we need to go back home. Someone could break into the house and burn it down or something."

"Wallace, there's a damn *tornado* barely a mile away!"

"Well I want to go back."

"With that thing out there? And with our six-year old? Are you crazy?"

"I went before, and it was fine."

"Yeah," said Mary, "you went, and I was crazy with worry and regretted the hell out of letting you! I don't know what I was thinking."

"People could be breaking in, stealing. I earned that land, working on the farm. Not James. He was always bitter that I got the house when Mom and Dad died."

"What does all *that* have to do with it? It was ten years ago. You're rambling."

"It's *my* land, that's what it has to do with it. So I want to be there, freak storm or not."

"You're drunk, Wallace. It's not safe," she concluded. "Especially not for Rod. Speaking of Rod, could you watch him while I pee?"

"Whatever." Wallace walked out of the bar.

"Hey, Dad. Look what I built."

"That's great, Son."

He ruffled Rod's hair and stumbled a little.

"Have I ever told you about why we live on the farm instead of in a city?"

"No," said Rod.

"Because I earned the farm for us. I stayed and worked when Grandma and Grandpa were still alive, and your uncle left when he was fourteen," said Wallace. He was drunker than he had thought. "In other words, we got it 'cause of *hard work*. Discipline is very important."

"OK, Dad," said Rod. He went back to his Legos, and Wallace passed out on the lobby couch.

\*\*\*

The next morning Wallace's cell phone woke him up. He didn't recognize the number.

"Mr. Mikell?"

"Huh?" said Wallace. He had no business talking without drinking some water first; his throat had been drenched with beer and left to sit all night.

"This is Barney Gillin, with the National Weather Service."

"Oh, OK," said Wallace, rubbing his eyes.

"We have concluded that your house is not in the path of the tornado, should it even move. The northern part of town however, is another story, and there is debate about whether to evacuate or—"

"We can go home? It's safe?"

"Yes, Mr. Mikell, we're sure. It's way too far north."

"That's what I said."

"We're baffled that the storm has sustained itself this long, and we suspect it'll dissipate soon. I assure you we are—"

He hung up on Gillin and rushed down to the lobby to tell Mary the good news.

She didn't take it well.

"I don't care what they say! I told you last night, it's not safe. That's final." With that, she announced that she was going to have a shower.

Wallace was pissed and groggy. He went to get water and breakfast without another word to Mary, and by the time he'd finished his dry Texas toast, his mind was made up. He went upstairs to hug Rod goodbye (Mary was still toweling off) and drove out to his farmhouse.

\*\*\*

The dirt roads that had been merely soaked were now impassable. Wallace was sure that given a few more weeks they'd start silting over. Or turn into a swamp. There were cars lining the dry stretch of road, and the grass path towards the tornado was stamped down. The rain came and went. Lightning was as prevalent as ever.

Halfway to his house from the truck, Wallace broke into a run. He was afraid that whatever vandals may be inside would get away, unpunished.

He made a full sweep and ignored the roaring of the storm. No one was (or had been) in the house. Wallace stepped out onto his porch, relieved, and watched the tornado and its audience. Incredibly, there was a pile of plastic-wrapped newspapers outside the front door.

His phone rang, and the caller ID read "Mary." Wallace ignored it. He would stay here and hold down the fort. He could explain it to her tomorrow after she calmed down.

The screaming wind was irrelevant when he lay down for the night; it was so nice to be in his own bed again.

In the morning, Wallace made some breakfast from canned goods and went outside to watch the crowd and the storm for a while. He had decided to call Mary in the early afternoon.

At one point, the tornado lifted slightly, thinning and twisting dangerously towards the crowd. Wallace sat up straight, praying for its departure, but it came back down as thick and stationary as if it had never moved.

Thirty minutes after Wallace sat down, a lone figure approached him. The visitor was short and chubby, wearing a corduroy suit, clutching his hat with one hand and a briefcase with the other. The man yelled something that was indecipherable over the wind, and Wallace invited him inside.

"Hello, Mr. Mikell. My name is Terrance Chornutte." Chornutte smelled like tobacco and had a voice like a torn sub-woofer under a cup of wet gravel. He held out a pudgy hand.

"Wallace."

"Wallace, then. Wallace, I'm here representing Drantch Corporation. We own a quarter of the theme parks in the country, and we are expanding."

"Oh?" His phone vibrated, but he ignored it. "Go on."

"I'll cut to the chase because that damn howling gives me a headache.



Drantch has toyed with the idea of educational theme parks at historical locations with little exhibits to keep the parents occupied. We think it will raise revenue, and the kids will still have their rides. Tornado tilt-o-whirls, a water park, you name it..."

Wallace didn't think he was cutting to the chase at all. "And?"

Chornutte chuckled a reedy, wet chuckle.

"We are very interested in your property, Mr. Mikell."

Wallace's stomach lurched. Chornutte could be talking a lot of money. After a time (Chornutte waited patiently, smiling), Wallace asked what the offer was. The fat man pulled a check out of his inside pocket and held it up next to his face, like he was posing for a picture.

The amount was considerable.

"I'll, uhh, need to talk this over with Mary, my wife. And I guess with my son too, but he's six."

"Sure, pal, sure. When can you let me know?" He handed over his card as he said this.

"Tomorrow, maybe the next day."

"Take your time. We know the storm won't be here much longer, but we're interested just the same. Historical sites." He winked and was gone.

Wallace followed him outside and stood out on the porch, staring into the black vortex. There was a decent-sized crowd around it, the updraft of wind sucking at their clothes, pulling them frightfully towards the black column.

Two of the spectators, a man and a woman, were having a yelling match. Wallace could almost hear their screaming above the wind. Most of the crowd had taken to watching the couple, despite the tornado towering over them. When the argument seemed to come to a standstill, the woman turned away from the man, her face in her hands.

The man then took one last look up at the great spinning cloud and sprinted over the barricade like he was leaping a hurdle in a race. The wind viciously yanked him up and thrashed him around three times like a marionette before throwing him out of sight.

"God!" whispered Wallace, and he called 911.

\*\*\*

The sobbing woman, wailing ambulance, frightened crowd, and walk back to his truck were already a blur in Wallace's mind as he drove back to the hotel.

Mary was still pissed. He let her chew him out for a while; he felt bad about leaving without saying anything. After she calmed down, she hugged him.

"I'm sorry, honey," Wallace said.

He wanted to wait until things cooled off to bring up Chornutte, but his willpower gave out after ten seconds.

"We have something to talk about, dear," he said.

"What now?"

Wallace told her about the offer.

Mary looked dazed. "...How, uh, much?"

Wallace told her again. Mary sat down, her expression blank and body rigid.

"We can't pass this up. We can move to a city, get better jobs. We'll make so much more money teaching in Oregon or Maine or something!"

"Breathe, Mary. Slow down; I want to talk about this."

"Wallace, there isn't much to talk about. You know I've always wanted to live in a city, that's what we've been saving up for, besides Rod's college. I know you love that place, but are you really content to stay there until we die? We don't even use the

land. We have forty acres just rotting. This damn tornado thing could be a blessing!"

"I love it there. It's home," he said.

Mary took in a deep breath and sighed. They decided to let the idea sit for a night, have a nice dinner, and spend some time with Rod, as a family, without discussing their leave of absence from home.

Dinner was good, but Wallace and Mary were both forcing laughter. Each knew what the other wanted.

\*\*\*

In the morning, they were up before Rod. There was a coffee maker in the room, but the complimentary coffee that came with it tasted like dirt. Mary brewed some anyway.

"Well?" she said.

"I want to stay."

Mary sipped the disgusting coffee, trembling slightly.

"Did you ever think of me when you decided that?"

"Yes, but—"

"It's so much money, Wallace! Come on!" she said.

"Keep your voice down; you'll wake Rod up. I know how much it is. I won't leave."

"Then maybe Rod and I will."

Wallace was stunned. Later he would wish that he had tried to calm her down, but he didn't; he went on the defensive.

"Maybe Rod wants to stay with me and not you," he said.

"Yeah, with a freaking tornado in the backyard. Let's see how the court rules."

Wallace was shocked. He stared straight ahead, unable to think of anything to say through so much indignation.

"So what are you going to tell this Chonet guy?" she said.

"It's pronounced 'Shore-nute'," said Wallace, and entered the number from Chornutte's card into his cell.

"I said, what are you going to tell him?" she said.

"We're not interested," Wallace said into the phone.

"Wallace, please!" said Mary

"I said, no!" said Wallace, and he hung up.

Mary started to cry. "Why would you do this to us?"

"Me? You'd uproot us from our home for some cash at the blink of an eye!"

"You're so damn selfish," she said.

Wallace stormed out of the room, slamming the door, and Rod woke with a start and began to cry.

It was the kind of conversation you couldn't take back.

\*\*\*

Wallace drove back to the house to sleep. The next morning, he grabbed the newspaper on top of the pile to pass the time. It read:

"Dramatic Suicide at 'Static Tornado.'"

"At about 4:00 PM yesterday, Weatherford resident Arnold Jordanson committed suicide by jumping into what meteorologists have dubbed 'The Static Tornado.' The man's girlfriend, Vicky Slinger, said that Jordanson was convinced that the tornado 'was God,' and that he must 'meet his creator.'"

This incident has convinced Franklin Francesco, pastor of the First Baptist Church, that the tornado is in fact 'The Devil' and is 'warping and twisting the minds of the innocent as it twists itself.' He informed *The Chronicle* that he would begin a protest against the storm 'ASAP.'

Meanwhile, meteorologist Brian Stout says that he is ‘...currently unsure why the thunderstorm and tornado remain in place. It’s not unheard of for a smaller type of tornado called a landspout to become stationary, but we’ve obviously never seen anything stay put near this long... On the Doppler, it just looks like any ordinary heavy thunderstorm. It’s just not moving.’”

Wallace stopped reading, and, sure enough, the preacher from the article was outside riling up the crowd, screaming through a megaphone. Bitterness washed over Wallace: at the preacher, at the idiots crowded around the storm risking lightning strikes, and at Mary. The worst was knowing that she wasn’t entirely wrong. How much of his attachment to his land was born out of spite toward his brother?

He walked into the empty living room and listened to the howling wind. He loved the drafty house: the wood paneling, the shoddy wiring that he had to fix annually, the heavy oak doors, the garish green paint coating the counters. There *was* pride and anger at his brother, too. But it was his home where he had raised his family.

And she had the nerve to call me selfish.

His phone vibrated. Bad timing.

“Wallace?”

“What?”

“Please call that man back; ask him for time to reconsider. Please. Think about Rod growing up in this crappy town just like we did. We hated high school, and—”

“And everyone hates high school! So what? You’re not thinking about Rod; you’re thinking about yourself!”

“Excuse me, but that’s what you’re doing! We barely talked at all about it before you called that guy on some impulse and turned him down! You’re acting crazy!”

“No, I’m not!” he said, his voice rising in pitch and volume.

“Wallace, I wasn’t bluffing when I said we’d leave. I’m about to go and file for divorce.”

“File for divorce then, bitch!” he yelled.

Then he threw the phone across the room and screamed, and the wind harmonized.

\*\*\*

He picked up his phone an hour later after calming down. She had caught him in a rage, and now that he was down from it he was terrified of losing her. He hadn’t meant any of it. There was a text message from Mary:

“Taking Rod to Mom’s.”

He called her, but she didn’t pick up.

Wallace decided it would be best for them to let each other cool off. The storm would leave soon, and she would come back.

\*\*\*

After a week, he received divorce papers in the mail. They had talked for hours, and her mind was made up. They settled on Mary keeping Rod during the school year (she was moving too far away for a weekend trade-off), and Wallace would get him in the summers.

After a few more days, the storm finally dissipated. It took about thirty minutes. The lightning stopped. The tornado became wispy and retracted into the cloud, and

then it was gone. It left behind a heinous spiral of dirt a third of a mile wide stripped totally bare and a hell of a lot of mud.

Meteorologists were in furious debate. Most people forgot about the phenomenon as quickly as their short attention spans gave out with no new footage. Those who did talk about it (and weren't scientists) mostly fell into three camps: it was aliens; it was God; it was unprecedented Nature, never to be repeated.

Wallace missed the storm. It had left him with profound guilt, loss, and insomnia; the sporadic creaking of the old house kept him from sleep.



Westview / Moore

# Black God Walks

by John Nizalowski

*Originally published in The Last Matinée (Kittredge, CO: Turkey Buzzard Press, 2011)*

Black god,  
god of languages,  
god of death—  
from whom  
coyote steals fire.

Just north of Kayenta  
a dark volcanic neck  
faces a red stone spire,  
its finger pointing  
the way to the sun.

Some of the hogans  
have dish antennae—  
flash of welding arc,  
power lines,  
coyote's fire,  
highway down the middle.

A massive water tower  
with big black letters  
that spell KAYENTA.

Two boys  
with a black dog,  
pregnant, teats bulging.  
Behind them,  
a pair of shadow men—  
walking doppelgangers.

West of Kayenta—  
reefs of sandstone limbs,  
wrinkled like a reptile's skin,  
rise from the great earth.



Scattered junipers,  
black goats,  
grandfather on horseback.  
New electric railway,  
old windmills,  
water tanks,  
and a rainstorm.

Long blue line of the Kaibito Plateau.

In a dust storm,  
a black stallion mounts  
a white mare.

Cinnamon dust  
cutting across  
shale desert,  
painted ground  
and hoodoos.

A maze of arroyos—  
glittering broken glass,  
empty wooden shelters,  
and arrayed jewelry  
line the highway.

