

Spring 1995

## American Goat - 1995

Sean Condon

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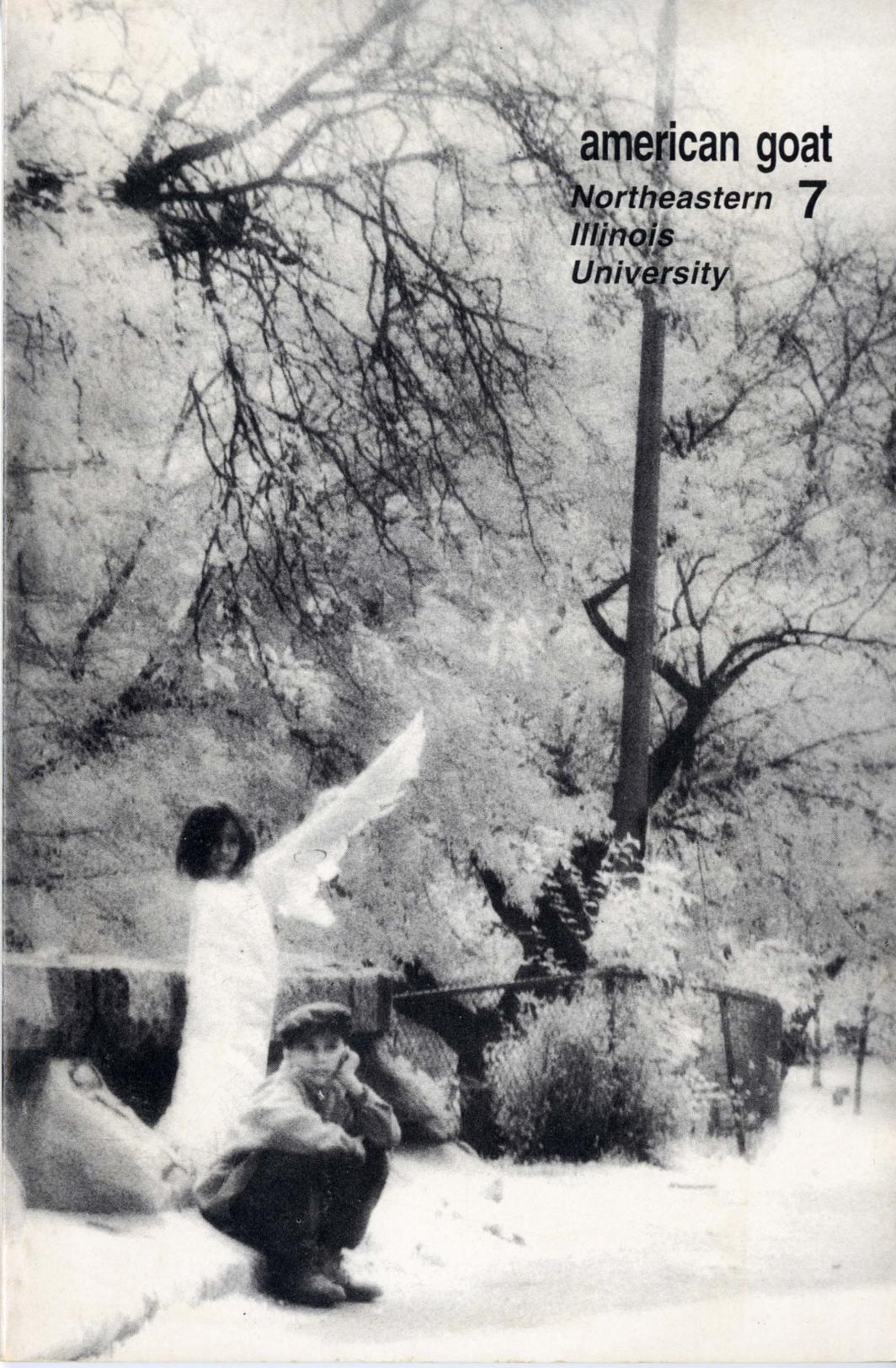
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**american goat**  
**Northeastern 7**  
**Illinois**  
**University**



# american goat 7

Northeastern Illinois University  
A Publication of *Apocalypse Literary Arts Coalition*

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## Submission Guidelines

**american goat** gets its name because it hungers for all sorts of literary styles: from traditional forms to experimental, science fiction to children's stories, erotica to romance - we take it all.

We are omnivorous in our quest for original, unpublished poems and short fiction. Submissions must be typed (dot matrix accepted), and margins should be one and one-half inches all the way around. We will accept up to five poems and two stories per contributor.

In each issue we print contributor's notes, so please include a brief statement about you and your writing. Bios will not be considered during the selection process.

We also accept submissions for cover art, black and white photographs or ink drawings, 5x7 or larger.

Send submissions, along with a self-addressed stamped envelope (include enough postage if you want us to return any manuscripts) to:

american goat/Apocalypse  
co Northeastern Illinois University  
5500 N. St. Louis ave  
Chicago, Il 60625

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spring 95

american goat

7

*Northeastern Illinois University*

Point Reyes Sestina

we took our sneakers off the water  
cold and the sand  
roughing our winter feet  
walking with our eyes  
we waited for whales to breathe  
but they stayed under long

the shore was as long  
as we walked the water  
wider we tried to hold our breaths  
too collapsing on the sand  
our eyes  
met we dried our feet

slipped our dry feet  
into our shoes sitting along  
the dunes again our eyes  
blankly searched the water  
we sat an hour on the sand  
wondering how whales breathe

when they sleep then breath  
of a whale blew on our feet  
pants covered with sand  
we longed  
for a glimpse through the water  
squinting my eyes

knowing far better eyes  
than mine see less than sprayed breath  
in the darkness of water  
they measure over fifty feet  
and yet that long  
we couldn't see from the sand

between my toes sand  
rubbed and March misted my eyes  
we left the beach along  
the path east my breath  
on your back my feet  
in your prints behind me water

standing on Point Reyes sand holding my breath  
my eyes searched for you and whales fifty feet  
long swimming like mystery under the water

Susan Kan

Deluge

In the pouring rain  
Drenching rain sheeting rain  
Opaque rain bleach colored  
In evening rain in rain  
Petting pelting perfect rain  
Nearly cold enough to harden  
Up to ice in rain that beats  
Pavement to pothole to mud  
In rain the only place I ever  
Feel new I am in rain  
Air soaked with tears  
I am there wet shaking held  
Tightly by rain's blown lines  
I grip the pay phone leaning  
In to the nook as lightning  
Snaps rain in half but the sky  
Heals it over a moment later  
Sutured by thunder rumble  
I whisper into the receiver  
Talking about nothing to  
An answering machine only  
Leaving behind the sounds  
Of ragged breath and rain  
Missing I've gone missing  
In the mist alone in rain  
Soaking down my back rivulets  
Pooling in my shoes rain  
Surrounds and I press my lips  
To the phone dripping talk  
While rainwater licks melts

*Laura Albrecht*

Exotic Drum

A musical instrument  
can be made of anything.  
It could be two skulls  
joined, yours and mine.  
The tiny interstices  
allow reverberation.  
In the narrow center  
where they touch,  
a flap of hide holds  
one round bone  
perhaps a knee or heel  
that swings and kicks  
the skins stretched tight  
against the craniums.

When a live musician's hand  
rhythmically twists  
this instrument of music,  
the beat sounds strong  
as from one head  
hypnotic,  
and we dance.

*Sophie Hughes*

## Autumn of Life

As evening drew near  
she sat patiently waiting for him  
gazing out her window at the autumn colors  
the beauty of the colors of death  
she turned towards the doorway  
waiting for a glimpse of him  
and finally he came  
he helped her to undress  
as he had many times before  
she felt his strong firm hands  
massage lotion into her back  
and when he was done he lifted her  
delicately into bed  
he positioned one leg and then  
the other  
sometimes they discussed his life and  
sometimes hers  
always offering encouragement  
and most of all, hope  
then he drew the covers around her  
and gently kissed her good night  
he told her that he loved her,  
she had waited many years to be loved  
so unconditionally  
he was still waiting.

*Kathleen A. Carrier*

## Seasonal Artists

We paint landscapes with moons  
and masked dancers.  
No trees.  
Trees are liars.  
They waltz with their arms  
with their toes  
seduce from the earth  
sweet breath.  
Yesterday's shade  
sucks tomorrow's pale sprouting.  
Loggers and storms attack  
their rough words.  
Disguising our eyes  
with ochre and leaves  
we brush our bare branches together  
wade into the night doomed  
to lives without partners.

*Lianne Elizabeth Mercer*

Fall

They found Hobby's body today  
Face down in the dirt, arms  
Swollen, his hands stretched  
Towards the gun that sunk him  
Down in the mud, miles away  
From the suicide note on his desk,  
Crisp, clean, its edges folded,  
The ink perfectly still in its jar,  
A room untouched, as if  
No one had ever breathed.

Ella, the Constable who patrols  
Our street, could not bring herself  
To file the report, could not look  
At the corpse bloated on its slab,  
Ida, who sits in front of the pool  
Day in and day out, waiting  
For somebody to join her or ask  
About her children, no longer  
Mentions his name. Even Cindy,  
The landlady, swears she had  
Nothing to do with cutting him  
Off or denying him a place to live.

