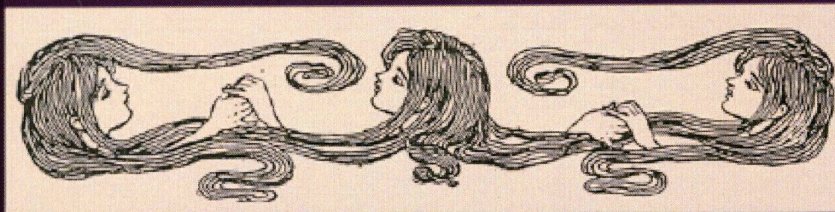
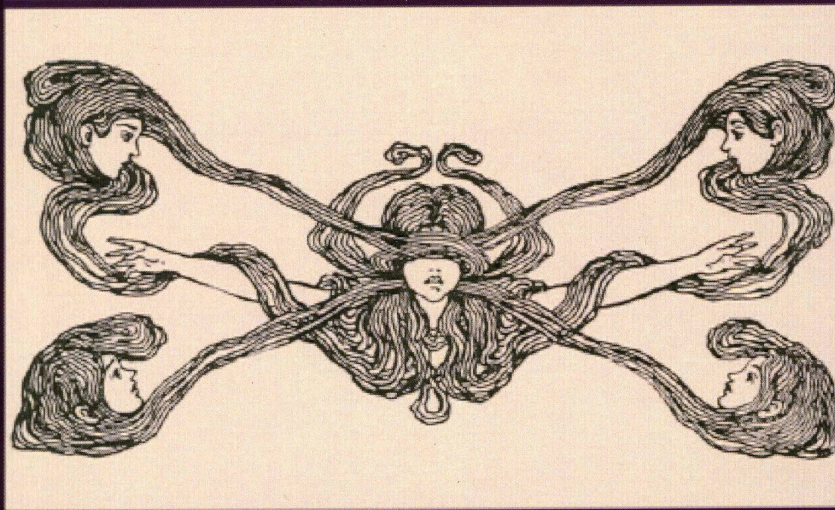


Harpur Palate, Volume 16 Number 1, Summer & Fall 2017

# HARPUR PALATE



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the same species, but the same species may be present in different habitats.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the sampling was limited to the upper intertidal zone.

Second, the sampling was limited to the upper intertidal zone.

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.: Harpur Palate, Volume 16 Number 1, Summer & Fall 2017

**BINGHAMTON  
UNIVERSITY**

# **HARPUR PALATE**

**SUMMER & FALL**

**BINGHAMTON,  
NEW YORK**

**Vol. 16 No. 1**

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*“Of all things men make, bread  
is closest to God.”*

—Linwood Rumney, "Daily Bread"

**Summer & Fall 16.1**



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# DISASSOCIATION

ANNE BARNGROVER

Oh, every season is long for you now  
especially in Missouri, where you're bound

to be restless in the honeysuckle  
light of June evenings. But things happen

every day without your knowing:  
your oven ticks as it warms, a slug

drowns in your bathtub, the chopper  
flies so low your windowpanes rattle

(who was it looking for?), your lover  
and your friend text each other,

*I hate you.* You've had a rough go.  
It's hard to regain one's reputation

after throwing a wig into a dancing  
crowd, but no one can tell you, *be more*

*approachable* when you must dip  
your nails into your beer to test

for roofies (there's a polish for that now)  
and all the windows in your house

are cricketed with alarms. Look at you  
here in your thin cotton dress, pulling

at the threads that shorten your hem.  
Look at the scuffmarks on your new

white boots. You refuse to ever be  
the girl next door. Still you blame

the cracks in the walls for the poison  
you spray every morning then wait

with the door open for it to dry. It's true  
what they say: the men who've known

you before see you differently now.  
A man asks *what's your name?* and you're

the one to respond, *it doesn't matter.*  
They don't want to remember

and you'll admit it: I've occupied  
the darkest times in their lives.

# THE ORIGIN OF HUMANS

CONSTANCE BREWER

Is this the Madagascar glow you told me about? Tall baobab trees blazing with the last light of a faded sun? Are the water-storing trunks and flat tops twisted out of a fairy tale? Are these the trade winds dreamed of, carrying us on outbound tide to sunset? Can we drift beyond the horizon to meet the dusk halfway? Why can't golden light be our new illuminated currency? Does slip-silver of leaping fish catch the wind and flip us back to radiant fantasy? Will the glistening cycle of beginning and end bring us closer to eternity? Who wouldn't long for Africa during a full moon? Would you leap into sapphire waters from hewn cliffs, clutching my outstretched hand?

## WHEN OTHER TOWERS COME DOWN

SARAH CARSON

You didn't need me to tell you the moon was a liar. By day it was all polish-the-podium, hand-me-the-microphone, get-a-feed-to-the-satellite-truck, kiss-the-lady-with-the-oxygen-tank. By night entire buildings were disappearing. Mom has not yet returned with the pizza, with the laundry, and already the city is a sound like a set fire; already the boards are black from burning and not burning and burning again. The newsman is saying there's nothing left, but no one is stuffing an envelope with their loose change. No one but us even saw the sky start to fall. Tonight we will struggle to sleep in the silence of ice on cut wires, ice on fuse boxes. We'll hold each other in crooks of knees, elbows, spent knuckles—a city pugilistic. GG will tell us the story of her first dance in the University Club, the first men to roll boulders to where they say the fence has always stood. We will hold our noses against the miniblinds, trace our fingertips along the new course of a skyline, stop at the places police cruisers have left the lights turning, stop at the places our eyes can't tell from the dark. “Move along sweetheart,” a cop will say into her cupped hands, her eye to the peephole of a locked door, our locked door, her knocking a drum that's been beating as long as we've been alive. “No, girlfriend,” we say in our breath on the windows, “You must misunderstand, no one must have told you. This is the house our fathers built when the moving was over, when moving was no longer an option. Our moving parts are stationary. Our moving days are done.”



# THE SPICE MARKET

ANNE CHAMPION

*Bethlehem, West Bank*

On one side, the stands waft perfumes of basil,  
thyme, oregano, and cayenne. On the other,

bars of olive soap. Perhaps a woman bathes her lover  
with them, cleansing away the wear of grueling heat, rinsing

his eyes of the sting of tear gas, letting sand and soap  
mingle to polish him soft again. Perhaps she thinks

of him while vendors brush silks and carpets  
against her cheeks, imagines the day they marry,

how afternoons in the market will belong  
to them both, and every scent will lead

to a future like a morning sun  
burning off a fog. Or perhaps, an eclipse,

and she will lose him. She'll touch her own  
shadow as it cascades over every spice, plunge

her hands in it like she's burying his bones—  
in the herbs, in the seeds, in something that can grow.

# ON RITSOS'S DIARY OF EXILE, BOOK ONE

JIM DAVIS

Wind strikes or winds around boulders,  
assumes new shapes & the guard smokes  
for warmth & paces lengths of razor wire.  
Boots were once warm like feet & laced up  
within. Pockets emptied of buttons.  
Faceless decks of cards. Flock of geese  
alight in a field when the guard strikes  
a match, begs the moon to take off  
her shoes & sleep in a lampless window.  
I want to give objects unforgivable alter  
egos. Sky stitched to refugee stars in war-  
torn dreamscapes. The craven goatherd  
leans his cane against an almond tree,  
dreaming two black ravens shared an egg.

**TO BE FILED UNDER  
"IMMIGRATION RAID:  
COLLATERAL DAMAGE" IN THE  
OFFICE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF  
HOMELAND SECURITY**

**BY LAURA S. DISTELHEIM**

WINNER OF THE  
JOHN GARDENER  
MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR  
FICTION



The only thing Benjamin Koppelman wants right now is for all those people out there in the world to leave him alone, which is why he's sitting in his safe place beneath the piano in his family room, inside the tent he's made out of his pale blue blanket by wrapping it all the way around him and then pulling it up over his head, while he listens to his mother's faraway-sounding voice in the kitchen down the hall, where she's talking on the phone to his father. You're not supposed to call his father in his office, where he's busy being a doctor, unless it's an emergency – that's the rule – which means it's an emergency they're having right now, and that's what she's telling him, Ben's pretty sure, even though her voice just sounds like mmmm-mmmm-MMMM-mmmmm-MMMM-mmmmm-MMMM-mmmmm from inside the blanket.

Well anyway, he doesn't need to hear what she's saying because he already knows that. *Of course* it's an emergency they're having if he's not where he's supposed to be at this time on a Wednesday morning, which is sitting at his desk at the very back of the row of desks that's farthest from the window in Mrs. Santaya's fourth grade class in Room 303 (first door on the right on the third floor landing, 24 stairs straight up from the office) at Lincoln School, with Maggie O'Neil on his left side and Jeremy Etlestein in front of him, but no one on his right side or behind him so that he's always sure to have as much personal space as he needs. He was the very first one to know they were having an emergency, way before his mother did even, when they reached the bottom of the hill on Kimball Lane on the way to school this morning. *She* didn't even realize, until *he* told it to her, that number nine was missing from the list.

"Now Benjamin, stay calm. Don't jump to conclusions." That's what she said when he yelled out, "OH, NO!" and started running up the hill. He didn't even take the time to point out to her that a conclusion isn't a *place*, that it isn't something you can *jump* to, because he was too busy running and still maybe hoping a little bit that he was wrong, even though he knew that he wasn't, even though he knew it already for sure, that something terrible had happened to number nine now that it was missing from the list, and see? he'd been right, because guess who he'd found waiting for him there, at the top of the hill, where Mrs. Delgado and Admiral

and Cha-cha and Miss Trixie and Popeye and Slugger were supposed to have been? No one, that's who.

"I need you to get your control" is what his mother said when she caught up with him, because by then she could see it, too, that number nine was missing, so there went number ten, too, which meant that *everything* was ruined, because if you don't go through numbers nine and ten on the list, how can you ever get to number *twelve*? You *can't*, of course. That's the rule. That's the *rule* that you can't get to number twelve if you don't go through numbers nine and ten, because that's the order of the numbers – nine, ten, eleven, twelve – which meant that it wasn't even 8:30 in the morning and already the whole entire *day* had been broken all apart. "Okaaaaaay?" she said in her slow, quiet voice that she uses when she knows things are bad. "I need you to get your control, and I need you to remember how important it is to be flexible."

*Flexible* is how this whole thing had started. *Flexible* is what she'd said to him all the way back at the end of last summer, when she'd taken out their School Day Morning Routine list poster from the closet where she'd put it at the end of third grade, and lay it out on the kitchen table and said, "There's something I want to talk to you about." Which is never a good thing, he knows, so he'd already had that warning light feeling inside him even before she'd told him that, even though she knew he was used to having her drive him to school, this year they'd be doing something new. This year, for fourth grade, she'd be walking him there instead.

See?" she'd said. "We'll do everything on the list just the way we always have, up to number eight:

1. Get out of bed.
2. Get dressed.
3. Eat breakfast.
4. Brush teeth.
5. Put on coat.
6. Pick up backpack.
7. Walk out door.

Then, here, for number eight, we'll just pull off the card that says 'Get into car' and put in one that says, 'Walk down street' instead."

He hates Instead, he'd reminded her, and she'd said she knew that, but that now that he was going to be a fourth grader, it was time for him to learn to be more *flexible*. "That's a big part of getting older, kiddo," she'd said. "Learning how to be more flexible." And it was also time for him to learn how to walk with someone else the way people do when they're going along the street side by side. *In fact*, she'd said, it would be a good idea if they got some practice doing that before school even started. Which is why that's what they'd done every single day in August – walked from their house, up the hill on Kimball Lane and down Green Bay Road to Lincoln School.

And it was a good thing they did practice, too, because *not like that*, she'd said on some days, because he was walking too far ahead of her, and then *not like that*, she'd said on others, because he was walking too far behind her, and then *not like that*, she'd said after that, because he was keeping his eyes on *her* feet and trying to make *his* feet – the right, then the left, then the right, then the left – move at exactly the same time they did. And in between all that, she was saying, "The rule is that we don't have to stop at the end of a driveway, *unless* there's a car pulling out of it," and "The rule is that we always walk on the sidewalk, *unless* someone rides up behind us on a bicycle, in which case we can step onto the grass," and "The rule is that we walk with our hands at our sides, *unless* we're passing a lawnmower, and *then* we can cover our ears."

He hates Unless, he'd reminded her. *Real* rules don't *have* Unless, he'd reminded her, and she'd said that she knew that, but that putting up with Unless was part of being a flexible fourth grader, and then she'd sighed, and he'd sighed right after her, because what he was thinking right then was that, altogether, fourth grade was beginning to seem like a not very good idea. But then, finally, one day, after a lot of days of practice, she'd said, "Wow, BENnie! Look at YOU! You're doing much BETter," and he'd known from the way her voice went up like that that she was happy about it because that's what Mrs. Montgomery, who he goes to spend time with first thing after lunch every day, and who he went to spend time with last year, in third grade, too, and who he spent time with even in the summer, when there wasn't any school, had been working on



with him ever since June – how to tell how someone is feeling from if their voice goes up or down.

Only then there was more. *Then* his mother had said he had to start working on looking into her face every once in a while at the same time that they were walking because they weren't really just walking *side by side*. They were walking *together*. He hates Together, he'd reminded her, and she'd said she knew that, which is why he had to *work* on it, and which was a big reason why they would be walking to school this year, so that it would begin to be easier for him, which was what she was sure would happen.

Boy, was she wrong, is what she found out right away on the first day of school, because boy, did she forget to tell him something, which was that their neighborhood on a school day morning is exactly *not* like their neighborhood on a summer afternoon, when everyone's at camp or at the beach or at their country club. What their neighborhood on a school day morning *is* exactly like is the machine his big sisters, Lauren and Madeline, use to make popcorn in when their friends come over to watch movies on t.v. – **KAPOW! KAPOW! KAPOW!** – with things moving in all different directions and making loud startling noises and exploding all over the place.

He'd never noticed that about his neighborhood on school day mornings when he was inside his mother's car, being driven through it, but he sure did notice it – *all* of him sure did notice it – *that* morning. His skin noticed it and his heart noticed it and the back of his neck noticed it and under his arms noticed it and his stomach noticed it and that thing inside him that tells him to flap his hands really fast up and down, that his father says he has to try very hard not to listen to, especially when he's outside the house, noticed it most of all, the whole time they were heading up the hill on Kimball.

**KAPOW! KAPOW! KAPOW! KAPOW! KAPOW!**

Kidskidskidskidskidskids, without very many grownups around anywhere to say, "Okay! Simmer down now!" and "That'll be just about enough of that," and "What did we learn about jumping on people's heads?" the way they do on the playground at recess. Just kidskidskidskidskidskids biking scootering running hopping jumping leaping skipping racing – backwards forwards up down on the grass on the street over the curb and back again





whole time he was walking, and it *did* make him feel safer, but it also made him feel so tired and spacey and mixed up by the time he got to school that the whole time he was in math, which they have the very first thing and which is usually his easiest class, Mrs. Santaya kept saying, “Ben, I don’t think you’re with us this morning,” which made him even *more* mixed up because he was right *there*, sitting in his chair at his desk at the very back of the row of desks that’s farthest from the window in Mrs. Santaya’s fourth grade class in Room 303 (first door on the right on the third floor landing, 24 stairs straight up from the office) at Lincoln School, with Maggie O’Neil on his left side and Jeremy Ettlestein in front of him, but no one on his right side or behind him so that he’s always sure to have as much personal space as he needs, so where else could he *be*? But at least he made it all the way to school. At least he never ended up back at home again.

Until today, that is, of course. Well, of course he’s back at home *today*, because they’re having an *emergency*. And of course he’s under the *piano*, because the piano’s his friend, so he can count on it to be there for him when he’s having a bad time, which is something Mrs. Montgomery says is one thing friends do. She does that a lot – tells him what kinds of things friends do, because making new friends is something else she says he has to work on this year, kind of like it’s his homework.

When she first told him that, he right away thought about how all the kids he sees on his way to school in the morning move all together in bunches, and about how they’re always putting their arms around each other and slapping each other’s backs and high fiving each other and looking into each other’s faces and he already knew that that was homework he was going to be getting a very bad grade on. Which is something he tried to tell her, only he doesn’t think she really heard him, and what he also tried to tell her, only he doesn’t think she really heard him, is that anyway he doesn’t *need* any new friends when he already has the piano, which isn’t only there for him when he’s underneath it.

No, it’s also there for him when he’s sitting on its bench and lifting up its lid to play it, which is his favorite thing in the whole world to do, even more than reading about lizards. That’s the only kind of togetherness he likes, the kind he does with the piano. It’s exactly *not* like the kind of togetherness

where he has to look into faces, which is what he and Mrs. Montgomery are working on now. “Just read the *clues*,” she says, “and you’ll know what eyes are *saying* to you. Wide open means surprised or scared, for instance, and narrow means angry or confused.” “And what about looking into the sun?” he’d asked her once. “Can’t narrow mean that a person is looking into the sun?” But she’d said let’s just stick with emotions for now, and she’d moved on to eyebrows.

“Raised means startled or surprised,” she’d said, “and scrunched down means angry or perplexed. Read the *clues*, Ben! They’re right there to *help* you. Like with mouths, for example, mouths are easiest of all. Turned down means sad or deep in thought. Turned up means happy or friendly or proud.” Which didn’t sound easiest of all to him. “What about a person who’s saying ‘cheese’ because he’s posing for a picture? Can’t that be what turned up means, too?” he’d asked her, and she’d sighed and shook her head and said let’s not complicate the issue, why don’t we just talk about skin? “Pale means frightened or sick,” she’d said. “Red means angry or embarrassed.” “What about sunburn?” he’d wanted to ask, but instead he’d just looked at the picture of the face she was holding up to him, waiting for him to tell her what it was feeling, closed his own eyes and picked an emotion, the first emotion he could think of, from in between the *ors*. “Confused?” he’d asked. “Try again,” she’d said.

He *never* has to try again when he sits down at the piano. There aren’t any *ors* when he sits down at the piano. He always knows exactly what he’ll find waiting when he lifts up its lid: 88 keys. 52 white. 36 black. *Every time. Always 88. Always 52. Always 36. Always black and white.* Never any colors running all together and making him dizzy and mixed up. Never any eyes and eyebrows and mouths and skin widening and narrowing and rising and scrunching and turning up and down and pale and red. Just 88. 52. 36. Just seven octaves plus a minor third, from A0 to C8. *Every time.*

And that isn’t even the best of all part. The best of all *part* is that the piano understands what he’s trying to say, and makes it so that everyone else can understand it, too. When he’s together with the piano, people don’t just *understand* what he’s saying, they even want him

to say *more*, which is something he knows because, when he's done, they clap very loud and then they yell out things like, "BRAVO!" and "ENCORE!" which he wishes they wouldn't do because it hurts his ears and prickles his skin and makes him want to go *under* the piano, which is what he did at his first recital, but his father told him afterwards that that isn't the best way to handle it, so now he counts inside his head to try to make himself not hear the clapping and yelling so much, and that helps.

Sometimes people even cry after he finishes playing. And one time he heard a woman say to his mother, "What a *gift* your son has!" which didn't make any sense at all because he'd looked all around the room and there hadn't been anything wrapped up in fancy paper with a bow on it anywhere, but his mother had said "thank you," so he'd decided that maybe that woman had just gotten confused and his mother was remembering to use her manners by not telling her how mixed up she was, so he'd used his manners too, and didn't ask where his gift was, and as soon as he got home he'd added a sticker to his Good Behavior Chart.

But one thing for sure that people never do after his fingers stop moving and he pushes back the bench and stands up is say, "Huh?" "Huh?" is what those two boys had said on that day, a couple of months after he and his mother had started walking to school, when he'd tried to be a good friend to them. It was when they had just reached the top of the hill, when his mother had stopped to talk to a woman she knew, who had come out of her house to pick up her newspaper in her driveway, and he'd walked a little bit away to wait so that the woman wouldn't reach out and touch him or look into his face or say things to him and expect him to say things back to her. That's when he'd seen two boys in his class come racing each other up the hill and then come to a stop and bend over with their hands on their knees to catch their breath. Even though he was busy piano pedaling away all the sharp edges and bright colors and loud noises around him, he couldn't help but notice that this was a chance to try to do his Making New Friends homework.

The reason he knew it was a chance to try to do his Making New Friends homework is because he saw right away that there was a way that he could help those two boys, and that's another big thing that friends do for



each other, is what Mrs. Montgomery had said. First, he'd had to remind himself how she'd said he should get started, which was to look into their faces (even though that made his stomach feel like it was an elevator that was dropping from floor 100 to floor 1 without stopping at any of the other floors), so he'd walked up to them, but not too close, so that he wouldn't be in their personal space, and did the best he could, which was to look at an ear, first on one of them and then on the other, and then he'd said, "You can't do that here."

That's when both of them had said, "Huh?" at exactly the same time, so he'd pointed to the sign they were standing right next to: SLOW CHILDREN, it said. "This street is only for slow children. See? It's the rule. It's even on a sign, which means it's *really* the rule, so you can't run like that here. I know a lot of the kids around here break that rule but that doesn't make it right. Just because other people break a rule doesn't mean *you* won't get in trouble if *you* break it, and that's why I'm telling you, so you won't do it again and get in trouble. I'm *helping* you because that's what friends do."

Which is when they had looked at each other and started smiling, which made their mouths turn up and which meant that they were feeling happy or friendly or proud, and even though he wasn't sure which one it was, he knew it meant that he must have done a good job of being a friend and he couldn't wait to tell Mrs. Montgomery that. But then one of them had said, "Weirdo," and the other had said, "Freak," and they'd turned and walked on toward Green Bay Road.

That for sure didn't work the way Mrs. Montgomery had said it was supposed to, is what he was thinking then, and he was also thinking, see? he *knew* all along he was going to get a bad grade on this homework, and he was about to go back to his mother and ask her why, if he did everything he was supposed to, he hadn't ended up making new friends, but the funny thing that happened is that that was when he *did* end up making new friends.

*Five* new friends, even, and six if you count Mrs. Delgado, so maybe it just works differently than Mrs. Montgomery explained it, or maybe she forgot to tell him that part, but anyway that was when Mrs. Delgado, who

he didn't know was Mrs. Delgado then, but who had heard what those boys had said to him because she was standing close by, holding Admiral and Cha-cha and Miss Trixie and Popeye and Slugger (who he also didn't know were Admiral and Cha-cha and Miss Trixie and Popeye and Slugger yet) on their leashes where they'd stopped to smell the grass, came up to him and asked him if he'd like to meet *her* friends, which right away it seemed like he was already doing because Cha-cha was licking his hand and Slugger was sniffing his foot and Miss Trixie was rubbing up against his leg and Admiral was sitting on the ground right in front of his feet, looking up at him, and Popeye was jumping up in the air and falling back down again and again to try to get his attention.

You're not supposed to talk to strangers – that's the rule – is what he always finds himself thinking about at times, like now, when he remembers that first day when he met Mrs. Delgado, but then he also always remembers that he never *broke* the rule because he *didn't* talk to Mrs. Delgado. He didn't even *look* at Mrs. Delgado, not even at her ear. He just looked at all the perked up ears and hanging out tongues and wagging back and forth tails and wet black noses that had gathered all around him, and he's pretty sure that the rule was only meant to be about *people* strangers, not *dog* strangers. And *anyway*, he hadn't actually talked to *them* either, but he sure had looked at them.

No clues he had to worry about reading there, is what he'd noticed right away. All the mouths were open with tongues hanging out of them, and all the eyebrows were so furry you'd never know if they were moving up or scrunching down, and all the skin was black and white and brown and dotted and definitely not turning pale or red. And he could even look *right* into all the big brown eyes without feeling that dropping elevator feeling in his stomach because he saw the same exact thing in all of them, which was *them* asking *him* if *he'd* be *their* friend.

The other thing he'd noticed is that, even though none of them was exactly respecting his personal space, it didn't make him feel the way it did when people stood too close to him or touched him or bumped into him. It just made him feel like laughing and getting into *their* personal space, which was what he was doing – kneeling down to pet Popeye and hug Admiral and



scratch Miss Trixie's stomach and shake first Slugger's paw and then Cha-cha's – when his mother finished talking and came over to them.

“My, you sure have your hands full,” she'd said to Mrs. Delgado, who had said, “Jes, it is today my first day I am having this job.”

“I'm Judith Koppelman,” his mother had said then, “and this is my son, Ben. It's nice to meet you.”

“I am Graciela Delgado, and this is a Slugger and Cha-cha and Miss a Trixie and Popeye and Admiral.”

