

# WATERSHED



# WATERSHED

Volume 33

## **WATERSHED**

Volume 33

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## THE MAN IN THE FIELD | *Timothy O'Meara*

One night there came a soft wind.

It was a wind not from the north or south. Nor was it from the east or west. It simply blustered from wherever nowhere is. This night it swept through a field, towards a single, special place. In that place, wild oats began to grow. Their stalks moved quickly upward, their roots grew down. They climbed towards the sky, twisting together into the deepening night. They grew as the first stars showed their twinkling faces. They grew as a failing red sun set the hilltops ablaze. Wiry vines of poison and pitch now crawled across the earth to feed the hungry swell. The wind shifted and the earth moved. The mass began to twist and turn into a familiar shape. It was that of a man, or so it might have seemed. Vine became tendon, root became bone. Slowly, from a tangle of earth, he was emerging. First his legs; thick stumps rooted in soil, beginning to pull free. His torso came next; an organic, muscular manifestation. A head now grew from what must have been the shoulders of the throbbing, swelling thing. It was almost finished. Out of the soil; insects crawled. They writhed from the ground and began to make their way up. Shoes closed around white feet below, as centipedes, spiders and beetles formed a face above. The cold wind quieted. Leaves fell lazily to the ground. Now silence placed its soft hands on the countryside.

A pale man stood in a field.

He had been dressed in black. His shoes, once roots, were of the latest fashion. He brushed himself off, blinking his colorless eyes. Down the hill, over a rusty old fence, he stepped onto a country road still warm from the day. There was to be a party that night, and this extraordinary man who didn't exist minutes ago certainly wouldn't be late.

FOREVER, AND BEFORE | *Emily Grelle*



## SELF-PORTRAIT | *Kurt Wooden*

I wrote once: the words were the fingers  
of my hands. Essential.

Little markings on the page,  
the high- and byways of a senseless place  
featuring only bankrupt roads,  
and a view of a bland ocean  
to the west. A great nautical  
monstrosity, white with vein-like  
blue bars, pounding, in waves.

The rocks of the beach, rough and crisp,  
taste only of non-earth, only of appeasement,  
of cardboard and windless days.  
They look rotten on the page,  
are stale in the mouth.

I fed a poem to a dog once, a dachshund,  
a tiny thing with legs and dog-steel teeth  
to tear its meat or bone or lines apart.  
“Teeth” was stuck manically between  
gum and cheek, laughing at the tongue  
not made for the delicate work  
of extraction.

There’s a carnival there (oh,  
how I want to write carnal,  
carnal, carnal there), a ferris wheel  
whose face is that of a Viennese man.  
Exasperated, English does not bend to his will  
(the words are rocks in the mouth)  
and he hardly knows when to stop spinning.

A book on my desk is only color; an orange,  
an orange like dominoes falling, like helplessness.  
Who does it taunt, or whom, this book?  
Pen to paper, scratch, scrape, scratch, sigh,  
the claue in a corner of the ceiling gets started.  
I set the pen down, smile broadly like a fish, and bow  
repeatedly until the tumult dies with a flourish.  
Silence coaxes my breath out for a quiet stroll,  
and the corners of my mouth are buried in cheek.



## SIERRA AND THE ORANGE | *Julia Doty*

The orange, today a memory  
That will soon be bitter and rotten,  
Basks in shade so far from the tree  
On the wickerwork wrought iron table  
With Sierra.

Today the heat beat down too hard  
Time for her to breathe  
Retreating to shade not so far from the tree  
At the wickerwork wrought iron table  
With the orange.

They look at each other,  
The reflective skin of the fruit  
Taunting with its glimmer  
Makes Sierra remember  
Her hunger.  
One last drag and she crushes  
A smoking ember against the floor  
To free her hand which grasps  
For the fiery sun.

She sticks her finger into the eye  
And, with her nail, rips the thick flesh away  
To reveal the tender, seeping heart.  
She breaks the glistening organ into fragments,  
Pale, saccharine blood spilling  
Down smooth, pale fingers.  
Rich veins burst against her teeth.  
The refreshing tang cools  
And washes the ash from her tongue.

Finally swallowed, the memory lingers:  
A sweet, lucent droplet of juice  
Dribbles across her swollen red lips  
And leaves a sparkling trail.  
Sierra licks it away.

The smoky orange husk  
Falls to the ground and lies on its back  
Like a writhing, twisted, gasping flame.  
Its fetal pose extinguished and trampled by passersby  
Into the earth with burnt out cigarettes  
A nest for the seed  
That will rise as a phoenix  
And blossom sweeter fruit still.

## THE FOX | *Heather Morse*

She must have died in her sleep,  
Father had said, poised beside the bed,  
His hands gently cradling his head.  
I waited, staring at Grandmother's empty place,  
Shuddering, only silence filling the space.  
Sitting down to a breakfast of toast and cold eggs  
Mother slowly rests a sympathetic hand on his leg.

Before she had grown old, I had been told  
She had been what the boys called a fox,  
Coquettish and coy, her face adorned in golden locks  
Father said she was a stunning beauty in life  
Rivaled only now by that of his wife.  
Silently ascending the stairs I crept towards her sleeping form,  
Extending a shaking palm, surprised to find her cheek still warm.

# ABBOTT AND COSTELLO ARE DEAD

| *Jennifer Ann Janisch*

## I.

When I was seven, my parents sold my dog at a garage sale.

I had been sitting under the ash tree in the front yard, sifting through the dandelions littering the lawn with knees stained green and fingers stained yellow. I wore leaves in my hair, not a wreath of laurels, but random juts of crispy, fallen leaves that crumbled at the touch. The wind was my enemy, always threatening to blow my batch of dandelions away.

I was going to sell the dandelions to the people in our driveway. I collected only the ones with a full spectrum of yellow florets. I rubbed the others, the withered dandelions, between my palms until they fell in pieces to the ground.

A half-sized school bus growled up the hill. I squinted at the reflecting glints of yellow, brighter than my dandelions. The brakes squealed like distant radio stations between quick flicks of a dial. I crawled alongside the tree and waited. I wanted to see what sort of kids went to school on a Saturday. The bus sat out of breath at the foot of my driveway. Its doors stayed closed.

I heard footfalls crunching the grass and saw my father's shoes, the brown suede rough and the soles worn. The laces drooped at the sides like the stems of the dandelions I squashed. I wanted to rub those laces between my palms until they were ash.

"Jennifer, would you miss Muttonhead if she didn't live with us anymore?"

"I don't care," I said. "She eats my crayons and pees in my shoes."

The bus doors opened. I dashed behind the tree and peeked. They were not children stepping off the bus. And they were not adults.

## II.

I don't remember why I threw the rake at my little brother. But I remember his face. His eyes were wide, startled. His mouth was open, silent. He slowly raised his hand to his eye, as if surprised by the weight of his arm. He cupped his brow. He screamed.

I slithered down that small hill in our backyard, through the leaves. I tugged gently at his shoulders. I wrapped my arms around him. I begged him to be quiet.

"Don't let Mom and Dad hear. Please, Jonathan. Don't let Mom and Dad hear."

He stared at my shoes, whimpering.

I didn't ask if he was okay. I didn't check his eye. I didn't apologize.

Later, we sat cross-legged on the green shag carpet in his bedroom with our Pooh Bears, all dirty yellow and ripped at the seams, stuffed in our laps. The Universal Pictures globe rotated on the television screen. We leaned forward, knowing that once *Hold That Ghost* began, we'd join Abbott and Costello in songs with the Andrews Sisters, in battles against ghosts and gangsters, in mishaps with candles and coffins. We'd be a team.

Until the movie ended.

### III.

Jonathan and I took piano lessons each week with an old man named Fred Startup. Rather than dropping us off, my parents stayed for the duration of our hour-long lesson in our piano teacher's home. They stayed because there were once rumors about this man of some misconduct with children. My parents didn't tell me about this until I had matured. I had always assumed that my parents stayed for the lessons because they were interested.

Mr. Startup greeted us each week with a series of hellos that sounded like echoes. "Hello, hello, hello," he'd say. And he'd make jokes. He'd ask if we knew how he got his last name. After the second time he asked, Jonathan and I still answered that we didn't know, as we believed him to be senile. After months of this, we finished his joke for him. "Because your grandparents would rob banks and jump on their horses and say 'We better start up out of here!'" After years of this, we shortened our reply. "Yep, start up out of here!" Toward the end, we said nothing.

Jonathan and I were sequestered to the piano after dinner every night in preparation for the week's lesson. We battled with our parents each time. Rarely did we succeed. Resigned to that hard bench, we smashed those keys, trying to drown out the laughter of the neighborhood children playing outside.