Hobby used to clean the pool. As  
The maintenance man, he sifted  
Dead leaves as they fell and steadily  
Clogged the drain, one by one.  
But now it is fall, and the trees  
Lose themselves without stop,  
Now no one swims.

Sometimes, at night, I hear Hobby,  
Face down and murmuring  
For the earth to find him,  
Bidding the leaves  
To pass him by.

*Rachael Nadel Stark*

Mother and Daughter

You couldn't keep me  
from touching myself  
as I listened through thin walls  
to noises  
I didn't understand  
didn't connect to what I was  
doing but feared instead  
while you rolled around  
in your bed crying out  
and once I heard you cry.

He didn't mean to hurt you  
but he slaps your ass  
in front of me  
whispers sweet vulgarities  
and I go kissing all the boys  
at school.

The first time  
fear runs out  
with blood.  
There isn't any love  
and I lay huddled up  
for hours crying  
knowing at that moment  
I am just like you.

*Shelley Getten*

## The Wave

It is like this:

On a certain day  
on a certain stretch  
of a certain beach,  
when the sun slants low  
and the hue of the sky  
is a certain blue,  
and the clouds hang  
just so;  
when the salt spray  
is more welcome  
than a lover's kiss  
upon your face,  
it is like this:

It is late in the day.  
A few families, grown  
weary and hungry,  
have packed their things  
and gone away  
leaving only  
a small shovel  
an empty cup  
a shoe.

And I, who  
am a strong  
and graceful swimmer  
and can make my body  
hard and flat  
to ride the crest of waves  
like a rock skimmed  
(like that),  
am tired from  
all day challenging the tide  
and too proud to know  
when to quit,

still seeking to outwit  
the sea and ride  
the perfect ride.

It is then that  
it is like this:

Hearing the sudden  
roar and the hiss  
and misjudging the swell  
and the force of it,  
my body is suddenly  
flung from the top  
of the curl, hurled  
into the churning  
surf and whirled  
and spun through the curve,  
caught in the crush  
of the wave  
in a thunderous rush  
of salt and sand  
and heavy sea.  
My back arches until  
I fear its breaking.  
My hands seek  
some permanence to hold,  
(some cold but anchored rock).  
My fingers rake slipping sand  
as the bottom drops  
and the world rushes out  
from under me  
and there is  
no sky  
anywhere.

In that moment

there is only  
the black and green  
the salt sting  
the aching chest  
from lack of air,  
and fleeting fear.

Then, with a rush  
of breath I'm up—  
my mouth, like the gills  
of a fish out of water,  
sucking air,  
my bathing suit crotch  
obscene with sand  
and one breast quite  
unrestrained.  
I'm hurled by the wave  
to land foolishly close  
to a teenaged  
boy on the beach  
who combs his hair  
tips sand from his shoe  
and laughs with his eyes  
as I'm dragged  
in and out  
in full view  
by the push and pull,  
the rhythmic suck  
of seven or eight  
small swells.

Like a duck  
or a stick  
or an empty cup  
I'm gently tossed.

In the quieting,  
as my thirsting lungs  
fill with air,  
my senses fill to bursting  
with the taste of salt,  
the smell of sun  
on oiled and sweating flesh,  
and the sudden, unexpected grip  
of some ancient grief  
for a small shovel,  
once lost.

Then, for a certain moment  
on a certain stretch  
of a certain beach,  
before the curtain wave  
wells up again  
to carry or to crush—  
in that brief moment  
comes a lull,  
relief from the pull  
and the push;  
in that moment  
comes a hush  
comes a hush  
comes a hush  
and the terrible sea  
is flat.

It is like that.

Brooke Wiese

Opium

I walk into the street

The headlights  
are wearing robes  
& tons of jewelry

The doorman craved opium

I walked the ballroom end to end  
& caught every nervous star  
that fell from the ceiling

*Alan Britt*

*After The Lantern Bearers*  
By Maxwell Parish

The lantern bearers appear  
in the middle of the night  
dressed in loose white trousers  
and silken shirts.  
Poised on the stairs,  
their faces are those of young sons  
intent on carefully performing  
their tasks.  
Each hands a lighted globe  
to the other  
until all the spheres hang upon  
the branches to bring day  
back to leaves and sky,  
and let the swimmer go forth  
silvering through mild waters  
by the light of the orange moons,  
extensions of the silent workers,  
the milky figures,  
who station themselves  
muting the dark.

*Janet Krauss*

## Horse

*Susan Kan*

When Stacy Brown asked me to make a siren sound so that she would run the 50 yard dash faster, I did it. We were in eighth grade gym, each day racing or throwing or jumping to pass different skills in the President's Test for Physical Fitness. Stacy Brown ran with the boys, that's how fast she was. Pam Garvey and I ran together, just barely making the time we needed to get the certificate signed by Gerald Ford. Pam helped me imitate a siren so that it would be louder and make Stacy run faster.

In April, when the weather turned warm, Stacy started to wear her gym clothes all day long. She never wore the navy blue all-in-one outfit that you could buy special for gym. She wore real gym shorts, red or green, with thin white piping around the edge. And usually she wore a softball jersey, the kind with black sleeves that reached only to her elbows. She wasn't on the softball team; she didn't do things like that. She would've been the pitcher, though.

There were some things that I knew about Stacy without knowing how I knew them. Her father killed her brother, that's one thing I knew. I guess other kids talked about her, but I can't remember any specific times. Stacy and I got along, people saw that. Sometimes she'd ask to copy my homework, and I always let her. Only her. Partly, I was afraid not to. Stacy might've been mean.

One day I stayed late at school to do my math so that I wouldn't have to carry the book home. When I left, I cut behind the building and saw Stacy shooting baskets on the far court.

She saw me and yelled, "Hey Rubic, I'll take you on."

Only Stacy Brown called me Rubic instead of Ruby. I walked over to her, my knapsack hanging heavily on both my shoulders, my hands in the pockets of my zip-up windbreaker. "I don't play basketball, Stacy. Besides, you'd romp me."

The muscles in her thighs were long and defined. She dribbled the ball between her legs the way that I tried to do in the privacy of our basement. I wasn't uncoordinated; I would get my certificate from the President, and not too many kids would. Ever since I caught Bruce Hopkins' kickball during a sixth-grade game, I felt pretty darn confident. The sports weren't the hard part; the team was. "Come on. I'll go easy on you."

"Stacy, do you live near here? Don't you have to go home?" Some people lived right across the street from the school, but most of the kids lived further away, in neighborhoods like mine, with only houses, no stores or McDonalds. She threw the ball to me with a bounce in-between instead of answering. I caught it and held it. "I don't know how." She skipped up to me and stole the ball from my hands in one scoop. I slipped my book bag off my shoulders and chased after her. It seemed like she was barely running

when she had the ball up to the hoop and in. She caught her own shot and passed the ball to me. I wished I had my sneakers on, not my loafers. I tried to copy what she had done, but in a second she had the ball, took a backwards step and shot it into the air. It fell through the hoop without touching the rim.

"See," I cocked my hip, my hand turned up as though the point I wanted to make lay in my palm.

"Don't give up yet." Her voice was both pleading and encouraging. We played some more, if you can call it that. Mostly I spun around in the middle feeling like a bumper in a pinball machine. Eventually, when the light started to change, hinting toward dusk, I said I had to go.

"No. We'll play Horse."

She showed me how to play. It was a good game for me, slower and more deliberate. First, I'd take a shot, then she had to do the exact same shot. If she missed, she'd get an 'H'. If I missed then she'd take a shot that I had to copy or else I'd get an 'H' then 'O' and so on to spell H-O-R-S-E. You lost if you spelled it out first. When it was close, Stacy started taking longer and longer shots. I could barely throw that far. She ended up winning, HORSE to HORS.

I leaned over to pick up my bag. She stood near me, quiet. It was a little weird. That's when I remembered the thing I knew about her that I didn't know how I knew. I don't have a brother, but I do have a father, and I just didn't want to think about it.

"My mom's gonna wonder where I am."

"Which way do you go? Let's cut across the railroad tracks, by the stream."

I wasn't supposed to cut across the tracks if it was the least bit dark, and the shadows were as long as they get before disappearing. "All right." I don't know why, but I trusted her.

She ran ahead of me, tossing the ball back to me. I felt awkward with my bag on my back; it bounced in opposite directions as I ran. "I can't, let's just walk."

"Here." She tugged at my bag. "I'll take it."

Stacy Brown looked silly with a book bag. When she put it on, I realized that I had never seen her with any books or papers. Whenever she copied my homework, she also borrowed paper and a pencil. We slipped between the buildings on the orange packed dirt path to the tracks and I crossed over. On the other side of the tracks, the path dropped off steeply, and I ran down it as I often did on the way home from school. Running downhill made me feel fast. But Stacy stopped on the tracks.

"This way." She waved down the tracks to the left. I'd never walked on the tracks, only crossed them. "Hurry."

I climbed back up and followed her. She was ahead of me and walking faster. I had a hard time speeding up because the ties were spaced a half-foot short for my stride.

"Wait up." But she didn't seem to hear. I looked back to the path. I wanted to go home, but she had my bag with my science homework in it.