That's how she'd said it, but he'd known, of course, that that wasn't the right way to talk about them, all mixed up like that and not in any special order, and that when he wrote their names in his List Book, which he'd already known he'd be doing as soon as he got to school, he'd put them in *alphabetical* order, so that's who they became in his mind, right then and there: His five new friends – Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye and Slugger. Who he told Mrs. Montgomery about the minute he walked into her room after lunch that day. “Really?” she'd said, and she'd sat back fast in her chair. “FIVE new FRIENDS all in one DAY?” Yep, he'd said, so he should get an A+ for his homework today, that's for sure. Only then, after he'd shown her the list of their names in his List Book, she'd kind of looked the way his bicycle tire did that time when he rode it over a nail, and she'd said, “Oh, I see.”

Which she didn't, he could tell. She *didn't* see that these friends were just as good as – even *better* than – friends who don't have perking up ears and hanging out tongues and wet black noses and wagging back and forth tails. She didn't see that he could have these friends *instead* of the kind who move in bunches and high five each other and slap each other's backs and look into each other's faces all the time. “I think you need to work on being flexible,” he'd told her, and that had made the air go right back into her and she'd sat up straight and put her elbows on the table they were sitting at and said, “Okay. Maybe you're right. Why don't you explain this to me.”

And so that's what he'd done – explained to her that these were for sure his friends because they would be there for him when he was having a bad time, which is what he has *every* morning on the way to school, and

that they would also *help* him, the way they already did today, to not have to piano pedal anymore, which he hadn't had to do the whole rest of the way to school after he'd played with them because he'd been too busy thinking about them to notice the popcorn popping all around him, and *that* would mean that he would do better in math like he already did this morning, because he hadn't been so tired and spacey by the time he got to school, and that they would *also* help him to not have to beg his mother every morning to pleeeeeeease drive him just todaaaaaaaaaaaaaay, which he still does on a lot of mornings, even though he knows it means he won't get extra stickers, because now he won't have that elevator feeling in his stomach and a warning light on inside him as soon as he walks out the door.

And then he'd turned to the page of his List Book where he'd copied down the School Day Morning Routine list at the beginning of the year, and he made a few changes to it and then turned it around toward her so that she could read how it would now be:

1. Get out of bed.
2. Get dressed.
3. Eat breakfast.
4. Brush teeth.
5. Put on coat.
6. Pick up backpack.
7. Walk out door.
8. Walk to bottom of hill.
9. See friends waiting at top of hill.
10. Play with friends.
11. Walk to school.
12. Have a good day

"Okay, okay," she'd said, and her mouth had turned up. "You win." And, even though he hadn't even known they were playing a game, he felt like he really *had* won.

But then, when he'd showed his mother the list after school, *her* mouth had turned down. "Mrs. Delgado may not be there tomorrow," she'd said. "I don't want you to count on seeing her every morning."

"But she *has* to be there," he'd reminded her. "That's her *job*. The rule

is that you go to your job *every* day.”

“Some jobs aren’t every day jobs, honey,” she’d said, “and even if this one is, she may not be there at the exact same time. The rule is *also* that *you* can’t be late for school, remember? I’ll talk to her tomorrow if she’s there, and we’ll see.”

“I hate We’ll See,” he’d reminded her.

“I know,” she’d reminded him back.

But the next morning, Mrs. Delgado had said, “Oh jes. I am coming here every day in the weekadays when the people, they no have it the atime for give a long walk to the adogs. So this is why they give it to me, this yob. And jes, I will be here always at the asame atime *por que* I have ato ago then to another yob, so is okay. I will be here is for sure.”

Which was how he had started actually *liking* walking to school. And which was how everything had gotten better except for one thing, which was that he didn’t get those extra stickers anymore since his mother said that stickers were only for doing hard things, and she had a feeling that maybe *she’d* be the one who should be getting stickers because she could just see that they’d be walking to school every single day from now on, even in the rain and the sleet and the snow. And he’d said, of course they would, look at the list. If he skipped eight, nine, ten and eleven, how was he supposed to get to twelve and have a good day? “Ah, well, if Graciela can take the weather, I suppose I can too,” she’d said.

Graciela is what she called Mrs. Delgado because, while he was playing with Admiral and Cha-cha and Miss Trixie and Popeye and Slugger every morning, they would always be talking, so if his mother had had Making New Friends homework, she would have gotten a good grade on it, too. Maybe not an A+, though, which is what *he* got the day Mrs. Delgado also became *his* friend. He knew right away that she was his friend that day because she was there for him when he was having a bad time, which was exactly what he was having after he’d gotten all tangled up in the leashes and ended up down on the ground on his side in the kind of way that he knew would have made the kids on the playground laugh and point at him and call out, “Koppelklutz!” or “Way to go, Slide!” or “Show ‘em how it’s done, loser!” but which had only made Mrs. Delgado



say – after she had helped him get untangled and get back on his feet – “Oh, this it happen to me, atoo. *Aiii Dios mio*, asomeatime, I think maybe we have here atoo many of the friends. But this adogs, they like very much jou. The boys and the adogs? Like very much one the oter. I know this *por que* I have too a boy who his name is Andreas.”

That’s when he’d heard Mrs. Montgomery’s voice *inside* his head, saying, “Now it’s *your* turn, Ben. This is where you say something about what the other person just said,” so he’d taken a deep breath and said, “Andreas is almost like Andre, which is the name of a man who plays the piano really good. Andre Watts is his whole name. Which is what I do, too, play the piano really good, and in my next recital, I’m going to play Beethoven’s Piano Sonata no. 17 in D minor, which a lot of people call ‘The Tempest,’ but that’s not what Beethoven called it when he was alive, so I don’t either. I don’t either call it that. I just call it Piano Sonata no. 17 in D minor when I’m talking about what I’ll be playing in my next recital, like I just did talk about what I’ll be playing in my next recital when I told it to you, but if I’m talking to Mr. Goldenberg, who’s my piano teacher, I just call it Number 17. Or maybe even just 17. Just 17.”

And then he’d bent down to hug Popeye, which was when Mrs. Delgado had said, “Aseventeen, this is a gud anumber. Andreas, he has aseventeen years,” which is how he’d known that the conversation wasn’t over, even though he had thought that it was, so now it was his turn again, and he began to feel all panicky inside because he couldn’t think of anything else to say about the name Andreas, or about the person Andreas, who he doesn’t even know, or about the number seventeen, so instead, he’d just said the very first thing he could think of, which was, “Why do you talk different than everyone else?” because she *did* talk different than everyone else, so even though he couldn’t think of anything to say about what the person just said, he could at least say something about how she said it, but that’s when he’d seen his mother take a step forward, which had made him think that maybe that wasn’t such a good thing to have said, and that maybe it was even a *rude* thing to have said, and that maybe now he was going to lose a sticker, only he didn’t think he *should* lose a sticker because he hadn’t said she talked *bad*, just that she talked *different*, only *that* made him think about

how maybe different *is* bad, because *he's* different and a lot of people think *that's* bad, so he'd started to feel even *more* panicky inside and almost like he might have to flap his hands up and down, but that was when Mrs. Delgado had laughed.

She'd *laughed*, which Mrs. Montgomery had said means a person is happy or amused or embarrassed, so at least he knew that what he'd said hadn't made her angry or hurt, and that it might have even made her happy or amused, and then, just as he was starting to worry that maybe it had made her embarrassed and he was *still* going to lose a sticker, she'd said, "I talk different *por que* I am born in Mehico," and when he'd looked really fast at her face, just for a second and then away, he'd seen that her mouth was turned up, so *that* meant that she was feeling happy or friendly or proud, so maybe he'd done okay.

Only now it was his turn *again* because she'd just said something new (and see? It *had* been different again, the way she'd said it, but he sure wasn't going to say *that* just in case there *would* go a sticker), so instead he'd said, "Mexico is where Mexican Beaded Lizards live. There are only two species of lizards in the whole world that have dangerous venom, and they're one of them. The other is the Gila Monster."

"This is very much interesting." That's what Mrs. Delgado had said then, and, out of the corner of his eye, he'd seen her eyebrows move up. Startled or surprised. She really *did* think it was interesting! Which had made him feel the way he'd felt in P.E. on that day when they were playing volleyball and Gregory Chin had passed the ball to him really fast and everyone, of course, thought he would miss it because he almost always misses everything in P.E., no matter what kind of ball it is, but that time he'd gotten it anyway and had sent it whizzing right back over the net. "Keep it going!" Mrs. Montgomery was saying inside his head, so he kept it going.

Boy, did he keep it going. "When lizards feel like they're in danger, they can lose their tails to escape and then grow another one later," he'd said while he was scratching Miss Trixie's head. "Lizards smell by tasting the air around them, which is why their tongues go in and out like that," he'd said while he was petting Cha-cha. "There are more than 5,600

species of lizards and the largest one of all is the Komodo Dragon, which can grow to be up to ten feet long,” he’d said while he was feeding Slugger the crust of toast he’d saved from his breakfast and stuck in his jacket pocket for him. “Some lizards have no legs,” he’d said. “Lizards have been on the Earth for more than two hundred million years,” he’d said. “Lizards live everywhere in the world except Antarctica,” he’d said. “Lizards grow for their entire lives,” he’d said. “Lizards shed their skin when they grow out of it,” he’d said. “Some species of lizards can squirt blood from their eyes,” he’d said. Which is when his mother had *really* stepped forward, and which was when *she* had said, “I think we’d better get going, kiddo, or we’ll be late for school.” And that’s when Mrs. Delgado had said to her, “Jour ason has very much asmart. Like my ason, too. My ason who he go to the high aschool, he has very much asmart, too, so I know how much it is a very agood ting, to have a very asmart ason.”

All the way to school that day, he kept hearing her say that, that he was smart. And even all day and all night, he’d remembered it, so when he saw her again the next morning, he wasn’t so afraid of talking to her, too, while he talked to Admiral and Cha-cha and Miss Trixie and Popeye and Slugger. After that, he reminded himself every morning that she’d said that, and that made it easier to talk to her. No one but his parents and his teachers had ever called him that before, and when his teachers did, it mostly seemed like they were sighing, like the next word after smart was always *but*. What he mostly ever remembers people calling him are the kinds of things those two boys had called him when he tried to be their friend. Those kinds of things, and Retard.

Which is what he had heard someone do this morning after he’d realized that the day had broken all apart and had had his meltdown right there on Kimball Lane. He pulls the blanket down from over his head and listens to his mother’s mmmm-mmmm-MMMM-mmmmm turn into words. “. . . no choice but to bring him back home. I couldn’t get through no matter what I . . .” he hears her say, and pulls the blanket back up. Of *course* she couldn’t get through because she had been talking in her slow, quiet voice and the voice in his head had been TALKING SO MUCH LOUDER.

“I need you to get your control and I need you to remember how important it is to be



flexible," she had been saying, while that voice in his head had been saying, "YOUR FRIENDS ARE ALL GONE!"

"Maybe they're just late. Maybe they'll be here any minute."

"NOW YOU CAN'T HAVE A GOOD DAY BECAUSE NINE AND TEN ARE MISSING FROM THE LIST. THE RULE IS THAT IF YOU DON'T GO THROUGH NINE AND SEE YOUR FRIENDS WAITING AT THE TOP OF THE HILL, AND THEN GO THROUGH TEN AND PLAY WITH YOUR FRIENDS, YOU CAN'T GET TO ELEVEN AND WALK TO SCHOOL SO THAT YOU CAN GET TO TWELVE AND HAVE A GOOD DAY. TWELVE IS 'HAVE A GOOD DAY' AND NOW YOU CAN'T GET THERE, TO TWELVE, WHICH IS 'HAVE A GOOD DAY,' SO EVERYTHING'S ALL RUINED. SO EVERYTHING'S ALL RUINED AND NOW YOU'LL HAVE A *TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE DAY.*"

"We'll just wait here for a few minutes and see if they come."

"YOU DON'T *HAVE* A FEW MINUTES. THE RULE IS YOU CAN'T BE LATE FOR SCHOOL."

"I need you to work on being okay with this disappointment."

"THE WHOLE ENTIRE DAY IS RUINED AND BROKEN ALL APART. NOW YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE A TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, ITCHY, SCRATCHY, TOO TIGHT DAY THAT WILL BE JUST LIKE THAT SWEATER YOUR MOTHER'S AUNT HELEN MADE FOR YOU THAT YOU HAD TO PUT ON LONG ENOUGH FOR YOUR FATHER TO TAKE YOUR PICTURE IN IT BECAUSE YOUR MOTHER'S AUNT HELEN WHO YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHO SHE IS BECAUSE YOU NEVER EVEN MET HER WORKED HARD ON IT AND YOU HAD TO REMEMBER YOUR MANNERS FOR AS LONG AS IT WOULD TAKE TO HAVE

**THAT PICTURE TAKEN EVEN THOUGH THAT SWEATER MADE IT SO YOU COULDN'T EVEN BREATHE. ONLY *THIS* TIME IT WILL BE A *DAY* AND NOT A *SWEATER* THAT WILL BE ITCHY AND SCRATCHY AND TOO TIGHT AND MAKING IT SO YOU CAN'T BREATHE, SO THERE WON'T BE A CAMERA CLICK THAT MEANS YOU CAN TAKE IT OFF AND ROLL IT IN A BALL. YOU WON'T *EVER* BE ABLE TO TAKE IT OFF AND ROLL IT IN A BALL BECAUSE YOU CAN'T *TAKE* A DAY OFF ONCE YOU'RE IN IT. THAT'S THE RULE."**

"Maybe Mrs. Delgado is sick. They'll probably be right back here tomorrow."

**"YOU HATE PROBABLY. YOU CAN'T COUNT ON PROBABLY, SO PROBABLY DOESN'T COUNT."**

Which had been when the first bell had rung and he had looked around and seen that most of the children had already turned the corner onto Green Bay Road. There were just a few small bunches of them left and all the kids in all of them were staring right at him. "Retard," he heard someone say, and then someone else said, "shhhh" and they all turned and walked away and then there was no one else left.

"Okay, honey, you know what that bell means."

**"YOU ONLY HAVE TEN MINUTES LEFT BEFORE YOU HAVE TO LINE UP AT THE DOOR. THAT'S JUST SIX HUNDRED SECONDS BEFORE YOU HAVE TO BE LINED UP IN THE EXACT RIGHT ORDER, WHICH IS THE ORDER WHERE YOU GET TO BE THE VERY FIRST PERSON SO YOU CAN WALK WITH MRS. SANTAYA SO NO ONE BUMPS INTO YOU OR POKES YOU OR PUSHES UP AGAINST YOU, WHICH WOULD MAKE YOU HAVE TO SCREAM, 'DON'T TOUCH ME!' WHICH WOULD BE A VERY BAD THING BECAUSE THE RULE IS THAT THERE'S NO TALKING IN THE HALLS."**

"Twenty stickers. You pull yourself together now and we go to school and you get *twenty*



stickers added to your chart. But now means *now*. If we don't leave *now*, we'll miss the *second bell*."

**"THE RULE IS IF YOU MISS THE SECOND BELL, THEY LOCK THE DOOR. THE RULE IS IF THE DOOR IS LOCKED, YOU HAVE TO BUZZ THE VERY LOUD BUZZER THAT HURTS YOUR EARS AND MAKES YOUR HEART JUMP AND YOUR SKIN PRICKLE SO THAT THEY'LL OPEN IT FOR YOU. THE RULE IS IF THEY HAVE TO OPEN THE DOOR FOR YOU, YOU HAVE TO GO TO THE OFFICE TO TELL WHY YOU'RE LATE TO A LADY WITH HIGH HAIR WHO LOOKS RIGHT INTO YOUR FACE. SEE? YOUR TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, ITCHY, SCRATCHY, TOO TIGHT DAY IS ALREADY STARTING."**

"Oh, BENnie!" Suddenly his mother had been using her regular voice and it had even been going up, like maybe she was even *happy*. "There's Cha-cha! And, oh, look over THERE. There's Admiral! Those must be their owners they're with. SEE? It's just like I SAID. Mrs. Delgado must be sick today. But doesn't it make you feel BETter to see that your FRIENDS are oKAY?"

His *friends* were *not* okay. His *friends* were *not* supposed to be all *over* the place like that, like they were all floating away. His *friends* were supposed to be all bunched up and *close* to each other: Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye, Slugger. Like that. Just like that. Not blown all apart. Not like the world was spinning too fast for them to hold *onto* each other. Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye, Slugger. *That's* how they were supposed to be: Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye, Slugger. Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye, Slugger. Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye, Slugger. Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye, Slugger. Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye, Slugger. Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye, Slugger. The world was spinning too fast and he had to try to spin even faster than it was so he could get it back into control. AdmiralCha-chaMissTrixie,PopeyeSlugger AdmiralChachaMissTrixiePopeyeSlugger. He had to spin and stomp his

feet and flap his arms and moan and scream. That's what he had to do, which he suddenly realized someone was already doing, because now he could hear them, the moans and the screams, filling up his ears and his head and his stomach and his skin and his heart.

And the next thing he knew, here he was, in his safe place, listening to his mother mmmmmmm-MMMM-mmmmmmming in the kitchen down the hall. Well, she *should* call his father even though he's busy being a doctor in his office. What bigger emergency can there *be* than a whole broken apart *day*? Only something he's starting to notice is that she's been on the phone a long, long time and so far she hasn't hung up and come into the living room and kneeled down in front of him and said, "Okay, this is what your father and I will do to make this better." Which is making him think that maybe she won't be doing that at all, and *that's* making him think that maybe there's even *more* to being a working-on-being-flexible fourth grader than getting used to Instead and Unless and Together and We'll See. That maybe another part of being a working-on-being-flexible fourth grader is starting to understand that there are some things in this world that, no matter how loud you scream or how fast you spin or how hard you flap your hands, can't anyway ever be fixed.



## OFFERING

C. W. EMERSON

*Now earth to earth in convent walls  
To earth in churchyard sod.  
I was not good enough for man  
And so am given to God.  
—Anonymous Medieval Song*

She kneels beneath the eaves  
where the earth yields easy,  
pine needles under bruised knees,  
working her spade into clotted dirt,  
cradling a bundle in the lap of her skirt.

She knows that Christ is watching,  
that no earthly power is needed  
for a sacrament of light  
to push itself into the world  
and do its work, as she has done.

And now the damp earth  
takes back her trouble. She slips  
a crust of bread into the bundle.  
How expertly she practices  
the husbandry of loss.



## BOY IN YELLOW DRESS

MATTHEW GELLMAN

The sun draws a map into the field  
and a compass at the edge

of the woods. The spinning letters  
spell the word *lost*. On the sycamore,

someone has carved a face.  
I follow the map into the copse

where the wind erases me,  
and the hummingbird with a hornet

in its mouth says *You will always be like this*.  
I want it back: the feathery smoke,

acres of heather and sedge, my name  
the twist in the river's tongue.

## MOTHERS SLEEVELESS

MATTHEW GELLMAN

She walks home from the all-girls'  
Catholic school under the thumb of March,  
arms crossed, petals on her shoulders,

suburban wind blowing into her mouth.  
She's alone, and the boys in the car behind her  
are watching, tobacco wet in their teeth.

They roll down their windows and bang  
on the windshield and honk. One unbuttons  
his pants. She starts to run from the voices,

the balmy street, the car door swinging open;  
past a shattered beer bottle and the empty  
shirts of her neighbors' lawns. She does

what she has learned to do, what she did  
yesterday: she holds down her skirt  
and runs deeper into the life I will enter.

# OLGA CONFRONTS MODERNISM

## CARMEN GERMAIN

“As for me, I have no fear of art,” Picasso said.

But how was it when she first saw *The Bathers*,  
the concave yellow of his lover’s hair,

how every oval offered a vagina, every  
cabana the Minotaur’s lair?

Near salt water, the sun  
spread its red scarf

on a giantess and her sisters, thighs  
massive as pylons of a wharf,

and from a mirror of many colors,  
a girl with a belly of moon gazed at a man.

So you can paint with whatever you want—  
hooks and nails. The hearts of women.

## VANISHING POINT

GUISEPPE GETTO

Alongside a garage in the coastal plain:  
native gardens. Locals restore  
wildflowers, turn toward the sun  
when truck farmers wander  
in their backyards. The yellow film  
of spring oak pollen  
carries barrier islands,  
sifts fine as *might as well*. Houses away  
and months there is a calling—  
and in the case of soil,  
the *shuff* of breeze burning  
with the hum of locusts.

From the pier ships draw lines  
to the horizon, lend their weight  
to perspective. I wake and find  
myself shining. There is no salt  
in the air, instead the exhalation  
of freshly sealed pavement  
greet our newly laced shoes waiting  
by the doorway. From the banks  
of the 400-year-old inlet



the lost colonies dot parchment  
near the empty shipping lanes.  
The spokes of graves in the national cemetery  
recall the season  
for ponds rippling in the scum  
of our forefathers, messages never sent  
or dropped in wagon ruts  
that root turnstiles to the square—  
tiny moments of grace and denial,  
life after life, the same.

## PASSING

LEONORE HILDEBRANDT

the mountain breathes its seasons—  
clouds hung with virga push into the desert  
streaks of rain that never reach the ground

when you hike the Mosca pass  
the rock's barren walls shade the path  
snow smothers the higher ranges

below in the dune field  
rabbitbrush grows in pale-yellow sheets  
meltwater seeps through fine sand  
then dries in the white-crusts flats  
of saltbush and saltgrass

the mountain broods over long and heavy times—  
bison and mammoth graze the valley floor  
night-fires flare up  
women with antler-tools knap spearheads  
and it rains for days

ring of hoofs—Spanish soldiers—  
they walk the horses  
on the narrow boulder-strewn trail

a tollroad awaits settlers  
who push on from Front Range towns  
with their pack trains and wagons

storms pass through--  
the stream's ditches give out  
a thunder-wave washes the road away  
rocks and trees batter the trail  
the tollhouse decays

elk and bear return  
flowers keep close to the path  
flies unravel the air-sound

the pass is humming in time  
--*mosca* means fly--  
stand still and they will gather

## PRAYER AFTER

AMANDA HOPE

I pray to whichever god keeps me from missing trains.  
Each prayer exacts a price. This time I give my lungs.

Not all parts of the self are needed in this world.  
Sometimes damage is beautiful – the spark

Of the pitted window, the glaze of colors in the spilled oil  
Coating the feathers of a dying bird. I give my fingers,

And pray to the god who turns doorknobs and ties shoes.  
Would it surprise you to learn what I can do without?

I lived ten years as a creature of claws, trying to conjure  
Kindness by spilling blood. Another ten I was a lizard

And whenever someone reached for me, my tail fell off in their hand.  
Now I have traded my apologies to the god who gives bread,

My secrets to the one who will grant me a warm place  
To curl in sleep. All that is left to me, my

Fear of doing harm, more vivid than the memory  
Of temperate seasons. I pray to whichever god will take it,



Leaving me simple. Leaving me shimmer. Leaving me  
What's left, unrecognizable, imperfect and final.

## SAINT FRANCIS' DREAM OF THE MUNDANE

JASON IRWIN

Who am I, if not my father's son?  
Heir to all his proclivities, his hyperbole.  
Yet look at me, itinerant and clownish,  
a mangy troubadour  
with glory burning in his half blind eyes.  
Alone in this wood tonight –  
the moon and stars above, the wind,  
the wolves howling in the distance –  
as I chase after God,  
that leather clad easy rider: at times  
wistful, and vengeful. Covetous,  
with a child's taste for gore.  
See how I suffer his wounds: tattoos of love  
writ in blood. Look at me,  
kissing lepers. Reciting poetry  
to the birds. Some nights  
I think how wonderful it would be,  
to trade in this beat existence  
for a split level in the suburbs –  
something mundane, yet respectable:  
a grocer, or insurance officer  
like Kafka. A room of my own,  
with a window facing the river,

where I could sit in the mornings  
with a cup of tea and watch  
the millwright's daughters bathe.

## KEEPS ME HANGIN'

MOYE ISHIMOTO

Once again, The Supremes are stalking me. Just this week, I heard "Where Did Our Love Go?" at Albertsons, Diana Ross's voice following me down the aisle of canned beans and tomato paste. On the car radio yesterday morning, "You Can't Hurry Love" the second I turned the ignition key. Today, "Stop! In The Name Of Love" vibrating the speakers at the drycleaners where the old Asian guy always tries to talk to me in Korean. *Annyeong haseyo*, he says as I heave a pile of wrinkled clothes onto the counter.

"Sorry," I say. "Japanese?" I point to my face as if that explains everything. He grins and nods like he understands, though I know we'll go through the same routine next week.

No one believes me about The Supremes. My boss laughs, my sister, Grace, ignores me and, if we were speaking, my mom would simply shake her head.

