

Lois Barr
Joseph Benevento
Emily Bobo
Doug Bolling
Brooke Carter
Joan Colby
Joan Connor
Barbara Daniels

Curtis Dawkins
Mary Stone Dockery
Phillip Gardner
Christine Harris
Kayla Harris
Emily Hazel
Richard Holinger
Brooke Kuykendall

Peter Ludwin
Martha Marinara
Karla Linn Merrifield
Crystal Ockenfuss
Paul Pekin
Brett Riley
Leah Sewell
Mary Wharff

2012

MP

The Mochila Review



Volume 14

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2012

A Publication of
Missouri Western State University
Department of English, Foreign Languages, and Journalism

Printed by Hignell Book Printing in Canada

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...A Journal of Contemporary Writing

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Subscriptions

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Submissions

We accept new work September 1st through December 15th. Check the summer edition of *Poets and Writers*. Detailed guidelines can be found on our website: <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/mochila>. Response in two to six months. Simultaneous submissions are fine, unpublished only. No electronic submissions. If work is selected, however, we request an electronic version. We also ask for permission to feature works on our website, as well as print. We claim first publication rights only, after which all rights revert to writers. As standard, we ask that writers include SASE, indicating if it is for manuscript return or notification only, and current contact information, especially email addresses. Payment two complimentary copies, additional copies 50% off.

Forever Young

*"May your heart always be joyful.
May your song always be sung.
And may you stay forever young."
-Bob Dylan*

One of my students, an aspiring science fiction writer, recently dredged up for our class the axiom, "Well, it's all been done, so the best we can hope for is a fresh spin on an old plot." His tone suggested a subtle hint of defeat as he uttered the same sad statement I encountered a few decades ago when I was a student. Can all of storytelling be reduced to seven story lines, or seventy? If so, are we trapped in archetypal formulas that stifle our creativity? One could interpret it that way. It seemed that my student had. But that doesn't mean it would be the right interpretation.

All of us who teach, and all of us who write or publish writing, want to believe our generation, and the generations that succeed us, will indeed have lots of new things to say, and lots of new ways to say them. We want what we write to be at least relevant and engaging, at most profound and urgent. We want what we have to say to matter. That is one reason we write. And there is no reason to think our writing now and forever can't be profound, urgent, and new. We certainly will not run out of new conflicts.

My student's comment came timed coincidentally with a story I heard on NPR about gene mapping. Costs are falling so rapidly, the journalists reported, that within the next few years nearly everyone will be able to afford to predict their propensity for genetic mishaps. The announcers cautioned that access to such science will profoundly affect our humanity. Young people seeking partners for marriage and family may demand that potential partners share their potential maladies. I envisioned an updated take on the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the Brave New World of genomes, however, we no longer need warring families. Today's fictions will explode with Faulkner's "human heart in conflict with itself."

The genome project harkens to our Fall from Eden. In our myth of apples, we too easily forget that the forbidden fruit was from "the tree of knowledge of good and evil." How many marriages won't happen because potential mates learn that their genetic pairings are likely to produce afflicted children? How many relationships will be aborted because one member of the couple chooses ignorance over knowledge? What does "identity" mean in a culture where it is so frequently stolen? How much knowledge are we humans made to hold? To what degree is ignorance truly "bliss" and "tis folly to be wise"?

Technology, obviously, is the engine that drives art to new forms and content. In this issue we have Brett Riley's story, "Phone Tag," in which our narrator rails against the technology that ironically divides those it was meant to connect because it carries new demands. In Richard Holinger's "L8R LUV

TEDDY,” we find the makeshift staccato hodge-podge language of texting, a technology that in art we are so far treating more as comedy than tragedy. At some point, though, writers must treat texting’s lethal presence seriously, with characters dying in auto accidents and middle-schoolers tempted into connecting word and act as a result of sexting. And regardless how much credence we place in the statistics citing Facebook as the culprit in divorces, we all realize that infinite temptations abound in the secrecy of online messaging and social sites. The Internet has become what the dark, smoky hotel lounge at out-of-town conferences used to be.

Our world is not the world of Genesis, nor of Homer, nor of Shakespeare, nor Virginia Woolf. It’s not even Ray Carver’s world any more. His phone sex workers would now be on YouTube and Craig’s List. Rather, ours is the sound-bite world of ever-more-slivered thinking, a world in which the American Psychiatric Association is considering removing “narcissism” from its list of disorders because narcissism is becoming so widespread as to be considered the norm. People are either “normally” narcissistic via Facebook, YouTube, and tweeting, or psychotically narcissistic. Now the only difference will be by degree, not by kind.