At some point, she cut off the tracks and into the woods. I started to feel scared. "Down here," I heard her say. There was a narrow path through the trees that made me think she'd been there before. She was sitting on a log at the edge of a small clearing with the sun's upper edge barely visible. The sky that filtered through was purple. She didn't look at me when I sat down next to her.

"Where's my bag?"

Stacy Brown said, "Mr. Mogensen has the personality of an in-grown toenail."

I smiled. She was right. Mr. Mogensen was the science teacher. Stacy knew that there was science homework. That she knew surprised me because it didn't seem like

Stacy came to school much.

She got up and walked toward the little creek, squatted on a rock, pulled another rock up and lifted out two green bottles. She walked back, twisted the cap off of one and handed it to me. The label said Rolling Rock; beer.

Stacy Brown was really bad.

I stumbled over my tongue. "I don't like...."

"Sshh. This is the best part." She was staring at the sky, as if she saw something appear in the growing darkness. My mouth was dry and I couldn't relax, but I sat quietly. I wondered if my mother had called the police yet. She was probably in the kitchen doing the daily crossword puzzle or thumbing through one of her new cookbooks. Ever since she had started doing Why Weight? our dinners had gone way downhill. No spaghetti anymore. No dessert. Mom said it wasn't to lose weight, just to eat better. Behavior modification, that was what she called it. Stacy drank her beer and I held mine. Once I took a little sip, but it was bitter and way too bubbly.

When it was definitely dark, she announced, "Okay, let's go."

At the path, I handed her my beer and said bye. She swung my bag off her shoulder, passed it to me, and said bye back. I ran most of the way home. The sidewalks heaved and cracked from the growth of large tree roots underneath. I passed the Brenner's big yellow house, then the Robertson's house with the stone first floor and the stucco second floor. I rounded the corner past Leo Purcell's. He had a beagle that chased tennis balls when Leo threw them from his chair on the porch. He was not a retriever, though, and Leo often asked kids to chase the dog and bring him back. My sister and I played which house do you like best? I liked the Goldman's house. A big porch wrapped around it like my mother's apron around her waist. The third floor had a

round turret, and I'd pretend that was my bedroom.

Our house was red brick with a black front door and a brass knocker. I went around to the side door and entered through the garage. That way, I wouldn't track dirt.

"I was just about to start worrying about you," Mom said when she heard the door.

"Pam Garvey asked me to help her with the math homework." It came out of my mouth like an unexpected burp. I almost said excuse me.

"I'm pretty sure the Garvey's have a phone."

The story grew in my imagination. We had stayed at school. We didn't have money for the pay phone. The teacher had helped both of us. We did social studies homework too. I walked her home because she was scared of the dark. But I just said, "Sorry," and went to my room. I looked for Stacy Brown after that day. She wasn't in gym class the next day so she missed the chin-up skill for the President's Test. Pam Garvey and I did 35 chin-ups in a minute, more than anyone else. Finally being small was an advantage. I wondered where Stacy was, but she wasn't the sort that you asked after.

The next time I saw her she was late to English class. Mrs. Heller's classroom had a green chalk board across the front with the panel on the far right reserved for that day's date and the homework assignment. Windows with giant venetian blinds passed along the left side. Behind us was a cinderblock wall painted the lightest pastel yellow, and the fourth wall had the bulletin board. Mrs. Heller had divided it into sections. In the first section was the word-of-the-week, one such as 'vener' or 'traversal' or 'solstice,' and its definition. Every two weeks we had a vocabulary quiz. The next section had the grammar lesson or part of speech that we were learning. She usually also had a quote of the month, written out in handwriting that I tried to

copy, it was so beautiful. The last section changed depending on our special units, usually having to do with reading or poetry. Mrs. Heller had stapled ribbon onto the board to divide the sections. The ribbon had the alphabet printed on it.

Long fluorescent lights hung a few feet from the ceiling, one above each row. Sometimes a wasp would get into the classroom and buzz in and out of the waffled grid that divided the light into little squares. Stacy Brown's desk was behind mine and one row over. She wanted the assignment and I didn't know what to do because I was scared the teacher would catch us cheating. Stacy squinted her eyes like someone was shining a flashlight in her face, and her skin was off a shade, like a white shirt that's been washed with new jeans.

Halfway through the period she pulled her legs under herself, scraped her chair back from her desk in one big push, leaned forward onto her arms and lifted herself out of her seat. She loomed over us, she being the only one standing, other than Mrs. Heller. Stacy turned, her eyes not focused on anything in the room, and walked toward the door at the back of the classroom. Mrs. Heller called after her, but it was as if she couldn't hear, as if some other sound were louder. At the door, Mrs. Heller grabbed her arm. Everyone was watching. Stacy shrugged her off.

"Stacy Brown, where do you think you're going?"

Stacy's eyes were red, not like she'd been crying - that was unimaginable. More like she had an infection, or she hadn't slept in a long time. She looked over and saw me watching with everyone else. I dropped my eyes to my desk. I was mortified. Stacy Brown turned away from Mrs. Heller and walked down the hall, not quickly but definitely with force.

After school, I hoped I would see her playing basketball on the far court. I waited around. Did my science homework,

went out to check the courts. Did my math homework and checked again. I decided to go down to the railroad tracks by myself to see if she was there. I wasn't exactly sure where the turn-off was, but as I got nearer I heard voices. I crouched down to peek through the brush. A lot of people were there. Boys with deep voices. I left.

On the way to school the next morning, I walked back down the tracks to the same spot. With the sky a monotone of blue, the place looked bigger. I could see that the bushes and trees were not thick at all, but rather sparse. The ground was packed dirt with the grass all worn away. It was neither woods or yard. The log was rotted at one end with candy wrappers and a Coke cup jammed into it. Cigarette butts littered the creek bed. I lifted rocks, but I didn't find any beer, only an empty Budweiser can. Then, turning, I looked over to the space that Stacy Brown had stared into the other night. What I saw were thin tall trees, leaves, and beyond those, the backs of the office buildings on West Avenue.

For the first time ever I was late to homeroom. Nobody said anything when I walked in and took my seat. The next day I stopped on the tracks again, checked under rocks, was late again. The teacher didn't see me although she yelled at John Bonus when he came in late. She gave Cecily McGarrett detention when she was late. When Stacy Brown came in, she said, "What a pleasure." I tried to catch her eye and when I did, I mouthed, "Hi."

It was the last marking period of eighth grade. We finished the President's Test in gym and switched to tennis. Half the class volleyed balls against the back of the school where a thick white line was painted at the height of the net. The rest of us played doubles on the four asphalt courts. The best players got the best court, and Stacy Brown was best. She wore her same green shorts and softball jersey, and she borrowed Ella Frederick's racket

because Ella had asthma and had to sit down most of the time. Stacy hogged the ball and never let her doubles partner hit. She wanted me to be her partner, but the gym teacher, said no. On Friday, when Miss Pruitter said no again, Stacy threw Ella Frederick's racket down, wood against blacktop. Ella started to breathe funny and had to take an inhale on her special inhaler. We got to play together.

When we won, Stacy said, "Yes!" and lifted her arms over her head as if to acknowledge a crowd. I had hit the ball once the whole game. Stacy came over to me to shake hands. It reminded me of our basketball game, only this time the teacher saw.

Stacy Brown took me to the tracks again that afternoon. No one else was there. A secret schedule seemed to regulate whose turn it was. It was an ugly place, surrounded at a distance by traffic, buildings, train tracks and neighborhoods, and yet somehow calm.

"Do you ever come here with other people?" I had a million questions to ask her.

"Sometimes." We sat down on the log. "Sometimes my brother..."

"Sometimes your brother what?"

"Nothing."

"I heard your father killed him." Another unexpected burp, but this one scared me even more, because I sounded scornful and teasing, just like the kids I must have heard it from. Stacy had carried my bag again, as if a tradition had been set. She unzipped it and looked inside.

"No, don't."

"Here's Miss Rubic's five-subject notebook. Here are Miss Rubic's folders, neatly labeled and color-coded for each class. And look, Miss Rubic covers her books using brown paper bags. What a good girl. Can everyone see what a good girl Miss Rubic is?"

I tugged at my bag. "Come on, Stacy, give it to me." And then she found it, my report card for the third marking period. She took it out of the envelope and stared at it for a long time. The sun was getting lower and every now and then she lifted her eyes to check, as if she were waiting for something. I watched her, hoping for the chance to grab the sheet. Once I tried but Stacy lifted it over her head with an easy sweep of her arm. We sat that way as the sky darkened, her looking from the report card out into the space in front of us, me perched beside her. I felt invisible, as if Stacy had forgotten I was there, like I felt when I was late to homeroom. When it got too dark to read, slowly and deliberately, she ripped the card up, nodding almost imperceptibly. She dropped all the pieces around her feet, and the white paper caught the last bits of daylight.

"He died in a car crash. My father was driving, but it wasn't his fault, no matter what my mom says."

Stacy Brown kept looking out to the space before the sky, and then I looked out too, and for the first time, I saw the light slipping off the leaves of trees and folding into the bark of the trunks, the darkness curling itself under bushes and stretching out on the water to float. I saw how the buildings in the distance, the skinny trees, the rocky stream, how all of these blackened into one.