Grace and I are sitting in a 50's-style diner called Roxy's, just off of Vermont Avenue. The opening beat to "You Keep Me Hangin' On" begins exactly as the waitress in her tight pink uniform hands us our menus. She taps her right foot impatiently to the song as we order our drinks, ice water for me and for my sister, a chocolate shake, no whip. I hate these kinds of places but when your older sister craves all things indulgent, and she's currently the only family member you're at the moment talking to, options are limited. So I sit and silently criticize the turquoise vinyl booths, the checkered linoleum floor, the chrome tabletop jukeboxes. The walls are



decoupage with old LPs, poodle skirts, tin signs, and classic horror movie posters where hapless women cower in the arms of hairy monsters. One corner of the wall is a proud display of *I Like Ike* bumper stickers, though nowhere is the friction leading to the Civil Rights movement, still a decade away. As if the future back then was already better, the ozone layer healed over, a healthy rainforest, affordable healthcare for everyone. A utopian restaurant from a blind past.

"Do you hear that?" I ask, but Grace's head is blocked by the enormous plastic menu, which she holds up like a laminated altar to greasy food. Blue-plate specials scream out in bright, yellow explosions where her face should be. Salisbury steak! Breakfast served 24-7! I already know what I'm getting, garden salad with ranch dressing for \$4.99, so I kick the edge of her seat.

"I'm still deciding."

"It's happening again," I say. "The song." She lowers the menu, cocking her head to listen. Her short black hair, possibly the only thing we have in common, swings around the back of her neck.

"Donna Summer?" she asks, the menu flipped up again. She's thirty, six years older than me with a magna cum laude from Harvard and a law degree from USC. She prints money like all big time corporate attorneys and even from the lofty heights of her income tax bracket, she's still determined to take me down a notch whenever possible. As if me being an under-employed junior college dropout isn't enough.

But after hearing The Supremes for the fifth time this week, I think, *Please*. Diana Ross's girlish lilt confused with the sultry and soaring Donna Summer, Queen of Disco? The waitress, young, the collective weight of the 21st century on her furrowed brow, reappears. She thumps down a chocolate milkshake with whipped cream and a glass of water.

"Do you know what song this is?" I ask, and she says, "No clue," licks her thumb and flips to a new notepad page. A chunk of red hair falls over her eyes. "Ready to order?"

"The Supremes," I say, and she stares at me, her face so blank that I wonder if I spoke in English. This time, Grace kicks me under the table. Hard, then orders a Reuben, Russian dressing on the side and French fries.

I point to the garden salad, located in the saddest corner plot of the menu, wedged between the dry toast, the grilled onions and the lonely pancake. But there are six crumpled dollar bills in my wallet and it's all I can afford.

"Don't you think it's weird that I hear their songs everywhere?" I ask after the waitress leaves. I've read everything I could find about The Supremes, how they met in high school and sang backup on Motown albums in hopes of their own record deal. How they topped the charts, one of the first African American groups to overcome racial boundaries. Grace scoops the whipped cream off the milkshake and onto a napkin. I know what she's thinking, that she *specifically* asked for a shake without it, that she should have complained to the waitress, and that somehow, this is all my fault. "I need to figure out what it means," I say.

"Try putting the effort into finding a real job," she says, because every meal together needs to revolve around this same subject. The whipped cream deflates into a soggy lump between us.

"I do have one," I say. Sort of. A meager paycheck shows up in my mailbox, made out to a Ms. Mina Tanaka, and from the production offices of a Mr. Scott Rosen who's too busy to pick up his dog's poop or drop off his own dry-cleaning or wait for the cable technician to install a new satellite receiver on his roof. So the honor falls to me, three times a week.

"You're talking about cheesy pop music," Grace says. "It's not supposed to mean anything." She smiles at the waitress, who slides our plates across the table. The Reuben glowers at me in its greasy deliciousness, the Swiss cheese melting down the pink layers of Pastrami into a toothy grin. My stomach grumbles as the Russian dressing oozes out from between the slices of grilled Rye, as if to say, *Take that, Miss Grace.*

I ask, "What if the universe is trying to send me a really important message?" I don't say so, but I wonder, when does a series of coincidences indicate something more? Grace pauses in the middle of cutting her sandwich, like this is some fancy dinner complete with linen tablecloths and all, because my sister is a strange, neurotic being who abhors touching food with her hands. She shakes her head at the dressing now spilling onto her plate. Or at me. I can't tell.

"About what?" she asks. That's the thing, I tell her. What do The

Supremes have to do with me? For example, take “Reflections,” which played on the radio the other day. Granted, I’d dialed up the oldies station, but what were the odds the deejay, at that exact moment, would choose *that song* out of thousands while I sat caught in traffic? *Trapped in a world / that’s a distorted reality*. Maybe it’s telling me to move on. But from what? I hum along under my breath until Grace lowers her fork and knife.

“Mom called,” she says, so softly that I almost don’t hear. In fact, I pretend that I haven’t. Grace may insist on having dinner with me every other week to “catch up”—her way of keeping tabs on how far my life *isn’t* going—but I’ve counted six months since I last saw our mother, the bricks of silence building between us. A curt exchange of words that led to my angry yells and her frustrated sighs, all compounded by our dad passing away three years ago. That’s when everything I believed flipped upside down and I dropped out of school. “She wants to sell the house,” Grace says.

I drop the fry that I’d stolen from her plate. “She can’t.”

“Yes, she can,” she says. Our childhood home, the one with the green shutters and the thick bougainvillea in Hancock Park, is going on the market. The purple bathroom where Grace taught me how to shave my legs, the rusty mailbox my parents were too cheap to replace. The dining room where we’d sit through our father’s endless stories about playing golf and watching *Jeopardy*—all for sale. Not to mention his study, stuffy with the faint reek of old leather and cologne, that very room where he passed away suddenly from an aortic dissection, a tear in his heart muscle that continues, to this day, to split our family apart. Grace says, “I told her to at least hold off until the housing market improves, or to rent the place out and move into a condo if she hates it that much.”

“She’s only doing this for attention,” I say. “Like how she cut her hair and started taking Pilates classes.”

“I’m being serious,” Grace says. “She’s already talked to a real estate agent. A staging company is coming and she wants to clean the whole house out.”

“She can’t,” I repeat. She couldn’t. No matter the number of arguments or how intense the strain between us, home is supposed to be untouchable. The vintage photographs of celebrities—Tony Curtis, James



Dean, Bobby Darin—wink down at me from the walls, as if they've known the truth all along.

"I'm going over Saturday to help out," Grace says. Then her voice takes on that bossy lawyer tone. Do this. Do that. Objection. Your Honor. "Call her," she orders me, like I'm some naive paralegal.

"Whatever."

"Don't tell me you're still mad at her."

"That's none of your business."

"Listen, we can't do this alone."

"Doesn't look like Mom has much of a problem with that."

"It's her house."

"Why do you always take her side?"

"Maybe this is the best thing for her," Grace says. "So she can finally move forward."

"She already has," I shoot back. "What's next, a boyfriend?"

"Since when are you so protective of Dad?" she asks. When I scowl and refuse to meet her eyes, she leans forward. "The plan was for them to live there together after Dad retired, remember? But that's not going to happen. And it's too big for one person." Grace sits back and picks at her sandwich. "Things aren't the way they used to be."

"Wait a minute," I say, and I can almost feel the sun breaking through the clouds above my head, everything suddenly coming into sharp focus. "That's what Diana Ross is trying to tell me. With 'Reflections.'"

"What the hell are you talking about?" she asks, her plate scraping as she pushes it away.

"The Supremes."

"Stop. Just stop it. There is *no* connection," Grace says, her voice now in full lawyer-badgering-the-witness mode. "They're singing about love, not selling houses. If they were singing about you, don't you think their lyrics would be about not having a job? Or a boyfriend? Getting paid to walk dogs? If you're looking for a sign, then start listening to me. Diana Ross could care less."

I stare at my plate, a tangle of wilted iceberg lettuce, chalky carrot shreds and a cherry tomato. Grace draws her breath in sharply, as if an



apology were blossoming on her lips but already vanished into the same dismissive heart she shares with our mother. She waves at the waitress, who slowly shuffles over with our check. Grace rifles through her bag for her wallet, I dig a quarter out of my pocket and flip the song titles on the miniature jukebox, the pages like wings behind the curved display glass. Fats Domino, "Ain't That A Shame." The Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice." The Righteous Brothers, "Unchained Melody."

The Supremes nowhere in sight.

By Saturday, our home already looks different. I pull my car into the driveway and take in the changes: the bougainvillea, usually a pink explosion above the front windows, now a manicured, orderly L-shape. A heavy ornate mailbox, snobby and condescending, as if only the most important letters stopped here. As expected, the front door no longer groans when I push it open.

My father used to joke about the noisy hinges, what he referred to as the "cheapest security system in the neighborhood." Handymen came and went without a fix, but I liked how each evening, that low whine announced my dad's return from his job at Cargo Express, Grace back from her SAT class. Mom ushering in the paramedics who arrived too late. I shake my head. Now, anyone can sneak in.

"Hello?" I call out, slipping my sneakers off next to a giant potted plant, which I've never before seen, the living room nearly anonymous. Gone are the framed family photographs on the mantelpiece—Grace with her law school diploma, me in my Girl Scouts uniform, our parent's wedding—and the familiar trail of keys, mail-order catalogues and knick-knacks that my mom leaves on the coffee table. *Hey, life, look at me. / I can see the reality.*

"You came," my mother says, making her way down the stairs. "Grace said you were going to call." She's taller and plumper than I remember, and yet, she glows, her hair cut short like my sister's, a wreath of black waves, her fuchsia workout clothes so bright and cheery and unwidow-like.

"Nice outfit," I say, which is easier to say than "I guess we're talking again" or worse, "I'm sorry." I walk over to the fireplace. "Where'd all our

pictures go?"

"I packed them up, don't worry," my mom says. "The agent recommended no personal items out during the open house, so I thought I'd get a head start."

"Isn't it a little too soon?" I follow her upstairs, her feet barely making a dent in the thick carpet.

"We got started on Daddy's stuff," she says. "Grace is in the bedroom. Look at you." She stops to squeeze the top of my arms. "Too skinny. Is everything okay?" I notice that she's not wearing her wedding ring, a small trio of diamonds that I used to name for the three of us. "What about Daddy?" she'd ask, and I'd point to the gold band that circled her finger.

"I'm *fine*," I say, and pull away and stride down the hall, because suddenly I can't take her being so nice, so protective, this mother of mine, who somehow forgot that the last time we were in the same room, we yelled unforgivable things at each other. *Nothing but heartaches / Oh, nothing but heartaches.*

"Glad you finally showed up," my sister says. She sits cross-legged on the floor of my parent's bedroom, rifling through a nest of silk ties. Dad's old suits and button-down shirts are strewn across the floor between half-filled garbage bags and cardboard boxes. The empty shelves and racks look forlorn in the yellow light of the walk-in closet.

"Can't stay long," I say.

"You have to work? On the weekend?" my mom asks, and I offer up a half-smile. Grace raises an eyebrow, like she can see straight through me, that the only reason I have to leave in a couple hours is because Mr. Rosen needs his dry-cleaning picked up. That I'm here to help, not make amends.

"Not a big deal," I say, and before Grace can say something rude, I grab a striped blue polo shirt my dad used to don when he golfed.

"Untangle this," Grace says, tossing me the ball of ties. I duck. "No clue why you kept these for so long, Mom."

"Oh, stop," our mother says, and picks up the ties from the floor. "Your dad worked hard to put these in order." She rubs the patterned silks between her fingers.

"So, you want to keep those? Or trash?" Grace asks impatiently. Our

mother sighs and then tosses the ties towards the biggest pile in the room.

“Look at all these clothes,” I say, sitting down. “What happened to Dad’s UCLA sweatshirt? The one we bought for his birthday?”

“Good luck finding that old thing here,” Grace says.

“We’ve got two piles, one to pack and the other to donate,” my mom tells me, pointing around her. The second heap, the ties on top, is twice as large as the other.

“Or,” Grace says, “we can just make *one* big pile and throw it all out.” I hold up a pair of black socks. “Remember how he used to wear these everywhere? Even to the beach?”

“Unless you’re prepared to lug his stuff around for the rest of your life,” Grace says.

My mother bites her bottom lip, clothes strewn everywhere, wire hangers zigzagging around the floor. “Probably not.”

“Wait, you’re not going to get rid of *everything*,” I say. I’ve been home for all of five minutes, and already the past is slipping away. I stand up, the blue shirt falling to the floor.

“What’s the point of keeping it?” Grace asks.

“Mom.” I turn to her, hoping for once that she’ll side with me. “You’re holding onto at least some of his things, right?”

“What would she do with a closet full of suits?” Grace asks. “There’s no room.”

“There would be if we weren’t selling the house,” I say.

“We already went over this.”

This is *Dad* we’re talking about,” my voice high-pitched and loud, because it’s the only way anyone will listen.

“This is Dad’s *stuff*. There’s a big difference.”

I turn back to my mom for help, for anything, something, a sign that I’m not alone in thinking that we’re not ready to let go. She only purses her lips in that same exact manner whenever my dad, at the dinner table, demanded more from me. Better grades, better behavior, a better reason for them to not feel so disenchanting with me. *Say something*, I’d mentally transmit to her, *Say that I’m good enough*, but my mom would merely nod along, squeeze my hand under the table or begin to clear the dishes. She



looks down at her clasped hands, right thumb over her left knuckles, pressing at the spot exactly where those three diamonds used to be.

Despite my mother's nefarious attempts to transform the house into a Pottery Barn catalogue, I find my old bedroom unscathed. Yearbooks, CDs, sticker albums and issues of SPIN magazine weigh down the bookshelf. I know that if I reach down beneath the bed, I'll still find my Barbie dolls and red shoebox full of tiny ceramic animals.

In the dim light, I can almost believe I'm a teenager again, my sister next door, the lamp on her desk burning a halo around her chair as she studies into the night. Me, on the bed like now, not bothering to do my homework. Followed by the solitude after Grace leaves for college, then law school while I stay put, swapping my dollhouse for a Soundgarden poster, my *Babysitter Club* paperbacks for an AIWA boom box. When it's my turn, I pick Santa Monica College because it's only thirty minutes away and moving out seems less of a hassle than simply embracing the way things were, with me always a little lost and Dad forever a little disappointed.

And then he dies in the room directly below mine, and me listening to the clatter of my mom washing the dishes, and formulating excuses to ditch English class in the morning. Mom calls his name, like it's dinnertime all over again and he *still* won't come to the table. She starts yelling my name, but like always, I don't listen. I check my email, her voice higher and higher until I tumble down the stairs to the study, where she sits on the floor, holding his hand, his face strangely gray and by the time I dial 911, it's already too late.

After the funeral, Grace solemnly sorts out the life insurance, cancels his cell phone plan, the title to his beloved Toyota. I fully expect our mother to carry on his tradition of nagging me about why I'm not at school, why I'm not doing better, where I'm going and why. Rather, her heartache manifests in levity, a slow release that lifts her shoulders and eyes. *For a feeling that's so new / So inviting, so exciting.*

Grace sees it as healthy ("When's the last time you saw Mom laugh so much?" or "It's good that she's going out more.") but even now, I scramble to piece together what our family meant and means. A lopsided table of



three. Silence whenever I returned home too late or too early. Every fickle decision—a short-lived tongue piercing, a Tuesday hangover—met with my mother’s new signature cocktail of resignation and nonchalance. What else could I do but stop going to school altogether? Fewer and fewer credits each semester until I had just enough to quit. “If that’s what you want to do,” was her response, and that night I scoured Craigslist for a job, packed a suitcase and moved out.

My bedroom door skids open across the carpet and I quickly wipe my eyes before my mother can see. She steps in, hands on her waist like she’s surveying a crime scene.

“We have to start clearing this room next,” she says.

“That’s really all you think about now,” I say, and sit up on the bed. Down the hall comes the jingle of hangers.

“There’s so much to do. Sometimes I feel like I’m never going to get the house ready in time.” She kneels on the floor next to me and, for a moment, I imagine she’s going to wrap her arms around my legs. Instead, she leans down and pulls the shoebox from under the bed. “Remember these?”

“How’d you know that was there?”

“I found them,” she says. “Someone still has to vacuum under here, you know.” She pulls off the cardboard lid and holds the box out, the miniature zoo no longer the jumble I remember, but rather in orderly rows, fitted together like a haphazard Tetris game. Kittens with painted balls of yarn. The outstretched wings of swans. Porcelain elephants with trunks raised, ceramically frozen in time.

The box jangles in my hands. “Thanks.”

My mother says, “You used to spend so much time collecting these. Why’d you throw them in a box?”

I shrug. “Where else?” In truth, I’d forgotten all about them, a culmination of gift shop souvenirs and flea market treasures. I hid the box as soon as I entered junior high, a desperate measure to distinguish myself from uncool to cool.

“I remember how you’d leave them out on the kitchen counter or the stairs, even one time in the mailbox.”

"A traveling circus," I say. "Well, until Dad stepped on one."

"Can you blame him?" she says. "Who'd expect a fragile little pig sitting behind the bathroom door?"

"It was a lion," I say. "And he never replaced it."

"It wouldn't have mattered, though," she says. "You would've just tossed it into this shoebox with the rest."

Because she's right, I stay silent, the shoebox a forgotten relic when I moved out, armed only with a laptop, some clothes, a couple of favorite books.

"I'll take the box with me tonight," I say. I'll find space in my studio apartment. Maybe along the windowsill or the broken radiator.

"But only if you need them," she says.

"I can—"

My mother pats my knee. "That's the problem with things," she says, and stands up, her hand now on my shoulder. "Sometimes you have to let them go."

I follow her back to the master bedroom, where Grace sneezes as she pulls out yet another pair of Dad's pants. Without a word, I join them. We open, shake out, ascertain, gather and fold, like three peasant women bent over in a field of dirty laundry. After I tie the ends of the last garbage bag, I run back to my bedroom and return with one final donation: a red shoebox that rings with my every step.

Brass bells chime as I push open the glass door to the dry-cleaners. My arms are sore from lifting and carrying and stuffing so many garbage bags into the backseat of my car.

The old Asian man looks up from behind the counter and raises his hand to greet me. *Annyeong*, he says, and when he smiles, his eyes disappear in a web of wrinkles.

"I'm not—" I begin to say but cut myself short. I'm late picking up Mr. Rosen's dry-cleaning, having lingered at home with the emptiness settling around us, Grace asking about dinner, me looking at my watch and rushing out of the house, promising to drop off Dad's stuff at Goodwill.

"No Korean, I know," the man says, then checks the paper stub I hand

him. He pushes the red button on the wall next to him and the carousel creaks into motion. What looks like a line of headless businessmen in plastic suits rotates around the store. "But still I like to say hello."

"Oh, hello," I say, realizing I've never greeted him, despite coming in here at least twice a week. He retrieves several dress shirts and a black suit.

"It's okay," he says. "Rush, rush, rush. Sometime good to stop and talk."

"Yeah," I say, and amidst the hiss and clanging of the ironing presses, music floats through the ceiling speakers. "Excuse me," I call out to where he stands by the cash register. "Do you know what song this is?"

He pauses to listen, then turns up the volume on the stereo next to him. *A feeling so divine / Till I leave the past behind / I'm lost in a world / Made for you and me.* He shakes his head.

"It's The Supremes," I say.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Definitely," I say. "I can recognize Diana Ross from a mile away."

"Ah, yes," he says, handing me the receipt. "Queen of disco?"

I consider correcting him, a brief explanation on the history of Motown and music during the 1960's before I deliver the laundered goods to Mr. Rosen's house. But then I hear Diana crooning over the melody of her lover's kiss, a thousand violins filling the air, our hearts beating in tune. The carousel of plastic wrapped coats and silk dresses sway a slow dance with the soft crinkle of static electricity.

"Exactly," I say, and match the grin on his face. I pay, and swinging the freshly cleaned clothes over my shoulder, exit the shop. The brass bells tinkle their farewell. Outside, the setting sun casts an orange glow on my parked car, and in the back seat, the stuffed garbage bags light up like giant paper lanterns.

## THE HORROR

ROBERT LEVY

Watching a bad horror movie last night  
was so good it almost hurt when the end  
proved too improbable, undercutting

the gleeful *Grand Guignol* that preceded—  
90 minutes of hacksaws and trephines  
as kinetic as a kaleidoscope,

and, finally, as repetitive. Blood  
will out, it's said, and out it came, almost comic  
in its stalwart capacity to shun

a scintilla of believability,  
which I didn't mind a bit. Only when  
the director tried to knit everything

into a neat ball that might roll over  
the implausibility of all  
that came before did I step outside

the splatterfest, laughing for a moment  
(possible without cruelty because  
no one who died was more than a puppet



jerked to and fro on the scriptwriter's strings  
and all that shed blood was ultimately  
ironic and self-referential, less

life essence than liquid scenery). The jock,  
the virgin, the whore, the nerd—each in turn  
received their red comeuppance for the roles

they played in the story's machinations  
as the shoddy plot unwound with the sound  
of rusty gears meshing and unmeshing.

O it was a perverse pleasure to witness  
punishment meted out so discretely,  
a torrent of body parts and torments,

all designed to remind each character  
of the true horror of themselves, the parts  
they played inexorably in a world

reduced to the dual satisfactions  
of judgment and castigation rendered  
instantly. Perhaps that is the best thing

about the genre—its unequivocal  
simplicity, its easy acceptance  
of good and evil with no in-betweens,

no grays to muddle the deluge of red  
that poured ineluctably from every  
pore. Only at the end, when the movie

tried to put paid to the meaninglessness  
of everything that went before, when it

brought together the virgin and the nerd,

resolved their essential disparity  
with the *deus ex machina* of "love,"  
did it cut the essential fuchsia thread

that bound the warped proceedings together  
in a way that was more comforting  
than scary, because everything that transpired

was so quaintly bland and expectable,  
so blatantly false and mechanical  
it made it possible to just relax

and tell one's self: *this is not real life, no,  
nor death, these sharp edges will never touch  
or slice an iota of my own flesh,*

*and thus I can sleep in peace, without the fear  
that an insane-asylum escapee  
in a hockey mask will shatter my window*

*late some night and slaughter me where I lay.*  
So I turn off the lights and tell myself  
it's all a sleazy dream of a fraught world

where everything that can go wrong will,  
where the house next door is always home to  
a family of serial killers,

that nothing, really, is as frightening  
as not having this alternate world  
in which to retreat, that what's truly scary

is finally pulling the covers up  
to one's chin, as though hiding your body  
from yourself beneath the sheets, the thick sound

of your heart ticking off every last minute,  
in your ears until all you are left with  
is the inescapable *thereness* of you.

## RINGS AROUND US

JENNIFER MET

the ring of fire—just a thought—  
it sounds like something from high fantasy  
magical jewelry forged deep in the magma  
heart of Middle Earth—an ancient artifact  
of more violent times—fiction—but it is real—  
the name given to the Earth's Pacific Rim—rife  
with seismic activity—with volcanic eruptions  
and earthquakes—with the collision of many  
tectonic plates—a place I have never been—  
a place I have not even seen on television  
recently—it has been months since the reports  
of earthquake and tsunami damage—the area  
again shrouded in invisibility—just a thought  
as I sit in the emergency room lobby waiting  
for the final paperwork—the scare is over  
and for a brief moment I even heard the baby  
heartbeat materialize—fast and strong—under  
my own steady rhythm—so now it is faith  
on which I live—belief that that ancient moment  
was real—not just high fantasy—and as I walk  
the forest next to my home these months later  
I see a black bear—a cub huffing from high  
up a yellow pine—where is the mother—just



a thought—but I know she is there—invisible—  
but there—as sure as the Pacific Rim—as sure  
as a wedding ring merging two souls across  
time and place—as sure as my jogging heartbeat  
or the life growing inside me—as sure as the  
Japanese aftershocks were real—not just fiction—  
somewhere—and for the first time I feel like a mother  
my heart reaching to overlap the baby I can't keep  
secret—theoretical—safe—fiction—just a thought

# HOW TO CONVINCe YOUR MOTHER TO GIVE UP THE FARM

JENNIFER MILLER

We'll pack up your two hundred acres, your thirty-odd years  
of home— blue birds in the nest box by the pond, the insatiable gaze  
of the fox, flocks of wild turkeys, the satellite-dish ears  
of deer outside windows at dawn. Breakables will be wrapped  
carefully: memories hanging like icicles from eaves;

fog; horses snorting in winter, the plush of muzzles as they lean  
from stalls. We'll press into paper spring grass in pastures,  
and wildflowers—bloodroot, hepatica, dogtooth violets.