One Saturday, Mr. Startup interrupted my struggle through unpracticed notes. He leaned forward in his rickety chair and tapped my shoulder. He looked disappointed. I stopped playing, relieved.

"Jennifer, did you know that Mozart was a child genius? That he was already composing music at five years old?"

"Since I'm already six years behind Mozart," I said, "there's no point in playing."

#### IV.

The library, situated alongside the lakes in town, was over two miles away. My brother and I walked there nearly every weekend. We talked about crafts, from the upside-down egg cartons decorated like a dozen oval-faced Christmas carolers, to the synthetic flowers hot-glued to picture frames—the livelihood of our gift-giving. And we talked about magic—Jonathan’s main interest. He wanted to be a magician. He once told me that if he could learn magic, he’d make Mom and Dad live forever. I didn’t tell him that magic was fake, as I couldn’t be sure that it wasn’t.

Jonathan grabbed the same stack of magic books that he’d read the weekend before. I never read anything. Sometimes, I grabbed some crafts book, but mostly, I walked aimlessly, intimidated by the number of books and the height of the shelves. I wanted the knowledge of the books without having to read them. I wanted to look well-read. I wanted to look smart.

I walked to the circulation counter often to talk with the librarian.

“Has Shakespeare written anything new lately?” I always asked this. And every time I asked, the librarian pointed to the *New Books* display by the door. No one ever bothered to tell me that Shakespeare was dead.

#### V.

The leaves were brittle. I picked one up, crushed it in my hand, sprinkled the dust over the ground, picked up another leaf.

#### VI.

Insects lived in my piano teacher’s house. I never saw them, but I saw delicate webs on shelves, burned wings on lamps. I saw what they left behind. Dust, lit by stray light, looked like dead skin. I wondered if it was Mr. Startup’s skin, what he was leaving behind.

As Jonathan took his turn at the piano, my parents and I sat in stiff-cushioned chairs wedged against broken bookcases and old Steinway pianos. My mom and I pretended, as did Mr. Startup presumably, not to notice when my father’s snores seemed timed with the piece Jonathan played, not to notice when he woke with the temporary silencing of the piano as I stood up and Jonathan sat down, the dust from the cushions bursting with Jonathan’s collapse into my seat as I continued where he had left off, that stumble through notes lulling my father back to his death.

I raced through my turn, playing everything *allegro* despite the appropriate, dictated tempo. I caught my breath at the coda with hands flapping, dispelling the dust, then back on the keys as Mr. Startup yelled for me to slow down.

“Adagio!”

But I sped up, faster and faster, hitting all the wrong notes and thinking only of outside, where my father would be awake.

## VII.

I picked up another leaf. My mother called out to me from the front door.

“Don’t play in that leaf pile,” she yelled.

I smiled, dove into a heap, came up dirty, gasped for air.

“There’s bugs in there,” she yelled.

I looked. I twitched. I shook. I never played in another leaf pile again.

## VIII.

I looked for Muttonhead. She was not tangled in the bedspread my aunt had crocheted, not scratching at the dollhouse my grandfather had built, not hiding under the piano my brother and I loathed. I stopped and listened. Muttonhead was blind. When we lived in the Bronx, burglars had ruined her eyes with pepper spray to quiet the excessive, resounding bark typical of Pomeranians. Sometimes, I could hear her lose her way, bump into walls, slip down the stairs. But I didn’t hear her that day. Or any day after that.

She had been tied to the ash tree. The leash was long, and I didn’t see her when picking dandelions, didn’t see her when staring at my father’s shoes, didn’t see her when the bus doors opened and the people with low-set eyes and flat noses and small mouths stepped off, people that others at the garage sale stopped to stare at, people that prompted one lady in blue Reeboks who had talked my father down to fifty cents on a Ouija board we never used, to leave quickly with a deliberate turn of her head as she rushed past them in the driveway. My father had mumbled something about the Ouija board after the garage sale, about how that was “as good as new and worth more than fifty cents,” but he didn’t mention the bus passengers or the woman’s hasty exit. And he didn’t mention the young couple who had asked if Muttonhead, too, was for sale.

She had not been for sale. Not until I told my father that I wouldn’t miss her. But I did miss her. Now that she was gone. And I

forgot about how she ate my crayons. I forgot about how she peed in my shoes. I remembered only the good things, and because of that, she became not a dog that I had lost, but a poor little puppy who never barked, never bit.

I can't remember the real Muttonhead at all.

## IX.

"Wouldn't it be great if we could meet Abbott and Costello?"

"Abbot and Costello are dead, Jonathan."

## X.

The dandelions were gone. They had matured. They had become wish-flowers. The wind swept through the grass. I watched, through the living room window, over the piano lid as I sat on the bench, the filaments, like moths—gray, wispy, old—fluttering into the air with each gust.

I left the piano and walked outside. My brother followed. He asked why I had stopped in the middle of practice. He asked why the weird people rode in the half-sized bus. He asked why I had thrown the rake at him that day in the backyard. I told him that I didn't know. I didn't know why I stopped.

I swam toward the wish-flowers and tried to catch them but my body broke the swell and I crushed them. All around me, those ghosts of the dandelions danced. I tried to hold onto them.



UNTITLED PHOTOGRAPH | *Emily Grelle*



## TO THE UNSTUCK | *Garin Wally*

Armpit odor (though non-offensive)

Triggered nostalgia unclear,

Yet I cannot recall a single frame.

Can't say where, with who, or when,

Can't say the smell is even the same.

But as does near life's ending slumber

Like a collage, life-long, I wish to member

As a child, long ago, I should have eaten more paste,  
Because memories unstuck to mind seem such a waste.

## ODE TO THE ECHO 400 | *Desiree Coutinho*

No one could call you  
an inanimate object,  
with your coughs and sputters,  
your maniacal whine that cuts  
through the crisp silence of the autumn morning.  
You are the fire that has been banished from the forest.  
The destroyer.  
The creator.  
Kali's sharp toothed racing chain,  
the wrath of a silver blade.

Who could ignore you?  
The raging beast roars  
bladeswhizzing  
teethchewing  
Trees bend and fall at your will.  
You are the metallic vibration of the divine current,  
and for a moment  
I am the goddess;  
but you Echo, are always the force.  
Commanding attention.  
Commanding control.  
When I slip,  
you push or pull or snap back  
in a threatening red flash.

and I see  
how easily  
you might destroy me.

Your smell of sawdust and gasoline hangs,  
by the end of the day we ache with exhaustion.  
I return to the shed,  
and close you in your orange sheath.  
Somehow I sleep sounder  
with you shut up  
in a plastic cover.  
It helps me forget the edge of my existence,  
that you sweet and terrible Echo,  
force me to remember.

## BROTHERLY CONCERN | *Cliff Benjamin*

Instilled with a level of compassion I find hard to sustain  
my eyes silently shut as a lone knock echoes through the crisp night  
causing a quiet sigh to escape my lips.

Him.

Reeking of cheap liquor, worldly possessions in hand,  
he simply looks at me with his downtrodden eyes.  
I open the door leading his broken gait towards the couch.  
He mumbles curses and slurs his way through a story  
which I ignore.  
I simply nod and hand him a blanket.

Through the night I hear bottles dropped  
profanities shouted and revenge promised.  
Urine stains my bathroom floor  
only marginally better than on my couch.

In the morning, he continues the inebriation process  
as if going for some secret record.  
Empty bottles mingle with his strewn clothes like a crystal forest.

I stand over him, in all of my imposing fury.  
Openly pondering how he can be nice to my cats  
yet beat his wife.  
How he remembers when his friend died  
but has long forgotten when his son was born.  
Years of festering anger ignite my rage.

His bleary eyes look up at me, worry crossing his drunken face.  
My seething hatred melts away as those helpless eyes meet mine,  
reducing my animosity to a memory.  
I ask him if he needs anything  
he simply shakes his head  
returning to his booze coma.  
I bring him another blanket.

## THE MOON AND SHADOWS | *Geoff Baker*

By the time the moon outside had spied  
us, we were high on hopes and hops and barley,  
thick, and she was just a sickle  
of her former shapely self.

Unsteady, we took the listing street  
like astronauts in steps too big  
for souls, in giant leaps for mankind.

The night so clear we saw the earth  
entire reduced to darkness on the moon,  
we knew that being of the earth  
means being in league with shadows.

Our silhouette was gracing lunar dunes  
and deadened seas, and filling  
footprints, slanting black along

the things men left, like slacking  
Stars and Stripes, a distant Earth,  
the spindle-legged carcass of Apollo.

