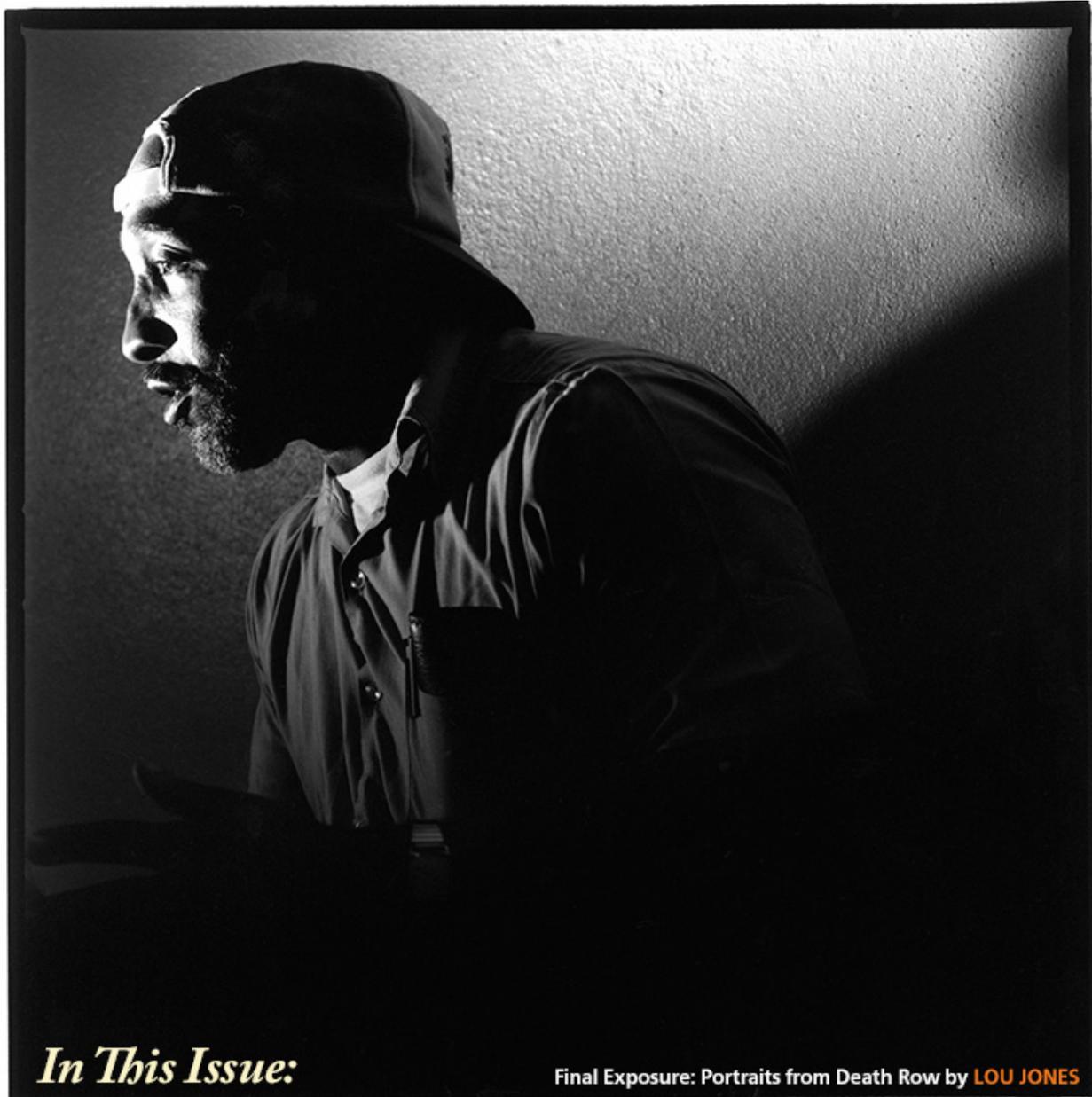


# SOLSTICE

A MAGAZINE OF DIVERSE VOICES

FALL/WINTER 2012-13



*In This Issue:*

Final Exposure: Portraits from Death Row by **LOU JONES**

## Contributors



HELEN ELAINE LEE was educated at Harvard College and Harvard Law School. Her first novel, *The Serpent's Gift*, was published by *Atheneum* in 1994 and her second novel, *Water Marked*, was published by *Scribner* in 1999. She recently finished *A Life Without*, a novel about the lives of ten people who are incarcerated in two neighboring U.S. prisons, and *A The Hard Loss*, a novel about a DNA exoneree's first week of freedom after 22 years of incarceration for a crime he did not commit.

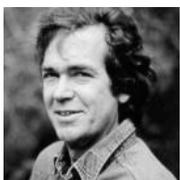
Stories from *A Life Without* have appeared in *Callaloo*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Hanging Loose*, *Best African American Fiction 2009* (*Bantam Books*), and *solsticelitmag.com*. She is Professor of Fiction Writing in MIT's Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies and a Writer in Residence with the Solstice Low-Residency MFA program at Pine Manor. A member of the Board of Directors of PEN New England, she serves on its Freedom to Write Committee and volunteers with its Prison Creative Writing Program.



SEAN CONWAY holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of New Orleans and teaches writing, literature, and film at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. His fiction has appeared in *Digital Americana Magazine*, *Collected Stories*, *Fiction Warehouse*, *Perigee*, and other print and online literary journals. His work has been nominated for StorySouth Magazine's Million-Writers Award, and he is a former recipient of the Jack Kerouac Award, funded by the Kerouac Estate. Most recently, he has been awarded a Norman Mailer Center Fellowship. He has studied writing with Andre Dubus III, Jill McCorkle, Steve Almond, Joseph Boyden, and Sigrid Nunez, among others. He lives near Boston, Massachusetts, where he is currently at work on a new novel.



KARIMA GRANT is author of two children's books and a contributor to two young adult anthologies and on-line fiction journals and blogs. Karima Grant lives, writes and revises in Dakar, Senegal, with her husband and four children. She is also co-founder and Executive Director of ImagiNation Afrika, Africa's first children's museum.



JOSÉ SKINNER'S fiction has appeared in *Solstice*, *Third Coast*, *Witness*, *Colorado Review*, *Quarterly West*, and many others; his collection *FLIGHT AND OTHER STORIES* was a Discover Great New Writers at Barnes & Noble selection, a finalist for the Western States Book Award for fiction, and won recognition from the Latino Literary Hall of Fame. Before becoming a fiction writer and earning his MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he wrote for the Mexican television company Televisa and worked as a Spanish/English translator and interpreter. He currently teaches English at the University of Texas-Pan American and directs the university's MFA program in creative writing.



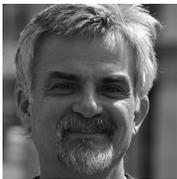
JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS is the author of six chapbooks, winner of the HEART Poetry Award, and finalist for the Pushcart and Rumi Poetry Prizes. He has served as Acquisitions Manager of *Ooligan Press* and Publicist for *Three Muses Press* and holds an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in Book Publishing. Some of his over 200 previous or upcoming publications include: *Inkwell*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Cream City Review*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *The Evansville Review*, *RHINO*, *Rosebud*, *Ellipsis*, *Flint Hills Review*, and *Poetry Quarterly*.



BENJAMIN A. DOTY graduated from the MFA program at the University of Minnesota in 2011. His short fiction has appeared in *Literary Imagination*, *the Colorado Review* and *Southword*. He is working on a short story collection.



JEAN TROUNSTONE is an author/editor of five published books, professor at Middlesex Community College and a prison activist. She worked at Framingham Women's Prison for ten years where she directed eight plays and published *Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women's Prison* about that work. Her piece, "Meeting Karter," won an Honorable Mention for non-fiction in Solstice's 2010 Summer issue. For Boston Magazine, she recently wrote "For the Massachusetts Parole Board, It's Time for a Change," November, 2012, and blogs weekly at "Boston Daily." She takes apart the criminal justice system brick by brick on Justice With Jean at [www.jeantrounstone.com](http://www.jeantrounstone.com).



ROLAND MERULLO was born and raised in Revere, Massachusetts and graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy and Brown University (B.A. 1975, M.A. 1976). He has been a Peace Corps volunteer, worked with the U.S. Government in the former Soviet Union, driven a cab in Boston, worked as a carpenter, and taught at Bennington and Amherst Colleges as well as other colleges. Since 1999 he has made his living solely from his writing.

He has published eleven novels and four books of non-fiction. His memoir, *Revere Beach Elegy*, won the Massachusetts Book Award in Non-Fiction. *Revere Beach Boulevard* was a finalist for the L.L. Winship/PEN New England Prize, and *In Revere, In Those Days* won the Maria Thomas Fiction Award in 2003 and was a Booklist Editor's Choice. His first book, *Leaving Losapas*, was a B.Dalton Discovery Series choice, and was optioned for film by John Turturro. *Revere Beach Boulevard* was optioned by the actor Tony Musante, and *Golfing with God* has just been re-optioned by GemFilms. A recent novel, *Breakfast with Buddha*, was nominated for the Dublin International IM-PAC Literary Award, and has gone into its fourteenth printing.



TERRI SUTTON lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She has written reviews for the *Next Act Theater* and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. She earned a MFA from Vermont College and currently teaches in the English department at Milwaukee Area Technical College. Her essay, "Am I Ugly" appeared in the anthology "Age Ain't Nothing But a Number: Black Women Explore Midlife." Her essay did not appear in any literary journal.



DAWN POTTER directs the Frost Place Conference on Poetry and Teaching, held each summer at Robert Frost's home in Franconia, New Hampshire. She works extensively as a visiting writer in the schools and as a freelance editor for literary and academic presses. Dawn is the author of two collections of poetry--*Boy Land & Other Poems* (Deerbrook Editions, 2004) and *How the Crimes Happened* (CavanKerry Press, 2010)--with a third, *Same Old Story*, due out from CavanKerry in 2014. She has also published a memoir, *Tracing Paradise: Two Years in Harmony with John Milton* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), which won the 2010 Maine Literary Award in Nonfiction. Twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize, she has received grants and fellowships from the Elizabeth George Foundation, the Writer's Center, and the Maine Arts Commission. New poems and essays appear in *the Sewanee Review*, *the Threepenny Review*, *Guernica*, and many other journals in the United States and abroad. Her anthology, *A Poet's Sourcebook: Writings about Poetry, from the Ancient World to the Present*, is forthcoming from Autumn House Press in January 2013.



MICHELLE BLAKE has published poetry and essays in *Ploughshares*, *Southern Review*, *Seneca Review*, *More*, *The New York Times* and a number of other publications. She is also the author of three novels—*The Tentmaker*, *Earth Has No Sorrow* and *The Book of Light*. Blake has taught writing at Tufts University, Stanford University, Warren Wilson College and Goddard College. She received a MTS from Harvard Divinity School and a MFA from Goddard.



DIANE GLANCY is professor emeritus at Macalester College. Her newest collection of essays, *The Dream of A Broken Field*, was published in 2011 by the *University of Nebraska Press*. Her latest collection of poems, *Stories of the Driven World*, was published by *Mammoth Press* in 2010. In 2009, she received an Expressive Arts grant from the Museum of the American Indian to write about the history of Indian education. A new poetry manuscript, *Report to the Department of the Interior*, is an offshoot of that grant. The poems published in this issue of Solstice are from that manuscript.



MAJOR JACKSON is the author of three collections of poetry: *Holding Company* (2010, Norton); *Hoops* (2006, Norton); and *Leaving Saturn* (2002, University of Georgia Press). He is a core faculty member of the Bennington Writing Seminars and a professor of English at University of Vermont.



D. NURKSE is the author of ten books of poetry. Recent awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.



DOLORES HAYDEN's books on the American landscape include *Building Suburbia and The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Her poems about places have appeared in many journals and anthologies including *The Yale Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Raritan*, and *Best American Poetry 2009*. She has published two poetry collections, *American Yard (2004)* and *Nymph, Dun, and Spinner (2010)* and received poetry awards from the Poetry Society of America, the New England Poetry Club, the Virginia Center for Creative Arts, and the Djerassi Foundation. She teaches at Yale.



WALLY SWIST's new book, *Huang Po and the Dimensions of Love*, was chosen by Yusef Komunyakaa as a co-winner in the Crab Orchard Series Open Poetry Competition, and will be published by *Southern Illinois University Press* in August 2012. His previous book, *Luminous Dream*, was chosen as a finalist in the 2010 FutureCycle Poetry Book Award, and his scholarly monograph, *The Friendship of Two New England Poets, Robert Frost and Robert Francis*, was published by *The Edwin Mellen Press* in 2009. He has been invited to record an audio book of his nature poetry with Berkshire Media Arts, *Open Meadow: The Poetry of Wally Swist*, released in the spring of 2012.



JOHN MCKERNAN, who grew up in Omaha Nebraska, is now a retired comma herder after teaching 41 years at Marshall University. He lives – mostly – in West Virginia where he edits *ABZ Press*. His most recent book is a selected poems, *Resurrection of the Dust*. He has published poems in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Virginia Quarterly Review* and many other magazines



CAROL ELLIS was born in Detroit, Michigan. She has her Ph. D. in English from the University of Iowa. Her latest publications are in *Zyzzva* and *San Pedro River Review*, and she has completed a new manuscript of poems. She lives under protest in the Central Valley of California.



SHARON A. FOLEY works as a school social worker and psychotherapist. She entered the Sisters of Mercy, an order of religious women, when she was eighteen and lived with them in community for twenty-nine years. She is a graduate of Simmons School of Social Work, Assumption College in counseling psychology, and Salve Regina University in English and elementary education.



JULIE EBIN has recently published poems in *Touch: The Journal of Healing* (forthcoming), *Off the Coast*, *Coin Flip Shuffle*, and *Getting Bi*. She is intrigued by the psychological and relational effects of illness and disability. Julie enjoys writing with children and dancing, among other pursuits.



MARGARET VIDALE returned to her childhood love of reading and writing poetry after retiring from teaching in 2011. Growing up, poetry was an escape from severe child abuse. Poetry has enabled her to release much of her early suffering and record the joy of later years.



SHELLEY SAVREN'S book, *The Common Fire*, was published by *Red Hen Press* in 2004. Her book, *The Wild Shine of Oranges* will be released by *Tebot Bach Press* in fall 2012. She holds an M.F.A. from Antioch University Los Angeles, and her work is widely published in literary magazines, including *Solo*, *Rattle*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Her awards include nine California Arts Council Artist in Residence grants, three National Endowment for the Arts regional grants, five artist fellowships from the City of Ventura, first place in the 1994 John David Johnson Memorial Poetry Award and a nomination for a Pushcart Prize. She lives in Ventura, California and is a full-time English Professor at Oxnard College.



AMY VANIOTIS is a freelance writer living in Portland, Oregon. She has poems forthcoming in *Nimrod* and *Poetry East*.



DENISE BERGMAN'S book, *Seeing Annie Sullivan*, poems based on the early life of Annie Sullivan, Helen Keller's teacher, was published in 2005 (*Cedar Hill Books*). It was translated into Braille and into a Talking Book in 2006. Her latest book, *The Telling* is forthcoming in 2013 from *Cervena Barva Press*). She also edited the anthology of urban poetry *City River of Voices* (*West End Press*, 1992). The first stanza of her poem *Red*, about a neighborhood near a slaughterhouse, is permanently installed in a public park in Cambridge, MA. Her series of poems called *Keyholes*, which combined the history of specific urban places with the present, resulted in an award-winning widely circulated photo/poetry installation. Denise was poetry editor of *Sojourner: A Women's Forum* and hosted a cable TV series called *Women in the Arts*. She has received several grants from the Puffin Foundation and the Massachusetts Cultural Council.



ROBERT SHREEFTER is a former college English professor who teaches visual arts, poetry and art education in the Art Education and the Integrating Teaching Through the Arts (ITA) programs at Lesley University. His interests are literature and literacy; and the relationship between the language of poetry and visual art. Much of his own work in printmaking uses poetry for inspiration, and poetry is often embedded in the artwork. He has also taught at the Art Institute of Boston, Massachusetts College of Art and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He has been a faculty member of Art New England. He has shown in galleries at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill; Lesley University; Castle Hill Truro, MA; Farm Gallery, Wellfleet, MA; Plum Gallery, Williamstown, MA; and galleries in Cambridge, England.



DAVID RADOVICH's poetry collections include *America Bound: An Epic For Our Time* (2007), *Canonicals: Love's Hours* (2009), and *Middle-East Mezze* (2011). His plays have been performed across the U.S., including six Off-Off-Broadway, and in Europe.



LOU JONES' eclectic career has spanned every format, film type, artistic movement and technological change. He maintains a studio in Boston, Massachusetts, and has photographed for Fortune 500 corporations, international companies and local small businesses including Federal Express, Nike and the Barr Foundation; completed assignments for magazines and publishers all over the world such as Time/Life, National Geographic and Paris Match; initiated long term projects on the civil wars in Central America, death row, Olympics Games and pregnancy; and published multiple books including *Final Exposure: Portraits from Death Row*, which chronicled

his six-year odyssey documenting men and women on death rows in the USA.

Jones has served on the boards of directors of numerous photographic associations, societies and museums, such as the American Society of Media Photographers, Photographic Resource Center and the Griffin Museum of Photography. He helped found the school Center for Digital Imaging Arts of Boston University and conceived the prestigious Griffin Museum's annual Focus Awards. Nikon has honored him as a "Legend Behind the Lens."

Jones has exhibited his eclectic imagery in colleges and schools such as Trinity College, Texas Tech University and New England College, and in collections at the Smithsonian Institution, DeCordova Museum and the African American Museum in Philadelphia. His photography is owned by various collections including the Fogg Museum, Wellesley College and the University of Texas.



## Staff

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## Editor's Note

This is a breakthrough issue for Solstice where we integrate more forcefully the power of the online format with literature and photography, and illustrate how online journals can promote juried literature rather than dilute it. We are thrilled with our new **updated web design**, which offers **mobile friendly interface** and alternative reading options for **e-readers and tablets**. Our new home page features a **slide show** of our authors and excerpts from their work. Also we're featuring new **Audio Author Chats**, the first one with **Roland Merullo**, author of the recent novel, *Lunch with Buddha*. Also, check out our new **Book Review section**; the first review by our nonfiction editor Richard Hoffman is on D. Nurkse's new poetry collection, *A Night in Brooklyn*. (Four of D. Nurkse's poems are in the poetry section of this mag.) Also, we feature a reactivation of our **new Blog** by Eugenio Volpe.

And surely you didn't miss on our **new Homepage** our **new cover**: a portrait by the famous photographer Lou Jones, from his lauded book *Final Exposure: Portraits from Death Row*. Click on the thumbnail images and you won't forget them. Read Lou Jones's artist's statement, and ponder.

And, of course, for this vital issue we continue to offer **vital literature of diversity** and **literature from the margins**. A few examples: in poetry, read Major Jackson, and also Diane Glancy, whose grant from the Museum of the American Indian has influenced her new poetry. Helen Elaine Lee writes from the point of view of an African American prisoner, echoing in some ways Lou Jones's photos, an echo that ricochets into nonfiction with Jean Trounstein's essay about her friendship with a woman released from prison.

Some of the lit we publish uses **humor and irony** to probe deeply, such as in Sean Conway's moving piece of self destruction, or Jose Skinner's loss of innocence story. Speaking of innocence, Roland Merullo's essay challenges concepts of innocence between student and teacher. And speaking of irony, read Dawn Potter's challenge to the loss of innocence in love.

There are many more rich pieces. Please **leave comments** for these fine authors.

And do check out our **new staff page** with their photos so you can get to know our ever-growing group of writers and other volunteers working together to promote diversity of all types in the arts. Also, we give deep thanks to our new Web developer/designer, Andrai Whitted.

So why not also check out our **donations page**?

To all, welcome to our community. Warmly, Lee Hope

# Photography

## Final Exposure: Portraits from Death Row

*Lou Jones*

### Artist's Statement

The twenty-seven inmates I photographed act as a metaphor for our criminal justice system.

The Final Exposure project actually started for me at about age 15 when I argued the issues of the death penalty with my father. Six years of my life have been devoted to documenting the unseen, unheard stories of an American subculture – people on death row. I wanted to see if art could make a difference. I realized before I began that we don't have to travel half way around the world to find some unique phenomenon or recently discovered civilization to pique our jaded curiosity. The problem of our government-sanctioned murder lives with us.

My crew and I endured bone-chilling snowstorms, cheap motels, greasy meals and having our bodies frisked in order to bring this story to light. We fraternized with some of the best legal minds in the country, and with as many of the most depraved. We explored the darkest side of the human condition even though it was our objective to humanize the people that the federal government and the states execute. We made sure we understood who was being killed in order to start a real debate about capital punishment. Many of the men/women are stoic when marching to their demise. But even though we admire the stamina that it takes to endure this ordeal in the super-macho environment, these are not heroic voyages these men are taking. And we must never be seduced into thinking otherwise.