Letter to My Mother, Twenty Years Later

I couldn't tell you then  
how quiet the house was  
that early summer afternoon  
just before the schoolyear's end, when

my sister, sunburned and stinking,  
stumbled upstairs to her room, me  
behind pushing, then undressing her like a  
clumsy lover. Helpless from drinking,

and reeking of Tango and Boone's Farm  
Apple Wine, reeking of low tide  
and of something else, she cried out  
as I wrenched her very pink arm

out of her damp and sandy shirt.  
I asked her where'd she'd been but  
she couldn't remember  
and cried and said her arm hurt

and not caring, I asked what she'd done  
and she couldn't remember  
but said she felt sick and sticky and  
hot, and complained of her sun-

burn and the grit in the sheets.  
I asked who she'd been with  
and she thought she remembered  
a name, then said she forgot

and I asked what she'd done  
again and again  
and she couldn't remember  
again and again

and that's when I hit her  
and that's when she screamed  
again and again and I hit her  
again and harder and more

and I leaned in her ear and hoarsely whispered  
"Your stomach hurts. Remember *that*  
or I will kill you." I slammed the door and went  
downstairs where our other, younger sisters

sat together, still as wood and cold  
as ice and scared, wanting you that moment  
home, Mother, as I threatened  
their lives if they told.

Brooke Wiese

Past Due

Perry is in the hospital today,  
My neighbor said, rent notices  
Tacked to his door, fluttering  
Like lost birds.

My neighbor swore to the police  
They only had to look as far  
As the smashed car at the end  
Of the garage -

The windshield fractured,  
Tires gouged, the floor littered  
With coffee cups and pictures  
Of Perry's wife -

The one who ran away  
With the marine and who  
He has not seen  
For thirty years.

Perry says, when he gets well,  
He will pay the rent,  
Fix the car,  
Get in touch.

He will do this -  
Leave the hospital,  
Walk down the street,  
Catch the breeze,

Just as soon as she is well  
And can tell night  
From day, from the bills  
Caught at his feet like dust.

*Rachael Nadel Stark*

Mover

Just two months ago  
I was in your home,  
moving your furniture, clothes  
and kitchen stuff.  
That was February, I think.

In my thirst, I asked  
for water, tap water.  
But you brought me  
Barley Tea.  
I said thank you without  
looking at your face.

I looked at your face more  
closely when I saw you  
in your casket. Lying there  
with hands crossed over  
your chest; your daughters,  
your husband standing,  
accepting, condolences.

The last box that  
I lifted was yours;  
you were in it.  
I said good-bye without  
wondering where the  
box was being lifted to.

Each time I drink  
Barley Tea, I  
think of you  
and how your  
kitchen stuff was  
not packed in brown boxes;  
how it was left open  
for everyone to see.

*Chong Ho Shon*

## Fields

They've built a school in my potato field.  
Walking this land that is no longer mine,  
I see a ball with scaly paint all peeled  
some child has hurled so far he cannot find.  
Swings and a slide on concrete playing ground  
stand where I weeded among potato bugs.  
Sand boxes filled with plastic toys are found  
where I would kneel and pick the rows fresh-dug.  
Potato picking time all day I'd bend  
working the soil to fill the baskets full.  
Six cents a barrel I could freely spend  
taught me arithmetic in that dirt school.

We plough through many fields to find our way.  
Our fields of intrest change, but learning stays.

*Sophie Hughes*

## The Price

This ballet butterfly, winging swift,  
seems with ease to curve her graceful flight;  
she drills for hours to perfect her gift

of poise on toes, maintain long lift;  
her partners arms support with careful might  
this ballet butterfly, winging swift;

he grasps her hand to guide the lightning shift  
from feet in air, to help her easily alight;  
she drills for hours to perfect her gift

of rapid pirouette, uses thrift  
in food and fun in hard-willed fight.  
This ballet butterfly, winging swift

as Ariel, must arabesque at barre, spurn drift  
from rote. Keen to keep bestowal of delight,  
she drills for hours to perfect her gift

As she begins to age, she'll get short shrift  
if she's too weak for lightning leap toward height;  
this ballet butterfly, winging swift,  
she drills for hours to perfect her gift.

*Rose Rosberg*

## The Outsider

*Lianne Elizabeth Mercer*

I had seen my father every August for the last 30 years. Yet after I crossed the spring-swollen creek, passed the blossoming apple orchard, and stepped onto the porch of the old dog-trot house and heard his labored, whistling breath, I nearly left. That sound sent me back to my room, when I was a girl forever and warm in my early morning bed listening to the way the air caught in his throat as he carried in oak logs for the fire.

My own breath congealed, hurt. I stood still, not wanting to breathe in my childhood.

That's the way my step-mother, Marian, found me.

"You made good time, Jean," she said, coming from the kitchen, twisting her hands in her flour-sack apron as though still apologizing for taking him from me all those years ago.

"I made good connections in Denver," I said. "And there wasn't much traffic coming west out of Dallas. I even stopped at the corner to smell the dogwood."

"This winter we sold 20 acres of trees to Steubing for pulp. He trampled the other trees and ruined the dogwood," Marian said. "When he made Daniel an offer for the mill, he said no."

That she spoke so calmly of the ordinary amazed me. It was

as though I had seen her last week rather than last year. I wanted to say something about his illness to startle the half smile off her face, but before I could speak, he called out.

"Who is it, Marian?"

His voice was pitched higher, as though he had lost the rock-hard place inside himself out of which he had lived.

"Marian?"

"I haven't told him you were coming," Marian said. "Go in and surprise him." She shoved me toward the hallway.

I balked. "How long has he been ill? Is he taking medicine? Will he need surgery?"

"Marian!"

She shook her head and fluttered her hands.

I could guess the answers. Probably he'd been ill for weeks and ignored it. Hadn't wanted to go to the doctor, much less do as he said. My real question was for me: Why had I come?

I stepped into the hallway that pierced the house from front to back. My heels jabbed the scrubbed pine flooring I had once mopped daily. It had never seemed clean, but was always red in the cracks from the west Texas dust.

"Marian, Godammit ..."

His voice trailed off when he saw me in the doorway. I had suspected there would be weight loss and pallor, but I wasn't prepared for the hatred in his eyes. It hid behind shock a second after I saw it.

"Jean? Jeanie!"

The covers fell away as he raised his skinny arms to me. I stood my ground, unwilling to hug him or even step toward him.

The light in his eyes made his face seem translucent, like one of those cheap dimestore jack-o-lanterns.

"Come here, girl. Can't you see I'm glad you're here?"

"Hello, Daniel."

He let his arms fall to the quilt. "Why did you come, then?" "Because Marian called. Because she told me you were dying." His expression did not change.

"That's one thing you couldn't run away from, girl. The honesty. I taught you that."

I said nothing. He treated honesty like he'd treated the old hound Whiskers - never fully noticing her, scratching her ears haphazardly when she wagged underfoot.

"And how is your life at the academy? Still teaching numbers?"

I breathed. Almost smiled. Although I had my masters degree and taught calculus and had tried years ago to explain to him what that was, he called it numbers. Every August he asked the same question. It had become part of our ritual—me returning home each hot, still August for three days and us being civil and polite, never angry, smiling only at the antics of Tequila or Sarsaparilla or Estacada, the latest stray cat.

"Yes, still teaching numbers."

He exhaled in rocky little gasps.

"I need you."

They were the words I had wanted to hear 30 years ago on my 16th birthday when instead he'd needed Marian. The words I had wanted to hear every year since.

"I need a woman, Jeanie," he'd said then, holding her hand, looking like he'd been caught giving Whiskers peanut butter. And would I please understand that for awhile they wanted to be alone? I would live with Grandma just down the road, but we, he and I, would still see each other at sunup and sundown when I came to feed Elfie. It was just that he needed a woman in his life and in his bed, and I would soon leave to go to college, and even now I buried my nose in books all day and was of less and less use to him, putting those rows of numbers on blank notebook pages instead of noticing when Elfie was ready to deliver her calf or when Miss Mary refused her oats.

By God he wanted a woman! And that pale, freckled, red hair-faded-to-brown woman was what he wanted. I hated him for preferring her to me, me with my dead ma's sky blue eyes and fair skin and black hair.

"What do you need me for?"

"To help me die."

My face felt like a mask. Stiffly, I walked to the bed and sat on the quilt ma had pieced the year she was sick. She had made herself sit in the chair, cutting shapes from flour sacks, then sewing them together with tiny, even stitches. Someone had kept it mended.

"You don't deserve help," I said.

Then I said, "I didn't want to say that to you. I have learned manners along with numbers."

"You've learned to hide. That's what the crowded city does. Here, the sky, the miles have kept me honest."

I tried to smile.

"Daniel, you're still trying to pick which walnut shell covers the live caterpillar. I loved to play that game with you. But I outgrew it at sixteen. After you found oil, you pretended to be the gentleman farmer your mother wished your father had been. He was honest; he plowed this plain to an early death trying to grow a crop the land wouldn't reclaim in a year."

"He and I end in the same place." With flaring nostrils, Daniel lay back on the pillows breathing hard like he had just run from the barn to tell me about Elfie's new calf. Besides the uneven noise of his breathing punctuated by staccato birdcalls and the thump of my heart in my ears, something else seemed out of sync. His hands held no cat; his fingers picked at the quilt.