We'll preserve strawberries, blueberries, blackberries. The garden  
can be put up in jars. We'll keep the idea of Hubbard squashes,

how they burgeon from manure piles with such giant dreams.

Autumn leaves—maple, beech, birch —can be dried into fiery seasonings,  
and friends and neighbors can be smoked like hams — farmers,  
farriers, vets, professors, and priests. Pancake breakfasts

at sugar houses can be ordered for take-out. We'll ferment the juiciest

gossip into sparkling wine; bubble wrap the last three chickens

and the last two cats, and if you want, also the skunks and bad luck—  
frozen pipes, cracked bones. Ambulances. Mud, shit, sweat, drought,

in sickness and in health. We'll exhume the border collie struck dumb  
by a car. Swaddle the arthritic ewe, the burnt bones of the ram,

stone-heaped graves of mare and ancient race horse. We'll digitize  
crickets, cicadas, and silence. Furl up the farm poster:  
sagging fences, slapdash outbuildings, the long trampled scarf  
of a drive. As for the cauldron of night sky roiling with stars—  
we'll roll it up like a carpet.

## MAKING DINNER FOR W. H. AUDEN

MICHAEL MINGO

I don't think Auden likes my cooking,  
the way he drags his spoon around  
the surface of the stew, the way  
his lips have barely moved an inch.  
I've read his essays, but I haven't  
any clue about his tastes.

I question every choice I made  
(Should I have added extra salt  
or thrown the shaker in the trash?  
Would pepper flakes have raised the dish,  
or made it taste of sprinkled soot?)  
and wonder why I let him in.

At first, he seemed the perfect man  
to share a Sunday dinner with.  
He's fond of lists, which lend themselves  
to recipes, and likes to see  
the cutting-edge of kitchen gear.  
I figured I was well prepared:  
my microwave and Ginsu knife  
would blow his antiquated mind,  
and even novice cooks like me  
can make a supper step-by-step.



But then he made a small request  
for certain spices, meats, and stocks--  
and didn't say what dish he wanted.  
I should have known he'd pose a riddle  
to any man who'd serve his food.  
I thought the answer should be simple  
and so I filled a pot of broth  
with everything my guest demanded  
and let them stew like aphorisms.  
I said: "The best ingredients  
will make an even better stew."

But Auden clearly disagrees.  
He doesn't even try to hide  
the lack of pleasure on his lips,  
the disappointment in his mouth,  
and at this moment I would love  
to smear the stew across his vest.  
I ask him what he wants from me.  
"You're the chef," he says, "and you're  
the one who needs to know, not me."

# THE WOMAN WHO DEVOURS THE LAND

MEGAN PARKER

We look exactly like the tourists we are. Flashlights looped onto our wrists with elastic bands and canteens hooked to belts and bobbing against khaki-covered thighs, we descend into the maw of the dead lava tube single file. My little sister, Rae, adjusts her Velcro headlamp so it sits centered against her forehead, her hair frizzed about her face like an auburn halo in the Hawaiian humidity. Our tour guide, Hokuikikai (“Call me Star,” he had said), offers his palm, and Rae toes down the uneven black rock. Our parents have already ducked into the shadows of the cave ahead of us. I can hear my mom fussing over her lilac Land’s End hiking boots. “Is this dirt on the heel? Is that a scuff? These are *brand new*.” The flash of my dad’s Nikon FM 10 illuminates the entrance in brief snippets of white light, creating with the darkness what my art tutor would call *chiaroscuro*—the art of light and shadow.

Fleet, my twin brother, maneuvers over loose bits of rock in true soccer striker fashion. Hence his college scholarship. “Hurry up, Paisley!” He beams at me over his shoulder as I stumble after him, last in line. We’re in a sort of bowl scooped out of the earth, made accessible by a narrow concrete staircase that leads down from the state park. Whiskers of fern sprout through layers of igneous rock while plumeria tree roots, broken through the ground from above, swing rope-like to the fossilized floor. Star notices me eyeing the fuchsia flowers that pock the dark ground, their thick stamens thrust into the air. “Flamingo-lily,” he says. Fleet bends to flick one. “Dick flowers.” This foreign green makes my head feel like a black and gray

kaleidoscope, all splotchy and unfocused. I'm waiting for my eyes to dilate to what's real.

As I blink away the black blobs, my fingers begin to do their uncontrollable dance my dad nicknamed the "Tardive Tarantella." He started using this moniker to make my mental illness seem more manageable. It's not. My hands have mutated into permanent tambourines—a side-effect of being on haloperidol, my little peach pills, too long. Part of why I upended each prescription bottle into the hotel toilet last week. But only a small part. It's good, really, that my hands still play the part of a symptom—otherwise my mom would see what I've done, would end our trip early. Truthfully, my fingers only bother me when I paint.

I slink inside the cave with the others. We congregate against the backdrop of sunlight, clicking on flashlights almost in tandem.

"Alright, Nelson family," says Star, his Hawaiian accent thick. "Let's go over a few guidelines before we begin our hike. Rule number one: Tread carefully. Years of wear and tear have loosened up the pahoehoe—the smooth lava rock—which is already slippery from ground water leaking through the ceiling and walls. Watch your step, true?"

Fleet salutes. "Yessir!"

My mom adjusts the canvas ear flaps on her pointless hat. My dad smacks the back of Fleet's head. "Knock it off."

"Rule number two: Stay hydrated. Even though we're out of direct sunlight, you'll be expending lots of energy on our ten-mile hike. Also," Star adds, "the more you drink, the less vog will bother you."

"What?" asks my dad.

"Vog. Volcanic smog," says Star. "It can trigger allergies."

As if on cue, Rae and I both sneeze. The acoustics of the tunnel echo the sound.

"Bless you," I say to Rae.

Fleet looks my way. "You okay, Fruit Loop?" His little joke for me.

"Just being polite," I say.

Star continues, "And rule number three: Stay together. You'd be surprised how easy it is to get separated in these dark tunnels."

"What happens to the people who get lost?" I ask. Perhaps there is

something like eagerness in my voice, because Rae frowns.

“Most turn up sooner or later. On occasion, though, a poor *haole* or two has wandered away from their group, probably into one of the smaller tubes that branches off this main part here, and, well...” Star shrugs. “I suppose they are at the mercy of the *unhane* now. Or have become ghosts themselves.”

Fleet prods my arm and says in poor Pidgin, “Ma-ke die dead.” Less than two weeks in Hawai‘i and my brother thinks he can speak the local lingo like Star. But I pay attention too, and I translate the slang: *Really, really dead.*

“Gracious,” my mom says to Star, fanning herself with her hand. “How awful.” An itch runs across my lips, and I hunt it with the tip of my tongue. How awful, indeed.

“So what does—how do you say it?—Ho-ke-ko-cockeye mean?” Fleet asks Star. We have been hiking for about twenty minutes on lava Star tells us stopped flowing in 1881. The tube’s entrance has become a yellow dot behind us. Wind screeches through cracks in the rock, carrying with it the eggy smell of vog. It leaves us all sneezing and wiping our noses. Dad stops every two seconds to take a picture of basalt identical to the bit he just passed. His white-hot flash detonates on repeat. It lets me see strange shapes in the negative light—cherry bombs of eyes, psychedelic curves of shoulders and knees mummified in rock. I’m in a raving lightning storm of stone ghosts.

“Hoh-koo-ee-keh-kai,” says Star. “My father was a navigator, a canoe voyager. He made passages across Polynesia, guided only by the horizon and stars. He named me Star of the Sea.”

“Like a sea star? A starfish?”

Star squints at him. “No.”

Silence settles then, which suits me. I can hear my thoughts this way, unfettered. I can see better, too. The haloperidol was some serious black magic—it altered what I could hear and see, exchanged hallucinations for something “real.” It felt like watching a censored TV: Every time I turned to a channel the pills prohibited—saw someone or something that apparently wasn’t there—my mind would reset, the image reimaged. Poof! Magic.



Now, I'm finding it difficult to mirror what I see and hear with what others sense. If I were alone, I wouldn't question. But now I must mutate, keep my family blind to my deceit. I force myself to see the lava like them—blackened and frozen mid-motion. As petrified as the forest in Arizona we visited last June for Fleet's and my high school graduation. Like the stone trees, this geological immortality has a tragic sort of beauty—honest but enslaved.

It's the kind of beauty I wish I could burrow into and fill its warm, hollow center with a heartbeat of blood. Resuscitate. If I weren't trying to become such a stellar liar, I might admit that this river looks golden-red instead of chalkboard black. My skin might be bubbling off my bones.

Rae touches her palm against mine and stills my trilling fingers. We wheeze in the sulfur-smelling air, our boots scuffing against the floor. The persistent *plink-plink* of dripping ground water makes my head ache.

"How far did you say we're hiking, Star?" asks my mom. She has bent down to tighten her boot laces. In the beam of my flashlight, I can tell they have gone from store white to soggy gray. She comes up frowning.

"This tube is twenty-five miles long," says Star, "but to beat sunset, we're only hiking in about five miles, then back out."

"So, ten?"

"If you can make it. It's easier coming out into light."

"It will be good for my thighs, then."

My dad says, "Star, how about you tell us some of your people's legends? To help pass the time."

"Sure thing, brother." Star begins to tell us one we heard two days ago at the summit of K lauea, about the mighty volcano goddess Pele who lives in its Halema'uma'u crater. Fleet interrupts Star to inform him that this story is old news to us. After a pause Star asks, "Did you find her hair?"

"Hair?" I say, tripping over my feet.

"If you'd looked closely at the ground during your visit, you may have noticed what look like black spider webs. They're actually strands of Pele's hair, strings of lava she's crystallized to her brow. She walks among us, you see, disguised as a human in need—a young *wahine* or old auntie—to test mortals."

"Spooky," Fleet says.

I try to picture her, Pele—a woman wreathed in molten fire with hair trailing the ground like glass needles, but she is too beautiful and fearsome to imagine.

"Have *you* been tested?" I ask. Star stops short, and I knock into his shoulder. My family keeps walking, now ogling and shining their lights on petroglyphs carved into the walls.

Star's russet skin pales, and his expression is one I haven't seen on him. Curdled.

"Sometimes, Paisley," Star says, "the pieces of what we are searching for are right in front of us. But often they are too delicate to touch. Like Pele's hair. And if you try, pieces shatter in your hands, betray you with a cut. Best to leave them be."

A red curl has escaped my ponytail, and I tug it. "Or what?"

"You scar."

Nothing more to say, we catch up to my family. I slip between Rae and this rougher-looking rock near the curved wall. I read about this type of basalt in my Hawai'i travel guidebook. Even though it looks like hunks of charred bread, it can slice through a shoe. I run one of my new rubber soles over its humps when Rae isn't looking, pausing to glance at the traction on the bottom of my boot. It looks like a pilled bedspread.

The tube stretches long and dark before us, pinching together in the distant blackness where I can't see if it ends or turns. I have the strangest sensation that we are traveling into the esophagus of a titan.

"Let's take a minute to hydrate, Nelsons."

We sit down on a semi-circle of mini boulders, letting the moisturized rock dampen our rumps as we sip from canteens. I'm not thirsty, but I drink to ward off the vog. Fleet clamors up onto a shallow plateau above us and shuffles loose rock with his feet. Bits fall onto Rae's and my shoulders. Rae glares at our brother with her mouth sewn up like a button.

"Watch it, Fleet," I say. He offers a shit-eating smile, the only way he knows how to apologize.

"How are you feeling, Paisley?" My mom asks.

She wears her rhetorical look, the one that curls an eyebrow into a

question mark. She sported this same expression when my guidance counselor had “strongly recommended” I see a psychiatrist my freshman year.

Schizophrenia hadn't mean as much to me as it had meant to my mom, whose grandmother had wound up in the cuckoo's nest because of it. But Grams' plight was in the days of yore, before the miracle of my little peach pills. I'm not her. I'm—

“Nutty as a fruitcake,” I say. But only because it's a stupid question.

“You know I don't like that.”

“I'm great, Mom. Super, even. See?” I show her the Tardive Tarantella. It's the best I can offer her. She stirs the damp air with a round of *tsking*.

My dad pats her knee.

Rae links her fingers with mine and squeezes. I'm testing Mom, and Rae knows it. She always knows. She squeezes my hand again, urging. I open my mouth to apologize, but Mom crosses her arms and turns away. I shrug. Rae unlocks her hand from mine and sighs.

Star stands apart from us, his color returned. His headlamp, which he moved from his forehead to his crown, bounces off the low roof and creates an aureole about his body. He catches my eye in the darkness. “Aloha.” And the way he says it, I understand what he really means: *I see you*. I suddenly become engrossed in gnawing off a hangnail.

“We'll hike another couple miles, and then we'll stop again to eat.”

Star hoists his backpack, which contains our prepaid lunches of cold cut ham sandwiches and dried pineapple, and beckons us to follow as he resumes his pace down the black tube. My parents rise and resume picture-taking and clothes-straightening. Dad says over his shoulder, “Let's go, guys.”

Fleet bicycle-kicks off the plateau and lands on his feet. Shining his light beneath his chin, he grins at me through lacerations of shadow.

“You ready to see more rocks, Fruit Loop?” But his little joke doesn't make me smile this time. It makes me feel like a child.

Suddenly, my body is too heavy to move. My mutation is more draining than I had anticipated. I want to solder myself to this rock. Despite Star's warning, I want to scar. Affix to something permanent, something real.



Instead, I web together my dancing fingers. "I'll catch up."

I feel Rae then, a slight press of fingers against my wrist. "I'm okay," I whisper, trying to smile. My face feels so thick. My head throbs. "I just need a minute." She nods, then picks her way toward Fleet, who has already begun walking.

She looks like a carbon copy of me as a kid. She's even wearing the same tie-dye t-shirt I wore when our parents took Fleet and me to the San Diego Zoo during a family reunion when we were eight. I had tried to vault the fence into the crocodile exhibit because I thought I could walk on the water's solid blanket of algae. I can't believe my mom saved that shirt all these years.

After a minute, the titan swallows Fleet and Rae whole, and I exhale. I slide the plastic switch on my flashlight to the OFF position and let it fall to the floor, trying to black out my headache.

It's only as my eyes begin to adjust to the lack of light that I notice the hole. It's tucked into the wall beneath the plateau near me. Little more than a crawl space to the left of the main tunnel path, the hole switches from black to white as I blink, my retinas still in flux. Blink-black, blink-white, blink-black. A little worm hole burrowing into the hot center of the earth, searching for a heartbeat of blood. Resuscitate . . .

Between one beat and the next, I slip into the hole in the wall. My heart erupts, pulse smelting my ears, and I crawl on hands and knees deeper into the darkness, all heaviness abated.

This darkness feels different. Quiet. Still. Abruptly, I'm terrified. I think I've never been terrified—never felt much of anything—and the sensation is rapturous. The air smells moist and acrid. The lava here is all smooth. My hands, knees, and boot toes fill the curved depressions where the solid river dips and twists. I hit my head several times against the volcanic roof, and little slices of freed rock bloodline my palms.

After a few minutes, my foot catches unexpectedly on something. I yank hard, and my boot comes free before I kick it back against a surface that's the consistency of hard foam. A small crackling sound. "Dammit, Paisley, I think you broke my nose!"

I can barely make sense of the voice in this ancient cocoon.



“What are you doing here, Fleet?” It’s too cramped to sit, so I plop onto my belly, waiting.

“What am *I* doing here? What the hell are *you* doing here?” His voice sounds nasally. He must be bleeding through his nostrils. “You never caught up to us, so I came back to get you. I saw your flashlight by this tunnel’s entrance and put two and two together. What were you thinking coming in here?” He clicks on his light. Pale yellow shimmers down the dark tube ahead of me. The stone ghosts live in this tunnel, too.

“I was...curious.”

“I figured,” Fleet says. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“I’m not leaving.” I wedge my elbows against the rock so I can cinch my ponytail.

“Well, I’m not leaving you here,” Fleet says. When he realizes I’m not going to budge, he groans. “Fine. Let’s see where this damn thing takes us.”

I’m not sure how long we crawl. Fleet has managed to worm his way next to me in the tunnel, bumping his shoulder against mine. The vinegar smell of his sweat fills my nose. His flashlight’s beam bounces erratically off the curves of the black passageway.

“Think we’ll find any oo-hineys?” Fleet asks, teasing.

“It’s oo-ha-nay, idiot,” I say. “And you don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Only because I can’t see them.”

Before I can reply, the floor abruptly slopes downward and disappears. Fleet yelps, grabs my wrist, and we fall. Our bodies twist and thwack against each other. We are the most graceless trapeze artists in the world. With a crack that knocks the air from my lungs, we land together against a rocky floor. Fleet’s heart staccatos against my back, and mine beats faster to match. I wonder if this is what it must have felt like in utero—two bodies fetaled like spoons, hearts humming-birding in the suede blackness.

Fleet stands, moaning, and pulls me to my feet. He was born only two-and-a-half minutes sooner, but I will always be the little sister who needs help. The little sister who weighed a third less than him at birth. The defective sister who had to cook in the NICU’s plastic oven until her gray skin pinked to medium-well.

INTRAUTERINE GROWTH RESTRICTION. Our mom had scrawled these words in our joint, cartoonish baby book, but only under my name. Dr. Seuss themed, I believe. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from my school's library helped me translate: Search under *I* for *IGR* and learn that *I*, not Fleet, got gypped on placental nutrients and other necessary fetal whatnots. *Big P*, *little p*, *what begins with P?* *Paisley's poor placenta*, *P p P*. It made me tiny. It made me . . . see. And yet, not see. It caused my brain to question what's real.

"Where are we?" Fleet asks, coughing. The vog hangs thick here, a whitish sulfur-smelling fog. The beam of my brother's flashlight sputters against the rounded walls and ceiling of a small hollow, barely discernable through the haze. The light hovers over the tunnel that dumped us here, about fifteen feet or so above our heads. My head starts to throb again, so I rip out my too-tight elastic, and frizz explodes around my shoulders. I'm not used to this type of humidity. In Boston, I can wear my hair down most days, especially during winter, and it curls like copper shavings.

"A cave," I say. He clicks his tongue in a way that would make our mom proud. There's dried blood above his lip and the bridge of his nose has begun to purple, but I don't think it's broken.

"I see now why Mom and Dad think college would be a wasted effort for you."

My mouth turns tinder-dry. "That's not fair, Fleet."

"But it's true," he says, shrugging. "Hell, Paisley, it's probably for the best."

"What would you know about it?"

"Only what I see," he says, pointing his flashlight at my trembling hands. I sheath them under my armpits.

Until our family moved from L.A. to Boston when Fleet and I were three, our mom was a hippie. A free love, clean living bohemian. Which is why she refused to medically treat my IGR. After her grandmother was tossed in the asylum by the state, Mom swore off hospitals. Unnatural things.

"I could have died," I had said to her after I researched IGR at school. "Before I was even born."

"But you didn't," she had said, not looking up from folding shirts on top of the dryer.

"But I could have! And then Fleet would have died too."

"Fleet would not have died. You didn't share the same sac. He was going to be fine either way." She spoke with words flat as the shirts she smoothed with her palms.

"But not me," I said. "Why didn't you just terminate me to avoid the risk?"

"I couldn't, Paisley. Can't you see?" She flattened the hemline of her own blouse, frowning. "I just couldn't."

But I wish she had. Then I wouldn't have to wear this liar's skin.

I glare at Fleet's shadowed face through the vog, fighting a sneeze. "You don't see anything."

"Oh, yeah?" he says. "Why don't you paint us a way out of here, Madam Artist? Go on. Oh, that's right." He shakes his hands at me. "You can't."

Fleet must not feel the sudden heat crash into the caved room as soon as those words leave his lips, because he resumes scanning for an exit with his flashlight. The heat sizzles first against my calves, and I think, *this is it*—my mutation finally becoming complete. It rises and rises, leaves a piece of itself to coil red in my stomach, a shard to splinter my heart. It surges and froths and spills from my lips, my nose, my fingertips. Its sulfur taste engorges my tongue, and I choke. I tense up onto tiptoes to keep from making a sound against the burn. God, but this heat is absolutely *molten*—

And just as I prepare to erupt like Kilauea, she appears.

A woman the color of a fall maple leaf stands before us. She looks both lovely and terrible at the same time, like one of those holographic stickers that shows a different image depending on how you tilt it. She's wearing a tattered white sundress that brushes the ground and is so filthy at the hemline that it looks as though it's been dipped in tar. Her feet are bare and ashy, her shoulders hunched. Black hair streams wetly down her back and licks her narrow waistline. I can't tell her age—too much sweat and dirt have grimed her face. But her eyes. Her eyes are two golden match heads flaring in their sockets.

"Where are you?" she asks. Her voice is water steaming over stone. "Here," I say. "Can't you see me?" She crooks her head. She doesn't blink.

Fleet looks at me. "What?"

"What?" I parrot.

He shines his light in my face. "What's wrong with you now?"

"The woman," I say, pointing. "You're lost, right?"

Fleet trains his beam to where I indicate. And it's the oddest thing: His light, when it touches her body, parts around her like a river runs around a boulder and shines instead onto the blank lava wall behind. She leaves no shadow.

The woman peers at me still, through the light. She looms her blackened fingers through her hair. Slivers snap off with the crack of breaking glass. "Will you show me the way?" She takes a step closer. The flashlight flickers.

"Shit." Fleet tugs on my arm. His voice quivers. "I thought you finally had a handle on this, Paisley. Where are your pills?"

"But she needs help."

"We need to get out of here and find Mom and Dad. Right now." He sounds worried, scared even, which is an absurd thing to be, here of all places. I pull against his grip.

"I'm not going anywhere, Fleet. I have to help her."

He pauses, his fingers going still on my arm. Not a shred of humor touches his face or voice when Fleet says, "Paisley. There's no one here. It's just us. Can't you see?"

But what he doesn't understand is that I *do* see. I see the flesh on his arms shiver and turn to chicken skin while his flashlight gives an eldritch flicker and dies. I see two match heads in the darkness dance on pinwheels of light. I see the detonation of my dad's camera, the piercing gray of my mom's eyes. I see Star and Rae with their headlamps, coronas in the darkness.

I see a tiny spot in the galaxy curled up in the design of my name. I try to marble it between my thumb and pointer finger. I want to know what it *is*.



“Rae would know,” I say on an exhale. Rae always knows. In the burning glow of the match heads, I see the outline of the woman’s hand, reaching.

“Will you show me the way?”

Fleet says, “Who’s Rae?”

## THE INCIDENT AT DIKE BRIDGE

RACHEL MARIE PATTERSON

It's easy to forget her face,  
their final frisk before the free-fall—  
no one out on the bridge that night,  
no noise, the old 88 edged up  
and revving water. It doesn't add up:  
the blood on her blouse, her purse  
back at the party, no panties when  
the divers dragged her up at daybreak  
and called her mother on the mainland.  
Perhaps it took hours to gasp up  
her pocket of air, her ringless fingers  
fumbling for the front-door lock,  
while her lover wandered the Vineyard  
collecting hotel keys, crawling off liquor.  
Tonight, her hair surges like seaweed,  
singing her secret. Put your ear-bones  
to the bridge, hear her hissing in  
the low reeds: There's no telling  
if he really braved back into the brackish  
water and saw her pale cheek pressed  
to the passenger window—no counting  
the lit homes he lumbered past on that dirt

road at midnight, drenched and dripping,  
or the telephones he never touched.

## 8 IS THE MAGIC NUMBER

VINCENT POTURICA

On the TV above the pho counter,  
another mother forgives a cop  
for killing her son. This one shot

8 bullets into the back of her *baby*.  
She says *faith*, America. Her words  
become Vietnamese captions

that stream across the screen,  
but 8 remains a number. My wife  
says *I can't take this shit anymore*.

The evening progresses quickly.  
The sky becomes a purplish shroud.  
A generation of murdered children sail

beneath it in a vessel that expands  
to avoid excessive crowding. For  
once, I wish the reporter would cry.

Outside the restaurant a green parrot,  
perched on a bike, assures each  
passerby that *8 is the magic number*.



# SQUARING THE DECK

MONICA ISABEL RESTREPO

I.



(20 points)

Before becoming the highest playing card in the deck, the ace was an *as*, bad luck, the side of the die with only one mark. Here's what I've learned: The ace both shields and exposes.

The longer you hold on to it, the more potential upside, but also the bigger the risk. When I draw an ace, I keep it with me for the entire hand, even when it has no correlation with the rest of the cards I'm holding. Of course, not everyone plays the game this way.