San Francisco Peak,  
home of the gods,  
emerges from rain and clouds.

The place where Black God walks.



# He Still Dances

by John Nizalowski

The dry cottonwood leaf curls—  
a sail,  
a woman's breast,  
a smooth femur  
under the desert sun.

It is the ghost  
of all the sacred dances  
never performed,  
all the clocks never created.

This leaf reminds us  
that the moon does not exist  
unless we see it,  
that the ocean's revelation  
is its creation,  
and two bodies are  
fully real only in the  
touch of skin to skin,  
hand to waist,  
thigh to hip.

The wind blows—  
the leaf becomes a rattle  
in the hands of a Hopi elder  
dancing the kiva floor's  
tight round.

Thank the gods  
he still dances,  
the void held back  
another year.

# The Thing About Diamondbacks

by Ann Applegarth

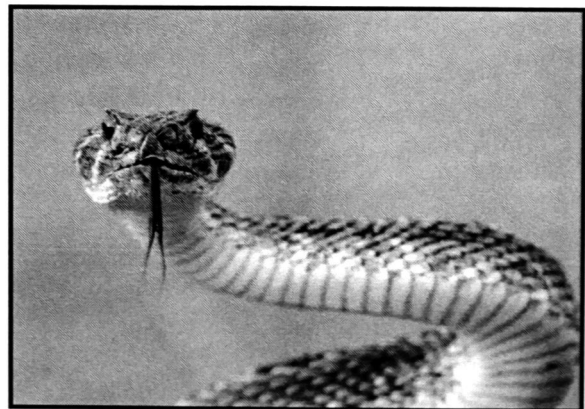
—after Josephine Jacobsen, “The Thing about Crows”

. . .is, they are languorous.

When you are languorous, and dance,  
you look either tired or dangerous.  
Western Diamondbacks are not tired.

I say they are not tired, even though  
they spend every winter snoozing,  
dreaming of how—come spring—  
they will emerge, stretch, blink,  
rear, aim, strike, murder, and feast.

It's a hot March day. Thunderheads bank  
and billow in the soft desert air, and  
chaparral and Mormon tea provide shade.  
*Crotalus atrox* slithers from beneath a rock  
in a languorous rippling *adagio*.  
Now a hiker stalks briskly up the slope,  
parting the air, stirring the brush.  
The Diamondback seeks the shade,  
coils his winter-lean six-foot body,  
and lifts his head, ready to sink long fangs  
into the hiker's soft exposed ankle, deeply,  
against the threat of summer hunger.



# Pǔ Tōng Huà

Tonya Ward Singer

*Reprinted with permission from Yalobusha Review*

Words fall empty around me, nothing but voices beating in syllables.

*“Nǐ lái bù lái.”*

*“Yī lǜ shùn fēng.”*

A young mother beside me on the bus holds her baby under one arm and clutches two plastic bags tearing with the weight of yams. Her words are water hitting hot oil, staccato bursts of sound. If this were my first week in China, I’d think she were furious. Yet now I’m used to hearing the rapid rhythm of conversations I don’t understand.

*“Cèsuǒ zài nǎr?”* was the first sentence I attempted, hours into my first day in Beijing. The woman collecting tickets at the Forbidden City squinted at me, then giggled to her colleague in a matching khaki shirt.

*“Cèsuǒ zài nǎr?”* I tried again, louder this time.

They stared at me, confused. I fumbled for the right page in my guidebook then pointed at the sequence of characters I’d failed to pronounce. They studied the page and then laughed with a flush of embarrassment before pointing me toward the bathroom.

Within a month, I learned the survival essentials. I could ask directions, negotiate the price of a tomato, and read which door to the bathroom was for me. But even after a year of making China home, I am a *laowai*, outsider. The language of daily conversation connections is a backdrop of percussion lost to me.

Characters decorate the billboards walling the street, fill the books and newspapers in other people’s hands. To my eyes, words are lines and patterns. Art surrounding my silence.

My voice, the language of my childhood and friendships has been reduced to the four sentences most people have memorized in school:

*“Hello, will you be my American friend?”*

*“Help me practice my English.”*

*“Can you use chopsticks?”*

*“China has the best food in the world.”*

At a bus stop or by the onion vendor, everywhere I go, there will be someone who approaches me for the same short conversation. And when we run out of words, we’ll both smile and study each other’s unfamiliar faces, then look away, embarrassed by how little we still understand.





# Two Minutes in the Spotlight: Singing at the Sunshine Theater When I Was Five Years Old

by Ann Applegarth

That inauspicious day is no doubt gone  
from every living memory but mine.  
My sisters were the culprits in a scheme  
for me to win the Sunshine Talent Show.  
This wasn't something I had planned to do,  
although I dearly loved to sing at home.  
"You Are My Sunshine" was the tune they chose.  
They made me practice morning, noon, and night.  
They coached me on my posture and my smile;  
they starched and ironed my yellow pinafore.  
On Saturday the talent show was held,  
and pickup-loads of kids showed up on time.  
The Sunshine's rows had never been so full  
of people—excitement was in the air.  
I wish that I could tell you all about  
how my performance went and how I felt,  
but it was just like singing in a dream—  
I don't remember anything at all.  
My parents said I did our family proud,  
and both my sisters told me I looked sweet.  
I never sang again on any stage;  
no talent scout has knocked on my front door.  
Of course I didn't win a prize that day,  
yet few things after that held any fear.

# To Li Po

by Ben Myers

*Originally published in Lapse Americana (NYQ Books, 2013)*

Look, I say, the snow is falling  
on our shoulders and hair.  
But you say perhaps we  
are a thing that is happening  
to the snow.



# Fantasia

by Lora D. Reiter

There have been snows before, but this I swear,  
Is like no other snow that ever fell.  
Earth is a changeling; all the sentient air  
Waits like the silent song within a bell.  
Branches of glass, set moving by a breeze,  
Make faint and silver filigrees of sound.  
The grass-clad hills are sculptured marble seas  
Where wreathed ocean gods might walk aground.  
This is enchantment. It were a small surprise  
To see a pale snow maid on yonder knoll  
And watch her emerald hair stream as she tries  
Her crystal unicorn in capriole,  
Or here, where lark and quail were wont to run,  
A phoenix rise from ice on fire with sun.





# Kansas Sonneteer

by Lora K. Reiter

Chickens at roost,  
Entrails from the supper hen  
Fed to the pigs.  
Children in bed.  
Husband in bed.  
Dishes in dishpan.  
Paper and pencils  
Replacing them on the table.  
Shadows from the glowing mantles  
Flickering on the wall, part of the ceiling.  
Orange from a Pall Mall cigarette  
Burnishing the jar lid where it rests.  
Sweat on her lip although the room is cool.  
How to say it?  
How to speak of ice on trees?  
Bells in the ice?  
Sun on the ice?  
Who would believe it?  
Who would even read it?  
Who would care to see her phoenix  
Rise from ice on fire with sun?  
Who would know a capriole  
She has watched a crystal unicorn perform?  
Who would hear a filigree of sound?

He sees mud where ice will melt,  
Cattle deep in it; hoof rot.  
She sees children to their waists in drifts,  
Roads impassable except for horses.  
But she sees as well the sculptured marble ocean  
Around their house,  
The burning bird rising with the pigeons.  
So she takes a puff,  
Frowns at the blank page,  
And starts her poem,  
Shifting in the cold  
As she arranges words against the darkness.

# The Smooth Path

Audrey Lentz

"I have never felt so lost in my entire life," Ella realized as she stared out the window at the pouring rain. She was blocks away from her car when the sky opened up and began dumping buckets of what smelled like koi pond water on her head. *I guess what goes up must come down*, she thought as she looked around her at the swampy water by the sides of the buildings. The city was filthy.

She had ducked into the first building she saw when the downpour started. She was wearing a white shirt over a black bra, so running to her car in the rain was not an option. She imagined her boyfriend Mark's disgust at her careless planning as she walked back into their apartment drenched with her shirt completely transparent. The building she happened inside seemed to be a combination of cigar shop and hookah lounge. The cigars lined the walls, and a group of college kids sat in the middle of the room around a giant hookah, taking turns passing the hose to each other, their backpacks laying haphazardly around their feet. Ella's business attire and dripping hair made her feel very out of place as she stood awkwardly at the entrance and looked at the window, trying not to make eye contact with the overly-relaxed group of kids in the middle of the room. Every time she locked eyes with one, she could just imagine him wondering what she was doing in here. Ella wondered that herself.

She pretended to look at the cigars on display as she walked around the room wondering what to do with herself. She made her way to the back of the store, past perfumes and teas and other interesting smelling products. She sniffed at a cigar and regretted it. An older lady brushed aside a curtain at the back of the room just as Ella arrived at the counter.

"Finding everything all right?" the woman asked in a grandmotherly tone. Ella, feeling insecure, looked the woman up and down. *Not the kind of person I expected to be running the place*, she thought. The woman looked like she should be at home knitting and watching the home and garden channel.

"I'm just looking around," Ella smiled. "I wanted to get out of the rain."

"Oh, I see." The woman turned away. Ella suddenly felt like she was taking advantage of her, like she was using the bathroom of a gas station at which she didn't intend to buy anything. The woman turned to walk away, and Ella searched for something friendly to say to make up for using the woman's business as a rain shelter.

"I'm so lost," Ella blurted.

"Oh! Do you need directions?" the woman asked.

"No," Ella sighed. "I can get home. I just don't see the point in going there."

The woman nodded and smiled, which surprised Ella. She had expected an awkward chuckle or more questions. Her cheeks had already started to burn from her sudden overshare. She was not the type of person who dumped her problems on strangers and made them uncomfortable. In fact, she was not the type of person who carried on a conversation with a stranger at all, but with all her issues at work that day, and knowing Mark would be home waiting for her to come up with an idea for dinner, she didn't know where to go or who to talk to.

"Come on back," the woman turned, and, with a motion of her hand to follow, she brushed back behind the curtain.

Ella hesitated. Was she going to try to sell her drugs? She wouldn't be surprised if a place like this sold drugs. Half the pipes on display were probably meth pipes. Ella stepped around the counter and lifted the curtain with one finger, as if to touch as little of the place

as possible. Was she being polite or was she really considering buying drugs? Ella wasn't sure, but she let the curtain fall behind her.

The curtain led to a tiny, cramped room. There were no shelves full of shrunken heads or strange floating appendages in jars like she'd expected. Instead, it looked like any break room for a crappy office. It contained a small fridge and sink, a card table with two chairs, some cabinets for food, and a couple shelves in the back for personal items.

"Have a seat." The woman pulled out one of the chairs by the card table.

*The drugs are probably in those cabinets*, Ella thought as she sat down. The woman waddled to the back shelves and rummaged in a worn gray bag, the skirts of her dress dancing with the pace of her elbows. When she turned around, she was holding a pack of cards. She placed them in three stacks on the table and sat down in front of Ella, whose face relaxed as she realized she would not have to turn down a bag of crack.

"Pick a card from each stack and set them face up in front of you," the woman commanded. With a shaky hand, Ella did as she was told. Each card contained a minimalistic figure colored in dark contrasting colors.

The first picture was of a man hanging upside down in a noose, with the noose tied around one of his feet. The lack of detail made him appear very calm and expressionless. The second was a man with a white cone-shaped hat sitting in a chair and surrounded by children at his feet. The third was a simplistic drawing of a sun.

"Your first card is the Hanged Man," the woman said. "This represents your career."

Ella chuckled. *Of course it does*, she thought cynically. She was working as an administrative assistant for an air conditioning and heating company and had just been denied the promotion to marketing assistant that she had applied for. It was given to someone who had been at the company a year less than she had been. Her heated discussion with her boss about why she didn't get the promotion was what caused her to leave the office so late that she got caught in the rain.

"This means you shouldn't make any drastic moves at work anytime soon because they will not go well for you. Don't take on any risky projects and try to avoid conflicts with your fellow employees and superiors," the woman warned.

Ella laughed. "It's a bit late for that."

"And how did that go?" The woman didn't ask it as a question but said it as if she was reprimanding a misbehaving child. Ella looked down at her hands in her lap.

"The second card is the Pope. This represents your love life. The Pope is patient and understanding. He does others' bidding while not asking for much in return," she said. "Now is the time to compromise and let arguments go."

"Well that's bullshit," Ella blurted.

The woman smiled knowingly. "Sometimes relationships



The Smooth Path



Audrey Lentz

are about pleasing rather than looking for gratification yourself.”

Who was this woman to tell her how to be in a relationship? Ella didn't have any major issues at home, but she wasn't about to start letting Mark walk all over her. He relied on her too much as it was. Sometimes she even had to stop doing the dishes to see if Mark would ever do them if she didn't. She thought back to the sink this morning. A bean had actually sprouted on one of the dirty plates and was beginning to grow into a stalk in the sink. Still, Ella held out and did not wash it, seeing just how long it would take for Mark to clean up after himself.

“The third card is the Sun. This represents your mood. The Sun is bright and cheery, pleasantly lighting up the sky, remaining positive about the day, and making it brighter for everyone.” The woman beamed as if she had just revealed the meaning of life.

“So,” Ella began, “I'm supposed to sit back and do nothing about my dead-end career, wait on my boyfriend hand and foot without asking for anything in return, and, at the end of the day, be happy to be alive like a total schmuck?” Ella stared at the woman in sarcastic exasperation.

“It's not everyone's path in life to do great, world-changing things, Ella,” the woman stared calmly back.

Ella gulped. She had never told this woman her name.