"Where's Estacada?" I asked

"Marian couldn't find him one day," he said. "You hate me so much that you won't help me out of my misery? You helped me with Miss Mary."

"You are not a horse."

"I'm in more pain than she was after she broke her leg. This cancer stabs my gut. I cannot breathe without two pillows and a little blue pill. I want the rifle."

He gestured toward the wall behind me. The rifle nested on two brass hooks, the swirled grain of the stock gleaming the way it had that late afternoon when he'd shot Miss Mary.

My own breath threatened me.

"Calm yourself, Jeanie," he said. "I'm not going to do anything now. Can't. Marian has hidden the shells. She's afraid of what I want to do."

"What do you want to do?"

"Has the city made you daft, Jeanie? I want to sing the old songs. I want to leave the goddamn stench. I want to race in the sky." He was taken by a spasm of coughing. Sweat glistened on his forehead as he held himself and took several shallow breaths.

It was as though I were nine again, in the orchard, kneeling next to Miss Mary, who had come to lay willingly in the shoveled out earth.

"Miss Mary is a runner, Jeanie," Daniel had explained. "It will kill her to limp for the rest of her days. You can see it in her eyes. So we'll send her to race in the sky."

I had watched her go, then helped him cover her with the crumbling red dirt, brushing at my tears until Daniel said I looked like an Apache.

He lay back on the pillows and I touched his hand. His skin was transparent, blue veins crawling beneath the surface like earthworms seeking the light.

He grabbed my fingers. "You must help me, Jeanie. I'm too tired to stumble any further. And I am a burden to Marian."

"Daniel, I'm not ready to tell you good-bye."

"You said good-bye at sixteen, Jeanie. You were stronger than you knew then. You're strong now."

"Thirty years of hate brought me here." My voice sounded frozen, like milk forgotten all winter in the spring house. "But I don't hate you enough to kill you!"

I choked on my tears and fled to the porch.

I was surprised to see it was dusk. Daniel was up to his old trick: making time stand still. At Grandma's, minutes had marched straight-backed and stiff through lengthy days. In college, time had either compressed itself into a few seconds on a date or expanded into amorphous clouds that swallowed entire

semesters of history and English. Some day I would discover the mathematical equation that explained how emotions affect the perception of time. I would be interviewed on the Today Show, written about in The New York Times, in demand as a lecturer. Never once would I think about the request Daniel had made of me seconds, lifetimes, ago.

I heard footsteps.

"There is stew," Marian said.

I followed her down the hall into the kitchen with its familiar faded rag rug, polished maple table and chairs, and wood stove. Through the large window over the sink, the sky changed from purple to gold.

The smell of sickness hung thick in the air. African violets, airplane plants, aloe, plus corn plants and their cousins sat on every table and shelf and overflowed into the corners. Cuttings nestled in glasses and cups, their thread-like roots leaching the water, transforming the liquid into leaves.

"The day Doc told him he had cancer he left with his sleeping roll and his gun," Marian said, spooning stew into two steaming bowls. She took thick biscuits from the oven and put them in a napkin-covered basket, then poured hot tea into heavy mugs. She sat at the side of the table closest to the sink; I sat across from her so I could see the sky. She took a biscuit from the basket, buttered it, and poured honey onto it.

I watched the slow, golden spirals melt into one another.

"He was gone for two days. The third day I saw buzzards circling and was about to send for the sheriff when he came home. Then he sat in the parlor by the cold fireplace, loading and unloading the rifle. After he fell asleep I hid the shells. He wants to die," Marian said, spreading more butter.

"He wants me to help him die." I hadn't intended to say it. The words stayed sticky and thick in the air between us.

Marian took a bite, chewed, swallowed. "I had to strangle Estacada," she said.

"What?"

"He had a fever and wouldn't eat. The vet said he would take a long time to die."

"How could you . . ." The dry words crumbled in my throat. I coughed, gulped tea, burned my tongue.

"A person should be able to kill her own cat," Marian said, spooning stew into her mouth, chewing, swallowing. "I believe in the balance of life. I take cuttings. Root leaves. Propagate plants because I have nothing else to care for. Twenty-five years ago I lost an unborn child. Her tiny wisps of red hair looked like the haze on an ivy getting ready to root. Daniel did not cry. He said one daughter - one heartbreak - was enough. He said it was enough that we had each other."

She looked defiantly at me.

"I never wanted you to leave. He believed I did because once I said I thought it would be hard for him to father a teenager and love a new wife. Next thing I knew he was telling you to live with his mother. After the child was taken lifeless from me, he said we'd try again, that there would be other chances to create life."

Across her face passed a look I had never seen on any human being. It was hatred, love, sorrow, pity, revenge.

"I believe in life."

I shivered. I listened to the plants change her words to carbon dioxide. I understood what she meant. She wanted a balancing: my father's agony offsetting her own. I looked out the window. The sky was gray with pale pink clouds.

"After . . . afterwards, where will you go?" I asked.

"I'll stay here. Reclaim these rooms from death."

"What will you do?"

"Propagate my cuttings. Grow corn and sunflowers. There is quite a market for sunflower seeds, you know."

The room seemed too full of leaves.

"I'm going down by the mill."

She smiled. "Go on, then. I'll take care of him. After supper I bathe him and change his pajamas and read to him. He

likes his Yeats and his bit of whiskey. Just leave the dishes."

The murmur of their voices accompanied me as I stepped into the night. At the edge of the woods, I glanced back. Through the open window I could see Marian and Daniel in the circle of the lamp's light. She was washing his back. His skin was sunken in between his ribs. His chest heaved with the exertion. The Yeats and the whiskey rested on the table nearby.

After the heaviness of the house, the woods seemed light. Daniel's breaths dimmed in the orchard and left me by the time I got to the mill 150 yards from the house. As a child I had played here, dropping hollyhock ladies into the creek, watching them bob and sink, done in by their own wet weight.

I stepped onto the thick board that crossed the creek, held onto a smaller one supported waist-high with struts from below, and stared at the black water gurgling against the rocks. For thirty Augusts I had stood here feeling helplessly angry, wondering why I had come home once more to meaningless, polite conversation, never until now admitting to myself that I was looking for something repairable in what he had once shattered. Tears erupted down my cheeks and splashed into the creek. Dizzily, I hung onto the flimsy rail, squatted, dipped my hand in the water. I laughed wildly at a world that set up wrong things to be done for the right reasons as easily as the water flowing around my hand changed direction.

Finally, I stood and felt my way along the rough mill wall to the door. I shoved hard until it creaked inward. There was a scurrying in a dark corner. I waited. Watched the moonlight play with the beams and the bins, making a pattern of shadows as neat as any numbers on a page. Only the sigh of the rocking mill wheel accompanied me as I crept toward the shelves. My foot clanged against a shovel.

I found the clay pots and mason jars on a shelf. Gingerly, I lifted each one until I found the pot where Daniel had kept extra shells "in case a mountain lion attacks while I'm planing the boards." I had thought it was a story he made up to keep me

near the mill until the morning we found the deer carcass on the opposite bank, still steaming in the early morning chill, its guts chewed and bloody.

Inside the pot were three shells. I slipped them into my pocket and headed for the house. In the moonlight, apple blossoms glistened. I let the smell wash over me, breathed in courage.

From the clearing in front of the house, I could see that his room was dark. On the porch Marian rocked in the chair Daniel told me his mother sat in, knitting long past twilight, humming the old hymns. Sounds of Daniel's breathing hung in the air like a painful lullaby.

"I'm going to tell him goodnight," I said, climbing the steps.

"He isn't asleep."

I walked slowly down the hall and stepped into his room. The quilt took on new patterns in the faint light coming in from the porch. Daniel's hands lay clenched in fists. The walls were in shadow. On the table, the empty whiskey glass sat next to a half-full bottle. I picked up the bottle, unscrewed the top, poured another shot.

"What are you doing?" he whispered in time to the beat of the rocker on the porch.

"Saying goodnight," I said. I reached into my pocket and handed him the shells.

He pulled me onto the bed and squeezed my fingers. "I asked her to call you," he wheezed. "I didn't know if she would. She hates me so much. Because of the child."

I wanted to say so much but knew my saying it did not matter. We sat, touching, in the silence for a long time.

Finally I stood, tiptoed to the wall, came back with the gun. I handed it to Daniel; I noticed the whiskey glass was empty.

"Shut the door loudly when you leave," he said.

I did.

On the porch I said to Marian, "He's comfortable. "It never lasts," she said.

I walked across the clearing toward the orchard, trying to hum a song Daniel once taught me, my breath rattling in my throat.

The sound of the shot ricocheted in the trees. Its melody hung in the air filling the clearing, note blending with note, spilling over me like creek water. I sang along with it. On the porch, Marian had jumped to her feet and was waving her arms.

"Stop it!" she shouted. "Stop that singing!"

I couldn't. I ran toward the house, breathlessly shouting the words to the old hymn, remembering Daniel had told me that often, when he was a boy walking from school, his mother would sit in the orchard knitting, singing him home.

