



**WATERSHED**

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Volume 20, Number 2  
20th Anniversary Issue

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Spring 1997

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Watershed

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*Spring 1997*

## Introduction

In this issue we celebrate twenty years of publication: of writers, readers, and collaboration in bringing those two groups together. The best, indeed, perhaps the only appropriate way to introduce such a celebration would be to list all the names of all the writers, editors, production assistants, and readers who have been a part of these years. Since we can't possibly do that, the issue itself will have to speak for them, as well as express our thanks to them. It will do that in three sections, each celebrating and honoring some aspect of the literary community.

The first section is devoted to the current issue of *Watershed*, and takes its place in the continuing evolution of the art of writing in our community. The second section is devoted to past issues. The "Best of the Last Twenty Years" of *Watershed* was selected by students currently enrolled in courses in the Creative Writing Program at CSU, Chico in consultation with the current editors. The third section introduces a possible future direction for both *Watershed* and the Creative Writing Program. In support of a proposal to establish a consortium of CSU campuses to award a low residency Master of Fine Arts degree, the editors have invited faculty at the other campuses involved to nominate work by their students. Writing by students from California State University, Hayward; California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo; and California State University, Los Angeles appears in the third section of this issue.

It's mostly water  
a little salt  
with a smear of clay  
and a dribble of honey  
your sister's sweat  
her hair in the sink  
what your brother thought was secret  
the things your father never said  
and the inky pigments from your mother's brush:  
the grey rinsewater  
you never throw out  
because it makes  
such a lovely wash,  
the background  
to everything  
you paint

I. Madame Monet and Son

You, Monet, are after the light, now  
turning Camille's bustle and Jean's shoulder  
into the whiteness of clouds.  
Instantaneity, you call it.

This blue circination  
of summer light,  
Camille's dress lives  
swirling in the same dizzying  
motion as the clouds.  
Jean's sun-burned cheeks and nose  
hide under the red rimmed  
safari hat, his hands  
shoved deep into pockets.

Shadows cast on such a day  
caught deep in green meadow  
light having full play,  
    Camille's death mask  
        only four years away.

II. The Cliff at Etretat

After you curse gray skies all day,  
you send the children home  
carrying your darker renditions.  
Light streaming down, you sit  
back to sea  
catching the cliff navy  
against a flame and aqua sky.

Suddenly you are awash  
the tide shallowing you  
your canvas smashed against rocks  
your beard painted blue



From now on all your seas are  
choppier, meaner.  
You are grateful for one more day  
to paint.

### III.      Waterlilies, Evening

"I am doing it again  
trying the impossible,  
painting grasses at the bottom  
of the pond  
even with cataracts."

So this is it then,  
to make light  
where there is none  
when you can hardly see.  
It is like Beethoven  
at the end  
pounding the piano,  
frantically scribbling the Ninth.

In the center of the waterlilies, you  
mine a small liquid gold pond  
a flash of copper,  
surrounding and contrasting it  
with every blue, green, and brown.  
Light gathers into darkness  
and yet *contraster* means resist.

While church bells summon the faithful  
I take down my weeding hook  
and confront the diablo  
on earth: that bad news infiltrating  
vinca, ajuga, my flowering  
rugs, green even in the darkest time  
when all hard celebration is done.  
It slinks, sends out runners  
to take the world with promises  
superficial and profound.  
Latin shows its true nature  
*cynodon dactylon*—harboring sin  
this dog with fingers  
seizes unsuspectors' throats.  
I follow, unweave it from the innocents  
burrow down my forefinger  
till I touch its heart, and pull.

Yes, I am Hernan Cortes  
and I have raped a race  
of its pride, of its culture, and of its riches.  
I am Malinche,  
and I have embraced and wedded  
my own destruction.  
I have worn a zoot suit  
and I have been called a greaser.  
I have sat in the rear shadows of classrooms.  
I have fought in Vietnam  
and I have not come home.  
I have stood on one side of a fence at dusk  
and I have stared out at a border patrol  
with *dolares de dolores*  
waiting for me on the other side.  
I have picked fruit in the morning  
and I have packed it in the evening.  
I have watched my son  
limp to Cambridge on clubfeet  
so that he may kiss John Harvard's ass for four years  
and taste of my fruit the next day.

Cupped in the cradle  
of my moist palm  
I squeeze  
plumped fruits  
until the ripeness of  
one heavy, fragrant peach  
bursts at the seams  
leaving trails of sticky  
sweet juice through  
the hot dusty  
gravel-lot grime  
that is coating  
my wrist.



1.

there is a brush stroke  
of harvest moon red  
over dark, pensive hills  
when we bury treasure  
by a young  
walnut tree in the valley  
promising light to the curled  
embryo waxing still  
in your womb.

2.

at the river  
broken stones quarrel  
beneath the soles  
of our shoes, your face  
is a distant, worried moon,  
mine as dark as river mud.  
two trees lie across the water,  
you say they grew together  
i see they fell.

3.

white moon holds  
in a pale blue sky.  
i think of sky  
that came before me.  
my chest rises  
and falls like the sea  
as i slip my washed hand  
between the stringy roots of our irises.

Start with the feet  
the feet.  
If you start with lips  
my heart  
will stop.

You  
    You  
        mix cornbread  
        stir beans  
        turn Pork ribs  
        slice green onions  
            for potato salad

I lean/I lean  
    on your counter

and recite  
poetry.

Your eyes  
    the color of steaming Sumatra  
    snap/flash.

Start with the feet  
a drop of sage in almond oil  
candles  
Distant Drums.

You pull  
    ribs  
    from the oven  
and say—  
I don't do relationship  
I just do sex/sex  
sex

sex

feet

Start with the feet.

We watch  
To Wong Foo

and eat

ribs.

## For Angela, Pregnant For The First Time

---

*Heather Britain Bergstrom*

Sister, the water filling your womb is not strange.  
You have felt it before

in surges:

The night mother left us  
and you calmed our little sister  
too old at eleven to curl into your arms  
you stayed beside her on the quilt,  
hands moving like lighted candles  
in the chilled dark of mother's absence.  
In the morning shoulders forward,  
bathrobe snug around your belly  
you took her place in the kitchen.

When you moved at seventeen  
to the small apartment in Seattle  
where you went days without food,  
counting the weeks of your life with your change.  
The phone call to father the night before Easter,  
the cramping in your stomach  
that wouldn't let you stand up,  
that put you alone in the hospital.  
Sister, I know now it was the water in your womb  
forcing you to become a mother to yourself.

And me, the time my Air Force lover  
drove me across the state to your doorstep,  
drunk on Vodka, without a job,  
young but sister, so were you  
you took me in, fed me, kept me warm.  
Beside you on the only bed,  
I felt your stomach moving  
like waves beneath your T-shirt.

I remember the tumbleweed forts we built  
in dry Hanford creekbeds,  
wrestling matches on arid grass,  
the dirt that clung to our summer backs,

the times you styled my hair  
to look like Henry's from *Bosom Buddies*  
or like Billy Idol's, but brown.  
How my mother wouldn't let me wear it that way  
for the photograph of all us cousins.

Tip-toeing between blackberry bushes,  
avoiding spiders like thorns,  
the whole gang of us  
squeezing into the green station wagon  
with Tupperware bowls brim-full of blackberries  
for the cobblers our mothers would make  
in your basement kitchen,  
our fingers stained  
with sweet blackberry blood

Cousin, your blood—  
spilt from wrists slit  
in your parents' bathtub—  
is still mine,  
infected or not.

**"Vegetables make love above the tenors."**

from *Under Milkwood* by Dylan Thomas

---

Nancy Talley

Vegetables make love  
above the tenors  
where only dogs can hear,  
those carnivorous curs  
who occasionally take  
a jolt of grain or carrot.

Vegetables  
with their lascivious root  
plunged into wormed dirt  
loving soundlessly  
tendrils reaching to moisture  
in the good earth singing  
in dark stunned caves  
above the whine of bats.

Oh round red ruddy beet  
stain my hungry chin  
with remembered passion.



## Boy Under

*After the photo by Lewis Hine*

---

Carole Simmons Oles

Scooped from his 12-hour night  
for this instant, he guards  
the mine door that saves  
his chalk drawing of birds  
in flight toward the handle,  
and his blunt plea to darkness  
*Don't scare the birds.*

Night again when he leaves  
for home, boiled potatoes  
and the chair nearest his father.  
Not soap, not the lamp  
can wash his grey face.

After dinner he has to walk,  
crunch the frozen mud  
glistening between rows of shacks.  
To behold the round  
moon fluff its feathers,  
his white breath soar over town.

Now I aint sayin  
I never been sittin  
on the rusted out tailgate  
of an ol' Ford  
ridin backwards down  
bumpy river roads  
with the sun all sweaty,  
blackbirds squawkin  
& dust blowin in my face.  
Maybe I was doin just that  
when we heard the hollerin  
Jack, he must've stopped hard  
& I don't remember runnin  
but seems I was outta breath  
when we got to the water,  
watched 'em pull that girl out.  
I probably still had a Coors in my hand  
& it mighta slipped  
hit hard on the rocks & foamed everywhere.  
Bren, she says that girl's hair  
was all dark & tangled 'round like seaweed,  
her skin all puffy - says she musta been under  
a long time  
& there was a man -  
had a snake tattoo - breathed into her  
over & over  
But hell, you know,  
I don't remember none o' that,  
nothin 'bout that day  
'cept her small blue lips  
& those goddamn blackbirds squawkin.

Oranges  
for Glenn

---

*Pamela Giuliano*

It is this spring weather  
the smell of dirt, the way  
early blossoms fall  
like late snow  
that brings me to you

Twenty years since that hill  
Witch's Castle, Skeleton's Hideout,  
tunneled bushes conformed  
to our young bodies,  
still similar.  
Endless days  
one eye on the distant streetfights,  
that hill, our lives  
where your brother ended his  
from the far tree  
at the edge of your father's land.  
Your father remembers that day  
you won the race,  
your out-of-breath pride and  
finding him.

Your mother cried, hilltop.  
Hating me, hating you,  
hating that hill,  
small wars of pine cones, crab apples,  
rocks. And all this  
because it is spring  
and I  
slice oranges  
bright and juicy.

i don't do anything  
but stare up at the sun  
while they—  
take this white rabbit with quick red eyes  
that must be five pounds,  
bigger than you—  
once were, i stare at the sun  
as they throw it against the fence,  
the fence brown and breaking,  
and i look at the sun  
while their-fourteen foot python  
licks electric the warm air,  
licks, and finally sees that rabbit and bites:  
and coils steel and squeezes  
and every time the rabbit exhales  
the snake gets a little tighter  
(that's the way it is when you're losing.  
every time you exhale  
that weight around your chest  
gets a little tighter)

let me tell you the rabbit screams,

and i didn't know they did that,  
so i've learned something:  
that rabbits scream. mike  
tries to give it a smoke,  
and jeff experimentally  
pokes the rabbit's legs  
with a ski pole. paul laughs  
like he's watching tv  
and art, art is so high  
his eyes  
are dark wet pools  
in the heat.

i look at the sun and say,  
well, hell, a snake has to eat,

and as the snake dislocates her jaw  
to swallow the rabbit starting at the head  
i touch the rabbit with my finger tips,  
i look into the snakes eyes iced  
and feel the still warmth of the rabbit.  
then i leave with my shirt off. i leave  
and go to get some sun  
while spring white petals fall  
bent, from the tree in the sideyard.

Strange,  
in that hard Fall  
with wife, first ill,  
with endless work, endless school,  
and well gone dry,  
how I couldn't sleep that night,  
how I got up at four A.M.  
and listened to Mozart's Requiem, K. 626  
with the headphones on so I wouldn't disturb the family  
sobbing, (sobbing quietly so I wouldn't disturb the family)  
all through the Sequence:  
Dies irae, Tuba mirum, Rex tremendae, Recordare, Confutatis,  
and of course, Lacrimosa.  
Four A.M. Pacific Standard Time,  
Six A.M. Central Time, in Oklahoma,  
where my father was calling the ambulance,  
where the passing policeman came in to start CPR  
on my mother  
whose heart had abruptly decided to stop.



sheets oily  
with nightmare sweat,  
the scent of dead tangerines  
wafts on still air

both awake -  
stiff and unable to touch,  
a deep chasm between them,  
an abyss of quicksand.  
drowning, drowning  
they try to reach out  
but they sink

into the small  
granite lined grave.

she aches to say the name  
for it to tumble soft  
from lips, a caress -

she closes her eyes,  
a cloud of yellow memories  
passes acrid,  
fragile moments  
falling apart, blowing on wind.  
poppy petals, orange tears.

The dark shape framed in light  
slices my chest with an ax, in/out

*hacked to pieces...robbery...  
a laborer...men in barns  
leaped for their axes*

I am a Hindu floating  
on that smoky river

*kerosene over her head  
and set fire to it*

Sand piled on me, crushing  
I can't push it off  
to turn over, reach  
the dancers on the wall

*fingers...bitten by the woman  
on finding herself buried alive*

The brook gargles onto its banks  
Someone draws back the weights  
and a snowball lands on my chest  
a mouth opens

*rales...pectoriloquy  
like lungs speaking to ribs*

Papa, come fetch us in the storm  
hurry, white blades are chopping your red beard  
fill the sleigh with blankets  
and tuck us in like dolls

*Called Home  
Harold Hackbart, 1911-1917*

I am the Swedish maid  
and have to be funny, laugh up  
blood onto the white linen cloths

*the odor of stale meat  
and green bones*

Mama in the kitchen preserving  
deer skulls, the jars sweating tears

*she deliberately lay down  
in the Wisconsin River*

On the coach, I have the sleeper  
while the cows and horses stand  
in the last car  
All the ice-covered trees  
brush the train as we ride ride make no sound

The part  
I could not write before;  
the part that was not included in the longer work  
on caring for the dead;  
the part after  
I helped my family  
through the decision,  
the disconnection,  
the forever minutes,  
the official pronouncement,  
and, one by one,  
their bedside visits;  
the part where I went back  
into the hospital room  
this time, not as a nurse  
for time of my own but:

The window was already open.  
Thinking we were finished,  
the nurse had started right in  
preparing the body,  
so I helped her.  
Together  
we released the remaining ties,  
removed the tubes;  
I held a towel to catch the drips.  
In the process,  
my mother's breast exposed,  
surprised me,  
the nipple so pink, tender,  
seemed youthful,  
how long since I had seen that sight?  
No memory emerged  
but still,  
it seemed so very familiar,  
and one last kiss  
seemed so very right.

i forget  
what actually happened  
that warm afternoon  
on the lake  
in the long shade  
of sugarpine;  
the smell of still water,  
kaleidoscope  
of broken bottles  
just below the pier  
where the new lovers  
dangled  
their skinny legs  
and the big rubber  
sea  
monster leaped.

i forget the bullet  
of the instant  
caught  
between their teeth  
cupid's barbed messenger  
half buried  
in those beating  
wings.

Six foot six leaning towards me  
soft black  
leather  
black  
black jacket

deep dark  
deep  
brown eyes  
flash  
    flash flash  
    flash  
    flash

black knit/black/black cap  
round white  
label/reads  
Oakland Homeboys

I know  
    my eyes  
    my eyes  
Blaze Blaze Blaze

smooth brown/brown  
    brown face  
    eyes dark/flash/flash  
soft lips/lips move/lips/move/move  
    words/words taste  
    lips/taste/taste taste taste  
taste taste taste taste

taste me.



Plum Island  
for my father

---

Pamela Giuliano

It's the sharp smell of the salt marsh  
that strikes first.

The white caps  
on the Newburyport River  
move unseasoned waters  
to tall reed grass  
punching out of gray sand.  
A return trip for the water

and my father. *We took a ride to the Island.*  
A distant voice drives me past the clam stand,  
leaning red snow fences, and Bennet's Hill  
towering over the summer island  
like some ancient gargoyle.

He chased fish on this beach.  
Striped Bass derbies.  
I spent nights with a light strapped to my head  
putting small sandy worms on hooks  
cast after cast. Never a bite. Our low beach

chairs dug in the sand.  
I wish I knew what we talked about  
as the tide pulled away.  
Nearly thirty years of midwest  
dirt clouds my vision.  
*We took a ride to the Island.*  
He knows I will listen.

1 The Should She Song

When a man tells a woman they're peers  
because they don't have sex

is he treating her  
like one of the boys

and should she take it like a man?:

*Just what I've always thought, J.B. ...  
Jimbo, how about those Knicks?*

or, should she take it like a woman,  
shake it and break it to him like a woman—

*Sex or no sex, honey. You're in arrears.*

2 Our Hero, Revised

Then he came wearing a nimbus of long-  
stemmed ideals and playing the flutesong  
we wanted to follow into a black-and-white  
dawn like Charlie Chaplin with Paulette.

Now biographers turn up puffs  
of him: hand on an actress's rosy nipple,  
legs spread beneath a roulette table,  
mouth swapping calories with someone's wife.

How dared he shine like a substation,  
a cure or world-class religious faith?  
Hey, that light was ours we shone on him.  
We built the tabernacle, burned the flame.

3 Storm Doors Cosmology

All night the heater paraded  
beating drums, crashing cymbals.

Time to take summer down,  
stop letting cold through the cracks  
where doors hung uneven, parted  
just where they should have formed one.  
Next morning I searched for tools,  
dragged storm doors from the rented garage.  
First put them on upside-down, then inside-out,  
then the whole door would swing shut  
just as I fit glass in place,  
would slip, twist, and my grip fail.  
Sweat poured down my neck,  
it was getting hot—maybe too hot for storm doors—  
rust on one screw had worn down the threads  
so I angled, pushed, pushed harder. Nothing held.  
Baseball size bruises rose on my calf where  
I'd fielded the weight of protection.  
When myself I had to install it  
oh how heavy the universe grew.

#### 4 Epilogue/ Sleeping Where You Sleep

You say you sleep all over the bed  
well I do too, sailing  
out for treasure or plunder  
out to bury my dead fathoms down  
where the schools of fish  
form a handkerchief-waving cortege

and when the day wakes  
so many birds announce our good news  
I can't name or quote them  
but they're all up for singing  
each throat a pulse that thanks back  
the pulse of the day

## My Day to Watch Mother

---

Heather Brittain Bergstrom

Like a nurse in white terry robe,  
I make sure she doesn't again swallow  
more pills than prescribed.  
In her hands she holds the picture  
of the man she left my father for.

*His plaid shirt reminds me of the men  
who drank coffee at the counter where she worked.  
His gray hair thin and combed back  
so different from father's that falls slack in his face.*

She doesn't answer when I ask his name,  
but I know it's Stan.  
I heard her say it in the bathtub,  
my ear pressed against the wooden door  
listening for her body moving in the water.

*It's his hands, more slender than father's,  
and the way they hold the green thermos  
as if the stem of a flower.  
I want them on my breasts—  
cool cotton hardening my nipples.  
I want his hands ...*

Her head turns slightly as if to beg.  
I take the picture from her  
tearing it down the center.  
His hands, like mother's ceramic doves,  
separate on the tile floor.

Trees limbs shrivel back  
toward the trunk, to the root.  
Greenless. Breathless.

You watch the sun crawl  
up the oppressive blue backdrop.  
This blue does not complement  
the withered brown that snaps  
between heels and concrete.  
This weight heaves itself upon you  
even before you lift the blanket.

It is the gray, the starkness  
of bare trees, a season of rain you dream.

These days, suspended  
like a fly caught in a web,  
drain your blood thin.