*Lou Jones*



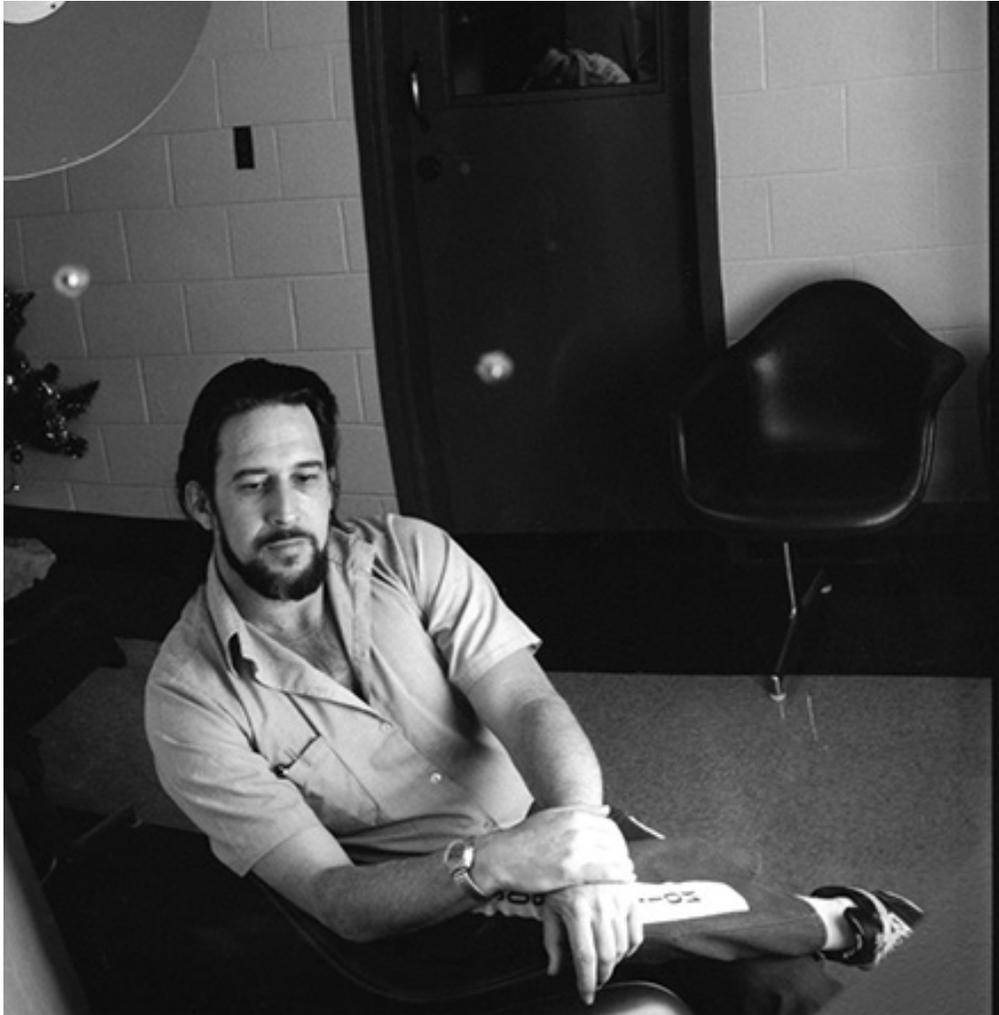
*Walter Lee Caruthers*



*Robert West*



*Pamela Lynn Perillo*



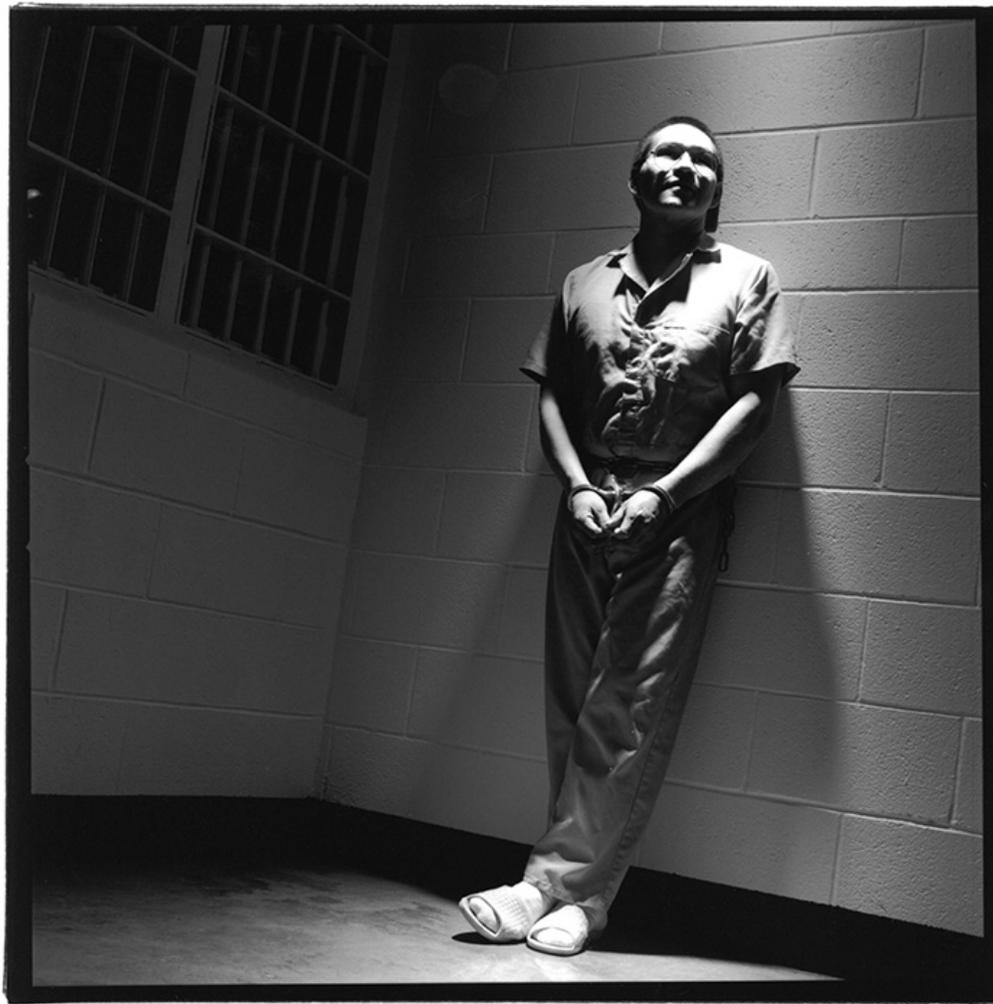
*Olen Hutchison*



*James Lee Beathard*



*Mumia Abu-Jamal*



*Lester Kills On Top*



*Edward Kennedy*



*Daniel Webb*



## **Fiction**

## **This Kind of Red**

*Helen Elaine Lee*

“Think of the good things, Avis,” the caseworker tells me. Keep alive that way.

So I close my eyes and try to remember colors.

My head used to be filled with counting things out and checking them off, with keeping track of all my time and all my chores. I made supermarket lists for just how much I could wheel home in my basket, when I was not allowed to drive. What all needed cleaning and cooking. And lists of homework and laundry and what the kids needed. New tennis shoes and leotards and backpacks and decent socks, and how much every thing cost, so I could ask Jerrell for the right money. Lists of what all I was supposed to do, and how many minutes I had to get all of it done right, to keep the peace. How much time before he got home.

But what’s the point of keeping track in here? Every day is that very same last one.

I try to think of colors, but not too many or too much. I try to do one at a time.

I knew green, but I think it has forgotten me.

Green is hard, but I try and remember July grass. And the just-coming leaves on the bushes at the edge of our corner lot, yellow-green and the size of your baby fingernail, the itty bitty fringe opening out from the bare dark of winter twigs.

And red. Red is easy.

There’s the red of the bricks of our building, growing up. There’s red and yellow trees way out there in the distance, it being October, so they say, it’s all the same to me. And there’s the sun, coming up and going down red, though I can’t see neither from my cell. And purple-red, like communion wine. Dark, but letting you see almost through.

And there’s blood, which they say is blue inside you and only red when it hits the air. It comes each month, or used to anyways, mocking with the reminder that you can still make life. But the good things. The good things. There’s the red of fresh tomatoes, pulling heavy on the vine, and the meat of strawberries bitten through.

I remember a cardinal I saw once, from the corner of my eye. Pay attention, Avis, it seemed to whisper, this can happen, this kind of red. It was gone so fast, and the flash of it, so surprising, so beautiful, it kind of hurt.

Red makes me think of Uncle Rush. He made it home after getting stabbed and laid there bleeding on his living room couch. He must have called for help, and then died in the middle of waiting for it to come. After trying to scrub it clean, Granny had that couch taken to the dump, stained as it was and reminding her of what she wanted to forget. Now that's a bad story, and they say you got to stay positive to make it through your time. But I gotta say, I don't picture much that's good. My kids' faces and little things, I guess you'd call them, that just plain are.

And mostly, in my mind, there's angry-red, strong and thick. And I think that's a clotted red, staining everything, turning to black at the middle and no way to see through.

His red words ring out in the night, telling me he's still alive: *fat bitch ho fuck-up selfish stupid cunt*. And they're mixed with his *sorry's* that follow, and the love talk that came out less and less: *sexy fine adore mine promise baby forever*. That last one was the truth.

What's bad remembers me. And I try to keep these things from getting out of hand. I can't keep them away, but I keep them small. And it's funny how a certain little thing won't disappear.

Feet pointing up from the foot of the bed, I can see that plain as day. Feet I kissed and licked once, even, in our early, passion days. His feet. And him laying there, proud and satisfied in his victory, rubbing his knuckles. He wants me to minister to his hands, which are sore from hitting on me. "Go get the witch hazel, Avis," he says again and again, and I just remember watching his mouth opening and closing with those words, without being able to hear a sound coming out until I realize what he was wanting. He looks silly, childish, even, but scary, too. And those feet pointing up, feet I had recognized and trusted, turned enemy as they kicked at my ribs and back while I curled, like a round beetle does when you take it from the dark safety of a stone or log. I look from his no-sound mouth down to his feet, look the length of him and then at the heels and toes without the hard leather and buried steel of his work boots from the plant, his feet soft and naked now, but still sinister and yet, too, they are still the feet I know and love. And I can't take my eyes off them until I catch his smile, and then the hard-on, another traitor in our tumbled-up, twisted, broke-down love.

In the glance from feet, to face, to dick, and back again, I know I have to make him stop.

As I said, what's bad comes back to me without the asking, and that's one piece of the story of me and Jerrell that I never can forget. Those feet. And all his words. *forever sorry fat bitch ho selfish stupid cunt sexy fine adore mine promise baby sorry fuck-up* I try, Lord knows I work at forgetting, and think of other things instead.

Like green. I knew green.

Green I try to get ahold of, but it fades and red's as clear as yesterday, as this day, whatever, they're all the same.

And I wish I could say I didn't, but I do, I do know the rusty, red taste of blood.

Before I stood and looked him over head to toe while he laid there on the bed, he had beat my face to a swollen mess, and was working on my chest. He had me pinned down on the floor, my lips swollen and bleeding as he sat across me, and he reached over and scooped the meal I had made, mashed potatoes and corn it was, which was so bad, so 'unacceptable,' so 'wrong,' as to be the reason for my beating, scooped a pile of it off the floor, and shoved it in my torn mouth, mixing it with my blood. "Eat it, bitch. There'll be more later, but see what your failure tastes like." All I could think, while I gagged on food and blood, was how long before my kids get home? How long before they see their mama like this? How long will they be safe? "Eat it, bitch," he said, and forced it down my throat.

So I went where I usually did, making myself small as possible and fast-forward to what would come later. The apologizing and taking-it-back. To the I-adore-you-baby and the that's-why-you-get-to-me-so-bad.

Some way, he stopped, and staggered into the bedroom with the rest of his six-pack. And called for me to bring him the witch hazel, which I did. And while I got myself and the kitchen put back together, he forgot about his hard-on and passed out on the bed. Later, as he begins to stir, I check on my face and the clock and his gun. I need to know just where everything is, in case he isn't finished with me yet. I tiptoe to the door and check on him. And there they are, those feet.

Who knew that would be Jerrell's last day on this earth? Well that's the way it started, and while I didn't know how it would end, I knew things would be mighty bad.

*sorry fat bitch ho fuck-up selfish stupid cunt forever sexy fine adore mine promise baby sorry*

I used to be careful over every little thing, knowing just what time it was and what was supposed to happen, what was expected of me. I was real good at planning and timing and counting.

In here at Oak Hills, you got to make sure you keep the right company and mind the rules, still. I keep to myself. And you don't have to wonder what's coming next or what to do. They sound a buzzer and tell you what to do. And I sure don't need a calendar, like Keisha and Ranita, for crossing off the days. They got reasons to count. My sentence has no ending. I got "Natural Life."

I'm done with counting, but I try to keep things tight enough to fit in this coffin of a cell. Not wanting or missing too hard. I try to manage, and then the caseworker comes talking about imagine. Imagine the good things.

Are we still alive? Can a pulse tell you that? I take my meds and try to say that Yes, I am alive in here. I will make a blanket, and type in the codes and numbers on the keyboard for my work detail. And a little bit at a time, I'll try to imagine the good things. But I'm afraid this is the afterlife Granny was always talking on and on about, and it's not the just reward she thought.

These walls are haunted, and not just by the ones still serving time. By everyone who came before.

But some folks do keep on living hard behind these walls, still fighting and getting degrees and writing poetry and letters, training in food prep and cosmetology, learning to garden, falling in love and hoping and praying. And some are just hibernating, waiting til their out dates to come alive again. I've heard of big old *men* men hooking up with queens inside, and I've heard of men who married women from the free world, even though they'll never get released. Most folks, I guess, their hearts do keep on beating.

Some in here still get to having sex, but it seems like that part of me's just dried up. Even my monthly's stopped coming regular. I guess it's The Change. You got to work hard around the rules against touching, but even so, sometimes I can hear Gwen and Ilene going at it in their cell. They're married, or might as well be, and they act just as crazy jealous and silly as you would not believe. I done it a couple of times in here, or let myself get done. It's as good as anything else, I guess. If you can get it, love's the thing to have. I laid there while Gwen did me, and it was like I could hear her moaning from a long ways off while I was disappearing, and it didn't really matter in the end. That part of me is all spent up; the bank is empty. With my husband, now that was something...that was some love that rocked me. It nearly killed me, do you hear what I'm saying? I've had enough of marriage to last me forever. Any way you cut it, somebody's always on top.

I work on this, where someone with a crochet hook can be supervised. "Occupational therapy," I guess they call it, and it gets bigger and bigger. That's how I know time is passing, after all.

I never thought I could make anything this big, and I never can seem to decide to finish it off. I work on it in the morning in the recreation room. People watch the stories, mostly, and long ago there was fighting over which ones they'd follow. I don't go in for them, myself. They never let any of the characters stay together. You can watch and watch and watch to see a reunion, and before you know it, they're broken up again. Well I guess nothing lasts, even in real life, but it seems like just another addiction to me. Some of the folks in here need a twelve-step program for the stories, but I guess it does make you feel like you're living in something that keeps keeping on.

This blanket is ten feet long and all a kind of nothing-dirt-red brown. The color in the crayon box that no one ever uses, the one that's always sharp. I wanted other yarn, that rainbow kind that turns a different color every foot or so. But I was lucky to get this, from the charity craft shop.

There's not much that's bright in here but there's no white, neither. Just the ugly that happens when you mix all your colors together. And gray, like our sheets, and the waist-high panties that never will look bright and fresh. Every kind of dirty and faded you could ever find. Nothing is yours, alone. Everywhere in here, someone else has been. I can picture those white sheets Granny used to boil and bleach and stretch out on the clothesline, so that even if nothing we had was new or extra nice, where we slept and what we put on our behinds was spotless. Nothing in here will ever be clean again.

There's the browns of most of our faces, and the brown of shit and dirt.

I see yellow in my eyes when I can't avoid the infirmary mirror. I see the yellow of my pee.

Orange is the loud cry of the jumpsuits the new ones wear.

It's the eight-box of crayons in here. You can find a little of something, a little blue, but it's one, single thing. Yellow, too. You know that 64-box is out there somewhere, in another child's hands.

Yeah, we have the things we tape up on the wall, photos and pages from magazines and posters. Flat color, trapped on a page, or pictures on a T.V. screen, looking like they're beamed in here from Mars.

That card Lamar made me I only had half of, and I kept that torn piece folded against the binding of my Bible. That CO Roberts took it in the shakedown my second year in, but then I got it back, torn, it's true, only to lose it again last week. Oh, I miss the robin's egg blue he used on that card, even if his little sky was just a sliver above a rooftop on the ragged edge, like this. How DID I lose it, practically the only thing I had from her? Must be reckless missing that's to blame.

I haven't seen my kids since Mama got too sick to bring them, and they haven't written in so long. Maybe it's best that they forget me, now that they're with my cousins, all the way across the state. Maybe, in their minds, I'm the bad that won't stop surfacing.

*fat bitch ho fuck-up selfish stupid cunt sexy fine adore mine promise baby sorry forever sorry*

Mama died three years ago, while trying to get my kids from childhood to adulthood. And here I was, not able to help. Not able to see her and tell her a last little thing.

They let me go to the wake and see her, after everyone else was done saying goodbye, in shackles and waist chains. I just did what I was good at: shrink and fast-forward once again.

I guess they thought I'd get away. But I know there's more to getting free than most folks know.

Yes, plenty of bad things remember me. His fists and all the backhands I get for "disobedience." The phone torn from the wall and smashed with a hammer, its wiry guts spilling out. The ringing of his phone calls every twenty minutes, while I'm still allowed to work. Seeing his car as he waits just outside the school to make sure I come right home.

Jerrell always did say I kept a sloppy house. Said I put my job ahead of him and my kids. I had worked so hard for that teaching certificate, studying in the bathroom late at night after everyone else had gone to bed, scraping together the money for each class, that I held on to it as long as I could. What about your own kids, he would say, when I was getting ready for school or working on my lesson plan. I had wanted to be a teacher ever since I was ten years

old, and I used to sit the neighborhood kids down in a row and play like I had a school.

It didn't last long, though. He called in mid-semester and told the principal I had to quit. I wasn't well, he said, and that was true. There's that feeling, right here, inside, of knowing that me teaching school was over. There's the taste of my blood and the taste of a gun in my mouth, too, and the way our little house seems to get further and further away from everyone and smaller and smaller, so that I can barely see myself.

Me, locked inside with the safe where he keeps the alternator he took off the car, the money and the checkbook and even my ID, safe from the world and safe from me. The way he pounds and drives himself into me when he has a notion to take the sex he thinks is his, and how it turns to hitting when the beer and vodka make him limp. The faces of my kids as they are watching while I yell for them to go to their room and lock the door. And in-between it all, my sorry's.

And there was a day I realized, just by his tone of voice, that he was turning on Lamar, that he was next. He could go for him in the night time, and in the morning, say that he was sorry and be proud.

Proud of his desk and his starched white shirt. Don't let no one dis him or ignore him when he was plant manager, working evenings. I hope, I hope, Lord, please let him meet his quota today. Always checking in the mirror that his clothes, his hair, his shave was right.

The only good thing about the piece of stainless steel that fills in for a mirror is that I don't have to hide from my body, and the sad, sad story it tells. The soft stomach and stretch marks from being pregnant and the saggy breasts that I swear still ache sometimes from the babies lost to me now. The fat I carry now from the starchy food in here and from being penned, and the healing my skin has done. Faded marks where his cigarettes burned the softest, hidden flesh, and the torn places that did their best to close. Who cares about it anyways? No one sees me and this body's just a shell that never did belong to me.

*forever fat bitch ho fuck-up selfish stupid cunt sorry sexy fine adore sorry promise baby mine*

Last night? Was it the night before? Whatever, I was lying on my bunk, trying to block out the noise enough to picture my kids' faces the last time I saw them. It was all fuzzy and bleached, but I could see Lavonne with that missing tooth in front and her clumsy eight-year-old smile tries to hide it. Rhonda with her fuzzy hair that just refuses to stay plaited or ponytailed. And Jerrell, Junior, who I call by his middle name, Lamar. My baby, who can't stay still long enough for me to kiss his dimples and talks in whole sentences, even though he's only just turned three.

I know they're all different, because time just keeps moving on, or so they say. For me, they're still just like the last time I saw them, four years ago, just before Mama died. And I try not to miss them too, too much.

Anyhow, they came and told me Mama was gone. Her pressure had been spiking, and the stroke just came. Lord knows, re-mothering three kids didn't help to keep her calm. She was getting ready for church when the stroke hit.

Had her stockings and shoes on, but she hadn't finished buttoning up her dress. I know that would have irked her, because she was particular and thorough about everything she did. It must worry on her that she didn't finish with her very last task.

Mama was in the middle of raising my kids, and in the middle of doing her buttons, and when she died, I was in the middle of a life-long apology for wrong loving and wrong choices. For dropping out of school and marrying Jerrell against her warnings that he would lead to trouble, by and by. For leaving all of them behind. Now I'll never get my sorry's finished. I'll never get them said.

People don't die in-between things. Even if they know death's coming for them, they're in the middle of something when they go.

Iva Jean, from Cellblock A, they say she was in the middle of watching her story, waiting to see if Tad and Dixie ever would get back together and stay. She had complained for days about the pain in her side, but the CO's said she was faking, and she never did get to see the doc. No telling how long she watched that story to see what would happen, and she never did find out.

We knew Granddaddy was passing on, and we were collected all around his big carved, mahogany bed, trying to see him off. He was peaceful, whispering things none of us could understand. I guess he died in the middle of loving us.

Uncle Rush, like I told you, was waiting for help. And Cece was just about to finish school. Planning and hoping for better things to come.

Most of the folks locked up in here, they just keep on hoping. Maybe I'll get a commutation. Maybe a judge will see it a different way. Maybe I'll get numbers `stead of alphabets. Maybe I'll get free.

I've stopped counting and let go of all my maybes. But I go over and over what I did in little bits and pieces, trying to see how I could have stopped him. Trying to reassure myself that I really did.

Every day is that day, and I am right there, stuck, no matter what colors and good things I try to think about. His last day and mine.

I'll never finish killing him. He's after me, still and yet. It will never be done.

*mine sorry fat bitch ho fuck-up selfish stupid cunt sexy fine adore promise baby sorry forever*

I see his feet point up and I am ready, knowing just what the clock says, and where the gun is, and waiting to see what will be. Folding the clothes I've ironed, then stacking them, I am counting it all out. Ten minutes before Mama brings Lavonne and Rhonda home and Lamar's still sleeping, but I've locked him in his room in case. In case...in case. Nine minutes until they get here. One step to reach the gun.

The starch is working good and I will do it perfect, just right, no wrinkles, no creases, no buttons that are burned or chipped, I have almost got the collar, almost got it, and there's only three in the basket left to do.

And I hear him rising from the bed like thunder, coming through the doorway with his fists in the air, like the picture of some vengeful god I've seen in books, and I can tell he isn't finished, not yet. Eight minutes and my babies will be here, and if he comes for me I will reach it, I'm deciding with my body, with my arms and hands and stomach, I will save myself I will help myself I will get free I will live. And he does come, like always, like I knew, he comes with thunder in his hands that he has somehow gotten in a flash, the iron in his raised right hand, its cord whipping like a snake, the steam hissing and bubbling where he has yanked it from the wall, and I have six minutes and I'm still close enough to reach and stop this, stop this storm.