Here's my first memory of decay: I am seven years old, safe inside the walls of my grandmother's purple-carpeted room in the small town of David, Panama – the forgotten town where my mother is from -- a place where the biggest thing that happened that decade was the opening of a McDonalds, a place where 90 degrees with 85% humidity is the coolest it ever gets. *Virginia is for lovers*: the wooden sign that hangs inside the door that shields us from the scorching heat. A small air-conditioning unit blasts the room with cold air, the only place in the house where this kind of luxury is permitted without pause. My grandmother, Maria Virginia, or Tita Tita as we call her, speaks in refrains and offers advice only to those who listen. She teaches me the tricks of Rummy 500, the card game we play all day and night, until even toothpicks can't prop our eyes open. Shuffling: the deck must be "squared" by creating two even piles and intertwining the cards

with the fingers, thumbs always in. Dealing: the cards must be distributed one a time in a clockwise motion. Risk: each card has its own value, making some cards more dangerous than others. “*Hay dos tipos de ganadores,*” she says, “*los que usan la cabeza, y los que tienen suerte.*” To win, I must either play smart or get lucky. I listen intently, cross-legged on the bed between her and my tubed-up grandfather, Chicho Chicho. After multiple brain hemorrhages, his body and mind are in a “barely there” state. Barely walking, barely hearing, barely swallowing, barely breathing. For Tita Tita and I, his heaving breaths are the natural background to our late night card games -- me, her, him, and, Don Francisco, the TV blaring loudly even in our sleep, every night a *Sabado Gigante*.

Here are the things I remember about my grandparents’ house: The shiny brown marble Labrador dog statue that sits still and angry in the front entryway. The painting of a spiky orange-haired clown whose maniacal eyes follow me every night into my grandmother’s bedroom. The shiny treasures in the bottom drawer of my grandmother’s bathroom, each jewel carefully wrapped and sealed in tiny silk Chinese envelopes. Tita Tita reveals her little trophies to me. She takes out an envelope. I hear the click! of a button, the *zzzzip* of a zipper, and then I see the brightness of a stone. Occasionally my grandmother repays my loyalty to her with a trinket. I always get more jewels than my sister, because my grandmother loves me the most.

When my grandfather dies, my mother goes to therapy. When my grandfather dies, I am in college, still unaware of myself. When my grandfather dies, I do not go to his funeral. My memory of him remains of a gentle man in decay, delicate and tubed-up, alive and barely breathing.

## II.



**(10 points)**

The King of Hearts (dubbed “Charles” in the 15th century after emperor-conquering Charlemagne) is famously known as the “suicide king” in the Rouennais pattern of the card. However, there is more to this popular catch phrase than meets the eye.

Card historians argue that the King of Hearts holds the sword *behind* his

head in preparation for attack, not *through* it as an act of suicide. Others interpret him as being on the defense: the King pulled out his sword and lifted it behind him to protect himself from an attacker. "Suicide king" remains the popular interpretation, even though historians have yet to find an adequate motive.

Here's my first memory of death: I am in the eighth grade when our classmate, Mariana, leaps from her bedroom window. The teachers tell us it's an accident, but we know better. We've seen those sunken eyes. During lunchtime, rumors swirl about a suicide note. Here's what I don't tell anyone: I want there to be a note. In English class, I sit and wonder what she may have written, compose a series of proposed suicide notes in my head. *Mom & Dad: It's not you, it's me. I'm sorry, but I can't bear to live.*

Now that I'm a mother, I wonder if it matters less *what* she wrote than *that* she wrote it. An attempt to communicate – the final act of compassion? To leave something tangible behind; something for a mother and a father to hold onto. Something to store in a damp box of mementos in an attic, or to glue permanently to the back of a picture and forever enclose in a frame. Words for a mother to use in her hunt for clues, symbols scrawled like Egyptian hieroglyphics on wood.

*"Da igual atras que en la espalda,"* Tita Tita would say. When the outcome is the same, what does it matter the intention?

Now and then, I picture Mariana sliding open her bedroom window. A breeze rustles her honey-colored hair. She closes those downcast eyes, the tips of her lashes reaching the amber circles under her eyes. She opens her arms, frees herself.

In the meantime, another classmate of mine is very much alive. Like me, Jason lives on the fringes of normality. Hair to his shoulders, chiseled jaw, skin the color of a milky latte, a nose with personality. Maybe he sees me as a kindred spirit, one that I am years from seeing for myself. Jason follows me around with a video camera and tries to convince me to join him in his quest for pleasure. *C'mon, M, let go. Explore the world!* Everything about Jason makes me uncomfortable: the voice consumed with passion, the way he subconsciously picks out words in his sentences to emphasize



and draw out. His clunky camera. When it watches me, my cheeks flush hot pink from horrific embarrassment.

What Jason doesn't understand is that, unlike him, I care what others think of me. I am a good girl. I should be loved. I'm smart enough to be class valedictorian, but not popular enough to be elected class president. Unlike Jason, who revels in his outsider status, I yearn to be accepted, to be normalized like the bell curve in my AP Mathematics class. While Jason makes videos, I neatly check the boxes in a list titled THE PERFECT DAUGHTER.

Jason goes on to make a living out of documenting experience. Today, his website describes him as a "media artist, futurist, keynote speaker, and TV personality." In one of his videos, Jason discusses the impermanence of beauty, explaining how moments of happiness can also lead us to feel devastating sadness.

My daughter and son have never been good sleepers. During the night, my husband and I hop back and forth between rooms; our bedroom, the baby's bedroom, the living room, back to our bedroom, my daughter's bedroom. There are nights when my son is soothed only by the smell of milk on my chest, nights when my daughter is reassured only by the touch of my hand on her salted cheek. It is during these long drawn out hours that sadness creeps up on me, when the house is too quiet, when the amber light of the moon glows through the windows. In this middle state, my mind travels to a time when my children will sleep through the night without calling my name, tucked into beds I have not made for them, hugging sheets I have not washed for them, reaching out for a body that's not my own.

"How do we respond to this?" Jason asks, emphasizing the *how* as I watch him on my computer screen, hair now neatly cropped. "Do we love harder? Do we squeeze tighter? Do we pretend not to care that everything and everyone we know is going to be taken away from us?"



III.



**(50 points)**

The Queen of Spades is a woman who rules her King, an individual who refuses to be reined in. Sometimes associated with intelligence and creativity, other times with sexuality, still other times with malice, the Queen of Spades represents the full extent of a woman's power. In the popular game of hearts, she is the most feared card in the deck. When she makes her appearance in Rummy 500, the Queen of Spades defines the path and outcome of every player's hand.

Here's my last memory of birth: It is six in the morning, and I am in the C-section delivery prep room of Baptist Hospital in Miami, Florida. A lightning bolt of contractions runs through my spine and thunders into my abdomen, the sting of a million fire ants running stomach to thighs. Unlike other kinds of pain I have experienced, I relish this one, hold onto it tight like the grip of my daughter's hand. "*De las gallinas no se ha escrito nada,*" I hear Tita Tita say. Nothing has been written about cowards.

A doctor walks through the see-through curtain that divides this 20-square-foot room from nurses who yell at laboring women like cattle ("Number 1 ready for prep in room 5!"). His eyes dart through the room, and I sense that he is out of his comfort zone, perhaps not used to seeing this much womanhood in the antechamber to extraction. I round my hips, bend my body, rest my elbows on the bed I refuse to lie on despite hospital protocol. My unwillingness to lie like Kafka's cockroach is offset by other physical constraints: a needle in my wrist tubed to a gelatinous IV bag, a plastic fetal heart monitor strapped to my stomach.

Although this is my first time meeting this man, I don't need to read the mint cursive letters on his robe to know that he is Dr. H, the doctor on call. He and I have engaged in heated exchanges over the phone ever since my water broke two days ago.

"Look," Dr. H says, "I don't know why or what Dr. I promised you, but here's the truth: we don't do vaginal births after C-section. Our whole practice would have to be present in the hospital, and that's just not possible.

Besides, a vBAC can go very wrong very fast. Trust me, I've been there. In that particular instance, the mother nearly died of a hemorrhage, and the baby, well, unfortunately the baby did not survive. M, let me ask you something: is this really what you want for your unborn son?"

Here's what I don't tell Dr. H: I am not just any old card in a deck. I will not believe every word you say just because you have a medical degree and a mint-laced robe. I have done my research. I know that the knifing you advocate is riskier than the natural birth I've prepared months for my son to have.

Here's what my doctor promised me two months ago: "you're a good candidate for a vBAC, M." Here's what he said two weeks ago, when he inserted his oversized finger into my vagina: "your cervix is softening, this is good news, you're making progress!" Here's what he said over the phone last night: "You need to go to the hospital. Don't worry, you will be safe. I'll be there soon."

Nine hours after his last promise, Dr. I walks into the room. A typically confident man, today he looks small; the bags under his eyes more dense, the leathery skin on his face more worn. It is clear to me from his hunched-over shoulders that this story will not have the heroic ending I had hoped. Dr. I places a heavy, apologetic hand on my exposed thigh and stumbles to the contraction-monitoring machine. I brace myself for the sentencing.

"You're not making enough progress," he says, eyes shifting as he pretends to study the waves on the page with mathematic precision.

*There go my efforts at making the needle move, I think. There goes the hard-earned oxytocin, nine hours rubbing my pink-fleshed nipples raw.*

"I've been having strong contractions for seven hours," I say, head stiff as an icebox. "Aren't you even going to check how much I've dilated?"

"The contractions are not consistent enough."

"Why," I ask, "Why did you lie to me? Why did you ever tell me that I could have a natural birth?"

"Because you wouldn't take no for an answer," he says. His eyes are calm and still, as if relieved. Truth floods out of him. "You were obsessed with this birth, M. I told you what you wanted to hear because you wouldn't

take no for an answer.”

The nurses in the wing grow quiet. Today they learn the nasty tricks of the game in which they are complicit.

Here's what comes next: The Queen of Spades is given five minutes to regroup. She is escorted into the operating room. Sedated, laid down, her legs spread open like a dead frog in biology class. A clean, sharp scalpel pierces her hard belly. Space is created inside her. Organs are shifted.

At 7:11, the Queen of Spades gives birth to a beautiful baby boy. The nurses bring the healthy baby to the heat lamp on her left and hold him up for her to see. *He looks just like my daughter*, she thinks, but this isn't the image that prevails. The picture she will never get out of her head is of the man to her right: his crude, triumphant upward turn of the lips. For years, Dr. H's visage of victory will serve as a harrowing reminder.

The Queen of Spades is an outcast. The Queen of Spades is powerless. A frenetic wheel, spinning in the mud.

#### IV.



#### (10 points)

In the French deck, the Jack of Hearts represents Étienne de Vignolles, a military commander who fought side-by-side with Joan of Arc in the Hundred Years' War. His nickname, "La Hire," was either assigned by the English as a term "God's wrath" or given to him by the French from the term for hedgehog. Étienne is said to have had a choleric disposition. Today, the phrase "la hire" continues to signify the sentiment of easily being angered.

Here's my first memory of self: It is the summer after sophomore year of college, and my family and I are visiting Spain. During a warm afternoon in the cool hallways of Madrid's El Padro museum, I fall in love with the work of Roy Lichtenstein, whose art is featured in a special exhibition. There's something that draws me to the conflicted women in his posters: their exposed, apologetic femininity, their hunger for self. Throughout the remainder of the tour, I glaze over the Vasquez and Goyas, thinking instead



about how I will convince my mother to buy me a Lichtenstein reprint.

As soon as we enter the gift shop, I go for the jugular.

"Mami, I'd like to buy one of these posters," I say, pointing to the rack of colorful posters, "to hang in my room."

My mother, who thinks it's a big waste to spend money in gift shops, eyes me suspiciously.

"It will be a memento from this trip," I add.

My plea strikes a chord. However, as usually happens when I bend my mother's will, her "yes" comes with fine print. I've only browsed a couple of posters when she points to one at her end of the rack.

My mother will buy me a Lichtenstein, but I will not have the right to choose it.

"Here it is," she says, pointing to the dotted image of a blond, blue-eyed, red-lipped girl sitting naked in front of a vanity, gazing emptily into the mirror.

Somewhat blindly, I take the poster with me to the various apartments I inhabit, not thinking too much about what it conveys. I don't think about Tita Tita's refrain: "Cada uno sabe donde amarra su caballo." Better to know the company you keep.

Here's what I don't ask myself: why can I only see the girl's face through her reflection in the mirror? Why the red dots on her cheek? Is she blushing? Is somebody watching? Has a precious moment of intimacy been transformed into a performance?

It is only eight years later, once I marry – and my husband questions the choice – when I begin to think about what the image means. Was I supposed to be that girl, I wonder, the one absorbed in the mirror's reflection? To define oneself through the lens of others – is this the way I've been taught to live?

V.



(20 points)

When it comes to the Ace of Spades, the truth is in the eye of the beholder. A symbol of war in the Tarot and a tool used to dig graves in the literal sense of the word, the spade has



long been associated with death. And yet, despite its deep connections to the dark side, history has offered the Ace of Spades new meaning. In the Second World War, helmets marked with the spade were seen as signifying good luck. In the Vietnam War, the Ace of Spades was a morale-booster for American soldiers who often carried the “Death Card” inside their helmets and used it to cover the eyes of enemy soldiers killed in battle, a tactic they believed helped ward off the Vietnamese.

Here’s my last memory of rebirth: My husband and I have been married for seven years. We have a daughter and we have a home, which we decorate with the paintings and posters we’ve collected throughout our lives, together and apart. The Lichtenstein is stored in the garage.

My mother presents us with another gift to hang. After a 20-year hiatus, she’s started to paint again, and we have the honor of owning the first-ever “Loli,” her self-donned grandmother nickname. Too modest to sign the front of the painting, she scribbles “Loli” on the back along with the painting’s title: “Desilución.” Spanish for disillusionment.

That afternoon, I see my daughter standing in front of the painting with her chin pointed upwards and a face so perplexed that her two eyebrows are almost touching.

“The girl is sad,” she says, shifting her head back and forth between the painting and me. “Why is she sad?”

Disillusionment stares back at us. A lavender-clad ballerina sits by a set of dark steps, her tutu perfectly plush, her toes perfectly en pointe. Her unpinned brown hair pours over her lanky arms, where her head is buried. Although we cannot see her face, we know that she is weeping.

That night, my husband and I discuss moving the painting to a more discrete location.

I am eight months pregnant with my son when my parents travel to Europe. They return to their home in Panama seven days before the birth. My father calls.

“Your mother had a lot of pain in her leg during our trip.” he says, “She was practically on meds the whole time. They did an MRI yesterday and discovered a spinal cyst...and...a small tumor. We don’t know what it is yet. They have to do more tests. I’m sorry, hijita, but she won’t get to Miami in time for the birth.”

My son is three months old when three surgeons at John Hopkins Hospital pierce through my mother’s back. They scrape away two cysts clung to bone and remove a small tumor. Because her spine has suffered trauma, they decide to perform a lumbar fusion.

“Your mother is very lucky,” my father says after the operation. “The cysts are common, but the tumor is rare and almost impossible to discover until it’s too late. The pain from the cysts is the reason we discovered it. Otherwise, in ten years’ time, it would have wrapped itself around her spine. By the time she’d started to notice anything, it would have already begun to cripple her.”

Today, Disillusionment is the first thing you see when you walk into our home. My husband and I moved it to the front entrance because it’s the area least frequented by the children. At least that’s what we tell ourselves.

“*El que pega primero pega por delante,*” Tita Tita used to say. The first to hit strikes hardest.

When my mother comes to visit, she stands in front of the ballerina, pointing out its imperfections.

“I should really bring my brush next time,” she says. “That way I can finally fix this hand. The angle is all wrong.”

When she leaves, I take her place in front of the painting. My chest fills with heat, and my hands grow cold. I caress the ballerina’s disheveled hair, the only part of her that’s exposed.

*Am I my mother’s ballerina?*

Other days, I glance at the painting and all I see oil on canvas, a blur

of lavender as faded as the memory of the maniacal clown on my grandmother's wall. Other days, the ballerina is as far detached from reality as the tumor that almost crippled my mother.

Today, Disillusionment is my Ace of Spades: a will to live, or, the door at which death knocks. It is my grandfather's heaving breaths, cold breeze flowing through open window. It is a fake suicide note, an embarrassing home video. It is waves on paper, scalpel on skin. It is the subconscious strokes of a soiled brush. Today, Disillusionment is a chance to reshuffle: good fortune brought by broken mirror.

## AN ATTRACTIVE PORTAL TO UNCERTAINTY

LISA ROMEO

"Winds in the east, mist coming in. Like something is brewing, about to begin." – P.J. Travers, *Mary Poppins*

*If you are going to study meteorology, you are going to leave home. If you are going to be a meteorologist, you are going to move away from home. If you are going to be a meteorologist, you better love change.*

The head of the meteorology department at Valparaiso University has spoken. We have driven 750 miles from our home in New Jersey, and our son seems to like this Indiana college with a reputable meteorology department; still, I watch his face for a sign that he's heard enough, maybe that he's changed his mind.

He seems, instead, serious and clearheaded, and asks to see their weather room, what by now—the start of his senior year of high school—we have learned reveals the heart of a college meteorology department. It is where the weather nerds gather on Friday nights (or really on any night, or any day), and debate the effect of barometric pressure on a fulminating system hundreds of miles to the southwest.

On the 12-hour drive home to northern New Jersey, we stop at Perdue University's meteorology department, and later, in central Pennsylvania, we pass within 10 miles of the main campus of Pennsylvania State University, where the boy has twice attended Weather Camp for high school students. At Rutgers University, an hour from home, we are disappointed not to be dazzled by our state university's meteorology department.



Three years later, the boy who hated change, who needed to know everything would stay the same, each day predictable, now spends his days anticipating, calculating, predicting—welcoming—change. He does not quake the way he did as a toddler, or a child, or a preteen, and something, anything, happened that he could not foresee—if the Cheerios ran out, or Sesame Street was pre-empted, or his racecar towel was in the wash.

The experts we consulted, when he was a toddler, a boy, a tween, agreed: he may grow out of it, but more likely, he will adapt, he'll cope. In other words, he will change.

Now, when the winds turn, when fair weather threatens foul, when there is a clear indication of coming unpredictability, the boy calls from college to report about it. When the weather changes—outside his window, outside in the world—even if it does something wildly unexpected—if it snows in Delaware in April, hits the 90s in Wisconsin in December or the 30s in Utah in July—this is now a good thing, or at least the thing that does him the most good.

This boy—who sheltered in the principal's office for fire drills, away from the noise and emptying classrooms disrupting the predictable routine of the elementary school day; the kid who declined birthday parties at the Funplex because he could not predict what might happen next—he once had parents who ran interference, explaining that he wasn't like other little boys who craved the new, the odd, the fun in surprise. This young adult is now most at home studying the most frequently shifting patterns—hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, the polar vortex: things that make him feel, inexplicably, settled.

I cannot sufficiently explain to myself or others how it is that a person who in virtually all other areas of his life, still seeks to eliminate variation (dinner in the dining hall is pasta and salad every night), is happiest just at the earliest point of realizing change is coming. Ecstatic, in fact, at the beginning a new meteorological inquiry, the moment when he has noticed...something. Something in the wind, the jet stream, the cold fronts.

If he knew the reference, my manchild might, in his best Gordon Gekko voice, declare, "Change—is good."

Once a week I get a YouTube link to a five-minute weather forecast on a local access cable television station for the small town at our son's college. It's the boy, letting folks know what to expect over the next week, when the predictions will hew close to seasonal expectations, when they will stray. He is confident, relaxed, at ease in a way I have rarely seen him, making eye contact with the camera. He is moving his arms in all the right directions on the map behind him, and few viewers are likely aware that he is standing in front of a vast empty Kelly green screen, and side-eyeing the moving graphic maps off camera to his right and left, and tapping a Jeopardy-like remote clicker encased in the palm of one hand which will switch the backdrop between a temperature map, a Doppler radar graphic, and an aerial sweep of the state.

*It might rain. Or maybe not. That overnight temperature dip could mean frost, so cover up those plants, folks, you never know. Bring the umbrella. But don't be surprised if it never unfurls. Plan that barbecue for Saturday, not Sunday.* How thoroughly happy he appears, explaining to others what to expect, and why.

In a drawer somewhere in our family room, spooled on an old VHS cassette, a three year-old child with velvet brown curls and a toothy grin, holds an upside down turkey baster and points to a crooked paper map he has taped to the door behind him. He is delivering an endearing, articulate and mature weather report. *There's a blizzard already howling outside. The snow is drifting as tall as an adult. His report ends, I'm your weatherman, S\_\_ R\_\_.*

When I see scratchy old videos of Eli Manning tossing footballs at age two, or a prepubescent Bobby Flay in the kitchen, I think of this video of my boy, and I wonder. Then I remind myself: the other moments inadvertently captured on video, of this boy refusing to step outside to the patio for even the briefest moment without a hat on, or the one in which he hurls a stuffed animal out of the playpen 14 times in a row because I'd carelessly cut off its fabric label. Those images, I realize, were not predictive either.

What, I have wondered often, might lure a child so intently terrified of change, so unrelentingly opposed to, and hysterical at variance, to a life composed of constantly parrying with change that is making its sure, relentless way, west to east, into his life? Arachnophobia sufferers, I reason, do not choose to spend four years studying spider biology. Acrophobes don't become high steel construction workers. Agoraphobes seek out jobs they can do without leaving the house. Or do they? Actors, I am told, are shy creatures who seek the stage to feel otherwise. I read about a pilot who needed tranquilizers before his first flight as a passenger.

I look up "fear of change" and see that it's called metathesiophobia, also known as the fear of having no control. I learn that the condition is partly encoded in our genes, that since the beginning of recorded time, humans have craved predictability. That reading predictable signs in the environment once helped ensure survival. I read that modern day treatment for severe metathesiophobia includes hypnotherapy, cognitive therapy, neurolinguistic programming. Nowhere in my casual research do I find the recommendation that studying some constantly changeable phenomenon will eradicate the phobia. But I consider that effective reprogramming via such approach-avoidance behavior makes a kind of sense. Peering into the eye of the storm, so to speak. But I don't believe my son is conscious of this connection.

I do ask him. I ask him why someone like him, who hates change, loves the unpredictability of weather. He surprises me by admitting that he has actually thought about this before. "Maybe," he says, stroking his beard, "it's because deep down, I have the weird idea that if I can predict the weather, then I can make other parts of my life predictable."

The boy also loves history, American founding fathers a favorite topic. Benjamin Franklin once declared, "When you are finished changing, you are finished."

At the University of Oklahoma, we must complete a half dozen forms, be pre-approved weeks in advance, and surrender our passports at the desk, to gain entry to the college's meteorology department, which shares space with the U.S. government's National Weather Center and Storm Prediction



Center. At 17, my son is hyper excited that we will be allowed onto the top floor of this six story building jutting straight up from an empty flat field outside Norman, Oklahoma, a building constructed to sustain an F5 tornado (thought it hasn't had to, yet).

One of the professors who normally speaks to high school seniors is away. *Stormchasing with a bunch of students*, we're told, and I have to glance at my son, who seems to light from within (and also, almost imperceptibly except perhaps to a mother, flinch).

There is not a single thing not to like at this University, except that it is in the center of the country, in the epicenter of the nation's tornado activity, 1562 miles from home, a two-stop airplane flight and a shuttle bus trip away. This challenges his idea of a college close enough to pop home for a weekend. Too much change, maybe. Still, that building, those resources.

We tour meteorology departments at Plymouth State University in New Hampshire (where his minor of choice is not offered); and pass Amish buggies on our way to Millersville University in Lancaster, Pennsylvania (too small, too quiet), a department populated by instructors trained at Penn State.

Ten months after his second stay at its summer Weather Camp, one month after a successful student-for-a-day overnight at the huge University Park campus, the boy decides on Penn State, though its Happy Valley reputation has been recently tarnished by scandal.

In the face of the huge upheaval college will mean, he wants, still, things to stay the same, to go to the college where he is already comfortable, where he already knows a few meteo professors. Or at least this is how his father and I interpret the choice, but we don't mind: the department's stats reveal that 80 percent of all working meteorologists in the U.S. are Penn State graduates.

Let the change games begin.

As my son makes his way along, I learn (how could I not), that weather is not as unpredictable as most think.

Even the most unexpectedly odd turn of meteorological events, is rarely startling, at least to some. In fact, the opposite is fundamentally true:



that given enough empirical data (science), and in the mind of a trained and intuitive forecaster (art), determining what the weather will do from one day, one week, to the next, isn't random at all. In other words, meteorology may be the perfect occupation for someone who must learn to recognize and interpret the signs of impending change before it makes its cold calculating way to where he's standing.