So, I'm sitting on the couch drinking Early Times whiskey  
straight from the bottle

with this chick I've been seeing for the past couple of years and  
the stereo's playing this vicious smoky room ricochet Coltrane sax  
solo and she's looking up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling  
and just a-smiling like a busload of mongoloid schoolchildren on a  
field trip, so I poke her in the ribs with my big toe and I ask her, I say,  
"Baby, what is it that you're thinking about, 'cause I just gotta  
know..."

and she looks at me and she says, "Man, it's this music, it's this  
rabid Coltrane be-bop jazz, it's got me thinking 'bout that time we  
were in that old white Mercury with the oxblood tuck-and-roll  
interior and the battery-operated Holy Mother of Jesus suction-  
cupped to the dashboard and you were blazing a path down that  
methamphetamine highway, man, pedal to the metal like a one-man  
gang-bang bending the needle of that speedometer over backwards  
and still pressing your foot harder on the gas, so fast that when we hit  
a bump we flew like the goddamn space shuttle, man, we took off,  
man, like ten- fifteen feet into the air and when we touched back  
down we'd bounce like a goddamn skipping stone and you could hear  
the elbows of those two waitresses knocking against the roof of the  
trunk every time we hit the ground and I was slumped against the  
door trying not to get blood all over the upholstery and listening to  
the wind, oh man that wind, the roar of that wind was so loud you  
could barely hear the sirens of the 17 Nevada State Troopers behind  
us splashing the sharp desert rocks with blue and red blue and red  
blue and red and they were so close you could almost smell the  
adrenaline on their breath but you just looked straight ahead, man,  
you didn't look at the rearview mirror you didn't look at the gas gauge  
you didn't look at the suitcase in the backseat, you didn't look at me  
sitting in a puddle of my own blood, man, you just looked straight  
ahead and I said, "Baby, what the hell are we gonna do?" and you  
closed your eyes and opened the glove compartment and reached past  
the .38 with the black electrical tape stretched around the grip, past  
the last box of hollow-point shells and searched around until you  
found that Coltrane 8 track and you popped it into the tape deck and  
turned the volume knob all the way up just as loud can be and I tell  
you, man, no music in the history of this entire planet ever sounded  
so goddamned brilliant as that music right at that very moment..."



and then, this girl I've been seeing for a couple of years, she lays her head back on the couch, closes her eyes and smiles, and I look at her and say, "Baby... what the HELL are you talking about?"

and she looks at me and says, "Ahhh ... nevermind, man, just take another drink."

Tight around a trembling wrist bone  
The skin thins  
Clean white

The buzz of soul  
becomes pulse  
travels  
this slight vibration is a bass line in the chest thump thump  
thumping like the rubber-ended mallet is really in there  
in the chest  
bumping a buried heart with its constancy  
its beats  
bass line and  
percussion and the notes and beats still throb  
a crusade toward that narrow wrist  
pulse  
avoids the mind  
that shimmery compartmented trap  
that brain  
so physical and technical  
medical cold white sterile  
fearful to become  
blood just cooled on the doctor-green tiles  
as the wrist  
this frail beating wrist strains with its hands  
fingertips poised ready  
in desire in need in passion as  
blue-violet paths quake under snow  
to melt away  
to pour that elusive  
something onto the empty white clean canvas

## Contributors' Notes

Heather Brittain Bergstrom. As both a reader and a writer of contemporary poetry, I agree with Jimmy Santiago Baca, who says: "...there are mountainous regions we have yet to map out within our voices, the themes...are sometimes great signs pointing the way...they are not domesticated—they are tribal songs to be shared by all...no one can keep them for themselves."

Patricia Caspers is the proud new mother of Olivia Eleanor Joyce.

Mark H. Clarke is a father, husband, writer, ant farmer, and registered nurse who lives and works in Chico, California. Most of what he does in some way involves healing, including the ants.

Katrina M. Davis is a re-entry, graduating senior at CSU, Chico, majoring in Journalism and minoring in Creative Writing. She is the single mother of three daughters. Despite exploring a variety of writing genres, poetry remains her first love.

Bob Garner is a writer and a figurative artist, writing and drawing in Chico.

Pamela Giuliano is a teacher, letterpress printer, and poet. She founded Plum Island Press and published several collections of local writers.

Matthew Helms is a "wannabe" sculptor/poet/actor who enjoys rollerblading in the rain and long quiet walks along the freeway.

Diane E. Imhoff lives and writes in Chico.

Ben Joyce is glad to get his poems out of the house for some fresh air.

Erica L. McCarter studies fine arts and creative writing at CSU, Chico. She practices painting and poetry.

Carlos Monarrez has been an English major at CSU, Chico for the last two years. He is from Los Angeles to which he will return this fall to begin graduate work in English at UC Riverside.

Carole Simmons Oles has published five books of poems, most

recently *The Deed* and *Stunts*. Her poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, and other magazines. She teaches English and coordinates the Creative Writing Program at California State University, Chico. She is spearheading the effort to develop a low residency MFA introduced and celebrated in the third section of this magazine.

R. Eirik Ott is a travelling performance poet and writer disguised as a journalism student at CSU, Chico.

Pamela Spoto is a poet, teacher, and stick artist.

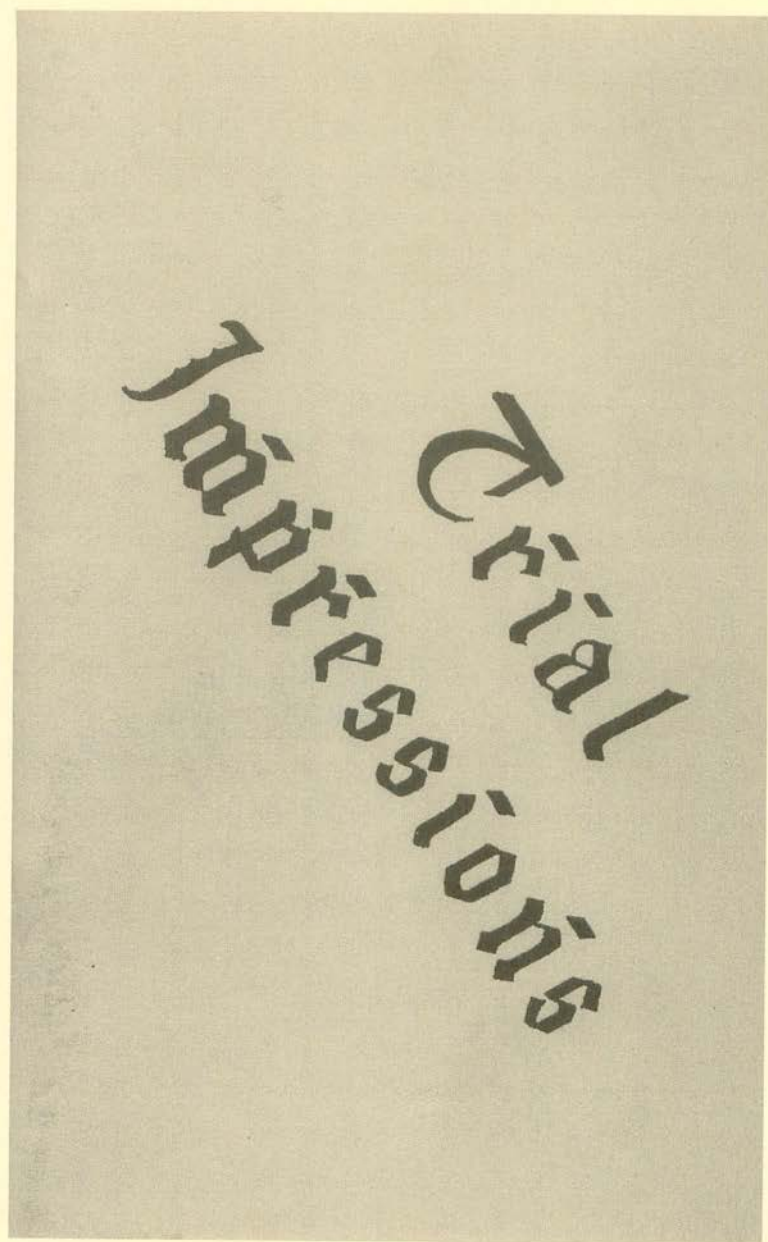
Kristene Patton writes “against fear. Against the wind with claws that lodges in my breath. And when you are afraid to find yourself dead in the morning (and that there’ll be no more images): silence of compression, silence of mere being—through this the years escaped the beautiful animal joy.”

Nancy Talley is a poet whose work has been published often before in these pages.

The Best of the  
Last Twenty Years

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1977-1997



Cover from Volume 1, Number 1



## Introduction: The Best of the Last Twenty Years

When the first issue of Watershed, then known as Trial Impression, was published in 1977, the literary magazine was an exploding and explosive phenomenon. All over the United States, writers and readers were discovering each other in the pages of what were called "littles." Watershed joined this both distinguished and motley company, providing a meeting place for the writers and readers of the University and greater Chico community. American poet Charles Olsen characterized the kind of literary magazine that Watershed aspired to be:

A magazine does have this "life" to it (proper to it), does have streets,  
can show lights, movie houses, bars, and, occasionally,  
for those of us who live our life quite properly in print

as properly, say, as Gloucester people live in Gloucester

you do meet someone

as I met you

on a printed page

We thought it would be appropriate that the selection of the best of the last twenty years, which would stand as our retrospective and celebrate this milestone, should be made by current creative writing students. Thus, the work in this section was selected by members of the Spring 1997 advanced and graduate creative writing courses. For those of you who have been reading Watershed all along, this will not be a meeting, but a reunion. For new readers, it will be a chance to glimpse the distinguished history of writing and publishing at CSU Chico and the Chico community. For all of us it is an opportunity to rejoice in the voices that sound, sounded and still echo here. And those writing students who selected these pieces represent the voices of the future, voices we hear and look forward to hearing on these pages.



## The Best of the Last Twenty Years

*An anniversary celebration.*

Editors:

### *Poetry*

Joanie Bassler  
Nikki Bonelli  
Dustin Breshears  
Sara Buckingham  
Barbara Caneer  
Christian Casucci  
Susan Collins  
Laurinda Carron  
Mark Guttman  
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Richard Herd  
Brian Hurley  
Bryan Jones  
Larae Kendrick  
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Sean Murphy  
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Matthew Ritts  
Mike Scott  
Geoff Thomas

Faculty Advisor:  
Gary Thompson

Coordinating Editor:  
Kiara Koenig

### *Fiction*

Final Selection Editors:  
Troy Johnson  
Kiara Koenig  
Janeane Rhoads-Peterson

The editors wish to thank the  
members of Clark Brown's  
graduate fiction writing class  
(English 320, Spring 1997) for  
making the first round decisions.

One is clearly the mother,  
a miserable bitch.  
Loudly she complains  
of poor posture, the dishes  
left undone. She does not care  
for a sassy tone,  
silliness, her sex.  
Her face is pinched,  
she waddles;  
in public she acts demure.

The other is blonde, voluptuous,  
a shameless flirt.  
I have seen her on the street  
dressed smartly as for travel.  
Her mouth is tart and wise; she giggles.  
Husband gone, she solicits  
younger men and winks  
at possibility.

The quiet one's the daughter,  
young for her age  
though her blue eyes are old.  
Mornings alone in her room, she dreams:  
pink camelias issue from her vagina,  
trussed-for-roasting babies  
chew on her small breast.  
She fears both mothers  
must be eaten for lunch.

From her upstairs window  
she stares into my life  
counting the hours  
on my upturned face.

K. Patrick Conner

She was an Indian all right, but she acted like maybe it was somebody else's fault. Well I didn't have anything to do with it. But that's what made her so hard to figure: she was so goddamned indignant about it. Wore her blood like a purple heart. Well you couldn't blame me for it, any of it. Sometimes she was this way, sometimes that. Sometimes she was venomous and mean, and sometimes she was quiet and damn near compliant. You never knew. She was impossible to figure.

I leaned against the bar, then shifted the receiver to my other ear and waited for her to answer. I turned around to see if anybody was listening, but there was nobody else even in the Missoula Club, except Grady the bartender and he was at the other end, washing glasses. Behind him, through the small window at the top of the wall, I could see the bar's red neon sign.

You never knew about Theresa. She was tough and hard and swung between her moods the way she swung between her men. Now she was living with some new one, the poor bastard. But maybe that's what it took. She was an Indian all right: shrewd and dumb at the same time. It wasn't easy to get out of Ronan and off the reservation, I knew that, and maybe you just did what you had to do. That was all right with me. She could do what she wanted with her life. Unless it crossed mine. That was the one thing she never counted on, the punch she never saw coming. *I understood her*. I had to shake my head when I thought about the poor bastard living with her now. What the hell did he know? And it was even money she hadn't even told him about me, though he'd find out soon enough.

"Hello," I said. I wanted for her to recognize my voice.

"What do you want?"

"I'm coming over," I said.

"Like hell you are."

I smiled. That was the way she was, but I knew it. I knew her too well. I told her I'd be over in a few minutes.

"Like hell you will."

I turned around and looked at the framed portraits of old baseball teams that covered the whole east wall. The pictures were old and grainy, made me think about the picture I had in my wallet. It was a picture of a bunch of us in Saigon, in some bar. I was hard to see though because I was in the back and it was dark, but it was me all right. You could tell. I felt like nailing it up on the wall but I didn't

know where the rest of the guys were now, except O'Neal who was in the hospital in San Diego, and of course the ones who died. The rest just disappeared once we got back. I wanted to remember them so I couldn't very well give up the picture. What if I moved? What if I got on at the mill? I'd want it to show around.

"No way you're coming over," she said.

"I'll be right there."

"Like hell."

I hung up. I didn't feel like listening to her bellyaching over the phone. And she would. That much was for sure.

"What did she say?" Grady asked, as I walked down to him and pulled myself onto a stool.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the five-dollar bill that was balled up at the bottom. It was beginning to fall apart. "Give me another, Grady."

"Forget her, Cahill."

I laughed at him, then told him to get me a drink. Grady was a good man, but at forty years old he acted like he was eighty. He'd been that way as long as I'd know him, and for the four years I'd been back he'd been passing out advice like keno tickets. Thought he was an expert on everything. Right.

As he reached down for the bottle of Early Times in the rack, I looked at myself in the mirror behind the trays of glasses. My hair curled down over my forehead and it was still wet from the snow. I brushed it back with my hand. It was getting easier to see the bald spots that grew back at each temple. Thigh burns, that's what Theresa called them. I had to laugh at that. She could be pretty funny when she felt like it.

Grady gave me my drink and change and I took a sip. "There's no bourbon in this," I complained.

"There's enough, Cahill. I'm closing up."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"That's your last one, Cahill."

"What kind of bullshit is that?" I was only kidding him, giving him a hard time. He knew it.

He shrugged it off and asked me if I'd heard anything about getting on at the mill.

"Nothing," I said. I took another sip.

"When are they going to let you know?"

"Didn't say."

He nodded. That was one good thing about Grady—it didn't take much to get him to understand something. You didn't have to tell him something maybe ten times before he got it through his head. He



tossed his towel down to the other end of the bar, near the phone, then turned back to me. "You want to know what I think, Cahill?"

"What's that?"

"Forget her."

I took a drink. The ice tumble down against my upper lip as I milked out the last of the bourbon. I set the glass down. "Give me another, Grady."

"Too late. I'm closed."

"C'mon, damn it."

He shook his head.

Sometimes he kind of pissed me off, but there wasn't any use arguing with him. He had his job to do, and I had mine. Still I never could figure where he got license to stick his nose into my business. What the hell did he know? I mean what the hell did he know about Indians, how to handle an Indian like Theresa?

"Let's go," he said. "That's it. I'm locking up."

I stared at him for a minute, stared him down so he'd know I could still handle myself, so he'd know I'd heard him. Then I laughed.

"Sure, Grady," I stood up. "I don't want to argue with you, don't want to get in your way."

"Go home, Cahill."

"Sure, Grady. I'm going home."

I pushed outside. The sidewalk was covered with a couple inches of fresh snow, although a trail of slush had been stomped down the middle. I followed the trail to the corner, then stopped and turned up the collar of my jacket. I looked up and watched the snow twist down through the streetlight. It was cold and my leg began to ache like hell.

I crossed Front Street and walked down to the parking lot. A smooth sheet of snow rose up the levee wall and I plowed through it until I got to the top. I looked down at the river. It was black. The wind came out of the east, from the north of Hellgate Canyon, and swept along the river's surface. I hunched up my shoulders to keep it from slashing across my face, then looked out to the shallows in the middle of the river, to the island formed by the Clark Fork peeling away into two channels. It looked like a good place to freeze to death.

I turned away from the river and started back down the levee, across the snow to the iron stairs that rose up the back of the Wilma Theater and led to Higgins Bridge. I stopped at the top of the stairs and leaned over the rail to look at the parking lot. It was almost empty—only two or three cars and they could have been abandoned. I turned around to see if the back door of the theater was locked. It was. The last snow must have ended a couple hours ago. Although

they never used to, they always locked the back door now. One night last winter I needed a place to get some sleep; it was freezing that night. Just some quick sleep. It wasn't like I was breaking in. What could you steal from a theater? Popcorn? I shook my head. All I needed that night was a place to get out of the cold, to warm up my leg and hands. Was that too much to ask? I must have fallen asleep. Then the next thing I knew I was in the back of a squad car and then I was in a cell. Christ. Anyway, they'd locked the door tonight.

I walked out onto Higgins Avenue, crossed the bridge, then turned down Third Avenue and headed past the train station. My leg pounded with each step and sent a shaft of pain up into the small of my back. But it wasn't too far and didn't take me long to get there. I could see she was home by the light in her bedroom window. The house was small and the foundation seemed to be slipping. My breath rose in front of me.

I walked up the porch steps and knocked on the door. I waited, then knocked again. Finally a light came on. "What do you want?" she snapped from behind the door.

"Let me in, Theresa."

"No."

"Come on, Theresa. Let me in."

"Get out of here."

"I'm freezing."

"Tough shit, Cahill."

I shook my head. It was just the way Theresa was. I should have known, should have expected this. I told her I was coming inside. "Just for a minute," I said. "I want to talk."

"I've got a gun, Cahill."

Jesus! I jumped out of the doorway and flattened myself against the wall. What the hell was she doing with a gun? My heart thundered up into my throat. But . . . then I almost had to laugh. Theresa didn't have any gun. Seriously, what would Theresa be doing with a gun? I spun back to the door, brought up my leg and kicked it hard, just below the doorknob. It gave easily, splintering away from the jamb, then abruptly it stopped. That's what I mean\* shrewd and dumb at the same time. She was standing too close and the door swung into her—she crumpled to the floor.

I rushed inside and closed the door behind me. She was sprawled face down on the floor. Her back and legs were the color of coffee. I smiled. She was beautiful. I asked her if she was all right. Her black hair spread across her shoulders. She began to cry. I walked over to the fireplace to warm my hands and leg on a fire that wasn't there. My face stung from the cold and the wind.

"Where's the fire, Theresa? You should have built a fire."

She rose to her hands and knees, then rocked back onto her heels. Already the tears had stopped. I knew they wouldn't last long. She stood up and picked up her blanket and wrapped it around herself. Her eyes were as black as the river.

"You've lost weight," I said.

She didn't say anything.

"I said you look like you've lost some weight."

"I've gained weight."

She had to argue, driven to disagreement as she was driven to love. I told her again that I thought she'd lost some weight.

"Get out of here," she hissed.

I stared at her for a minute to let her settle down. She must still have bee sore from getting cracked by the door. My fingers felt like they were burning but I knew it was just the blood beginning to move again. "I'm clean now, Theresa."

"You're a liar."

"I'm clean."

"My ass."

I shook my head, then let it drop. "You have anything to drink?"

"No."

I said her name slowly, soberly: "Theresa."

"What?"

"I'm telling you I'm clean. It'll be different this time."

"Get out, Cahill."