I reach for it. I reach for the gun and shoot. And he is down and there is blood and burning metal and too many sounds to sort, and the red, red blood has ruined the perfect white, starched and ironed shirts, and I know that I will get a beating for this. I shoot him, not even seeing where but just trying to stop it and to live, and then, who knows how much later, Mama gets here, who knows how much later because I have stopped counting and I am working on disappearing now. It must have been only minutes because the kids are due from school, and she says that when she gets here with Lavonne and Rhonda, when she sees him and the red, red blood, she tells the kids to wait, wait, just you wait now on the porch, and she breaks a window with a brick to get inside, cursing Jerrell that he refused to let her have a key. And she finds him dead and the gun right there on the floor, and me in the closet with Lamar, screaming that he is coming and the shirts are ruined and he will never let me go.

I keep getting up and washing my face, and tying my shoes, and putting on my clothes, and then doing it all in reverse. First on. Then off. Beginning and ending the very same day. This is the routine of my hours and my days. On and off and on again.

I stopped counting how long since I've had a visitor, and the last one was my brother, Will, who could barely look me in the eye and seemed like he came to keep a promise to Mama he had made. People say life goes on, but is it true?

Seems like it goes and goes until it stops, right in the middle of one thing or another.

When Aunt Irene died, she was cutting coupons from the Sunday paper, talking about what she was gonna buy. Mama said her hands grabbed the table and sent the coupons flying up, and then they drifted down all around her like fanfare, like confetti flags.

And my cousin, Mamie? She was in the middle of talking trash when she went. You just wait until..." she said, and fell over. We were running a Boston, and I never did enjoy a game of bid whist since.

My first cellie died in the middle of getting herself together, as soon as she wrapped up. Got some dope that was too

good a promise to turn down. She was on her fourth step.

Even if you got it all in order: bills paid, house cleaned, dinner ready, kids bathed. You're showered and combed and dressed. Even if everything's taken care of, no loose ends, you're still doing something, you're not in-between things. You're breathing, hoping, waiting. Something's going on.

When Jerrell died, there I was, trying to save my own life.

Who else was going to do it? The police, who took him outside and told him to calm down before they sent him back in to beat me worse? Mama, in one of the only visits he allowed me, who told me to try not to set him off, and then to just leave?

Leave, I thought, is that what you did? Maybe she's wiped her memory of my own daddy clean. Or she hasn't seen my bruises, or heard a word I say. Maybe she doesn't realize I haven't worked in two years and I got these kids and a baby still in arms. That I don't even have a house key, that I got no money or driver's license, or way to start over again. She doesn't know that things could change if I can just get a handle on them and not make him mad, or that I know it's true what he says about me being a *stupid fuck-up* and no one else will ever love me like he does. Maybe Mama doesn't remember how he tracked me across three states when it was just Lavonne and Rhonda, and he swore to hell he'd kill me if I left again. Maybe she doesn't realize that I'm far too much like her.

She brought the kids to see me and tried to provide for them. She was with me, through the jail part and the court part, too.

The booking and the trial, they're all a blur that just gets further and further away. I could barely hold myself together, either shaking in fear, pleading for my children, or numb from the meds they had me on. I was so jumpy I expected him to come thundering through the doorway to the courtroom, not finished, not finished with me yet.

That's the way it went for me, six years ago, when they locked me up. I lost everything except my sometime memories, my today that's just the same as yesterday. He took it all. I may not have saved my life, though I was trying. But I saved my kids from Jerrell, and now they've got to raise themselves. I try to keep from wishing I could see Lavonne's full set of grown-up teeth and whatever Rhonda's done about that rebel hair. And Lamar, whoever he's become. Wishing hurts too much. And I wish I could see Jerrell again, in a good minute, when he was happy with me and his words were the good kind.

But there are his feet, again and again, and the blood in my mouth, and the spitting iron and his ruined shirts, and the safety of the closet, Lamar in my arms and me making us smaller and smaller until Mama opens that door.

I kill him every night, and I am sorry. But like I told you, I was in the middle of trying to save my life.

No need to hold a funeral, or a wake for me. Who would come, anyways? No need to cry for me, for what I caused

to happen and what all I'll never see or do.

This is how my story ended. And after all, everyone dies in the middle of something.

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## Monte Carlo [Mint Condition]

*Sean Conway*

It had taken Vaughn Oliver close to two years to bank away the six grand he'd need to buy Jolie the ring she'd wanted—one and a quarter-carat pear-shaped diamond set in a white gold band, size seven—and exactly two minutes to lay it down for a mint—*mint*—1987 Chevrolet Monte Carlo SS. 75,000 original miles, eight cylinder engine, white white *white* with the pencil-thin burgundy racing stripe slicing down the sides and those easy-in/easy-out tinted T-tops. Not a flaw to be found. Not a crust of rust on the outside or ring of an accidental cigarette burn inside. Sun exploding off the hood and windshield like the car's own self-sustaining energy. He hadn't even tried to bargain with the guy. Fifty-five hundred bucks. Let me go to the bank I'll be back in a minute.

"I don't get it. So what's this mean?" Bess always sounded condescending when addressing him. He told her that all the time, but she'd just say that he was being insecure. He hated that he felt like her younger brother even though he was five years older. She looked down at the car, eyebrow wrinkled, Ben propped on her hip, fidgeting to get down.

Vaughn punched an oversized button on the wall with the side of his fist and the garage door grumbled closed. "What's what mean? It's just a car." He could almost feel the escaping weight of that lie, leaving his head buzzing, full of helium. Just a car, he'd said. The words would've sounded dead even to an untrained ear, a stranger walking by. How could it be just a car? He'd owned the exact same one when he was twenty years old. Dropped out of college to pay for it. Drove it halfway across country after Jennifer Decklyn broke up with him. Any random handful of photos scooped out of the picture box up in his mother's attic was bound to include a few faded shots of a skinny version of Vaughn standing pseudo-casual in front of the SS with his arms folded, one foot probably resting on the other. Maybe shades on his face, a sweep of light brown hair layered over his forehead. Even as he'd forced the lie his eyes kept falling to the car, its shiny chrome, the hood ornament. *Monte Carlo*. Swirling letters glimmering as if forged in ice. Jolie, not an hour before, had kicked him out over this.

Bess shook her head. So did Ben. "I hope you know what you're doing."

Vaughn lifted his hand, surprised at its weight, and placed it on his nephew's head. His hair soft, full of static, clinging to his fingers. She'd said it, he was sure, because she knew full well that he did not, at all, know what he was doing. But the truth was, well, maybe he kind of did. No, it hadn't been planned—you can't plan something like this. Driving by a mint '87 Monte Carlo on the way back from getting scratch tickets and a Dr Pepper. He hadn't even really debated the decision or questioned it in the slightest. There it was. It existed. It was for sale. And he had the cash. Even without consciously admitting it, he'd certainly known he'd be forcing Jolie's hand. And somewhere,

down in the recesses of his gut, he must've been okay with that.

When his mother pulled open the back screen door of the garage, Vaughn was sipping a Dr Pepper on the mangy sofa that the day before had been covered in trash bags full of old clothes, two flat lawn tractor tires, and a box of partially used paint cans. He'd flipped the cushions, batted out the dust best he could, misted it good with one of those spray fresheners that smell like clean laundry, and moved it to the back wall where it faced the rest of garage. Next to it he'd stood an old lamp—all it needed was a new bulb and some masking tape over the crack in the cardboard shade—so that he didn't have to use the bank of cold overhead fluorescents all the time. From the old shed he'd salvaged a mini-fridge, wiped it clean of spider webs and mold, and stacked it on top of the work bench. He'd thought about going home—home to the apartment, Jolie's technically, since it was in her name—and getting his iPod dock, but on the closet shelf in his old bedroom that his mother now used as an ironing room he'd found his stereo. AM/FM, dual cassette deck, and turntable with a broken arm. He didn't own any records, and couldn't remember ever using the record player, but he still had a box of cassette tapes, bricks of them, and so took the box into the garage with the stereo.

His mother looked from him to the car to the sofa and back to him. Her mouth was moving but Vaughn couldn't hear her over Sammy Hagar. The tapes sounded pretty decent, but he was surprised at how noticeable the underlying hissing noise was. He wondered if it was because the tapes were so old and worn, or if cassettes had always sounded that way. "*What?*" he yelled, pointing to his ear.

His mother frowned, said something again. This time Vaughn got up from the couch and went to the stereo. Did this thing used to have a remote? Or had they not been invented yet? His fingers were tacky with Turtle Wax.

"What are you doing? Moving into the garage?"

Vaughn looked around, pleased. "No, but I could, huh? Not a bad little set-up." Two bags of clothes sat on the bed in the guest bedroom, which was actually his bed once upon a time. It was a small room, depressing. Antiques and shit. A wall clock that tick-tocked way too loudly. If he was going to be staying here a while—he didn't want to use the word *living*—then he knew he'd have to take over the garage, turn it into some kind of man-cave. Something to call his own. For sanity's sake.

"I think Ben's trying to take a nap," she told him, pointing in the general direction of a small rectangular vent in the corner of the garage ceiling. "You should turn that music down. Bess didn't come down and say anything?"

Three months earlier Bess and Ben had moved into the small apartment above the garage. If he'd done this just a few months earlier he could've taken dibs on it. But Bess's husband Stephen had been deployed to Afghanistan right after Christmas, so Bess had decided to sublet their condo for a year and come back home to be near Mom. Their father

had passed away a little over two years ago.

Vaughn smiled. Turn that music down—he loved it. '87 Monte Carlo. Sammy Hagar. *Turn that music down!* He took a slug off his soda. “What’s so funny?” Mom said. “I didn’t say anything funny.”

They’d thrown Stephen a surprise going-away party back in January at the local Knights of Columbus. Catered with lasagna, salad, finger sandwiches, deli platters, and a cake to end all cakes. Stephen’s brother played with his band Karate Chop Action and nobody could believe how good they were and why in the world weren’t they on the radio already. Vaughn thought they were all right. A little like Blues Traveler or Huey Lewis or something like that, something with a lot of annoying harmonica.

He and Jolie had been fighting during the car ride there, he remembered, and it had spilled over into the party. Stephen was the bigshot hero in the family these days, even though Bess had had to call the police on him at least once before that he knew of, and maybe more than that. The kind of townie fuck who got into bar fights and bounced from shit job to shit job, then joined the Marines at 26 and has been worshipped ever since. Meanwhile Vaughn had put himself through school on his own dime while tarring driveways, taking classes on and off throughout his twenties, enrolling when he had the time and the money, finally securing a degree in Exercise Physiology at the age of 31 to no particular fanfare. No Knights of Columbus. No Karate Chop Harmonica Douches. No deli platters. So, yes, he got a little pissy whenever the family’s attention turned to Stephen and what a guy he was. Jolie accused him in the car of being jealous. Whatever, maybe he was. He’d heard that Stephen had signed up for the Marines after drunk-driving his father’s boat into a dock up at Winnepesaukee. Thirty-five thousand dollar boat, gonzo.

Vaughn’s online class had just started that week and already he had fifty pages to read and a small paper to write for Monday. The last thing he needed was to spend a Saturday night kissing Stephen’s ass. Sunday was football playoffs and he knew he wouldn’t be getting any reading or writing done then. “Everything’s everyone else’s fault, isn’t it?” he remembered Jolie saying in the car, the sarcasm front-and-center. “We’ve known about this party for two weeks.”

“I’m just thinking out loud. Don’t listen to me if you don’t like it.”

“Well let me turn the radio on and I won’t have to.”

“The radio is on.”

“I mean music. Not sports talk.”

Vaughn braked to a stop light and cracked his window open, even though it was ten degrees outside. For some reason he felt hot. “Fucking Bess. She’s got good taste, doesn’t she?”

Jolie looked across at the open window but didn’t say anything.

“Yes she does.” He answered the question himself.

“He’s a good dad, Vaughn. He’s so good with Ben.”

Vaughn pushed out his lower lip as though considering this. “Yeah, that’s why he’s leaving for a year. Because he’s a great dad.”

Jolie shook her head. “That’s not fair and you know it,” she told him. “Can you close the window?”

His trouble may have really started when he’d begun taking grad classes, right around the time he’d also begun trying to save for that ring. Back when life had promise, when it was actually fun to plan, to commute home from work and let his mind drift to the future, to what’s next, what’s possible. The days of spreading black tar with a mop, heat coming at him from the July sun above and the hot stink below, were over. Jolie was a great girl, smart and ambitious and, let’s face it, pretty hot. And he had a good job now. Well maybe not good, that’s why they paid you. But an easy job. Middle school phys ed. He put nylon warm-up pants on in the morning, a pair of running sneakers, a comfortable sweatshirt. Shorts and flip-flops in the spring, even if the principal didn’t really like that too much.

He was supposed to—by rule—enter a graduate program within three years of having a teaching job, and something like five years to finish it. Something like that. He wasn’t entirely sure. He’d taken a couple classes, one summer a couple years earlier, another on Monday nights a year or so later. But that was about it, and he’d been teaching seven years now. He’d thought, or hoped, he’d be able to slip on through for a while, since no one seemed to be asking him to hold up a diploma. But that didn’t last. Walter was nice enough to write him an extension not once but twice, and that bought him some time. As long as he was showing strong and steady progress, Walter would never cut him loose until absolutely forced.

Which brought him to this semester. He had seven classes under his belt but still five to go after this online class. Online classes, he was beginning to realize, were a mistake. At least for him. After teaching all day, running the weight room from 2:30 to 4:40 over at the high school, and then trying to squeeze in a couple rounds of golf here and there, it was tough to make himself log on and get much accomplished. Jolie saw it all, too. For a while she hadn’t said much about it, just let him do his thing, but that started to fall apart in the last month or so. He’d lie and say he’d logged in at work during prep period, answered the posted questions, skimmed through the required reading and posted comments on the other invisible students’ written responses. Truth was, sometimes two or even three weeks could go by without a single log in. And somehow Jolie knew it.

The research paper was due May tenth, five days away. Fifteen to twenty pages. Minimum of seven outside refereed sources. A week after that, his end-of-the-year final evaluation with Walter, when he’d be asked to turn in updated transcripts. He picked his head up from his laptop, drew a hard breath, and let his gaze shift to the car. The head-

lights stared back at him, stoic and still.

Monday was bright and dry, the air warm even with the spring breeze. The kids were crazed with spring fever, teachers too. Vaughn led them outside for kickball. They used the old softball field at the far end of the field even though it was riddled with crab grass and bore a wide swampy puddle between right and center field. It was easy enough to explain that he didn't want the students ruining the good softball field. There were games left in the season, maybe even playoffs. Really, though, the far field sat alongside a grassy embankment that tilted toward the noon sun, a nice spot for Vaughn to lay back and keep an eye on the games, and if he caught a little color on his face, then that was just a nice little side perk.

Once the game got going on its own he could back off, fold his arms behind his neck, tilt his chin toward the sun. The winter had been long. It was nice to be out of the stale gym for a change. The grass felt prickly, lacking life, the ground cool and maybe even a little damp. Somewhere a plane was circling, its low drone growing heavy, trailing off, coming back heavy again. Once in a while Vaughn pulled one eye open and looked for it, but so far as he could tell it was invisible. Below and to his right, the kids cheered about something.

He noticed a hawk gliding way overhead on one of his brief airplane scans. It was high up there, just a dark something against the blue sky. Its spread wings gave him away. Vaughn didn't know much about birds, but he knew a hawk when he saw one. When he was no more than six or seven his father had pointed to two of them sliding over the sky in almost a figure eight. Vaughn thought they had been the most graceful, calm things he had ever seen. And then his father told him that they were probably looking for food, mice or snakes and chipmunks. Just gliding above it all, doing their own thing.

And then his eyes would close again, and he'd listen to the far-off plane, the low drone, daydreaming about old summer days in the back yard with his dad, about sitting above the toy world in an aisle seat, about a mint Monte Carlo SS sitting in the garage like it somehow passed right through the fabric of time.

Kids yelling from the distance. An uproar growing. His name being called. The sun was bright even through his closed eyes, the back of his eyelids glowing red. "Mr. Oliver!"

"Mr. Oliver!"

"Mr. Oliver, he was safe!"

"I totally got him! Mr. Oliver!"

Vaughn lifted the back of his head off the grass and it was too bright to open his eyes. He unfolded his arm and pushed his thumb out, cocking it back and forth. "*Out!*" he bellowed, then eased his head back again, interlocking

his fingers across his stomach. The kids erupted again, half in celebration, the other half in protest.

So much for writing a paper. Bess and their mother were working in the backyard, trying to breathe life into a garden that hadn't resembled a garden at all these last couple years, not since their father had passed away. For some reason it bothered Vaughn that they were even trying. Dad had been the gardener. Everything green and tall and dense. How many times had he given Vaughn and Jolie bags of peppers or tomatoes or cukes because the garden was producing way too much? What his mother was now doing, and Bess, somehow came off as invasive.

Ben, as usual, was pretty much left unsupervised, wandering in through the back door of the garage, trying to show Vaughn a rock he'd been sucking on. Vaughn, sitting in the back seat of the Monte Carlo patching a tiny rip in the vinyl with clear fingernail polish, thought for sure that Ben was going to throw the rock at the car.

*"Bess!"*

"No no no no no no no!" Ben said, mimicking Vaughn's panic. It might've been funny if he wasn't so sure this was going to end with his car scratched, or dented, or at the very least smudged with spitty fingerprints.

"Ben, put that rock down nice, okay, buddy? Be a good boy." Ben showed Vaughn the rock, then put the edge of it back into his mouth. Up close, Vaughn could see that it was gritty with dirt. "Bess!"

*"Cuh!"*

"Yeah, car," Vaughn said. "My new car. Don't touch it though, okay?"

From the corner of the garage, one of his hissing mix tapes made the clunky switch from Sammy Hagar's "I'll Fall in Love Again" to Billy Squier and "My Kinda Lover." Not a seamless transition, as the end of the Hagar song got cut a little abruptly. He remembered how much time it'd taken to lay out the playlists, the strategy involved. The tempo of the song, the genre, how one ended and another began. A long fadeout followed by a startling and sudden kick start into the next song. For instance, "I'll Fall in Love Again" had that decrescendo, the gradual fade into nothing, the song getting further and further away until there was nothing left but that ever-present hiss. And then those signature guitar chords that unmistakably open "My Kinda Lover." That had taken some time for him to match up. Too bad for the crack and bang of the tape recorder stopping. Sliding the nail polish brush back and forth over the final corner of the seat tear, his nose inches above it, a headache starting to form either from the concentration or the fumes or the stress of Ben and his rock, Vaughn couldn't help but smile at how obsessive he used to be about that kind of stuff.

Ben stood at the open car door now, licking his lips and then sucking them in, craning his little head to watch Vaughn in the back seat. Vaughn blew gently at the fresh mend, twisted the cap back onto the polish. He handed

it to Ben. "Go give this to your mum, okay? Give that to Mummy." Ben looked at it, shook it, looked at it again. Stuck the bottom of it into his mouth. And then, thankfully, trotted away. Crisis averted.

Karate Chop Action, the way he remembered it, had played three originals in a row, grinding the party to a halt. Three in a row. Who does that? Cleared the dance floor faster than a fire alarm. He'd had little else to do except drink. The night was a loss. No online class work tonight. No reading. Instead he was stuck listening to Karate Suck Assholes and about half a dozen rambling amateur toasts, mouths too close to the mic, lips smacking, nose air amplifying over the room.

He hadn't seen Jolie in a while. Well, yes, he'd *seen* her. He could see her right now, standing in a group of girls, Stephen's sister and sister's friends. But she'd been avoiding him most of the night, ever since he called Stephen a phony and his brother's band a bunch of pussies, and then called Bess insecure and desperate for taking him to begin with. She could do better. She could do a lot better, he'd kept saying. And Stephen wasn't really all that good looking, with a long forehead and bad skin, and now she'd bred with him and poor Ben had half those bad genes. Cute kid but cute like all kids were cute. Not cute in any standout, particular way. Cute like two year-olds are cute. Vaughn had shot four beers the first half hour, then Stephen's buds had bought shots and he'd happened to be there, so he tossed back a shot of 151. And somewhere in the middle of all that Jolie had slipped away from him.

Over the next four days he put new rims on the SS bought off Craigslist, had the front windshield replaced, changed the filters and hoses under the hood, tried not too successfully to tape a good-sized hole in the exhaust, and wrote two paragraphs of the research paper that was now due the next morning.

From where he was sitting he could see it outside in the parking lot, actually gleaming, luminous at the edge of a high streetlamp's swath. It was the first time he'd taken it out of the garage since its purchase. Sipping a rum and Coke, he couldn't tell if he was eyeing it with pride or unease. He'd tried to park it where it would be away from other cars but at the same time within sight from the front window of the Gas Station. It was a shithole bar a lot of young kids infested, but it was close to home. The SS wasn't quite registered yet.

Wendy DeCordova was talking in his ear, her breath hot and spiced with tequila, her hand pushing on his shoulder. He thought she was telling him about the new job she took as shift supervisor at the Deck Lounge over on route 4. Something like that. He wasn't really sure. Outside, a few kids leaned on the railing smoking. Vaughn watched them, made sure they weren't eyeing his car or anything.

"You still with that girl? Wendy asked in his ear too loudly. Vaughn recoiled a little, raised his shoulder to his ear for some reason, wiping it at his earlobe. He'd known Wendy a long time, though he hadn't seen her in what seemed

like years. In fact, he wasn't even sure who she was talking about. Jolie? How would she have known about Jolie? Had he even crossed paths with Wendy since they'd been together? Maybe she was asking him about someone else, like Tara Beeds or something, someone from the old days. When was the last time he'd seen Wendy?

"You mean Jolie?"

Wendy shrugged, her shoulders loose and head rolling untethered from one too-many drinks. Her eyes, he now noticed, were glassy and blinked slowly. "I guess. That girl, I dunno. Mark said you were living with a girl."

Mark was Mark Talbonne. Vaughn guessed it was safe to say that they had been friends once upon a time, but it wasn't entirely accurate. They'd hung out at bars, like this one, the Gas Station, or Juniper's up the street a ways, the Tide. But they weren't friends. They didn't watch football together or shoot the shit on the phone. Just a bar acquaintance, really. They'd both banged Wendy though. He knew that much. Vaughn had fucked her probably half a dozen times over the course of three or four years, always late at night or even early in the pre-dawn hours, always after drinking at a place like this. Then he'd start seeing someone and steer clear of her for a while, then a year and a half later he'd be single and sipping a beer at Juniper's and there would be Wendy coming through the door with one of her ugly friends. Usually he'd tell himself, *not this time. Stay away from her*. He always regretted it after because he could do a lot better than her, *had* done a lot better than her, and it always made him immediately miss the girl he'd just broken up with or been dumped by, and he'd go home feeling shitty, trying to stand balanced at the sink while he wiped himself off with a wet towel. He was glad, then, when Mark started taking her home. It was a line he could draw for himself in the sand and stick to.