# TO THE YOUNG MAN SHOUTING FROM HIS CAR TO MINE ON SEEING MY HEAD SHAVED

| *Malama MacNeil*

my own children both older and younger than you, I could be your mother  
expecting better from you

I could be your aunt, who has never forgotten your birthday

I could be the woman who cooked your breakfast this morning in the dorm  
or the one at the ER who nursed your buddy after the fight

I could be the woman in the care home who bathes your grandma  
who loves you  
even though you never visit

I could be the woman doing piecework in Honduras, Arkansas, Hong  
Kong, Malaysia  
who sewed the logo on your cap

or the one on her knees in a field, picking the lettuce for your burger

I could be from the convent, the abbey, the hermitage, shorn and humble,  
wedded to my Lord, praying for the World in which you live

or one of the penitents approaching on bleeding knees the saints  
sadly gazing from  
their niches

I could be a ghost of one of the millions, shorn and naked, who died  
from the gas, starvation, typhoid, or despair

or one of the women who slept with the enemy, out of love or a  
stubborn will to live

or in another time, one of those who cut our hair and left our skirts  
behind to go to  
battle in a just or holy war

I could be a woman just coming from infusion therapy, marked by  
the radiation  
tattoos, dreadfully weary, fighting for my life

I could be a woman who found herself in a Presence so sacred,  
so ancient, so much  
beauty all around, she marked herself newborn, fresh with Love,  
naked as Truth,  
whose hair was offering rendered to the fire,  
cast on the water, laid on the earth, loosed to the wind

I could be sitting at this stoplight by my mate, life partner of 40  
years, father of my  
children, who has to be restrained from running you down when  
he hears you

in your arrogance, young man, there is so much you may never know:  
I could be any, or all, of these, and I could, in fact, be the “fucking  
dyke bitch” you  
called me

## THE BOOTS | *Colleen Rodman*

The boots were weather cracked, dingy, filthy, rank, and unraveling at the seams. But yes, they were his boots alright. Six years did not make them any less recognizable.

They sat slouching on themselves atop the dining room table in front of his face, and he looked down at them morosely. Sarah walked across the kitchen, opened the refrigerator for a beer, and her voice rose as she followed neatly with an explanation.

"I thought I should finally get these back to you," she said, "I've had them for so long. Poor thing, I don't know what you've been wearing all this time when you go wood chopping. Sorry for keeping them hostage!" and she laughed.

He looked at the boots and tenderly stroked the old leather surface. Their worn surface mirrored his hands, cracked and rough, recalling a few more years than the soft, peach canvas of skin stretched over Sarah's hands: Yin and Yang. "You don't want them anymore."

She looked at him quickly. "They're yours! You've always given me a hard time about keeping them! I felt bad about it."

"What'll you wear now? You don't have any other boots."

"I'll just get my own boots. I can have my own boots." She said this with a sharpness he didn't understand.

"After six years? You don't want them anymore?"

"I'm just saying. I thought it was time to do the right thing."

He felt his gut winding itself into a coil, loaded, ready to spring. He looked at the boots, which had for six years enveloped her tender, delicate feet and sheltered them from the elements. These boots had sat for six years snugly under the edge of her lavender-scented bed, had trodden the path from her back porch to the wood pile and back again in the winter, had propelled her feet up the rocks of the bluff in the summer, and had accidentally stepped on his toes when she came in the door from the cold to kiss him under the mistletoe at Christmas. These boots were his boots, but Sarah lived there, they had Sarah inside them, and his feet would slip into little ghost feet of Sarah when he tried to put them on again.

"Sarah, I love you."

She laughed. "I know hun, but they're your boots."

He sighed and took a tattered old lace in his fingers and let it slip between them to the table with a soft pat. Sarah floated over to the kitchen sink and leaned over it, staring down the drain for a moment in silence. Then she said, "Besides..." she did not meet his eyes.



“Besides, they’re getting a little old anyways.”

He looked up at her, felt his stomach lurch, and swallowed back hard. He thought of the space without boots under her lavender-scented bed, a bed in which, he knew, they had not made love in months.

“Like, they’re falling apart, is all I’m saying.”

UNTITLED PHOTOGRAPH | *Jin Bynum*



## TETHER | *Joanne Lowery*

Like a good pedestrian the coyote walks facing traffic  
around the bend on the road above the river,  
or maybe he is a deserter from a wild pack  
on his way to nowhere in the middle of the lane,  
but no, the thin rope trailing behind him  
signals he is merely an escaped domestic,  
a dog whose restraint became frayed,  
a dog making his getaway

with his long brown tail still attached  
and a long gray rope trailing.  
He looks happy to be living an ownerless life  
dodging Saturday's early morning traffic,  
putting distance between himself and a stake  
in the ground, its purpose exchanged  
for a whiff of canine freedom

while the rope does nothing, just drags  
a statement about connections,  
how if you pull long enough  
and the fibers are old, how if morning  
suddenly proves too much to endure,  
you lurch and for an instant don't understand  
that one tug has set you free, the rope  
like a tail with a waving end, the tail  
that is yours, part of you, weightless  
behind you, tapered as a paintbrush,  
an extension of backbone, what you won't chew at  
when you seek a new life without a water dish,  
the road straightening, hoping no one is out looking  
for you, what will happen if they catch up with you  
and you are taken back.

## ARTICLE READ IN THE DAILY CALIFORNIAN

| *Kurt Wooden*

The windows shook  
a pang pang pang  
of knuckle on glass

*Mama, get out of here! Leave us be!*  
your daughter said.  
The phone was in her hand a blinking.

Maybe you didn't hear her  
or wanted more than a jilt.  
When the policemen came,  
all glowing red and blue,  
was it really a knife  
between your waistband and your womb?

The one plucked his gun out  
and held it at you,  
metal at the windows, the door frame.  
When you wouldn't give it up, Mama,  
your pride stabbing your reason till  
holes opened and bled all over  
your daughter's porch,  
the man pulled his trigger  
three times.

A witness said he threw up  
at the end of the block  
when you didn't get up.  
A dot of red on the door frame,  
three children asleep inside.

His five years in blues  
must have taught him shoot  
one two three  
or not at all.  
You understand, Mama?  
You do.

## PIPER | *Joanne Lowery*

A rat's paralysis, nest no longer rustling.  
Till his flute finds me, song  
sparkling a twitch, and I raise my old gray head  
and my old gray head rises and sniffs.  
Nightfall's nutmeg, the sweaty trail  
of beguiled rodents dragging their tails  
intaglio. I raise my heavy gray head  
and listen to the two-legged invitation.  
Who do I follow, and how sure am I  
my tail will go with me,  
dusty imprint ending cliffside?  
Can old gray hair resist the promise  
of rat nirvana, my meager nest  
mean and mine by contrast?  
Whiskers, tell the truth  
about evening's parade.  
Let me dream cheese dreams instead:  
all flutists gone, night's owl passing over.

## ROUGH SKIN AND BROKEN BOTTLES

| *Kelley R. Burnett*

I don't know how far these boots will carry me  
As I move my body through the spines of the city,  
Wishing I were running up and down the tiny paths in your ribs.

When that train pushed through  
I knew our pockets would be emptier,  
Our grins tighter,  
Like apples left out in the sun.

But one thing I imagine  
Is other homes—  
Hollows of trees, nests,  
Tiny foxholes

Or even if we could recognize each other  
If we were in bodies or times  
Other than these.

## THE APPOINTMENT | *John F. Buckley*

Obedient, wanting to please the fertility specialist,  
I dip my scrotum into the beaker of boiling water and  
leave it to steep for three minutes. I add cream after,  
to thicken the infusion, anything that will help.  
But holding the specimen up to the light, the doctor  
frowns, proclaims, "This is not yet tea," pours the  
contents into the sink, and reads the pubic hairs  
arranged like wet leaves at the bottom of the glass.

He will not tell me what he sees, instead asking,  
"Are you a virgin? Have you ever suffered a grievous  
injury to your pride? Did the basement walls of your  
childhood home contain imprudent levels of rayon?  
How many high-voltage power lines run through  
your bedroom? Is your microwave fully insulated?  
When was the last time you tasted pungent cheese?  
What sort of man are you, in honesty,  
what sort of man?"

I clumsily confess to him our private affairs,  
how after we make love, I take my wife out to  
the fertile green courtyard, pick her up by her ankles  
and swing her around, how the mini-plunger works  
to extract my last milky drops, how we devoutly pray  
to household saints Dr. Seuss and Mother Goose,  
burning dried Gerber's strained peas like incense  
at our living-room shrine. He nods and passes  
back behind the heavy curtains, leaving me waiting,  
aging, my Saharan loins aching.

He comes back into the room with an unlabeled tin  
and a newsletter. "In this box is a dark, rich type of  
lapsang souchong. It will resolve your difficulties but  
cost you your firstborn child. Brew it in your tears.  
This is the newest copy of *The Pennysaver*.  
Check the section on yard-sale adoptions; some couples  
have made lucky finds." I thank him and tell him I'll  
sleep on it, walking out to the waiting room, to my wife,  
my entire family. "Baby, I'm ready. Baby, let's go."