I shook my head. "What do you have to drink?"

"Nothing."

"Doesn't he drink?"

"Not like you."

"What the hell does that mean?"

She didn't answer me.

"Where is he?" I asked. "Has he got any bourbon in the cupboard? Does he keep it above the refrigerator like I used to?"

"He lives here," she said, biting off each word sharply. "So you'd better get your ass out before he gets back."

"Why?"

"Damn it, Cahill."

"Where is he?"

"Get out." She walked over to the door, the blanket trailing along the floor behind her.

"No," I said.

"I want you out."

"Can I kiss you?"



"She stopped and glared at me.

"I want to kiss you."

"Get out."

"I'm clean now. I'm clean." I wasn't just saying it either—I meant it. "It'll be different this time." I hadn't come over for nothing. The mill was going to let me know any day now. Once I got on I'd work every day and I'd come home to Theresa. See? Better than the bum she was living with now. Where was he? It was the middle of the goddamned night.

"Get out, Cahill."

"I want a kiss." I thought about just taking it, whether she liked it or not.

She shook her head slowly from side to side, stared down at the floor. Her hair hung down over her face. "You'll leave then, if I let you kiss me?" She looked up.

"Why can't I just have a kiss?"

She walked over to the fireplace and stared down at the mounds of ash.

"Why not?"

"All right." She turned to face me. Her hands were at her sides, as listless as the grey and black blanket that had been nailed up to cover the window. She stood straight. Her cheekbones were sharp.

"Forget it," I said.

"Kiss me, Cahill. Then get out."

"Forget it."

"Do it!"

"I don't want it anymore."

"Then get out."

I walked over to the couch and slumped down into it. I rubbed my leg. I could feel her watching me. It still ached bad from the cold. I told her again that it'd be different this time.

"It isn't going to be anything," she said.

"It'll be different."

"Get out."

"Do you have any cigarettes?"

"What for?"

"I want one."

She *had* to give me a cigarette. She walked across the room, then into her bedroom. I thought about following her. I could just take her and settle this thing, but her bedroom was small and cold if you closed the door. It was warmer in the living room. She came back and gave me the cigarette, then lit one for herself and tossed me the book of matches. I lit mine and took a long drag. "I'm clean," I said.

"Don't, Cahill."

"I mean it."

"You've got to leave, Cahill. You've got to leave, now, please."

"It wasn't my fault, really. I couldn't help it but now it's over."

Again I thought about just taking her. I could drag her back into the bedroom. She'd fight. She'd fight all right. That was just the way she was. I couldn't believe she didn't have anything to drink. Maybe she thought she was moving up in the world. That was a good one.

Maybe she thought she was going to marry the governor. I wanted to laugh. She had no sense of herself. I told her I'd take that kiss now.

"No," she said.

Once we just lay there, on her bed. She looked at my leg, ran her fingers down the scar, the length of my thigh. She stared at it, clinically, her eyes working hard to determine its origin. What happened? She asked me. Piece of shrapnel, I told her. Anti-personnel mine. But it wasn't true: I didn't much feel like telling her I'd done it in a car wreck in San Diego. And what did it matter anyway? She believed me, that's what mattered. She was lucky I hadn't come back in a body bag. I'd told her about body bags. I'd **shown** her my picture and pointed out the ones who hadn't made it. She was luck, damn lucky.

I stood up and walked over to her. "Let's go," I said.

Tears ran down her face. I glared down at her.

"What do you think you are?" I shouted. "Get up!" I reached down and pulled her out of the chair. She trembled as if she were cold. I tore the blanket off her. She didn't fight, didn't move.

All she wanted was to be treated right—maybe last time I was wrong. I could feel my throat swell. She cried harder, but still didn't move. All she wanted was to be treated right, *not* like she was some goddamn Indian whore, and that was all right by me. I covered both her breasts with my hands. They were small and tight and broad, like women in Saigon. I unclasped my belt. I went down to my knees, then reached in and wedged my hands between her legs and forced them apart.

She broke away. Before I could grab her she ran back into the bedroom and slammed the door. It sealed like the door of a vault. I wanted to laugh: if I could blow down the front door, I could sure as hell break this one. I pressed against it and listened. It sounded like she was choking, coughing, phlegm snapping in her throat.

"Theresa?"

She didn't answer.

I reached down to the doorknob. "I'm coming in," I said.

Suddenly I was spun around. Instinctively I tried to duck but he



caught me, knocked me down and then kicked me. Pain shot up into the base of my skull and my mouth was full of blood. I gagged it out. She jerked open the bedroom door as he stomped down on my hand, then kicked me in the small of my back. Then he kicked me again. She tried to stop him when he kicked me in the back of my knee. "This is the one?" he shouted.

"He didn't do anything," she cried, louder now and broken by sobs.

"This is your junkie soldier-boy?"

He grabbed me, jerked me off the floor, then ran me out the door. I fell as soon as he let go and tumbled down the steps.

The snow had stopped. I lay there a while. Then I got up, steadied myself on the railing. All I'd had a chance to see was that he was an Indian too. Figured.

I kept low for a couple of days after that, kept out of sight until things came down from the boil. I walked down to the Orange Street bridge and crossed back over the Clark Fork, and I spent the night in the shell of an old Chevy station wagon ditched just down river from the bridge. It wasn't too bad there: it was dry and somebody had been there before. Inside was a blanket and some newspapers and some plastic spoons, though I didn't feel like eating anything.

During the days I called the mill and tried to warm up. There was no word yet at the mill. I figured I had some pull there as a veteran, but they weren't hiring, at least that's what they said. I could wait. I'd get on soon enough, and then I'd get a place to live. I wrestled a bottle of aspirin out of the county offices and that helped some, but my mouth was sore from Theresa's Indian, felt like somebody was using a **sledgehammer** on my teeth. My leg was sore too and my back was stiff, but that was something I was used to.

After a couple of days I went by the Missoula Club to see Grady. I sat at the bar and in the mirror I could see that my face was swollen and purpled and looked pretty bad. I told Grady what had happened and he couldn't believe it, which showed how little he really knew about Indians and their ways. And I told him I was clean now. Seriously, I told him about the puking and the sweating and the itching, and how the itching was the worst. More than anything else, the itching was the worst—like a million ants that live under your skin and are alive and always crawling and moving.

But something was wrong. Grady didn't feel much like talking. He acted busy and hurried even though there were only a couple of old timers and me in the bar. He pulled a twenty-dollar bill out of the cash register and slid it across the counter to me. I told him I'd pay him back.

"Yeah, I know," he said.

"I didn't ask for it."

He nodded.

I told him that I thought I'd be getting on at the mill pretty soon and he told me he didn't want me coming in anymore. I asked him what he meant. "We're friends, Grady."

"I know, Cahill, but you can't come in here anymore."

"Why not?"

He shook his head. "Just take the twenty," he said.

"I said I'd pay you back."

"Just take it, Cahill."

I nodded and I looked at him, then I left.

I told myself that pretty soon things would change. The winter couldn't last forever, the mill would have to let me know. Theresa would come back. Or maybe I'd just blow—just disappear and forget this place. Missoula wasn't the only goddamn town the country. I could go down to San Diego where it was warm and full of beaches and talk to O'Neal. Still, though, I wanted what was mine. Nothing more, nothing less. I wanted what was mine. I'm clean now—so how long is it going to take?

I crossed the street and pushed into Red's and told the bartender to pour me a beer. I shoved Grady's twenty onto the bar. He spit down at the floor, then looked at me as if I were dying or something. "Give me a beer," I said. I pushed the twenty at him. He stared back at me. I pointed my finger at my face and said, "It really doesn't hurt."

All of the old true tractors  
have withered in the field.  
Plowed down to history,  
they dot the wheat,  
bright scarves of an old woman.

This house is older still.  
Favoring the wind like a bad leg,  
she leans east and prays  
each night from the basement  
where her heart lies fading.

I am tired  
in my nineteenth year  
of bad dreams and a voice  
that no longer knows the verses  
of children's songs.

Take the key and lock her up,  
Lock her up, lock her up.

Today my hands are calloused.  
The flat rungs of the ladder  
no longer leave the long white ropes  
in the palms.  
Nor do I stop halfway up  
for fear of falling.

Instead,  
I check the grain level  
and start down.

Kathleen Gallo

*for Nancy, lost to me  
in Guatemala*

We had traveled by train  
two days from snow and January  
following the same white brilliance  
on dining-car linen to sunbleached  
sidewalk and stucco. For the first time,  
I saw orange trees—marigold moons  
shining through emerald leaves,  
the colors intense as Chinese enamelware.  
Azaleas and Bleeding-Hearts spilled in our paths.  
In search of ideas like exotic fruits,  
we sat at the feet of travelers  
just returned from the South.  
We accepted their gifts:  
precious spice of a new world.

Now I live with orange trees,  
blossoms cover my walk—  
gifts tucked away in old trunks.  
I think of you who wore them like skin:  
still travelling South, still searching.  
I peel the memories of those lost days slowly,  
savoring each segment for its richness,  
inviting the bitter—the smell of orange  
lingers still.



I slept last night  
in the hollow of a sequoia  
During the night  
I felt my blood flow  
away from me  
At dawn it returned  
weak as rosewater  
I believe this is how  
a man goes crazy  
piece by piece  
Losing his sense of direction  
to whatever bird  
flies over and wants it  
Losing his skill at romance  
to any creek he falls into  
I swear the trout  
steal your eyes and spawn them  
I did kill a man  
up in Angels Camp  
You must understand with his eyes  
he told me he wanted to die

There is a meanness born inside me  
sharper than the call of any animal  
It haunts me  
from the cave of my soul  
I want to die peacefully leaf by leaf  
moon by moon, grain by grain  
in the arms of a woman gone nine years  
But the only thing I know is this meanness  
It's a bridge that stops short  
on both sides of the canyon  
and only love or meanness  
can carry you across



*Phil Hemenway*

Ever since he had declared war on his heavily lagered waistline, O'Rourke had found his eyelids fluttering life back to his face at increasingly vulgar hours of the morning. What bothered him was that he had begun to enjoy his early risings. Leah called him smug. Or elitist. This morning it was the mutterings of garbage men and the gonging of airborne trash cans that roused him. Then, the growls of Hillside Scavengers' decrepit trucks gnashing down the trash reached his diaphragm. "Gobble, gobble," he wheezed. Footsteps clacked down the drive. The man above turned over in bed. O'Rourke heard a cough, then a second and decidedly feminine one. He smiled as he lay there. "Neighbor 1, Moi, 0," he whispered. The smile slipped away with a whimper.

The half-light of dawn made the drawn blinds of the room glow a pale gold. His bed was a futon on the floor. Looking up from his spot equidistant from the west and south windows, he appeared to be lying under two intersecting bars of feeble light, diffuse because of the sun's slow easterly rise. No color reached him where he lay, but by reaching up from the floor's shadow, he could illuminate a hand or foot. Across the room his sweatpants, shirt, and jockstrap hung like a stringer of fish from the closet doorknob. He smelled salt as they mocked him, his fingers locked carelessly behind his head on the pillow. "O'Rourke says *sleep*," he chanted, the sound resonant with morning until the walls pumped quiet back to the room. He smelled the running shoes in the open door of the closet, a vaguely clean odor of toes and mud. The path through the park had hazards now, puddles unavoidable for the poison oak bushes on either side of the trail. "O'Rourke admits to no obstacles," he grunted, sitting up. It would be light enough soon.

His bare chest itched as he dug fingers through the mat of tangled hair. The bed's blue plumeau bisected two white thighs. "Moron," he muttered. The right hand dropped to the ring of spare flesh at his waist. His yawn acquired purpose. He shifted to a kneeling position on the bed.

His left hand began a crawl through the red cowlicks atop his head. As he knelt there, his own nudity recalled an April afternoon's track practice in high school. He and Basil Kimble stole a freshman runner's clothes and ran them up the flagpole. The boy's slender body had looked so white and ridiculous that day, running naked down the infield of the track at incredible speed, to hide in the sawdust of the pole vault pit. He stayed there, until laughing classmates untied the

knots in the flagpole rope and lowered the sweatsuit flag. They returned the clothes to the boy, and he pulled them on quickly, embarrassed and trailing flecks of sawdust as he sprinted back to the gym. The young girls who had dropped their books to run see something remarkable, a boy running naked in high school, untangled fingers from the wire fence around the track and continued on their way home.

"O'Rourke requires orange juice." He stood up and grabbed a salty shirt. The dried sweat was foul and its abrasion offended his neck as he pulled it on. "L.A. in '84 is out, but better thighs," he remarked, snapping on the jock strap. He pulled on sweatpants, then slipped running shorts over the pants. A stop at the john, an emptying, then cold water in the face. "Essential routine," he mouthed at the mirror. Shoes and socks in hand, he made for the refrigerator.

He sat down at the dining room table, placing a full pilsner of orange juice in front of himself. The room's windows faced the street. He had not drawn the curtains the night before, and light crept in from the budding sun and the still burning street lamps. As he looked out the window, he had to acknowledge the tight strain lingering in the elastic pouch between his legs. "Should have asked her to stay last night," he muttered between sips of orange juice. Sleep flickered once again as an alternative. He pulled on one shoe but did not tie it. The outline of her body shaped itself in the room's muslin light, forcing him to make adjustments in the supporter. "Should have begged her maybe..."

It was a runner's body he saw, the body of Leah Heywood. She ran nearly every day, seven miles or more, as if distances existed simply to be galloped through. She would rise early from his bed and pull on shorts, a tank shirt and shoes. He liked to watch her as she balanced on one foot, then the other, pulling on striped shorts to cover a black tangle of hair clinging to a sculpted pubis. She was beyond mere beauty this way, nearly naked in the dawn-light, her brown nipples like two perfect clichés as they slipped beneath the cotton cloth of her shirt. He admitted quite openly to his ogling. Her standard admonition became, "You're a peeping pig, O'Rourke." He would reply, "Mistress Heywood, number 69, now deigns to perform the compulsories," or some variation that earned him a flung book, pillow or hairbrush, depending upon her mood.

Of course, there was nothing compulsory about it. Often, he did not watch. He would sleep through her quiet contortions and awaken later with the sun an hour old in the room and her skin a hot red along the edges of the wet shirt. Several things might happen then. He had confided to her once that he, Patrick John "Oh Marcello, I



am so bored" Jack O'Rourke, preferred to run before making love. He explained how the run, the punishment his body took when he first began, then the smoothing out process as he hit his stride, breath coming more easily, burning in the lungs subsiding, miles passing, how all this became a preliminary, a strenuous build-up to whatever resolution they might find together afterwards. "Unless I run to exhaustion, which I wouldn't do, heh, heh," he added. Leah raised herself up on one elbow to look down on him, nestled in sheets. "It's all glandular I suppose," he said, his attempt at the clinical sending them both into a naked fit of laughter. "Prostate *subito*, ejaculatio toto," he droned in mock benediction. "The intensity of the crisis is enhanced by the degree of muscular tension," he babbled as she led him by some handy appendage to a shower or breakfast.

"It's all true," he said. He reached down to tie the shoe and felt a smaller wad of stomach bunch in his lap. Progress, but he was unable to face the sensation again. He pulled on the other shoe and tied it, sat up and drank the orange juice down.

He stood up, opened the window and stared out into the street. He could see her bending at acute and obtuse angles as she limbered up. She had a routine, one stage of which his imagination invariably locked on. It was a classic exercise: her legs straight, she crossed one over the other and bent down to touch both hands flat to the floor. He loved to watch this one, for the thigh of the supporting leg bulged to a supple smoothness as the strain increased, the calf below pulling to a narrow but equally attractive tension. His response was usually tactile, but once she had begun the exercise, he did not bother her. She approached this time with a singularity of purpose that excluded all; the giving of free rein to her body was linked to a privacy she insisted upon from the day he had first met her at the University track. It had required her to sleep at her place this last night, the first time in two weeks. O'Rourke closed his eyes and watched her limber up, admiring the shapes she assumed as she readied her body for its test, uphill, around trees, over the bridges in the park. He had forced himself to be dispassionate, to withdraw his hand because she was not sculpture. But the ritual she observed each morning had produced for him its own type of classicism. "She who is about to fly salutes you," became her parting announcement.

He stepped over to open the door to the street, perhaps three seconds before the line of streetlamps snapped off. A strange excitement infused into his body. He began his own loosening turns in the cool air crossing the threshold. Stretch, stretch, snap, snap, the machine came to life. He lay on his back with legs rigid and elevated four or five inches from the floor, and looked down over the tension

in his abdomen to the ludicrous billow of cotton sweatpants. "Green ones," he grunted. There was a hole below the left knee where he'd snagged them vaulting a fence. "Harem pants... a down and out Scheherazade, trading gossamer silk pantaloons for sweats." He grinned, breathless, as he dropped his legs to the comfort of the floor.

An unseasonal dawn warmth pushed through the door as he stood up. It was sudden. "Overdressed," he muttered. He pulled off the shirt, glad to be rid of the clawing just below his beard. Then, stepping through the door and onto the porch, he realized that the pants were the offenders. "Surely, we must uncover the legs," he said, mocking himself. "O'Rourke retreats and divests himself of an offending garment."

He returned to the porch with only the yellow running shorts on. The air was cool again against his bare thighs. His skin contracted, making his body feel more compact and useful. An unencumbered feeling gave way to an unreasonable sensation of purity that lurked just below skin level. He thought suddenly of men from tribes with names like Somali, Bantu, Igbo; men whose economy of motion spoke of constant touch with reality; black men who rose quite early to leave their huts and run fifty miles, all day along trails though brush or across veldts where waist-high grass oceans were before them; men who run to stop by twilight before a startled white woman, their black skins seamed by sweat trickling through a patina of dust, and a string of bloody hares or snared birds dangling from a shoulder.

"This be insanity," he said to his yellow running shorts. The morning light flushed the ambiguous penumbra from the edges of things. "I could stick to residential streets, cut dead center through the park. Who'd see at this hour?" A Serengetti calm elevated his sight, and he dropped the shorts to his ankles and stepped out of them.

A practical consideration dawned then: Support. "With or without?" Already his excitement over the sudden variation in the morning habit had prompted his body to take its own measures. "The men of Greece ran naked. The men of Africa run naked. A wrapper of soft hide maybe?" A possibility, but he pulled the elastic strap down to his ankles and stepped out of it. He dropped it back inside the door, made sure that door was very unlocked, then closed it. He faced the empty street quite naked, except for shoes. "Civilization stares up from the feet of O'Rourke," he giggled. Tender feet, without the genetic callous of centuries. He set out at a good pace down the street, running shoes slapping the sidewalk cracks, a whisper from ancient Greece or modern Africa only half mocking him.



Two miles to the park entrance. He made it with only one minor incident. A newspaper truck was parked outside an all-night market, its driver on his rounds filling the vending machines with the early edition. He made it past the store without incident, but as he glanced back over his shoulder, he saw the store clerk's head peering through the little market's open door. The news vendor stood pointing in amazement with a look of *there goes a naked man* etched on his face and a bundle of newspaper in his other arm. Momentary panic, more speed, until he cleared the lion-guarded gates of the park and entered a cop-less haven.

He found a quick stride and flew down the jogging trail, through the lush growth of dogwood and wisteria, oaks and spring grass, toward the park's west entrance. Two miles through the park, then less than a mile from where he would emerge to Leah's house. He wanted to run to her house, try to borrow some shorts and run home. "Or maybe she'll drive me," he panted. But he did not want to intrude. He recalled the twelve hours of absence that had passed between them, and he seemed fresh even to himself. "She will 'receive' me, be 'at home'," he gasped, then laughed hoarsely as he crossed the footbridge spanning the swollen creek.