But I also learn that there are, of course, as in any mutable scientific phenomenon, curveballs that catch the most accurate forecasters off-guard. A nearly unanimous January 2015 forecast called for a blizzard to bring several feet of snow to the New York City metropolitan area; in fact, only about six inches accumulated due to a slight and debatably unforeseen storm track shift about 50 miles to the east. Boston was surprised. My son was not.

I learn that most of the country's meteorologists are employed not as broadcast reporters, but in government and industry, in the field known as operational forecasting, the track within the major my son has chosen. He claims to understand the meteorological job market, that he likely won't be on national (or any) TV, which is okay because while it would be a kick to work on camera (and he does on the student broadcast), those five or three minutes represent hours of data study, a half dozen forecast attempts, screens of data scanned, layers of thought, hypotheses, questions (*What happened in this area last year, last month, last week? What is happening over there, those winds, that storm, this pattern, that anomaly? This should happen, but that valley, this oversized factory, that erupted volcano thousands of miles away, could disrupt expectations, and how can we factor that in?*) and that it is those hours, those questions, which intrigue him.

I learn that climate (large scale, global weather and temperature patterns over decades, centuries, millennia) is very different from weather (daily, local or regional micro variations in temperature, humidity, wind, precipitation). That perhaps this is why the term "climate change" terrifies many, because it suggests not something with an unacceptable variance we've learned to deal with (bring an umbrella!), but the possibility of a massive shift (Manhattan under water!) we don't want to comprehend, and cannot, on our present course as a planet, meet and respond to. An umbrella

will not ward off sea level rise, broken ozone, constant drought. This is the kind of change, I imagine, that even meteorologists do not welcome.

I learn that people will joke about how it must be nice to be preparing for a career in a field where it's acceptable to be "wrong 50 percent of the time," and that "TV weatherman" is all most people know of what meteorologists do. I learn that companies like FedEx, Anheuser-Busch, Lowe's, and All State Insurance employ forecast meteorologists, and so do the Buffalo Bills, Denver Broncos, Colorado Rockies.

I learn more practical things, too. That sleet, hail, and freezing rain are terms almost universally misused and misunderstood. That the polar vortex has always existed and does not in fact, spin. That it can snow when the temperature is above freezing.

I am not particularly fascinated to learn these things, only mildly interested in the way one is when something we thought we understood turns out to be far more complicated, and because someone we love finds it fascinating.

"We may never get back to California again. I'm not going to spend an entire day inside watching The Weather Channel," I tell my son in August, a few weeks before he begins his senior year of high school. The television in our Omni hotel room in Los Angeles reports that a rare hurricane may slam into our home state.

"Mom! A hurricane's about to hit New Jersey, and I'm stuck out here. You don't understand," he complains.

We're stuck because our return flight to Newark was cancelled, and we can't get rebooked for two days, and so my husband and I worry about our house flooding, about old trees falling, about patio furniture hurling itself at our first floor windows. To take our minds off worry, we take the kids to Malibu, the Grammy museum, an ill-advised drive along canyon roads where we cannot understand why oversized hillside houses don't slide off their stilts. My son glances up occasionally but remains focused on weather apps pointed to the East Coast, mind and texts filled with data, the differences between a superstorm and hurricane.

In California, the ocean breezes billow our beach umbrellas, the sun

blinks from the rare cloud. We learn the meteorologist's joke that the worst job in the world is to be a forecaster in San Diego, where "74 and sunny" is what you would have to say 345 days a year.

At the Charlotte, N.C. airport, on a redeye layover to New Jersey, in the crowded but quiet passenger lounge, we eat complimentary oatmeal, drink coffee and hot chocolate. Everyone, even those with cell phones in hand or computers on laps, stares at multiple television screens, all playing the same Hurricane Irene footage, a weather reporter wearing waders, fire rescuers behind him in boats, moving house to house in Woodland Park, NJ.

"Look, isn't that terrible?" a woman near us says to no one. "I feel bad for the people who live there."

"We live three miles from there," my son says, half to her, half to himself.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she says, to me this time. "It must be hard to watch."

A few years later, this boy will write an essay about what this moment felt like to him, a mix of disappointment, relief, thrall, and surreal disconnect, all combined into a perfect moment of clarity.

But for now, he jokes, "When Jim Cantore arrives in your town, it's time to *Get Out!*"

When our boy was around 11, our family took a tourist-y boat trip around the island of Manhattan, because although the city skyline is visible from hill near our home, we did not regularly take the boys into the city. It was a wilting humid day, and while I was stocking up on water bottles at the dockside store, and my husband was wrangling the kids into line, he turned to wave to me to signal their location. Just then, our son wandered into an adjacent line, which began moving, edging closer to the water though the boat had not yet docked. Suddenly, he realized his father and brother were not behind him, and his arms flailed, panic erupting.

"Mom! Dad! Mom! Dad!"

Within seconds, my husband reached him, he calmed, the storm threat receding. Later that afternoon, I recall passing under a bridge, our preteen son explaining why winds were chopier over water, how the barometric



pressure changes everything.

Among students studying meteorology in colleges and universities across the United States, forecasting rises to an athletic pursuit in a competition known as WxChallenge. Thousands of students compete individually in three categories: freshmen/sophomore; junior/senior; graduate students/teaching assistants; and sometimes on a 12-member college Wx team. Trophies, bragging rights, resume lines, and peer respect are at stake. Every two weeks, from September to April, competition administrators select a different U.S. city; competitors must enter their best non-guess, by the same time each evening, for that city's next day forecast. Frequently, cities are chosen for unusual characteristics—Wichita for its erratic thunderstorms; Grand Rapids for fickle lake effect snows; Newark, NJ for the tight confluence of urban heat, ocean and bay influences; Astoria, Oregon for variable timing of high and low temps and unstable Pacific coast storms; Butte because the Rocky Mountains mean random and unreliable temperatures. San Diego is never among them.

Five days a week, for about 32 weeks, including spring break, these weather geeks—almost all meteorology majors, though some are studying environmental science, engineering, even geology or geography—talk among themselves in small groups, argue, parry, and then separate. Each then individually dives into a kind of fugue state—spinning math, science, historical data, gut instincts, and sometimes, a hunch—to decide on their forecast, and enter it into a password secured site. Points accumulate for how closely predictions match actual conditions.

As a freshman, my son ended the year fourth in his category against more than 1000 freshmen and sophomores, missing third place by .001 when something distracted him as he was about to enter his final forecast the final week. He looked away from the computer, while the screen must have flashed *something went wrong, please re-enter*. His team still took the national championship trophy.

Sophomore year, struggling with required math courses, he says he "did poorly," finishing seventh against about 1200 others, but was again on the winning national team. Meanwhile, each semester many hundreds



of students at dozens of meteorology departments at universities across the country defect from the meteorology major, with its unrelenting load of calculus and statistics, and although he too has not passed several math courses, and must retake them, extending his time as an undergraduate, my son has not switched majors. Change, you know.

Junior year he was "doing okay" in Wx—holding steady in eighth place—then shot up to first place overall in all categories in February, but ended up third. Others in his program scored above him individually, and the team won again. Such accomplishments are a big deal for the meteorology department, for the College of Earth and Mineral Science, for alumni whose WxChallenge standings come up in job interviews. It is a very big deal in the northwest corner of the major research university; it is even a smallish big deal on a sprawling 40,000-student campus where, one mile away on the southeast edge, a football team and its affiliated scandal still captures national negative attention.

Each year, the winning Wx team does the same thing: takes a picture, posing in front of the 48-screen wall in the weather room, then heads out for pizza.

Two years after Hurricane Irene, Superstorm Sandy will slam into coastal New Jersey, barrel up the center of our peanut-shaped state, rattling windows on our colonial house, plunging our leafy suburban street into a powerless state for nine chilled days.

I will know for more than two weeks that it is coming because my son has told me so, and because he has instructed me to pay attention to weather reports sourced from something called the European Model, over the Global Forecasting System or the North American Model. In northern NJ, in very late October, media will make light of the prediction, tag it "Frankenstorm," point out how unlikely it is, this far north, this late in storm season.

Before Sandy pulverizes the Jersey Shore and tosses a massive boardwalk roller coaster into the ocean where it stands upright and eerie for weeks; before our younger son's high school three blocks from the Hudson River is flooded and closes for two weeks; before my job as a reporter

requires that I post hourly updates about the local availability of gas for generators—two months before any of this, we will drop our son at college for the first time.

When Sandy surges and wrecks beloved parts of our state, the inevitable phone call comes, and it is entirely predictable: *Another hurricane in New Jersey and I'm not there. I'm stuck in central Pennsylvania where all we got is some wind and rain.* He will joke that being in the wrong place (that is, safe and away from severe weather) when a dangerous weather event occurs, instead of in the epicenter of its unpredictable track, may not bode well for a future meteorologist.

When our boy entered kindergarten, he was watching The Weather Channel the way other six year-olds watched Nickelodeon or the Cartoon Network. Storm Stories was my favorite show, he remembers. Then Hurricane Floyd glanced New Jersey, and he recalls watching the rain bucket into our backyard, more interesting even than TWC. He always wanted, he tells me now, to figure out when something "cool and scary" like that might happen again.

In "Walking the Tornado Line," a lengthy article in *The Oxford American's* Spring 2015 issue, Justin Nobel interviews witnesses to the unrelenting April 2011 line of Alabama tornados, and while their descriptions are meteorologically captivating, it's Nobel's own revelation about why weather stories call to him that sticks with me. "As childhood ended and adulthood loomed before me, weather became an attractive portal of uncertainty, and I attempted several heady journeys into the elements."

Without flagging the quote, I give the article to my son to read, and he notices this line on his own, as well as Nobel's descriptions of darting outdoors in severe weather as a kid, wanting to experience storms for himself.

By now, I have seen university weather rooms, charged with a combination of alarm and anticipation, empty out as students and instructors alike rush outside to see for themselves the hail their computers assure them is currently falling. (Hail, by the way, which forms when strong winds blow thunderstorm rain to higher altitudes until the water freezes and the ice

becomes too heavy to sustain itself.) "We're all still like kids who think the weather's cool," a graying tenured professor tells me.

I'm his mother, brewing in some parental stew of hope and protective instincts, and so I want my son to both fulfill his dreams of being in the swirling center of freak weather (hurricane in Jersey in October!), or major predictable weather (tornadoes in Kansas in August)—and also stay safe behind a computer screen, parsing the meaning of different models. I'd rather he never go stormchasing. I also secretly hope he gets the chance. Go, I want to say, feel the hurricane slap your face, brace against the rumbling cornfield as the tornado roars its way across your path. No, I want to say, stay safe, stay inside, stay.

I think back to when he was born, into a unwelcoming season we called the "winter of 17 snowstorms," and how his colic cries were often soothed by getting up close to the bay window and watching the snowflakes descend, how on so many nights, the only way he could calm and sleep was by listening to the *Rainstorms* tape, or how he liked to move the radio station dial, not to change it to another station, but to listen to the static in between. The sounds of approaching change.

Change, I have come to understand is, ultimately, predictable. Change will come for him, one way or another.

## DAILY BREAD

LINWOOD RUMNEY

No music allowed in the bakery  
where I work—the baker's zealous speech  
carries the morning cadence.  
I, alone with him where  
no natural light can enter, heft and deliver  
bulk bags of flour, yeast, salt.

Over the hymn of industrial mixers that flash  
like chain mail, he proclaims,  
*Of all things men make, bread is closest to God.*

I shuffle between proofing stations  
to oil and stack racks of bread pans,  
building transient temples gleaming  
a head taller than me—ready to receive  
the daily dose of faith.

*Have the workers of iniquity no knowledge?*  
he intones as the dough congeals,  
folded and braided into itself  
by the rhythm of the mixing blade—  
*Who eat up my people as they eat bread  
and call not upon the Lord?*



We slap dawn's first dough  
onto the cutting table as he repeats  
that I am unfit to bake with him:  
*It takes belief first, then skill.*  
Lacking both, I grip the slicer,  
crude in its perfectly rectangular shape,  
and plunge it into the dull mass  
before me, granting form to his faith.

## SALTWATER

EMILY SCHULTEN

The ground is a giant, sloping salt lick as I'm flying  
into Utah, and the water reminds me of when

my brother told me people are drawn to it, because  
it's easier to float in saltwater, the way as a child

I'd lie on the ocean, head sunk just enough that  
my ears heard the shored voices and seabirds' sound

as only a melody – I'd ignore everything being said.  
But from the airplane's portholes, it seems not even

all of the Great Salt Lake could cradle me well enough  
to make music of the ringing reminder inside my head,

my surgeon's words that after all of this he may still  
wake without my kidney, my body having failed

his failing body. And when I am grounded, land-locked,  
I can't stop hearing the clear call that gulls make.

## JUST SO SMALL AND PERFECT

MARVIN SHACKELFORD

A week after my mother died I packed her ashes into my purse, packed a suitcase, and headed for Dallas. Driving the highway, dodging semis in her old '87 Bonneville and smoking cigarettes I'd found in her bedroom closet, cartons enough to have lasted another year, I could feel her next to me in the seat. Her voice was muffled, bagged and all as she was, but she was asking questions, giving advice. She suckered me into a conversation. In death she was less to the point, and she started out rambling about the four lanes of the highway, how they used to be two. She and my father used to take trips to see the Rangers play on holiday weekends. Back before we came along, us kids, and before things went bad and Dad started hitting her.

"He had fists like a son of a bitch," she said. "A man that didn't need a hammer. And to him everything was a nail. You should imagine that."

"You tell that story too much."

"You should imagine that," Mom said again. "Cause a man that sees nothing but nails, and he's himself a hammer, well. How do you think that ends?"

"He came to your funeral. He was sad."

"I did good, leaving. He did good by you kids after that. I wish I could've once give him back a taste of what he gave me, though."

We were silent a while. I was nearing Childress, its lights pressing against the nighttime sky as I dropped off the high plain into rolling cotton country, red dirt I knew was out there in the dark. I'd made the drive

enough times myself that I didn't have to see it to get my bearings.

"And now *look at you*," Mom said. "Look at you. Look at you."

"I've earned a vacation," I said.

"You haven't earned shit. And you don't deserve this, Kristi."

"What do you want?"

"What every parent wants. The best. Just turn around and go home."

She kept talking, but I rolled down the window and lit a cigarette. The wind washed her out and left me a roaring silence. I hadn't had a cigarette in nearly two years, since I'd moved in to take care of Mom. She'd quit, too, but still had them stored, ready to start again or just in case of what I didn't know. I took a long drag and coughed. They were probably stale, and not what had been my brand, but it had been long enough I couldn't really tell the difference. Along the road I occasionally saw small pairs of yellow, shining eyes, cats and skunks and opossums that stared into the headlamps and let me pass before carrying on with their business. My mother, her ashes bagged and nestled in their little urn, had her own eyes out in the darkness. I heard her voice in my head, pleading but pitiless, and watched where I was headed.

I found Jorge's neighborhood, kind of in between Arlington and Dallas, before sunup. Morning traffic was just getting going, people heading to work and school, about their days. I drove between rows of 70's ranch-styles, every street named for a flower or tree or occasionally, just for variety's sake, an Indian tribe. I was ready for sleep but jittery, wired with nervousness and maybe a little excitement. Jorge lived on Lavender, a dead-end lane cut off by railroad tracks. Across them a field of grass, holding a few grazing cattle, stretched to the Interstate. I drove up and down a few times until I spotted the house number he'd given me. He had a silver Honda car in the drive, something new since I'd last seen him. The house was indistinguishable from those surrounding it, and lights shone in a couple windows. I parked on the street and sat a moment, took a deep breath before going to the door.

Jorge stood in the open doorway with a surprised expression even though he'd known I was coming. He looked no different than he had six



months earlier. Skin pale, hairline receding, goatee a little too thick but shiny and trimmed. I'd been tried to decide whether or not we'd parted on good terms. We'd been together a couple years, since before I moved in with Mom, and only really stopped because he left Amarillo for a new job, some sort of IT thing. And there was more than that, but there's always more. He'd asked me to go with him, but I couldn't. I wouldn't, and I said no. We eyeballed each other, and then he finally invited me inside. He opened his arms, and I pressed into him for a hug. He gave off heat and an oily, manicured scent. He had a habit of ordering beard-care product from Norway and shampoos from God knew where, spending a lot of money on what hair he had.

"Sorry about your mom," he said, and we pulled apart. "But I'm glad you called. It's good to see you."

"Sorry for the short notice."

"No, no. How's Connie? She taking it okay? And Chad?"

I shrugged, mumbled they were so-so, and he led me through the living room and into the kitchen. Before leaving Mom's house I'd taped a note to the door: TAKE WHATEVER, I'd written, DON'T CARE. My sister had been after me since before Mom went to hospice to let her in, start taking things. Or at least marking what they wanted. Chad, our brother, hadn't been so involved, but he was perched, waiting. He checked in every so often. Bobby always needed money, help, something, and that's the only reason he ever called. I was happy to see Jorge but he was a means of escape, too. I didn't know what they'd do with Mom's stuff or even the house, but they could fight it out without me.

"Really," I told Jorge. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be that way." We stopped at the kitchen counter. He topped off his coffee cup and poured me one. I sat Mom's faux-silver and gold urn out on the faux-marble. "Is that her?"

"Fits, doesn't she?" I pushed her back into a mix with some jars and canisters lined up at the back of the counter. "Never know the difference."

"Weird." He shook his head and then drained his mug. "Listen, I have to work. Make yourself at home today, okay?"

"I thought you said you were calling in."

"Can't. Get yourself some sleep. Don't watch TV all day and then not be awake this evening. Computer's unlocked, but don't go crazy on there, either."

"Oh, Law." My mother's voice coughed its way to me. "And so it begins."

"Have a sandwich for lunch." I followed him to the living room, where he picked up a backpack and loaded his wallet and keys into his pockets, and then to the door. He stopped, and smiled. He leaned in and kissed me on the mouth. "I really am glad you're here."

"Me, too," I said. I stood on the porch to watch him into his new car and off down the street. The day was already warming up, sun just showing. Along dead-end Lavender people's lawn sprinklers were firing to life. I sat down on the lone porch step and closed my eyes, listened, thought I heard talking from somewhere. I opened my eyes and didn't see anyone. I thought about sleep and about how I'd otherwise spend the day.

We spent a week getting back into the swing of things, relearning each other. Jorge took adjusting. We'd always took it together, anyway. He woke in the mornings and went about his routine, sprucing his face and hair while I made breakfast. An egg apiece, toast, coffee. I suggested juice, and he only shook his head, slowly and sadly. A terrible idea. I kept Mom on the counter, too, and this displeased him in a similar way. His eyes kept falling to her, running over the urn like he was trying to open it, move it, make it go away.

"She's fine," I said. "She fits there. Leave her."

"You don't think she'd be more comfortable in the living room?"

"No, I don't."

I liked having her there amongst the coffee and flour and sugar jars. There wouldn't be any explaining to Jorge that I needed her around or that I was having conversations with her. He wasn't geared to accept such a silly notion. But we had breakfast, the three of us together, and then he went to work where, he explained in detail, he took care of all the computer needs of a large Methodist hospital. He handled their daily business and also saw to their online presence—website and email servers mostly, for now, but he

was working on developing their social-media outreach as well. He'd started with a Twitter account, said it was hipper and more to the point.

"At-Metho-care," he told me, pleased with himself. I thought immediate of methamphetamines and the centers who saw to sobering up their abusers, but I didn't tell him that. I knew the frown I'd get, and I wanted to enjoy what he was enjoying, what he'd done.

My days were hollow and strangely silent after the wind down with Mom. The first day I slept on his couch. I fell asleep with the TV and woke when he came home, had dinner and talked and then fell asleep again. That first night I slept in the bed with him. We kept to our separate sides of the bed, a polite kiss. Talked a moment of something that happened with a computer-illiterate doctor and I was out. I felt a craving for sleep, hard like a pang. The next morning Jorge left me a small list of chores and directives for surviving my time without him. It wasn't much. He didn't know how long things took, or didn't need much done—I flittered through his small cleanings and ran his few errands and then slept, clear and quiet in the living room. When Jorge wasn't around I smoked more of my mother's left-behind cigarettes, out on the concrete patio behind the house. I ran them down to nothing and then flicked the white butts high and far into the heavy, well-watered grass. He'd complain, if he found them. He'd admonished me into quitting even before Mom grew sick, saying he hated the taste of smoke and ash. He'd wanted my taste, he said, and I thought it endearing.

Since he'd moved Jorge had taken up a new hobby, I discovered. In one of the spare bedrooms he'd set up a table and covered it with small dropper bottles of paint. He had dozens of small metal figures in various stages of painting—miniature people but elves and dwarves, too, all manner of monsters and even dragons. Stuff I vaguely associated with Dungeons and Dragons, though that wasn't something I remembered him playing. I stopped to look at them a couple times when I was rounding the house, dusting or vacuuming or picking up. I sat in his chair and turned them over in my hands. He had nothing else in the house that suggested those games, so I finally asked him during dinner one night. His eyes lit up, and he laughed.



"No, no D&D," he said. "Just not for me. I met some folks who do play, though, and I really liked their miniatures. So I started painting them.

"They're just so small and perfect," he went on, setting down his fork to gesticulate with both hands. "Such amazing detail, the individual pieces. Sometimes I build larger dioramas—still tiny, in the big picture, but big for them. It's so much fun. I've got a Facebook page, artist page. I post pictures of my projects so people can follow along."

He went on about a company there in Dallas that made miniatures, the best he thought, and said he went to their store every week or two for group paint sessions. I'd have to go, soon, he said, meet everyone and check it out. I promised I would.

That night we made love, first time in a long time. I'd been alone since we split, and I got the feeling so had he. Jorge was unhurried but quick, too, careful to check every few seconds, asking if I was getting everything I needed. I promised him I was and worked hard to enjoy myself. I appreciated his concern, it was one of his finer qualities, and I could feel myself maybe starting to unwind from the hard months just behind me. We lay tangled, panting and grinning. I wanted a cigarette, though, and realized I'd either have to quit them soon or tell Jorge I was taking them up again.

"That was good," I said instead. "Thank you, sir."

"No, oh. No. Thank you." He laughed and then quieted, held his breath a moment. "We can have even more fun next time, if you want. I've still got all our stuff."

"Oh," I said, remembering how we used to play and knowing exactly what he still had—a faux-leather footlocker stuffed with rope, handcuffs, a whip, an outfit or two. I was pretty sure I was turning red in the dark, a little embarrassed, as ever, by the notion. It was more Jorge's thing, though I'd done it plenty. He liked being in charge, especially in the bedroom. Most the time, anyway.

"We could," I told him. "Yeah. We can."

Even after that we didn't, though, at least not right away. We stayed very vanilla, as Jorge liked to call it.

"But that's a good flavor, too," he promised.



I started hearing my mother's voice creeping back to me, salty and exasperated. It was almost a wonder Jorge didn't hear her, too, I thought. She was angry and awful, sitting on the counter and critiquing our love-making from the other room.

"What in the world's sexy about any of that?" she wanted to know. "And good Lord, the things he's wanting you to do more. Help me."

She spent quite a bit of time on our general physiques. His hairline and paunch, my cellulite and sagging. And my wardrobe.

"Like a pair or panties that don't involve a granny are going to kill you. Maybe you should let him dress you up after all."

I worked to shut her out and kept settling in. I did let him spank me one night, bending over the corner of the bed so he could slap at me with an open palm. I bruised a little but at least enjoyed the sting, and he ate it up. Our days went on about the same. I began thinking about something more permanent, knowing it was too far ahead, too soon, too something, but I was wondering if it was doable. I didn't think much about Amarillo and the house that wasn't mine—I wasn't sure what home I'd have left, anyway. I'd had my phone off a week and a half and wasn't thinking about it when Jorge's landline started ringing. I answered and heard my sister Connie's voice, raspy and tired. She was always tired, from doing what I didn't know.

"Kristi," she said. "You're hiding."

"I'm what?"

"It took some calling. We've been calling everywhere. Chad was right, though."

"Tell Jorge hey," I heard my brother say in the background.

"We need to talk," Connie said.

"I left a note."

"We found that."

"Take whatever."

"We would," she said. "You've got the car."

"The car?" I said.

"It's Mom's. It was."

"I'm driving it," I told her. "I've been driving it the last three years."

"That's our issue. We have to have it nice and clean and present, we'll have to sell it, and you're out driving it around."

"Here, here, let me. Come on," I heard Chad saying, and then he had the phone. "Kristi? Listen, you know I hate talking money, but we've got this going on. I've got this stuff going on, I mean, and we have to get it all together for the lawyer. We split three ways.

"I need the cash," he went on. "We all need it, everyone does. Couldn't you use it?"