## SIDESHOW | *Justin Herrmann*

I had just started a new job selling magazine subscriptions door to door. I was a month sober at that time, and it was my first job in longer than that. It wasn't something I was good at. Maybe I didn't have the patience, or the sharp tongue, or the ability to read people, or whatever it is that sales people have. It was something I took to get back on my feet if you can relate to that.

It was my second or third day on the job, and I was walking a neighborhood full of two-car garages, and mailboxes in the shape of things like roosters and boats. Sweat was beginning to soak through my shirt. I could smell myself.

I had seen a couple of kids go into this one house. It was the middle of the day, when kids should be in school. I followed them and knocked on the door. When they answered, I told them I was with the school system, that if they didn't go back, their parents would be notified. A heavyset kid with a buzzcut who reminded me of a woodchuck told me they got out early on the account of a bomb threat. He said it was a good thing they were home because I was probably looking for houses to break into. I told him he was right, that no one expects it in the middle of the day. I said if they needed a job to look me up, that no one would expect kids either. I gave them a fake name.

The house next door had a good looking yard. Well-kept rose bushes with black gravel over the soil as shiny as glass. The thought crossed my mind to pick a rose for Janine, my ex-girlfriend, but I didn't. I knocked on the door of that house instead. An older guy, maybe in his sixties, answered. He was in a burgundy bathrobe. I shook his hand and was startled. I might have taken a step back. Each of his hands had only two big fingers. They looked like lobster claws. Lobster claws made out of flesh.

"Please come in," he said. "It's so hot outside."

"Thank you," I said. I followed him in. I was glad to see what kind of home someone with hands like that would have. The place was clean and orderly like the yard. The chair and sofa had matching rose patterns. The kind I imagined old ladies with lots of cats to have.

"Please have a seat," he said. "Make yourself comfortable. May I get you a beer?"

I'd like to say that this was a tough choice for me. I'd like to blame taking that drink on being depressed about Janine, or saying that I thought taking the drink would help me make a sale. But the truth is, I felt like having a beer, when have I not? and this guy



happened to offer. It's that simple.

"The bathroom is down the hall if you need it," he said.

I had taken a piss in some bushes down the street earlier, but I wasn't going to tell this guy that.

He went to the kitchen for the beers, and I had a seat on the sofa. There was a picture on the end table of two people. I could tell one of them was him in his younger days. The hands gave it away. His arm was around someone with a beard. I was surprised to see this other person was a woman. A woman with a beard. They must have been part of a sideshow. I had always wondered if those beards were real.

He came back with two glasses of beer. One in each claw. I would have liked to see how his hands worked the bottle opener.

"This woman in this picture with you," I said, "is that a real beard?"

At that he smiled. I knew that kind of smile. It was the kind Janine used to make when she'd talk about living with her grandmother for those couple years in the Adirondacks as a child, or whenever someone would mention grandmothers, or the Adirondacks, or baklava, which she used to make with her grandmother in the Adirondacks. I've never smiled like that.

"Ah, Francesca," he said, not saying whether or not the beard was real. But the way he said that, ah Francesca, she must have been the love of this guy's life. A lady with a beard. The truth is though, I can almost relate. Janine, she had a thin line of fuzz over her top lip. I think about that lip a lot. Sometimes I'd rub my tongue across that fuzz. It can be things that make someone different that make them appealing. It makes you feel like you have something special. Something no one else does. But I don't think I could handle a beard. Then again, I don't have claws for hands.

He handed me one of the beers. "This might be a bit different for you," he said. "You could say I am a beer hobbyist, or maybe a beer exhibitionist," and he smiled a different kind of smile from the one before. I smiled back to be nice. "This is an Orval. It's from Belgium. Belgians are the real kings of beers."

It reminded me of a bitter champagne, but it was something anyway. "That Francesca," I said, "is she your wife?"

"No," he said. "We used to travel the carnivals together."

"Carnivals," I said. "I wouldn't like all those people staring at me."

"People staring at you isn't a bad way to make a living," he said. "The ones to feel for were the ones like the fire-breathers. They were kids mostly, having picked the trick up somewhere or another, on the street sometimes, trying to earn a living. Their lips would bleed,

and they'd have sores in their mouths and throats that wouldn't heal, because as you know, the show must go on. It always goes on. Those like myself, and the twins, and the Alligator Man, we had it easy. Most of all, I was lucky to be out there with someone like Francesca. Good company is the most important thing in life. Remember that." And there was that smile again.

I couldn't get over it. How he felt for her, this Francesca with a beard, after who knows how many years. Me, when I think about Janine, I am miserable. But that doesn't mean I can stop.

When I was packing my things from our apartment after she left, there was cat hair everywhere. Clumps of it in corners where I'd moved dressers, and all over. I used to hate that cat and all his hair. But I don't know, sweeping it all up, I didn't want to just dump it in the trash. I felt like I should do something with it. She loved that fucking cat. But what can you do with a bunch of cat hair, anyway? So I just left it in a pile in a corner.

She let me see her one time about a week or so after she left. Where we met, how long I could see her, everything had to be on her terms. It was like I was a child or a convict. So we met at a coffee shop a block away from her mother's house of all places. I don't even like coffee and she knows it. Anytime I'd try to touch her hand she'd pull it away. Do you know how that makes a guy feel? There was a time when we rearranged our whole lives for each other, and now I can't even touch her. What about everything we had before? What about how we used to stay up late drinking Old Style on the lawn in front of the apartment and talk about our future together? Our future. How someday we'd buy an old motel somewhere in the Adirondacks and fix it up ourselves, or maybe buy an RV and go from state to state looking for the best baklava in the country. Doesn't any of it count for anything now?

"Sure there are those who put on a bit of an act for the crowd," he was still talking about the sideshow. "Marvin Bocott who was billed as The Pinhead, he simply had an unusually shaped skull. There was nothing wrong with his brain at all, but he played up to the crowd like he was something less than human but greater than ape. The crowd was always amazed at his ability to almost master simple human actions. Like the way he could smoke a cigarette if someone in the audience would light it for him. If you want to know the truth, he was actually a quite skilled violinist."

I had nothing to add to this conversation. Absolutely nothing. I kept drinking my beer and tried to listen to what he was telling me. "It is all about perception," he went on. "The crowd wants to see

something unusual, maybe something unusually sad, and that sadness might loosen their pockets a little for the hard lives they perceive us to have, but mostly it makes them thankful that they have ten fingers and toes. So most of us made a pretty good living by just being."

I'll admit, the idea of it sounds nice. Not having to kill yourself in a factory, or trying to convince people to buy some useless junk. Getting paid to just live. It sounds nice, but what good does that do a normal guy like me. Like I could gamble until someone cuts off my hands to settle a debt or something, and then I could try to convince Janine to get on steroids and maybe her fuzz would turn into a full beard. Then we could go on the road together and people might pay to watch me get drunk and pour myself shots with my feet. It's not an option for a regular guy like me.

He's right about that perception thing going a long way, though. The way you look at the person you're with, the person you think you love, changes over time. When you're first with someone, everything is milk and cookies. You love everything about them, even their imperfections. But I guess like everything else, you get used to it, you get comfortable, you take things for granted. Things you used to like become a problem. You start saying things, terrible things, things you will regret as much as ever having that first sip of beer with your father while fishing on Lake George, and not liking the taste of it but liking how it made you feel close to him, and just like drinking, once you start, once you get to a point where you say these terrible things, you can't stop. You can't stop until she's gone.

I sat there in this guy's living room and couldn't stop thinking about Janine. I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to say something. "Do you got a phone I can use?" I said.

"Sure," he said. "It's in the kitchen next to the refrigerator. Let me grab us another beer."

But I didn't get up. I didn't know what I could say to her. I couldn't even tell her I was a month sober. But even if I was, what would that matter? What would that change? She would say something like, that's nice, or even, that she's proud of me. What more could I expect? That she'd take me back over it? It wouldn't change our past. I could tell her that I've changed. That I'd be good. That I'd be the me that used to rub her body with lotion after she showered. That I wouldn't be the me that threw her pot of marigolds out the bedroom window for a reason I can't even remember now, the me that told her to wax her fucking lip. But if I really wanted to be honest with myself, I'd know this wasn't possible. I'd know it'd be a matter of time before things went back to how they were.

He came back with a fresh glass in each hand. "This beer," he said, "it's a style called oude geuze. It's naturally fermented and quite sour. Almost like vinegar."

Even vinegar sounded fine to me. We sat and talked. He mostly talked. And we drank more beer. He told me more about the sideshow, and more about beer. I didn't sell him a magazine subscription, and he didn't tell me if that beard was real.