He galloped through the park with remarkable ease, feeling for the first time in many years what *getting in shape* means. The usual heaviness in his legs did not exist. His muscles seemed governed by an external source of energy that shot a constant *fiat* to the machine. He basked in strength, felt he could run forever if he did not have to dress again. A conspiracy of odor and color drew him on through the clouds of his own breath. He began to chant, "Run, run, run" until he left the park and turned into the long street of a recently completed housing tract.

Leah kept an older cottage on the outer edge of the development. As he pictured it, his destination, something quite near to hysteria suddenly seized him. "What have I done?" he moaned. Houses that had been dark were now ablaze with lights. Shadows moved regularly in kitchens, spreading waves of morning coffee and bacon to the middle of the street. O'Rourke sped up. "I flew through the park," he muttered, "I flew. Five minutes, I need five minutes more, or I'll ride out of here in a squad car."

Flight, more speed essential. He picked up the pace, willing the street to remain empty. But two blocks from his destination, the only truly extraordinary event of the whole morning occurred. He had begun the run with a sense of purity, or history, He had made a contest between his legs and the air. There had been no bragadoccio. He had hoped for privacy, relying only on the possibility of its

violation as an occasional source of energy. Now he had a good lather going, and it made him feel as though he had accomplished something very nearly perfect.

Half-way through the block, he looked down the street and saw, only two doors away, a woman reaching out to pull several quarts of milk and a newspaper through her door.

"I will not be taken easily," he hissed. "Run up a one-way, climb a wall." He held stride, feet rhythmically slapping the street.

When she finally saw him he looked directly into her face still heavy with sleep. Her mouth fell open as he crossed the concrete drive of her neighbor's house. She stared at him for a full ten paces before her faced slipped into a broad smile. He returned it, raising his arms and turning his palms up to shrug a greeting. Then, just as he pulled even with her lot, she quickly put down the milk and paper, pulled the door to her house almost shut, and stepped out of the doorway. She glanced quickly up and down before she opened her robe and bared her naked body to him and the morning air. He slowed by instinct, but kept on. She disappeared quickly into her house, taking the milk, the paper and a wonderful pelvis with her.

He broke his stride as soon as he saw Leah's gate and trotted through it. He thought briefly of the conventions as the real sweat began to pearl on his chest. Oblivious, he walked through the yard. "Should I return?" His own voice startled him, and he made for the shrubs outside the window of her bedroom. He slipped through the leaves and branches and peered in. The familiar outline of a body beneath a sheet presented itself backside first to him. The smooth curves, the soft point of shoulder, the black hair flowing out over the pillow. He hesitated, secure in the bushes, thinking again of "That woman. She wasn't begging or even advertising. Maybe she knew I was panicky. Women can sense that." But as he stared through the window, it seemed that her brief splash of nudity had been only a non-mathematical equation. "I could go see her later, with a bottle of milk and some flowers, and say, 'Remember me?'" He laughed aloud, very secure in his anonymity, content to stay that way.

He tapped on the glass to rouse Leah, but his laughter had already stirred her. She turned toward the window. "I must be quite a remarkable sight, time-and-space-wise," he said through the glass. "You will notice I am quite naked," he added as she began to smile. She got out of bed, wearing one of his old t-shirts, and walked to the window. As she opened, she began to laugh, a deep, shaking gale. When she could speak, she said, "You jerk. How did you get here? Where are your clothes?" He saw then that he did not appear to be unwelcome.

His breath came easier now, and he said, "I ran over. Cut through the park and the development. Just kind of a kink, you know?" And he laughed, throwing back his head in relief and gratitude. "No one saw me," he sang. "And you see this?" He spun around in a bizarre pirhouette, a naked dervish in running shoes. "See this?" A dew of clean moisture nestled in the hair of his body and his skin burned red. "*This* is a runner's body."

They laughed together while she eyed him, still with considerable disbelief. Then she reached out and spread the fingers of her left hand on the back of his neck.

"Yes," she said, "I can see that," and she pulled him sweating through the open window.



South wind  
blows off the levee  
with rain  
and a sky full of geese.  
All day, under their edgy cries  
Arturo works the canal,  
crumbled at flood stage.  
For a moment  
his heart trips  
like a broken wing  
or a migrant boot, stubbed  
on winter's ragged edge.

To turn back again.  
Back to Hidalgo,  
to a wife and four daughters  
who fly from the dusty yard  
in white cotton dresses  
crying, home, "bienvenidos."  
Arranging their wings,  
those heavy black braids,  
to preen in the sun.

Melissa Kintscher

The echo of our laughter lingers,  
sadly,  
like lipstick marks on cocktail glasses  
left by ladies, long since departed,  
gaily on the arms of men,  
or alone,  
and drunk,  
crying black mascara tears,  
that fall  
like notes of a sad song,  
down their faces,  
as they stumble home  
on heels as high as my expectations,  
on darkened streets  
that reveal as much light  
as we do emotion,  
hiding out,  
like taxis after 2 a.m.,  
behind jokes as bad as cheap wine.

When it rains in the spring the air smells  
like tea  
warm and poured over ice  
aromatic  
the warm hits cool  
the quenching of dry  
the spring rains smell like warm tea on ice  
that's what my sister always said  
when the days got long  
and sunsets linger till ten o'clock  
and the girls and I ride our bikes  
through the dim  
the empty  
streets, past open, screenless windows with curtains  
blowing through a breeze  
and parents on livingroom couches  
with wide open front doors  
open back doors  
watching kids  
playing hide and seek  
whizzing down the road, the girls and I  
our bikes, ourselves, screaming and laughing  
at the idea of parents,  
of time, of constraints  
when the air turns warm  
we fill canning jars with pink lemonade  
and gin  
and sit on porches, in the shade with broken sunglasses on  
talking on and on  
talking  
endlessly about the night  
rides to the Burger Box drive-through  
on our bikes  
and waiting in the cars' line  
to order  
in groups of four,  
a car, we were  
hysterical  
a car we were

riding our bikes through town to a porch  
and eating greasy bacon burgers  
with onions  
in our laps  
with poppyseeds, catsup and mayonnaise  
lasting until the hints of heat of  
daylight hours would weave through and  
remove  
quenching breezes  
of midnight sprinklers and shade and streams  
and heat of the morning would curl, would brown  
the leaves of trees smelling like  
popcorn in the sun,  
not buttered  
not air-conditioned  
not the smell that dances down through  
town on midnight streets  
from exits of theaters  
where people go in  
refuge for hours  
from the wage, the power  
of suffocation  
from heated days that smell like  
popcorn endlessly dry and burnt and scorched  
popped and poured without an end  
or a breath of relief, no refuge  
except at night on porches and streets  
of iced tea in the rain.

Lying curled on my side  
I look for you  
    in cracks  
    on ceilings and walls,  
High up in one corner  
    ivy grows through a gap  
    that the shifting foundation  
    made not long ago.

White summer-hot sun pierces through  
    long crystals at the window,  
Playing color on my naked face,  
Sparking me to wake and  
    rise stumbling  
    to another day's heat.

There have been five new moons  
    since  
I heard—through soft-bright blankets  
    of stars and nightdreams—  
Your footsteps falling heavy  
    on the giving porch,  
Your keys jangling, twisting,  
    for the darkened lock.

I have washed all flavor of our loving  
    from my ocean sheets,  
The lost mountain scent of your hair  
    gone from my pillows too.  
I've been wearing a pair of old blue  
    jeans you left behind,  
Though lately the zipper won't  
    close over my melon-belly  
This tiny vine that grows to fruit inside me  
    reaching tendrils to my heart.

*Berylene Rizor*

Watch—

she'll come from over there,  
behind the garage,            stop,  
then lumber along beneath the laurel,  
her fine snout aimed in one direction,

her eyes squint down against the rude  
gray light,  
her body saying, "possum, possum"  
as she rocks across the yard  
and slips through the hole  
in the northwest corner of the fence.

Going home.

Every morning I watch her  
from this tiny upstairs window,  
and every afternoon  
I'm careful not to mend the gap  
in the peeling wooden fence.



A saxophone  
is a velvet man  
whose husky voice  
can touch a place in me  
reserved for none

A saxophone  
is a silky hand  
that softly runs  
the length of me  
kisses me in private places  
then bellows out his pleasure

A saxophone  
is dusky eyes  
with a look of hot desire  
Those eyes can have their way with me  
take my love, all my money  
then blow a note  
that comforts me

A saxophone  
is easy feet  
that guide me through a number  
an arm that reaches for my waist  
lips that brush against my face  
embarrassed, I regain composure  
then beg to go again

*Timothy Bluhm*

Four wheels  
And that's all, that's it.  
Seven inches off the asphalt  
Eight hours out of L.A. and not slowing down.  
And Paul screaming get back get back.

Everything's floored and the wind  
Is not really wind at all.  
It's you and me, my foot, your money,  
And sweet Loretta.  
Here comes Tucson, you know, Arizona.

The haloed parasite  
Hovering crazily on the desert floor  
Thirsty and waiting.  
This is L.A.'s junkyard; you can see  
The air here, too.

Yes, the black man, hand  
Stretched out  
Got some silver, man?  
Hard for a colored man to get a ride  
In this town.

Night can't resist  
Holding the minute hand but the stereo  
Tells time too.  
Four more cassettes to El Paso.  
You know, Texas.

*Amelia Barth*

A green child leaned against a skyscraper,  
Arms wrapped around the knees drawn to its chin,  
And studied a sea of shoes and forgotten gum.

*Diane E. Imhoff*

*for Anne Sexton*

Loving the Killer  
was bad business.

It was like  
feeding yourself  
almost fatal doses  
of cyanide  
in your Cheerios.

It was like  
swimming in  
dark lakes  
until your lungs  
exploded  
and then coming up for  
precious little air  
and going down again.

It was like  
eating too many Tums  
carrying razor blades  
for rainy days,  
begging for open  
heart surgery  
every Saturday  
at 7pm  
and hanging  
at wierd angles  
off known to be  
fatal bridges.

And yet, it was  
someone  
to love, it was  
something  
to do.

Honest people smiled,  
when they saw your charades  
because really  
everyone was doing it.

There wasn't one  
lover around  
who hadn't lost  
something  
misplaced  
a part of themselves  
somewhere  
in this act of  
trying to find  
a killer  
to love who didn't  
kill you  
completely.



**On the Bridge:**

*Crossing the Mississippi River*

from Volume 16, Number 2

*Mark Lewis*

I am a  
steady man  
rolling over the wide water  
at night, all the windows rolled down.  
My cigarette glows better  
than the lights on the bridge turning that black water orange.  
They have a pyramid in Memphis.

I arrived as the sun busted.  
I saw stubble behind me, and a broken-down machine some men  
were  
    working on.  
Then I saw buckwheats blowing their white flowers across a field.  
In the trunk I got a load of stolen bibles.  
They built a pyramid in Memphis,  
tilting toward the river in the Mississippi mud.

Oh-snap my fingers!—  
when I get to Memphis,  
I'll be a  
steady man—  
strolling down some wide avenue at night,  
all that neon pricking  
at my skin, reflecting some razzmatazz circus  
where pretty girls in goldenrod dresses conjure love.  
They built a pyramid in Memphis.  
I see no reason to pray.

trees turning slightly,  
around halfway  
and leaning to the ground  
as finally they lie down.  
green trees fall differently,  
somehow animated and relaxing,  
they hold on  
until the gentle rushing of  
leaves and branch,  
is silent.  
others break halfway  
leaving ends  
lightning struck and charred.  
and some trees die all their lives.  
i hope that i fall green  
living to the last  
turning,  
and with a great sigh  
lie crumbling down.

*Bob Garner*

they are peopling my dreams with pompadours  
and lucky strikes and chevrolets and tractors  
and buddy's rabbits in the coal shed copulating  
congregating in the barn with uncle j and  
johnny's bloody nose and dewey's jelly rolls  
and kathy with the big ones at the drive-in  
god i think i love her no its only lust i must  
be going crazy in the year before the bullet  
and the women in the magazines

I. tomorrow's September  
so I'd better write  
my August Poem  
today—I heard  
that all great poets  
write them, like all  
great poets get drunk

II. I took a train once  
home from Santa Cruz  
the sun never rose  
to wake me so I never  
got off to meet you

you thought I did it  
so I could stay  
with Marc  
but I'd seen him  
the night before  
(heat dripping)—  
I think it was August,  
we got drunk  
and like all great poets  
mourned lost love

*Aaron Kenedi*

The naked trees of winter stand pale and smooth  
Icy against the touch of twilight  
like skeletons stretching their dry bones.

Thin, gray limbs hold now  
only the life of the marsh crows  
in their private frenzy.  
Blackness blowing in its own wind.

They pray beneath a full moon  
that smiles with a polished grin like a vaudevillian  
song and dance man,  
but possessing all the wisdom of the eye of Odin.

Under a whisper of smoke,  
the frost from your breath;  
under a faint crackle of energy  
the evening exhales into night

And the marsh crows peel from their frame like flesh  
humming against the winter sky.



It was our last good day, which I didn't know at the time. I ate lunch alone, like I had every afternoon since Sandra went into the hospital. Charlie was there waiting when I brought the chicken scraps back to the car. He ate what you might call daintily, picking the bits off my fingers like maybe he wouldn't eat chicken today after all, but that was just his way of scolding me about not taking him inside.

"They don't know you're human, Charlie," I apologized. I rubbed his scented, curly hair. His belly was drum tight under the black fur. "Remember Agnes at the old Bar and Grill on West Street?" Charlie looked up at me and nudged his little wet snout under my chin to tell me yes, he remembered. He used to trot right into the Bar and Grill and sit in his own chair and wait for the doggie bib. I always got him his own plate, too.

"He's a better tipper than most," Agnes would say.

Charlie finished the chicken thoughtfully. He was partial to it with barbecue sauce, but here in Retirement City, Oregon, they tried not to upset our touchy stomachs with spicy food. I knew he missed Agnes' cooking as much as I did. I gave him a rib tickle until his back leg went wild and the bell on his little red collar jingled.

"I've got to talk to the doctor first about Sandra," I explained, "then we'll take a run on the beach." I turned the car on and Charlie laid down and put his head on my lap, his patient pose. Since she'd been on the scene longer than he had, he tolerated my wife Sandra. Besides, no matter how much he stuck by me wherever I went, there came that rare day when he was left at home and *she* called the shots. I got to the hospital and parked in a shady spot (not hard to do in Oregon), and cracked the window for him before I went in. I could feel his poodle stare following me all the way up the wide steps before the automatic doors swooshed shut. It was like he'd decided too late I shouldn't be going in there without him and all he could do was wait.

I hate hospitals. Been in and out of them myself too many times. But Sandra's a basket case when she has to go. She's sixty-five, same as me, and is skinny enough to fit into size five pants, which she has racks of back at the house. She's a live one, and still thinks she's a looker, dyes her hair *femme fatale* red. I have to keep my eye on her all the time. Outside of Charlie, she's all I have.

When I got to her room, Sandra was sitting up in bed, refusing the little bucket of pills the nurse tried to get down her. I sized things up

and bossed her into piping down and taking them. She looked around the nurse's rump at me like if it weren't for who she married she wouldn't be stuck in this dump. But I know how to handle Sandra. I gave her a mean stare and she unclamped her false teeth and started sticking in pills. Of course she made sure to worry each one a hundred times with her tongue before she gulped it, like a nun swallowing her rosary beads. Pay back.

The nurse scowled at my tactics, but I ignored the biddy and checked things out while Sandra was distracted with the rosary. She'd gotten messages from all her kids, written on a hospital smiley pad. Cute. When I'm in the hospital I don't get calls from anyone, especially not my kids. Sandra and I don't have any together. We got married when we were both forty-three. Now she's always trying to make out like her kids are my kids, because she knows mine are a bunch of drug addicts and shiftless bums I can't be proud of. She, on the other hand, has an accountant, an engineer, and a highly placed bitchy executive daughter. Three out of four; only one of hers is a shiftless bum.

"Did you talk to the da-whore?" Sandra asked as soon as the nurse huffed out. She still had the last pill stuck in her craw and with that and her rattly breathing, she talked funny. I put down her smiley message from the shiftless bum and realized something was up. She was looking at me like *I* was the one who had asthma and had to be drug in here gasping for breath and turning blue. She wouldn't let on what all the sympathy was for, though. It wasn't her style. Sandra's from the old school of hedge and manipulate. If she had to spit something out direct, her throat would close over. She gave me her *It'll be all right in the end, Honey*, expression, which meant whatever it was would prove hopeless.

The doc waltzed in as if on cue and Sandra looked downright panicked when he motioned me out to the hall. He worked in high gear, like a race car driver, and had no trouble being direct. He laid it out cut and dried. Sandra's life would have to change, he said. No more dust mites or airborne particles or smoke. She wasn't even supposed to clean the house. Well, I could handle all that. I could put plastic on the pillows and get an air filter and find a kid to come in cheap for the heavy cleaning. I was already used to going outside to light one up. But then he dropped his bombshell.

Charlie would have to go.

"It's either your wife or the dog," he said. "It's that serious. She won't survive another attack." He went on blabbing high speed about how most people think it's the hair you react to but it's not, it's the dander. He was working so hard to convince me, I realized Sandra



must have told him about me and Charlie's relationship.

"It's not your fault," he finished. "Poodles are fairly non-allergenic dogs. Some people with weak lungs can handle them, but Sandra can't." He was ready to wrap this up. "Look, find him a good home, clean your place with a fine tooth comb, and I'll release her."

Find him a good home? I didn't tell him Charlie was almost fourteen. The guy was younger than me and didn't act like he'd ever even cried over *Old Yeller*. I didn't tell him Charlie'd been with me since I rescued him from an abandoned car when he was a pup. That he was a one-man dog. That he'd gone a little blind in one eye lately and sometimes took a pee before he got all the way out of the house. That he couldn't fall asleep unless curled on my lap with my hand over his right ear. You don't find a good home for a half-blind, fourteen-year-old floor wetter.

No wonder I got The Look from Sandra. She knew. I was going to have to put Charlie to sleep. *To sleep*. What a rotten thing to call it. The doctor told me to have the house ready by Friday. That gave me two days.

"What are we going to do?" Sandra was choked up with fretting when I came back in the room. As if she didn't know. She'd never even liked Charlie. She just wanted to make sure I wouldn't choose him.

I sat down and stared at her. It'd always been in the back of my mind that her asthma was always in *her* mind, and right that minute I wanted her to admit it. I wanted her to jump out of bed, take an easy gulp of air, and tell me there'd been a mistake, she could breathe fine, and let's forget this nonsense.

But Sandra's chest just kept throttling the air she drank. And I couldn't forget what she'd looked like when I brought her here, how scared I'd been. I still had the claw marks on my right arm from her digging in when she couldn't get her breath.

At the car, Charlie was all wriggly to see me. He'd torn the chicken carton to shreds. It looked like a weed-eater had hit the Styrofoam. Little white rocks hung from his chin. He hadn't done anything so childish since he was a pup, and he expected to get it. I obliged by shoving him over so I could squeeze behind the wheel, and he slunk to Sandra's usual area by the passenger door. I had this big urge to drive to the vet's right that minute, get it over with while Charlie thought there was a reason. But I threw the car into drive and headed for the beach. That's not the way we did things, Charlie and I.

It was an awful pretty day. Clear and not too windy. The kind of colors that make you want to believe in God. Squinty-blue Pacific

and canvas sand dunes. I got out Charlie's retractable leash and hooked it to his collar. Not that he needed a leash, he'd never run off in his life, but we'd had some fights with the ranger about the law. I could unhook it once we hit the surf.