Chad always had something going on, and I didn't feel like arguing with either of them. I promised I'd be back soon, I was just visiting, and I halfway hung up on them. They were hot to start moving property, dividing the empire. Half the reason I'd left town was their showing up at the house, wanting things. They'd have to deal with it without me for a while, and they'd have to wait on the car. I'd sold mine, paid off some debts, back when I moved in with our mother. They could wait. Bonneville couldn't be worth all that much, anyway.

"That car," Mom said. Felt like she was whispering in my ear. "That car is the only one I ever owned. Who goes through life only owning one car? Bought it with your father's alimony money. Before he decided he just wasn't going to pay it. Shouldn't have left him off with that."

"I thought he paid child support."

"That ain't alimony, dear." My mother's voice dripped, full of something hard to tell. "He quit the alimony after the first man I met. He was supposed to pay until I got married again. Which didn't happen, of course. Most people learn once is enough.

"But I started seeing Herman Willis, fellow worked at the school district. Oversaw buses or the free lunches for poor kids, something like that. I've done forgot how the hell we even met. Went out with him a few times, didn't even sleep with him. But your father sure thought I did."

Mom laughed. I knew the story. Dad had a jealousy in him and never stopped thinking of Mom as his. He flew into a rage when he found out she was seeing Herman, and that's when the alimony stopped. He was done. If she'd taken him to court he'd still have refused.

"It's one of his better qualities," she said, and I could feel her shaking

her head. "Sort of. The first man I did sleep with after your father—well. I don't guess you know that story."

"I don't."

"That's too bad," my mother said.

I started picking up a newspaper every morning and penning my way through the classifieds. I hadn't worked in a while and wasn't sure what was out there. I'd been a receptionist at a couple doctors' offices before Mom got sick, one dentist and one optometrist. I could do ninety words a minute, typewriter or computer didn't matter. My knack precluded the need for a spelling checker. If I was still in Amarillo I thought I could call one of them up, that they'd probably be willing, even want, to rehire me. At least recommend me somewhere else. There wasn't much showing, though—people kept saying times were tough, things were slow. I guess they were right. Or I was looking in the wrong place. I started circling lesser listings, work-from-home opportunities and get-rich-quick schemes. I wasn't proud.

I was thinking about staying. Jorge seemed open to it, and I thought we'd be okay. We were always pretty much okay. After a little looking I lined up a couple interviews. The first was with a gastroenterologist's office manager, a short and chubby woman who dressed poorly and chewed her nails. They needed a part-time receptionist, or so the ad had said, but she didn't seem especially interested in filling the position. The other was a call-center job, helping people with their cell phone bills or activation or something like that. A short man with a beard asked questions about my favorite foods, how I acted at a party, whether I was more of a drama person or comedy. I told him comedy. Even after the interview I still didn't know the details and it paid nothing, but I expected to hear back from them. Didn't know if I'd take it or not.

Jorge started disappearing in the evenings, getting used to having me around. While I sat in the living room, watching television, he retreated to his painting setup. He was every bit as serious about it as he'd seemed. Most every miniature he spent weeks with, adding thin layers at a time, and then when he finished he tucked them away into a foam-lined plastic case. Couldn't set them out, or at least wouldn't. Dust, he said. He didn't even



bring them out of the case to show them to me, only taking me on a tour of his online page instead, the pictures he'd taken. I tried to remember how he spent his time before he moved away, and I couldn't. I thought we'd just watched TV together, gone out to dinner or movies. I peeked into his sanctum every so often, watched him bent at his table, brush in hand and staring at a figure through a bright magnifying lamp. Hunched like a toymaker, Geppetto, but not really making anything.

"I'm working on the metals," he said at one point. "Non-metallic metals. Using different colors to get the effect without actually using a metal paint."

On the second Wednesday since I'd been staying with him Jorge loaded a couple dozen of his tiny paint bottles into a carrying case, along with brushes and a few miniatures and other supplies. His group was meeting, and he insisted I go, check it out. We climbed into his Honda, so low to the ground, and drove into Dallas proper. He was excited for the trip, his first since I'd arrived, and he kept telling me how excited he was for me to meet people. He told me their names, but I couldn't keep track of them all. I watched the city lights grow and fade along the highway. It was just after dark, a little late-day traffic was still out, and I realized it was our first trip out of the house, at least that wasn't to the grocery, Wal\*Mart, or something like that.

"Just be, I don't know—reserved," he told me as we rode along. "There's a process to learn. I've learned so much from these guys."

"I don't have to paint anything, do I?"

"Well, no." Jorge frowned and let his foot off the gas pedal a little. "But you might want to. This is a great chance to learn."

We arrived at his miniature company building, a huge warehouse in a small semi-industrial area just off a busier, store-lined street. A number of cars were nestled at the side of the building, facing the glass doors of their storefront. Jorge carried his gear and nearly had a skip to his gait. He led me inside to a fairly large space. Racks full of miniatures, hundreds, maybe thousands, circled the room, along with shelves holding board games and books and novelties. A couple dozen people, men and women, a few of them with kids, already sat at folding tables, their own paints and figures spread



out as they worked. They greeted us both like long-lost friends while Jorge got to a seat and unpacked. They were nice, really nice, but I had to insist, as they introduced themselves and welcomed me to the scene, that, no, I really didn't want to paint.

I sat down by Jorge and watched them all wrap up into the same pursuit. Jorge painted much like he did at home, silent and absorbed. Others talked about games, their workdays, politics. They all traded paints back and forth, the small half-ounce bottles, and advice, tips or suggestions for doing things. Some were good, really good. Much better than Jorge—their half-finished minis were exquisite. Smooth and clear. Some were free-handing intricate designs on cloaks, or lions and birds on shields, drawing perfect eyes on tiny faces. For a moment I thought of Mom, taking care of her for so long. Tiny pills split up and grouped and put into her hand. Carefully walking her room to room in the house, delicate steps. So much of her fragile and difficult to see, and I kept working on her. I looked over the painters' work and then got to studying the paint itself—they all had so many of the same, nearly-same.

"Can't you just make your own colors?"

"These are precise," Jorge said.

"You can't just mix your own? Like, blue and red is purple, yellow and blue green?"

He hemmed and hawed, turned a little red in the face.

"This is better," he finally said. He added, very quietly, "Please, don't."

"It's much better paint," someone else offered. "Very good consistency. High-quality. They make it here."

"You're sure you don't want to try it?" a woman asked me, and I begged off once more.

I settled into my seat and smiled, checked my watch. I didn't know why Jorge was embarrassed by my question, but he surely was. It took him a few minutes to calm down and get into his groove. Once he did he looked boyish, almost joyful, and I tried to appreciate what he was doing. I wanted to like his likes. But he—everyone—was just adding a layer of paint and letting it dry. Painting and watching it dry. Like coloring in a coloring book. I snuck out for a cigarette after a bit, and when I returned Jorge glanced at

me and frowned. He'd noticed. He didn't say anything, though, just worked on his figure. He'd turned a small goat-man, or maybe he was a satyr, shades of flesh and fur. It was coming along all right, I thought.

He must have noticed how bored I was, because before long he started packing up. The rest of the crowd was still going strong, nearly nine o'clock, but we slipped on out. He told his friends goodbye, and I stretched and headed for the car. Jorge set his case in the backseat and climbed behind the wheel, slowly drove us away from downtown. He was silent. I tried to figure out what I ought to say to him but couldn't quite find it. I fumbled at the armrest and cracked my window a bit, trying to let a little air in, and he immediately rolled it up again from his side. I heard the small click of his locking the window controls.

"That was really disappointing, Kristi" he said, and I wasn't sure if he meant the paint or the window or something else altogether. But I thought I agreed.

We stayed up awhile trying to put Jorge's finger on the problem. It just wasn't kosher, he finally stammered, to talk about other paints. Bad form in the company's house, or some such. I shrugged, and I apologized. Jorge seemed mollified, but I was a little exasperated by the time we went to sleep. I woke the next morning before him, without alarm or prompting, just awake. Before coming to Dallas I'd always been up early. Mom's schedule in the waning days had been bizarre, but she'd liked the early. Turned me into a morning person, eventually. I slipped from bed and made my way to the kitchen. I pulled a stool up to the counter where my mother sat. Awake. It was morning, after all. I put on a pot of coffee.

"You know what I always liked?" she wanted to know. "I had to get to be nearly forty years old before I figured it out myself."

"Ballet," I said.

"Ballet," she said. "I saw Swan Lake for the first time when I was 38. It's practically a blamed children's ballet—children dance it—but I loved it all the same. Good stuff."

"The way they go at the end."

"The way they go into the water together, in the end. Lovers together,

forever. A lot of folks will compare it to *Romeo and Juliet*, but that misses the point, I think. And the staging—nothing in a play compares to the ballet. You should see it, Kristi. You really should.”

“I’m sure it’s lovely.”

“You’re sure it’s—just say no,” my mother said. “No, thank you. That’ll do.”

“I just don’t like it.”

“What *do* you like?” she wanted to know. I shrugged. “What do you want? What does it for you? That ought to be easy enough to answer.”

“It’s not.”

“It is. You just say it, and then you get it, or you try. I found out I like ballet, so I started trying to get it. Take it. I bought tickets for all the Amarillo shows. I swayed standing in line at the grocery. Every now and then I’d take off all my clothes and stand in front of the mirror on the back of my bedroom door, and I’d peek up onto my tiptoes like I was a dancer myself. You walked in on me once, remember?”

I shook my head, couldn’t help smiling. She’d jumped a foot in the air and hollered me out of the room.

“I felt stupid, and I loved it,” she said with a hard sigh. Then she paused a moment. “So what are you doing?”

I didn’t know. Really didn’t. I opened her urn, took a steak knife from the holder on the counter and cut a slit in the plastic, vacuum-sealed packaging that held her remains. I wasn’t exactly sure where I was going with them, but I felt of a sudden it was time to go. Shortly I heard Jorge’s alarm. I started his breakfast, sat and sipped coffee while he went about his routine. I poked my fingers into my mother’s ashes, lifted out a small pinch. Gritty, what I supposed I’d expected. I sprinkled them into a mug and filled it with coffee for Jorge. He came in for his breakfast, sat at the table and went to it. Sipped the coffee, coughed a little.

“I left you a list on the bedside table,” he said. Chores. “Just have a salad for lunch.”

I didn’t say anything. If he had anything to say about our night before he kept it to himself—no further complaint nor apology. I saw him out the door, a little earlier than usual, like he aimed to escape. I went back inside,



checked his list of busy work, and then I hit the computer. Had to look around a little, but I found a Thai place that delivered at eight in the morning, called them up and put in an order. The woman who took it sounded sleepy, unsure, and I thought she must've thought I was crazy, even if they did take orders so early. They charged double the delivery fee, but I didn't care. I wanted it.

I plugged my phone in to charge, got a shower and then sat down to check my voicemail. The inbox was full, most from my siblings. Connie sounded progressively angry and terse in her messages, each slightly louder but shorter than the one before it. She had questions about the car, the house, things that might be tucked away in the garage and whether Mom had seen a lawyer at any point. Chad was apologetic on the line but wanting to hurry things along—cash, he finally said. He just needed some cash to operate. I understood that, right? Between their messages was one about the gas service being shut off—they'd no doubt raided the house for goods, our mother's little treasures, but hadn't bothered with anything like paying a bill. I couldn't say much, though. I'd just left it sitting there, too. Long enough.

I packed my things and loaded into the Bonneville. My mother's ashes I settled in the passenger seat again, wedged between one of my bags and the armrest so she wouldn't spill. Back inside I made sure I hadn't forgotten anything, found a piece of paper to leave Jorge a note. Thanks, I told him, but too much to do. I carried it to his painting table and tucked it under a half-painted blue dragon right in the center of his workspace, where he'd be sure to see it. I turned out lights and let myself out, locking the door behind me.

I drove out to Arlington, not having to fight too much traffic, and followed directions on my phone to the baseball park. I found it just off the Interstate but a bit to itself, surrounded by well-landscaped trees and fields and nestled beside a small river. There weren't a lot of people around. I drove onto the manicured grounds, parked at a curb still well away from the stadium. It occurred to me that this wasn't even a place my mother had ever been—her last trip to a baseball game would've been to the old stadium.



Where that was I didn't know, but I thought this was fitting anyway. She always spoke fondly of her and Dad's jaunts, a happy time preceding much less happier moments. The park felt like that—kind of an old place, totally a new one. I felt like a part of it. The park, my mother's life. Things long before me, all passed now.

I walked her out into the open field, off the sidewalk and alongside the river. It crinkled and rolled almost silently. The water was a little dirtier than it had looked from a distance, and I turned away from it, kept walking. Finally I found a good spot. A tree gnarled its way full of leaves to the sky, sitting atop a small hillock as well-maintained as all else around us. The wind was at our back, and neither of us had anything more to say. I shook Mom out into the breeze, made sure to stay upwind. She settled and faded from sight. I thought about a prayer, some little eulogy, but nothing came to mind. I didn't wait long before sealing up the empty container and returning to the car. I had a lot ahead of me, but I thought she'd have been pleased.

## DANCING WITH SIVA

LESLIE ST. JOHN

Beyond the yellow house I fumble at the stone  
steps leading to the sea, try to get the curve  
of the balustrade right in my memory.

Surely the water was much closer than this.

When the moon milk-beamed across the terrace,  
where I stepped wet from the outdoor shower  
and draped myself across the thick railing.

Warm wind salted my body.

All those voices swelled from the house,  
as new friends diced onions, papaya,  
spoke a Spanish I didn't recognize.

Waves barreled over each other, never reaching my toes.

Moonbathing I asked Venus to lie inside me,  
pull my freckled skin, my damp hair into her  
opalescent light, homestead in my bones

until I was hers.

Not the fifteen-year-old whose blue bikini  
“the size of a washcloth” caused uncles to stumble.

Not the married twenty-something who felt  
another man’s cock on her back  
in the blue light of a foreign film.

Not the girl inside the woman inside his jeans  
posing for him, in a Nicaraguan motel.

But hers—

Light being of desire that heals with touch  
*my palm to your cheek*  
is healed with touch  
*his cheek to my breast.*

Naked in a warm pool under winter-bare fig trees,

I slow danced with a man  
whose shoulder bore three thick strips  
and an empty circle into which I softened.

With the smallest steps, waves whispered  
from us until I stepped on his foot.  
No surprise a chrysanthemum bloomed between us—

foot to foot, eyes permissioning—  
before I could apologize,  
he said, “Please, do it again.”

And I felt her lift my arms around him  
until I leaned into his Portuguese.

Still now I hear the song she stirred in him—

*My foot misses your foot stepping over,*

feel the warm wind of her whisper.



# RUINAS DAL CONVENTO DE LAS CAPUCHINAS

GEORGE SUCH

The Capuchina nuns slept here on wood beds  
with straw pillows, sequestered from *el mundo*,

having come on a ship from Spain, bodies full  
of bare desire, young and hungry for God.

Something human loves a cloister, nourishment  
behind the walls, the way boundaries dissolve

in disciplines and rhythms shape the shadows,  
a place where surrender and power caress.

The walls taper inside their cells, webs  
of mortared brick, each room a sequence

in a circle, built around a central chamber  
where twenty doorways open, as if *un ojo*

once watched all. I wonder if they returned  
the gaze, if they saw as they were seen.

A bright green moss grows in the corners

Still now I hear the song she stirred in him—  
My foot misses your foot stepping over,

feel the warm wind of her whisper.

## NEW RIVER

JOSELYN TAKACS

—FOR RONALD HOLDREN—

The parking lot of the funeral home was mostly empty, just as Kurt had hoped. The wake didn't start for another half hour, but in fifteen minutes, the cars would start to file in. This parking lot was empty most of the time, like church lots on weekdays and liquor stores on church days. Lylesburg needed only one funeral parlor, if only for once a month. Theirs was a small town that straddled route 460 on a stretch of small towns. The old route veined through the Appalachians to West Virginia and to nowhere in particular. When the lot filled, folks would park along the side of the road. Everyone would be there because it could have been anybody's sons.

Kurt got the call the day before when he was working in the greenhouse. It was Jerry who called. Kurt figured Jerry called to say he couldn't meet at The Straight Eight later; his wife wouldn't let him. Kurt was used to this. Jerry canceled more often than not. But Jerry's voice was different, embarrassed or something, so Kurt had said, "Hey man, it ain't a big deal. I know you got stuff going on." This was when Jerry told him that Eleanor's boys had drowned while swimming in the New River. "It was the rain runoff Brush Mountain," Jerry said. "They didn't know it'd be so strong."

Kurt recognized Eleanor's mustard-colored Suburban, but he didn't

know the other two cars in the lot. He hoped her family wasn't there yet. Kurt remembered, years before, sitting in Eleanor's living room across from her parents—her mother's clasped hands in her lap as she crossed and re-crossed her legs; her father watching the muted TV in the corner. They hadn't liked Kurt five years ago when he'd dated Eleanor, and he'd hate to suffer through talk with them now. Kurt hoped that he could somehow slip inside, sign the book, and leave unnoticed. The whole town would show for this, so he doubted anyone would remember if they'd seen him, least of all Eleanor. Eleanor, who lost both of her sons the same day. When Kurt thought of the boys—Billy and Carter—and all that Eleanor would go through, the thought of saying some bullshit like, "I'm sorry for your loss," made Kurt sick, but the truth was, he could think of nothing else to say.

Kurt sat in his truck and picked at the dirt crescents beneath his fingernails. His hands were dirty even when they were clean. He worked up the courage to open his truck door, and the August heat swamped the car. Kurt started to itch in his black wool pants, the only black pants he owned. He'd have to get out.

He stood for a moment in the parking lot and stared at Eleanor's old station wagon. Kurt had driven it a few times himself because Eleanor didn't like the boys riding in his truck. They would inevitably plead to ride in the flatbed and Kurt, who growing-up always rode in the flatbed, understood this and conceded every time. In the trunk of Eleanor's station wagon, he spied a half-deflated soccer ball. He felt his chest clench up at the sight of it. She would go home to a houseful of evidence of her boys' lives and every deflated soccer ball would remind her, and for all of this to fall on Eleanor—a spritely woman, eager to laugh, even at herself—it seemed more than unfair.

The funeral home was converted from an old colonial house. Kurt noticed the daylilies blooming in the flower bed. Prester John lilies. Kurt had probably sold them to the owner. Every year, he put an ad in the paper. He described the blooms as brief, explosions of color, fireworks. Each bloom lasted only one day. Come see the fireworks in our garden, his ad said. He had the time to think of those things.

Because it was once a house, he felt he should ring the doorbell but



didn't want to bring attention to his arrival. The sweat rolled down his legs, and he opened the door. A wall of chilled air from the a/c swept over him. Inside, he felt he had just walked into a stranger's home, but an unnaturally clean stranger. There was a light bell when he opened the door, and Kurt waited briefly there in the hallway to be found, but no one came. A wooden staircase led to where he imagined the bedrooms once were. He could hear the floorboards above him creak under someone's weight. He wondered what was up there now, or if someone still slept up there, and if that's where Eleanor was. He'd been in this funeral home a handful of times—lastly when a friend of his mother's, Mary Bailor, passed away from cancer, but the rooms had been filled with mourners, he'd been caught up in brief exchanges, and he'd never looked around.

On either side of the entrance were sitting rooms lined with pastel couches. Doilies flowered on the polished coffee tables. Crystal bowls of caramel candies were dispersed on various tables, right next to the Kleenex boxes. It reminded him of a spinster's house: sterile, unsexed, eager to please. Kurt heard music, something classical, coming from the back room, and he followed it. The expectant, emptiness of the space made him uneasy, and he considered slipping back outside to smoke a cigarette when he came upon the large, photo-collaged poster board that read, "Carter Ballone 2000-2010 and William Ballone 1998-2010."

Kurt couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the boys. He had little reason to see children; he'd never married. If Kurt saw the boys walking to Eddy's Ice Cream or someplace, he'd honk and wave, but he didn't stop. There'd always been a reason to keep driving—rotting peaches or wilting pansies. Now, the familiarity of their faces in their school portraits shocked him: Carter, a towheaded boy with springy curls, the youngest, had braces now. Kurt hadn't noticed. Billy, the elder, was freckled, quieter, with serious look to his mild smile.

Both boys, in the tradition of the rural town where they lived—talked, walked, and ate slowly—as if there were nothing propelling them towards the coaster of youth. They had the air, as some country boys do, of seeming much older than they were. This was probably because of the long pause they would take before answering a question. Kurt did this too, he

imagined, but he found the affect endearing in children, and it seemed to him a thing of the past, given the flippancy of other boys he'd talk to when he sold produce downtown. Kurt remembered, when the boys were younger, how Billy used to whisper his jokes to Carter, who would laugh and say the punch line too soon: "A numb skull!" Carter had shrieked, "A numb skull!" before Kurt had the time to pretend to ponder the riddle.

Kurt traced their ages through their pictures. The boys at soccer. The boys canoeing. Boys in the snow. Boys in diapers. Boys with their father. And there it was, a picture of him. The boys, five and seven, were on either side of him on Eleanor's couch. They had all just watched a movie, some kids' movie. The kids had their legs outstretched on the coffee table. A half-eaten bag of chips at their sneakers. They wore the half-posed, giddy smiles of young boys. Kurt had an arm around each kid, and he, too, wore a goofy, satiated smile. This was a picture of him as a father. Probably the only picture like this. He hadn't known this picture existed, but why would he? He saw Eleanor only in passing, and she might make him laugh with a comment about Billy's teacher, an anecdote about the dog, but she'd erected a wall of niceties between them, and he didn't begrudge her that.

In the few months that he had dated Eleanor, Kurt had tried to play the role of Dad, but the boys' wariness amplified his own, and at times, he felt they'd had a better grasp on that business than he did. Eleanor had once asked him to get the boys' hair cut, but he couldn't remember why or where she had been. Perhaps it had been a test. So, Kurt drove them to The Hair Port and was surprised how quickly their calm gave way to sly distrust as he parked in front of the mobile home-turned-salon. The hairdresser was out that day, and the hairdresser's niece, Teresa, was filling in. She hadn't helped matters when she began cooing at the boys as if they were toddlers. Kurt nearly felt offended on their behalf. Noticing their anxiety—the boys' blank, overwhelmed expressions ripe with the potential for tears—he changed his tune and resorted to bribery. He promised to take them on what he advertised as "foraging" on his parents' property. Carter's attention was quickly diverted by the vacant hairdresser's chair as Teresa washed Billy's hair, and as Kurt pumped the chair up and down with his foot, Carter supplied a soundtrack of mechanical mimicry to suggest the

chair was en route to someplace else. The whole ordeal took longer than expected because Teresa, her face pained in concentration, would only snip the hair in half-inch increments.

Later, as Kurt parked his truck on the hill beside his house, he explained to the boys that when a guy gets really lost, like on an expedition, he has to be prepared to survive in nature. The boys squealed with disgust when Kurt popped a pansy flower into his mouth. Kurt told them that people put pansies in their salads. The boys refused to try, but minutes later, Kurt barely caught Carter as he stuffed a trumpet flower in his mouth. He scared the kid so badly that Carter started to choke, and Kurt had to rinse Carter's mouth out with the hose. You gotta ask me if it's okay before you eat something, he said, and the boys nodded, their thrill deflated. Kurt gave them each a strawberry basket and led them to the blackberry bushes on the edge of his property. The bushes were at the end of their season and the berries scarce from the deer, but the boys had picked enough to leave them stained and impressed.

Eleanor stood next to him at the window overlooking her backyard when they'd returned. They watched the boys chase each other in her backyard. "They look ridiculous!" Eleanor laughed. "They look like she attacked them with hedge cutters."

It was true; they did look terrible, but Billy looked the worst. There wasn't a straight line in his cropped brown hair. Carter's curls, at least, disguised the unevenness. Kurt admitted, "I don't think hairdressing is Teresa's calling."

Without looking back at him, she said, "Carter'll get a fro if this keeps on. He's got hair I would've killed for at his age."

Kurt watched Carter as he ran screaming after his brother, arms outstretched for his toy rocket. He looked to Eleanor's dark brown hair pulled into clip at the base of her neck. Her arms were folded, and she watched the boys in her backyard with a kind of bemused pride. Eleanor turned her small, serious eyes on Kurt, and he suddenly felt happy to be a part of it—the scene that was them.

But Kurt had rushed into the relationship, without considering what he'd signed up for: that is, to be a second-string father for someone else's



kids. Eleanor had been a high school unrequited love, recently divorced, and miraculously standing alone by the bar one Friday night in winter. He'd made some promises he couldn't make good on. Eleanor called him on this one evening after the boys had gone to sleep. She'd been lying next to him on her couch, and he was resting his chin on the top of her head. She turned, without warning, and said, "Kurt, I want to be wrong about this, but I'm in no place to gamble. You're not ready for all this, are you?"