## THE BREAKING POINT | *Colleen Rodman*

It comes in the creak of your bed  
after so many years of quiet, flawless function.  
It is the implied defeat  
in the mattress's eventual squeak  
of protest, after rebounding from impact  
every night, every morning, every  
spontaneous and inevitable afternoon.  
You believed you could go on this way.  
Its coils were loaded on any given day,  
and it held its shape under the weight.  
You even rotated it every few months  
to give the parts hardest hit a break.  
The frame was oak and bolted:  
your fortress, canopied and draped,  
and you never felt it shudder even once  
in all the years of abuse  
it endured for your wild itch,  
and all the compensatory  
measures that you take.  
Until today.  
It came in the creak of your bed  
when you crawled in at 4 or 5 AM  
and collapsed to the old plush horizontal plane,  
and heard the  
Doubt  
that the exhaustion hosts  
escape from a hard space between  
the headboard and the old oak posts.

UNTITLED PHOTOGRAPH | *Jin Bynum*



## THE STORM | *Garin Wally*

An orchestra enters the room;  
A soundtrack for the match.  
Low and muffled tones echo softly  
Fading in slow  
But come on hard.  
Soft pitter-pattering hats  
With an occasional  
CLAP!

Wind chime vibes,  
And bass!

Corners are vacated for  
Electric kickboxing.  
Bombs fall on distant London  
And pulsing veins on beat  
Its war in a bowling ally  
And someone is blowing his nose.  
Round after round  
The sweat drips off the beaten  
marshmallow faces.  
Punches thrown late into the night  
Synced with ominous nocturne.

Flashbulbs at an air show  
Strobe reprises of day,  
Photography in the fourth dimension  
flashes the history of man in an instant.

## THE THORNY BRANCH | *Steven P. Pody*

Neanderthal, you silly man,  
how is it that you guttered out?  
When Cro the Ho was sapient,  
you were the tougher, and had smarts:  
    Surviving as some chunky skulls,  
the scientists measure, in our time,  
a larger brain than modern heads:

    A hominid, ...but Oh You Kid...!  
Your timing wasn't quite the best  
to be a European.  
But a big, robustus corpus  
    would have been

    advantageous, per diem.  
The rage of the age was ice,  
but ice reflects thee not today.  
I look for heroes on my cereal boxes,  
    and you're not there. Nowhere.  
You're not in my shirt or shoe size,  
and you're not in my acid-washed genes.  
Wherever did you go?

It is said that you were a lesser competitor  
because you weren't very social.  
Cooperation deters not the rugged individualist!  
Unless it does. No names on your dance card...  
Pushed into the margin lands, perhaps  
you answered evolution's ad for a job  
as a race of Yeti or Sasquatch.  
Maybe you intermingled a bit, after all,  
and survive as part of the very intelligent,  
hairier people of the Earth.  
Maybe some passing extraterrestrials  
took pity on you, and you colonized  
a fairer planet, producing trinkets and selling  
Mammoth burgers for intergalactic space-ways.  
What a mystery! What a tragedy!  
Bad times, bad neighbors,  
    and bad karmageddon.



Extinction sucks. Whisper to me  
your echoes. Tell me you are hiding  
in the deep roots of the Himalayas. Tell me  
you ran into a god of your own, who cared.  
Tell me of the greatness you could have been!  
Together, eventually, we might have been awesome.  
As it was, Cro-Magnon talent manifested thusly:  
Brother,  
over eons, savage conquest or slavery wasn't  
our cruelest gift.  
That would be  
oblivion.

## MANICURE | *Julia Doty*

Hospitals must be exciting for doctors  
Running from dying child to dying child  
But we are already dead. In limbo  
Poised at the edge of ultimate terror  
Waiting for forgiveness and release.  
Time is pushing forward  
And we are sitting still.

I am eleven and Christmas is over.  
Waiting, waiting in my ridged metal chair  
That cradles me with steel arms.  
It will wheel me anywhere, but where I want to be.  
In the stark, sterile white room,  
Where they feed me tasteless bread,  
They spray the walls and floor with antiseptic  
On a strict schedule  
To kill anything that might be growing.  
It invades and stings my nose.

...

Christina waits just like me  
In a room down the hall that's just like mine.  
She loved Christmas.  
We wait for it to come back to us  
And paint each other's nails  
Beside the decorated pine left behind.  
Red with sunny yellow spots  
Open-sky blue  
Cheerful, healthy pink.  
I brought the red polish today.

But a ghost came to visit her this morning,  
The tail of his starched white coat vanishing at the door  
As he moves on,  
And Christina will not hear me anymore.  
"I can paint my own nails" she insists,  
But she can't.  
The paralysis is spreading to her arms  
And the wand will not stay in her fingers.

The effort of holding on  
Is more than she can stand.

“They said that they would pray for me”  
Her voice quivers.  
Beside her bed in the arms of the living evergreen  
Rainbows of reflections hang from strings.  
Christina stretches sideways  
For the dainty crimson glass  
To crush it in her fist.  
But she is too fragile.

Tears once trapped behind her eyes are not in her power.  
Gloss over and blur the colors  
Stumbling down the cliff side  
I sit and stutter  
Because I am useless and eleven.  
My “It’s alright”  
Blindly seeking deaf ears.

The legs of the tree, not planted in the earth,  
Could not keep their stance  
And topple to the pull of her misery.  
The faint screech of breaking glass  
Crushed between the branches and her hand.  
She stares at shimmering shards sticking out of her palm  
And the blood bubbling up  
Streaming down her wrist in dark ribbons.

I want to stand and run to her  
But my legs won’t hear me  
They never do.  
Soon I am pushed to the hall  
By the white ghosts flooding in  
To wash Christina out.

...

The heavy sallow door locks me away  
I look in every direction  
Door after door silently closing  
Down the infinite hallway the eyes and ears shut  
As Christina screams and screams.  
My voice cannot reach,  
I don't have the power to make them smile  
Because I am useless and eleven.

Guess I have to paint my own nails today;  
Christina is lost.

## THE TRADITION | *Kelly Cunningham*

With Everest in the distance, unearthly  
and unseen, up past clouds, the mountain  
fingertip touching Lord Shiva's fingertip  
on the next life's level, he roamed—his  
sights set on manhood and shaking earth,  
meanwhile the sea pushed the mountain  
higher a little each year. Rhododendron  
and bamboo riding the wind: chilled, fierce,  
wet, fertile—he roamed the cocoa road  
with a sweet jujube stem in his hat,  
his sights set on her, with the deep plum red  
lips, her fruit ripe on the vine. When he saw  
her he would tip his hat and smile; the way  
he had heard the old stories of how his father  
tipped a hat to his mother, the way a flower  
tips to the bees buzz.

## THE GOSPEL OF DARWIN | *John F. Buckley*

They say Adam's gills blossomed, and he crept upon the sand, eyes growing bulbous and forward, fins scraping, then slapping, then punching the ground, fish scales fluttering away like dry leaves from Eden's trees in autumn. He croaked at the stars and slept.

Adam dreamed in two dimensions for the first time, fantasies of planar movement and the fresh tyranny of gravity. Eve left the lagoon across the other shore, circled around, and collapsed alongside his heaving ribs, air sacs flexing in sync.

Nestled, basking in temperatures perpetually perfect for ectotherms, they ignored the shadowy vine writhing their way from the periphery, until with no lies, no seduction, just a flash of fangs and white palate, the serpent brought wisdom with two lumps in its throat.

\*\*\*

In the second scroll of the reptile Torah, Moses the crocodile was born in a pet shop in Cairo and soon bored his owner, who flushed him away to the sewers lining the Nile, each pipe teeming with linen toilet paper, sodden reeds, waste and prey.

An eerie phosphorescence among the weeds shone his way. Even with his twisted jaw preventing elegant predation, Moses grew greatly, snapping at beetles, pale, eyeless rats, half-eaten shawarma plates, and the occasional errant golden calf.

Escaping the aquatic chariots and rooting snakes of the Pharaoh's sanitation workers, he made his way in the dark to the Red Sea, where he menaced shipping routes for four decades, commanding fear at his yards of bulk, his fifty ankle boots' worth of black hide.

\*\*\*

A peregrine stork from Galilee delivered infants, love, and Vlasic pickles to the meek, the leprous, and the poor, to the limping and lisping and all those removed from the conventional spices and garnishes of the world, from the briny, garlicky kisses of community and bounty.

His fishing was legendary, but the stabbing of his beak and the shrill timbre of his calls pricked the necks of the alpha members of his flock. They tore out his pinions and pinned his wings to the fuselage of a giant balsa airplane, setting it aflame: "Here is your nest!" they cried.