Charlie loved the beach. He went crazy with all that space to run. It was good just to watch him feeling so free. Me, I'm too old to even walk far anymore, but Charlie turned young by the ocean. We didn't talk about what happened in the car. There was a long moment when we hit the hard sand, after I'd snapped off the leash to let him go, when he looked over his shoulder at me, as if he wanted to apologize. It nearly killed me. "Go on, Charlie," I said. "Run."

I was already contemplating if I could live without Sandra, instead of my dog.

We'd seen Barbara Woodhouse from British television on the set late one night. She's the old *grande dame* of dog training—kind of a dog herself in those clunky shoes, checkered shirt and pullover sweater—but she sure knows her stuff. That night she was going on about the telepathy between dogs and humans. Charlie was on my lap as usual, and he watched the whole show. He was partial to animal shows anyway, unless there was a good cartoon on, but this time was different. He kept nodding at Barbara and digging his nails into my leg, like here at last was someone who could explain things.

Charlie was no dummy. He'd torn up the chicken carton so I could get mad at him. To make it easier on me. He'd sized up the situation even before I'd gotten back to the car. He knew I was going to betray him. He just didn't know when.

When we got home from the beach the phone was ringing. It was Bitchy Executive, pleading her case. *Can't come all the way up from Smog City if it's nothing serious with Mom*, she whined. *It's nothing serious, is it, Bill?* I hated the way she made Bill sound generic. Like I could be anybody her mother'd picked up off the street.

What would you call wheezing like a locomotive and flopping around like a mackerel, a picnic? But I let her off the hook. I didn't want her up here, didn't want any of them. Especially not the bum, who would be the easiest, and therefore the first, candidate on their list of Who To Send.

Our talk was short and sweet, more a debriefing than a real conversation. We never had much to say to one another. She thought I was a surly S.O.B. who'd ruined, and then run off his own kids. She thought I was too bossy to Sandra and spent all my time watching Rush Limbaugh and *Wild Kingdom*. That's okay. I pissed her off by telling her old man she wouldn't be so mouthy if he'd made her stay home and raise their kids like a woman should.



But she did surprise me by not signing off at the first lull. "How are you holding up?" she asked, like she really meant it. I almost dropped the phone. Worry over me was last on the list where Sandra's kids were concerned. Let's face it, worry over me was last on the list where my kids were concerned. What was going on?

Charlie was at my feet, staring up with liquid browns, waiting for his dinner. Damn her, she'd almost fooled me. It wasn't real worry, only Sandra's coaching. No doubt my wife had already spread the news about Charlie. He wasn't even gone yet.

"Lousy!" I said, and slammed the phone down before she could finish stammering.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't get rid of Charlie. That night I sat up going over the alternatives. Farm Sandra out to her precious kids?—where she'd be much happier anyway, according to them. Forget it, Sandra wouldn't last a day in L.A. with her wheezy airways, and I probably wouldn't last a day without her.

Make Charlie a bed in the garage? Turn him into an outdoor dog? We'd still have our walks on the beach, and he could take rides with me as long as I vacuumed the car after.

Charlie whimpered to be let out. I got up from the Lazee-Boy and opened the door. I watched him hobble down the steps like his earlier run on the beach had been some wild fantasy. He got stiff with the cold, and the fog was in. He stayed right at the edge of the porch light like a small black ghost, and the minute I creaked the door part way shut he crutched right in again. Forget the outdoor dog bit.

I went back to the Lazee-Boy and Charlie climbed onto my lap and curled up. I had back troubles and fell asleep right here most nights, watching the tube, my hand over Charlie's right ear. If the back was really flaring and I couldn't get my shut-eye, I'd talk to Charlie. He liked my stories and didn't care if I rambled on like Sandra complained about. He looked downright understanding over what had happened to my kids, and the bad business deals when I was in sales. I thought of what he looked like when he was just a pup, a black curly ball with a big smile. I thought about how he loved going out on the fishing boat, how excited he got when he could sit on deck with his nose in the wind, or run around yapping if I had a fish on. I thought about how sometimes, when I just felt sore, the only thing that helped was to have Charlie snuggle up so I could run my fingers through his soft coat.

"What are we going to do?" Sandra sounded like a broken record. She was awake early and had gotten right on the phone. They shouldn't let patients have phones by their bed, not patients like Sandra. I'd moved Charlie off my lap to get up, and he stayed where I



put him on the floor, eavesdropping. "I've been worrying all night. Poor Charlie," she went on in her hacky voice. "Honey?"

*Poor Charlie.* Sure. "I'm taking care of it." Charlie's tail went back and forth.

"You mean you're—"

"I'm taking care of it!" I yelled. Charlie edged over and plunked his head on my foot.

"Well, I've got to get out of this damn place." Sandra shifted to guilt mode.

Charlie's head felt hot through my sock. Sandra sniffed and wheezed.

I never could make heads or tails of the practice of feeding a big fancy meal to a condemned man. How could you eat if you knew you were going to be knocked off in the next few hours? But Charlie was unusually hungry that morning. And if he was hungry, I was going to give him whatever he wanted. I cooked us steak and eggs. I sat at the table with him on my lap, so I could cut his meat the way he liked it, in tiny bites, and let him lick them off my fingers. He wanted vanilla ice cream for desert.

After I called the vet, we sat outside on the porch steps watching the fog burn off. Charlie gummed my hand with his toothless spot and licked my fingers good one last time, while I told him it was better to go now before he got too blind. I reminded him of how, just last month, he'd run into the kitchen wall, and there was the bladder problem. He stopped gnawing and blew air through his nose in a sarcastic way. Maybe he'd guessed all along Sandra would win out. She'd never so much as petted him in fourteen years (she claimed that made her sneeze), and Charlie was like a gambler who couldn't believe his good luck had lasted so long. Now it was time to cash in those chips.

The braver he was, the weaker I felt. I had to drive around the block six times before I parked at the vet's. Then my legs drug like lead weights and I swear I had a mild heart attack trying to get them moving. I was like Sandra heading into the emergency room. I couldn't get my breath. When I finally got free of the car, I threw the leash away, picked Charlie up and kept him right tight against my chest.

I've always hated those metal examining tables they have for dogs. Like they chose the coldest slab they could find to make the poor animal tremble. I have to hand it to Charlie, he was a trouper to the end. The vet's assistant, all perky efficient, tried to take him from me, but I gave her a good glare and she backed off.

I set him down myself. He kept his eyes on me for reassurance.

Like he was saying, *It's okay, Bill, I'm going to go through with it. It's something I've got to do.* I wish he'd fussed and cried and bit the hell out of that slimy vet. I wish he'd jumped off the table and pissed on the linoleum. Why'd he have to march off like a duty-bound soldier determined to please his general? They strapped a rubber hose around his leg.

"You should leave now." Definitely slimy, a short guy with greasy hair. He looked at me over a pair of those whacked-in-half glasses, needle waving. "If you don't want to watch."

"Get it over with," I snapped, and looked down at Charlie. "Get it the hell over with." Charlie's chin hair had turned grey in the last few years, and more bristly. I could feel it poke when I put my hand under his mouth and lifted his head. I didn't want him to have to watch what they were doing; I didn't think a little five pound poodle should have to watch. "Keep your eyes on mine," I told him, "right here."

"You didn't have to talk so rough." The vet was peeved. People were always peeved at me when Sandra wasn't around to smooth things over.

It didn't matter. Charlie knew the reason. Charlie knew.

I buried him out back, under a headstone. I got some of my favorite pictures of him laminated, hung them around the house and in the car. Charlie always liked the car. He liked going places, seeing things. Sandra says it's just eerie the way I talk to the pictures, though.

They let her out on Friday as planned. I had the house scrubbed of dust mites and dander. I had the filter hooked up, and she hasn't had any more attacks. But she feels guilty as hell, the way she's being so nice to me. *Honey* this and *Honey* that. Even tried to get one of my kids to call. And when that didn't work, she had Max from next door invite me to a card game. First time in years she's actually offered to let me out of the house without her. "Now be nice over there," she warned, which just about set me off.

Sandra claims the day Charlie died she saw him running up through the clouds outside the hospital window, heading straight for dog heaven. Sandra's a dingbat. Maybe that's why she sticks with me.

At least I'm not that stupid. I know I'll never see Charlie again, and I've got to live with the finality of it. That's the difference between Sandra and me. She always thinks she can fix things somehow.

She made a big deal over my buying a fish tank. She was glad to see me setting it up, filling it with tropical fish and arranging their underwater scene with the diver and the treasure chest half open, lights twinkling where the treasure should be. She likes it when I talk

to the fish better than when I talk to Charlie's pictures. Lots of people talk to fish, she says.

But who are we trying to kid? I can stick my fingers in the water and my fish act like they know me. They swim over and nibble off my fingerprints. But they're not Charlie. I can't call *Fishy, Fishy*, cup my hand over their ear, and whisper to a bunch of cold fish, all the things I used to tell him. All those things I could never bring myself to say to another human being.

*Patricia Caspers*

I could see my father's puffy  
red face in the bar  
from another room.  
I watched him slip  
gray oysters down his throat  
between beers.

I sat still  
while my mother stared  
at the plastic covered candle  
at our table,  
chewing bread crusts.  
I watched my father laughing.

I wanted to go home,  
call out to him,  
hate him.  
I wanted to walk into the bar  
and swallow gray oysters.



he is sewn into the fabric of  
her life like a pocket that  
is taken for granted.

he is close to her  
provides a warm sanctuary  
for her loose change, her fears  
car keys and reflections.

his lint for her is thick and blue.  
she feels this  
digs deep into him  
and turning him inside out,  
she brushes it aside.



I am a nurse who works at night  
Taking care of your father  
Who is dying.

I work at night taking care of your dying father  
Who can't sleep:  
What's the point, when so much sleep lies just ahead?

Your dying father can't sleep  
And I'm his nurse  
So we sit up in the night talking.

He talks of you in the dying night  
When he can't sleep and I have to stay awake  
Caring for him.

He tells me of the pride he feels for you,  
And the joy he feels at the sight of you.  
There, in the dark,  
He doesn't bring up the things you retain:  
The shaming words,  
The angry temper you feared to face.

But in his dying night  
He doesn't mention love either,  
I think  
Out of his own shame for the residues  
He suspects he left in his love for you.

If he seems especially sad about the interminable night  
And I feel strong enough to bear it,  
I tell him I'm a father too,  
And that I trust my children will somehow feel my love,  
Whatever memories they may retain.

After helping them to their feet and holding them steady  
So they don't have to urinate lying in their own dying beds,  
So they don't have to urinate lying in bed like babies,  
More than one have said:  
"You're a good man, Mark,"  
And most say: "You remind me of my son."

I have a cricket in my house

he chirps when the refrigerator comes on

I think he's in love

after searching for weeks  
he's sitting behind the  
icebox

waiting for the  
motor to turn on

I can relate

Because His words said from a wooden pulpit  
gather people like circus elephants,  
and fill trays  
with dollar bills like dead butterflies,  
because they cause the starched hands of a minister  
to conduct

I whisper them only when you sleep.

Because I fear an obsession like mine  
for the man with hair like spilling honey  
who will knock on your heart,  
bringing punctured hands like lilies  
and the smell of blood from under his robe,  
because the Mary whose body He could not know  
loved his,

I will not tell their story.

Because I want you to dress up  
and visit me on Sundays,  
remembering always the water of my womb  
that darkened your lips to wine,  
body that tore like bread when you pushed out,  
heavy breasts that never ran dry,  
because I want you still calling for me  
evenings after I am gone,

I will not say His name aloud.



Cover from Volume 20, Number 1

Selected Work from the  
MFA Consortium Campuses

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*Spring 1997*



## Introduction: MFA Consortium Campuses

This section of Watershed's 20th Anniversary Issue is devoted to writing by students at California State University, Hayward, California State University, Los Angeles, and California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. The work was nominated by faculty at these campuses. Works from California Polytechnic State University are prize winners in the campus-wide creative writing contest and will also be published in *Byzantium*.

Watershed dedicates this section to the faculty involved in developing the Masters of Fine Arts consortium proposal. We look forward to this new and promising development of the already strong writing community in Chico and the communities at other CSU campuses.

### Nominating and Coordinating Faculty for this Section

*California State University, Hayward*  
Sara McCauley

*California State University, Los Angeles*  
Mary Bush  
Timothy Steele

*California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo*  
Paula Huston  
Al Landwehr

*But one can ruin one's life waiting for hopes that linger in the back of one's mind to come true, as one can ruin one's life lingering in the back of a movie theater, motionless, while other people live and move on a two-dimensional screen.*

—Richard Friedel, *The Movie Lover*

### The Confessions:

I avoid saints. You see, saints are more than just statues of martyred men and women, a rosary grasped in one marble hand, the other raised in benediction, more than just lifeless statues forgotten in the corners of cathedrals, in the centers of remote villages in France or South America. Saints live, watch silently from those villages, crying, bleeding, sweating, they stir to life in those cathedrals like the statue-turned-flesh Madonna had sex with in her music video.

I confess my guard rises whenever I meet someone with "St" as a prefix to a surname, whereas "Silver," "Gold," or "Wein" ease me immediately. Even people with saintly first names, Peter, George, John, Mary, Theresa and such, put me on edge. I mean, have you ever heard of a St. Abraham, St. Moses, St. Rachel or a St. Herschel for that matter?

St. Valentine's Day is always just "Valentine's Day," and I ignore St. Patrick's Day altogether—I don't trust holidays that lack gifts or some particularly interesting food.

Once I had a serious case of hives and chose the emergency room at San Francisco General instead of St. Luke's, a hospital much closer to my apartment.

When I go home with a one-nighter, and conduct my forensic search of his bathroom cabinets for AZT, Zovirax, pentamidine inhalers, and other telltales, St. Ives shampoos and conditioners unnerve me almost as much as the others.

Growing up in the 80s, I never comfortably watched "St. Elsewhere" or reruns of "The Saint." As a matter of fact, the only saintly presence in my childhood was in a photo album hidden behind all the others. Inside was one faded photograph, yellow with wavy edges, a photograph of the entire family taken in Germany in the 20s. Next to it, a newspaper clipping about the S.S. St. Louis, a boat full of German Jews that landed in Florida early on in the War. It returned to Germany, amnesty refused.

I also confess, however, that none of this applies to my feelings about the St. Mark's Baths. I have never been to New York before, but if it is indeed Oz, then the old St. Mark's Bathhouse building is the end of my Yellow Brick Road. Of all the famous bathhouses and places for sex, the Everard Baths, the Christopher Street Piers, the jungles of Fire Island and such, the St. Mark's overshadowed the rest. It epitomizes the wild life, the uninhibited heyday of the 70s and early 80s that I missed out on. Sex, Discos, Sex, Drugs, Nightlife, Sex, Studio 54, men prowling in tight 501s and tank tops even in the dead of winter, men behind their mirrored aviator sunglasses, the friction sound of corduroyed thighs in Central Park, the weekendlong parties, bar to bar, club to club, the blow jobs from warehouse to warehouse. It was a wild, idealized life, both foreign and familiar, one I only know second hand from the fictional adventures of B.J. Rosenthal and Fred Lemish. I hate reading of the way things used to be. I grow jealous of what I missed. Still, I close my eyes, hold the finished book to my chest, and do my best to clutch at those elusive literary straws. Or after I see some movie, I stare at the empty screen in the empty theater long after the last credit rolls up and the ushers start sweeping popcorn and fallen Milk Duds.

I imagine the St. Mark's Baths as a beacon, a focal point to queers in the 70s and early 80s, Athens to the philosopher, North Beach to the Beatnik, Schwab's pharmacy to the starlet, Haight Street to the hippie, Sicily to most of Chicago, The Old Country, a glorified former homeland, an idealized, dreamed-about land, the other side, a place that combined the way things were with the way things should be, a place where, once gone, only The Good is remembered.

I once saw a short film about a teenager staying in New York with his older cousin whose lover had recently died. The older cousin gave the younger a pair of the dead lover's shoes that, with morbid practicality, happened to fit. When this kid put them on, through the magic of short films, they transported him back to the old days, the late 70s presumably, where he awoke engulfed in a dark haze of Marlboro smoke, the mint of poppers, the rainbow flecks of a mirrorball, and the glory of Gloria Gaynor. The shoes took him to a disco, where leather queens with their rugged Village People good looks stalked from behind their handlebar moustaches. Club queens in tighter than tight white denim, gold chains, and Keith Partridge button-downs, twirled around in dervish circles. H.G. Wells meets Armistead Maupin with some help from some not-so-ruby slippers.

Had St. Mark's actually been a converted cathedral, deserted by the priests with the oncoming of East Village beatniks, hippies, artsy fags, drop-out students, the pierced and tattooed? Was it built with



huge brownstone slabs the size of pyramid stones, with vaulted, oaken doors atop 40 marblewhite steps with gold handrails? I imagine the East Villagers converted the cathedral for sex: glory holes in the confessionals; a sign saying RECTUMORY over the rectory-turned-leather dungeon; naked go-go boys writhing with Pentecostal fury in the alcoves once occupied by Virgin Mary statues; shinyblack garbage bags ducktaped over the stained glass; the gargoyles strategically placed like porn shop voyeurs; pigeons nesting in the belfry, then flocking to the skies like the swallows around San Juan Capistrano when the bells of St. Mark's rang for the most phenomenal orgasms; and finally, the cathedral's original statue of St. Mark bound in S&M fetish attire: zip-up leather hood, harness strapped across his robed chest, cat-o-nine tails clutched in a marble hand that had once held a crozier.

But no. St. Mark's wasn't some 90s sex club in San Francisco with theme nights, two for one coupons, and themepark rooms with entire floors of pup tents or neckhigh with foam. St. Mark's was a bathhouse, a place I have never been since they were all but extinct by my junior high school years in the late 80s. I imagine St. Mark's gloriously towering above the brownstones and graystones of Greenwich Village, its steeples bathed in sunlight. It hived with the life of The Village: the leather clones that buzzed from bar to bar, the made-up pretty boys, the downtown business men, the Chelsea punks, the NYU students, the timid Jersey kids. All found grace within St. Mark's walls. The great crowds streamed in and out, lined up around the corner. The men circled the block, circled the massive cathedral, circled like Muslim pilgrims around the Kaaba at Mecca.

I imagine every one within was goodlooking, gym-toned, young, and with none of those bristling moustaches or Brady Bunch Men perms of the 70s. Muscled, airbrush-perfect bodies lounged in the private rooms, lounged in Chippendale calendar poses, like those prostitutes you hear about in Amsterdam windows. The mint of poppers wafted from room to room like patchouli at a Grateful Dead concert, enticingly sweet, intoxicating. Clouds of steam swirled down the hallways, and the men circled each other as they wandered through the clouds with white towels wrapped around cut groins and slim stomachs. They eyed each other, silently chose among the angelic bodies, the naked angels in the clouds.

One beckons me into a private room. I close the door as he draws back his towel with a magician's flourish. We spend long hours passionately kissing, and he'll call me the next day. We spend long hours of passionate sex before...

Who am I fooling? What do I know from bathhouses? Nervous,

unsure of the unspoken rules, the bathhouse etiquette, I'd feel inadequate, scared to death, as tense and confused as Arnold Beckoff with his beer can in that back room. And on top of all that, even in my fantasies I can't escape the fact that I would be having hot sex in a hot zone.

In the mid-80s, New York City closed the bathhouses. I imagine St. Mark's the day after: All the clones and queens, the uptown boys in their Lacoste shirts, the leather daddies in their chaps, the boychicks from Brooklyn, stood around the locked oak doors of St. Mark's murmuring their disappointment. I imagine them confused and shocked as they read the notice tacked up on the doors by the Health Department, as confused and shocked as those who read for the first time Martin Luther's Theses tacked up on the door of Castle Church. Some walked by heads down, ashamed, penitent. Some walked by with smug smiles, thankful for the end of a so-called sleazy aspect of their community's life. The closing cast a melancholy, a depression over the whole Village, the whole city, a sadness and disbelief not seen or felt since the morning after Kristallnacht.