They sat in the Monte Carlo, the passenger window down while she puffed a cigarette. He kept looking at her sidelong, making sure she pointed that smoke out the window, swallowing back his rising temper. If the car stunk tomorrow he was going to be pissed. At her. At himself for letting her stink it up like this. In between long draws she talked about some painting class she was taking, but Vaughn wasn't listening much. Instead, he kept eyeing the cigarette. "Watch that ash, it looks like it's about to fall."

Wendy held her hand out and looked at it, then flicked the side of the cigarette with her finger. "Take it easy, V." She took one more long drag, then tossed it, only half-smoked, out into the parking lot. "So nervous about your pretty little car." She'd tried to say this in a cute way, saddling up next to him, putting her chin on his shoulder and looking at the side of his face, running her hand from his knee up his thigh, lingering there, back to his knee for a minute, then suddenly to his crotch. Vaughn turned the radio down a little, so he could concentrate, slouched a little. Through the windshield he watched someone crouch down, holding her own hair back from her face, her back and shoulders heaving as she vomited.

For a fleeting moment he thought of the research paper, the three or four paragraphs on his laptop, not much more than a page, unedited, zero references from which to work. He'd told himself earlier that he was going to pull an all-nighter tonight and belt it out. Just like the old days. Couple energy drinks. Some Van Halen or Motley Crue or

maybe .38 Special slicing through a set of headphones. But he pushed the thought away, put his head back against the headrest. His jeans were now partway down, bunched at his pale thighs, Wendy leaning on his shoulder, fisted him in her hand. "It's been a while," she breathed, looking at him, her hair falling from her ear and over her cheek. Suddenly she was tugging on him fast, her hand firing up and down like a piston. Vaughn grimaced, uncomfortable. "I miss this," Wendy said, her open mouth against his cheek, not kissing but breathing, gasping. She was going too fast, sometimes hurting him. He squeezed his eyes, going limp in her hand.

And then, a minute later or maybe five, he pulled his head forward and stopped her, knocking her hand away at the wrist. "Okay, okay," he said, turning from her and fumbling with his underwear, putting himself away. "That's good, that's enough."

Wendy pushed her hair from her face, mouth open, her chest heaving for air. The front windshield had begun to cloud over. "What?" she asked, looking a little stunned, then hurt. "What's wrong?"

Vaughn zipped his fly and in just a few seconds it was as though nothing had ever happened. "Nothing..."

The girl who had been puking next to the building was now sitting on the steps smoking a cigarette. Someone had come out to join her. Vaughn couldn't tell it was a guy or a girl. He started the SS, the engine grumbling the way cars nowadays just didn't do, and swatted the defrost lever all the way to the right. The blast of air drowned Wendy's breathing. "I gotta go. I got a paper due in the morning."

Wendy looked at him. He felt it but didn't look back at her. Her chest was still puffing and collapsing. His car smelled of sour tequila and smoke and, from the opened vents, dust. She reached down for her pocketbook and pulled it against her torso. "Oh. Okay..."

Vaughn looked out the side window at some crab grass along the shoulder of the road, cigarette butts and bottle caps peppering the sand, laces of rotted wrappers entwined in the long blades. "I gotta go." Now he glanced at her, showed her his eyes so she'd know he was serious. Then turned on the radio, punched in the cassette tape that had been sticking out, the tape deck swallowing it with a *thunk* that rattled through the speakers.

Wendy looked at him and puckered her lips in thought and then, blinking, swiped at the door handle, struggling to find it, then finding it. The door groaned open. She stepped into the parking lot, her dangling earrings flapping side to side, glinting under the street lamps. "Whatever," she said, and then the door banged shut, rocking the car.

Easy with my door, he'd wanted to yell at her. But she was gone. And for some reason he felt like there was no voice there anyway. Nothing in his lungs but weak air, empty air.

Through the first spit of fine rain he watched her light up another smoke, taking a long, distracted drag, watching him as he cranked the car into reverse and backed away. He saw her shake her head, judging him, so he gunned it, tried to leave a loud little patch, maybe kick up a few pebbles in her direction, but the ground was too dry, his tires

too good, and the car lurched back, heaving his body forward off the back of the seat. He took his foot off the gas but before he could find the brake or even so much as swing his head around the car crunched against a fire hydrant and even seemed to momentarily lift off the ground. The noise was loud, a gut-wrenching crumple of metal and glass. Heads from the smoking crew under the awning of the bar turned to look. Wendy turned around too. She put one hand on her knee and pulled the cigarette from her lips with the other. He thought she might have been laughing, but maybe her mouth was just open. Vaughn, his scalp itchy with fury and embarrassment, banged the shift down to drive and gunned out of the parking lot, glass and plastic still tinkling in his wake.

Driving along Sleigh Road with its snaking and narrow course, he realized he was probably a bit more drunk than he'd realized. He checked the speedometer and made sure he wasn't going too fast, something he often lapsed into after a few pops. His head felt heavy, almost as if he had a cold. Unclear. Maybe it was just the booze, but he wasn't sure. This felt strange, like he was watching himself, a mere passenger. Watching him struggle to maintain the road. Watching as Wendy attempted a clumsy hand job. Even that crunch of metal seemed far away now, and he'd somehow convinced himself that it had just been a light tap with little to no damage. Happened all the time. Always sounded worse than it really was. He'd probably just find a minor scrape that a little swipe of touch-up paint would take care of.

But of course he wasn't that drunk, not drunk enough to lie to himself that blatantly. The back of the SS was crushed. His nonexistent paper was due in hours, and it wasn't going to get finished. The online class, he knew—had known now for weeks, if not months—was going to end with a quiet F. And in a few weeks time he was going to sit down with Walter during that last week of school, everything boxed up and stored away, the temperature pushing the seventy or even eighty degree ceiling, and Walter was going to shoot the shit with him for a few minutes about summer plans, about the fall schedule, about how slim the budget was going to be and looks like there will be no new jelly balls and no new hula hoops being ordered, and then he was going to ask Vaughn for his updated transcripts, a thin manila folder rustling on Walter's bouncing knee. Vaughn could see it all playing out. And then, well. And then there would be no updated transcript, and then Walter would sigh, and sit quietly, and sigh again, and re-cross his legs the other way, and then tell Vaughn that he'd put him in a tough situation. And Vaughn would know, of course he would know, that he wouldn't be leaving that room with his job.

He thumbed the garage door opener, headlights sweeping across the driveway and house and he aimed the car into the bay, creeping slowly, certain that with his bad luck he was going to knock a side mirror off or something. Then he was in the shadow of the garage and the door was grinding closed behind him. The headlights shown bright on the old sofa, dusty and stained, his laptop computer sitting askew between a cushion and the armrest, virtually untouched these last few days. Empty Dr Pepper cans stood like burgundy bowling pins, on the garage floor, the small warped table next to the sofa, and along the workbench near the silver boom box with the duct taped cassette door and aluminum foil antenna. His tapes were scattered along the work bench; he'd been too lazy or too distracted

by God-knew-what to put any of them back in the fake wood case. And the tools—wrenches and ratchet sets and pliers—strewn about, nothing where it belonged. His father would've killed him.

The car was still running. He thought about punching the garage door back open and driving to Jolie's. Driving *home*. He still had his key. Step quietly into the condo, toe his sneakers off, down the dark corridor with one hand against the cool wall, guiding him. Smells of Yankee candles and whatever that laundry detergent that was so unmistakably Jolie. The smell that more than once stopped him in a store or even at a ball game and always made him think of lifting Jolie's tank top up from her stomach. He wasn't sure why. Into the bedroom, three or four silent steps and then slipping into bed, the sheets clean, the bed practically still made because she hardly disturbed the sheets at all when it was just her. Tucking his hand around her ribs and cupping her hip, forming to her shape as she breathed, pushed her ass against him, not even awake but fitting herself automatically into him like memory foam.

But it wouldn't happen like that, he knew. His head was heavy and he was tired, no shape to drive, and he probably shouldn't have driven himself here to begin with. Too far away. And anyway there'd be no silent reconciliation. It wasn't their style, never had been—and certainly not *his* style. He'd left a dent in the plaster wall right next to the door the last time he'd been there, like a sideways sinkhole framed with zagging cracks, two or three smudges of blood centered in the dent from that second and third punch making it look like some kind of fucked up flower. He'd scared the shit out her, made her sink to the floor in tears. She hated to cry, absolutely defied tears in all the time he'd known her. There'd be no rewind.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting slumped in the car but he thought the radio station he was not really listening to had rolled through three or four songs. Maybe more than that. The engine still running, a grumble pumping rhythmically from below. He didn't want to go inside, out the back door of the garage, through the breeze-way, trying not to wake his mother as he drunkenly fumbled for his room. For the *guest* room. Imagining it made his chest feel hollow. The echo of the mostly empty room. The mustiness of the sheets. The ticking of that obnoxious antique clock. Then his mother waking him up for school in just a few hours. The raging pain behind his eyes. The sour stomach. Coming back out to the garage to find the smash rear bumper and trunk that he'd no doubt forgotten about.

He listened to another song, something 70s maybe—he didn't quite recognize it. Reminded him of being a kid. A passenger in his father's Buick. Steely Dan or Bread or Jim Croce on the radio, his father with his elbow out the window and his father blowing bubbles and crackling his gum because he'd quit smoking for the tenth or fifteenth time. On their way perhaps to the store for the Sunday *Globe*, and probably a Three Musketeers bar or Chicklets gum for Vaughn. The men taking their Sunday ride while Mom stayed home with fussy Bess.

Vaughn's eyes were closed now and he listened to the radio and thought about the smell of the Sunday paper on the car seat next to him, and wouldn't it be so easy to just sit here and pass out, and as the thought crept over him he let his fingers find the buttons to the automatic windows and they hummed down, and suddenly the engine sounded

loud, grumbling and hitching and he could already smell the exhaust. He focused his attention to his breathing, to his chest rising and falling like a hypnotic watch. He'd be fast asleep in no more than ten or fifteen breaths, and so what if he passed out drunk and asphyxiated himself on the fumes. An accident. Slip out of this world like a wisp of smoke. Like he had never been here at all.

Then The Carpenters came on the radio and he smiled because it was perfect. Lullaby music. Music to fall asleep to. Only he didn't quite smile because he was so tired now, too tired to actually move his lips. Tired, and just the right kind of buzzed, and high now too, his body dissolving into smoke. And he thought of his sister and mother tending to the garden, nurturing it back to life, and he thought of Jolie crying at the news and crying for the second time this week, and he thought of his father and his green gum and his Sunday stubble and Jim Croce and that piano intro to "Bad Bad Leroy Brown" and Vaughn thought without a shadow of a doubt that this cool song was about the guy next to him, the guy tapping his fat football ring on the steering wheel, cracking his gum and singing over his shoulder at Vaughn in the back seat.

He could actually feel some deep part of his being trying to wrestle itself out of this dream. Like someone in the fog of a coma listening to and trying to follow the voices out of that fog. Only instead of voices he thought he heard the wail of a guitar. In the dream the guitar had belonged to Ricky Heathers, his long-ago high school friend. A knock-off Gibson with lime green flames and, inexplicably, a magic marker hand-drawn skull. Ricky was working the whammy bar, making it squeal in a high-pitched shriek. But as he came out of the dream the sounds lingered like an echo. He shifted in his seat, his back tight and sore, his neck crackling when he tried to move it. A headache pulsed behind his eyes. Parting his stuck lips, he realized how thirsty he was, how dry and raw his throat felt. When he peeled his eyes open at last, he saw through the blur and sting that he was still sitting in the car. It had stalled out in the night, its dashboard red warning lights still illuminated but falling dim with the battery certainly drained. It was daylight. The garage reeked of oil, a veil of smoke sitting in the air like netting. He could still hear the guitar. Now he smelled a hint of vomit, then stronger. When he shifted his shirt crinkled, drying throw up splashed down its center. His stomach constricted.

He felt himself shoulder the car door open though he didn't recall making the decision to move. His legs ached. Now his head ached even more with the movement, a bloom of white pain obstructing his vision, then dissipating. It stunk in here and he could hardly draw a full breath. His head cloudy and hurting, his body hurting too, he hardly remembered what had happened, why he was sleeping in the car, why the garage was polluted with fumes. Black bands encircled his vision and began closing. He needed air. Another waft of vomit hit his nose and he thought he might get sick again. The guitar, somewhere above him, continued to wail, but now the dream was far away and he started to think that maybe it wasn't a guitar squealing after all. Now, as he stepped toward the back door cupping his forehead in his sweaty palm, he thought it was an animal in pain.

He swatted the door's handle, missing it the first time, then caught it and stumbled into the brightness. It was early, the sun low, the air cool and sweet in the afterglow of dawn. He pulled a hard breath and then started coughing. Definitely not a guitar. Or an animal. Something else.

A force welled inside him, squeezing his guts, doubling him over and bringing forth a series of dry heaves. The wailing continued on and on, but now a door from above swung open and someone was on the deck, the pads of bare feet slapping the boards, frenetic and loud, too loud for this early in the morning. Someone was in a hurry. Vaughn planted his fists on his thighs, swallowing back a heave, lifting his head to see Bess in a plaid pair of pajama bottoms and a cream-colored bra, hurrying first left and then right up on the deck, going nowhere, acting crazy. Vaughn squinted at this and the low sun was making his headache explode through his sinuses. For a moment he thought maybe Bess was being attacked by bees. Scurrying and flailing about, acting like a whack job. Then Vaughn realized, and this was where things turned, began to draw into focus, that the strange sounds were coming from her, loud and wildly high, and now she was bounding down the crooked steps and she was lugging something in her arms, something flopping and swinging. He thought for some reason that she held a stack of towels, that she was going next door to use the washing machine. But what was her hurry and why was that noise coming out of her? And if she was in a hurry to get somewhere why was she not moving in a straight line? Why was she zig-zagging and turning in an aimless circle? The towels, now that she was at the landing, were not towels at all but something else, something oddly pale but also tinged blue, like a robin's egg blue. Another door opened and he looked left, saw his mother pulling her robe tight and looking wide-eyed, her hair wild. Everything flashing in fast-forward while he felt muddled and slow and unable to so much as turn his head quick enough to keep up. The towels that weren't towels bounced and flapped loosely about, and he saw with a new clarity that those were skinny arms hanging, a small head lolling side to side with no more direction than Bess seemed to have. Vaughn lowered himself to one knee, the ground damp and cold, braced a hand flat against the grass so he wouldn't fall.

His mother was trying to follow Bess but Bess wouldn't stand still, kept pin-balling back and forth, the endless scream impossibly high and unfiltered, a piercing siren sounding from hell itself. Vaughn, from his knees, found a way to stay on Bess, his eyes locking, focusing. The arms flopping loose, Ben's little head bouncing against her chest. When it fell to the side, he saw the half-open, glassy eyes, a white tongue falling loose. Vaughn blinked, deliberate and slow, pain slicing through the center of his head. To the right, just above the tree line, a sliver of motion in the sky caught his attention. He lifted his chin toward it, catching breeze on his cheek like a feather, and watched a hawk gliding in an arcing semicircle, wings at full sail, turning carefree toward the morning sun.

## The Chameleon

*Karima Grant*

Rabia would not have chosen this house with its reek of store-bought happiness. Shining tiles and light fixtures made-in-China-ready-to-break. Windows underdressed with pretend curtains. Like the girl: her whole life on show.

*Bu la am-am taxa bew, ndax ñàkk du wess: never be proud of good fortune, misfortune awaits.*

Rabia inspects the room she had been seated in for the naming ceremony. Too much sun. Heated rooms meant faded furniture, inflamed passions and tempers. Rabia presses her lips into a tight line. An air conditioner would be needed for every room of such an oversized house. She supposed they had the money. Or rather her nephew had the money. Or, as the girl insisted whenever Rabia hinted at her own diminishing circumstance, the *company* had the money. Her nephew and his wife, to hear her tell it, were absolute *slaves* to the company's whims and desires.

Silly girl, thinking it could be so easy. Returning home to Dakar, and having a company take care of every little want and need. As if there were no tradition still, no family left who might *know* better, who might offer caution and wisdom and discretion in all matters. Advise against such good fortune so gaudily on display.

If the girl had been *her* daughter-in-law, this naming ceremony would have been amid the bougainvillea covered walls and the hibiscus bushes of Rabia's garden. And the nephew returned from America, might have been a son. One of many sons Rabia might have borne for some nameless invisible husband from an upstanding family like hers.

Her neck stiffens. She straightens, a habit whenever the feeling of regret attacks.

Modesty. Virtue. Decorum. What had saved her all these years from the disgrace of a bad marriage.

Already near ten in a hot morning, so late for a naming ceremony! If the girl was her daughter-in-law, Rabia would have more than one thing to say about making guests wait like this!

*If you want to know what patience is, take a wife. Know what indulgence is, have a child.*

Rabia stands. Discreetly tugging the dyed wrap skirt into place. At her age, it would not do to be seen unkempt. She glances around the room. No one was watching. There has been no one watching for some time now.

Little Ms. Time-is-Money late for her own naming ceremony when she had been so pressed to move from Rabia's house! Blaming the company. Parroting their threat to terminate the housing allowance if she and the nephew didn't move into their own place 'as soon as possible.' As if upon their arrival from the airport, Rabia hadn't read the

dismay written across their faces at the state of the family home. The nephew could be forgiven (men were like that, Rabia knew), but the girl... The girl had been betrayed from the start.

Cringing at the thick sheets of dust on the stiffened curtains and worn rugs. Offended by the ripped insect screens, chipped and missing tiles and uneven floorboards. Pinching her nose at the smell of mould. 'Stay here?' she had said, raising her eyes at the nephew in alarm.

As if Rabia would never fix the broken and falling apart, throw away the no-good, gone-to-rot. As if a patched and mended life was not what the girl had ever had in mind. Choosing instead this brand new house, the new life study-in-America had bought her, turning her back on the old before of a never married aunt-in-law.

*Haste and hurry can only bear children of regret.*

Blood called blood, Rabia had prattled on the weeks before their arrival to anyone who had listened. How happy she had been to know her own blood was returning to her, so fresh, so young, so successful in a stale, defeated world. Of course, they would provide for her, include her in their common future. Of course, they would restore the old house and deliver Rabia finally to a happily ever after.

But they had moved.

*Whether you wait for tomorrow or not, tomorrow comes.* And so Rabia had continued on, juggling her debts: first the fish-lady, then the vegetable seller. (She had long ago given up meat.) The taxi-man, who took her back and forth to work and had known her longest, could be counted on to not shame her, unlike the other two with their seething jealousies of Rabia and her good name and upbringing. Rabia returned to market haggling like she had once watched the maids do, willing herself to forget the years when sellers offered their very best wares at the once elegant now termite-eaten servant's door. She straightens herself. Extra francs saved had paid for this new outfit. Made especially for the baptism of her first almost grandchild.

The staircase to the second floor was winding, its banister a wood she didn't recognize from a country she had been warned against visiting.

'A country of heathens and infidels, most likely...' she comforts herself. The halls are bright with color. Her own graying walls recalled the modesty her mother had always preached.

*Marry a woman, never trust a wife.*

Ahh, but Rabia had been made trustworthy. Modest, obedient, faithful, all the old world reasons for being a girl. Tradition. Yes, she was the bearer of tradition. And she had been good and decent to uphold tradition, honoring the family name by never marrying beneath her. Even if that meant there were no more suitors, no more from decent families because it had all changed.

*Time was not soap, but still it paled.*

Yes, it had all changed and where had she been? Homes like these for young couples? Too many rooms! Rabia knocks upon door after door, finding the girl in the biggest, sitting on a bed as large as an island. Rabia straightened what was left of her full height (the years too had stolen inches from her stature), prepared to remind the girl of the waiting guests. Of courtesy and politeness.

*Lu la yar ak teggin meyul, leneen du la loo mey. What courtesy and politeness cannot get you, nothing will.*

The words ready on her tongue. The chastising every young girl needed to be brought into line:

‘Seated elders see what a standing child missed. The men have all arrived. They do not like to be kept waiting.’

The baby is in the girl’s arms. The girl turns her head toward Rabia, a slow smile spreading.

‘We have a surprise, you know. For you.’ The girl giggled.

Such silliness. Hardly a wife.

‘We’re supposed to wait to tell you, I know. He wanted to wait. But I just can’t.’

The girl stood, the baby in her arms, wrapped not sufficiently well, Rabia could see.

‘I wanted to be the one who tells you. As a thank you for all you have done for us.’

The girl was bound to be an imperfect mother, handicapping that poor, defenseless baby from the start. Oh, if Rabia had only been given a chance...

‘We have chosen to name the baby after you.’

Rabia stops. Hesitates before the baby in the outstretched arms of the girl.

A namesake. Testimony to a life lived.

The girl pushing the baby onto Rabia.

‘They say a namesake takes seven qualities from you,’ the girl continues, but Rabia is not listening.

Decorum. Adjust her head wrap. Make sure it was straight, not falling. Touch it, steady it, hold anything but the baby.

The girl moves toward her, the baby in her hands, an offering to Rabia.

‘Now, no false modesty here,’ the girl pushes on. ‘It’s decided.’

A namesake. Another girl in the world to carry on her legacy.

Rabia trembles, arms reaching out to take the baby.

The baby, quiet in her wrapped peace, is already warm and heavy in a precocious satisfaction with the world.

*Lies that build are better than truths that destroy.*

Rabia's tongue comes undone.

'Choose another name,'

She hands the baby back to the girl.

'Your guests are waiting.' She straightens, every inch the full height her life had allowed. She turns, walking back down the stairs, across the tiled floor and back to her seat in the living room.

*The chameleon changes color to match the earth, but the earth will never change colors to match the chameleon.*

No. She could not wish this life on another.

## Looking Out

*José Skinner*

If Jennifer told the story of her life so far, would she tell it as a beautiful dream, or as a nightmare? That's what Rufino asked her, up on Lookout Mountain. It was a beautiful question. No, it was more than that. It was *sublime*.

"Honey, your life *is* a beautiful dream," said her mother, holding both Jennifer's hands in her own. "But even beautiful dreams sometimes have bad parts in them. That's just reality."