The cinders from the pyre floated and rose in a mockery of flight, finally landing on the crests of onlookers, staining their feathers gray. Those marked by ashes soon hid their heads beneath cowls and wrote of their shame in illustrated parchment Audubon field guides.

\*\*\*

Beneath a crescent moon, Moe the mandrill wished upon a falling meteor, watched it land, and loped to the point of impact to discover a tome without pictures but filled with an attractive green curvilinear script, a finding that led him to clench prehensile toes in glee and awe.

Avid by nature, a fierce entrepreneur, he set forth five times a day to hawk his discovery, kicking down doors from Qatar to Zanzibar. His Brotherhood of the Onion Helmets soon swarmed like hornets, wrapping their queens in silent beeswax and velvet curtains.

After Moe passed, they unanimously elected the alley baker as his successor, a primate both sunny and shitty in turn. His chic followers continue the sales campaign, their children strapping hot red packages to their chests as they ride buses into the afterworld.

\*\*\*

But what's to be the final revelation? Kerchieved roaches teeming within Frigidaire cathedrals or nanotech pathogens waging jihad in the pleural cavities of fathers, sons, and sacred goats? What else will emerge to ape hominid genuflection in the Aesopian mirror?

Perhaps all flesh will fade to dust, leaving all holy mountains to the automatic bagel-slicer, the cross-cut saw, the robot bomb-sniffer and mp3 hymn-player. And with a set of 10 new commandments, "Resistance is futile" and "Kill John Connor," shiny new fables will come.

## COO COO CACHOO LOVE | Sharon DeMeyer

Bubbly blonde babes, searching for true love,  
Wild and crazy dog poop on your shoe love.

Tap into pale ale and slurp up the foam,  
Guzzle Sierra Nevada brew love.

Neil amid diamonds of sweet Caroline,  
Hot August nights humming song sung blue love.

Mysterious ghost girl down by the pond,  
Deathly liaisons turn of the screw love.

Thump on my rind and test me for ripeness,  
Lime colored stickiness honey dew love.

Tell me you love me in 59 words,  
Peruse fictional *News and Review* love.

Climbing up stiff stalks and nibbling my leaves,  
Panda bear dreams of tasty bamboo love.

Slather me gently with Vicks Vap-o-Rub,  
Night sweats and feverish ah-achoo love.

Bonded together in tight-fisted bliss,  
Never release me with super glue love.

Chunky meat simmering hot in the pot,  
Conquer my hunger with thick beef stew love.

Cream velvet petals of flowers in bloom,  
Nostrils flaring with Pepé Le Pew love.

Coating my surface in silky warm swirls,  
Melting milk chocolatey smooth fondue love.

John, Paul, George and Ringo down on all fours,  
Sharon has found her coo coo cachoo love.



UNTITLED PHOTOGRAPH | *Kate Holtzen*



## AFTER THE FIRE | *Kelly Cunningham*

My love, despite  
our 103 degree  
wedding, our  
fight in the rain  
when I sat on your  
windshield for  
two hours so you  
couldn't leave,  
and the hundreds  
of miles our feet  
hiked in unison,  
I still can't  
forget how  
we burst apart,  
the hot slice  
of air, how I still  
sometimes wake  
into the dark,  
thinking  
of you cooked  
in the garage,  
how the doors  
blew in.

For weeks your  
burns healed—  
first crude  
and bleeding,  
then ochre  
ooze shining,  
chafed beyond  
skin, a glare  
of film over raw  
licked surface.  
Someone had to scrub  
those wounds for  
you, so together  
we stood—

your moans, your  
tears washed  
down the shower  
drain, as I ripped  
at your newly  
burned skin.

## DAD'S ROSES | *Sharon DeMeyer*

My father, always preoccupied working the land, playing the field, feeding his addiction to alcohol, as if he had no responsibility to his children, or to their mother. Now, approaching eighty, he tends his roses, with such care and tenderness, I wish I could sprout petals, velvet and pale, so he might lean in, to take a closer look.

## **DACHAU, GERMANY | *Krissy Raymond***

Midnight iron gates clink like the guns hitting their belts  
Jagged gray gravel lines the ground that leads the next thousand in  
They have no idea that they will not sleep tonight or any night  
In their beds they will see sleeping bones turn to corpses

I am forever scared. I am forever hungry. I am forever awake.

Stone towers support the slaughter and the ammunition slices the skin  
Blood is water here and I need something to cook my oatmeal with  
The air is blue this time of year and the clouds are heavy felt  
Three times I have seen it change from red to blue to black to white

I am forever here. I am forever yearning. I am forever dying.

Tall pines surround the block to screen the smoke and smell from  
the neighbors  
Four bullets crack and my blood turns to ice  
A pile is growing and the grave must be dug deeper  
It is painful to see, horrible to hear but it will kill you to smell  
death's ash tray

I am forever bones. I am forever tears. I am forever confined.

## CLAYMORE | *Kurt Wooden*

Cutting coal-colored: a tiny box named from swords  
for its calling to maim bodies. And in their hands  
children hold them until the things burst like star light,  
finger-eating fire that eats, too, little bones, sloping shoulders;  
shrapnel buries itself in the wet graveyards of their chests.

## THE LEBANESE BUTCHER | Jennifer Ann Janisch

☛ I had only eaten testicles once, when the owner of a bar that I frequented during my short stay in a tiny Iowan town had invited me to her house for a Rocky Mountain Oyster cookout. Because I hadn't wondered about the sort of seafood a landlocked state could deliver, I hadn't suspected anything when biting into the deep-fried nugget, not until one of the hovering Iowans asked how I liked bull testicles. "Cause that's what you're eating," he had said.

Years later, my fiancé, Lucas, and I waited at the counter in Lebanese Butcher, a small grocery and meat market in Northern Virginia, trying to identify the large pieces of meat in the display case. Lucas pointed to a hunk and whispered, "I think that's liver." Another appeared to be a leg, though from what animal, we didn't know. Parts like *neck*, *loin*, *tongue*, and *brain*, were listed on a sign above the counter. I didn't see anything that resembled brains in the display, but I did see something that resembled intestines, and just beyond that, a tray of veiny, ovoid lumps that appeared to be testicles.

When Kheder, the owner of Lebanese Butcher, asked what I would like, I began to say *Rocky Mountain Oysters*, but not knowing if the euphemism was used by the Lebanese, I stopped and said *bull's balls*, then quickly, *testicles*. "I called yesterday," I added.

The day before, I had mentioned the Iowan testicle-eating experience to Lucas. Both curious as to the whereabouts of the food in the Northeast, we clicked away at our computers in the office we shared, shouting out the results of our research.

"The Japanese believe that testicles are an aphrodisiac!"

"There's a testicle festival in Montana!"

Other than a Web site requiring a minimum order of twenty pounds, we'd had no luck in finding a vendor. Twenty pounds seemed a bit much, though we did toy with the idea of having a testicle festival of our own, eventually nixing the notion when unable to produce a list of guests who would do more than gawk or prod. It was Lucas's idea to call butchers.

The first butcher shop that I had phoned ended up being an upscale gourmet meat store, though I didn't know that when I called. "We don't sell oysters," the woman had said, "but we sell scallops wrapped in bacon." When I clarified what I meant by oysters, she hung up.

But when I called Lebanese Butcher, Kheder, after listening to me stumble through my inquiry, proudly proclaimed that he did indeed serve the food, and subsequently mentioned the brains and spleens that

I might also be interested in. I had only understood half of what he said because of his accent and because of what I had thought was static but what ended up being, I realized the next day, the meat saw.

The man operating the saw pushed the meat through the buzzing blade like a shop kid with wood, the noise overpowering both the blare of Middle Eastern music and the banter between customer and clerk. Kheder grabbed a remote from behind the counter and lowered the music as I pointed to the tray of testicles and asked how one might prepare them. He began to run through the recipe and I hurriedly took notes while Lucas, who had a better ear for accents, occasionally translated his English.

Though Lebanese, Kheder could've passed as one of my Italian uncles. His skin color was more olive than brown, and he was burly but in a way congruent with a love of, rather than an overeating of good food. He gesticulated while he talked, but likely as an aid in my understanding rather than as a manner particular to him. When he said, for instance, that I must first take the skin off the testicles, he made a *pulling open* motion with his hands, and when subsequently telling me to cut the testicles in cubes, he gestured *cutting* by making chopping motions with his right hand into the palm of his left.

"You like me to show you?"

Before I could look to Lucas for clarification on what he asked, Kheder gestured me back behind the counter. I made my way past a woman at the register wearing a head scarf and onto the rubber-matted floor of the butcher area where Kheder reached into the display case. I had only known about the eating of bull testicles, but when he noted that the tray contained lamb testicles, I wondered as to other animals, like goats and pigs, and the fate of their loins. Kheder grabbed a handful of the lamb, gently slapped the testicles onto the cutting board by the meat saw, and then disappeared.