"What kind of nonsense is this?"

Perhaps I've confessed too much to my matchmaker.

Kelly Grossman, abuser of the word "babycakes" and transplant from New York out here to San Francisco, always has someone for me to "just get a little acquainted." She knows I'm taking my first trip to New York, a birthday gift to myself, so she gives me the number of a friend of hers who still lives there.

"Enough with the bathhouse. His name is Kale, and the two of you should hit it off. You're both young and bitter as all of shit, and can be sarcastic with each other until you fall in love. Give him a call, huh, babycakes. Will it kill ya to just get a little acquainted? You both have hippies for parents, so you should have lots in common."

"Sounds like our parents would have more in common."

"Give him a chance, will ya? I mean, you're an Aries and he's a Scorpio. Worse case scenario, good sex."

"Why's a nice schadchan like you relying on astrology? What would your rabbi say?"

"By any means necessary, babycakes. Especially with picky queens like you."

"Hey!"

"Anyway, his name is Kale and he has a sister named Chard. Get it? You'll hit it off. I think."

"Suddenly unsure?"

"Well, he hasn't been the same since he joined that meditation cult, uh group, I mean, that meditation group."



"Grossman?"

"He's the same, honest. Just a little more mellow. Hey, has the Grossman ever steered you wrong?"

"The bartender with the Zoloff?"

"OK, one time."

"The poet with the heroin?"

"OK, OK. Should I take blood samples before your every date, now?"

I hate being set up by Kelly, which is about every week, but you never know. I still subscribe to the philosophy that there exists The One. Still, each trial makes me feel awkward, on the spot, like Amy Irving sitting before the big-mouthed, big-lipped, big-haired Sylvia Miles in "Crossing Delancey."

"Just get a little acquainted, huh? It'll be good for ya. Give ya something to really fantasize about, and not that crazy bathhouse."

But what about that crazy bathhouse? What has happened to it since it closed?

I imagine a forty-year-old Queen, one of the rich, single types who in the 70s bought rundown Victorians, renovated, remodeled, restored them to their former rococo glory, and collected healthy rent checks every month.

The Queen discovered plans for the old building's demolition, plans for it to be paved over with a Starbuck's Coffee or a Noah's Bagels or some 90s strip mall. The Queen still remembered the old days of St. Mark's, the swirling steam clouds, the honeysuckle of amyl nitrate. He was one of the frequenters, one of the few who 'Lived to remember, but didn't much tell. So he bought the ruin, and even briefly considered renovating and rededicating it to the Villagers somehow. But he didn't. He never even visited his purchase. As a matter of fact, he avoided walking down St. Mark's Place altogether. He didn't know exactly what he'd find, didn't want to know. He dreaded the thought of that "Twilight Zone" episode where the Nazi captain some years after the war returned to the concentration camp where he had seen to the deaths of thousands. The captain returned only to find pale ghosts in striped uniforms. The ghosts held a trial, judged, found the captain guilty, and sentenced him to endure the same pain he inflicted on them. It drove him insane.

The Queen knew he wasn't responsible for the tens of thousands. But he feared the dead faces of the leather queens, the faces of the wide-eyed Iowa boys fresh off the Greyhounds, feared their voices and faces would resemble the ghosts from that "Twilight Zone" episode: eyes starved and darkcircled, arms rail thin, skin ashen, strained deathbed voices that called from within the old cathedral, a raspy

litany of "Why aren't you here with us? Why aren't you here with us? Why did you survive? Why aren't you here with us?"

So the Queen purchased St. Mark's, but the guilt and fear and nostalgia have kept him from the East Village. He hasn't visited what I imagine the reality of St. Mark's to be: The City replaced the Health Department Notice tacked up on the door with a CONDEMNED one, and put up a chainlink fence around the entire building. The plaque commemorating it as once the home of James Fenimore Cooper hangs in tarnished neglect. Plywood, warped and faded from the angry New York elements, crisscrosses the windows, bandaging them shut. The paint, once a taupe, beige, *écru*, or some other 70s color with a useless French name, flakes off in large patches exposing dark lesions of the brownstone concrete beneath the once bright skin. The inside fares no better, and after years of rotting, wasting, cockroach infestation, being eaten away by rats and termites, the walls crumble into plaster ashes upon the floor.

Just another building, another of the condemned. Other older queens remember as they walk by. Some point discrete fingers and whisper to one another of ten, fifteen years earlier. Some move a little quicker, their hands plunged a little deeper in pockets of their worn leather jackets, baseball caps pulled a little further down over peppercorn beards. Still, others gather before the chainlink fence, gather in the shadow of the ruin, their black denim jackets faded and patched, fringed holes at the knees of their 501s. Some come in wheelchairs, and with their bony fingers, marble pale, they claw the chainlink. Others as thin as the walkers they lean against, bow their gray heads down in solemn silence, in humility. Some remember the dead, the near-dead, and give thanks for their own survival. Eyes closed, some rock back and forth, and from a distance, the queens before the St. Mark's ruin seem to be davening, praying like the black-clad Orthodox Jews before the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

#### The Visions:

It hits you with the first sentence of whiny Brooklynese from the baggage claim girl at La Guardia, an accent you attributed only to hookers and secretaries from the movies, a dream, a New York Dream that inspires you to stand in Times Square and throw your hat up like Mary Tyler Moore, while "They say the neon lights are bright, on Broadway" rolls through your head, the dream that takes you to Tiffany's just to see if John McGiver with an Oxford accent really works behind the counter and will offer to engrave your ring from the Crackerjack box, and every time you pass a HELP WANTED sign in the window of a vintage clothing store or used book store or dark café



with worn couches and those green library lamps,, you think, hell, I could apply, have my roommate send all my belongings in huge steamer trunks from back home, and start a new exciting life of a cosmopolitan bohemian (bohemian because, after all, you're just squeezing out cappuccinos for \$7.50 an hour), but who cares because you plan on falling in love, and of course all the men are young versions of Robert DeNiro and Dustin Hoffman, sensitive brooding types with roses at their fingers and Keats at their lips, and they're as sexy as Mickey Rourke (before the cosmetic surgery) and do incredibly sensual things to your naked body with ice cubes and honey (sorry to conjure up any unnecessary Kim Basinger images) and he's your Ideal, an activist/painter/sculptor/performance artist, and the two of you find that perfect studio/workspace in that Bauhaus brick building with the industrial elevator, and your penthouse apartment has 30¢ ceilings with windows just as high that look out upon water towers, gravel rooftops, the Brooklyn Bridge that lights up like a Christmas tree every dusk, and you toss leftover French bread to the blanket of brown and gray pigeons flocking on your rooftop, bread that your Robert Dustin DeNiro Rourke bakes for you weekly because he's also a /chef, and you decorate your apartment in mid 80s minimalism: parquet floors, one-color paintings by Rothko and Newman, a thousand dollar telescope poised at the window, hammocklike couches, a Persian area rug or two, big and glossy *A Day in the Life of Somewhere* books untouched on your wrought iron coffee table, and you throw dinner parties for your avant garde art gallery publishing filmmaker poet painter friends whom you and Robert Dustin make fun of after they leave, and the two of you spend long hours in the park where you feed more pigeons together and fly kites with Marlo Thomas caricatures, and then he takes you to that little restaurant with the checkered tablecloths and bent silverware that serves the most incredible spaghetti and meatballs and you eat silently and stare into the deep brown of his eyes by the light of candles burning in empty chianti bottles (the ones in baskets, you know the type) while Edith Piaf croons on a transistor radio, and most importantly you two lounge on the edge of huge concrete fountains downtown, fountains with Poseidon and Aphrodite and water sprite statues in the centers, and right when Robert kisses you the water shoots fifty feet up in the air and cascades down like fireworks and this scares more of those New York pigeons who fly up like wedding doves, and the two of you never leave the city except to spend white hot days on a Fire Island beach or a day in Brooklyn which of course hasn't changed since the 50s when Gary David Goldberg ran around playing stickball, with egg creams at drugstores,

and the sounds of Dodger games and suppertime shouts from grandmothers, and you'll go to Brighton Beach to hear loud, Neil Simon mothers and to play chess with old men who curse in Yiddish when checkmated, but otherwise you have no reason to leave Manhattan because your life with Robert is full and wonderful, every morning he goes off to work, leaving you most of the day to explore and wander the streets, most of the day to follow those cinematic shades, those shadowy straws you've clutched at for so long of a gray, crisp Woody Allen morning after a rainy night, and you feel just like Mia Farrow or Barbara Hershey walking down those wet avenues lined with brownstones like perfect brown teeth, and you look great in a billowy Donna Karan trenchcoat with a fringed, green muffler wrapped around your neck, Big Band music from the forties in your head, and the sound of iron gates sliding back off doors as the neighborhood businesses open energizes you, the neighborhood butcher shops, the barrels of sour pickles, and you smell fresh salmon and oranges and Nicholas Cage is baking fresh bread in a sweaty tank top for you in one of the bakeries, and Joe at the flower stand gives you a carnation because you never forget his birthday and you always ask about little Sal and Eddie, and you know every one else on your block including that yenta Mrs. Kravitz who leans out her window in a powder blue housecoat, her head a mess of scarfwrapped rollers, her nose in every one's business, and she leans out fanning herself with her crossword puzzles on hot days and watches the children and dogs splash in the water gushing from the hydrant on the corner and yells out, "Be careful! You'll break your necks!" and you pass out lollipops to those kids, and the cop on your block gives you warm, John Candy smiles, and you walk to 5th Avenue among the Mona Lisas and Madhatters where all the women smoke cigarettes as sexily as Anne Bancroft and move with the grace of Audrey Hepburn's feline bones, and you never know which one of the women is really a mermaid, and they were right when they said the neon lights were "always bright on Broadway," even though it's the middle of the afternoon, but the Enjoy Coke sign is just as breathtaking, and when you're tired of walking and before you spend the rest of the day at the theater, you relax in a small diner on 42nd Street where the cabdrivers pontificate their pearly wisdom, and if you're with the only true love you ever had and he walks out that diner door never to be seen again, the waitress with her maraschino red bouffant will pull a pencil nub out from behind her ear, point it at you and say through her bubblegum, "So go afta him already, are ya crazy, whatcha waitin, for?" and you run and catch up to him, and the two of you kiss right there in an intersection among the polyester anger of Wall Street men and



honking limo drivers, and it rains because all important New York kisses happen in the rain, and you kiss, and you're in love, and those pigeons fill the screen as the camera pans out, the music plays, the credits roll.

The Pilgrimage:

My first trip to New York. I arrive courting the intention of abandoning my life in San Francisco to work in a bookstore, live in an incredible apartment and make it even though all I have is "one thin dime," determined that life begins at Grand Central Station, trees grow in Brooklyn, roses in Spanish Harlem, and miracles happen on 34th Street. I'm armed with Kale Berman's phone number, the New York Dream, and a Neoplatonic shred of romantic hope. Kale Berman. He'll be The One, and Kelly Grossman will gloat all the way to the wedding. He'll be sexy and literate and sexy and the whole meditation cult thing is something he only does once in a blue moon to relax his literate, sexy mind that fantasizes about me nonstop between the three novels a week he reads, which lays to rest my worries about a transcendental group of moonies and Krishnas.

I call Kale my first night in New York. He is pleasant (but rather undynamic), boyishly cute (short, 5'6"), smooth (not a hair on his chinny-chin-chin or otherwise), thin (probably aerobicises thrice daily), and not at all sarcastic or loud (probably thanks to the meditation cult). He takes me to a subterranean, catacomb of a restaurant in the East Village where we dine on spinach crepes and Sanka.

Afterwards, we go next door to play pool at a sleazy bar, a haven to East Village truck driver types (if such exist), where a dieseldyke in a stretched HERE COMES TROUBLE t-shirt serves us Wild Turkey Manhattans (which are no better enhanced from being there). Kale and I drink, play eight ball, and drink about two hours and forty dollars away.

We discuss the differences between life in San Francisco and New York. He destroys the visions of my "9 1/2 Weeks" apartment with stories of his four room flat he shares with five people, and how his job at Starbuck's barely covers rent. Here I am in the Emerald City and Kale is turning into Frank Morgan behind the curtain. Mary's hat I toss up in Times Square flops down on the sidewalk like Rhoda's.

We drink, discuss apartments, our lives with Kelly Grossman, and as we leave the bar, it's pretty clear that our evening will end with sex.

I don't realize we are on St. Mark's Place, until I spot the St. Mark's Inn. Was this once the baths? Have the small rooms been



converted into hourly lodging for the pierced and tattooed, the hustling, the speed freaks looking for a place to suck down Quaaludes after weekends of indulgence?

"Joshua?" Kale calls from ten feet up the sidewalk, shifting his narrow hips. "Why are you stopping? Still wanna go back to my place?"

"Kale, do you suppose this is the old St. Mark's Baths?"

"Oh I don't know." He taps his lips with his forefinger, looks around anxiously, squints, then points to a windowless building. "That was the baths. Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's the one."

The four-storied building is unassuming in the faint light of the new moon. Neither cloud nor star hang in the empty sky above, just that whisper of moon in a field the charcoal gray of a just shut-off television screen. The building is unimpressive, so plain, so geometric that it makes me completely uninterested in everything: the sky, the moon, the building itself, Kale.

I see an old woman sitting up against the door, her face softly wrinkled like a linen shirt. She wears six or seven sweaters despite the hot April night, and a fringed scarf gypsywrapped around her head which she props on her fist. She's the poor woman, old and prophetic, I've imagined on the steps of some medieval cathedral where pigeons take bread crusts from her open palm.

But the Wild Turkey Manhattans really set in and combine with that sliver of angry Aries moon that brings out the Aries in me. She is on a cathedral, and I want to yank her by the scarf, kick her off like a dog that crapped on the carpet. How dare she! Do crones lounge so casually around the ruins of the Acropolis? Do they so smugly congregate at Stonehenge, panhandle on the steps of the Coliseum, at Notre Dame? Why not open for them the sacred places, the holy places, let them bathe their unclean bodies in the waters of Lourdes, let them piss on the Sphinx, at Delphi, the great Pyramid of the Sun. Why not usher them into the the Cave of the Patriarchs, the Tower of David, the Tomb of Rachel? This crone's disrespect! This sacrilege, This woman! A woman!

"Joshua? Joshua!" Kale stands a little further up the sidewalk, hands firmly on his skinny hips. "Do you wanna come back to my place or are you more interested in the bum?"

The woman still watches nothing, unaware that seconds ago I considered attacking her. I look back at Kale, back at the woman, up at the building. Kale is just Kale. The woman is just a woman. The building is just a building. The door is still there, no CONDEMNED notice, just some faded, looping graffiti. There are no boarded windows, no chainlink fence, no paint flaking off in dark lesions, no

plaque saying anything about James Fenimore Cooper, no Martin Luther notices, no pilgrims, no gargoyles, no ghosts, no memories. Nothing special. Just another building.

I stayed with my aunt and uncle once for two months in Utah, where the air felt so dry and dusty that it hurt to breathe, and all the people looked the same. Women wore fluffy, blond perms and men wore jeans and cowboy hats. In exchange for my room and board, I helped my aunt and uncle repaint their triplex apartments to prepare for a new batch of tenants. One of the units needed a lot of repainting. The past tenants had been Satanists and had painted black, purple and red pentagrams on the walls and ceilings in thick paint. I spent hours sanding them level, and then I layered on six coats of eggshell white paint. Even after all that, if the lighting was right, I could still see those pentagrams.

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Even a year later, after I moved back to California, I still thought about those pentagrams. They'd come up at the oddest times. "Mary, do you ever think that maybe you're crazy?" Zack asked me.

We were driving on the freeway at night. Actually, I was driving and Zack was sitting in the passenger seat, coming up with these questions. It sounded like another one of the little mental tests he tried to give me every now and then like, "What do you think of when I say the word 'popsicle'?" Or the time he gave me a list of nouns and adjectives to memorize. Two weeks later, he asked me to repeat them back so he could evaluate my personality from which words I still remembered.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"I was just watching you at dinner tonight and I wondered if you ever thought you might be crazy."

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I have pictures of my mother before she married my dad. She was beautiful, like Audrey Hepburn with blue eyes, and always smiling. She smiled in her wedding photos as well, her white dress had a skirt like a bell and her parents and siblings stood around her. There aren't any pictures of her smiling after the wedding. I remember once when I was young I heard her laugh and it surprised me so much I turned to look at her. I wish I could have known her when she smiled like the pictures. I wish I could have known her.

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I met Zack three years ago, on the edge of my life. I found him because he was in the same place. Where nothing meant anything. A month after I met him, he told me he had killed his wife. He hadn't told anyone about it for months, but he was getting to the point where he felt like he could talk about it. He got married his freshman year of college and two weeks after the wedding, she was dead. They used to fight a lot, he told me, and he was a control freak. He kept notebooks that listed all the things he knew drove her crazy, all the things he knew she hated. He liked to be in control of her emotions, to be able to change her mood like he changed channels with the remote control.

They had a fight one day and she locked herself in the bathroom. He was angry, so he let her stay there. While she was in there, he got more and more angry, until he went and pounded on the door. She wouldn't answer him, so he broke it down. She had slit her wrists with one of his razors. There was blood everywhere, but she was still alive. He carried her to the car and drove to the hospital, but it was too late.

"That's how I killed my wife," he told me. He hadn't held the razor in his own hand, but I could tell it made no difference to him. Clearly, he felt that he controlled her every move, and her hand would not have moved without his influence. It was a fine line to draw, and I couldn't argue with him, once I'd heard the story.

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It's hard for me to decide if my mother was killed or if she just died. It would be nice to think she just died. It would be nice to think that my father hadn't told her he'd take her to the emergency room after his business meeting was over. It would be nice if that sentence didn't have the words "after" and "business meeting" in it. It would be nice if he had driven her to the hospital as soon as he realized her headache was a stroke, rather than asking her to wait until the afternoon, which was when I came home from school and found her in a coma on the bed, choking on her own vomit.

So, when Zack told me he had killed his wife, I found it hard to argue, but I wondered how many times that day went through his head since then. I wondered how many times he wished he had asked her, "How are you feeling today?"

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My aunt, Rachel, used to help at the apartments as well. She was in her forties, but in great shape. She carried sheet rock for the bathrooms and helped me take the doors off the hinges and carry

them outside to paint them. Sometimes she said her back hurt, mostly when my uncle, Robert, was around. He didn't seem to hear her. He was in a rush to finish the apartments before the new tenants were due to move in. Rachel and Robert had three kids, all with the first initial "R." They liked to keep things consistent, I guess.

Once, my aunt and I were taking a break out on the front steps where we could watch the cars go by. It was the middle of October and chilly outside, even in the afternoon. While we sat there, she swirled the paintbrushes around in a glass jar of turpentine to clean them. I picked at the brown leaves of the bush next to the step, and she started to tell me about her financial problems. Robert made good money as an independent contractor, but he never billed the customers.

"I've been after him to bill them for months now," Rachel told me, "but he won't. We've even lost one of the contracts because they wanted their bill and he wouldn't send it. We have twenty thousand owed to us by different companies that we could collect if Robert would just send them their bills." She looked down at her hands in the paint splattered work gloves and shifted a little on the cold cement of the stoop. "I've tried to figure them out myself, but his records are so disorganized I couldn't get anything straight."

"Why won't he send them?" I asked. I pictured the house where they lived. It was a beautiful house that had gotten more and more run down over the years, the furniture faded and three beat-up cars in the driveway. Robert bought jet skis and dirt bikes for the kids, but didn't seem to care much how the house looked. Rachel hadn't answered me, so I looked up. She picked flakes of paint off her left glove.