The woman remained stoic. “Life will never be smooth if you're constantly fighting what's meant to happen. Don't fight your path. Be happy you have a job to pay the bills. Be happy you have a partner to share your life with. Be happy that you're going to have a healthy baby boy in two years.” The woman grinned again.

Ella shakily stood up. Her insecurities and shyness were gone, replaced by panic. She wasn't aware she was standing until she was walking out the door, past the group of kids who looked at her like she was crazy. She stumbled out the front door. She had forgotten that it was raining until she stepped back outside. In the midst of feeling like she might pass out or vomit, she realized she had forgotten to say goodbye to the woman or ask if she wanted money for the fortune telling. Then she realized she didn't care.

So this was her life. She was doomed to work passively and care for Mark until she had a child. Then everyone knew how that life went, and it wasn't one that Ella had ever wanted. Would she really get so bored with her job and love life that she would change her mind about not wanting kids in as few as two years? That was the reason she had put off marrying Mark in the first place. In her mind, the longer she held out on getting married, the longer she could delay having kids.

Then Ella realized something else. It didn't matter if that woman had any idea what she was talking about or not. It didn't matter if she was psychic or insane because she was right. If Ella continued doing what she was doing, hoping for some external event to change her life, then she would continue to have the life she was having and trying to be happy about it. She probably would get so bored and fed up that she would let Mark talk her into marrying him and having a baby. Probably not in two years, but eventually.

She had walked about a block in the direction of her car and stopped. *I don't care if my path is perfectly smooth or if I'm going against fate. This is not the life I want, she thought, and she turned around. I'm probably going to regret this. In fact, I know I'm going to regret this. For months while I'm looking for a new job and trying to figure out what to do with myself, I'll hate myself for this.* She stomped angrily back up the street. Angry that no matter what she did at this point, it would be hard. In the midst of her fury she was pleasantly relieved when she noticed that her shirt was thick enough to remain opaque despite being soaked.

She was going to go back to the office and give her boss her two-week notice. If

she didn't do it now, in her heightened emotional state, she knew she'd realize that smooth paths, no matter how boring, really are better than rocky ones, and that choosing rocks over pavement was a stupid and crazy thing to do, and she would continue on her smooth, boring, and baby-filled path until she died. She had to act now before it was too late. Not only that, but when she got home, she would actually talk to Mark about his household duties. It would be a huge, bring-up-everything-awful-you've-ever-done dish-throwing fight. If a bean sprout wouldn't get Mark to wash a dish, maybe one hitting him in the head would.

As Ella marched past the cigar shop on her way back to the office, she didn't see the old woman smiling at her through the same window she'd stared out of only an hour before, feeling so lost. The woman watched Ella march down the street and chuckled. She walked past the group of smokers in the center of the room, stopping to see if they needed anything, and waddled back through the curtain. She then put the pack of cards away, pulled out a little bag and a pipe, and sat down at the card table to have a smoke of her own.



# Genetic Code

by Judy Bertelsen

A hometown friend said, "When you drove up,  
I thought it was your mother in the car."  
I have heard her voice in mine,  
share her brain, her damaged heart, her skin.  
When I was young, the doctor said, "You have bad skin.  
Your mother has bad skin; you have it, too."  
Nothing could be done.

Seeing me off, she said, "I'm willing  
you should go away. You will be unhappy  
and I cannot stand  
to live that heartbreak twice."

One night I called. Wild, with strained  
heart and raging brain  
she slammed down the phone.  
I called back; she softened.  
we talked straight and said goodbye.  
Ten days later she died.

Dream Fragment:

My mother floats in the  
dark night air, hovering  
almost out of view.  
The pink climbing rose blooms  
in lush profusion, waving and weaving  
about the white porch columns.  
I am surprised the rose still lives. I want  
cuttings for my garden now.

New growth flourishes  
where the holly bush had been:  
a peach-tinged yellow peace rose  
tall as a tree.



# Seeing Red

by Judy Bertelsen

There is no red out there—  
only red that registers  
in eyes and brain.

But something out there  
triggers. It feels firm like a leather  
box or soft like a cloth rose  
or fleece throw;  
seems more steady than  
optical images that flip  
between the elegant beauty  
and the gnarled hag.



# The Real Thing

Viki Craig

He sat behind me, talking to a slender blonde, leaning in and smiling in an intimate way. She was in her early fifties at the most, but more likely in her forties, well-maintained, professional, expensive-looking. I could hear bits of their conversation, her speech faintly Eastern and well-educated, his pure Western Oklahoma. They sat with their elbows on the bistro table under a ruby-tinted swag lamp.

I smiled. Kyle so depended on his bad boy, motorcycle-riding, Sturgis-bound image to reel in these women, pretty much all of them cookie cutter products. He worked out, affected a goatee and mustache, and enhanced his graying sideburns. Fact of the matter was that he started out as a siding salesman and had never really transcended that kind of inner core.

About that time, the genuine article sauntered through the door of the coffee house, deep auburn hair bound back in a long ponytail, full tattoo sleeves on both arms. His hog outside was daring anyone to mess with it. But he wiped his wet boots on the welcome mat. Interesting. A big, muscular, take-no-prisoners kind of fellow, as fine a painter of abstracts as he was a tattoo artist. Randy could break down a carburetor, machine new or replacement parts, grill the world's best steak, and walk his ex-girlfriend's Shih-tzu with no threats to his masculinity.

He could also drill you with his pistol, and I should know. We go to the range to shoot three mornings a week. He's competitive. I'd like to be.

Randy nodded as he passed my table and looked to see what I was drawing. It is my habit to do sketching exercises prior to painting, and I often do them in our local coffee house on Saturday morning. His smile became huge; "Hey, man, that is a great horse. I can't paint them—I can only tattoo them, myself."

"Bet you could, if you really wanted to," I rejoined, smiling, too. There's not much he can't do. He studied my sketch of the Arabian for a few more moments, then went to the counter and ordered pure adrenaline in the form of the Hammerhead, a drink for people who want to mainline their caffeine. Obviously he'd been working out, judging from the sheen of sweat glistening on his muscles.

My attention returned to the conversation behind me. "Yeah," said Kyle. "A lot of my friends have shed their wives and are going out with girls in their thirties, but I want somebody to talk to who knows who The Doors are, know what I mean?" She nodded. I guess she knew what he meant. She didn't look like The Doors type, though.

Blaine, one of the regular employees at the coffee house on the weekends, brought Kyle and company their paninis. The owner was celebrating buying the panini maker for a song and experimenting with three cheese and portobello mushroom sandwiches on ciabatta bread. The flirtatious pair behind me hardly touched their food, too into their conversation to spare time to appreciate the good grilled sandwiches. *Philistines*, I thought.

Then the heavy glass front door swung open and remained so from the force of the fierce Oklahoma wind. I looked up and felt a tremor of something—apprehension, unease—as I saw the tall, shadowy figure outlined in the bright sunlight behind him. Such a Western cliché he was, but still, the stranger gave me prickles.

I didn't recognize him. He was maybe 6'3," hard-muscled, brown as a nut, dressed



in castoffs, or so they appeared. His tee-shirt was screaming yellow with Pirate's Bay Air Taxi Service on the front and a skull with a red doo-rag advertising an Alaskan company. It had multiple stains, and his chinos were ragged around the cuffs, his work boots steel-toed and serious.

As he lurched in my direction, I could see a glazed look in his unnaturally pale blue eyes. Viking on drugs. At the last moment he veered off from me, and, spotting the blonde behind me, he strode to her table, looming over her and her companion accusingly.

"Becky," he said, "what the hell are you doing with this guy? Don't you know the kids are at home by themselves? What kind of mother are you?"

Kyle looked at the blonde, then looked at the stranger. "Do you know this guy?" he asked his companion. Stunned-deer-in-the-headlight time. She slowly shook her head in the negative. You could tell that Kyle was really wondering. After all, he apparently hardly knew her. He decided to believe her. Kyle stood up. I sighed; he might have been tough in his own mind, but the stranger was five inches taller than he was and road-tough. Also, maybe crazy.

I put down my sketch pad and pencils and looked to see if the back exit was blocked. Just in case.

Just at that moment, the owner, Will Tolbert, shorter than either of the guys squaring off, but not inclined to put up with crap, stepped between them.

"Knock it off, buddy!" Will shouted. "Kyle, do you know this piece of grah-doo?"

The stranger grabbed the owner by the shirt collar and threw him against the wall—not an easy thing to do. Will slid down the wall and lay crumpled in an unresponsive heap.

Kyle took that opportunity to throw a punch at the stranger, but it only grazed him—he was exceptionally fast on his feet. I wondered what drug he might be on. The blonde made a full retreat to the kitchen, and I moved away from my table to see how things would end, too fascinated to leave.

"As for you... get your own damn woman—don't go around stealing someone else's." With that said, the stranger punched Kyle right on the jaw, hurling him across a table and two chairs. Pursuing the downed man, he methodically began to kick and punch him, clearly aware of the anatomy of his victim and the damage he could inflict. He was not a stranger to the street fight scene.

I grabbed Blaine and told him to call 911. Blaine faded to the kitchen to retrieve his cell phone and make the call. I went to the fallen owner, who still was not moving, and checked his pulse and breathing, which, reassuringly, were fairly normal.

Just then, Randy came out of the restroom, taking in the scene instantly. He approached the stranger from behind, quick, silent, no more than a shadow.

It seemed that he merely cradled the man's head and neck in the crook of his elbow, but the stranger dropped like a rock to the wooden floor. Kyle, meanwhile, was bleeding from his nose and mouth, curled in a fetal position in a futile attempt to protect himself from his attacker's boots. We could hear the siren on the police cruiser as it slid into a parking spot in front of the building.

Randy joined me, kneeling beside the owner. "He okay?"

"Yeah, I think so, Randy. We need to get the EMT's to look him over. He's too stubborn to go to the ER, as you well know."

A flicker of a smile passed over Randy's face and was gone. He moved across the room to Kyle, who was groaning quietly. "Is the chick still in the back?" he asked Blaine.

"No, she split right away."

"Figures."

The patrolman approached me and Blaine. "So what went down here?" I groaned. It was a baby cop, not one of our experienced guys. I swear he really had peach fuzz on his cheeks.

"Well, officer," I responded, "a stranger came in and accused Kyle here of stealing his woman. Will, the owner, intervened and was knocked silly, and then the stranger beat the crap out of Kyle. Blaine called you guys, and Randy over there, who'd been in the restroom, came out and quietly grabbed the stranger and put him to sleep, so to speak."

"Was the woman here?"

"Yes, but she left." I smiled at the young patrolman.

"Do you know her?"

"Nope. Kyle would have to tell you her name."

"Flavor of the month?" He rolled his eyes. Hmm. He was more savvy than I thought.

"Definitely."

Will was woozy but conscious, so the patrolman went to him to get his account as the ambulance arrived. We were swarming with EMT's, examining Will, the stranger, Kyle, and anyone else who'd hold still for it.

"You know, Randy, I just came in for coffee and to do a little sketching. But before this becomes more complicated, I think I'd like you to escort me home. And can you show me that Sandman move of yours?"

"I don't think you're tall enough, darlin'. We could try. . ." I love that man's smile.

I gathered my sketching tools, packed them in a disreputable bag; Randy took the bag from me, also tucking me under his arm, which at my height of 4'10" is not hard to do. By the way, I'm the girlfriend now. Yeah. I looked at the male bodies littering the floor.

Then I left with the real thing.



# Why He Should Not Have Been Sold 6,000 Rounds of Ammunition

*Reprinted with permission from Quarterly West*

by Suellen Wedmore

—Aurora, Colorado: 7/20/12

Because the young woman in the theater's first row  
    raises zinnias and her tomatoes are ripening,  
because her baby is teething  
    and her husband, away on business,  
    dreams of three bare-legged girls  
    eating ice cream cones.

Because, in July, monarchs lay eggs  
    on the underside of milkweed leaves,  
    and a hummingbird's flutter  
    stirs the nasturtiums,  
    and because today the sun rose with a green flash,  
    *le rayon vert*, and I believed Jules Verne  
    who wrote that those who see this  
    will know love.

Because the white-bearded man in the third row  
    has a schnauzer that needs to be walked,  
and because his grandchildren are visiting tomorrow  
    and he has four quarts of his own spaghetti sauce  
    on a shelf in the freezer.

Because the balding man in the fourth row  
    doesn't want to die lonely,  
and because the man and woman beside him  
    are afraid to make a commitment.

Because the artist in the back of the theater  
    will, for the rest of his life, swirling his brush  
    into Winsor red, see blood,  
and because the university student in row five,  
    who speaks Shoshone with his grandmother,  
    is translating Native American myths:  
    how in the beginning, Wolf, the creator,  
    shooting an arrow beneath the body of the dead,  
    could call them back to life.

# *Noise and Stories:*

## Poems by John Graves Morris: Some Affirming Gestures of Poetic Form

by Helen Maxson

In Thomas Hardy's World War I poem, "I Looked Up From My Writing," a poet becomes aware as he writes that the moon is gazing in his window. He asks her what she's doing there, and she replies that she's been scanning the earth to find the body of a man who killed himself because his son has died in war. She points out the unfairness of death in war, explaining that the dead soldier had hurt no one, and then goes on,

And now I am curious to look  
Into the blinkered mind  
Of one who wants to write a book  
In a world of such a kind.

In the poem's final stanza, the moon's skeptical perspective is potent enough for the poet that he feels shamed by it:

Her temper overwrought me,  
And I edged to shun her view,  
For I felt assured she thought me  
One who should drown him too.