Jennifer's mother wanted Jennifer to tell what happened between her and Rufino on the mountain as a nightmare. She wanted her to tell it that way to Headmaster Jackson and even the police.

Jennifer pulled her hands out of her mother's and jumped from the couch. "Maybe my life's a nightmare and Rufino is the only beautiful part!" She stumbled to her room and threw herself on her bed.

Her mother didn't even know him! No one did. He sat in the back of the class, like all the unknowables, and never said anything. A big, freckled rock, trapped behind the leaf of his desk. There were rumors about his having done time in the juvenile jail, the D-Home or whatever they called it, but like all good rumors, she didn't know where she'd heard this. He lived south of town, where his family raised horses and alfalfa or something. He had big farm boy hands, full of blood.

Headmaster Jackson and the other administrators must have known at least something about him because this was a private school and they didn't let just anyone in. Rufino was good for the school's diversity, they knew that much. He called himself a Chicano, but he could probably mark four or five boxes on one of those what-race-do-you-belong-to questionnaires. His freckled skin combined oddly with his kinky black hair. Small brown eyes and a broad nose. Big teeth. He really wasn't very good-looking. But then neither was she, was she? He sat at his desk, silent, one of his heavy, green-veined hands dangling at his side while the other cupped his chin.

He'd been admitted that fall. In late September some jocks from one of the public high schools had crashed the homecoming party and tried to start a fight. That was sport for them, picking on the prep school wussies. Rufino waded into them, slopping his big fists into their faces as girls screamed in terrified delight. People thought that would be the end of Rufino at Prep but in fact Mr. Jackson congratulated him. Let townie bullies be warned! Still, the incident hadn't won him any friends at the school; people were even more afraid of him now.

Jennifer and Rufino had English class together. At the time of Rufino's proposal to her to go up Lookout Mountain with him, they were studying Romanticism. To Jennifer, romantic had always meant walks on the beach and can-

delight dinners with someone you loved; but their teacher, a small, dark-haired woman with a smile full of secrets, liked to point out the dark side of the Romantic writers. Even Blake's *Songs of Innocence* were full of ominous moments, such as the shadows and darkening at the end of the "Echoing Green"; and "A Blossom," though it only talked about birds in trees, was about how you can be sexually attracted and repulsed by the same person. The sparrow in the poem, she added, was a phallic symbol. The important thing about Blake, she said, ignoring the snickers, was the way he kept two conflicting things going at once and then took them to another level.

Then there was this Romantic thing called the sublime, which Jennifer understood was something like when you looked out at the desert or ocean from a mountaintop and felt afraid but not really, because even though you knew that all that out there was a lot bigger than you and could swallow you up and you were nothing compared and were mortal, you were still *you* and alive to tell about it.

She looked up the word "sublime" in the index of a library psychology book. The entry was followed by subliminal, submission, and a little further down, suicide. She noticed the way the book's cover dented the bright blue veins of her wrist, and slammed it shut. The sound was practically sublime itself, an echoing boom that made heads look up, including Rufino's, who turned his strange face slowly to hers.

She left the library and went down into the arroyo behind the gym to smoke. At home she also had to hide in the arroyo to smoke, because her mother hated, absolutely hated, smoking. That was fine for her mother, who was skinny as a rail and didn't need to lose weight like Jennifer did; and smoking helped you lose.

Rufino followed her. He scuffed the ground and asked her what she thought of their English class.

She took a drag, exhaled through her nose, and said, "It's sublime."

He scuffed.

"I'm joking," she said.

"I know." He swung his freckled face up and looked worriedly at the mountains. Jennifer followed his gaze.

"It really is sublime from up there, I guess," she said (somebody had to make conversation). "The view."

"Yeah," he said. Then: "Wanna go?"

"Up *there*? Like, *now*?"

"No, I don't mean now."

"Well, when?" She couldn't believe she was helping him ask her out, but she was.

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's a school day."

"Yeah," he said.

She was afraid that if she didn't say yes he might not talk to her again.

"Maybe," she said at last.

"What's maybe mean?"

"Maybe means maybe."

His face turned red, the freckles disappearing in the flush. "But what does it *mean*? What's maybe *mean*?"

"Okay," she said. He was like a child, but a really intelligent one. "Tomorrow, then."

Her mother called it Lookout Mountain because she could never remember the real name for it, Atalaya, which meant the same thing, but in Spanish. (Until she was probably eight years old, Jennifer thought it was Look Out Mountain, like in watch out you're going to fall.) Though Jennifer had lived in Santa Fe since she was little, she hardly ever went hiking in the mountains. She didn't like heights; she had a lot of falling nightmares. Falling to your death seemed so absurd; yet it was the simplest way to die. First I'm up there, all alive; then I'm down here, like totally dead.

She'd never really noticed the rocks at the top of Lookout Mountain until that day in the arroyo. It was hard to tell how big they were. Houses, she supposed. There was one particularly big, craggy one at the very top. Anyone standing up there would be too tiny to be seen from town. It was weird to think that once you had been up there, forevermore you could look at it from any point in the city and say: I was up there.

The morning of her and Rufino's hike, she got up early and sneaked into the kitchen and made a cheese sandwich. She took her books out of her backpack and replaced them with this sandwich, along with a pint of Evian water and a rain poncho. Oh, yes, sunscreen on her face. She burned easily. Her complexion was what her mother called milky, a description Jennifer found repulsive.

She bicycled past the school. Probably people saw her from the classroom windows. Well, fine. Rufino was waiting for her at the trailhead, as agreed, his heavy arm dangling out the window of his mud-spattered pickup.

Rufino dragged his pack off the front seat of his truck and shrugged it onto his back. He slammed the door, making bits of manure in the bed of the pickup tremble. Jennifer locked her bike to the signpost, which read, "Atalaya 2.5 miles."

The mountain loomed before them. She could see the individual trees on the rim, serrated against the sky. The boulders up there looked precarious. She wanted a cigarette badly, but it wasn't right to begin a hike with a smoke.

Rufino went first, shrugging his backpack some more to get it comfortable. He had a shambling gait, like a bear's.

"Rufino," she said.

"Yeah."

"Are there bears up here?"

It took him a while to answer. "Sometimes, I guess."

"Did you hear about the two guys walking in the woods?"

"No."

"They came across this bear. A grizzly. With cubs. The first guy goes, 'What do we do?' The second guy goes, 'Run.' The first guy goes, 'Are you kidding? You can't outrun a bear.' The second guy goes, 'No. All I have to do is outrun you.'"

"That's a good one."

In fact, it was kind of horrible, like all jokes. That's what made them funny, being kind of horrible.

The first part of the trail ran fairly flat, the chamisa bushes oily-smelling in the sun, but they soon began to climb into the shadows of tall trees. Rufino forged ahead, his breathing heavy.

"I have to stop," Jennifer said. She was out of breath too.

Rufino's face was flushed, his hair sweat-matted to his forehead. Even his small eyes looked hot. He let his pack drop from his big shoulders and took out his water and drank big gulps. Jennifer drank her own water and then lit a cigarette. OK, so cigarettes were anti-nature, but she had to have one.

They had come to a bend in the trail that showed, between the trees, the city below. Behind the city stretched a range of mountains like a long blue cat.

"That's school," he said.

"Where?"

He pointed to flat roofs dotted with silver bells.

"Maybe we should go back," Jennifer said.

"You said that?" her mother said. "You told him you should go back?"

"I said 'maybe', Mother. *Maybe* we should go back."

"And what did he say?"

"He said it hadn't gotten sublime yet."

"What was *that* supposed to mean?"

Jennifer began to cry then. She suddenly felt great pity for her mother. The only thing she'd ever heard her mother call sublime were the éclairs from the Chocolate Maven.

Her mother held her head and stroked her hair and waited for her to continue.

Jennifer snubbed the cigarette out against a rock very carefully so it wouldn't start a forest fire (she didn't tell her mother about the cigarette; she had to be very careful about what she *did* tell her) and gave a last glance at the school before she and Rufino continued up the trail. Inside one of those buildings their classmates were gathering for English class, vaguely aware that a couple of losers were missing. Assholes: they'd already forgotten that Rufino had saved them from those high school thugs. And little did they know that she and Rufino were about to experience what they were only studying.

The only person they saw on the trail was a woman coming in the opposite direction with a walking stick and a muscular Rottweiler on a leash, which she pulled up short as they passed. The dog was probably bigger than a wolf, but it wasn't sublime. A dog could never be sublime like a wolf, a wild thing. Were there wolves up in these mountains? She didn't think so. In any case, wolves didn't attack humans, or so she'd learned in school. Now, snakes... Were snakes sublime, or were they just gross? Actually, she really didn't even find them gross. One time when she was little she woke to find her stepfather standing over her only in his shirt, a stiff snake peeking out through the shirttails. As soon as her eyes fluttered open he disappeared. He disappeared so fast and silently that she couldn't be sure it wasn't a dream. That's what her mother would probably tell her, it's only a bad dream, go back to sleep, so that's what she told herself, though she didn't think it was a particularly bad dream, just strange. She remembered it the next day, and at breakfast she told them about it. "A snake, huh?" her stepfather said in that fake voice he always used with her, but even more exaggerated now, almost a shriek. "I felt sorry for you," she said. And she added, gaily, "I always do!" Her mother barked a sudden laugh and he broke into a weird grin and turned red. Later her mother prodded her for more information about this dream, but Jennifer didn't have much more to say about it. Soon afterwards the stepfather left the home, and her mother didn't marry again; after that it was just her and her mother and her little sister, in houses without males; even their cats were all girls. Her mother moved them from what she called "nasty old Chicago" to the fairy-tale town of Santa Fe and enrolled the girls in private schools, where she believed they'd be safe. It wasn't until later that they found out that Santa Fe had one of the state's highest rates of reported rape.

Jennifer and Rufino climbed. The air thinned and cooled. Her head grew light. Every now and then a break in the trees offered a view of the approaching mountain, which looked strangely close and far away at the same time, like the dreamworld backgrounds of medieval paintings.

Then she found herself ahead of him, and wondered how that had happened. The trail became much steeper as they neared the top of the mountain. They had to grab the jutting trailside rock to keep their balance. Small chunks of white quartz rolled under their feet. One of the authors they were studying about the sublime also had a lot to say about what things were beautiful and what things weren't. He'd probably say the color of the quartz was beautiful, but not its jagged shape. Only smooth, rounded things were beautiful. Her milky legs, for example.

She became aware of him close behind, aware of his eyes on her legs, and aware that he might think the reason she wore shorts and had taken the lead was so he could admire her from the rear. Her self-consciousness tripped up her gait and she slipped on the mica-slick rock and fell forward. She pushed herself up before he could help her. Her scraped knee glittered with specks of mica even after she brushed it off, and a few tiny droplets of blood welled and joined the silver sparkles.

"You go first," she said.

Finally they reached the saddle of the mountain. Sweat trickled between her breasts and dampened her bra. She drank what was left of her water and was still thirsty. Rufino offered her his, or rather, the extra water he carried in his knapsack.

"Wait a minute, wait a *minute*," said her mother. "He had another water?"

"In his pack—"

"Was is fresh? Was it sealed?"

"What are you talking about, Mother!"

"Listen to me, Jennifer. Was it sealed? You know, sealed? Did it go crack when you opened it? You know, snap, crackle, you know *cra-ack*, like that?"

Had her mother lost it? And then Jennifer got it. Her mother thought maybe he'd spiked the water with what did they call it, roofies or whatever—

"My God, Mother, I don't know! Yes! It crackled."

God, why was she telling her anything! A nightmare, this was a nightmare!

The top of the mountain was strangely park-like, with short grass between the trees and rocks, and the trees looking as if they had been pruned and tended, except for a lightning-shattered one split right down the middle, leaving the

yellow heartwood jagged and bright.

“Need to make a pit stop,” said Rufino, and he lumbered off behind a boulder.

She needed to pee too. Funny how even when you're thirsty you have to pee. She went behind a tree on the other side of the trail. She looked down at the padded crotch of her panties. Her period was starting; she was just beginning to spot.

Speaking of spots, what was that? She flinched from the thing crawling near her foot, and then saw it was just a ladybug. She let it crawl up her finger. Round, cute little thing. It flew off. Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home, your house is on fire, your children are gone. Who would invent such a horrible nursery rhyme? Why were children's minds poisoned with such things?

She rejoined Rufino on the trail, which continued along the saddle of the mountain for a while. To her left, between the trees, she caught glimpses of the vast, golden desert spreading out to where the earth actually seemed to curve. It made her queasy.

“There's a rock up ahead where you can see it all,” Rufino said.

“I don't think I want to go there yet. I feel a little dizzy.”

“You felt dizzy?” said her mother. “Like you were going to faint?”

“I was *hungry*, Mother!”

“Do you want to eat our lunches now?” said Rufino.

“Yes.”

They sat in the shade of a grove of pines and ate their lunches. Rufino had brought a bean burrito and a boiled potato. She offered him a bite of her pimento cheese. He'd never had pimento cheese before. He declared it good stuff. He offered her more of his water.

“You mean, he kept the water for you? When he gave it to you the first time, you gave it back and he kept it for you?”

“Yes!” She knew what her mother was implying: that he could have slipped something into it when she wasn't looking. Rufino and his roofies. Oh, hideous, Mother!

“I felt fine, Mother, fine!” In fact, she did feel a little better, after her sandwich, but still light-headed. A smell of decay rose from the soil—was it a good smell, or a bad? The spot where they sat was like a pasture with tasseled grasses and blue flowers—what was the word? *Pastoral*—on the right it fell off into dark ravines and to their left were the

boulders, the ones you could see from the city, beetling out into the sky. Her knee still sparkled, though the specks of blood were dried black now. She tried to wake herself with a cigarette, but even after smoking she began to nod, overwhelmed by a dreamy fatigue. Not drugged! Just sleepy... A nap... But she wasn't sure she wanted to nap in front of him, and anyway, he wouldn't let her. He wanted to get to the rock and show her the sublime view.

They clambered up one rock and down another, she following him, headed to the farthest boulder, which jutted into the void. And suddenly they were there, suspended in space, tilted into the sky, the tawny desert stretching out to distant mountain ranges, the adobe city below a mere insect-like disturbance of the earth. The only signs of life were the occasional knife-like glints slicing up from some distant windshield or window. Directly below rose the pointed trees, like green-cellophaned toothpicks.

This silence would swallow up her scream like a puff of vapor. But she didn't have the breath to scream. She had to stay perfectly still and keep her balance and look straight ahead. She mustn't let it overwhelm her, yet she had to submit to it. She had to bring it into her, make it a part of her...

His voice startled her. "Jennifer."

"What."

"Something I was wondering."

"What."

"If you woke up from your life, would you tell it as a beautiful dream, or as a nightmare?"

He was somewhere behind her, a little to the left, but she was afraid to turn around and face him.

"He was behind you?" said her mother. "And you were afraid?"

"How do you wake up from life?" she asked Rufino.

"Like maybe...when you die?"

Why was he talking like this? But she knew what he meant. She knew exactly what he meant, though she had never thought about it that way before.

"How about you?"

"How about me what?"

"Is your life a beautiful dream, or a nightmare?"

"I could tell it either way."

“So how do you tell it?”

“Depends on who I’m telling it to.”

“So how do you tell it to yourself?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On what part of me’s listening.”

“And how do you know what part of you is listening?”

“That depends on how I tell the story.”

Mother: “I’m sure *that’s* true. He’ll tell his version whatever way it helps him get out of this.”

She wasn’t understanding the conversation at all, her mother. She was just hearing what *she* wanted to hear.

“Rufino. Grab me.”

“*Grab* you? You told him to *grab* you?”

“Catch me, I don’t know, Mother! *Hold* me.”

Her mother held her for a long while. Then, still holding Jennifer’s hands, she looked into Jennifer’s eyes and said:

“What happened then?”

“Nothing!” Jennifer looked away. She could feel her mother’s eyes boring into the side of her head.

“Nothing? What does ‘nothing’ mean? What does it mean, Jenny?”

Jennifer didn’t answer, and her mother sighed one of her forever sighs. She told Jennifer to rest and that she’d be back soon.

Jennifer sat up in the bed. “Where are you going?”

“Just to the drugstore.”

“That’s all? Just to the drugstore? Then you’ll be back?”

“Yes,” said her mother, wearily. “I’ll be right back.”

Jennifer threw herself on her pillows and listened to her mother drive away. She knew what her mother was getting:

the morning-after pill. Okay, whatever. As long as she didn't call the cops, like she'd threatened to earlier. God, she was so tired. Too tired to go to the arroyo for a smoke. Too tired even to cry any more. Almost too tired to think about Rufino, his big hands grabbing her...

Tomorrow—the morning after. That's when she'd wake up to her nightmare life, or her beautiful one.

## Driftwood

*John Sibley Williams*

“a pelican  
landed on my shoulder  
intensely still  
like a story  
that hasn't happened yet”

-A. Molotkov, *Punctuation Marks*

I'm here by the sea to begin my story again, with the pelican. Nightly, it carries to my bedside reports on what has changed, on what has not, on which direction time moves, and whether or not I'm allowed to forget. But its news is static. It hasn't a pen. This story is mine to unmake.

So I open my notebook for the first time in six months. The pages crackle and fan out from their spine in blank white wings. All around me things are crashing and merging and recreating themselves. I am in the middle of their lesson.

Though the pelican is as hungry as I to start again, it waits on my shoulder, intensely still. *It is time*, the bird raps with its empty beak into my skull. *I need to fly soon; let me.*

I write:

“The middle of the story, I'm learning, can be the beginning. Sometimes.”

The pelican seizes me tighter. Its leathery feet are a fist. I cross out the last word, “Sometimes”. The bird unclenches.

“I am again a child kicking through the surf, bleeding from scraped knees. I am an 85-year-old who has finally reached the coast, after a lifetime of driving. I am everything but these hands reaching into the surf, still searching for her body, everything but these hands, this surf.”

*Better.* Its wings unfold their paper creases and test the wind's warm thermals.

The air is a jar of salt. The earth below me is an hourglass, sand frozen in its narrows. The day sits all around me exactly as it used to, exactly as it did that morning.

I write:

“The story did not yet have a pelican in it. At that time I was writing a poem about how everyone’s first memory is the sea— the anointment of bathwater or waves, scrub grass, dunes that seem the size of a negligent father but become years later just enough to fill an hourglass. I could not have known the strength of the current. I had only read of undertows. My words had a deadline, an expiration date; I was not thinking of hers, was not thinking I was that father.”

*And what will you erase from the story,* the pelican asks. My ear flushes raw from its words, from the toothy sea air.

“First, I spend months remembering her name to the point it needs to be forgotten. This is when the pelican arrives, my co-author. It reminds me of her strawberry blonde hair, just like her mother’s, and how she loved to swim out a bit further than her muscles could return. It reminds me of the way she was suddenly as absent as she was moments before present, alive, swimming, calling ‘father, watch!’ across the tops of the waves. It reminds me I was never really watching.”

*And why am I here,* the pelican returns, *weighing down your shoulder, in this new story just beginning.*

“You are not,” I write in answer. “First I write you from this story. Then the sea, the salt. I cross out myself as I was and my daughter as she can never be. I erase that poem and its deadline. I am not that morning, that life. I am a man of 33, alone by the sea, with nothing weighing down this shoulder.”

I close the notebook. There has never been a pelican. The sand begins to flow down through its glass tube. I have not wasted my life.

## Impossible Terms

*Benjamin A. Doty*

The train tracks were two buildings behind his in St. Paul, but Sam could feel how close they were by the tremor that made the bed frame vibrate. The cars of the train lumbered, and the more Sam squeezed the bedpost, as if to make the vibrations stop, the closer the train was and the harder it became to ignore the thought of his deceased father, which came now at an inopportune moment. Sam could feel the slow movement of the train, as if the tracks on which the train rode were the bones along his spine.

Sam had returned from his father's funeral in Alpharetta, Georgia, not even two weeks ago. The train on its tracks reminded Sam of the effort his father had made to teach him something when he had been in high school, before he had moved to the Midwest for college.

"What is it?" asked his wife.

"Nothing," he said, but he couldn't quite lose the flitting thoughts about his father, as much as he wanted to.

Sam made out the features in the dark of this wife's face from the pale blue light of the alarm clock on the nightstand. He saw that her eyes, as reflective as pools of water under moonlight, were open and intent on him with that question, What is it?

It had been Sunday, eighteen years ago in Georgia, and while most were heading to the first church service or sleeping in, Sam's father had been taking him fishing. It had been trite: father and son fishing together for the first time. His father had been surprised that they'd not gone earlier in life to do this, but his father was not much of a fisherman, he had said, and that was the reason.

Yet his father had talked about perfection. "A complete life," he had said, "involves integrity to principles. It involves developing the body along with the mind. You have to try and excel at everything that is important to you." His father, who had played on two varsity teams in high school, had seemed to want some glimmer of, if not interest in, physical prowess in his son. It had been only when they talked about politics or books, however, that he and his father had found common interests. His father had stopped suggesting high school sports after Sam wouldn't even try out for cross-country. Now there was the outdoors and cultivating an interest in Sam for that.

Sam couldn't help but feel that, in his father's eyes at least, he lived at the edge of a vast terrain of shame for not falling into the examples of manhood his father had in mind. All of the older males had even served in the military, and it had seemed very unlikely that Sam would.

Even though his father had become an Episcopal deacon ten years before passing away, Sam remembered how imperfect his father had been, despite his father's talk, despite the fact that his father had believed that lives had to be grand performances—strong and moral—even in fishing.

They had been walking for ten minutes, following a path of red dirt that went alongside the power lines, Sam remembered. He hadn't wanted to come, but he tried to romanticize fishing. He had, of all things, just read *The Old Man and the Sea* in his English class.

"Manliness, ruggedness, individualism and patience. These are all the values of the sport of fishing," his father had said.

They had been carrying close to \$200 of new equipment. Sam's fishing pole had been an unexpected gift on his birthday, solidifying the obligation he now had to go with his father.

His grandfather, whom he hadn't known well, had passed away the prior July, and his father's attitude toward him had changed because of it. His father now talked of life and death as real matters, subjects he had said Sam had to consider with a great deal of importance now that he was entering his prime.

"You have to, have to," his father had said with emphasis, somewhere, sometime, along the walk to the fishing hole, "find something in life you want to do that will make you happy, and a partner, a good woman, who'll stand by your side."

"Of course, Dad," Sam had said.

"I'm serious. You don't want to listen to me, do you?"