"I finally asked him that the other day," she told me. "He said that as long as I wanted him to send them, he wasn't going to do it." The look of acceptance on her face startled me more than her revelation about my uncle.

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I looked at Zack in the car next to me. "Yeah, of course I think I might be crazy sometimes. Doesn't everyone?"

"No, I'm serious, Mary. Have you ever thought about getting psychiatric help?"

"What, you're saying you think I'm crazy?" I looked at him under the passing flash of the streetlights, but he stared straight ahead. "Coming from you, that doesn't mean much," I said.

"What does that mean?" he asked. I could see out of the corner of my eye that he had turned to face me now.



"It means I don't know anyone who would refer to you as normal, so I don't think your judgment is valid." There was a long pause after this comment of mine.

"That may be true, but it doesn't matter which end of the spectrum I'm coming from," he said. "I can still recognize it when I see it. But I guess a psychiatrist couldn't do much for you anyway." He tapped his fingers on his knee in time to the music on the radio. "You're functioning, but I can tell you're a little funny around the edges."

"If I'm crazy, you're crazier."

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After I moved out of my aunt and uncle's house and into my own rental house with roommates, my uncle invited me back for Thanksgiving dinner. I'd heard that the apartment project had lagged far behind schedule and was still unfinished, even though the new tenants had already moved in. School had started for me, so I hadn't had much time to help out lately. A little painting around the outside windowsills, but that's about it. Rachel and the kids did most of the work, and she had finally forced my uncle to hire two students to do the roofing, although he waited so long that the second day they were up there, it snowed and big yellow water spots spread on all the ceilings I had painted.

Thanksgiving Day, I stood in the kitchen with Rachel while she peeled carrots and watched the turkey in the oven. Robert's parents were coming for dinner, as well as his brother's family. Rachel cooked all the main dishes, while the guests brought things like salads and desserts. She looked pale and tired and I asked her if she had been sick, or was she just worn out from all the holiday preparation? I thought she would brush the question off, but she looked up at me, "No, I had a miscarriage two days ago, and I'm still hemorrhaging. We were waiting 'til Christmas to tell everyone I was pregnant. We wanted it to be a surprise," she said, and the motion of her hands with the peeler stopped. "Do you think you could finish peeling these carrots while I go lay down for a minute? And please don't say anything to the rest of them, I don't want to ruin the dinner."

I stood there at the window and looked out at the snow-covered lawn. I looked at the window sill, and remembered all those hours painting and Rachel's sore back from carrying sheet rock and doors in and out of the apartments, and my uncle's impassive face as he watched her do it. Their wedding photo hung on the wall behind me, I'd looked at it many times. Rachel wore my mother's dress, and my mother stood in the line in blue, not smiling. I wondered if there

would ever be enough layers of eggshell white paint to cover the pentagrams on the apartment walls.

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"You know, I could kick your windshield in right now," Zack said in a deliberate voice and raised his foot up like he was going to do it as I crossed three empty lanes to our exit.

"That would not be the action of a normal man," I said. He froze, then dropped his foot back to the floor and leaned over to wrench the wheel from my hands. The car swerved to the left as the exit ramp curved to the right, and I started to laugh.

*... To be restrained in things not affecting... the good of others... by their mere displeasure, develops nothing valuable, except such force of character as may unfold itself in resisting the restraint.*

— J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*

I will not call your leg "My Love,"  
Cannot wish your thigh "a treasure;"  
Below your waist, and just above,  
Aloud, I must not name this pleasure.

I should not link your tender touch—  
Would not link your truth to danger;  
Along your back, to gaze as much  
Affixed, I dare not eye a stranger.

Your silken arms I best not see,  
Ought not search your frame for beauty;  
A stately neck, and limbs — a tree;  
Resigned, I limp and fail my duty:

My voice is trembling, I say, "You're sweet:"

I could not hold my heart so low—

Would not wreck my blood to ponder;  
Atone. For what? When love's the glow  
Believed, then hated aims to wander.

## Observing Customs

Based on Ngo Tu Lap's *Waiting for a friend*

CSU, Los Angeles

*Jose Miguel Kubes*

I stand here again, listening  
to the tears of the Cai River  
as they flow through the trees  
I thought torn  
by artillery shells.  
They grow

and so have I.  
I don't limp  
as much now and the pain  
is barely there,  
but who am I to speak of pain?  
I'm still alive;  
Pain  
should not matter.

Somewhere underneath  
the foot of the  
Dun mountain  
I know the ashes  
of your burned  
feet lay digested  
among soil  
on the spot where the rock  
shaped like an elephant's head  
crushed  
you.

I remember.

I know the piece  
of your head  
that got blown off  
must still  
be at the mud  
flats of the Vam Delta,  
after having traveled down the Cai.



Flesh rots  
beneath layers of dirt.

I hold our canteens,  
clutching them to my stomach  
like I did the wild bananas  
right before I was covered  
with earth  
thrown  
up from the explosion.

The enemy's progression,  
as bodies fell  
piling onto  
each other,  
still echoes  
off this slope.

The fumes  
released  
by my sticks of incense,  
like ruffles,  
don't take away  
the smell  
of carnage  
from my nose.

I light them to recollect,  
not to forget.

I remember  
and you wait for me,  
I know.

My tears are thick  
and they salt  
over on the leaves  
of the water ferns.

Each leaf from the jungle  
is a tombstone;  
when one falls  
another will grow.

She tells him what she wants, the drinks, the half-eaten cheesecake, things she paid for that nobody finished. She loads a cardboard box with Pepsi cans, wine coolers, packs of Camel cigarettes. "I at least deserve this much," she says. "Can you carry this out to the car for me? I have to get my clothes."

He lifts the box and cradles it between arm and chest. He looks around the kitchen for other remnants, moments from the party that might jog his memory: empty beer bottles, shriveled balloons, a crystal drinking glass on its side. There is the smell of gin and stale cigarettes.

"Are you ready?" his girlfriend calls from the living room.

"One minute," as he takes one last look. Only small bits of last night seem lucid: the woman in front of the bedroom mirror, flame to her face, pontificating on the truth; the muffled sobs of a hairy man; the dark woman who wouldn't leave the vicinity of the doorway. Everything else is hazy.

"I've got to get home," Nicole says.

He turns, leaves the kitchen, slowly, haltingly, box under his arm. He is halfway across the living room when he feels warm liquid seeping through the box. "Shit," he says, drops the box, and examines his shirt. "It's stained."

Nicole walks over and pulls a wine cooler from the box. "You didn't tighten the lids enough," she says indifferently. She sets her clothes down and walks into the kitchen.

He tries to remember if he cheated on her last night. He recalls a pretty blonde girl, Cuervo shots on the porch, the moon low, enormous, the two of them looking for a face on its surface that wasn't there.

Nicole returns with a wet cloth. "Let me see," she says, stretches his shirt, rubs the rag across it, hard, pulling the collar against his neck.

"It's stained," he says. "Water's not going to get out a wine stain."

She scrubs harder; the collar burns his skin.

"Forget it," he says. "It's no use."

"Fine," she says, "It's stained."

He reaches for her shoulder, but she has already walked away.

In the kitchen, she begins loading another box with drinks from the refrigerator.

"You can't take those," he tells her.

"I paid for them."

"Not the beers, you didn't pay for the beers."

"I paid for the beers," she says, "and the watermelon."

He remembers fireworks, a barbecue lid flying fifteen feet in the air. He remembers the police car.

"You really made an ass of yourself last night," she tells him, still looking in the refrigerator.

He nods.

"Do you even remember?"

He shakes his head.

"I guess it's better if you don't."

He sees a woman lying naked in his bed, a young man passed out in his bathtub, mouth open, legs and arms loose, limp, frail.

"The worst part is, you didn't even want me around. You kept pushing me away."

"I can't remember," he says.

"I know, you never can." She closes the icebox. "I guess that's everything. You sure can throw a party," she says, shaking her head.

The red and white banners Nicole had spread about the house last night as decoration hang loosely from the ceiling and the archways.

"Stay for breakfast," he tells her.

She puts her hands on her hips and frowns. "I'm not hungry," she says.

"She was *blonde*," Nicole tells him in the car.

He keeps his eyes locked on the road. He rubs his forehead. "Do you have any aspirin?"

"Just so you know, I think she was with the guy who passed out in the bathtub too." She turns and looks out the window, at the houses, neat, clean, ordered, existing in the hot, long stretch between his house and hers.

"You really had no right to take those wine coolers," he says "I think I paid for those too."

"Like hell you did."

Years later, in a house near a railroad track where locomotive's horns blew late into the night, the would have a similar argument about a dining room table.

—from a portrait of a girl on the cover of the *National Geographic*

1.

When I die,  
Will I be a dishwasher  
in the heavens  
like my grandfather,  
Or will I be here  
on the streets of the *Ganges*  
with my cousin  
Watching my sister as she prepares  
herself in bridal gown  
on our steps.

2.

Last night,  
Sometime between  
the coolness of rolling waves,  
*Prince Arjuna* lifted up our  
bed sheets again  
to take us in his chariot.  
Into the darkened streets  
we drove the downed fog  
back to sea.

3.

The sun is  
Much larger today,  
much darker today  
in this alley.  
Swaying back and forth  
her eyes crossed the river  
to touch us on the other side,  
Taking us deep within  
the eclipsed alley  
to offer  
*Brahma* more tea,  
to wash the caste from  
her calloused feet.



4.

Sixty-four páisas  
Painted the walls  
    of my pocket today until  
        the sprinkle of stars  
Glazed my glasses,  
    reflecting fireflies  
        on the skins of my eyes  
...and I fell back  
    into the coldness  
        and the dampness of walls.

5.

In the morning,  
Men from the north  
    come to the river  
        to sample virgins  
On our streets  
    while elders  
        bleached our pockets.  
And I, for a moment,  
    lifted her up  
        and she opened her eyes  
And she looked,  
    and she looked,  
        and she fell  
Down the steps,  
    down with the fog,  
        down to be with the Sudrás.

*Note: Krishna, also known as Lord Krishna, is the human incarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu. In the Bhagavad-gita, Krishna was the charioteer and advisor to Prince Arjuna. Brahma is a Hindu god. Sudrás are the working or the lowest of the caste system.*

---

Stephanie Pollycutt

—after Salvador Dali's *Mujeres con cabezas florales encontrando la piel de un piano de cola en la playa*, 1936.

The woman on the left  
pinches the comer  
of the piano's skin  
and gazes at the drooping  
keys. Stretched flat  
on bleached sand  
lies the rest of the carcass.

Two friends parade  
with her on the beach.  
One raises a plaster arm  
cracked on the soft underside;  
the other carries a sacrificed  
violoncello. Dali names them  
women with floral heads  
and I agree that the woman's  
friends deserve this name  
(small red leaves form  
round head bushes).

But the woman on the left  
sports only sparse leaves  
within her ivory tresses.  
On the desolate white beach  
studded with dark rocks,  
she is sculpted by two notes  
and a minor chord. She opens  
her mouth and the echo  
of a piano emerges, shattering  
her porcelain friends.

She raises the piano.  
She reveals the limp chords.

—For Bill

One: Misanthropy

As a pomegranate sun squatted  
in the California Pacific, Mr. Wilson's rusted head  
pushed itself out of Tanner's Used Books  
with it's mothball-dying smell riding his back  
like campfire smoke. Revolted, he patted his arms,  
then flailed them, trying to shake it off,  
but the thickness of fat and fume  
brought him to retching up anything  
that tasted otherwise. *All's well with that*,  
he thought, lifting his nose to smell  
the bodies of people passing in the street.

Two: Solitude and the Stigma of Airs

You could find him each morning  
seated at a small patio table in front of *La Teraza Cafe*,  
with the sports section spread out before him.  
And you would think  
that Mr. Wilson could afford to be so casual;  
alone with his bitter espresso  
and his fresh German cigarettes.

You would naturally assume it.

At thirty-six, he was *there*  
in that stinking gray mass of his mind  
that churned vulgar for days,  
so all he could do to ignore himself was sleep.  
His hand lay at a distance from anything  
that resembled himself, so detached  
and forgotten it was almost cleared away by the busboy.  
He began slowly to coax it with bruised nerves, lifting it  
an inch and then dropping his fingers,  
one by one,  
against the scalloped glass tabletop.  
He was counting what mattered.  
One hand and five fingers.  
He marveled at it.

### Three: Dancing with Demons

When the sun had gone, night crept up  
under his shirt with all its pitchy enigmas to hide.  
Mr. Wilson danced with nothing but the great  
moonless sky, and kissed broken bits of the bottle  
he had sucked dry.

*Anything to stab the voices in the gut.*

He would sleep with the comer whore  
or a very old woman, just to give them something to gnaw on  
for awhile: he would think  
of men and sex, and sex with men, to feed  
their carnivorous appetites. But they never were quite satisfied.

*They wanted him.*

They liked the taste of his own neurons snapping  
like jerky. Liked to feast on the left side of his brain  
until it was forgotten of Nietzsche and Descartes.

### Four: Rejection

Mr. Wilson could walk past any one of us,  
his head in much pain: a great part of it cannibalized,  
the rest slowly in decay. And you or I  
would shift our steps to get out of the way of his.  
The air in that space between you and he, static:  
much like the field between arguing magnets.  
And you would do nothing but shake  
your well-balanced, perfectly weighted head,  
acknowledging to him his genius:  
his chucking away that lump of reasonable  
brain jelly off into the ulcer of another day obliged.  
(Or perhaps confessing to him  
your fear of becoming animal,  
like him, again.)



I lost my virginity to the sounds of *One Trick Pony* by Paul Simon. (was fifteen and the boy had borrowed the record from his mother, who was just down the hall in her bedroom. When I close my eyes I can still remember the soft crackling of needle on vinyl, the slow and warped whirring of the rotation of the record in between songs.

"What are you thinking about?" you ask me. A delicate dry line threads its way between your eyebrows and I want to smooth it away with my fingers. I am twenty-three now, an age that makes me feel infinitely old, but one that I am sure I will look back on and laugh at.

"Nothing," I say. I am thinking about nothing. It is late on a foggy Sunday morning and we have the down comforter wrapped around us in bed. You smile at me closely and I look away because my pores are too big. When I move I can feel tiny pricks from the pointy ends of plucked feathers and the sickening smack of sticky bodies trying to breathe. Paul Simon is singing inside my head again.

The boy's name was Dan, a senior at my high school, and I wasn't worried that his mother was just down the hall. She was a quadriplegic encased by metal and tubes and old watery smells with a dog that answered the door. When she talked to me I would stare at the yellow lab sitting beside her, longing to touch it but knowing I couldn't because it was a guide dog, no time for play. The dog would stare back at me, perhaps thinking the same thing, and short puffs of Dan's mother's words would reach my down-turned face, interspersed by an insistent beep signaling a release of oxygen from the machines strapped to her wheelchair. I couldn't look at her, but alone, with Dan, I would ask over and over for him to tell me the story of the accident. As he told me his face would change, as if his babyfat was somehow melting away, his lips thinning, his cheeks losing elasticity, his chin growing more defined. He would begin, "It was the flood of 1982, the year of the *el niño*. It had been raining for weeks when they told us to evacuate. My mom had already packed the clothes and was just trying to salvage some food when the mudslide hit. In one giant swoop the house washed down the hill, the refrigerator toppling over to rest straight across my mother's back. She lay pinned there for hours until the paramedics could reach her, but by then her spinal cord had been severed and she was numb from the head down, without ever knowing why." At this, Dan's lower lip would shake, and

I would rub his shoulders and neck.

"Look at me," I would say. "Look at me." I would cup my hand under his chin and force it around, thinking how suddenly beautiful he had become, how tormented and old and wise. I liked to look at his eyes after that story because they would fill with glittering facets and fear. I so loved a good tragedy back then.

"Let's play I spy." We are still in bed, although it's later now and you must be getting bored. "Me first," you say. "I spy something that is blue."

"I don't want to play," I say. "Let's get up. We're being lazy."

"Come on, Emma. We never get to do this, just hang out together. Please? I spy something that is blue." You press your face into my neck and so

I guess.

"Is it the sky outside the window?"

"No."

"The poster?"

"No."

"Your shoe on the floor?"

"No."

"This is boring." It is the blood inside my veins. When I first met you I didn't like you, but you know that. Your skin was too brown and against it I felt white. White and transparent, rice paper white, white like fragility and steroid injected eggshells. Dan was white. His skin was pale, not beautiful pale, but puffy and clammy and weak. Behind his back I called him Schmoo, and without ever knowing it he danced to my words. Follow the bouncing ball! *I'd like to help you in your struggle to be free, there must be, fifty ways to leave your lover.*

I knew I was going to do it that night. I told my two best friends and wore my favorite outfit: a cream colored short skirt and a Hanes T-shirt to which I had sewn small pink appliqué roses around the V-neck. I wore all white because I wasn't afraid. Somehow I knew I wasn't the kind of girl who would bleed.

We were supposed to go to a party, but Dan must have known, too. He said he forgot something and we turned around and drove to his house and he got the record and put it on and his mother was in her room and I lay back on the bed and he moved on top of me and all the while Paul Simon sang about all the pretty little horses. He's inside of me, I thought. He's inside of me. Inside of me. There is something inside of me. The whole time I couldn't stop thinking.



"Do you give up? It was your history book on the table." You point over my shoulder and let your arm drop around my body. We lie like spoons, your chest to my back, and I wonder how it is that you can't hear my thoughts, even though you are so close to me. I test you. Dan, I think. I think it loud. Dan. Dan. Dan! Thoughts can scream. Dan fucked me! Fucked me fucked me fucked me. The word is dirty, bad, and so I think it some more. Dan fucked me! But of course you can't hear me, you can't know, you don't even know who Dan is. It's just a chest to a back, and even though I can feel your heart it doesn't mean a thing. "Your turn," you say.

"I spy something that is red."

"The clock?"

"No."

"The candle?"

"No."

"The blinking light from the answering machine?"

"Yeah, you got it. It was the blinking light." When I say this you squeeze me really hard, and you kiss my hair and I can feel you against me. There is nothing inside of me right now.

"I love you," you say.

"I know."

After we did it, Dan was in love with me. Or was that before? It doesn't really matter. I can't remember much about the rest of Dan and I, just small blips of images that exist in the sophisticated black and white world of memory:

*We are at the beach and he skewers a dead jellyfish on a stick and I laugh and / run. In a restaurant we eat fettucine and are too scared to try to order any wine. It's Valentine's Day and he has gotten me a cheap pink nightie that / keep wrapped way up in the dark corner of my closet so that my mother will never find it. He kisses me before I have a chance to close my mouth.*

This is what I remember, and even so I am not even sure I didn't see those things in a movie, perhaps during some bittersweet montage where Meryl Streep sinks into Robert Redford, or Julia Roberts into Richard Gere; one in which some cinematic, thematic, automatic ballad croons softly in the distance of the sunset which they are all sure to ride off into. This is all I remember; these memories and one more.

"Do you want to?" you ask me. It has begun to rain outside and I think about my bike out on the deck, getting rusty and old. "Do you want to?"

"Why."

"Why?"

"I mean, what."

"You know."

"No."

"Come on. I spy-"

"That game is tired."

"I spy something that is hard."

"So now you're an undercover spy, as well?"

"Oh, that was bad!" You laugh and the bed shakes with you. "Do you want to?"

Dan asked me to go to his senior prom with him, and of course I said yes. I bought a black taffetta cocktail dress and elbow length gloves and dyed to match shoes from Kinney's and swept up my hair and felt so untouchably beautiful and glossy and mature that I didn't even smile when we had our picture taken at the dance. Instead I stared straight at the camera and raised my eyebrows and anybody who looks at that photo will know what I was thinking. "...*there are fifty ways...*"

Dan didn't dance. He shuffled, and he swayed, but he didn't dance. I can remember his cheek pressed up against mine, he had just shaved, and I couldn't stand how soft it felt, so boneless and hairless and dumb. I pulled away.