The man operating the saw, meanwhile, yelled, "I mix legs and chops for you," as the petite woman on the other side of the counter nodded and checked her watch. I moved into the corner, out of his way as he carried the meat from the saw to the scale. I stared at the lamb testicles on the slab, tried to catch glimpses of Kheder in the backroom, and looked curiously at Lucas on the other side of the counter. He shrugged and wandered through the aisles.

Kheder returned five or so minutes later, though with no explanation for where he had gone. I joined him at the cutting board and watched as he palmed one of the testicles and sliced its center like one would with a hard-boiled egg. He then began peeling back the purplish, fleshy skin marked with alpha waves of dark veins and



stippled with what looked like tiny hair follicles. The membranes clung to the meat, the task seemingly arduous.

Once the skin was removed, Kheder threw it into a plastic container by my feet. Looking down, I saw other clumps of meat in and around the container and instantly wondered about them, for in a place that wasted so little of an animal, I was curious as to what, other than testicle skins, was considered trash.

Kheder worked the skins off the rest, sweeping the exposed testicles—spongy and tan-colored—into a pile on the cutting board. He then grabbed the pile and headed for the backroom. I stayed behind, not knowing whether he intended for me to follow, but he soon poked his head out and waved me in. Until I walked into the backroom and saw that it was a kitchen, I hadn't understood exactly what was happening, that he was actually going to cook the testicles for me.

The kitchen, about the size of a hallway, was hot, particularly next to the industrial stove, where I was standing. Pans hung above the stove and sink. On the back wall, large jugs of spices with masking tape labels marking them as *Bylaves*, *Cinamon*, *Hell*, and *Osfour*, among others, haphazardly filled the shelves. I had assumed that *Bylaves* was a misspelling of bay leaves, considering the misspelling of cinnamon, but I had no clue as to what *Hell* and *Osfour* were.

Kheder threw the testicles in a pot with water to boil them, adding in black pepper, lemon and onion slices, and a cinnamon stick. Then he disappeared again, perhaps to help the meat saw man at the counter. I peered into the pot, watching the bubbles begin to form. Just when he returned, a mound of foam soared to the brim of the pot. With a long ladle, Kheder began skimming some sort of clumpy substance from the surface. When I asked him what that was, he stuttered, searching for the word, and then smiled and said something like, "You know, the stuff, I don't know English word." That *stuff* kept rising to the top of the foam, and Kheder kept scooping it off and emptying it onto a plate before me. I examined it, wondering if I could figure out what it was. At first, I thought that it might be blood, because in recipes that I had read the day before in regard to cooking Rocky Mountain Oysters, blood was removed through boiling.

But Kheder was a *halal* butcher, which meant that the meat he served was in accordance with Islamic law. *Zabiha*, the proper Islamic method for slaughtering an animal, involves reciting a short prayer to Allah before the slaughter and draining all the blood from the animal thereafter, as Muslims are not permitted to consume animal blood. It was possible that the blood from the testicles was not something drained during the slaughter, and that Kheder was thus removing

the blood during the cooking process. But this seemed unlikely considering that he didn't know the English word for the substance; as a butcher, *halal* or otherwise, he would presumably know the word *blood*. My best guesses as to the substance were not ones that I dwelled on, largely because I had planned on eating the testicles when I arrived home.

When Kheder seemed satisfied with the abatement of *stuff* surfacing, he took the pot to the sink and carefully drained the water. Returning to the stove, he threw some oil in a pan and raised the heat. The testicles flew in and the flames flew up, with Kheder tossing in some salt and garlic powder before tilting the pan, tossing them around, and pouring them onto a plate.

I followed Kheder out of the kitchen, not the way we had come in, but through another door beside the shelves of spice jugs, leading to an adjoining restaurant. At a counter station just before the seating area, Kheder garnished the plate with tomatoes, turnips, goat cheese, and pita bread as I peeked through the swinging saloon-like doors on the side wall which separated the restaurant from the grocery. I was searching for Lucas.

"Here," Kheder said, cutting my search short. "You and friend pick out soda and eat, no charge." I protested, but he tossed the plate on a table and returned to the butcher counter.

I found Lucas outside, smoking a cigarette. I waved from the door.

"The guy cooked the balls! We're going to eat them here!"

Despite there being room for only a handful of tables, the restaurant half of Lebanese Butcher sported a massive fountain on its side wall. A string of lights encircled it, from which hung a seemingly displaced flower pot. Behind me, on the service station counter where Kheder had dressed up the little darlings, was a hookah. In front of me, was The Plate.

I mentioned the lack of forks to Lucas, and after debating whether it was custom to use our hands or if Kheder had merely forgotten them, we guessed the former and filled our small pita slices with the testicles and garnishes. The first thing I tasted was the pita bread and the goat cheese, as my small bite had yet to reach the testicles in the bread's pocket. But I bit directly into a testicle in my next bite. Lucas and I looked at each other.

I asked him what he thought it tasted like.

"It reminds me of chicken hearts," he said. I was surprised to hear that he had eaten chicken hearts before. "When my grandma cooked Thanksgiving dinner," he added, "she cooked the giblets separately. I guess they were turkey hearts, then."

He took another bite of the pita, as did I, though I tried more

carefully to isolate the different tastes in my mouth. The testicles were salty, oily, and had a spongy texture, tasting much like they looked.

"It tastes like chicken," I said. "But greasier."

The truth was that there was nothing particularly abnormal about the taste. Admittedly, I was disappointed, having wanted some clear distinction between this food and other meats normally eaten. The testicles, in fact, could've passed as a greasy attempt at some alternative Italian meatball. Had they been covered in tomato sauce, I doubt that any of my uncles would've given them a second look.

After we had finished eating, Lucas and I waited with the other customers as they ordered their *halal* meat. Kheder looked at me and held up his hand in what was seemingly a goodbye, and I was confused and put off by his dismissal. As I was about to turn and leave, however, the gesture changed. *Come*, he said.

Behind the counter, Kheder handed me a small, laminated card that contained details on the slaughterhouse he owned some forty miles away.

"Call me and I take you to visit."

I think he asked me then if I was scared, though I couldn't be sure, as Lucas wasn't near enough to translate. I shook my head, hoping that I had correctly interpreted the question. Kheder smiled.

## DECLARATION OF BANKRUPTCY | *Colleen Rodman*

In fiscal terms,  
we were done before the rent was due.  
It happened this way:  
We built credit  
on moments we saved  
not knowing, not asking, not sharing our space.  
We took out a loan on  
Optimism!  
To invest in a  
Future!  
We paid our debts in nominations  
of needless nights alone,  
cold unhappy dinners,  
and faked climaxes.  
We bought stock in each others'  
Company  
and then the frauding began:  
Stashing away in private accounts  
our dividends  
(the gestures such as anniversaries),  
laundering to neighbors, coworkers, former lovers—  
“friends.”  
Time! Such a fickle currency:  
Inflation, in this country,  
left us nursing deep gashes in purse-hearts.  
The eviction notice came in the form of the hide-a-bed couch.  
You say  
our pay stubs, I may have noticed,  
always read “non-negotiable.”  
We didn’t buy our nights, our nights  
bought us out.  
The heart = eminent domain.

## THE WATERMAN'S LAMENT | *Kenneth Fries*

In summer air off Tilghman Island  
Rebecca chugs through Dogwood Harbor

Crusty Skipjack Captain Wade  
Cranked up sail in settling weather

That old Skipjack has been dredging oysters  
in the Choptank  
for a hundred years  
reefed against December gales  
bringing home the plentiful and sweet

Alas this evening  
Captain dredges only tourists  
from the Eastern Shore  
grand banks and bars  
few oysters can be found

Over-fished by watermen like him  
killed by run-off from the condos and the farms  
and harangues from short-gain politicians

Distressed oysters struggle in the dead zones  
of the Chesapeake

Fading now the rugged art of dredging under sail

Captain had a crab boat back a while  
Trot lines working eel bait  
'Til the Asian market opened up for eels  
Captain could not pay the price

Turned instead to chicken necks  
(crabs like the bloodiest)  
even went for lips of bulls

Once Captain drove down South and bought  
a ton of tongues of Smithfield hogs

It is no good for watermen. They face a fickle market,  
city folks who want their crabs in May or June  
when they are small and cheap  
can't hold on 'til fall  
for luscious large ones, sweet and dear

So Captain slowly spins the wheel  
like an erring mariner in mist

His weathered voice carries over lowered sail  
if not an oyster  
he can dredge a tale

Folks will pay to hear his wit  
absorb the salty water life more reckless than their own  
gains and losses vividly recalled

They want a piece of that old Skipjack's wooden mast  
carved as a decoy, sported on the mantle ... but now

Captain sails for tourists  
only when the sky is fair

He knows the breeze will slacken with the dusk

No Asian oysters will refresh the Bay

He glances at his makeshift crew  
hoists a lawyer joke or two

Turns Rebecca home to stay

**LIFE'S WORK** | *Timothy O'Meara*



## THE PROSPECT OF THE FALL | *Corey Gruber*

How welcome they are, those late September gales  
carting in autumn on long gusts of almond breath,  
turning greens to goldens in cooling groves  
of fruit and nut where, slowly and little  
by little, brittle boughs  
lay down their dog day labors,  
their drying veins, and feather the land  
in fluttering wisps of hansa yellow.