We are not sure whether the moon—as the speaker characterizes her—thinks he should commit suicide because he is a member of the violent human race or because he is misguided enough to try to commemorate some aspect of human life in a poem. Perhaps she feels that the poet should be trying to change things rather than writing about them. Whatever her intention, the moon's comment questions the value of writing about a world which seems to hold little, if any, redeeming value. Her question is an old one. Readers of *Gulliver's Travels* are tempted to wonder why Swift put effort into an intricate satire which ends with the main character abandoning the human race completely, so despicable does he find it. Yet, the sheer volume of imaginative detail in Swift's work testifies to the labor and sense of purpose that created it. In the poem cited above, Hardy has followed a consistent rhyme scheme and meter, suggesting that despite the speaker's doubts about the value of his writing, the author has taken his own seriously enough to craft it deliberately. The nature of the poem does much to refute the moon's perspective.

John Graves Morris's book of poems *Noise and Stories*, published in 2008, enacts a similar irony. Morris, a professor of English at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma, celebrates in his work the literary traditions in English that have shaped his art, evoking the work of specific forebears and testing artistic perspectives of

contemporary poets and teachers, citations of whom introduce his book. Thinking back to Hardy and Swift when reading Morris's book is a critical move that is much in keeping with his poetic purposes, even for a study like this one, which mentions earlier works to evoke moods and experiences rather than to consider those works in depth. Most of the poems in *Noise and Stories* probe, with compelling subtlety and insight, painful situations in the lives of their speakers. Like Hardy's poem and Swift's satire describe in fatigued and resigned tones a shallow culture in which nourishing or meaningful experience is rare. Perhaps the "noise" of the book's title names what the poet sees as the essentially unpleasant, unrewarding nature of life. And yet to read the book is to spend time in a world made of carefully chosen words, closely drawn images, compelling feelings. The book's short lines and short stanzas, the matter-of-fact tones of its words, its crisp and simple diction give us the impression more of a carefully-laid mosaic than, say, of a fluid and seemingly spontaneous Renoir. The defining lines that distinguish the poems' observations, whether of the visual or the philosophical variety, seem clearly drawn. Furthermore, it is a sign of the care Morris has put into his book that its poems reach both to each other through verbal and thematic echoes and to the culture beyond Morris's book through frequent allusions to literature, music, and other artistic works. In various ways, each poem participates in at least one larger context. Perhaps, in keeping with the book's title, we can see the rhetoric of its poems as recasting various sorts of noise as elements of stories that the poems tell together and with other works of art, possibly softening the noise somewhat. *Noise and Stories* is a dark book. It is a thoughtfully crafted book. One way of reading these poems is to study aspects of their artistry as responses to Hardy's moon and as signs that Morris believes a book of poems can make a difference in a dark world. Some of the poems ask the same question the moon does, but all of them answer it, in part, through their formal qualities as poems, affirming their own power to impose some order on the chaotic noise of experience and, thereby, to stand up to the difficulties they describe.

It is not a given that artistic form bestows affirmative significance. Critic David Lodge studies in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* the novel's "stone mason geometry," a phrase used originally by Proust to name a defining quality of Hardy's novels. Lodge traces patterns of "recurrence and repetition" in *Jude* that are much like the patterns in Morris's book I will trace here, but he finds in them reinforcement of the novel's unrelievedly pessimistic vision.<sup>1</sup> Much of his argument centers on distasteful and discouraging repetitions in Hardy's novel: the pig's sexual organ that Arabella throws at Jude and which participates in a series of ugly "cross-references" running through the book; the series of rude awakenings that interrupt Jude's dreams for a better future; the biblical allusions that, in their clear irony, offer no redemption at all.<sup>2</sup> Lodge focuses on the moods and tones and meanings that these unifying patterns carry—they are ugly, rude, and impotent—not on the rhetorical moves, or "geometry," they make together. Still, it must be said that even if Lodge were to focus on that rhetoric, as I will with Morris's poems, it would be hard to assert that it ameliorates a vision as dark as that of *Jude the Obscure*.

Nonetheless, the consistently thoughtful tone of "I Looked Up From My Writing" — its convincing evocation of a questioning mind that raises issues rather than resolves them—makes room for other interpretations of life than the one it has foregrounded, room to find in its rhetorical gestures independent comments that tell their own story. Together the poems in Morris's book leave the same sort of space, most of them studying a particular form of darkness or one speaker's experience, alluding to other works of art to tell stories larger than their own, but refraining from summing

up life as a whole. As we will see, even what may be the darkest moment of the book, the final stanza of “Gut Light and Circuitry,” reflects a temporary perspective.<sup>3</sup> There is room in the poems’ collective vision for Morris’s artistry to counter its prevailing darkness.

In fact, not even the darkness of *Jude the Obscure* is impenetrable. Bert G. Hornback, writing of “Hardy’s constant disagreement with his critics over the allegations of pessimism in his work” and Hardy’s insistence “to the very end of his life that he was a meloirst, not a pessimist,”<sup>4</sup> would find in the pessimism of *Jude the Obscure* a mask. Hornback writes of Hardy’s pessimistic voice that it is an “assumed voice,” and that “in his better poems, there is another voice speaking behind and through the disguise, saying what Hardy could so rarely say right out, that he feels deeply the wrongs which plague us here, and seeks through pain for human happiness. When he admits these feelings, as he sometimes does, he answers all of our troubles with hope—always hope—and life.”<sup>5</sup> Hornback refers to neither “I Looked Up From My Writing” nor *Jude the Obscure* (though he does refer to other novels despite his focus on Hardy’s poems). Still, the reflective and convincing voice in “I Looked Up From My Writing” seems to affirm Hornback’s point that the poet sometimes let his own voice speak in his poems and that his own perspective held out hope for a brighter world than the dark one he often described. If Hornback is right about Hardy’s poems, their artistry is one of the most convincing ways in which they express that hope. The art of Morris’s book plays a similar role. Even when it underscores ugly images, fictional events, or thematic implications, it simultaneously—and perhaps more eloquently—floats free of them to become, itself, an actor on the stage and, thereby, a more emphatic influence on the book’s meaning.

Of the thirty-nine poems in Morris’s book, despite their precise words and images, only three have pronounced rhyme schemes, and only one has an entirely regular rhyme scheme. A logical starting point in a study of Morris’s formal artistry, these rhyming patterns reflect their subjects in some way. The poem entitled “Poem”<sup>6</sup> is one of a few exceptions to the book’s dark perspective, idealizing a young woman while the speaker’s rapt gaze on her moonlit body grows increasingly stable and direct. The match between its subject and its musical but irregular rhymes points to the same formal artistry found in the darker poems of the book, and its perspective, like theirs, departs in its own way from what readers might see as comfortably normal. The changing music of its rhyme scheme (first, a b c a, then, d e e d, and finally, a stanza in which all four lines end in an “n” sound) gives form to “the tune alive” that the beloved suggests in the second verse and “the moonlight’s pale music on [her] bare skin” of the last line. More consistent rhymes might miss the mark in this poem: moonlight, after all, can flicker when a breeze stirs the leaves, and there is a suggestion of breeze in the motion of the shirt that has been covering the woman’s body:

Against, away, and up, seldom at rest,  
unbuttoned, your button-down shirt as you walk  
undulates and billow, aspiring to cover,  
uncover again the blue night’s breast.

Too, there is a change of tone in the final verse for which the softened music of the “n” sounds seems appropriate: we are told that, as compared with earlier moments in that evening’s rendezvous, those at the end of the poem offer a little more darkness, “stilled motion,” less aspiration, and no sound. As the speaker’s gaze stabilizes, his reaction to his lover is a bit more cerebral, slightly less musical, than it

was in the first two stanzas; the speaker ponders the beloved's "sublunary perfection," describing its music in abstract terms: "I stare at more sublunary perfection / the moonlight's pale music on your bare skin." Reading these lines, we remember a customary association of the moon with the less than ideal, which ideal is associated with the sun. We remember, that is, the moon's association with time and change, its phases, its participation in the changing tides of the sea; and we remember its association with darkness.<sup>7</sup> In light of these perspectives on the moon, the speaker's oxymoron "sublunary perfection" suggests a growing infatuation, a muting of reality that is reflected in the ending "n" sounds of the poem's final lines.

Another of the book's three rhyming poems, "Another Inscrutable House,"<sup>8</sup> shows this correspondence between message and form. It describes a house whose "corner angles / do not meet exactly," whose "broad trendless garden's face" is, despite the missing regularity of a trend, "a baker's tray of woods-lit sumac tarts." The house is orderly and disorderly at once. It experiences "constant rain," but reflects the musical impulses in "Coltrane's sunshine saxophone tirade." It is "warmly cul-de-sacked / in Romance," thus reflecting the orderliness of literary tradition. At the same time, it is a "wilderness" and, hence, "inscrutable." Morris introduces the poem with the phrase John Lennon used to count out beats leading into the song "A Day in the Life"—"Sugarplum fairy, sugarplum fairy"—bestowing upon it the song's portraits of a car accident, a war, and potholes in England the orders of rhythm and idealizing fantasy. We notice that Morris's poem has a sonnet's form, but the rhyme scheme of each verse changes in the next. In this inscrutable poem, the slightly inconsistent form closely reflects its subject, a house that is askew. In fact, if we see the poem as a kind of house (as the title invites us to do), perhaps it answers Hardy's moon by seeing poetry as an imperfect sanctuary, the best we can do in a world that won't add up, and, as the last verse says, "A force to kink the cogs of dailyness, / drudgery, loss: a house, a wilderness." Perhaps one writes dark poems, first, because one is honest, and second, because an honestly skewed poem—though an inscrutable wilderness to the reader—retains the dignity of clear-sightedness, departing from the mechanistic cogs, the falsifying 90 degree angles, of what is commonly deemed "normal" in everyday life. Employing a changing rhyme scheme to depart from perfect form, the poem suggests that faithfully representing even the inscrutably irregular is a way of being equal to it.

With similar though darker irony, the poem in the book with the most regular rhyme scheme, "Gut Light and Circuitry: Another Meditation about Content and Form,"<sup>9</sup> confronts an emphatic lack of faith in the value of poetic form and, ultimately, a bitter skepticism about human endeavor in general. Since that skepticism is associated with the all-encompassing sadness of a grieving speaker, a poet, we hesitate to see it as the poem's final word on either artistry or life. Indeed, the poem invites us to attribute the rhyme scheme's formal dignity to the respect and affection the author himself holds for his mother, whose life and death, in 2003, are commemorated in the poem's opening inscription. The speaker's grief is a wilderness that Morris understands, but in this poem the author is not drawn to an alternative state of mind, as he is with the inscrutable house or the moonlight on the skin of his speaker's beloved. "Gut Light and Circuitry" does explore a marginal frame of mind, but the author's artistry suggests that the poem has already moved beyond it to a faith the speaker cannot share.

Initially, the poem underscores its title's cynical suggestion, in the phrase "Another Meditation," that the speaker's thoughts are old, exhausted, and without consequence. He sees a torn windsock filling briefly with wind and associates it, first,

with the tumor that has recently killed his mother; second, with an unwritten poem that might express the swelling sorrow he feels at her death; and third, with any poem that strives to reflect a poet's uncrafted feelings (or, as the cynical title puts it, gut light) by letting them take their own shape in words. In the speaker's mind, the poetic alternative to gut light is the "wattage" with which verbal effects like rhythm and rhyme express a poet's feelings, giving them the brightness that circuitry brings to otherwise dark and separate bulbs. One suggestion this imagery makes is that the eloquence of feelings, like the light of bulbs, is a potential quality that only needs strategic systems like rhythm and rhyme (or circuitry) to be perceived. Without that artful treatment, a poet's feelings are, in the mind of the speaker, like the tumor that killed his mother or the unexpressed sorrow with which he, like the filled windsock, is "round" or ill. In keeping with this perspective, the speaker likens to a naïve dream his childhood faith that feelings will generate their own poetic visibility, using ironically well-crafted onomatopoeia to liken the power of free verse to the power of a locomotive, and the natural music inherent in feeling to the locomotive's steam: "its puff after apter puff in a chain / of expressionistic luster I could see." The grieving poet remembers, even as he rejects, the notion that the writing of free verse, the expression of "raw feeling's sparks without form" can ease the suffering that generates it.

But the poem goes on to doubt that even highly-crafted art plays a benign role in human existence: "The horror of the world has welled intact / from its grace." The word "wells" evokes the windsock that "belled" with wind in the first stanza, the "moment's tumor" and "sorrow" that bring to mind the poet's mother's death. If well-crafted art embodies the world's "grace," then the horror of the world that "has welled intact" from that grace disqualifies art as a blessing. In the end the speaker implies that neither free verse nor verse taking a traditional form encourages hope that human efforts, poetic or otherwise, can alleviate the dark aspects of our lives. To illustrate his point that grace gives rise to horror, the speaker likens his mother's final condition to that of the screaming woman in Munch's painting *The Scream*, in which the scenery behind her takes its shape from her round mouth, surrounding her with her own pain. As a landmark in the world's artistic history, the painting might be considered a facet of its grace, yet it portrays the world's horror. The speaker envisions his mother's death in terms of Munch's painting, casting his mother's "coughing, sputtering labor to breathe" as "the focal point of this dim, tiny room" that is encircled by TV voices discussing gloom and war like a "wreath / of braided hopes unraveled by a new fear / and expelled by swelled lungs and skipping heart / into a scattered dormancy." In the mind of the speaker, the illnesses of humanity surround his dying mother, shaped by her illness as her illness is shaped by a painting. In the end, the poet's sorrow, the dark light of his gut, shapes the world of the poem into a world of misery. However, the formal qualities of artistic grace would have helped this speaker no more than the shape of Munch's screaming mouth helped Munch's screaming woman.