"Tell me about your mother again," I said. I left my arms wrapped around his neck, but my body fell away and I waited.

"I don't want to right now. We're dancing."

"Tell me," I said. "I want to hear that story."

"Why? I don't want to talk about my mother at the prom."

"Please? Just once more? You can tell me really quick,"

"No! You always want to hear it. I can't do R, I don't want to. It makes me sad."

"I know."

"Do you want to?"

Later, much later, we went to Dan's house for a post-prom party where some boy lucky enough to grow a full mustache or have an older brother, or both, had brought beer and Southern Comfort and wine coolers for the girls. Somebody turned the stereo way up and people leaned close to one another to talk and lips brushed against



ears and kids laughed too loud at jokes they barely heard. Dan's mother was still in her room.

"Is something wrong, Emma?" Dan was talking an inch from my face and I shook my head.

"No, nothing's wrong."

"Let's go to my room."

"But I want to dance."

"Come on, Emma. Don't be like this, it's my senior prom."

"Okay, but only for a minute. I don't want to miss the party."

I remember on the way to his room some girl I didn't know grabbed my shoulder as I walked by and whispered to me frantically, "Is my lipstick on straight?" It was all over her chin, whale-fat red and smeared, and I told her yes as Dan pulled me in and shut the door.

"Kiss me."

"Dan, let's not get into this. Everybody's outside."

"So?" He lifted my dress up and touched me through my stockings.

"Don't. Everybody will know what we're doing."

"Who cares?" He pulled me down onto his bed.

"But we don't have anything."

"Just this one time won't hurt." He tried to find a zipper to my dress.

"We'll miss the party."

"Emma." He closed his eyes.

"Later, okay? I promise."

"I love you." He smiled.

"I don't want to." The words fell out of my mouth quietly and I stared down into the bedspread where he was pushing my face, looking for them.

"Come on, it's my senior prom." He unhooked his cummerbund and slid off his pants and underwear.

"What about your mom?"

"Who cares about my mom? You didn't seem to care any other time. Fuck! She's a goddamn cripple, if that's what you need to hear to get into it!" He yanked my stockings to my ankles and I might have let him but I don't remember and something ripped and I turned my head and he pushed himself inside of me and it burned but I didn't bleed and that was the first time I thought of nothing. "*This is the sound of silence...*"

"Do you want to?"

"Mmm." I roll over towards you and let you put your hands on my breasts. Your fingertips are cold but I don't flinch.

"Kiss me."

I put my lips on yours and I can feel how chapped they are so I lick them and you suck my tongue into your mouth. It tastes like Diet Pepsi and words.

"Do you know how sexy you are?" you ask, but it's not a question to be answered. "So sexy, so goddamn sexy." You pull my body on top of yours so that we are perfectly lined up and I begin to move.

"I love you, Emma. I love you."

My hair falls down over your face and I can't see you, but I know you are there.

"Talk to me, Emma. Say something in French, you know how I love that. Say anything."

So I begin to tell you the story that I always tell, the one that you have never heard. "J'ai perdu ma virginité aux sons de *One Trick Pony* par Paul Simon..." My French is broken and I whisper.

"Yesssss." You close your eyes and you smile.

"Everybody's got to pitch in," Dad used to say. We'd be gathered around the kitchen table on a Sunday afternoon. "We all have to do our share."

My brother, Tom, sat across from me during these meetings, sullen and big. He was eighteen. I was fourteen and sat sullen and small, emulating my brother. Dad preferred to stand. He preached from behind his chair, his voice singing out loud and enthusiastic. Mom lay in bed upstairs, of course. I always wondered if she could hear us. We had those weekend pep-talks for over a year. Dad said it was to boost morale, but he was full of it. The meetings were for her.

My mother was a beautiful woman. Her name was Cora and she was my first love. She had shiny, dark hair, black eyes and tan, gorgeous lips. I think of her as Italian. I was her favorite. Sometimes, she would pull me down to her while she lay in bed, to tell a secret. I'd lean over, nuzzle my ear to her soft mama lips and she'd whisper. "I'd choose *you*, Owen." It was an answer to a question my dad had asked the family once on a road trip to San Francisco: If you were stranded on a desert island and could only bring one person, one tool, and one book, which would they be? Mama hated this question. She and Dad got in a horrible fight because she refused to answer. Tommy and I were in the back seat, twelve and eight years old, waiting for the answer. Would it be one of us? Dad turned the question our way, to avoid irritating Mother, but we could only pick a useful tool. I asked Dad what he would pick, but he said he wouldn't play if we didn't. That's when Mama started yelling. I like to think she had an Italian accent. I like to think she scared my dad. Dad said he would play to avoid an argument, but it was too late. I don't think Mama wanted to know his answers that day. I know I didn't. Lately, I think about who he would have chosen. Tomorrow would have been his birthday.

On Sundays, Dad's hands pressed hard on the top edge of his chair. His dry, scaly knuckles turned white. There were yellowed spots underneath the arms of his shirt and his face was oily with dirt and perspiration. "We have to be committed to the family," he'd say, then lower his voice. "Not just for her, you know, but for all of us." He looked at us sincerely, with sad, imploring eyes. I think he liked those meetings. He played his part well, and Tommy and I followed suit. We were a family of thespians, all of us. Even Mama.

Dad was an okay guy. During the year of family meetings, he held



two jobs. He did this for us and we were to be grateful. One of his jobs, he liked. He was a clerk for a small-time loan agency. He liked the people there, he said, although he didn't depend on the job. It was unstable. At nights and on weekends he was a parking garage attendant. He didn't like this as much, but it was steady income. Three years after Mom died, he lost the loan clerk position. The business ran out of time and money and started to make huge, irresponsible cutbacks, including Dad's salary. They were eventually sucked in by a wave of irate customers and collection agencies. I was eighteen by that time and felt the tide near my feet, too. I moved to California a month later. Dad died two years after that, alone, in the booth of the garage he worked in. I am responsible for his death. At forty-eight, I take responsibility.

I live in our old house now because I am crazy. A crazy old cuckold. I moved back to Colorado from sunny Santa Monica at thirty-three due to a job offer in Boulder. I was in an apartment for over twelve years downtown. Every once in a while, I'd take a Sunday drive through my childhood neighborhood. It was during one of these drives, about three years ago, that I noticed the old house was up for sale. In a childish fit, I sold my car, took out a loan, and became a homeowner. It is in a small suburb of Colorado about forty minutes from my office. I was, and am, an editor of a local hiking magazine. It is mostly sold as an impulse buy for tourists, but it's good work. I am satisfied. Cora taught me at a young age, the secret to satisfaction.

I walk around the house sometimes and remember. The furniture is different. The walls are painted a different color, though some of the pock marks are familiar. One of the previous owners added a room on the first floor, which is the one I sleep in. I don't sleep in Mama's old room, although it is largest. I tried to sleep there at first, but could not gain ownership. Imagine me, in Cora's room. My nights were restless and full of nightmares, or dreams that seemed like nightmares by morning. No, I sleep in the guest room. Even at my age, I am unwilling to disturb ghosts.

I said the family pep-talks were for Cora, but that's not entirely true. Dad wanted to teach us boys workman's values that year, too. Tom and I were to learn an important lesson in life. "Everybody has to work," my dad would tell us. He would be speaking to Tom, but the edge in his voice indicated a sharp warning that was intended also for me. His eyes focused alternately between us. I would be fifteen in a year and would have to get a job, too. "The sooner you start, boys, the sooner you will know what it is to be a man."

"*I do work, Dad,*" Tom once said, interrupting him. He was anxious that day. He had soccer practice at 12:00 and we were



running late. He played forward for the David HighVarsity team. He looked at his watch and at the table before us. Dad's gaze turned toward Tom and he stopped talking. Tom raised his eyes to meet our father's. It was unavoidable, "I haven't even cashed it yet, anyway," he whined. Tom bagged groceries at Freemont Foods.

"I'll cash it," Dad said, irritated. He did not like his sermons to be cut short. "I'm going to the bank tomorrow."

Tom took a crumpled check from his pocket and placed it in Dad's extended hand. "Here, then," he said. "I got a raise."

Dad unfolded the check. His heavy brow lifted and he smiled. "That's great, Tom," he said. He meant to encourage. He wanted us to grow up to be good men like him. "That's really great."

Tom nodded. He was already like Dad in many ways. He had the same thick eyebrows, dark brown hair, and jutting chin that scared women and boys like me. Tom was taller and bigger than Dad, though, and much more quiet. When Tom went to restaurants, he ordered his steak medium-rare. If it came back well-done, he'd just pick up and leave. Just like that. No sending it back, or nothing. That was Tom. He used to amaze me. He still does, I guess,

Dad was enthusiastic. "They must think you're a hard worker to give a raise so soon, huh?" His eyes sparkled and danced a little in the yellow kitchen light.

Tom nodded again. I think he had had the raise for awhile.

"They'll make you manager in no time." The poor bastard really didn't know when to quit. He was about to say more, but Tom rose from his chair.

"Can I go?" Tom asked. He gathered his practice clothes, cleats, and shinguards that were lying at his feet and placed them in a duffel bag. "I have practice."

Dad was taken aback and quiet for a moment, but then nodded consent. Tom was already out of the kitchen. He reached the front door, opened it, and hollered a bye before the door closed behind him. Dad and I were left alone. He looked like he was about to cry, he was such a baby. I remember thinking the wind could knock him down. I fidgeted in my seat and thought about leaving, but he was too pathetic.

"Tom's the best player on the team," I said to make conversation. It was true. I had tried out for the team that year, too, but the coach said I wasn't fast enough. "You sure you're Tom's brother?" Coach asked. "Your brother's a fireball." He placed me on the freshman team, but I quit. Soccer didn't really interest me. Tom was the athlete.

"Yeah?" Dad muttered. He wasn't listening.

"Yeah," I said, enthusiastic-like. "Everybody at school says he'll get player of the year." I was making it up. Nobody at David High cared about soccer in '62. Besides, I didn't even know if the school gave out player awards.

"Really?" Dad asked, gaining interest. He was easy. "How about you, Owe?" Dad's voice lifted with the question and he turned his eyes on me.

"I don't play, Dad." I tried to make it sound like I would if I could. "We're not allowed to play field sports freshman year."

"Oh," Dad said, as if remembering. He smiled nice and patted my shoulder. "Well, maybe next year," he said.

I nodded and winked at Dad, at once regretting it. I felt young and foolish. I never knew how to be a man in front of him. I was as tall as him by that year—I had grown three inches over the summer before high school. Still, I felt lanky and out of place with my long legs and skinny arms. I wasn't built sturdy like Tom or Dad. I didn't have the same ruddy countenance and bulk. I had light brown hair and a small frame. People said I looked like my mother.

"What's that for?" Dad asked about my wink, laughing slightly. He was in a good mood.

"It's his senior year," I said and threw another awkward wink. "I'll let him be the star for awhile."

Mom turned in her bed upstairs. I took the creaking of her bedposts and boards as conversation. Did she mean to reproach?

Dad heard the creaks also and grew tired. He remembered his role and the point of the meetings. "Did you finish your chores this week, Owen?" His voice was settled, but weary.

"Yeah," I said. I always tried to match my voice with his for somber moments.

"Good," he said. "Did you do all of them?" He was winding down. The meeting was almost over.

I watched my father lightly stroke the top of the wooden chair as he did every week. He gazed at the swirled designs and caressed them as though he saw a pretty face. Across from me, in Tom's empty seat, I looked at the swirly brown lines, too. I saw what I always saw in them. A cartoon. It was an alien face. He had a small nose, no mouth, and three eyes. He was a monster, but he wasn't scary. He used to be my friend.

I looked at Dad again. I would've answered, but he stared at his chair. I got up to leave, but he noticed. "Did you, Owe?" His eyes were on me again. "Did you do the garbage and the kitchen and bathroom this week?" he asked. He knew I had. "Did you take care of everything?"



"Yeah," I said. "I finished everything." I placed an emphasis on the last word so he wouldn't ask. I wanted to puke whenever he asked.

"And your other job?" His voice trailed and his eyes returned to his brown, wooden lady.

"That too," I said and left. He didn't even listen for my answer.

My other job. I would have to say, looking back, it was probably inappropriate. But what were the options? We couldn't afford to hire anybody. Dad barely had time to sleep, let alone help out with the house. Tom looked the other way. Besides, he worked, too. I was the one that was home. I was the one, between Tom and I, that was willing to do it when Dad asked. I volunteered. Tom would have been such a brute, anyway. He could be so mean to Mama. No, Mama liked me. I was gentle, unlike Tom. I knew when to keep quiet, unlike Dad.

And it wasn't that bad, either. It really wasn't. Mom and I got to know each other that year, I had never known her before. Not as an adult, really. Not as a person who lived outside of me and my wants and needs. Not until that year.

I would always complete my chores, first thing, when I got home from school. I wouldn't even eat or go to the bathroom. It was a deal I made with myself everyday so that I would get everything done. A little belly and bladder incentive. My jobs were to clean the downstairs, dishes, laundry, and Mom. Generally everything house-related.

During bitter days, I would clean and cry and complain that I was not a maid. But I never cried in front of mom. I think that would have hurt her feelings. She was not to blame for our situation.

After the downstairs was tidied up, I would head upstairs to attend to her. I passed the dining room, Tom's room, and the front door on the way to the staircase. At the top of the stairs was Mama's room. I walked quietly to the open door— she was usually sleeping—and went in.

"Mama," I'd say and tap her shoulder. Tom said I was a baby for calling her 'mama' at fourteen, but I didn't care. He wasn't home, anyway.

Mom would hear me, but wouldn't open her eyes. I'd shake her a little more and coo at her, "Wake up, Cora." She smiled whenever I called her by her first name. Her whole face lit up. She had large laugh lines above and to the sides of her lips. Beautiful. Her teeth were white and straight with a small gap on the left side near the

middle, where two of her teeth were missing. The wrinkles around her bright, dark eyes also thickened with her smile. She was gorgeous. She no longer slept in her wig that year, but I preferred her bald head. She had wisps of black hair that danced like wings at the sides of her ears whenever she moved her head or spoke to me. She looked like an old angel in pain. I was enchanted and disgusted with her. There was also a small rectangular tuft of black hair at the base of her skull above her neck, and then lower in front, down there, a triangle. Her skin was smooth, she used special soap, and she had a bit of a belly due to the chemotherapy. Her whole body was a little puffed up, in fact. She looked like a big, fat baby or an overgrown cherub.

Mama would hum a bit, to let me know she was awake. I'd kiss her forehead and go to the sinks to start the water. Underneath the cupboards was a small, red bucket and tropical soap. I would fill the bucket with coconut suds and warm water, grab a washcloth and return to Mom.

Before I washed her off, though, I had to clean the sheets. She had rubber sheets, the kind you buy for a toddler who wets his pants. I would sponge that off and pat it dry with a towel. That was the most difficult part of cleaning Mom. I would have to lift her heavy body and roll her to one side or the other to sponge underneath. After that, it was easy, except for the awkwardness. When it was time to take her clothes off, she would raise her arms above her head to help. Mama wore a nightgown, so I just slipped it right off. It wasn't an ordinary mom-nightgown, though, pastel blue or pink with lace. No, my mom wore a cotton flannel nightgown that reached down to her ankles. It had pictures of colored ice cream cones and sundaes on it. It looked stupid. They were the kind of pajamas I saw my little cousin Katie wear when our family went to my aunt's house for Christmas dinner. Aunt Jeanine called them nighties. *Katie, go get your nightie, it's time for night-night.*

I was probably the only fourteen year old boy I knew, who knew exactly what a naked woman looked like. Mama didn't look like the girls in Tom's *Playboy* magazines. I remember being surprised at the slipperiness of her breasts. They were large and my hands, above the washcloth, could feel their softness. Her stomach was rounder than mine and her hips spread out like a heart. I learned what women looked like down there that year. I learned about the lips of a woman and the delicate spot in between. Not at all like I had thought. I learned what hurt if I was too rough with the washcloth and I learned, by accident, what felt good, when Mama would squirm a bit and move my hand. I understood that year, what men found attractive about women, but I was not attracted to my mother. I did



not think of her in that way.

Mama and I would not speak during the washings. I cleaned as fast and effectively as i could, without staying in one place too long. We would both put on our clinical faces and pretend not to be embarrassed. I chanted lines to myself to stay sane. *Cora is my mother. I am cleaning Cora. My mother's name is Cora. I am cleaning. I clean Cora. Cora is my mother.* After she was clean and dried, I quickly pulled her nighty over her head and tucked the covers over her. I walked over to the miniblinds behind her bed, and opened them, letting light into the wide, gloomy room. I emptied the sudsy water in the sink and put the wet, red bucket back in to the cupboard. By that time, I would have to go to the bathroom fairly urgently. I'd usually go back downstairs, relieve myself, wash my hands, and prepare a snack for Cora and me. It was during this time that I got to know my mother. We would share toast and juice on her bed over a tray and talk.

My mom was a smart lady. I guess she had a lot of time to think things over, laying in that bed of hers. Sometimes, I think she knew everything that would happen in our lives. Including her own death, and my father's, too. Even my life here in this house at forty-eight. I think she knew all of it. She watches me now and knows the rest of my life, too, I think. The details I haven't found out yet. She's in this house. I can smell her and hear her. She's in my dreams.

I left for California at eighteen to avoid being trapped in a house with a father who had kept working two jobs just because he was used to it. Mom died when I was fifteen. I got a job that year, but the money I made was my own to waste on movies and girls. Tom had left. Mom was right about him when she had said the year before, "One of these days that poor boy is going to run and he's never going to stop." She was more right than I would have guessed. Tom left home the day after graduation. He didn't have a dime to go on, but he left anyway. I could never have done that. When I left, I had my savings. Tom joined the Army at nineteen in '63. I joined the Reserves only when I felt the pinch of necessity. That was four years later in '67. Our war stories are a joke in comparison. I don't see him too much, these days. He lives in Pittsburgh with his wife and child.

Dad lost his loan clerk job a month before I left for California. He had talked to me the night he was permanently laid off. By then, we were strangers.

"What are you going to do now?" I had asked him. I was piecing together my place in the puzzle. I wanted to know how his loss would affect me.

Dad stared at me and shook his head. "I don't know, Owen," he

said. I'd never seen him more despondent.

He hadn't found a job when I left. He spent his daytimes searching for work, but no firms or corporations wanted a man with little education and a drowned out nothing-agency on his resumé. I must admit, I left him in a pinch. The day I packed my things into my car, he wouldn't even see me off. At eighteen, I didn't think he knew why I was leaving. Now, of course, I know he did. He died in the parking garage booth during his Wednesday night shift. He had swallowed a bottle of pills and washed it down with a bottle of bourbon. I got a call from the hospital in the middle of the night. I was with a girl.

My mom had told me something once, a week or so before she died, that I think of lately. I think of it whenever I walk alone in this old, creaking house. It was one of her secrets. The kind she'd make me bend over to hear. I had asked her if she was happy. I'd never asked her that before, but everybody seemed to agree she was going to die soon. The whole family wound down and we silently prepared for it without open acknowledgment. I wanted to know before she left if she had been happy. Could she have enjoyed her life? Mama thought about it for a moment and then whispered the secret in my ear. "I feel my life, Owen, and it feels like nothing."

The words might have scared me at the time; they scare me a little now, but when I rose from her lips and saw her sweet face smiling and crying, I knew what she had said made sense. And I knew that it was beautiful.



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