## the note, the gun, the ditch

she came home to find the note you'd been writing for months  
in your head - the one you thought would help them understand

but no-one could: not the cops who went to find you while friends  
embraced your family, refusing to believe until the call;

not your sixth- grade students, or the many who passed through your room  
before; not your shrink whom you fooled from the start;

not the minister who said it wasn't you at all, but a demon you tried to  
battle on your own; not the thousand who crowded in the auditorium.

you fooled us all with your generous smile; helped us all but couldn't help  
yourself out of the darkness some of us have known. they found

your note which said you didn't think you were pulling your weight,  
though

it was the weight you pulled that pushed you deeper down - it was the

weight made you so long to be light, to be lifted toward the voices calling  
from the other side, but I still can't believe that you left this all behind -

the little girls whose wedding days you'll never see, the loving wife who  
now takes all the burden on herself, and I don't know if it will ever stop

feeling like a horrifying dream or if I'll ever stop believing  
that I'll see you in your yard when I go by,

but that there really was a note, a gun, a ditch cradling your body,  
taking all your weight upon itself.

Shelley Getten

## The Horseradish Patch

I.

Outside the henhouse  
the lush leaves grew  
chest-high when I went  
troubled by a teasing. I tore  
a leaf, separated the stem,  
wiped off the dust  
and rolled a tight "cigar."  
Brushing away tears  
I puffed smokeless the  
rich green leaf  
biting to savor its sharp taste  
that matched my mood  
of anguished resentment.  
I strode and swaggered  
in my overalls, the green  
jutting out the corner  
of my mouth. I chased  
the hens, and kicked the dirt.  
Holding the thick "havana"  
between my fingers,  
I spat the bitter juice.

II.

Knee-high the leaves  
sway in brisk September.  
Carrying a shovel and pan  
I carefully select  
the strongest stalks,  
glad to have this task  
to occupy me in my grief.  
I push the steel down deep.  
This may be the last time  
I dig horseradish.  
Unearthed, the rank root  
cut and carried to the house  
is washed, sliced,  
and fed into the grinder.  
Max, my Dad's best friend,  
has come to bring condolence.  
He breaks down weeping.  
I've never seen a man cry before.  
My sister comforts him.  
I grind horseradish for dinner.  
The stinging vapors rise  
and multiply my tears.

Sophie Hughes

## The Stall Wall Painters

Sometimes, I go there. Not because of a bodily urge,  
but just to read the news.  
I walk into the stalls of the men's bathroom  
on the third floor. Looking for humor I suppose.  
What does it say this semester?

WHITE CHICKS LOVE TO SUCK  
BLACK DICK

Someone retorts:

SO DO BLACK GUYS NAMED DICK

Oprah and Geraldo are doing it on T.V.  
And they do it every morning.

The PhD's, MD's and JD's do it  
sitting.  
Until their hands hurt.

The stall wall painters. The walls  
know who they are. The walls  
know their social consciousness too.

What will it say next semester?  
I ask myself as I piss into  
THE BOWL. Missing miserably, as  
the urine bounces off the seat and  
drips onto the linoleum floor.  
If they only had a marksmanship class!

My eyes are diverted by THE PAINTING:  
a ball point pen rendition  
of a woman spread eagle.  
I call it the "Moaning Lisa."

There is a gay man asserting his homosexuality  
on the walls with a Paper Mate Medium Point  
Pen.

The wall listens.

Allows itself to be scribbled on.

ALL FAGGOTS SHOULD DIE

A vehement heterosexual retorts.

I must leave now  
since I have released my morning coffee  
along with last night's 4-0.  
But before I open the stall door, I must  
communicate my social consciousness:

JESUS LOVES YOU

My immortality is branded.

At least until the janitor walks in  
with his scrubber.

*Chong Ho Shon*

## Prediction

When he said, "There is no tomorrow," the heart  
went out of me. He hung a sorrow on  
a body till now blithe. Delivery  
once made, the crime is in the waiting.

LET ME

TELL YOU. ONCE, MISCHANCE STRUCK LIGHTNING-LIKE. TODAY  
IT GLOATS IN ITS LONG-DRAWN-OUT GLOW, BACKS AND FILLS  
LIKE AN UNCERTAIN MARE, CONVULSIVELY BREEDS  
NAUSEA IN ITS RECIPIENT. THERE IS NO  
HURRYING IT UP. WHO WOULD NOT RATHER  
COLLAPSE THE INTERVENING HOURS INTO  
IMMEDIACY AND FORESTALL THE TWISTING,  
TURNING, THAT THE NIGHT IS BUSY PREPARING?

BUT SUPPOSE, WHEN THE CLOCK STRIKES NEW DAYLIGHT,  
IT ANNOUNCES 'TOMORROW: HERE ALREADY?'  
WILL BELLS RING TO WAKE THE SLEEPLESS WORRIER?  
OR WILL MORNING BEGIN LIKE ANY OTHER  
AND AT ITS OWN PACE PROCEED THROUGH THE HOURS?

The stars were not yet out, and I kept musing  
over what it would be like to continue  
into tomorrow and skew the prediction  
of a voice with an identity I knew  
but could not for the life of me remember.

*Archibald Henderson*

## Blue Windows

Blue windows.  
Curtains closed.

An escaped parrot  
rips the sky.

The season never ends  
though plans are made.

The night opens up.  
Its teeth allow me  
just enough room.

*Alan Britt*

Bagman

the Bagman's been living  
in the garage  
and the landlord says  
next time you see him  
tell him to get out  
or he's going to call the cops  
but i can't do nothing  
except listen to him howl  
over a blaring radio  
GET DOWN DADDY  
YEAH PLAY IT  
GET DOWN  
and imagine what he's doing  
all day  
in the dark  
with the doors and windows  
closed  
and the sun beating  
on the roof  
roasting that huge body  
of his  
like a cargo of coffee beans  
across the Atlantic  
maybe he sucks air  
through a hose  
uses a bucket  
for his toilet  
and newspaper  
for his bed  
maybe he loves himself  
at night  
and shoots jism

at the walls  
or maybe he cuts himself  
with a razor blade  
and drinks the blood  
for fun.  
maybe he tries not to think  
about the garage  
and why he's there.

the landlord worries  
about profit  
and the devaluation  
of his property  
who will want to rent  
with the Bagman  
in the garage  
his trespass  
so obvious  
by the blaring radio  
and the howls  
of his madness  
GET DOWN DADDY  
YEAH PLAY IT  
GET DOWN  
but i only hear him  
when it's not important  
and i only know he's there  
when i stop  
what i'm doing  
and remember.

*Jeanne Markell*

Theresa's Day

For ten dollars a day,  
Theresa will clean  
Your house, the dreams  
You keep by the stove,  
The stale hopes  
Of your sons and daughters—  
The crumbs of lives gone astray.

For ten dollars a day,  
Theresa will pretend  
The ache she buries  
In her bones for Talpa,  
And its nights baked in clay,  
Are only the pale imaginings  
Of a white woman's laundry.

For only ten dollars a day,  
Theresa will nod  
And say, "jes, Mrs., jes"  
Inhaling the church incense  
Of Mr. Clean,  
While she scrubs  
The sacred tiles of your floor.

*Rachael Nadel Stark*

The moon is full,  
an albino  
girl, all  
alabaster & apologies  
against the prom  
night sky, where moths compete  
for the honor  
of fiery death  
while perfect mothers wonder  
where they went  
wrong. This night  
the full moon hangs  
outside the orbit  
of brighter, better known  
heavenly bodies. Far away,  
even oceans feel  
its solitude  
streaming down  
into their depths  
and tides commiserate,  
casting shells ashore  
like change tossed  
to a blind girl  
begging at the mall.

*Rose Maria Woodson*

## Looking For Something That Floats

*Ellen Shepard*

The best thing in the world when you're waiting for the phone to ring is a big bowl of Cheerios. I'm on my fifth bowl when Sam finally calls.

That's Sam as in Sam-antha. I'm Claude as in Claude, but Sam used to call me Claudia, when we were alone. When she started it, it seemed really hip, like both people taking the wife's name when they got married. Now it just seems weird, but I sure do miss it.

Not that we didn't sort of swap gender roles anyway. Sam is determinedly stolid and guarded. I'm one of those sensitive-new-age-guys and it's been the bane of my existence. All the clichés about women being more attracted to "bad boys" are true as far as I can tell. Every woman I've ever dated says she wants a man who can show emotion but when I shed a tear - and ok, I do it with alarming frequency - she just wants to be "friends." So I have a lot of female friends. And Sam split.

Our best friends are kind of androgynous too. We call Candi "Bear," and if you saw her you'd understand why. Nat and Alex do the

same thing with names as we did. Alex is the woman, and Nat - Nathaniel - gets "Natalie" when no one's around. Yeah, and we all wear Birkenstocks too.

So anyway, Sam calls right after I pour the milk. I hate that. She knows I hate that. I'm sitting right by the phone but I still let the machine pick it up. I finish chewing a mouthful while the message plays, the one that used to have Sam and me singing on it, and now it's just me. After the beep I let her say "Claude are you home?" for a while because I know how much she hates talking to machines. When I think she's about to hang up, I grab the receiver.

"Hello?" I say, all breathy.

"Claude?"

"Yeah, who is this?"

"It's me. Sam."

"Oh, hi. I was just coming in the door and I heard somebody on the machine so I grabbed the phone." I scrunch my cardigan down my shoulders so it sounds like I'm taking off a jacket. "What's up?"

"I don't know, I'm returning your call."

"Oh, I was just wondering how you're doing." I clang the spoon into the bowl to make "putting things away" noises.