"I do."

In some small space in a corner of his heart he had wanted to, but he had recalled how often his parents had bickered until they had decided that being quiet in each other's company was an amicable truce, almost the same time he and his father had gone fishing.

He had likened the stillness of the water they arrived at, before them, to the quiet his parents had found between each other—flat on the surface, dark and murky underneath. He had likened it also to his own uncertain future and his own relationship with his father.

The train traveled up the back of his spine when Sam thought of it and almost cut a valley down his skull. There was no way to quiet these thoughts at this inopportune moment.

Parents were always enigmas to their children, Sam thought now, eighteen years forward. You wanted, and didn't

want to know, why they were the way they were.

Now that his father had passed away, he felt a kind of forgiveness, looking back. Two people, even father and son, Sam thought, expected things from each other on different, often impossible, terms.

“No, son, no,” his father had said, trying to show him how to properly swing the pole to get the line out. “You’re releasing too soon.” Sam remembered his father’s impatience as well.

Sam listened to his own breathing in bed and then noticed how his breathing responded to his wife’s.

All he had wanted from his father, Sam thought now, had been what every other kid wanted—a break from having to meet every expectation.

“What is it?” his wife asked.

“Sorry,” answered Sam.

“Where’s your mind?”

“The train.”

“What?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Your mind should be on us.”

“It is.” This wasn’t far from the truth.

In the first ten minutes, Sam had managed to get the hook in his index finger twice, causing it to bleed the second time, eighteen years ago. The first thing he had reeled in was a clump of algae. He had exerted so much effort to pull it that his sinker had almost hit his father’s forehead.

“Lots of roots under water,” his father had said, trying to make him feel better. “Don’t worry.”

“Sorry.”

“Just keep trying. That’s all you have to do; you’d be surprised how far that’ll get you in life. Remember Teddy. Shoot, remember your grandfather.”

Sam blushed. He couldn’t believe that his father had to mention two dead men, including his grandfather, who had been a decorated naval officer in World War II. The reference to Teddy Roosevelt was a fascination and near idolatry

his father had for the late President.

Sam had been grateful when all he had to do was watch the bobber float, when nothing would happen and his father would be quiet. Sam had his digital watch on, which was a terrible thing to have now, and when he didn't look at it to observe the minutes pass, he had stared at his left index finger to see that it had stopped bleeding.

The feeling, and even muted sound, of the train continued. There were their breaths more excited than they would be at sleep, and these were, more than ever now, expectant, nearly ready to power down and conserve. Yet Sam hated thinking of his father now. He wondered why death made his father more alive than when his father had been living and if he would be more hurt than his wife if they never had children of their own.

Sam wondered why he had tried to become who he was—a copywriter, a husband, a half-hearted jogger two mornings a week, a liar, a lover, a pessimist, someone who read only the front of the local newspaper every morning, and innumerable other things, as he went through the scattered thoughts through his head, through time and place, to his father and now to this moment, which should have had his full attention.

Chekov had said that you only need a moment in a life to capture the person, Sam had read. He wondered if that time he had gone fishing with his father captured his father's entire life. He wondered what moment would capture his.

Yet Sam was no Hemingway to raise the catching of a fish to an eternal struggle between humankind and the short stature of his years. The recognition Sam had wanted from his father came when his father had told him how proud he was of the life he had made when he had gotten married and the family he would start.

"She's a fine woman," he had said. "You've made me a proud father today."

Yet the recognition seemed of his wife, not him, an admission of his father's own failures to find, as he had put it, a good partner.

The fishing was supposed to be best in the morning, his father had said, eighteen years ago. Something had nibbled, and Sam had reeled in his line, only for slack to come back after the first try. This had happened several times, but Sam had gained confidence in his ability to cast his bait past the shallows. He even thought, maybe, this fishing thing could work out.

After practicing his newfound casting ability for more than a half hour, Sam had looked up to see an elusive sun behind slow-moving clouds. His father had looked up too, and each time his father did, Sam noticed how much his father had to squint.

"It's a crazy world, isn't it?" his father had said.

Sam had paused and sighed. He had imagined a moralizing tangent about to come from his father, as irritating as a bout of coughing.

"Crazy," his father had continued. "You know what the biggest difference between your mother and me is?"

Sam had typically shut off at this point. He had wanted to hear, and not hear, what his father had to say.

"You got a girlfriend?" his father had gone on. "What happened to that girl from India you went to prom with?"

"We were just friends." There had been no girl, and Sam hadn't felt very much like talking about that with his father. Yes, he couldn't play sports, and didn't even try out. Yes, his life wasn't a grand performance. Yes, he still hadn't finished *Anna Karenina*, a book Teddy Roosevelt had finished while apprehending two thieves who had taken his prize row boat when he had been about Sam's age. Yes, he wasn't dating and was too scared to ask anyone to.

"You will," his father had said, dismissively.

Sam had glanced at his father and back to the muddy water. They had sat on two backless green fold-out chairs. His father had slouched forward in his and used his knees for support. They had brought a thermos with coffee Sam poured into two plastic cups. Sam was frustrated.

"The difference," his father had said, "is that I love your mother, but your mother doesn't love me."

It had been the abruptness of it, Sam remembered now. It had been, partly, in the coolness also.

Sam wondered what made two people of the opposite sex palpable, how all of a sudden they could make bonds for the rest of their lives simply for the sake of having children or not living alone, how they could go on so unused to it, except as they had received that kind of commitment from their parents, and then expect it from a random encounter, a stranger. His father had, no less, married a foreign woman, a Turkish woman to be exact when his father had been in the Army, but it could have been any woman. She could have been from New Hampshire or Arizona, and they could still have been different people.

Sam couldn't concentrate on the love he was supposed to make to his wife. He hadn't known love, so how could he be prepared to know how it ended? Or what that was like?

When a man loses his father, thought Sam, he loses his one best chance to see the rest of his life.

"What is it?" asked his wife.

"Nothing," he said and kissed her. But then he thought he had an answer. "Baby?" he said.

“What?”

The bed frame still trembled, as did all the confidence he had, about the future, about himself and her.

His wife lay under him, and Sam wondered when the day would come when she would no longer love him, no matter how many innumerable acts of love they would perform.

Eighteen years into the past, a fish jumping out of the water, a crack of thunder or something pulling the line would have distracted Sam and his father, maybe even have had some symbolic attractiveness later, but there had been only the stillness, the unmoving quality of everything, including time, as if his father had quieted everything in the landscape and brought it to a standstill, the way a parent, perhaps, only could, everywhere still except his father's hands, which, Sam noticed now, were trembling.

“I cheated on your mother last week,” his father had said.

The idea of love absent, his father cheating, them alone in the woods on a lake of abundant fish he couldn't catch, all of it together had been beyond Sam's ability to grasp. He had felt balanced between a terror of his father he hadn't remembered and the feeling he was supposed to have of anger, along with confusion and disappointment.

“You don't know the woman,” his father had continued, “and you won't know her because what was between us is over.”

Sam had stared at the small lake to where his white-and-red bobber floated still on the surface. Sam had known his mouth would be as quiet as the bobber almost motionless on the lake, and his father wouldn't be able to coax him into doing anything new like fishing anymore.

The modest panorama had been still. His father had relinquished his power over the natural world. There had been two fish his father had decided to keep in the old white paint bucket beside them filled with some of the lake's brackish water. It had been, perhaps, his father's most memorable performance, if all memories could be thought of as such. His father might have even gained some satisfaction, or sense of absolution from the act of confessing to his son—Sam could only imagine.

They had not been as far away from civilization as Sam had thought they were. Near the pond, he had been able to hear an engine on its tracks getting louder.

Sam kissed his wife's neck. The old man was gone. The trains were distant and far away, but not so far that he couldn't feel them in some strange way in his bones and the unknown genes that made up who he was.

The train was interminable. The vibrations continued, it seemed to Sam, even though only a few minutes had passed. Everything is a risk—marriage, love in all forms, and parenthood.

“Baby,” he said and kissed her. How could he tell her all the things on his mind in one sentence, or word or breath?



## **Nonfiction**

## A Gift from Prison

*Jean Trounstone*

When Dolly died this year, grief caught me by the throat. “Mother and daughter,” people used to say when they passed us on the street; me pushing her wheelchair down an uneven sidewalk; her cursing skateboarders whizzing by. At the community college, she’d been a speaker in my classroom. No one imagined we’d met behind bars.

She strode into Program Room 2 in 1987, her pocked-mark face framed by bouffant hair. Dolly, a grandmother, announced her nickname.

After “Dolly Parton?” I asked. I was cocky, a new teacher in the pen with an intact family.

Her throaty laugh filled the room. “My great-grandmother called me ‘Doll.’ It stuck fer Chrissakes.”

While others guffawed, I saw the babe she must have been. Bonnie to a Clyde I could only imagine, a man I later learned had killed an enemy. Dolly had been near the scene but did not wield the knife. She had a lousy lawyer and got “joint venture,” leading to a life sentence, but when we met, she was only a few years in.

“What a bargain,” she used to say of her eligibility to see parole after fifteen years. Zero resources to fight her sentence or the abusive boyfriend who refused to admit she had no part in the crime.

She brought knitting to our classroom and gossiped as though she still worked in a beauty salon. She planned to get her degree and “make the damn State pay” for their mistake. She’d stand at the one barred window in the run-down room where pieces of electrical cord hung from the ceiling; she’d blow cigarette smoke into winter air. She was the one who noticed that a bird’s nest had fallen from a barren tree into the yard; the one who befriended a nineteen year-old ostracized for killing her daughter. Dolly insisted that we start a theatre program since men had that privilege.

While I gave her opportunity, she gave me as much. She was the cajoler of prisoner lethargy, the nurturer for sore spots. It was Dolly who gathered women to classes and to console me when I lost my mother. She knew the right words; she never said too much. It was Dolly who engineered a begonia behind bars “for my director” at the curtain call of *The Merchant of Venice*. She played Antonio to a standing ovation.

I loved Dolly.

When I got the call from her sister, the words were simple and the meaning even more so: Dolly has had enough of illness; she has chosen to die.

I was in shock. Death is always too sudden, too indifferent. We had buried my mother-in-law two weeks before and I was still bruised from that death: another mother gone.

\* \* \*

Dolly's life had not been easy. She relied on wits more than money. She knew how to get the city to move her from one public housing apartment to another. She wrote poems about missing the taste of lemons; her mother's hands. She had three children, and as a single mother, raised pigs on an Iowa farm. She'd lived with her co-defendant whom she constantly forgave – until she went to prison and learned to stand up for herself.

One of our saddest days together was when she cried about a grand-daughter's murder. She cried too about the child's mother, not yet the addict she would become, but a daughter Dolly feared had inherited her bad choice in men. I reminded her of the good things –the battered women's program she started, the Associates Degree she'd earned – but she was inconsolable.

Dolly came up for parole in 1999. It was a grim sight when I entered the spare room to testify on her behalf, and eyed Dolly, a grey pony tail braided down her back. She was sixty-years-old, four years younger than the age my mother was when she died, and sitting handcuffed and leg chained.

She won parole, and in 2001, I went to visit her at her brother's house, her new home. She had a room filled with a flowered quilt, stuffed animals, and photos. She had her own bathroom and trees in the back yard. I told her of my impending breast cancer surgery; she hugged me fiercely. Then she cooked spaghetti with sauce from scratch, and we sat together and ate, uninterrupted by time and correction officers.

There were many meals in the free world. Some at a Chinese restaurant; some when she moved back to the city. She'd feed me lasagna – her mother's recipe. Sometimes I'd buy us dinner at a steak house; sometimes, a burger at the 99.

In her apartment, I'd be so relaxed that I'd fall asleep curled up on her couch. There were always stories about her grandchildren; there was an inevitable tragedy too – someone would have run away; someone would be high; bills would be impossible to pay. In those first years after she was released, I gave her what I could: paid and unpaid gigs to speak together about women in prison; shopping trips for her necessities; an air conditioner.

Then, two years ago, Dolly, who'd had diabetes and heart problems even before prison, had bouts of pneumonia. Years of smoking had brought on emphysema, and eventually, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. She could barely walk around her apartment, was hospitalized on and off, and struggled to breathe with a respirator.

The phone call from her sister was followed by a talk with Dolly's brother.

“Can I visit?” I asked

“Yes!” came a raspy voice in the background. I'd come the next day.

That night, I called to see how she was doing, and her daughter answered, the one that hadn't overdosed from drugs. "I don't know what to do," she told me. She wasn't strong. She wasn't ready.

"She just wants you to be with her," I said, conjuring up my mother's coma and how I sat, whispering into the phone from afar. "Tell her you love her."

"You don't understand," she said. "I'm afraid."

That night, Dolly fell, and when her daughter summoned the ambulance, Dolly refused to go. She would have no more of imprisonment, be it behind bars or on a machine that kept her alive. She called out her mother's name, and a few minutes later, passed away from this world much more gently than anyone could have predicted.

I went to her funeral. I cried with her family.

She called me her teacher. But as our friendship is written, she was mine as well. We found in each other what we needed and something unnamable we lacked in our lives.

## Studying Innocence

*Roland Merullo*

Though I no longer teach, I am still fascinated by the spiritual aspect of the relationship between teacher and student. By “spiritual”—a word polluted by overuse— I mean only the mysterious aspect of the teacher-student relationship that stands outside the boundaries of science and measurement. Beyond pedagogy. Beyond psychology. What is it that passes between teacher and student, in both directions? If we look through the widest lens, beyond subject matter, beyond personality, what is it that rides back and forth, invisible, in the air of the classroom? These questions have a certain moral weight to them. Those of us who have taught, at whatever level, may have become mired in the routine, or partially blinded by our own workload, our passion for the research or artistry that consumes much of our out-of-classroom lives. We may have stopped asking such questions, preferring to busy ourselves with more practical concerns. We may never have asked them at all.

But these questions pulse near the heart of the ancient profession that is teaching, and the ancient occupation that is learning. What, really, is going on?

Well, many different things are going on. The student is being exposed to some kind of factual or technical information (the conjugation of Italian verbs in the conditional mode; the intracellular activity in silicon molecules; the various options for applying paint to canvas). The student is being influenced, in a positive or negative way, by the psyche of the teacher: his or her insecurities, life experiences, strengths, charm, wit, warmth, arrogance, needs, and so on. The teacher is being influenced, in return, though often not as powerfully. And, with each class discussion, each lecture or workshop, every movement of a particle of knowledge from one brain to another, one spirit to another, the student is losing a bit of innocence.

Another loaded word, “innocence”. We use it, commonly, in the sense of sexual innocence. Or we use it to denote someone who has not yet been exposed to evil. But I use it here the way “simplicity” is used in some monastic texts: the quality of being uncomplicated, straightforward, apparently but not actually naive. This is often what we mean when we speak of the “innocence” of a young child. His or her reactions, while not always attractive, are always pure, unselfconscious, direct. As the child grows and learns, this innocence erodes—all through high school and college, perhaps even all the way to the moment of death. The teacher, any teacher, inside the classroom and out, is part of this process of erosion, and so bears a certain moral responsibility not included in the job description.

It is fascinating to me that, in a world like this one, innocence is only an endangered, and not yet an extinct species. There are times when human history seems as though it was designed to eliminate all vestiges of innocence from the collective behavior patterns. Even the tribulations of an individual life—family trauma, illness, want—ought to be enough to harden every creature. And yet, to varying degrees, this innocence, this spiritual openness and emotional

generosity persists.

When I look back for the touch of it in my own life, I think of a corner store in western Mexico, years ago, where a young boy came up and took my hand. He was seven or eight, we'd never met or spoken. I was having one of those days that make travelers want to spend the rest of their life in their own living rooms, studying TV. I was discouraged by the trip, and the weather, and my mood, and my traveling companion's mood, and Mexico, and money, and America, and health, and life. By virtue of some mysterious intuition, the Mexican boy seemed to sense this swirl of sadness in me. He came into the one-room store a few minutes after me, and immediately walked across the wood floor and took my hand, held it for a few seconds, then let go.

In the Micronesian archipelago, in Siberia, in southern Italy, total strangers have offered me food, a place to stay, assistance of one sort or another. In 1996, writing about the presidential campaign for the Philadelphia Inquirer, I lost my way on the dirt roads of central Kansas, miles out on the prairie on a Sunday morning without cell phone or map or any sense of where I should be headed. After driving for half an hour I saw a blue pickup truck parked at the side of the road. I stopped to ask directions, and the driver, a middle-aged man who was out there checking on the company's oil wells, called his wife on his walkie-talkie and, on the spot, invited me to their home for a fine meal and warm conversation.

Everyone I know has had experiences like those—as far afield as a village in West Africa, and as close by as a snowy road in the next town over. We seem to have an instinct for compassion and generosity, and that instinct is the soul of innocence. But it has sometimes seemed to me that education—especially higher education—washes that instinct out of us. Those of us who toil in cerebral fields are too well-steeped in human history to behave very often in such an unarmored way. We pride ourselves on being analytical, critical, skeptical, sophisticated, self-aware. But isn't it that sharpened critical focus, the powerful muscle of doubt, that makes spiritual simplicity—and the spontaneous, “foolish” generosity that often accompanies it—almost impossible?

At the same time, as a wise friend pointed out to me when I raised this issue with him, education is what frees us from prejudice and superstition. Literature encourages us to imagine our way into the interior worlds of another person; it fosters compassion. Science encourages us to demand proof for popular beliefs. History forces us out of the cocoon of modern, individual experience. Anyone who has ever spent any real time among the working, sweating classes understands that the myth of the pure-hearted, decent, gruff-but-kindly ironworker or factory seamstress is often just that—a myth. In Micronesia, in Mexico, in the polluted coal-mining towns of the Donbass, even on that same 1996 trip through the Bible Belt, I encountered meanness and pettiness alongside the occasional innocent gesture. So the kind of innocence I am talking about here is not ultimately a function of education or lack of education, sophistication or provincial naiveté. It is more mysterious than that. It cannot be bound up that neatly.

But the elusive origin of this—what shall we call it? this *trait*—does not absolve a teacher from taking it into consideration when he or she steps into a classroom. Age is often an important factor in a person's innocence or lack of

it, and most teachers impart their knowledge to students who are ten or twenty or, sometimes, fifty years younger. It should be impossible, as a middle-aged woman or man, to stand in a classroom of nineteen-year-olds and fail to sense the undercurrent of innocence there. There were times, in my own literature and writing classes (I taught at Bennington and Amherst Colleges from 1993-2002, and part time at other colleges in the 1980s), when I felt a strange urge to bow, to genuflect, before a young man or woman who had just said something particularly honorable. There were times when I saw, with perfect clarity, that a student of mine—younger, less sophisticated, less educated, less mature—was full of a simplicity and humility that I had long ago lost. Often this occurred when I watched one student criticize another's writing in a manner that was both straightforward and sensitive, critical and rigorous while at the same time without agenda, without ego, without any sense of gaining or losing advantage. I did not often see exchanges like that in faculty meetings.

But I didn't bow to my students (except once, at the very end of the term, in a personal ritual). I wonder if other teachers experience that urge toward admiration, and I wonder how it expresses itself. I wonder if the sexual urge some professors feel toward their students has a component of envy in it—not just envy for their youth or physical beauty, but for their relative spiritual simplicity. Could it be that some faculty-student affairs are not only matters of lust or power, but have something to do with a deep spiritual longing on the part of the older man (or woman) as well? Conversely, could it be that some teachers humiliate their students because they cannot bear their own loss of straightforwardness, genuineness, grace? Could it be that what some students most admire in their teachers is not intelligence or wit or the ability to entertain, but the balancing of the critical faculties with a certain purity of heart?

Only very rarely did I encounter a nineteen or twenty-year-old writer who had something to teach me about that craft. But, much more commonly I encountered aspiring young writers, or passionate students of literature, who had something to teach me about being human. At such moments, standing, as I was, in a position of power, of what I think of as “institutionalized respect”, I found it difficult to do what any good student must do: open myself to the possibility of my own ignorance. From time to time, in the midst of doing my job as a teacher—which was to take something I know and convey it to someone who does not know it—in the midst of speaking, for months at a time, about a subject I knew well to people who didn't know it as well, I found it painfully difficult to pass on other lessons to my students: evidence that it is possible to be intelligent and straightforward at the same time; critical and genuine, confident and humble. Some days, in the classroom, I had the painful sense that there was still so much I needed to learn.

## The Cumulative Shrinking Effect of Explanation

*Dawn Potter*

*“Yo, Shakespeare,” said my friend Angela. “Write about unrequited love, false promises, fake IDs, blown head gaskets, radio late at night, sex with the same man after twenty-five years... you know.”*

### 1. Unrequited Love

All of my loves have been unrequited, for I consistently fall in love with men who are less excited about loving me than I am about loving them. Of course, the accuracy of this claim depends on how one defines *love*—a word that, in my case, has perpetually adolescent overtones and that, when mixed with graying hair and housework, creates a kind of melancholy oldies-station uproar—those oldies that I can’t believe are old, those songs with the embarrassing end rhymes and predictable guitar sobs that I know I ought to despise but that keep making my eyes prickle and my throat swell shut.

But in the old teenage days, I wasn’t standing on the outside looking in: I wasn’t examining myself for the familiar, glorious signs of chaotic despair. I was just chaotically, gloriously, in tears. As Ray likes to inform me, over the phone, but kindly, “You always did like melodrama,” even though he himself has been drunk and five hundred miles away from me for most of the twenty-odd years of our friendship.

You could say that Ray is one of my unrequited loves, also the instigator of other unrequited loves, also the person who most enjoys picking the scabs off the unrequited loves that I’ve mistakenly assumed were healing up. Oh, the idiotic conversations we’ve had: the hand holding, the beer, the up-all-night-with-Tammy-Wynette epiphanies. But here I pause a moment to note that I’ve shifted into the *we* persona, that hopeful signal light for the unrequited—our lantern in the belfry, our torch in the corridor: as if a pronoun, a sturdy two-letter innocent, can, by grammatical sleight-of-hand, transform distraction into union, aloofness into a gift.

It doesn’t, which is why, I suppose, *unrequited* comes into its own in middle age—partly because there’s more time to notice that *we* is a less lonely way of saying *I*. When I was twenty years old and infatuated with the various boys who lolled around on old couches drinking beer, smoking pot, and listening to the Ramones, I did think, I really did think, that *I* would become transformed into *we*; that just possibly one of them might love me—by which I meant light up joyously whenever I walked into a room; by which I meant overlook my ugly clothes, delight in my body, coddle my fears; by which I meant adore me.