Already that scent bemuses school children  
about costumed gambol among bales  
adorned by scarecrows and pumpkins  
whose faces have been drawn or carved  
with the rigid angles of fruition.  
Already they sense the dry, leafy  
death of August  
and exchange it for the blushing table set  
complete with candied yams and deviled eggs.  
Even then can they taste that chatty joy  
in mother's kitchen, the budding rum cake  
oven lit, and the season's serenity  
in stewing pine needles  
on frosty, holy nights.

Here comes the harvest,  
that sunburnt mirth,  
the riches of rising early!

Here those sunsets, setting smoky,  
tasting of salmon and barley ale  
beyond tufts of itinerant amber  
and a horizon reddening. Here



moon rays in the obscure  
escort of cloud-tors  
cresting in airy night,  
the whirl of hollow wind  
and the score of brushwood  
upon sealed panes,  
prompting some coarse palm  
to cover some cold breast  
with brooding recompense.

## NORTHWEST FROM MAURITIUS | *Kenneth Fries*

Like love, perishable, it stretches.  
Africa, this dry vast land  
lies quiet in the desert light,  
rose-yellow in the warming day,  
below the lifted wing,  
beyond green hills of Kenya.

I imagine herdsman with their ragged goats  
wandering the parched ground;  
old people, young in years,  
cracking with despair,  
drink down diminished pools,  
their consolation in the desert night.

But farther north  
the fragile skin is slightly parted  
by little strings of water  
uncoiling toward the sea,  
and at Khartoum the muddy bands converge;  
toward Egypt swells the River Nile.

I see black land along its banks,  
and clustered tiny farms  
fed by the constant stream,  
generous, like love.

## **WATERSHED CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES**

### ***Geoff Baker***

Originally from southern California, Baker teaches literature in the English department at Chico State. In his spare time, he plays guitar and travels.

### ***Cliff Benjamin***

Benjamin is a 35 year old returning to Chico State to get the English degree he regretted never getting. This is his first semester back in 10 years. He is a native of Chico and hates writing about himself.

### ***John F. Buckley***

Raised in the Detroit area, Buckley has lived in California since 1992. He teaches English at Orange Coast College and Santiago Canyon College while doing some writing and editing. He often isn't sure which to pursue: awkward intensity or dreamy mindlessness. Knee-jerk anxiety isn't quite cutting it.

### ***Kelley R. Burnett***

Though a native Californian, Burnett has always felt that Portland, Oregon is home. She gets a little too riled up about fall and is a sucker for anything "pumpkin" flavored or inspired. Though most of her time is spent working at a flower shop (and consequently wondering what she will actually do with her English degree), this winter, she is resolved to keep a tiny army of succulents alive in her apartment, improve her vocabulary, and get better at telling the truth. All in all, her heart is swollen and her fingers are crossed.

### ***Jin Bynum***

Bynum is in his second year at Chico State. He's an English major with a concentration in publishing and a minor in photographic studies. What started out as more of a hobby became something that he loves because it provides a way for him to show others how he sees the world.

### ***Desiree Coutinho***

Coutinho lives in Weaverville, California.

### ***Kelly Cunningham***

Cunningham is an English education major and plans on teaching high school English. She has been married for 12 years and has a 4½ year-old daughter. Besides writing poetry, she is a piano accompanist at a church in Yuba City, and she sings opera with a small regional opera company. Cunningham is also part of a poetry writing group in Nevada City, and poetry is a very important part of her life.

### ***Sharon DeMeyer***

DeMeyer graduated from Chico State with a BA in English in 1996. She is currently a master's student in creative writing.

### ***Julia Doty***

Doty is a junior at Chico State. She is working on a major in psychology and a minor in creative writing. She has a great passion for poetry and fiction; it has always been her dream to become a published writer.

### ***Kenneth Fries***

Fries has been living in Chico for the past five years with his wife, Janet, since retiring as a federal attorney with the US Agency for International Development, in Washington, DC. He still does some consulting work on development projects in Africa for the International Law Institute in Washington. He has been writing poetry for the last 15 years, and is inspired by travel, time for reflection, and encouragement from other writers in Chico.

### ***Emily Grelle***

Grelle is an English major and will be graduating this spring. One movie she would like to be turned into a full-length book is *It's a Wonderful Life*.

### ***Corey Gruber***

Although Gruber submitted a poem for this submission, he claims that he typically writes fiction. In his writing he likes to examine the abrasions of human interactions in the realist trend. Currently, he is compiling selected pieces of short fiction for his thesis project at Chico State, where he plans to graduate this spring with an MA in English. Next year he plans to attend an MFA program somewhere and continue toward his endeavor of teaching creative writing at the university level. Currently, he teaches one section of English 220, Beginning Creative Writing at Chico State.

### **Justin Herrmann**

Herrmann works as a janitor in Antarctica.

### **Kate Holtzen**

Holtzen grew up in a small town in the middle of nowhere. She's been surrounded by sunshine, love, and art since before she can remember. She was in band from 3rd grade, and she has no shame in admitting her love for classical music and marching bands. "I didn't always feel this way, but you can only deny your true colors for so long." After graduating high school she expanded her artistic endeavors into different areas. She is currently working on her photography skills as well as her singing and writing. Due to her experiences, she feels that art is often overtly underappreciated, but subconsciously irreplaceable. "It is the driving force and the core of humanity. It holds the power to express what words alone cannot."

### **Jennifer Ann Janisch**

Janisch is an English instructor and MFA candidate at George Mason University and is also the creative nonfiction editor of *So To Speak*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Prick of the Spindle*, *Fringe Magazine*, *Tiny Lights*, and other such journals. She is currently working on a memoir.

### **Joanne Lowery**

Lowery's poems have appeared in many literary magazines, including *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Eclipse*, *Smartish Pace*, *Cimarron Review*, *Atlanta Review*, and *Poetry East*. Her most recent collection is *Jack: A Beanstalk Life* from Snark Publishing. She lives in Michigan.

### **Malama MacNeil**

Malama MacNeil is a native of the Central Valley, California, though she lived five years on the Shenandoah River in Virginia, and four years on the windward side of Oahu, in Kailua, Hawaii. She works, writes, dances, gardens, and volunteers in Chico, and is currently following a calling to serve as a doula to the dying, incorporating hands-on healing, practical support, story-telling, and spiritual practice. She has contributed poems to *Watershed* several times in the past.

### **Heather Morse**

Morse is 24 years old and will graduate from Chico State in spring 2011 with a bachelor's degree in English and a minor in creative writing. Following that she plans on attending graduate school in

Chico and becoming an English teacher. Born in Redding, CA, she moved to Chico two years ago to attend the university. She spends too much time in the kitchen, too much time at the gym, and too much time reading books. Life is just something that exists between chapters. She also enjoys writing and traveling, but likes to call Chico her home.

***Timothy O'Meara***

O'Meara is a senior at Chico State, majoring in graphic design. He has always loved to write, but has never really had anything published before.

***Steven P. Pody***

Pody lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

***Krissy Raymond***

Raymond is a third-year English education major and is getting her minor in creative writing. Over the past year she has pushed herself to develop as a writer. She has never felt more inspired than she does at this time in her life, and she is thrilled to be able to submit her writing to *Watershed*.

***Colleen Rodman***

Rodman is a Chico State sophomore majoring in English, who enjoys flying kites, riding trains, talking to strangers, and going home to write about it. She can usually be found meandering around downtown, making up stories about staircases, and finding empty lots beautiful. Every few days or so, she wishes life was a musical.

***Garin Wally***

Wally is an undeclared freshman at Chico State, considering a BS in plant biology and a minor in creative writing; poetry. Self-taught, and influenced by the works of Dante, Greek mythology, Romantic, Modern, and Beat Generation poets, he has only been writing poetry since March 2009. He loves nature, Guy Richie movies, and espresso. This is his first time in print.

***Kurt Wooden***

Wooden writes and lives in Chico, California.