"What are you eating?"

I stop mid-clang. "Nothing, just putting some stuff away."

"I thought we weren't going to talk for a while."

"Yeah, I was worried about you. You were so upset last night."

"I was upset because you said you didn't think you wanted to go on living without me."

I stir the Cheerios quietly so they swim in a little circle. "Well, I figured you were worried about me and I wanted you to know that I'm doing ok."

"Claude, we can't keep doing this."

"I know." I try to sink my Cheerios, but the damn things

keep popping back up. The milk swirls again and again into the spoon.

"Two months. We said we wouldn't talk for two months."

"Ok."

"We said you needed to learn to be alone."

"Yeah."

"Are you going to be ok for two months?"

"Ok. Sorry I called you. Don't worry about me." I think, two months from the day we broke up means there's only five weeks left.

Pause. "Ok."

"If you need anything, call me."

"Ok. Bye, Claude."

"Bye."

I put down the phone. Nothing's ok. My cereal is totally soggy. And how come she always says good-bye first?

Here's my recipe for Cheerios on a depressing day. Get a really big bowl — not like a mixing bowl, but the biggest regular bowl you've got. Hopefully your dishes don't all match so you have a variety of sizes. Fill it with Cheerios but make sure they don't go too far above the brim because if you fill it too far, they'll fall all over the place when you add the milk. And this is the important part: put the milk in before the sugar. That way the sugar will stick to the wet part on top of the Cheerios. If you do the sugar first it all sinks to the bottom, which is great on a good day because you get this sugar sludge treat at the end. But on a bad day you want the sweetness right away. Fill the bowl about 1/3 up with milk and add two heaping teaspoons of sugar - and I do mean heaping. Then eat it sitting at your kitchen table so when the bowl's empty you can make more.

Nat and Alex have dragged me out for dinner. They keep telling me I'm losing weight and they have to fatten me up. General Mills could make a million dollars if they marketed my diet plan.

We go to our favorite whole-wheat diner. I actually make it most of the way through my sprout salad before I ask if they've heard from Sam. Alex starts fiddling with her nose ring and I know they have. Sam dated Nat before me, and they're still close. Yeah, this bothers me. Nat runs his fingers through his long hair. "I talked to her last night."

I pretend to be concentrating on a sprout caught between my teeth. "How's she doing?"

"Good, she's good."

"She seeing anybody?" I mean this to be funny. We've only been apart a month.

They look at each other. Alex has Demi Moore's voice and eyes. Usually these things can soften a blow but when she says, "Do you want the truth?" I feel like my face is about to explode.

"Jesus Christ, she's seeing somebody?"

"She's kind of moving in with somebody."

I stand up fast and my head hits the pot of ivy above me and it crashes onto the table, right into the bean dip. I don't look back, I just run outside.

My insides want to get out so bad that I just keep running, I'm flying down the sidewalk holding my sides, with people staring at me and Alex behind yelling, "Claude!" When I hit a red light it's like I'm a wind-up car that's hit a wall, I flip around and start running back the other way. Alex is about 30 feet behind me, panting. She looks all watery, I can barely see her and I can't talk. I just let her grab me with both arms and steer me into a doorway that has little steps in front of it. We sit and I cry so hard that finally I can't breathe and I have to slow down a little. Luckily, Alex is used to this from me.

When I can choke out words, they are "Where's Nat?"

Alex is still holding my head onto her shoulder. "I don't know. I think he had to stay behind to pay."

"Oh shit, I'm sorry."

"It's ok."

We both look at our feet for a long while.

"How can she be moving in with somebody? It's only been a month."

"I know. She met him at a bar."

"Jesus Christ."

Nat appears in the doorway with both hands shoved in the pockets of his poncho.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"It's ok." Nat looks at his feet for a second and says, "You know Sam."

"What do you mean?"

"You know Sam can't ever be without a relationship."

I repeat, "What do you mean?"

"I mean she dumped that chiropractor for you. She started seeing the chiropractor right after we broke up, and there was a long line of guys before that. She doesn't know how to be alone."

I stare straight ahead. This has never, ever occurred to me. Sam was the strong one. "No, I think she just attracts people."

Nat shakes his head. "She can't stand to stay in a relationship and she can't stand to be alone. You, on the other hand, know how to stick around."

I think about this. I hadn't been with anyone for a couple years before I met Sam. I would have stayed with her until the end of time. I'd never thought of these as good things.

I am suddenly aware of the cold night air on my face and I draw in the deepest breath I've taken in a long time.

Here's what you do when you want to treat yourself. Same recipe as before, but this time put on a little sugar before the milk, and make it brown sugar. Then add a couple teaspoons more brown sugar after the milk so you have brown sugar on the top and the bottom. Watch it melt down the Cheerios for a second before you dunk your spoon in. If you have any raspberries around, throw a few on top.

This is heaven.

I've stayed home most of the day, just in case she calls. It's the two month anniversary of our breakup. I have this date circled on my calendar. Our period of silence is over.

We've both changed in two months. Sam has a new home and Max, her new boyfriend. I'm in the same old home, alone, but I'm a lot more used to the idea. That's my change.

Except for today. There's no being used to anything today; it's the worst day I've had in a month. This must be how ex-junkies feel. I haven't missed Sam much in the past couple weeks but now, knowing I'll talk to her today, I want her so bad I ache. I want my fix.

So I find things to do to keep me busy inside the apartment all day. I clean the kitchen and the bathroom. I defrost the freezer. I make pea soup and divide it into one-meal size containers which I store in my defrosted freezer. I do laundry in the basement and every time I come back up I check the machine for messages. Nothing.

All this time I can't help fantasizing that she'll call and tell me she's made a terrible mistake. Max is ok but she's realized that she's really ready to settle down, to love one person, me, forever. I know she must at least be anxious to hear how I'm doing, and I want to tell her. I'm doing pretty damn good. I want to show it off.

By 11:00 at night I'm thinking maybe she's scared to call, scared that I'm mad at her. Ok, so maybe she doesn't want to get back together. I know she must at least want to be friends. And I would hate for her to think that I'm avoiding her.

So I pick up the phone and dial. The pauses between rings seem so long that each time I wonder if maybe I've been cut off. After five rings, someone picks up and I hear Sam say "Hello?"

"Sam, it's Claudi -,"

A deep voice says "Hello?"

"Hi, um, this is Claude..."

"We're not home right now to answer your call because we've gone to Oz to find the Wizard."

The two voices break into "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." They mess up the end and just before the beep comes I hear them giggling.

I don't leave any message.

Here's one only for people who live alone. Pour Cheerios into a bowl - use the mixing bowl this time but only fill it half way up. Empty an entire pint of Haagen Daas Vanilla on top. Heat up hot fudge in a separate container, but don't put it on until you've stopped crying. Otherwise it won't stay hot.

Bear's face is hanging in the air above me, and it's not a pretty sight. Bear is an albino and she's got this Barbara Streisand thing going with her eyes. You always wonder if she's seeing two of you. At the moment her face is red through her ghost skin and her flat white hair is swinging down.

"C'mon Claude, push!"

It occurs to me that this is the closest, I'll ever come to giving birth. I've heard that women in childbirth scream at their husbands, "You bastard, I'm here because of you!" I think I might do the same to Bear, right here in the middle of the gym.

My arms are still partly bent and they're shaking like I'm on a Magic Fingers bed. I'm so tired I think I'm going to either cry or barf. "No way." I let a hundred and twenty-five damn pounds of barbell come slowly back down onto my chest. Bear leans back against a treadmill, looking down at the ground like I've failed her personally. I can't be mad; she's been a great friend. She started dragging me to the gym two months after Sam split. That means I've been coming here seven months now and I still can't bench press more than a hundred and twenty pounds. I think part of the problem is that I hate every minute of it, even though Bear says exercise helps to "work things out" and even though it's really cool to have big biceps.

Bear can do thirty reps of her own weight, and that's no small amount. She's built like the Michelin man, big and soft looking on the outside but steel belted underneath - and she has to beat guys off with a stick. Go figure. She's also one of the nicest people I've ever met.

Inside, she's just the kind of woman I'm looking for and I feel frustrated as hell that I'm not the least bit attracted to her outsides. Not that she's ever expressed interest in me that way. But still.

She wipes her forehead on the sleeve of her t-shirt. "I'm gonna go get some juice. You want some juice?"

"Yeah, Orange-Cranberry Snapple."

"Aw, Claude that stuff has sugar added to it. Why not just get grapefruit?"

"SNAPPLE," I say, and she stomps off. It doesn't occur to me for a few moments that I've picked a really stupid time to piss her off; the barbell is still lying across my chest.

I'm in trouble. The last time I tried to push a weight off me when I was this fried I totally lost control and it fell back over my head. It hit the floor with a huge clank and rolled until it banged into the ankle of this yuppie woman waiting to use the Stairmaster. It didn't hit her too hard but she turned out to be a hemophiliac. She got a bruise like she got stepped on by the entire Boston Marathon.

So I decide to wait for Bear. I close my eyes and breathe deeply, hoping to look like I'm just resting from my little warm up before I start to really kick some bench-pressing butt.

A female voice comes out of nowhere.

"Are you still using this?"