"No," he said. Her question provoked the answer before he'd turned it over in his mind. "I thought I was, but I don't think so."

She nodded, smirked sadly. "I can tell," she said.

He felt like a coward as he drove home that night for making her say it and not him.

In the adjoining room, rows of chairs faced the pair of open caskets. He stood in the doorway, and at first, he thought he was mistaken, but he looked closer and the caskets were filled with something. She'd filled the open caskets with her sons' toys. Stuffed animals, comic books, Nintendo games, and action figures. Kurt didn't know what would possess her to do this. He didn't dare to come any closer, but he couldn't avoid boys' sleeping profiles. Kurt looked around for the book to sign. He couldn't find it. They hadn't put it out yet. He felt he didn't deserve to be alone with the bodies.

Suddenly, Eleanor appeared at his side. She looked up at him. He'd forgotten how petite she was, 5'3" at best. Her face was like a wrung-out washcloth. It was such a nice face, he found himself thinking. She had a clean, broad Polish face with defined cheekbones. Eleanor had always been guarded, and Kurt never seemed to know what was going on in her mind, but Kurt knew about fragility, and he was afraid to touch her. He said,

"Ellie. I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say."

"I know." She shook her head. "Everybody keeps saying things, but there's nothing to say." She looked at the ground and then pointed to the photo collage. "Did you see the picture?"

"Yeah," he said. "I had no idea."

"I love that picture," she said. "The boys were so happy."

He wanted to say the right thing, but he was tearing up just looking



at her. He hadn't expected to. She waited a moment for him to speak and when he didn't, she walked past him to the coffins. She leaned over them and was stroking their faces. He stayed back. Kurt couldn't will himself to come any closer. Their faces were painted, but they were not painted the right color, and the boys' faces were whiter than their tan summer necks and hands.

"They were great kids," he heard himself say. "I'm just so sorry. I don't know why this happened."

"They tell me that Carter probably got caught," Ellie said, "and then Billy went in after him. That's what they say happens."

"It never should've happened," Kurt said, and Ellie turned quickly to him. He'd said the wrong thing as if he was blaming her. He assumed she wasn't there when they drowned. "It's not your fault," he blurted. "Christ. Of course, it's not your fault."

She nodded, clearly not believing him.

"The toys," he started to say. He wanted to ask her about them but wouldn't. "The boys look real nice."

He took a step toward her and put his hand on her back, looking around him, hoping someone else would appear. She was trembling as if she would shake herself apart.

"I just," she said. "I always knew I'd screw it up. All the good things I had. I knew that I'd lose them somehow, but all at once..."

She sunk to her knees. She put her head down on the coffin, and she howled. It was a terrible sound. A dying sound. He had the sudden urge to pull her away from the coffins, to scoop her into his arms and carry her away, but he was frozen by the sight of her. He'd never dreamed he'd have to see anything so goddamn sad and unfair. He worked with plants. He made things grow. He sold his vegetables downtown. He lived his life quietly outside the sphere of tragedy.

"Ellie, you did your best... you did better than anyone could've done. Your boys were so lucky."

Her crying slowed, and she turned to face him, her eyes billowed with tears, the indentation of the coffin edge on her cheek.

"I need you to do something, Kurt." She said this coldly. He saw her

eyes as she spoke, wild with an idea, wild with conviction, and he was afraid.

"Anything," he said. "Just say it."

"I want to hold them," she said. "I need to hold them again."

He didn't know what this meant until she stood up. Kurt took a step backwards as she leaned over the coffin. She reached in and cradled the eldest boy, Billy, one arm under his legs and the other under his head. In a long, unsteady heave, she lifted him out of the casket. Kurt watched a stuffed rabbit tumble over the coffin's edge. She took a quick step to the side as she turned, as if she would drop him, but she caught herself and came toward Kurt. She held the boy out to him.

"Take him."

"Oh, Ellie. I don't think..." but he couldn't stop her. His arms went out instinctively as if to take something too heavy for her. She put the dead boy in his arms and turned for the youngest. The boy was much heavier than he looked, and Kurt thought, he's been waterlogged. Billy's thin, muscular legs dug in to his forearm. To his horror, the boy's head rolled back, exposing his neck. There was a swipe of rouge on Billy's cheek, and from afar, he could be sleeping, but so close, he was lifeless, painted. He'd never seen the boy so neat, his brown hair side-parted and gelled in place.

Eleanor, her face cold and determined, stepped forward with her blonde son, Carter. She pressed the boys together, side-by-side.

"Look at them, Kurt," she said. "They were my boys."

"Oh, Ellie," he said. "Fuck." He was crying then, not sobbing, but he felt the wetness on his face, his trembling lips.

"They were all I had," she said. "It's not home without them."

Kurt searched his mind but could find nothing that would console her. Her arms trembled with Carter's weight, but she didn't move to return him. Kurt watched as someone appeared in the doorway. He looked down at the boy in his arms. It was like the boy was still underwater. Kurt had taken them to the River once when he was around. The spot he liked to go when he was growing up, and then even just to think as an adult, was a gravel clearing off McCoy Road where the river was a quarter-mile wide. The murky brown water bent at the base of the evergreen mountain and snaked out of sight. Shelves of large granite jutted into the riverside and the large

boulders formed ellipses across the river's surface. The current, much stronger than it looked, was whitewater about the rocks. He and the boys had been alone that day, only a fisherman had been in sight upstream. He'd put them each in inner tubes and tied a rope between them and his arm. He listened to the boys' laughter and the river's familiar shushing. Kurt would have held on to them until his arms broke.

## EAST MOUNTAIN VIEW

PAUL TRAN

The first time we left  
my mother said *Take  
only what you need.*  
He was passed out  
on the couch, fifth time  
that week. I decided  
there was nothing  
worth keeping. No trinket  
to prove I was there  
except my busted lip,  
a punctured lung,  
*The Lion King*  
on VHS. I watched  
my father hooved to death  
in a gorge. The dream  
a pattern: Its raw wind  
whistling through the hole  
he punched in my chest.  
I wanted my life back.



## A MARRIAGE

VALERIE WOHLLED

She gave him letter openers of chrome,  
bone, sharpened stone, on their anniversaries.  
Quietly he lay the handle in his palm.  
Once, diamonds and platinum from Tabriz.

Malachite or cocobalo wood  
(almost extinct, streaked in ruby red and black;  
that year the miscarriage, the child in its hood  
of blood, also streaked ruby red and black).

Years of letters!—airmail in blue  
tissue thin as failed eggshell; once, pink-faded  
envelopes from a mistress, rose-scented, fell through  
the slot. He'd run his fingers along the opener's edge—switchblade

of porcelain or ivory, but left them all unused—better  
his hands' weapon, tearing apart letter after letter.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Anne Barngrover** is the author of *Yell Hound Blues* (Shipwreck Books, 2013) and co-author with Avni Vyas of the chapbook *Candy in Our Brains* (CutBank, 2014). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *North American Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Ecotone*, *Crazyhorse*, and *Mid-American Review*, among others. She holds graduate degrees from Florida State University (MFA) and University of Missouri (PhD).

**Constance Brewer's** poetry has appeared in *Dark Matter Literary Journal*, *The Nassau Review*, and in the *New Poets of the American West* anthology, among other places. Constance has an MFA from the University of Buffalo and is co-editor for *Gyroscope Review* magazine. She is also the recipient of a 2016 Wyoming Arts Council Fellowship grant in poetry. Constance lives in Wyoming with a small but vocal herd of Welsh Corgis.

**Sarah Carson** was born and

raised in Michigan but now lives in Chicago. She is the author of three chapbooks and two full-length collections of poetry: *Poems in which You Die* (BatCat Press) and *Buick City* (Mayapple Press).

**Anne Champion** is the author of *Reluctant Mistress* (Gold Wake Press, 2013) and *The Dark Length Home* (Noctuary Press, 2017). Her poems have appeared in *Verse Daily*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Pinch*, *Pank Magazine*, *Thrush Poetry Journal*, *Redivider*, *New South*, and elsewhere. She was an Academy of American Poet's Prize recipient, a Barbara Deming Memorial grant recipient, and a 2015 Best of the Net winner. She received her MFA from Emerson College. She teaches writing in Boston, MA.

**Jim Davis** is a student of Human Development and Psychology at Harvard University and has previously studied at Northwestern University and Knox College. His work has appeared in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Seneca Review*,

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**Constance Brewer's** poetry has appeared in *Dark Matter Literary Journal*, *The Nassau Review*, and in the *New Poets of the American West* anthology, among other places. Constance has an MFA from the University of Buffalo and is co-editor for *Gyroscope Review* magazine. She is also the recipient of a 2016 Wyoming Arts Council Fellowship grant in poetry. Constance lives in Wyoming with a small but vocal herd of Welsh Corgis.

**Sarah Carson** was born and

raised in Michigan but now lives in Chicago. She is the author of three chapbooks and two full-length collections of poetry: *Poems in which You Die* (BatCat Press) and *Buick City* (Mayapple Press).

**Anne Champion** is the author of *Reluctant Mistress* (Gold Wake Press, 2013) and *The Dark Length Home* (Noctuary Press, 2017). Her poems have appeared in *Verse Daily*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Pinch*, *Pank Magazine*, *Thrush Poetry Journal*, *Redivider*, *New South*, and elsewhere. She was an Academy of American Poet's Prize recipient, a Barbara Deming Memorial grant recipient, and a 2015 Best of the Net winner. She received her MFA from Emerson College. She teaches writing in Boston, MA.

**Jim Davis** is a student of Human Development and Psychology at Harvard University and has previously studied at Northwestern University and Knox College. His work has appeared in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Seneca Review*,

*The Harvard Crimson, Portland Review, RHINO, Midwest Quarterly, and California Journal of Poetics*, among others. In addition to writing and painting, Jim is an international semi-professional American football player.  
@JimDavisArt

**Laura S. Distelheim's** work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, has been noted for special mention in *Best American Essays* and *The Pushcart Prize*, and has received the Mary Roberts Rinehart Award, the Richard J. Margolis Award, an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship Award, a Barbara Deming Memorial Fund Grant and the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Medal. She received her J.D. from Harvard Law School and is the creator of Neighbor to Neighbor, an organization that combats hunger among and creates scholarship opportunities for low-income children in her community.

**C.W. Emerson** is a psychologist in Los Angeles and Palm Springs, California. His work has appeared in journals including *Atlanta Review, Poetry East, Saint Ann's Review, Mantis*, and many others. Emerson

studies with poet and teacher Cecilia Woloch.

**Matthew Gellman's** poems are featured or forthcoming in *Thrush, The Journal, Lambda Literary, H.O.W. Journal, The Adroit Journal, Word Riot, DIALOGIST* and elsewhere. He is the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Prize and an MFA candidate at Columbia University.

**Carmen Germain** is the author of *These Things I Will Take with Me* (Cherry Grove). Recent work has appeared in *Poet Lore* and *The Cider Press Review*, and work is forthcoming in *Fifth Wednesday* and *Cold Mountain Review*. She lives in Washington state and northern British Columbia.

**Giuseppe Getto** is a Zen Buddhist, a poet, and an Assistant Professor of English at East Carolina University. His first chapbook, *Familiar History*, is currently forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. His individual poems can be found in journals such as *Sugarhouse Review, Slant, Reed, and Eclectica*, among others. He is still trying to figure out where his own voice fits within the increasingly divergent conversation



that is contemporary American poetry. Visit him online at: <http://guiseppegetto.com/poetry>.

**Leonore Hildebrandt** is the author of a letterpress chapbook, *The Work at Hand*, and a full-length collection, *The Next Unknown*. She has published poems and translations in the *Cafe Review*, *Cerise Press*, *the Cimarron Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Drunken Boat*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Poetry Daily*, and *Poetry Salzburg Review*, among other journals. A native of Germany, Hildebrandt lives “off the grid” in Harrington, Maine. She teaches writing at the University of Maine.

**Amanda Hope** is a poet and librarian from eastern Massachusetts. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *cream city review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*. She has two degrees, in subjects that have nothing to do with creative writing. She enjoys riding the subway, scratching various animals behind the ears, and wearing magnificent boots. You can find her on Twitter @AmandaHopePoet.

**Jason Irwin** is the author of *Watering the Dead* (Pavement

Saw Press, 2008), winner of the Transcontinental Poetry Award, and the chapbooks *Where You Are* (Night Ballet Press, 2014), & *Some Days It's A Love Story* (Slipstream Press, 2005). *A Blister of Stars* is forthcoming from Low Ghost/ Coleridge Street Books, 2016. His work has appeared in *Poetry East*, *Confrontation*, and *Poetry Ireland Review*, among others. Originally from Dunkirk, NY, he now lives in Pittsburgh. [www.jasonirwin.blogspot.com](http://www.jasonirwin.blogspot.com)

**Moye Ishimoto** lives in Los Angeles where she works in television and is most probably stuck in traffic right now. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Pacific University.

**Robert Levy's** work has appeared in *Southern Review*, *Poetry*, *Paris Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Boulevard*, *Southwest Review*, *North American Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Threepenny Review* and *Alaska Quarterly Review* among many others. He won an NEA Fellowship, fellowships at Yaddo and The MacDowell Colony, multiple awards from the Poetry Society of America, and

the first Paumanok Poetry Prize from SUNY Farmingdale. He has published three books.

**Jennifer Met** lives in a small town in North Idaho with her husband and children. Her poetry and hybrid words have appeared or are forthcoming in *Gulf Stream*, *Zone 3*, *Kestrel*, *Moon City Review*, *Juked*, *Sleet Magazine*, *Barely South Review*, *Apeiron Review*, *Haibun Today*, *the Lake*, and elsewhere. Recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize and winner of the Jovanovich Award, she is Assistant Poetry Editor for the *Indianola Review*.

**Jennifer Stewart Miller** grew up in Vermont and California and holds an MFA from Bennington College. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cider Press Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Jabberwock Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Raleigh Review*, *Sycamore Review*, and other publications. She is also the author of *a fox appears: a biography of a boy in haiku*.

**Michael Mingo** is pursuing an M.F.A. in poetry at the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars. He holds a B.A. in creative writing from Carnegie Mellon University

and originally hails from Vernon Township, New Jersey. His work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Barnstorm*, *Soliloquies Anthology*, *Angle*, and *Pirene's Fountain*, among others.

**Megan Parker** is an emerging writer and graduate student. She has presented her work at FLAC (Florida Literary Arts Coalition), as well as at a Slash Pines Project collegiate reading in spring 2011. Her work has been published in *FLARE: Flagler Review*.

**Rachel Marie Patterson** is the co-founder and editor of *Radar Poetry* ([www.radarpoetry.com](http://www.radarpoetry.com)). She holds an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The recipient of an Academy of American Poets Prize, her work has been nominated for Best of the Net, Best New Poets, and the Pushcart Prize. Her poems appear in *Cimarron Review*, *Smartish Pace*, *Parcel*, *The Journal*, *Thrush*, *Nashville Review*, *Redivider*, *Fugue*, and others. Her chapbook, *If I Am Burning*, was published by Main Street Rag in 2011.

**Vincent Poturica's** writing appears or is forthcoming in *New England Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Western Humanities Review*, and *Forklift*,

*Ohio*. He lives with his wife in Long Beach, CA, where he teaches at Cerritos College.

**Monica Isabel Restrepo** is a lyric essayist currently earning an MFA in Creative Writing at Florida International University (FIU). She is the owner of Gala Consulting, a firm specializing in helping students write their personal essays during the college application process. Monica is also Editor of Non-fiction at *Gulf Stream*, FIU's student-run literary magazine. In her spare time she loves to play tennis and bake with her two small children in sunny Boca Raton, FL.

**Lisa Romeo** teaches in Bay Path University's MFA program. Her non-fiction, nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best American Essays, has appeared in many places, including the *New York Times*, *Under the Sun*, *Hippocampus*, *Front Porch*, *Under the Gum Tree*, *Word Riot*, *Sport Literate*, *Sweet*, *O-The Oprah Magazine*, and anthologies, including *Why We Ride* (Seal Press). Lisa is creative nonfiction editor for *Compose* and holds an MFA from Stonecoast. She lives in New Jersey.

**Linwood Rumney's** poems, non-fiction essays, and translations have recently appeared in or are forthcoming from *Arts & Letters*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere. An associate editor for Black Lawrence Press, he lives in Cincinnati, where he is pursuing a PhD as a Taft Fellow.

**Emily Schulten** is the author of *Rest in Black Haw*, poems available from New Plains Press. Her poems appear places such as *Prairie Schooner*, *New Ohio Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Fifth Wednesday*, *Mid-American Review*, *North American Review*, *Salamander*, *Verse Daily*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and others. She teaches English and creative writing at The College of the Florida Keys.

**Marvin Shackelford** is author of a poetry collection, *Endless Building* (Urban Farmhouse). His stories and poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Epiphany*, *Confrontation*, *Cimarron Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *The Mackinac* and elsewhere. He resides in the Texas Panhandle with his wife, Shea, and earns a living in agriculture. And plays some D&D,



and poorly paints some miniatures, when he can.

**Leslie St. John** is a poet, yogi, and teacher living in California. She holds an MFA in poetry from Purdue University and is the author of *Beauty Like a Rope* (Word Palace Press). Her poetry and creative nonfiction have appeared in *Teach.Yoga*, *Apersus Quartery*, *Cimarron Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Florida Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Oxford American*, *Rebelle Society*, and *Verse Daily*. She is creator of *Prose and Poses* and offers yoga and writing retreats: [proseandposes.com](http://proseandposes.com). She teaches English at Cal Poly.

**George Such** is a third-year English Ph.D. student at University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where he has been awarded a University Fellowship. In a previous incarnation he was a chiropractor for twenty-seven years in eastern Washington. His collection of poems *Where the Body Lives* was selected as winner of the 2012 Tiger's Eye Chapbook Contest and is available from Tiger's Eye Press. When not involved in his studies, George enjoys traveling, cooking, and hiking.

**Joselyn Takacs** is a Fiction Fellow in the Literature and Creative Writing PhD program at University of Southern California. She holds an MFA from Johns Hopkins. She teaches writing and lives in Los Angeles, California.

**Paul Tran** is a Pushcart Prize-nominated poet and historian. Their work appears in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Offing*, *RHINO* & elsewhere. They've received fellowships & residencies from Kundiman, VONA, Poets House, Lambda Literary, Napa Valley, Home School Miami & the Vermont Studio Center. They live in Brooklyn, where they are an Urban Word NYC mentor & the first Asian American in almost 20 years to represent the Nuyorican Poets Café at the National Poetry Slam.

**Valerie Wohlfeld's** most recent book of poetry is *Woman with Wing Removed* (Truman State University Press). Her first collection, *Thinking the World Visible*, won the Yale Younger Poets Prize (Yale University Press). Her poems have been nominated six times for a Pushcart Prize. She holds an MFA from Vermont College.



## SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

*Harpur Palate* has no restrictions on subject matter or form. Quite simply, send us your highest quality short stories, flash fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. Almost every literary magazine says this, but it bears repeating: please familiarize yourself with our publication before submitting.

We receive submissions through our online submission manager, accessible from [harpurpalate.com](http://harpurpalate.com). Please note that *Harpur Palate* does not accept unsolicited email submissions and cannot accept submissions from anyone, past or present, associated with Binghamton University.

**PROSE:** Fiction (100 to 6,000 words) and Creative Nonfiction (100 to 8,000 words) accept one longer piece or three flash fictions per author.

**POETRY:** Up to five poems, no more than fifteen pages total.

**DEADLINES:** September 1 to November 15 for our winter issue, and February 1 to April 15 for our summer issue.

Simultaneous submissions are acceptable if you notify us immediately upon acceptance elsewhere. Due to the number of submissions we receive, we cannot respond to questions about whether your work has been read. Unless otherwise noted on our website, our response time is one to four months.

Harpur Palate no longer accepts paper submissions.

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As always, we give special thanks to Colleen Burke, Professor David Bartine, and Dean Susan Strehle for their tireless efforts on our behalf.

## THE MILTON KESSLER MEMORIAL PRIZE IN POETRY

AWARD: \$500 and publication in the winter/spring issue

OPENS: September 1st

CLOSES: November 15

Milton Kessler—poet and teacher—was a great friend and mentor to students in the Creative Writing program at Binghamton University. In honor of his dedication to the development of writers, *Harpur Palate* is pleased to announce the annual Milton Kessler Poetry Prize.

Poems in any style, form, or genre are welcome, provided they are no more than five pages long and previously unpublished. The fee is \$15 for each entry of three poems and includes a one-year subscription to *Harpur Palate*. You may submit as many times as you wish, but no more than three poems per entry fee.

We receive entries through our online submission manager, accessible at [harpurpalate.com](http://harpurpalate.com). Include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, email address, and story title. Your name should appear only on the cover letter and nowhere else on the manuscript.

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AWARD: \$500 and publication in the summer/fall issue

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CLOSES: April 15

John Gardner—prose writer and teacher—was a great friend and mentor to students in the Creative Writing program at Binghamton University. In honor of his dedication to the development of writers, *Harpur Palate* is pleased to announce the annual John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction

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OPENS: September 1st

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We are pleased to announce the *Harpur Palate* Award for Creative Nonfiction. Developed by Marissa Schwalm, former Editor in Chief of *Harpur Palate*, the prize will be awarded in November of each academic year.

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We receive entries through our online submission manager, accessible at [harpurpalate.com](http://harpurpalate.com). Include a cover letter with your name, address, phone number, email address, and story title. Your name should appear only on the cover letter and nowhere else on the manuscript.

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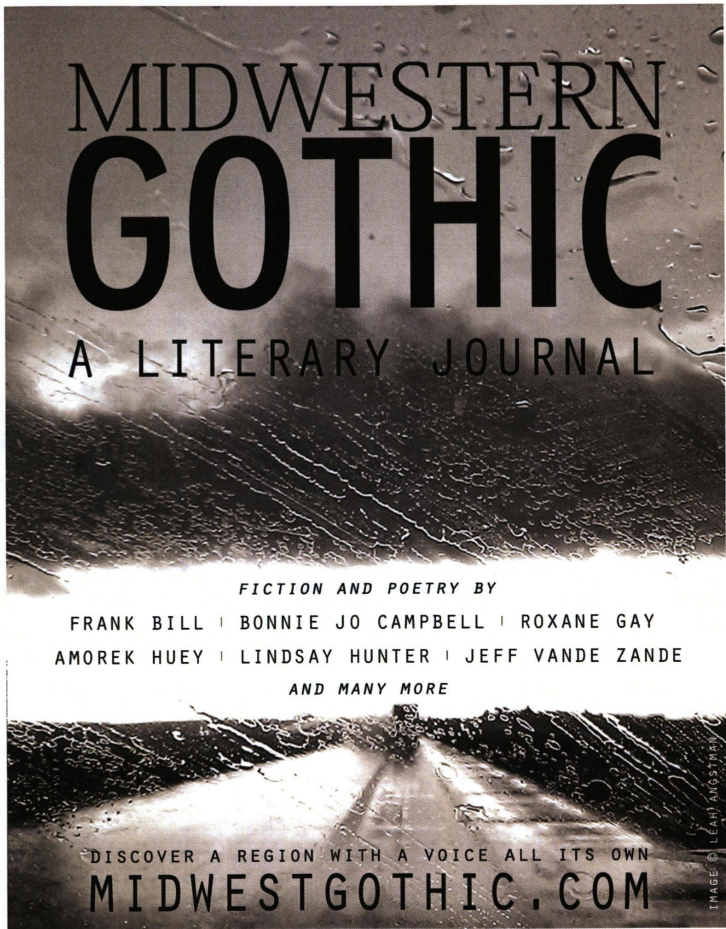
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LAURA S. DISTELHEIM

WINNER OF THE JOHN GARDNER  
MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION

ANNE BARNGROVER

CONSTANCE BREWER

SARAH CARSON

ANNE CHAMPION

JIM DAVIS

C.W. EMERSON

MATTHEW GELLMAN

CARMEN GERMAIN

GUISEPPE GETTO

LEONORE HILDEBRANDT

AMANDA HOPE

JASON IRWIN

MOYE ISHIMOTO

ROBERT LEVY

JENNIFER MET

JENNIFER MILLER

MICHAEL MINGO

MEGAN PARKER

RACHEL MARIE PATTERSON

VINCENT POTURICA

MONICA RESTREPO

LISA ROMEO

LINWOOD RUMNEY

EMILY SCHULTEN

MARVIN SHACKELFORD

LESLIE ST. JOHN

GEORGE SUCH

JOSELYN TAKACS

PAUL TRAN

VALERIE WOHLFELD