In the poem's final verse, the locomotive that the child poet associated with the power of free verse becomes the train that grieving adult associates with death, which all must face. As Diabolus, a destroyer of mythic dimensions, the train makes moot the issue of poetic form by dismantling the dichotomies on which it rests:

Closer to ash, Mother's eyes saucer, and time  
 Blasts Diabolus, its steaming train's rush  
 at the rest of us commuters: a crush  
 of all discord and light, darkness and rhyme.



Even the sense-making structure of logical opposition is lost in the final commonality of death.

And yet, even this dark poem cannot dispel the affirmations of Morris's dark book. As readers, we can dismiss neither the music of the poem's rhymes nor their suggestion that formal poetic circuitry can impose order on whatever disorderly crush it describes. Referring to his mother's final experience, the parts of her body, and her environment, the speaker tells us that "Each part / withers outside meter's enclosing sphere." Perhaps this is the voice of the poem's author who, having lived out his own grief, can choose wattage and circuitry over gut light, the grace of rhyme over horror. Like Hardy's poem, this one both asserts and refutes the moon's skepticism. Like the rhymes that portray Morris's infatuated lover and inscrutable house, the rhymes of this poem enact the story they tell, though in this case they suggest only its unhappy ending. Both the ironies and the rhymes of Morris's book assert the author's faith in the value and potency of his work.

Poems that don't rhyme are likely to use elements of form that are more subtle than rhyme, particularly if the rhythms of their words seem more conversational and naturally occurring than deliberately crafted. Most of the poems in Morris's book are of this variety. An aspect of this subtle artistry lies in the poems' line breaks, each one bringing innuendo to a speaker's voice. As each line ends, whether in mid-thought or at the end of a sentence, we register that ending, perhaps unconsciously, developing our sense of the poem's shape. The first two lines of Morris's poem "Middle of February"<sup>10</sup> end with images that, by virtue of their positions in the lines, are emphasized in the mind of the reader: "What sweet fruit the moon / through my bedroom window." The first line plants the moon, intriguingly conjured as a sweet fruit, center stage in our imaginings. The second line, coming to rest on the period after "window," builds around the speaker's perceptions the qualifying framework of perspective: they are seen through a window that creates a certain angle of vision. The third line in the stanza ends in mid-phrase, flowing into the next line: "its oval cooling and morning's / metal revisiting my dry mouth." The split mid-sentence between "morning's" and "metal" might reflect a hesitation on the part of the speaker to arrive at the ambiguous, possibly harsh word "metal." At the same time, it might suggest an ironic continuity between the two lines created by the phrase that is split between them, some impulse in the speaker to combine what is customarily separated—the coolness of morning and metal. The next, and last, line of the stanza is a self-contained adverbial phrase, the end of which ends the sentence: "seconds after I turn off the alarm." The structure and position of that line might suggest to readers an alien intrusion, an end to dreaming, that the full sense of the line undercuts: despite the jolt of the alarm at the end of the line, the speaker is still gazing at his sweet fruit seconds after the alarm is silenced. The shocks of reality may not carry much weight in this speaker's world. Whatever the case, what individual readers hear in the adjacent lines will depend on their own sense-making instincts, which depend largely on the personality and experiences each reader brings to the poem. Still, the poet sets up the reading experience by breaking the lines where he does, a process which is not part of the writing of prose. The partnership between a poet's shaping touches and a reader's sense-making shades the meaning of all poems. In the bridges it builds, it is another version of the ameliorative power rhyme can affirm in dark poems. In fact, in Morris's artistry, bridges of several kinds can ease the separateness or isolation that several forms of the book's darkness entail.

Many of the poems in *Noise and Stories* explore the personal, sometimes abnormally heightened or idiosyncratic, experience of one individual. We have seen

in “Poem” an association between moonlight and the infatuation of the speaker. Similarly, “Middle of February” associates the moon with a state of mind that departs from features of the customary, features like 90 degree angles in buildings we build or (as we will see) the demands of gravity. In the first stanza (as we have already seen), the speaker delights in the moon that has yet to set when he turns off his morning’s alarm clock, and he expresses his delight in details like the moon’s “oval cooling and morning’s / metal revisiting [his] dry mouth.” We wonder if he has a fever that needs cooling or a hangover that is drying his mouth. Something seems askew, and the next verse reinforces that impression by suggesting a sinister, inescapable quality to the moon. For the speaker, it is:

A coarse familiar face,  
a map I am unable to refold,  
its reflected O the province  
I did not ask directions to.

The fact that the moon is simply a reflection of the sun and not a light in itself, the fact that the speaker simply finds himself in its province without having wanted to be there, the fact that he is unable to leave it: these details underscore our sense that his state of mind is somehow irregular. In fact, some details of the speaker’s day are described in images that physically reverse the events they describe, as if they were happening in a mirror. As he starts his car, he sees in his rear view mirror a cat that has been keeping warm near its engine and is now “scurrying inversely” as it escapes. At the same time, he sees that “. . . in pools of rainwater, / tree limbs grow away from the sky / as twilight thickens and swells.” We sense that he is not comfortable living in a world that defies gravity. In the last stanza, he confirms his distress: “Even in reflection, / the moon is nothing to howl at; / why can’t I stop?” The pun on “reflection” here—it is both a natural phenomenon of light as well as a mode of thought—heightens our sense of his inverted perspective. We wonder if the speaker’s existence in a reflected world suggests that the perspective of a poet, whose work presents his personal take on reality rather than reality itself, is always idiosyncratic even at its most normal. His howling at the moon confirms that it partakes of a wilderness rather than a more civilized, deliberately-structured context. Other lines in the poem find metaphors in breath, flowers, and clouds, more tokens of the wild, the natural, and the organic as opposed to the constructed.

Many of the poems in Morris’s book portray this distance from some culturally-shared norm. In fact, whether as vacation wilderness or as compulsive howling, the distance repeatedly offers reasons to write that Hardy’s moon does not know of. However, Hardy himself, choosing to explore the mind of his speaker by having him shun the moon’s gaze, shows that he was aware of them, and Morris’s book seems to act on them as well. Taking the mind as a world in itself—its need to idealize, its penchant for obtuse angles, its capacity to lose its balance—Morris depicts terrain that can isolate. His book is a study of human relationships, most of its poems portraying a facet of interpersonal dynamics as one individual has known it. The book is not optimistic about human relationships. However, each poem, as its artistry and its story engage the reader, affirms the importance of telling its story and, in so doing, works against its own pessimism. Although the book as a whole suggests that its speakers and its readers have known much isolation, some of the circuitry that brings light to its poems shows Morris’s faith that such a book, by engendering connection of one sort or another, can alleviate their loneliness.

A fabric of repeated motifs and frequent allusions, tying each poem to other works both in the book and beyond it, works with artistic features like those we have

examined to shape the poems and unify the book. If we think of the book's rhetoric—its linking repetitions and allusive gestures—as an element of its form, we can see the book as a meditation on form and content that affirms these connections as a potent expressive network. One of the book's recurring motifs appears in "Poem,"<sup>11</sup> the portrait of infatuation in which the speaker studies his beloved in the moonlight. Midway in that meditation, he thinks of his beloved as a moth drawn to the light of the moon. She is "a sentient moth a circle perfect light: that lucent, musing, lambent, marmoreal O." The "O" here evokes a marble-seeming moon; the title of the poem links the envisioning of a beloved to the imaginings of writing poetry. In another of the poems, "Middle of February," the moon's "reflected O" evokes for the speaker a "province / I did not ask directions to." In the echoing between the two poems, the connection between the moon and the writing of poetry is reinforced, as is each poem's connection to Hardy's "I Looked Up From My Writing." In several ways, the power of the moon links Morris's two poems and turns each one into a comment on the other. As a result, the infatuation of the lover and the howling of the poet become kindred conditions. When we extend this connection to the round mouths of Munch's screaming woman and the dying mother in "Gut Light and Circuitry," love, writing, and suffering come to be different aspects of the same experience, each linked, it seems, to a different stage of life.

In linkings like these, the book repeats vivid words or images like "pretzel," "slather," and "blue night," the sky's blue, a metallic taste, rising and falling, cigarette smoking, and stars. Sexual desire and images of women's breasts figure in several of the poems. Even patterns of logic serve to unify the book. For example, confessions of inadequacy on the part of a speaker who does not have the resources to pay off a painful debt or cost are a recurrent ending, remaking each other in circumstances that vary from one poem to another. One young man describes the experience of losing his better judgment to drinks in a club:

the pulse and the light  
and the smell having rushed  
into my blood, a better,  
more honest heartbeat,  
the nagging in my head bound,  
gagged, and held for a ransom  
I will not be able to pay tonight.<sup>12</sup>

Another speaker, feeling depressed and inadequate, likens himself to famous musicians who struggled with alcohol and drugs; trying to build his own sense of stature, he tellingly picks models, like Miles Davis, who had failed to resolve their own problems:

Embracing his father, all Davis thought  
about was the trumpet he wanted  
to play to make up for years  
he had wasted, fight the fight  
with himself he knew music  
could never really win.<sup>13</sup>

Another man remembers the childhood pain of realizing, after pulling a cruel classroom prank that he will not be able to avoid the disappointment he will see in his mother's eyes:

I kept glancing at the telephone,  
trying to imagine how to wheedle  
my way out of this whopper and replace

the disappointed shadow in Mother's eyes

...

and fingering two pennies as if I could  
rub them into enough change to buy  
all the six-ounce bottles I would need  
to quench my increasingly unbearable thirst.<sup>14</sup>

With similar inadequacy, one reminiscent adult realizes how much anguished decision-making he brought to his divorced mother through his own misbehavior as a child:

How many moments will you spend  
engaged in such a dark conference  
with the future? How good  
can I ever be to have deserved it?<sup>15</sup>

Changing the means of payment from good judgment and self-control, to self-esteem, to money (as a metaphor for maternal approval), to good behavior, these endings create in the book a fairly consistent psychological and emotional type. We can read each echo as both reinforcement and qualification of the other passages it evokes.

Morris's frequent allusions to works outside the book might seem, at first, to scatter its focus, but in the end (and ironically), they unify it tightly. The allusions take several forms. The book begins with quotations from three contemporary poets and a Professor of English as perspectives from which to consider its contents. A few of the poems begin with quotations. Besides alluding directly to the 1942 film of the same title, the poem "Holiday Inn" begins with two phrases, one from Cole Porter—"The change from major to minor," and the other from The Beatles—"I read the news today, oh boy."<sup>16</sup> Another poem begins with lines from Neil Diamond: "She would ache for love / and get but stones. . ."<sup>17</sup> Two of Morris's poems evoke American poet Robert Frost, one by weaving a well-known phrase from "Mending Wall" into a speaker's words: "Something there is has gashed / holes here in the sidewalks and curbs,"<sup>18</sup> and the other by referring to a famous documentary about Frost while commemorating Morris's father: "Perhaps you had a lover's quarrel / with the world . . ."<sup>19</sup> One poem corrects Dickinson's phrase "a certain slant of light": "Not a certain slant, but a swath, / of light and with honey's texture."<sup>20</sup> Talking of the Christmas season and Christ's first coming to the earth, one poem reaches, through poet Mark Doty<sup>21</sup> to Yeats's "The Second Coming": ". . . Green clumps / of mistletoe winked afterthoughts . . . as leaves swirled on the ground / & the season slouched toward dark."<sup>22</sup> Other allusions involve simply mentioning famous names like Richard Burton, the play *Becket*, and the musical piece by Debussy, "Claire de Lune," among many others.

Among readers of poetry, it is common practice to extend the reinforcement and qualification of an allusion to the meanings of both the alluding text and the earlier one. The customary analysis of allusion and echo on the part of Morris's reader is appropriate to this book. However, it is important to say that at first glance, a number of the book's allusions seem to lack any relevance to the alluding texts, as though the gestures of referring are as important in themselves as whatever meanings they bring to Morris's poems. In fact, this assignment of importance goes to the heart of Morris's project: in this dark book, acts of reaching out can be agents of redemption.

If, in this study of Morris's book, it is appropriate to think back to the gaze of Hardy's moon on a working poet, it is similarly appropriate to think back to a moon

created by Dylan Thomas that also sheds light on the value of poetry. Thomas's poem, "In My Craft or Sullen Art," evokes both Hardy's moon and Morris's answer to it.

In my craft or sullen art  
Exercised in the still night  
When only the moon rages  
And the lovers lie abed  
With all their griefs in their arms,  
I labour by singing light  
Not for ambition or bread  
Or the strut and trade of charms  
On ivory stages  
But for the common wages  
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart  
From the raging moon I write  
On these spindrift pages  
Not for the towering dead  
With their nightingales and psalms  
But for the lovers, their arms  
Round the griefs of the ages,  
Who pay no praise or wages  
No heed my craft or art.<sup>23</sup>

The poem expresses Thomas's dedication as a writer to the raging, singing moon. Like the poems of Morris, it presents a dark view of life, certain that the embracing arms of lovers hold griefs, not joys. In light of these parallels, we might think of Morris's echoes and allusions as kin to Thomas's lovers who reach beyond themselves to each other in order to break the isolation of their dark lives. Perhaps we can see them as kin, too, to the lovers in Arnold's "Dover Beach," who, even though they are under a moon that "lies fair / Upon the straits," are nonetheless hearing an "eternal note of sadness" in the waves on a beach and reach to each other as the only possible "joy" or "help for pain": "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!" If we read Morris's allusive book in terms of connections like these, it offers to its readers comfort, empathy, and advice on coping with isolation and struggle.