In fact, a few of these utopian vanities did manifest themselves, briefly, and erratically, and often at the wrong moment. During orchestra rehearsal, a nasal and prematurely balding flute player was the one who lit up when I walked into the room, whereas a gay man on acid ended up being the person who happily stayed up all night coddling my

fears. But delight in my body always seemed to be entangled with anxiety about my body, a distress that I tried to assuage by way of guilty trysts with people who weren't my boyfriend. And meanwhile, the boyfriend, who I'd been sure was the man of my dreams, turned out to be a permanent exasperation. Everything grated: I was bored by his *Moby-Dick* mania and terrified of his habit of changing lanes on the Jersey Turnpike while making fervent eye contact with passengers in the backseat. He, in turn, didn't like my overwrought parents or my baby-white legs. For a while, we did enjoy the histrionics of fighting and reuniting; but he, too, was prone to guilty trysts—and so eventually, amid tears and recriminations, our unrequited hysteria dissolved into misery into relief into occasional dreams into the memory of this boy I used to love so much that I thought my life would end if he left me. But it didn't, and I married one of the other boys on the couch. As Ray likes to inform me, over the phone, but kindly, "You always did like melodrama."

## 2. Broken Promises

The aforementioned boyfriend, at one fraught moment, made me swear that, if we ever broke up, I would not go out with any of his friends. If I did, he would never forgive me.

Considering that he himself not only fooled around with numbers of my friends but also propositioned my sister, I still don't feel too guilty about marrying his roommate. But I do hope that, wherever he is, he's seen fit to stop hating me. We could be friends again. We could even love each other, and write charming letters about the past, like maybe about the time we were at Arby's in Ardmore, Pennsylvania, and an old guy who looked like Howling Wolf swaggered up to us, sitting there at our plastic table. I was probably eating French fries, and you must have been eating one of those giant-sized roast-beef sandwiches with the barbecue sauce soaking through the squashy bun and dripping onto a wad of napkins. You had both hands clamped to that sandwich, your wide mouth wide open and ready to bite, and then Howling Wolf hauled over to our table and he looked at you, with that sloppy sandwich, and he looked at me, and he looked back at you. And he then he poked a big finger straight into your face and he said, loud enough so that anyone else at Arby's who might have cared to listen in wouldn't have had any trouble at all: he growled, "DON'T YOU NEVER HIT A WOMAN."

I have to say, under such alarming circumstances, you did behave very well. You set your sandwich down on the napkin wad and meekly replied, "No, sir, I never will." You might have had some barbecue sauce on your face while you were talking, but it didn't matter, not in the least.

Which reminds me: you might be interested in learning that I once took a poetry workshop from a man with barbecue sauce on his face, and it didn't matter then either. If you and I were writing letters to each other, I could tell you about that workshop—how this poet was like a ten-year-old boy trapped in a sixty-year-old's body; how each morning he would carefully park a toy car on every student's chair so we would have something to play with during class. If you didn't still hate me, we could talk about toy cars, and then about how you used to eat corned-beef hash

out of a can, and how the only thing you liked about my mother was her homemade sauerkraut, but you *really* liked it: your eyes would light up at the sight of kraut on your plate, and she, who on any ordinary day would have been happy to see you being dragged away by federal marshals, would sweeten up and smile.

But if you're going to waste all this time being mad, just because I've been cooking dinner for your ex-roommate for twenty-five years, not to mention pinning his ragged Carhartt pants onto the clothesline and ferrying his sons to baseball games and piano lessons and whatnot. . . . I mean, come on! In retrospect, I can see you might have had fun with my sister. Imagine if you had married her. Year in and year out, I would have seen you with barbecue sauce on your face. Think of it!—think of how good it would feel to remember we'd broken that ridiculous promise, how the four of us could all be shivering outside on lawn chairs, right at this very second, watching somebody-or-other's kid flub an at-bat while the swallows begin their circle-and-dive above our heads and the tree frogs shrill by the river.

### 3. Fake IDs

I have never owned a fake ID. I'm not actually certain I've ever even seen a fake ID, though once I did have fun watching my son and his friends construct fake ride bracelets for the Harmony Fair. The project involved hours of careful scanning and gluing; but then, at the last minute, they chickened out and refused to wear them. Since the rides at the Harmony Fair are notoriously lame, I think the only reason they labored over the bracelets at all was for the joy of proving they could do it, which is more or less the same reason I agreed to fake my neighbor's application for a marriage annulment. I was sitting at a picnic table slapping mosquitoes and watching my kids splash in a lake when his wife tossed the papers at me and said, "Want to fill these out? He can't be bothered." One could hardly blame her husband, seeing as he wasn't Catholic and had divorced his first wife so long ago that he had forgotten what she looked like. But my friend, his second wife, wanted to keep everything tidy with the Church, so I sat there at the picnic table and had a good time filling out the form. Today I can't remember a single question it asked, let alone any of my fraudulent answers. I do recall deciding that all-capital-letters would make my handwriting look more manly. Anyway, the Church fell for it.

### 4. Blown Head Gaskets

*Blown head gasket* is metaphorical shorthand for *despair*. When I'm standing at the garage counter waiting for Terry the mechanic to get off the phone and I hear him mutter, "Blown head gasket," I know he might as well be saying "Potato blight" or "Heart failure." His mustache droops. His eyes turn bleak. *No hope* is what he means.

Though, of course, automotive misery is nothing like death by famine.

What's scary about metaphor is how it works as seduction. "Mom, you exaggerate *everything*" is how my sons put it.

Words jump into the pulpit: they wave their arms around; they invent a character and claim she's me. In real life, I don't even know what a blown head gasket is.

According to Ray, he doesn't answer my emails because I spend too much time honing my sentences, and it makes him self-conscious. Quite possibly he's lying and is just too lazy to answer. But on the other hand, he's right: this morning I spent half an hour polishing a one-line Facebook update.

"I like you," says my friend Donna, "because you're the kind of person who doesn't notice she's just said *anon*."

### 5. Radio Late at Night

is what my sons listen to when they're sleeping. First, it's a long, repetitive, crackly debate about whether the Red Sox should trade ailing Mike Lowell to the Rangers; now it's a talk show with Dee Snider, ex-frontman of Twisted Sister, who snarls, "If it ain't metal, it's crap"; and me—I've been upstairs asleep for hours, wishing for sex in my dreams, when suddenly I'm wide awake and it's two o'clock in the morning, and outside a barred owl is complaining about his meal, and my ex-boyfriend's ex-roommate is beside me snoring, and these guys downstairs on the radio are arguing about NASCAR in their tinny little voices, and I feel like I've woken up from a two-year coma only to discover I'm on the lam, waiting for the snipers, holed up somewhere in a weather-beaten motel at the end of the world.

I really hate radio late at night.

### 6. Sex with the Same Man after Twenty-five Years

Unrequited.

As you know.

## Am I Ugly?

*Terri Sutton*

It was Tuesday, my regular day to pick up my nine-year-old niece from school. This was a routine I'd started when Myesha was still in day care, a guarantee of spending at least one afternoon a week with her. Over the years, the basics of our afternoons had changed only slightly. There was food, talk, and an activity we could do together. When Myesha was younger, the activity was usually snuggling on the couch, where I would read to her until she drifted off into a nap. In more recent years, our activity time had led me to explore the woody trails of my neighborhood park and, after much practice, to learn the latest clapping games that girls invariably perform on playgrounds.

Myesha and a girl I recognized as one of her friends strolled toward the parking lot, whispering back and forth to each other. In front of my car, they parted—waving with the wild abandon that only children can muster. Myesha pulled the door open and in one efficient motion flung her Barbie book bag into the car then hopped into the backseat.

I heard the clinking of the barrettes that dangled from the ends of her braids. She thumped the back of the passenger seat with her tennis shoe. She's tall like her dad. "Seat belt," I reminded before shifting into gear to leave the lot. It was a reflex, not a required prompting. She fastened, and when I looked back, she was staring out the side window, her head tilted upward at the sky.

"Can I ask you something?" she said, moments later as I pulled into the McDonald's drive-thru.

"Sure," I said.

She was silent for a few seconds, long enough for me to hear her sudden intake of air, then a steady exhale. "Am I ugly?"

Experience has taught me that for certain questions it's the time it takes to supply the answer that carries more importance than the answer itself. And so I responded quickly, "No, Myesha. You're not ugly."

When I glanced in the rearview mirror, I expected to see her deep-dimpled grin that would tell me she was teasing

or that solemn look of satisfaction she got whenever I told her exactly what she needed to hear. But instead her face appeared frozen still, her eyes narrowed as if she was examining a priceless coin.

“Why do you ask?” I said.

She hesitated, and it seemed to me the first time Myesha had been reluctant to speak her mind.

“There’s a boy,” she said. “I like him, but he doesn’t like me.” She dragged one French fry through a glob of ketchup.

“Who is this boy?” I asked, already picturing a cruel, little oaf in my mind.

After swearing me to secrecy, she revealed his name. “He’s nice,” she said, “but I want him to like me.”

“There’s a lot that goes into liking someone,” I said, emphasizing *a lot*. “You can’t really explain what makes one person like another...”

She stopped me. “No,” she said. “It’s happened before.” She was watching me now—leaning forward the way she did when one of her favorite songs came on the radio. “At my last school. I liked a boy...but...he didn’t like me back, so I was thinking maybe it’s because I’m ugly.”

At that moment, I knew I couldn’t explain the mysterious path that leads to an attraction for one person, but not another. Instead, I crafted examples about the subtleties of preferences: jeans—straight-legged or flared—and hair-styles—braided or pony-tailed. With each instance, I talked faster, like a rapid-firing pistol. I moved on to games, followed by movies, snacks, teachers, girlfriends, then finally I drew comparisons with boy-girl relationships. I wanted to give Myesha more than ugliness to think about, to overwhelm her with other possibilities. I didn’t want her to conclude that she was ugly because she couldn’t think of anything else.

“We like people for all sorts of reasons not connected to how they look,” I said. “It might be the way they laugh...or because they like the same things you do...or because of how smart the person is.” I caught a glimpse of her in the mirror. “Does that make sense?”

She shrugged, but I could tell she was thinking about what I’d said—she’s that kind of child. And I was thinking,

too, about ugliness and a picture of myself years ago when I was thirteen.

I don't remember the occasion when the picture was taken. In those days, any Sunday afternoon might find my sister, brother, and me in the backyard still dressed from church while my mother snapped photos of us with the Instamatic camera. What I do recall is that I liked the picture of me standing in the backyard, wearing a lime green dress with a white leather belt that showed off my small waist. I was posed in the way girls did then—arms behind me, my head tilted to one side, and with just enough sway in my hips to suggest a promising body.

One day, my brother suddenly materialized while I sat at the kitchen table admiring the photo. At sixteen, he was constantly in motion, sweeping through the house on his way to meet friends or to get to football practice. But this day, he paused long enough to peer over my shoulder at the picture.

"Look at old, ugly Terri," he said, then disappeared out the side door.

If he had said it in the taunting way that older brothers usually talk to baby sisters, I would have responded in kind and then forgotten about it. But his tone had been amicable and so matter-of-fact that he could have been making an observation about the weather. Even my mother, who was busy in the kitchen, said nothing—not even the usual, "You know better than that," her familiar reprimand for our minor infractions. It was as if my brother's declaration of my ugliness was such an obvious truth that it had, by tacit agreement, gone unsaid for the first thirteen years of my life.

After that, I was changed. In retrospect, it seems absurd that a few careless words should have affected me so deeply, but from that day something that I'd never considered before became a permanent part of me. Don't misunderstand, like other girls my age I had compared myself to the competition, and, to the extent that one can, I'd given myself an honest assessment. Maybe this one had nicer hair (that was important then...and perhaps now, too) or that one wore better clothes or had a better figure. Until that day, my appraisal had been that I was comfortably situated in the mid-range—not a candidate for a circus freak show or a beauty contest.

I considered the standards of beauty for African American women. There was Lena Horne, an indisputably exquisite looking woman, with keen features, straight hair, and thin lips. Today we don't talk about the preference of having European traits but back then we all knew it was better to have hair "like white people." Diahann Carroll, star of *Julia*, had a polished style beyond anything I could attain while locked in the bathroom and experimenting with drugstore makeup. When I compared myself to these women, I felt the full weight of my ugliness—a skinny, yellow-skinned girl with nappy hair.

I settled into the life of an ugly girl. I became quiet and shy. My insecurity about my appearance led me to avoid anything that might draw attention to me because that would invite people to see old, ugly Terri. I understood when my friends and I went out that boys and later men would be more interested in my attractive friends. I believed that any attention I received was a gesture of pity or boredom and accepted practically all dates because I assumed the invitations would be few and far between. Once when I was in high school, I dated a boy who, in plain terms, I loathed. He never listened to anything I said, opting instead to interrupt or “talk over” me. One those occasions when we ate out, he would stuff hamburgers and onion rings in his mouth, then chew through a conversation. At times I was so disgusted by the sight of his eating that I would excuse myself to the ladies room just to get away. And yet, I never refused his invitations.

My accepted ugliness undermined every aspect of my life. As an adult, I became a pleaser, believing my acquiescence was a necessary concession. I doubted the motives of every relationship. Why would any man be attracted to me? Why would any woman want to be my friend? While most girls wanted to squeeze into the smallest dress size possible, I deliberately bought clothes a size larger than I needed. My goal was to camouflage my ugly body as expertly as I camouflaged my inner self.

Then one day I realized that soon I would be fifty. Although I had always exercised regularly and followed a careful diet, I couldn't stop the spreading cellulite on my thighs or the hanging flab on my arms. My body was changing. I acknowledged that the Lena-and-Diahann ideals no longer seemed applicable—or enviable to me. This realization had an oddly jarring effect on me. While I felt a sense of relief at not having the unattainable over-shadowing me, I also felt a sense of loss. Where were my standards of beauty?

At the same time, I was preoccupied with questions. Who defined ugliness? Did I have to accept that definition? What was I really like? Did I respect myself? Would I want myself as a friend? Was I living the life I wanted? For these questions, I had few answers. Equally disturbing was my growing annoyance with people, accustomed to my compliancy that continually made demands of me, and I was irritated with myself when I gave in. “That's what happens when you turn fifty,” my mother told me when I complained about their insensitivity. “You just won't tolerate people messing with you.” I wondered if she was right. Maybe fifty was the gateway to intolerance or maybe it was the tunnel to something else. Increasingly dissatisfied with myself and unwilling to remain in the role I had played for so many years, I decided it was time to create another picture.

I was the only one who saw this imaginary photo of me sitting in an orange velour chair, a gift from my sister when I moved to Wisconsin in 1983. Though I donated this chair to Goodwill years ago, I invented a snapshot of myself, pressed into its comfortable, buttoned back, hands folded in my lap. Deliberately, I brought neither my face nor my body into sharp focus, sensing that I didn't need to see what was outside I needed to concentrate on what was

inside.

For months I studied my photo, always in the chair although sometimes posed with my legs curled under me or leaning on an armrest, reminding me of *The Thinker*.

I searched for clues to understand the life I'd led. Like a detective, I followed the threads back through critical moments when this response instead of that might have made a difference. I returned to that day in the kitchen when my brother had casually defined me as ugly. Each time I remembered, I imagined another way to counter him. "Who asked you?" I might have said, or "It takes one to know one." Even rolling my eyes in smoldering defiance would have been better than accepting his pronouncement. Thinking about the power I'd given his words embarrassed me.

In time I began reading self-discovery books, searching for explanations for my behavior. There was no shortage of works that were loaded with theories, case studies, key agreements, spiritual laws, and makeovers to help me analyze my life. I devoured them all, reveling in the range of possibilities and solutions they represented. Finally, I had the power to define my past and to shape my future.

Some days change was difficult, and other days it seemed impossible. Backsliding into comfortable, painful habits was easier than cultivating new ones. Frequently after agreeing to something I didn't want to do, I would force myself to renege, explaining tactfully and sometimes timidly to the person that I couldn't comply. With practice, it became easier for me to say "no" immediately to acquaintances and colleagues when their requests were counter to my own needs. And any feelings of fear or insecurity that I'd experienced in the past began to fade. Last year, ignoring all skepticism, I went back to school to fulfill a dream of studying writing.

Since then, I measure myself by what I see in my imaginary picture. I focus on what I am learning, by the people I am affecting in a positive way, and by what I am giving to my community. Every day I meditate to connect with the inner person I am, and I don't consider how that person looks to others because I know she is beautiful to me.

The next Tuesday I picked up Myesha as usual. After talking to her about school, her food preference, and giving the "seat belt" reminder, I mentioned the boy that she had talked about the week before. "Any changes?" I asked.

"No," she said, pursing her lips. "That's just the way he is."

## Room For Wonder

*Michelle Blake*

Last fall our town church had its annual fair, and as usual the library held its book sale on the same day. The weather stayed warm and dry, so we ate barbecue chicken and potato salad, seated at long tables next to the white wall of the church, which reflected the sunlight and made the air feel even brighter and warmer; shopped at the White Elephant sale, where I found a pair of giant felt slippers to slide over my boots when I bring in wood during the winter; and wandered down to the library to buy used books.

This year I found a first edition BELL JAR, a first edition IN COLD BLOOD, and a second printing of LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN, with the beautiful Walker Evans photographs. None of the volumes was in great shape, so this was not what you would call practical shopping. I tend to drag my reading material around with me from cabin to library to bedside table, and the wear and tear is too much for the less hardy versions, so I usually read the cheaper paperback editions, but I like owning the hardcover originals, each one an objective correlative for the word *book*. Also, I like to own extra copies of books I love, so I can loan them to folks and not worry about getting them back every time. This year I found A BARN AT THE END OF THE WORLD, in paperback, and a couple of Donna Leon mysteries, as well as a mix of mid-level novels that make for good sick bed reading.

When I took the books up to pay, I showed the cashier, a neighbor I don't know well, the two first editions and the Walker Percy (and James Agee) book, and told her I should pay more than the usual \$2 a piece for those, and a few other hardcovers.

"Do you know about books?" she asked.

"Well, I love books. But I'm not a dealer. I'm a reader."

"Want to be on the library board?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, much to my astonishment. "What do you do?"

"Raise money, organize events, plan programs—the usual."

“Sounds like fun,” I said.

This is radically unlike me—or unlike the version of me I once knew. Over the years of seeing my two children through a small and needy Friends school, I became a master at determining the volunteer work I was actually willing to do and saying a firm “no” to everything else. As anyone who works at home knows, especially if your work is in the arts, folks tend to believe you are really lying around, shades drawn, watching those shows where young, sleek people decide which stranger to marry. Acquaintances apparently think they are doing you a favor by offering you a better way to spend your time, like baking things so you can raise \$4.57 for the scholarship fund.

But my life is drastically different now that I no longer teach college classes, my children are out in the world on their own, and no one is calling one last time to see if I have changed my mind about being the grade-parent, whatever the hell that is. Mostly, I have plenty of time to keep our old dog walked and our house reasonably straight, to meet deadlines and pay bills and write pretty much every weekday—though things heat up during the weeks of spring planting and fall harvesting and storing, but that’s true for most people where I live, and no one argues with you if you shake your head and say, “Not this weekend—we’ve got to get in the apples.”

On reflection, though, it seems my mind hasn’t quite caught up with my reality. There’s still some part of me that wants to guard time as if I were an old miser, grudgingly counting out seconds against payment due. When my neighbor asked me to join the library board, another part of me who understands the actual parameters of my current life and shifting attitudes apparently stepped in and decided I *do* have time, whether I know it or not.

Meetings are once a month in the front room of the library, which is only two rooms, both of which are warm and friendly spaces where one longs to spend a little more time, surrounded by an assortment of classics and everything else. This last week I did my volunteer stint, opening the library and checking out books for two hours on Monday night. As I got ready to leave the house, I felt the usual mild resentment I feel whenever I have to go out on winter evenings, so I putzed around until I was running a little late. Which meant I had to drive the back roads faster than I usually do and was not in the frame of mind to enjoy the fading light over the stubble of frozen fields.

I consoled myself by imagining that I would have the two rooms to myself and could lie down on one of the extremely comfortable couches with a pile of books, but three people showed up and stayed through the evening, and it turned out I enjoyed getting to know each one of them. It is the month to get out the annual library appeal letter, which means it is the week to update the mailing list, which meant the person in charge of the mailing list worked with another person who is good at making labels, and that second person’s partner came with her, because they were on their way home from town. The partner had brought work with her, since the library has wireless Internet,

so everyone was involved in a project. After shelving all the books on the returns cart—except for one furry children’s book that didn’t have a number—I did sit upright at one end of a couch with a pile of books.

I also chatted with the partner for a while about how nice the dates looked in November, 2011, with the lovely 11 s on either side of the day’s number—11/14/11. We observed that 2012 will be the last time a version of that configuration will work in this century, when in December the dates will read 12/01/12, 12/02/12, 12/03/12, and on down the line. Then no more framed dates until January 2101, when the dates will read 01/01/01, 01/02/01, 01/03/01, etc.

The year 2101 will occur eighty-nine years from now, assuming there are people to read the calendar and write the framed dates on their letters and documents. Otherwise, there will be no 2101, since the concept of dividing time into increments—years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds, milliseconds—exists only in human heads. And too often we do treat it like money—doling it out to friends and relations and bosses and stoplights, when it’s actually only an abstract concept, not a concrete thing. (Of course, to some degree the same is true of coins and dollar bills, which are not—themselves—of any value, and which used to represent a certain amount of gold bullion but now represent god-knows-what, but this is a much farther-reaching exploration and just the type of thing that happens when restrictions on time grow up and move into their own apartments and one is left alone to muse.)

I told the partner of the woman typing the mailing list that I had read a story about a young boy on the autism spectrum who could tell you the weekday of any date all the way back to 1582. You could say, “August 11, 1845,” and he would say, “Tuesday.”

But he couldn’t do that for any year earlier than 1582.

As it turns out, 1582 is the year when Pope Gregory XIII made major changes to the Julian Calendar, established by Julius Caesar, and created the Gregorian Calendar, which is the one we use today. In other words, the boy could access this information only as far back as the moment when the dates and weekdays were determined by the same system we use to determine them now—but not before that.

She was duly impressed with the story, and we discussed, briefly, the collective unconscious and how much we all probably know that we don’t know we know.