My whole body flinches. "Yeah, gonna do a few more reps. Just catching my breath." My heart is racing. It's quiet for a minute so I think she's gone away.

"This place has gotten so crowded lately."

I open my eyes and see a woman who looks on the outside how I think Bear must look on the inside. Bright. Pretty. She's wearing baggy sweats and a ripped up purple t-shirt. She's got sort of a round face and brown eyes that are so dark and big you want to crawl around in them. I'm sure she's a social worker or physical therapist or something else in the "helping" professions. I have

this thing for kindness. I think it's incredibly sexy. Unfortunately aloofness has always attracted me even more, but maybe it's time to make a change.

"Do you come here often?" I can't believe I've said this.

"She laughs a little. Normally I would be relieved that she thought it was funny but normally I 'm not trapped under a hundred and twenty-five pounds. My face is burning up.

"I jog here every weeknight. I lift weights on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

I almost say, What do you do on weekends, but thank God the barbell has cut off the blood supply to the part of my brain that says really stupid things.

"Do you like to jog?" she says.

I'm about to say "Love it" when an alarm goes off in my head. For me this moment in any relationship comes early - the moment when I really try to be a macho dude, just so she'll please, please, please stick around. Only she discovers the real me the first time we watch a tear jerker movie and splits shortly thereafter. This is the moment I've spent the past nine months telling myself I would never, ever put myself through again.

"Jogging, hmm." I pause to buy time, hoping it looks like I just can't choose which among my many and frequent workout activities I love the best. I take a deep breath and say, "Well actually, no."

"No?"

I'm losing her, I know I'm losing her, but I push on. "Actually I'd rather have hot surgical steel needles shoved under my thumbnails than go jogging."

For the longest second in my entire life her face goes completely blank. Then she laughs. She doesn't walk away. And it's as if the whole world has been set right, like all nations have joined hands, the air is clear, the oceans are clean, and there's a marching band playing to celebrate.

By the time she pulls the barbell off my chest I know two things: Her name is Jill, and I'll be coming back on Thursday.

This is the recipe I make for breakfast now. I call it "Claude's High-Energy Life Jump-Starter."

Get out your biggest regular bowl. Fill it with Cheerios. Then dump in about a tablespoon of peanut butter. You'll have to break it up with your fingers so you don't get one big blob; it sounds gross, but it's worth it. Throw in some raw oatmeal and slices of banana. Mix it up with your hands, add skim milk, and drizzle a little honey on top. No need for seconds, this will keep you going for a long, long time.

## To Mother

I am not a rendition of you;  
same in blood, perhaps, part DNA  
but either way not a replica.  
And you are not the I in me -  
    this reflection cast,  
    my mirror, yet blurry  
as I worry if this self be true;

Now separate from the arms that held  
and the eyes that cried through  
years slowly bided as I pushed out -  
    away from you.

And into Life's mouth, chewed, devoured -  
my fledgling mind, my sprout-spewn soul  
Life bit a hole, created a wound  
that your balming hands couldn't feel.  
    Disguised with image,  
    A tear left, ignored  
And while lies soared my innards soured.

Infested by time, hardened with pride,  
Suicide soothed, then burned  
as they choked my Life back into me -  
    This shell - this coward.

Then empty they gave me back to you.  
Devoid of hope, enmeshed in hurt's snare;  
You followed me there and took me in,  
this rebellious child, battle-worn;  
    So unlike the one  
    whose strength - long trialed  
now showered this child -  
    Soaking, but true.

Yet allowing me then to slowly walk  
baby steps of myself, a mimic - your sway  
I portray in these hips  
shaped to pass on what you gave of yourself -  
    A daughter, anew.

Tracy A. Jennison

## Clay

Mud smell-  
slap,  
poke,  
squeeze,  
pinch.  
Roll it long,  
hold it in your crotch,  
strut.

A proud mother  
recording footprints,  
a patient mother  
stretching to limits,  
a mute mother  
enduring fire  
to become eloquent.

By a silver stream I found it  
oozing between my toes.  
They told me  
it's a different  
kind of earth.  
You can make things.

Sophie Hughes

## Learning To Be Proper

I've said it before,  
back in '69 with Vallejo in my pocket  
again in '78  
& maybe last night.  
I must've talked about it  
until we were all  
blue in the face.  
But the bare truth is  
I've never talked about it  
properly .  
Her hips  
make my blood perspire  
& her blue eyes  
stick to my lips.  
To put things into perspective  
the hours are needles  
that stretch whispers  
across her infinite waistline.

Alan Britt

## I'm Such a Loser

I can't even kill myself. I'm such a loser.  
I walk out into traffic and the cars miss me.  
I coronate myself with a Jewel plastic bag  
over my head and wait to die. I find a hole.  
I drink bottles of cheap wine, piss  
on myself, masturbate and piss some more,  
smash the bottle and use the broken glass to  
slash my wrists. Again.  
I sell my body on Sunset Blvd. hoping someone  
will fuck me. Fuck me until my anus turns  
raw and starts to bleed. Without stopping.  
It's too awful here.  
Maybe I really don't want to die. Maybe  
I was too drunk, on life. I couldn't  
cut my throat with my knife. I just  
wanted to run, put my head between my legs,  
pull my jacket over my head and cry  
about the strife my parents bestowed  
upon me. I need a beer.  
Does anyone have some beer?  
God, I need a cigarette.

Chong Ho Shon

American Haiku

My butt-hole is rammed crap-full of  
nightstick.

Whatcha wanna bet you're next?

Brooke Wiese

## Contributor's Notes

**Alan Britt** - Has been published in many magazines including: *Exquisite Corpse*, *Blank Gun Silencer*, *Bitter Oleander*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Salon Postale*, *Negative Capability*, and *The Falcon*. His work has also appeared in the anthologies such as: *The Dolphin's Arc*, *For Neruda*, *For Chile*, and *Rising Waters*. Alan also has three chap books out: *The Afternoon of the Light*, *I suppose the Darkness is Ours*, and *We Follow Night*.

**Shelley Getten** - Grew up on a farm in Minnesota, and lives near Minneapolis with her husband and her two year old son. Her works have or will appear in an anthology *Grounds For Peace*, compiled by Women Against Military Madness (WAMM) and Women Poets of the Twin Cities (WPTC).

**Archibald Henderson** - Is the author of three collections of poetry, the most recent being *Where Are You Now*. His poems have also appeared in issues of *Mediphors*, *Negative Capability*, *Anglican Theological Review*, and *Grasslands Review*.

**Sophie Hughes** - Has had poems published in magazines and anthologies in England and Ireland. Her works have most recently been in *Sidewalks*, *Echoes*, *Expressions*, and *Poem*; all American publications.

**Tracy Jennison** - Has had poems published in *Listen*, *Algimore*, and *Youthwalk*.

**Susan Kan** - Is an MFA candidate in fiction writing at the Warren Wilson College Program for Writers, and makes her home in Northampton, Massachusetts.

**Janet Krauss** - My poems have recently appeared in *Painted Hills*, and *MacGuffin*. My work reflects my need, through my love of language, to comprehend situations, episodes, scenes and feelings that affect me. I rely on nature as a metaphor.

**Lianne Elizabeth Mercer** - My poetry has appeared in *Negative Capability*, *Sow's Ear*, *RiverSedge*, *Concho River Review*, and *Calliope*. My chapbook, *No Limits But Light* was recently published by Chile Verde Press, San Antonio, Texas. My fiction has been published in *Common Bonds Stories by and About Modern Texas Women*, *Tales of Magic Realism by Women Dreams in a Minor Key*. My short story "Chiaroscuro" placed in the top twenty in the 1994 Nimrod/Hardman Awards sponsored by the Tulsa Arts and Humanities Council.

**Ellen Shepard** - Is a student at Northeastern Illinois University, having returned to school after a ten-year career as a stage manager in Chicago area theatres. She was a recipient of NEIU's talent scholarship for writing. She dreams of a Cubs World Series, peace on Earth, and a dog in every home.

**Rahael Nadel Stark** - A former New Yorker and reluctant Texan, teaches at a private school in Houston. Her poetry has appeared in *Green Fuse*, and will be appearing in *Poetry Motel*, *Potpourri*, and *No Exit*. She is at work on a book of poems and a collection of short stories.

**Brooke Wiese** - I live in New York City, and studied with Elaine Equi, Allen Ginsberg, Marilyn Hacker, and Joan Larkin. In the Spring of 1993 I received my MFA in poetry from Brooklyn College. My poetry has appeared in, or is forthcoming in: *Anathema Review*, *The Bloomingdale Poets*, *Brooklyn Review*, *Poetry Motel*, *Hawaii Review*, and elsewhere. I write mostly in traditional forms because in them I'm provided with both a puzzle to solve, and the discipline I need to hone my craft. And I love solving the puzzle. If I can, additionally, within the structures of the form, tell a story coherently, and rip at the reader's gut a bit - that is success! And my goal.

## **In This Issue:**

Laura Albrecht

Alan Britt

Kathleen A. Carrieria

Shelley Getten

Archibald Henderson

Chong Ho Shon

Sophie Hughes

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Susan Kan

Janet Krauss

Jeanne Markell

Lianne Elizabeth Mercer

Rose Rosberg

Ellen Shepard

Rachael Nadel Stark

Brooke Wiese

Rose Maria Woodson