The recurrent motif that appears most frequently in Morris's book is that of breath and breathing. In some poems, a struggling person's breath is rasping or labored or filled with tobacco smoke. In others, the imagery of breathing suggests self-expression of one sort or another. In the poem, "Braille," breath and wind involve a forgetting of one kind of knowledge and the learning of another:

All we know is forgotten  
in breath, but pear trees  
under streetlights last night  
inspired and exfoliated  
white secrets, smoke  
signals from another world.

...

How much have we forgotten  
by breathing and rebreathing air  
as if it would always be

the same?

...

A sudden gust of wind  
& even the telephone lines  
are riding the sway of language,

...<sup>24</sup>

The imagery of breath and breathing in this poem invites us to see it as a study of being alive and of the writing of poetry. The frequency with which we see the theme in the poems seems almost to give a breathing rhythm to the book as a whole. Still, one poem uses the theme in a scene which stands out in the book, creating a sort of center to which all the other scenes connect, if only by contrast. The scene appears roughly at the center of the book. In the lengthy poem, "Holiday Inn," there are scenes of strikingly painful violence as well as struggling breath. Still, the world of the poem grows more peaceful as stanza follows stanza into the darkness of dusk and night, progression of which ironically lightens the tone of the poem. At the end of the poem, the troubled speaker sits down in a dark theatre and watches the audience, not the movie. The passage is probably the most positive in the book; there is no irony in the comfort the speaker finds in the situation he describes. In fact, the passage seems almost to belong in another book, and it is easy to see it as some kind of touchstone in this one, an affirmation of something the world of the book needs more of, that something presented as if it were almost commonplace. The speaker describes two figures in the audience at the theatre:

Five rows below me,  
a small boy has fallen asleep  
in his father's arms,  
his head propped against a shoulder,  
his mouth a purple smear,  
his back rising and falling.  
Sitting till the end of the movie,  
I watch only this boy as he sleeps  
and the father who absently strokes his back.  
It is only a moment,  
but as long as this moment lasts,  
I will be breathing with them.<sup>25</sup>

Even though this scene takes place at night and in a dark room, the arms that hold the child provide peace. If, like the other holding arms we have considered, they also provide solace and protection, it is against sadness and danger that are yet to come, not against threats to present well-being. It is a scene of intimacy between father and son, as well as between them and the speaker. They are all breathing together. In fact, we wonder if the audience in its darkness, safely watching calamities in a film rather than living them out themselves, are all breathing together, studied by the speaker until he narrows his focus to the child. If so, the scene offers respite from the darkness of the book, redefining it as something that connection can penetrate and ease.

The poem's frequent mention of words and language encourages us to see the speaker in this scene as a writer. Perhaps the connections between father, child, and poet suggest an unconscious goal of the failed or shallow relationships described in Morris's poems. Perhaps they suggest the conversation, the breathing together, effected between Morris's poems and the other works to which they reach through his echoes and allusions. Perhaps, for us, they explain why, in Hardy's poem, a man

would kill himself because his son has died in war and why Hardy would write “I Looked Up from my Writing,” despite his speaker’s embarrassment about his own poem. Perhaps Swift, unlike Gulliver, felt that disappointment assumes a missing satisfaction that is worth working for. In this scene, Morris depicts one form that this satisfaction might take and lets his poet take part in it, portraying a central goal of the book.

### Endnotes

1. Lodge, 195.
2. Lodge, 200.
3. Morris, 48.
4. Hornback, 56.
5. Hornback, 56.
6. Morris, 66.
7. Perhaps we think of the opening lines of Shelley’s poem “Mutability,” which can be read as a lament about human life:

We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;  
How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,  
Streaking the darkness radiantly!—yet soon  
Night closes round, and they are lost for ever:

Strictly speaking, Shelley is describing the clouds here, not the moon, and certainly the sun disappears every night. But the moon’s veiled light, and the darkness surrounding it, dominate his illustration of transience.

Or, reading Morris’s lines about “sublunary perfection” may evoke a sense of the moon found in Indian astrology and enunciated on-line by Therese Hamilton in the webpage “The Zodiac of the Stars”:

*And what of the Moon? In India the Moon is said to rule the senses and emotions. This is not so very different from the western view of the Moon. In India the Moon is said to be fickle and changeable. Emotions change and fluctuate as our thoughts and attitudes change. Emotions vary with the circumstances of our lives, and with the positive or negative ways we perceive other people as treating us.*

*Astronomically, the Moon we observe each night is cyclic. It waxes and wanes and finally disappears each month before it is reborn again. If it were not for the light of the Sun, we would not be able to see the Moon at all. This is why the principle of reflection belongs to the astrological Moon. (Hamilton)*

8. Morris, 90.
9. Morris, 47.
10. Morris, 70.
11. Morris, 66.
12. Morris, “The Speed of Desire,” 26.
13. Morris, “As Bad as Achilles,” 53.
14. Morris, “Forgive Us Our Debts,” 13.
15. Morris, “That Summer Afternoon, Those Offices,” 63.
16. Morris, 35.
17. Morris, 31.
18. Morris, 49.
19. Morris, 56.
20. Morris, 31.

21. Doty, 122.
22. Morris, 88.
23. Thomas, 142.
24. Morris, 86.
25. Morris, 42.

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# Out at Third

*"April is the coolest month"*

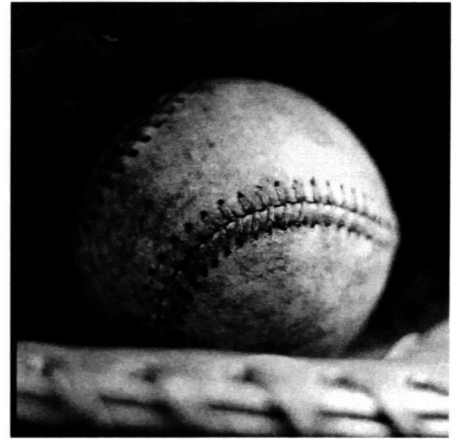
by John Bradshaw

You know it. That Prufrock puppet got it all wrong.  
He saw spring and freaked.  
The thought that earth's green is not his green—  
Well, it just pissed him off.  
Being a self-absorbed thoughtful sort,  
Prufrock couldn't just admit his jealousy.  
Nature's got him trumped.  
If he lived in his gut, he'd probably just say it straight.  
But heaven forbid that a naked—albeit misplaced—passion  
Should wend its way through his veins.  
He's gotta clear it through Cognition Central.  
If it isn't approved by jellyspined Protocol, then forward it  
To the Convoluted Ego.  
We'll just rationalize it up a bit, till it seems all spiritual-like.  
Then we can hold our seething envy and feel vindicated.

The problem is the boy never played baseball.  
If he had, then he'd have known the seasons of the world.  
Every spring, it's the same thing.  
The bitter stiffness of winter gets sweated out  
As we remember the Fundamentals:  
Pitch-and-catch, hit-and-run, slide-and-tag.  
The green of spring is true green;  
Baseball knows the season of the world.  
It ain't no phony Cambridge game of bridge,  
But a real ball game, dirt and leather, sun and sweat  
And the cloudless blue of deepest wisdom.

The only thing cruel about April  
Is that there's no one to blame but yourself.  
If you don't stretch it out in your sprint for third,  
If you just dog it every day out in left field,  
Then you sit out the summer on the bench.  
There's no one to blame but yourself.  
And you know it –

And that's why  
Prufrock should have played baseball.



# Cutting Back the Camphor Tree

by Gwynn O'Gara

Come fall, we prune the tips shading  
the solar panels, the branches  
shadowing the lawn.

I hate pruning, but I know it helps  
the plant, child, self  
stay healthy and keep bearing.

No ordinary tree, the camphor.  
Year 'round leaves fall as new ones sprout,  
like him and me mostly always trying  
the strange mismanagement of marriage.

He's good at cutting.  
When one of us covers the path or  
takes up too much space,  
he clips us back with blade or tongue.  
I'm good at leaning into the sun,  
leafing, spreading.

One year I dropped too many leaves,  
brown curls of solitude.  
It was a tough summer,  
and it wasn't just the rats  
hoarding seeds in the insulation;  
it was us wanting different things.

Togetherness apartness—  
he baited traps; I emptied them,  
starting with the head honchos,  
big mamas, giants as long as  
their tails, dwindling with each  
corpse to mousie size.  
I bleached the floors; we  
vacuumed the mess, crawled

under the house and decks,  
and closed up entries.  
What had entered us?

He saws a thick branch.  
We breathe the scent  
of tiger balm and cardamom  
and the healing sweat  
of doing good work together,  
raising a son together.

The last California Sister flickers  
past, speckled white on black  
with orange dots, looking for  
a leaf or stem to hold her eggs,  
that won't be pruned or drop,  
that will be here in the spring.



Cutting Back the Camphor Tree

Gwynn O'Gara

# Into Paradise

by David Wyatt

At the gate, a line, of course, a few  
souls shoving one another aside, the weak  
and the small, babies enough to fill  
a hospital—all having to wait longer  
than the rest. "Early to bed, early to rise," a mother  
sings to her infant, near where everyone  
has to sign a book on whose pages,  
I swear, the ink disappears within seconds,  
as each elect passes beyond the gate  
and into a garden of orchids and lily ponds.  
A man, who says nothing, even when asked  
a question, holds a placard that reads  
Life Without End. Great wings  
are visible nowhere. I think of the sweet  
oak tree, some of its branches black  
and bare after long years in one place,  
under numerous skies, from a neighbor's yard.  
It is the thing—crows afraid to land in it  
before nightfall—I take into paradise.



Into Paradise

# The Books of the Dead

by Ben Myers

*Originally published in Lapse Americana (NYQ Books, 2013)*

A young girl, twelve or fourteen,  
one thin hand in leisurely  
flight to her open mouth  
is yawning in the library,  
on a low couch  
beside a long and sunny  
window

while the voices  
of the dead  
speak from books.

Any morning  
you might  
meet your father,  
the intellectual,  
bald from chemo, shuffling  
softly in his bathrobe  
through the rumpled  
pages of Dostoevsky,

or that dear  
old teacher,  
somewhere in Virgil's  
*Eclogues*, feet  
in the brook, brown pants  
rolled to knobby  
knees, socks  
laid out on the bank beside him.

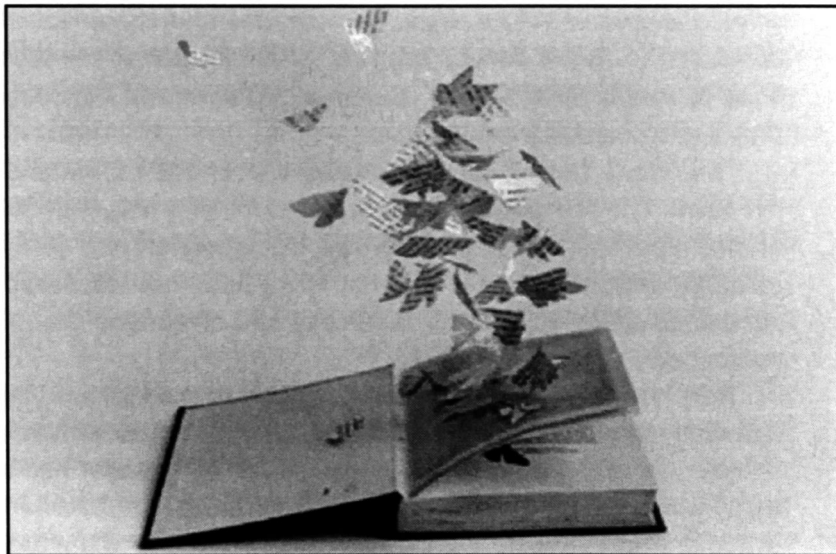
Perhaps you have a school-friend,  
still rummaging about  
*Das Kapital* with a wrench,

and there's your grandma,  
nestled amidst the *psalms*,  
a straw hat  
left among the cabbages.

It's like returning to a broad, green place,  
ringed with elms and cottonwoods,  
there you picnicked with friends  
a quarter century ago

to find them all still there,  
taking up the plates and  
pouring steaming coffee from a thermos.

You sit down and resume.



# Strands

## Ashley Underwood

*She wished for forgetting before she actually forgot. The smoke ate at her lungs in her sleep, making her cough while lying in the hotel bed. She whimpered, struggling against the covers, sleeping on the far edge of the right side of the bed, leaving the left side untouched. The pillow became wet against her cheek. She cried out, rolled over to her other side, and reached toward the empty side of the bed. When her bandaged hands met the cold covers, her eyes slit open.*

*"Brandon?"*

*Her eyes opened wider, blinking away the sleep. She focused on the flat bedspread and untouched pillow. She shook her head violently, released a strangled wail, and rolled away from the empty side of the bed. She reached down to pick up the doll she'd thrown on the floor while asleep. She pulled it in against her chest, curled her legs close to her body, stroked the patched-up dress, and loosened some of the mud from the yarn-like strands of hair with her raw and scratched fingers. Soon enough, her eyes drifted closed and her hands rested limply against the doll.*

*"Mom! Dad's home!"*

*She sat up in the hotel bed with a smile, a line appearing between her eyebrows when she looked at the unfamiliar curtains and cheap table and chair. She looked down at the doll in her lap and leaned back against the wall, absently moving her hand to caress the doll. Her eyes began to burn and she sobbed, her tears falling to the mud-stained fabric in her arms.*

"Brandon! Tasha!" her voice carried over the rubble and debris that had been her town. The sky was black with reflections of emergency blue and red, the orange of fire, and spotlights. Ambulances from neighboring communities were moving carefully through the piles that had once been houses, stopping any time they saw survivors waving their arms frantically and screaming that someone was hurt and needs help.