Then we both returned to our reading and working, but in the back of my mind was a lot more to say about time: how it is a human invention, how it provides a hook for our hope—next week, we say, next year, it will be better.

While the rest of the world, the non-human beings, simply live in each moment as if it were truly all that existed, since, after all, it is. A yoga teacher once told me that the past and the future occur only as contractions in the body; if we live in the present, we breathe deeply and relax.

Finally it was nine o'clock, and time to close up. We have to record for the state how many people use the library when it's open, so I put four marks in the ADULT column, and one mark in the ADULT BOOKS CHECKED OUT column, and then I made myself a card and checked out Jonathan Safran Foer's book EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE; the narrator is a nine-year old boy who seems to be on the autism spectrum and is incredibly smart, as in a genius. It's a wonderful voice, and I wonder how I have missed this book, except that I often believe I don't have time for books that I'm not *sure* are good, which sometimes translates, if I am to be totally honest, as books by people a whole lot younger than I am.

After everyone left, I walked through the quiet rooms turning off lights and turning down heat, replacing and fluffing pillows on the couches. I noticed how much easier my breathing was than when I had arrived. Someone else had already brought in the OPEN flag that flies on the signboard out front, so all I had left to do was pack up my own stuff and make sure the night latch was turned sideways in the doorknob, before I pulled the door shut behind me.

The cold night sky was clear but many of the stars were lost in the glow of the three-quarter moon. As I drove home slowly, I caught glimpses, in the swathe of my headlights, of the stubbled fields and a couple of porches with wood stacked high for the winter. I thought I heard a coyote howl, but it may have been a disaffected hound. I did see a red fox poke its long nose out of the weeds by the side of the road. I don't see many foxes, so I braked right away and turned off the engine and headlights, hoping she'd show herself again. And as my eyes adjusted, I sat and watched the world transformed by moonlight, tree trunks bright against their black-shadowed background, the road a ribbon of grey leading into darkness.

It seems to me that back then, in my former life, when I worried more, I had a clearer and more consistent sense of time. Every second mattered, and it was way too easy to waste some seconds chatting in the school hallway or having tea with someone after drop-off. Those sorts of activities were the thin end of the wedge—what followed was ever-widening chaos and, eventually, gaping failure. Which meant time was the hard-won currency of success: if I spent my time well, I could make enough money and garner enough attention to boost my flailing ego.

As I move from the householder stage of my life to the retired person stage (though this describes my social habits and not my work habits) and my mind begins to open and expand to take in more than family and work commitments, to take in the lovely order of framed dates, the howl of a disconsolate hound, the bright windows of winter

houses—just so time itself transforms from hard-won currency to something much more like the radiant blessing of moonlight. The benefits are numerous, but chief among them is a lot more room for wonder.



## Poetry

## **Pencil Factory, Est. 1972, Blackfeet Reservation**

*Diane Glancy*

The message came by the carriers of doom  
with books, pamphlets, primers.

These government reports were exportations of our events  
to a government far away.

I discovered the classroom was a strong drink of whiskey—  
method and theory deadened the wounds.

Teaching was a song of alcohol—  
silver rockets in the glare.

## **They Said Hallelujah**

*Diane Glancy*

They said he was seated on his throne. The wounded got up from the ground. He made them whole and it happened before our eyes. We had not seen this before though the missionaries said he would. He is a God who robs his people of what they are and want to be and makes them into sheep. We wanted to be warriors and did not want to bleat. Then the ones we looked for brought us whiskey. It was something we had to have to survive as sheep.

## **That Was Never There Before**

*Diane Glancy*

They come at night—  
the old ones from those agency prisons and boarding schools.  
They walk the sky carrying northern lights.  
Maybe they're looking for a road.  
Maybe they're hungry for turtle meat.  
Maybe they want to pick up a rock or just smell the earth.  
They shake their heads— Why haven't we learned it right?  
They can't leave us alone, or let go.  
They're meddlers. Interferers with the lights.  
Here— over this way— put your thumb in our socket—  
see how you dance to this new light.

## Night Steps

*Major Jackson*

I'll never forget the wind the corner whispered,  
nor the windowed darkness that was more  
a frame for the world's high-rise loneliness.  
I'll never forget the days we lingered  
beneath our fingerprints and how we were  
each other's private sacrament.  
The brooms and mops hung behind doors  
like secret agents. The crooks of our knees  
ached from all the praying; our astonished hands  
could not keep up, being daydreamers  
of water towers and such. What monastery would  
welcome such after-images like those we spoke?  
Electric wires over a bus stop, a fly mumbling  
and dodging a swatter, a light brown maid smiling  
on a bottle of corn syrup. I'll never forget  
such sprigs of trembling and honeysuckle  
nor other forms of desire, the nightsteps  
of an upright bass or blue-eyeshadow  
like slashes beneath my mother's brow.

## Slowness

*D. Nurkse*

I found a turtle in the road,  
happily sunning beside the median strip.  
I wanted to move him to the safety of the berm  
but I was afraid of a nip, a rash, ticks.  
I tried to poke him with a birch twig.  
He wouldn't budge. I feared my scent on him.  
When I came back with work gloves, he was a stain.  
That small head lolled, hinged and stubborn in death.  
I made a promise, *don't hope, just act.*  
I broke it driving north to you.

## **The South Side**

*D. Nurkse*

The fire swept our narrow house.  
How can I wash away the stink?  
Why do I have to keep recovering,  
hoarding zero like a gem?

All day she tallies our singed books,  
sheets with little scrawls of soot.  
When will I scrub away the stain?  
We lock the list in a Sentry safe.

This city is huge; a thousand fires.  
At midnight ambulances surge and fade  
to Saint Luke, Methodist, Maimonides.  
She murmurs beside me, tense in a dream.

A siren whisks away its shriek.  
The fire almost took her life.  
Tense in a dream, our city is huge.  
Who can count the changing lights?

## Force Drift

*D. Nurkse*

We open six beers and by the second  
we can watch ourselves interrogate.  
We cull whispers, endless criss-crossings  
of a vast onyx desert, but no confession.  
At the third Bud the blows begin:  
perineal strikes, carefully calibrated  
and entered in a log. By the fourth,  
the detainee is laughing at us,  
escaping to the parched ravines  
of Helmand Province. *I am the child  
who won't stop hiccuping, the father  
who nailed the hoop a foot too high  
on the garage door, the wife on a cell  
to her shrink, mom beating egg whites  
with a slow whisk.* By the fifth  
the terrorist is dead, but here's the sixth,  
Boeing transport lit like a wedding cake,  
waiting on the tarmac to take us home.

## Distance Of the Givers

*D. Nurkse*

The storm surged and we worked in the mess  
serving the survivors; four to six wax beans,  
one curled half-circle of Spam, a dinner roll.  
Many were landlords, or judges, or mayors,  
before, and longed to be again, in Beaufort,  
though the lines were down. Or we fed the crews  
who chainsawed upturned maples and pick-axed  
their great raised disks of earth.  
At twilight the poor waited with their own plates.  
At dusk we cleaned up styrofoam and lucite,  
entered our spreadsheets in a master program,  
and slept in our locked SUV. All night we flinched  
at a fingernail scratching a fender, a flashlight  
whose weak disk contained the template of the bulb.  
Before dawn we woke to faint cornets. We washed  
and assembled the trestles. We could hardly tell ourselves  
from the logy stubborn flies coupling in midair.  
The crowd milled behind the fences. We were the givers,  
that was our power, hoarded like water in cupped hands.  
Once we could remember the storm, but now  
we only know it, we can never again imagine it.

## Hue and Cry

*Dolores Hayden*

*hue e cri*, outcry in pursuit of a criminal

white trash  
redneck  
yellow belly  
green-ass  
blue collar  
black hat

black operator  
white wrapper  
blue line  
red-handed  
green goods  
yellow flag

yellow dog  
blacklist  
greenwash  
whitewash  
redline  
blue-sky

blue meanie  
yellow peril  
red menace  
blackbird  
whitebread  
greenfly

green around the gills

bluesy

white as a sheet

yellow

black mood

red-ass

Red Hot

Green Hornet

Black Molly

Bluebird

Yellow Sunshine

White Lightning

redblooded, sing the blues,

eat the green weenie, yellow heart,

here's your black and white mug shot

## **The Hinge of the Year**

*Wally Swist*

In July, our time together was impeccable: a walk  
around the Common discussing *After the Rains*,  
a film with Shakespearean twists in plot and theme;  
salmon and swordfish dinners that I made for you,  
with a glass of champagne; our shopping together  
at Salvation Army, and kissing in the dressing room;  
and there were so many fireflies, we would walk  
the back meadow, hand in hand, into their flickering,  
to a place beyond that somewhere. In its abundance,  
August is sweet with corn and farm-fat tomatoes,  
and if you become quiet enough within, you can hear  
the hinge of the year turn, feel the snap of surprise  
on your skin with the coolness of the early mornings  
before September's beginning and summer's ending.

## **July Grave Yard**

*John McKernan*

Marble bunks

With cotton blankets

Fresh flowers

Hint of incense

The silence of dew

Brass markers

Flashing their starlight

On thin layers

Of a full moon

Everywhere

Lace & silk bras & shoe strings

Vodka bottles & tequila worms

And us Small children

With our large summer school bodies

## **Tenderly**

*Carol Ellis*

Walk with me for a while until fire burns the last angel and wings wither until it is almost impossible to remember, then we must remember with flowers and stones and talk as if it were possible to be heard by others besides oneself. The ground dampens against the palms of my hands. I do not know what tender things to believe. I am alone with flowers and grief. Down the row someone else stands with his head bowed. I miss whom he misses. I miss those I did not know. I miss where my heart used to be. My flowers are the only blue flowers they stand with some discomfort in the cup provided. Once on an older grave I placed a rose to keep someone warm under a cold stone. The grass watered into wildflowers that look like daisies but aren't I pick some and give them away to graves while trying not to think of bodies, feeling souls all around silent as a choir of strangers come together for one purpose: to be sent down deeply away from sunlight in a new dark, we will see a new dark but do not tell me where you will be burned and scattered.

## Why I Joined the Convent

*Sharon A. Foley*

I was the offspring  
of Sister Frederick,  
the feather in her barren cap.

I'd sneak out of personal  
typing class for the booty  
of her time, for the play of her against boredom.

I loved her foyer, her vestibule,  
her lips. I loved  
her rapture.

Steel grey eyes pierced me  
though she kept her face calm.  
I loved her kinetic mind.

Once, I saw her dancing  
with her father. We drank the Brandy Alexanders.  
I loved the fondness in her voice.

Her life was velvet:  
black veil, white scapular over  
her breast.

It was her kiss  
in the garden that ignites  
my panting for quickness, for thirst.

**Dear Dad,**  
*Julie Ebin*

Dear Dad,

In the corner of the room I inhabit a corner of your eye.

Through the window my eyes rove from room to room spying on the family across 77th. Fish and green rooms and red blinds. Someone's in the red room playing the piano with a boy.

I cannot hear through their glass. Wallpaper glitters huskily. Gold pans across rooms looking, looking. Here, fruit on the table, still.

I want to be an ambulance siren but am a closed mouth. I feel things move inside like pine needles and beetles or maybe marbles. Last night I tried to sleepwalk but wet the bed. Tears only dry by morning.

I grade listening by your snoring. I can count even up to a hundred while I wait. The sun gathers on my pajamas and thickens.

The sun is passing but not through me, I am transparent. When I unlock the door there is no echo in hallway C. Bolts turn beneath your hearing.

I will try to unlearn dust. I will begin by being clean. Snap shades, startle pigeons. Banish the scratchy sound playing over and over in my head. I can make believe.

All I really want is to disturb.

## ¿Carmencita?

*Julie Ebin*

Her hands, still fair,  
are question marks  
in her wheelchair lap.  
One slim wrist resists  
however her husband  
smooths her fingers out,  
(– *déjàme* –) unfurls them  
like a Spanish fan,  
to pose her as normal.

First her pinky stutters shut.  
Her ring hangs sideways.  
Then her middle finger, her pointer  
roar South, East, thrash in,  
and in. Her disdainful thumb  
stays crooked.  
Palm smiles inside.

## **Dreams of My Father**

*Margaret Vidale*

Once I was a quick chickadee  
hiding above you, peeping  
through a dense cluster of red

maple leaves. Your sparse  
hair tufted from  
the bulge of your skull,

your body seemed a boney  
extension of the tree  
stump on which you sat.

Shifting sunlight reflected  
off the rifle barrel resting  
across stick-thin thighs.

You sat motionless, oblivious  
to fall's finale blazing  
around you. A sudden crack

of thunder was followed by  
the cessation of all sound.  
Your body, headless now,

slumped onto a mossy bed,  
draining sheets of crimson  
over the silvery-green cover.

Bits of bone, chunks of brain  
matter, streaks and blotches  
of blood mixed with autumn

hues, turning the sunny

afternoon into a surreal scene  
from a gruesome horror film.

In the distance I heard  
the loudening laughter of children  
walking home from school.

## The Girl from Appalachia

*Shelley Savren*

Some things are better off lost,  
some people best not found, like the girl I met,  
just 19, sitting by a pond in Ohio,  
whose hands fit perfectly into mine.

Her brown eyes led down an abyss  
and I followed, craving that chaos,  
mysterious and raw like a secret.  
She showed me a different way to touch.

But when she didn't get her way  
she bolted her room, broke bottles, mirrors  
and every other fragile thing. Cops took her  
and twice I bailed her out.

She dressed sloppy, didn't brush her hair,  
took showers twice a day.  
I brought her home and everyone sensed it.  
*Something's wrong with that girl.*

One June we drove to the Golden Gate,  
slept in a crash pad, got stoned  
every night until she stopped showing up.  
I figured she was dead or in jail.

Years later when she found me on the web,  
I'd forgotten her last name,  
just remembered that tumbling in my gut,  
her flaming hair, alluring mouth.

Maybe I understood that part  
she kept trying to wash away, because  
something inside me  
wanted to break everything, too.

## The Mayor of Ra'anana

*Shelley Savren*

He called his older sister Mama  
but the photo in his hallway  
was the same as on my grandma's shelf  
of their mother, killed in Birkenau.

He wouldn't say how he survived the camp,  
because Nazis favored blonds  
because he was only 20 and fit to work  
because he cleaned a capo's room each day

for an extra piece of bread.  
My cousins gleaned it was because  
he dug graves outside the crematorium  
and didn't pry gold teeth from gassed bodies,

marched the Auschwitz death march  
from Poland to central Germany  
and didn't die  
of hunger or exhaustion or from cold.

He marched when war was over,  
home to Romania,  
joined the underground, smuggling Jews  
on boats from Transylvania to Palestine.

He saw his family, the last time, getting off  
the train. Next day, a Nazi pointed,  
*See the smoke coming from that oven?*  
That's your mother.

## To The Man Walking Behind Me

*Amy Vaniotis*

I don't look back.  
I know you're there.

In case you are the sort of man  
who looks for ponytails I reach up  
and pull mine free so you will see  
I am not the sort of woman  
who will let her hair become a rope  
that trusses her.

And in case you are the sort of man  
who counts on shock—a high yelp,  
a suggestive *O* of surprise—I pull my hands  
from my pockets, square my hips,  
make a pillar of my torso so you will see  
you won't surprise me.

But mostly I am ready, I am waiting  
for your hand to reach out and  
bridge the space between our bodies,  
I am daring you to graze my skin  
for just one fraction of a second  
so we will see if I

am the sort of woman  
who is more flint than flesh,  
if I will be my own protective rage,  
if there is a cold fuse coiled  
in a snake up my spine—  
so we will see if you

are the sort of man  
who will ignite me.

## Eradicating Wrinkles: Stolen Beauty, Stolen Land

*Denise Bergman*

“Ageless Skin”

the full-color ad ink is still moist:

Dead Sea complexion cream

erases wrinkles

smoothes out image and misperception,

intercepts inconvenient

fine facial lines on a sky-high wall

and tries to convince you

there’s nothing left to deny.

•

Ahava company (in Hebrew, *love*)

says their (*sic*: the)

Dead Sea’s life-enhancing ingredients thrive

with ancient properties

regenerative properties,

properties

that produce the greatest abundance of moisture-

retaining minerals on earth.

•

Riches from stolen

mud sold for slathering.

Looks like crud

that clogs the shower drain,

globbs the spaces

between your toes

looks like the patted wad

the potter centers on her wheel and spins  
into an urn.

•

In dreams the West Bank woman  
walks her Dead Sea shore

in dreams like her mother  
like her aunts  
she sieves crystals from buckets of salt water

wipes mud off her lips, mud off her cheeks,  
nose, callouses and hammer toes

washes its bite  
from her baby's bottom,  
its bitter  
from her toddler's ears.

In dreams she floats a meridian long  
like a magnet for brine.

At night her stars are quiet, just stars.

•

Before back-in-the-day you had what you had.

Greed fit in a day-old fist.

Water was water: drink, quench, groves and fields.

You heaved boulders, piled rocks,  
borrowed land from land and reshaped a stream.

You stole nothing.

The little you owned  
was far more than a single share.

## The Telling

*Denise Bergman*

Matchstick thin a girl  
with a jug too burning hot to hold  
  
stumbles  
and the field of berries holds its blue breath  
as she and the jug  
fall soundless  
on the shoulderwide path of matted-down  
footsteps.

Cracked, cracked to pieces  
the jug  
flashes its boiled water  
over her mother,  
who had stifled the wail of birthing  
muffled the first squawks  
first chirps of rose-pink life,  
now this  
  
now this  
  
her mother scalded to death.

A girl  
  
and a wet wrinkled baby.  
No milk  
no movement, nothing.

•

That was the telling,  
my grandmother fleeing.  
A sepia memory  
mildewed, perhaps, or not  
  
the telling, as if a coin lifted from a box at the back

of the bottommost drawer in the darkest  
most airless corner of the shadedrawn room

her telling

told to no one but me  
and that time only  
as she pulled two blueberry muffins  
from the bakery bag  
and set them and a knife on the plate.

•

A memory, over and not

like the song about the song  
that never ends.

•

A girl, not here, not there,  
stopped in what becomes forever  
dead center

and fuels the nights of her sleep.

•

Had I known, I could have told her

no one dies from a jug  
of boiled water.

## A Poem for Wendy

*Robert Shreefter*

My life  
on the road.  
A bus, a train  
A red Volvo wagon  
110 miles one way  
220 miles another  
Connecticut flying by  
Can Connecticut be cut by a half  
Hartford all the way to Stamford  
or entirely plucked,  
Moved farther north,  
Made the Siberia  
Of the Americas,  
Or to the far south—Con-Tierra-cut Del Fuego  
And forget about Newton to Sturbridge, MA  
And Westchester County to the Bronx.  
Then I could come see you every night  
Sharing our nights in Brooklyn,  
Our nights near the Brooklyn Bridge,  
Our Nights on the Promenade.

## Eclipse

*David Radavich*

Today the moon  
reappeared  
  
as a ghost:  
now slivered,  
  
white, the self  
we all carry with us  
  
as baggage  
cold and heavy,  
  
full of belongings  
and longings  
  
to be somewhere  
meaningful  
  
or just to reflect  
someone else  
  
in our present  
impending dearth,  
  
to grow  
and to fade  
  
a night fully  
without color,  
  
dim light  
in the bone somehow  
  
opening the world  
to its waves,  
  
the man in us,  
the woman

concocting  
our healing,  
  
ebb and flow  
of the planetary plenum  
  
of the one and only  
body we have  
  
bloodless before history,  
silent against sunrise,  
  
still  
in its craters.

## Support Solstice

Dear Solstice Lit Mag Community,

This year is pivotal for Solstice. We are poised to extend our vital mission of outreach to publish writers on the margins, the established, and the up-and-coming, including those of Asian, Latino, African American, African, Caucasian and Native American backgrounds. With our 2012 Fall/Winter Issue, our Website will be redesigned and will accommodate e-book readers, mobile phones and tablets. We also have a new Blog and will publish interviews and book reviews!

We hope that you will help us take advantage of this unique opportunity to promote our mission. In doing so, there are many ways you too might benefit. For example, with a large donation, we can offer a professional critique of your writing and/or a literary prize established in your name. More benefits are listed below. Whatever you offer, Solstice is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and all donations are tax deductible.

Further good news: Solstice received a Best of the Net Award in nonfiction for a piece by Michelle Cacho-Negrete. Also, over the last years, we have published such terrific writers as Stephen Dunn, Richard Hoffman, Kathleen Aguero, Roland Merullo, Helen Elaine Lee, Dzvina Orlovsky, Afaa M. Weaver, Martha Collins, Michael Steinberg and many more. Our annual contests have had prominent judges, such as Terrance Hayes, Andre Dubus III, David Huddle, Jennifer Haigh, A Van Jordan, Jerald Walker, and others!

Please contribute through [PayPal](#) or mail to Solstice; PO Box 920653; Needham, MA 02492. This year your donation can be doubled and make an even bigger difference in promoting diversity of all types in the literary arts and in photography!

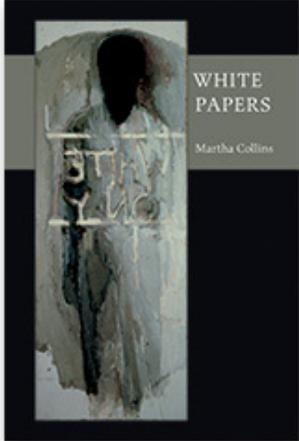
With warm regards,

Lee Hope, Editor-in-chief

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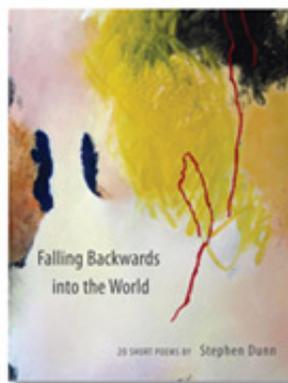
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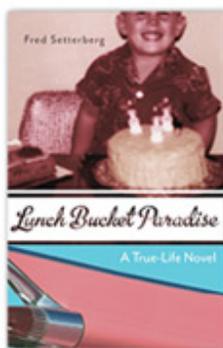


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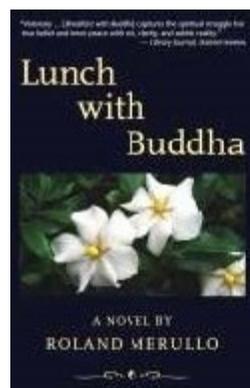
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