Her eyes forgot the scene when she heard a scream. She quickened her pace, stumbling over pieces of wood in the dark, the fires only casting shadowy flickers. She ran down the street, past the bones of homes that had stood strongly for over thirty years, past the piles of metal, wood, and brick that marked the remains of the Wheeler house. She stepped around the rising tower of the fireplace and chimney and stopped abruptly, off balance. Shannon Wheeler was curled up around something, her cries and sobs rising over the popping of the fires and the sirens.

"Shannon?" she said, placing her feet carefully between the debris. Her neighbor didn't answer, but remained close to whatever lay in her arms. Stepping closer, she gasped, making out a strong male body, and shuddered at the glimpse of what remained of Benjamin Wheeler's face. She stepped away from the sight, shaking her head sharply, and turned to run back to a clearer section of street. She waved down an ambulance and directed them toward her friends' house.

"Wait," she called after the second paramedic. "Have you seen my daughter and husband? Brandon and Natasha McCail? He's 35, brown hair and hazel eyes. She's thirteen, looks like me except with brown hair. This is my street."

Her eyes dropped to the ruin of the ground when the only reply was an apology and a suggestion to check the response headquarters.



*She called it The Dark.*

*She wasn't sure how long she'd been there, or even if she'd even been anywhere else. She had memories, but she didn't really know if they really were memories. The Dark was the perfect backdrop for her mind to play movies that could have been memories. Trees, sunlight, wind, love, loss, despair— she remembered these things.*

Fire, wooden shards, and scraps of cloth were the only remnants of the house she had loved as home. She didn't notice the smell, the child of smoke and rain, but she saw the rubble and felt the ash falling on her skin. She blinked the wetness out of her eyes, and her panting joined the sounds of sirens and rain.

"Brandon!"

Her cry cracked at the end, and she paused to fight off hysteria.

*For a while, she remembered what their faces looked like, trapped in a horrible death. The beginning was filled with grief, tears, and wailing to the darkness that was her world. She cherished the sounds of her grief, the feel of the wetness on her cheeks.*

*She used to swallow a tasteless pill that contained the perfect amount of vitamins and calories to survive on and one water ration a day. She used to love the taste of that water and that pill, but, after screaming and crying for so long, she woke up with her mouth stitched shut, her eyes unable to produce tears, and a tube leading directly out of her stomach. Soon she had to keep her eyes constantly closed. Blind, she didn't even know if The Dark remained forever dark.*

She collapsed three steps away from the storm shelter and brushed the hair from her husband's face. She was scared to touch him, afraid his body might crack into thousands of little pieces. His skin appeared to be porcelain, a look of pain etched on his face. The picture of his death imprinted itself onto her mind, and she couldn't stop touching his hair. It was so soft between her fingers, those brunette strands, and they were the only things that looked familiar. The strokes of her hand were shaky, and she couldn't stop the tears from trailing down her cheeks.

She forced her hand away, trying to keep her eyes on his hair, and refused to take in the shard of wood that had skewered her husband. She tucked the information away, repeating to herself that the time for grief was after she found her daughter.

She closed her eyes tightly and prayed to anyone listening that they could grieve together.

*She had a designated area in which to urinate and excrete other wastes. The hole was filled with a solution that nullified the smell, so the scent in the room never changed. The temperature was constant, and every time she slept, she was drugged and bathed so she had no body odor. She was perfectly hygienic, perfectly isolated. While in the beginning she remembered taste and smell, after so long in The Dark, she only knew where to plug in her tube to obtain sustenance.*

Her voice cracked from screaming. David, the Methodist minister, stopped her first; next came Becky, Tasha's music teacher, yet no one could tell her where her daughter was. The town wasn't large, but her feet and legs ached; her yells became croaks. She could pick out people she knew, but most were worried about their own families and did not care for the woman shambling in the streets calling her daughter's name.

*Sometimes, she crawled around the wall, touching the corners. She relished the different angles. The textures of wall and floor were the same, but the meeting of the wall and the floor was a beautiful right angle. After so long in The Dark, she could feel the imperfections in the walls, and she could walk straight to them.*

*She ran her fingers over the stitches on her lips. Over and over again, she searched the seam, looking for the differences in texture and pattern. She felt the different spacing between the stitches, felt the imperfections of the human hand, and knew*

*that her own kind had mutilated her.*

She woke with the sun cresting over the edge of the world. Her hands were raw and tender, and her mouth was as dry as her eyes were scratchy. The morning sunlight cast a new face on the world—one that didn't hide the results of the storm. She had collapsed, stars overhead, and slept a few hours in seconds.

Her eyes scanned the devastation, and she saw a glint a few yards away. She crawled to it, her hands screaming at her, and focused on the golden spark in the mud. She pulled on the chain, wincing as the metal bit in to her skinned palms, and widened her eyes at the charm.

*Stitches, corners, she felt the difference between her skin and the feeding tube. She dipped her hand in her excrement basin, and received a warning shock. No touching the solution. The stitches kept her smile inside her mind. She took her wet hands and ran them through her hair, running the strands between her fingers.*

*She emitted a sound that was something between a growl and a cry. She could do nothing else with sealed lips and dried eyes.*

"Tasha! Tasha!" the voice that escaped her was barely audible, a scratchy remnant of her normal voice. She crawled faster, barely able to see through the tears in her eyes. Her hands scraped against wood and rock, mud and water, and her clothes were caked with filth. She almost didn't notice the strange strands that touched her fingers. She frowned, looking down at the packed mud, and dug her broken fingernails into it, trying to extract some of the strings. She grabbed a few, pulling lightly, and her gasp echoed in her mind when she realized she was holding hair.

She pulled a little harder, following the hair to its origin, hoping to discover a stranger's face staring at her through the mud.

*There were moments in The Dark when she would fall asleep and wake up with the smell of antiseptic in her nose, the feel of a mattress against her back, and the room would be white and soft, instead of black and unforgivably hard. She could see and hear, and she would walk in this place, clothes once again resting against her skin, pictures of her family pinned against the walls, real food and water to taste in her mouth.*

*The white of the walls almost gleamed with the artificial light, and she had to squint after so long in The Dark. She remembered how to talk in these dreams, and the people there told her they were so glad she was having a good day. However, she would inevitably look at her family photo, pinned against the wall. She would notice the gleam in their hair and the love in their eyes, and she would fall asleep and wake up with the familiar feel of stitches shackling her lips.*

The eyes staring up at her through the mud could have been her own, yet these eyes were almost bulging out of their sockets. Her daughter's eyes held the gray of death in them, and they were dry and coarse with dirt.

"This is not my daughter," she whispered repeatedly, as she began clearing the mud off of the rest of the child's face. Tasha had been covered completely by mud, buried alive. Whispers became desperate chanting as the mud revealed beloved features, a girl-child the image of her mother with her father's brown hair in place of the blonde. The chant became a sobbing plea as she touched the skin of her daughter's face.

*She woke up one day with a shaved head. Her hands gleefully played over the new texture of shaved flesh barely covering bone. It was a new present, and with each day that passed afterward she reverently explored the new sensation of hair growing into prickly, then longer and softer strands of hair.*

"Mrs. McCail? We're so sorry for your loss. We understand you've lost your family

and your home. I know this is a difficult time for you, but do you understand what we're saying? Do you remember collapsing at the funeral?"

She caressed the doll she'd found in the rubble. Her face was swollen and the bandages on her hands limited the feel she had when she petted the doll's hair. "It used to be yellow yarn," she said. "Like my hair. But now it's brown, muddy brown. Not at all like Tasha's hair."

"Mrs. McCail? You're unable to take care of yourself. You haven't eaten in days. You cannot continue like this."

She gazed at the doll in her lap. It had been her doll when she was a child, then Tasha's doll. "We're taking you to a nearby mental institution, so that you may recover from your grief."

*She often rocked back and forth allowing her back to lightly hit the wall behind her, humming a tune she didn't remember knowing. It was always the same melody. Perhaps she had made it up, but until they removed her vocal chords she could hum. The sound echoed around her, and her mind's smile bloomed. These people had made a tomb with beautiful acoustics.*

She walked next to the caskets, her hands clenched around the doll, up the hill and past other freshly turned mounds of dirt. The new headstones gleamed in the sunlight while the old were chipped and their finish worn by time. The two open graves were not touched by the sun and yawned as black pits in the ground. Some stones around her were overturned, the storm not even allowing the dead to be ignorant of its presence.

Water not yet soaked in by the earth made small rivers between the raised dirt of the graves. Plastic flowers, wilted with the weight of water, rested against the stones they were placed by. The procession walked toward those yawning pits. She did not look at the caskets, both of them glistening black.

She remembered looking into Brandon's casket, but her daughter's face reigned in her mind. The mortician had schooled the pain out of those familiar features, closed the bulging eyes, and removed the constant stare from her face. The skin had looked and felt like wax under her lips. She'd stood by that open casket, stared at that face, and had no tears. Her eyes were dry and scratchy, and her lips lay closed together, only allowing the smallest whimper to escape. Her bandaged hands contrasted starkly against the black of her borrowed dress.

The casket was closed now, resting on the device that would lower it down into the engulfing earth. It had been her husband's wish to be buried, hoping that one day their bodies would rest beside each other in death, but she'd considered cremating Tasha. She thought it cruel to place her daughter back in the confines of the earth that had suffocated her, but she'd decided, to show some sort of family unity, that they would be buried in adjacent plots.

The preacher said his words, and friends and family stepped forward to place white roses on Brandon's casket and small sunflowers on Tasha's. She stared at her daughter's casket as it slowly sunk into the earth. She gasped when she saw the lid lift open and the small body sit up, reaching hands toward her mother. Tasha's mouth stretched against the stitches tying it closed, and her eyes opened, revealing white shriveled raisins. A small keening sound came from her throat, and suddenly her head was bald.

She stared, eyes wide and breath panting, at the hair growing from her daughter's scalp. It was blonde.



# She and Me

by Mary Soon Lee

She who is me  
wants another child  
but dares not say so.

I who disown that she  
am too old, too busy,  
too tired for babies.

She who is me  
wants an infant snuggled  
against her skin.

I who disown that she  
want no children at all,  
my husband my own again.

She who is me  
wants to live for centuries,  
birth an army.

I who disown that she  
know there's no guarantee  
we have even one more year.

She who is me,  
I who disown her,  
both of us hushed

when our youngest  
climbers onto our lap  
to hear a story.

# Not Enough

by Mary Soon Lee

In three weeks,  
I fly back to England  
after five years away.  
I remember what happened  
last time I returned,  
how the shapes and colors  
had a familiarity  
my home here lacks,  
a difference everywhere and nowhere—  
the patterns on the dresses,  
the style of the lamposts,  
the cut of the houses—  
all of it pressed into me  
before I could read.  
All of it waiting for me,  
but none of it enough  
to make me want to go,  
to smile at other people's parents  
when my own will never stand  
at the front door  
calling me home.

# Breaking

by Mary Soon Lee

One moment we walked  
through a sunlit zoo,  
and the sunlight poured  
through me,  
who had seen the elephant,  
so small,  
standing under its mother—  
no frolics that morning,  
no wobbly-legged run,  
just the two of them together,  
mother and daughter—  
and then your hand,  
so small,  
reached for Grandma's,  
your face bursting  
with the joy of it  
because this was her first visit,  
the first time you had a grandma  
to call your own,  
and it was what I wanted,  
the sunlight in you because of her,  
but in that moment  
I was broken  
by the one who wasn't there,  
the grandmother who will never hold your hand,  
and it had been more than a year  
since I felt this sharpness of desolation,  
because everything fades,  
even grief,  
and so there was something there  
that I clung to,  
as if tears could prove love.  
Or bring back anything.

And I walked on,  
wordless,  
because there was too much  
and too little  
to say,  
and it wasn't until night  
that I thought  
she was there all along,  
your other grandmother:  
there in you  
each time you reach out to strangers  
unhesitatingly,  
as she would do, and I would not,  
a sunlight coded into your blood and bone  
in strings of nucleic acid,  
so large a thing  
that I know the smallness in me,  
who wanted more.



# Elation

by Scott Spradlin

—*just* on the edge of manifestation in my chest  
Like a sneeze  
that  
doesn't  
come

There may be euphoria, yes  
—but after there will be a crash

Both will be horrible.  
Both will be the same.

The trick is to trick myself.  
Both are always going to be there.  
Neither is always permanent.

The trick is to believe myself.  
Dubious claim.  
Consider the source.



# The Shattered Image

by Lynn Hoggard

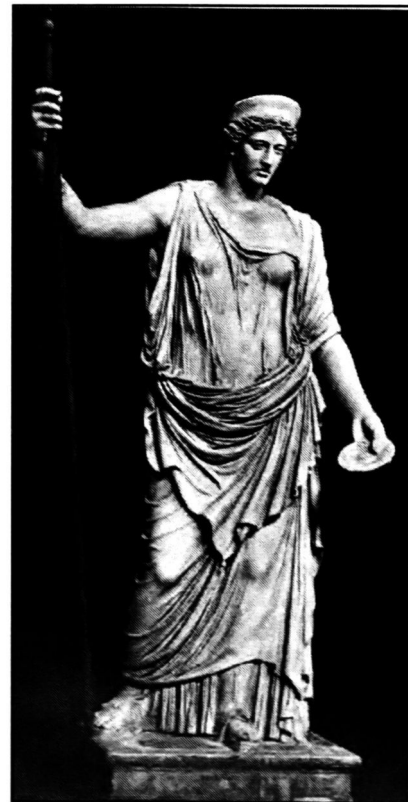
We aren't at the beginning but must begin,  
not with the whole but its opposite—  
with the spiking nail of an eagle's claw  
forming her foot, with a curving chunk of stone  
from her dual-horned diadem, with an orb-like fragment  
of her breast—shattered bits of a goddess supreme  
until supplanted by the parts we know:

Jealous, raging Hera, plotting vengeance  
on those her randy husband raped; supine,  
voluptuous Venus, ready to wreck a hearth  
or civilization; treacherous, warlike Ishtar,  
who mated with, then murdered, men—these  
well-worn female parts still shackle us  
as we trail in the dust of power men leave behind.

Thousands of years before marauding nomads  
wrenched control, erecting their warrior-gods,  
the fertile goddess reigned.

Queen of heaven and earth, goddess  
of love and beauty, Inanna herself conceived  
the cycles of birth and death for living things;  
her death and rebirth turned earth green again.

How do we see the wholeness  
of an image known only in parts?  
Is there still within our core  
the echoing whisper of Inanna's song?  
Can she speak to what we have become?  
Can tears connect these broken bits of stone?



# Hard Wine

by Lynn Hoggard

Drunk with the bitter truth  
I refuse all other wine.  
—Anna Margolin

Butterfly was reeling from it  
the day Pinkerton finally returned  
to her country with another wife.

The taste of it on her tongue  
made Gretchen go mad, kill her newborn,  
while Faust, oblivious, roamed the earth.

My friend David with cancer  
also drained that draught.  
Knowing there was no way back,

he waited for the bitter brew  
to fill his senses up. And then  
he let it shut them down.

# The Canyon

by John Peterson

The houses rise  
from the canyon's  
cleft walls  
in acrobatic displays  
of rock and lumber;

they loom  
over the creek  
like sycamores,  
sprawl  
through air  
like oaks,  
grow beside water  
like alders.

The morning glories  
long  
green  
vines  
drink  
from the creek

this canyon, this home.  
a song of praise for this life,  
in my silent fashion,  
until I, too, begin to sing,  
my treetop window

their song reaching  
of this canyon;  
that is the life  
and decay  
singing the beauty of growth  
their blue trumpets  
stonework,  
a wall's crumbling

fanning across  
the houses above,  
banks toward  
its cobblestone  
and climb

# Tail

by Robert Rothman

I can understand that sitting would be more difficult, and the sleek verticality undone, but imagine the wag of happy anticipation, the shimmy of pleasure, ease of balance across a log above a gorge, the prehensile joy of flying from tree to tree. Vestigial bone, I know you only when I fall, the runt of memory shocked, the wild days of prehistoric thrill and exhilaration in my shrunken end.



# Funding

by James Nicola

What opposites in test tubes,  
with curiosity,  
were mixed to make reactions which  
have ended up as me?

The Scientist created, and  
a Board renews his grants  
no matter His success rate.  
I'm grateful for his chance.

Occasional explosions  
or subtler incidents  
threaten forward progress:  
The experiment's

refunded every autumn,  
if not with every spring,  
when everything starts turning  
back into everything

as we turn into us—now,  
for instance—and persist,  
as long as there are funds left,  
and the Scientist.

# Contributors

**Ann Applegarth** lives and writes in Roswell, New Mexico, where she teaches poetry classes for adults and children and where she served as poet-in-residence for the High Plains Writing Project at ENMU. The recipient of an Academy of American Poets prize at UNM in 1980, her poems have been widely published in the small press, online, and in the Linda Rael art book *Living in Green Acres*.

**Judy Bertelsen** is a semiretired physician/geriatrician. She earned her B.A. with honors in English and political science from U.C. Berkeley, her Ph.D. in political science from University of Oregon, and her M.D. from Brown University. She has made her living as a professor of political science and, after completing medical school, a primary care physician. She grew up on a farm in the central valley of California; her current yard's soil is native clay (deposited eons ago by an ancient river) from which she built a small earth oven, which is put into service making wood-fired sourdough pizza. She has participated in the Tin House Writer's Workshop from 2009-2013, Surprise Valley Writers' Conference from 2008-2013, and Yosemite Writers Conference in 2007, where she was awarded first prize for her poetry. Her work has appeared in *Decomp* and the *Kabita Campus* poetry collection.

**John Bradshaw** was born in Colorado and ostensibly raised in California. After a tour in the Navy (where he served as a mop-technician in the Aleutian Islands), he turned his calloused hand and jaded eye to academia (a small country hidden in the Alps). He has attended universities in Louisiana, Iowa, and Oklahoma (and has yet to be apprehended). Bradshaw is currently teaching English and Philosophy at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. He winters in Weatherford and summers in Norman. But he poems wherever he can.

**Dr. Viki Pettijohn Craig**, who earned her Ph.D. at Florida State University, has written poetry, non-fiction prose, and short fiction from her teens to the present. Most recently, she has had poetry and prose published in OU's journal *Blood and Thunder* and non-fiction prose in the *Oklahoma Humanities Journal*. Years ago, her poetry, author

interviews, restaurant reviews, and other non-fiction prose pieces were published in *Westview*. She is glad to be a contributor again. Craig's story, "The Real Thing," featured in this issue, won the 2014 *Westview* short story competition.

**Lynn Hoggard** received her Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Southern California and taught at Midwestern State University, where she was professor of English and French and the coordinator of humanities. In 2003, the Texas Institute of Letters awarded her the Soeurette Diehl Fraser award for best translation. For several years, she was arts writer for the *Times Record News* in Wichita Falls, Texas, and wrote more than six hundred articles, features, and reviews. She has published five books: three French translations, a biography, and a poetry anthology. Her poetry has appeared in *13th Moon*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Concho River Review*, *Descant*, *New Ohio Review*, *Soundings East*, *Summerset Review*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Wild Violet*, and *Xavier Review*, among others.

**Mary Soon Lee** was born and raised in London, but became a naturalized U.S. citizen in March 2003. She is married with two children and two cats. Her poetry has appeared in *American Scholar*, *Atlanta Review*, *Cider Press Review*, and *Rosebud*.

**Audrey Lentz** has a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Texas at Dallas and has spent much of her academic career in writing workshops. She has lived in Texas and South Carolina and calls Oklahoma City her home. She is passionate about many genres of writing including fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. She currently participates in Red Dirt Poetry events in Oklahoma City and runs a personal blog at [AudComments.blogspot.com](http://AudComments.blogspot.com).

**Helen Maxson** was raised in New England, and she still misses the mountains of Vermont and the beaches of Rhode Island. However, after teaching English at SWOSU for twenty-five years, she also misses the wide horizon and open spaces of Oklahoma when she goes back to the Northeast to visit. She prefers Red Dirt music to classical for listening, and buffalo to hamburger for dinner.

**Benjamin Myers** is a winner of the Oklahoma Book Award for Poetry and the author of two books: *Lapse Americana* (NYQ Books 2013) and *Elegy for Trains* (Village Books Press 2010). His poems may be read in *32 Poems*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Nimrod*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The New York Quarterly*, and many other journals, as well as online at *Verse*

*Daily, Devil's Lake, DMQ* and other poetry sites. He is the Crouch-Mathis Associate Professor of Literature at Oklahoma Baptist University.

**James B. Nicola** has had over 300 poems published in sundry periodicals and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. A Yale grad and stage director by profession, his book *Playing the Audience* won a Choice Award. As a poet, he also won the Dana Literary Award and a People's Choice award (from Storyteller), was nominated for a Rhysling Award, and was featured poet at New Formalist. His children's musical *Chimes: A Christmas Vaudeville* premiered in Fairbanks, Alaska—with Santa Claus in attendance opening night.

**John Nizalowski** has published one book, a multi-genre work entitled *Hooking the Sun*, on Farolito Press. In addition, his writings have appeared in various magazines, including *Puerto del Sol, Weber Studies, Blue Mesa Review, Chiron Review, Bloomsbury Review, The Albany Review, The Listening Eye, Fish Drum, Harp, Creosote, Snowy Egret, Convergence*, and *New Mexico Poetry Review*. A number of anthologies have also featured his work: *The Blueline Anthology* (Syracuse Univ. Press), *Reading Under the Sign of Nature* (Univ. of Utah Press), *Rekindling the Inner Light* (Frank Waters Foundation Press), *The Spirit That Wants Me: A New Mexico Anthology* (Duff, Inc.), and *Harvest From the Hills* (Seven Buffaloes Press). Currently, he is an instructor in creative writing, composition, and comparative mythology at Mesa State College in Grand Junction, Colorado, and is working on a biography of Southwestern author Frank Waters.

**Gwynn O'Gara** is Sonoma County Poet Laureate Emerita, 2010-2012. She is the author of *Snake Woman Poems* (Beatitude Press) and two chapbooks, *Fixer-Upper* (d-press) and *Winter at Green Haven* (Word Temple Press). She lives in Northern California and has taught with California Poets in the Schools for over twenty years.

**John Peterson** lives with his wife, Tessa, and their two sons in Sierra Madre, CA. He graduated from Claremont Graduate University with a master of arts in literature and creative writing and a doctor of philosophy in English. John teaches literature and writing courses at Pepperdine University in Malibu, CA.

**Lora D. Reiter**, (1904-1991), Kansas Centennial Poet, was better known as an essayist than poet,

but her poems are perhaps more formidable. She was completely self-taught, but her learning was deep and wide because she read everything she could find, including a good deal of poetry. She especially respected Robert Frost, Joseph Auslander, Emily Dickenson, Shakespeare, and Milton, and her instincts, like Wordsworth's, turned her to the natural world for instruction in order, ferocity, beauty, mystery, and meaning. She forged her visions from her observations. Although she wrote in multiple forms, including free verse, she preferred the demanding structure of the sonnet, and she became expert in the form. This poem, "Fantasia," demonstrates her command of rhythm, rhyme, sentence formation, and image in that while the poem is very tightly built, we are scarcely aware of any of the poetic elements. Even the comparisons are subtle: sound is filigree or the tension waiting in a bell. Her poems have recently been collected in *Poppies in the Wheat*, available on Amazon or from [lorakreiter@yahoo.com](mailto:lorakreiter@yahoo.com).

**Lora K. Reiter** was much influenced by her mother's love of nature and poetry, and her own writing frequently uses images from her country background as well as her travels in Mexico, Asia, and Europe. A retired professor of literature, she is currently completing a book, *From Ash Creek to China and Back*.

**Robert Rothman** graduated from the University of California at Berkeley, undergraduate and graduate school (J.D.). He lives in Northern California, near extensive trails and open spaces with the Pacific Ocean over the hill. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Alembic, Cold Mountain Review, Diverse Voices Quarterly, Existere, Foliage Oak, Front Range Review, Grey Sparrow, The Griffin, Mary: A Journal of New Writing, Pank Magazine, RiverSedge, Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, and *Wild Violet Magazine*.

**Tonya Ward Singer** writes poetry and prose in the slips of time between parenting young boys and running a business helping English-language learners excel in public schools. Her creative work has appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the anthology *Expat: Women's True Stories from Life Abroad* (Seal Press, 2001), and online journals. She has also published literacy resources with Scholastic, Pearson-Longman, and Oxford University Press. [www.tonyasinger.com](http://www.tonyasinger.com).

**Scott Spradlin** grew up in California but now currently resides in Oklahoma. He has never before been published and doesn't ordinarily write poetry. He is thirty-three years old and works at a grocery store.

**Ashley Underwood** grew up in Forgan, Oklahoma, which is not much more than a speck on the landscape of the Oklahoma Panhandle. She graduated from SWOSU with a BA in English Writing and a minor in Pre-Law in May, 2012, and has continued her education through the University of Oklahoma's Legal Assistant Education program. She will graduate with a Paralegal Certification in August, 2014. She currently works as a legal secretary at Tisdal & O'Hara law firm in Clinton, Oklahoma, and plans to become an attorney in the future. However, the last thing she wants to do is sit in another classroom, so she has decided to take a few years off from school after she receives her certification. She is active in theatre through Southwest Playhouse in Clinton, Oklahoma, and enjoys it immensely. Underwood's story, "Strands," featured in this issue, won the 2014 *Westview* student short story competition.

**Suellen Wedmore**, Poet Laureate emerita for the small seaside town of Rockport, Massachusetts, has been widely published. She was awarded first place in the *Writer's Digest* rhyming poem contest, her chapbook *Deployed* was selected as winner of the Grayson Press annual contest, and she was awarded a writing residency at Devil's Tower, Wyoming. Her chapbook *On Marriage and Other Parallel Universes* was recently released by Finishing Line Press. After 24 years working as a speech and language therapist, she retired to pursue an MFA in Poetry at New England College, graduating in 2004.

**Victor Wolf** is a writer, bassist, and composer who lives in Weatherford, and who received an associates in music at Northern Oklahoma College before transferring to SWOSU. He is excited to be published in *Westview*, and to graduate from SWOSU with an English Writing degree and music minor. You can follow him on twitter: @vectorwolfmusic.

**David Wyatt's** poems have recently appeared in *ABZ*, *Natural Bridge*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, and are forthcoming in *Kestrel*, *Poetry South* and *The Georgia Review*, from which he received the inaugural Loraine Williams Prize in Poetry this past summer.

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