One writer in this issue is working not with new content, but with an exploration of forms. In Mary Stone Dockery’s “If I See You Again,” we find the postmodern invitation for readers to participate in creating meaning, in finding the “truth” clouded by opposing storylines, footnotes simultaneously negating the narrative while confirming it by the precision of the negation. Likewise, in Lois Barr’s poem, “Unexcused Absence,” we find her intertextual nod to Tom Wayman’s poem as well as a footnote referring readers to YouTube.

In part of my mind I hear Fitzgerald’s “And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” And in another part of my mind comes Dylan’s, “May your song always be sung.” In this edition we have many songs being sung. And I like to believe that even if we have only seven basic story patterns, each new generation is born into a world unknown to all the storytellers who came before, and because of that, our plays, poems, and stories shall remain forever young.

Golden Dreams



Rain

for Lois

Even within this steady pounding I hear
the lyricism of birds. It skirls through lilac
and rhododendron while a train rumbles
south, its horn the cry of a loon.

Little else penetrates the liquid curtain.
A pine cone rattles on the roof.
A squirrel scampers across it
like a man trying to outrun a squall.
Then just thrum and hiss and splatter.

This is the morning you missed
after frenetic, heat-sealed days
with Minnesota friends, the hour
you wanted to freeze your tongue.

A weather system moved onshore
when you left town. Its cargo spilled
from dawn's bleak overcast. I grew up
with wind and water, this meditative gift.
Learned to track treasure in mist the way

my father once hunted jaguar. His bow
hangs from the wall opposite my bed.
Now I roam its dark, supple length.
Drawn down to the breath.

Watching You Sway up the Beach I Embrace an Altar of Tides

for S.

Such proportion befits a teenage girl,
a roundness to offset the chop
of whitecaps when the wind came up,
the sharp stones between tracks

and railroad ties we had to cross
to reach the sand. A force
of nature like kelp, bullheads
I caught in the shallows, the aroma

of fish and sun and saltwater.
You were the neighbor girl who fired
a blood already risen to heat,
the older, unapproachable jewel

whose curves fell off the horizon.
Was it then I began to love geometry?
Give arc and angle their due?
I had a hunger for globes: those

that flaunted color-coded countries
and fleshy spheres proclaiming riot:
a soft, fecund mathematics
whose equations none could measure.

Movement at the land's receiving edge
combined with shape to sculpt
desire's pain, its reeling churn.
Dazzled by visuals, kinetics,

the hiss of spray and froth
as gulls screeched overhead,
I entered a church only a boy
could name. Nothing empty,

static. A music of motion advancing
then receding as opposites declared
two sides of the same moist coin,
the same slippery word: *Alive!*

Peter Ludwin

Remembrance Gathering at Chinese Massacre Cover, Hells Canyon

*I guess if they had killed thirty-one white men
something would have been done about it, but
none of the jury knew the Chinese or cared much
about it, so they turned the men loose.*

--George Craig, Wallowa County rancher

For increase, it is beneficial to cross great rivers.

--the I Ching

I walk the same burr-infested ground
you and your fellow miners knew,
Chea Po, the ground your blood defiled.

We should all die in such a place.

The trail to the low rock shelter winds
through wild aster, Queen Anne's lace,
the rich, buttery blossoms of prickly pear.
Rain-greened cliffs amplify the river below.
Arrived during a more settled time,
we can afford to linger over such details.

This June the Snake, bloated with snowmelt,
covers the gravel bar where you died.
Only a tiny ribbon of sand lies exposed.
Several butterflies, black with gold borders,
have alighted there. The colors of death
and the dream you pursued to the end.

At the ruins of your shelter a small
monument honors the dead. A Nez Perce
and a Chinese couple have come with us
to the massacre site. Caucasians comprise the rest.
Those for whom atonement is itself an ore,
one whose value climbs on the thermals.

A local points to steep terrain north and south.
Here gang members set up their ambush.
Silence wraps like a towel around the invocation.
A gong brought all the way from Lewiston,
struck for each of the murdered miners,
reverberates among the cliffs.

One by one we grasp burning sticks of incense
and bow three times.

Holding the paper likeness
of an ingot, I thrust it into flame.

Nothing speaks but water.

Peter Ludwin

American Dream

It has been several autumns now since your dull husband left you for a far remote alien land.

--unidentified Chinese miner in Oregon

I wonder, Chea Po, how you came to the land
the first immigrants called *Gum San*--Gold Mountain.
If you sailed to San Francisco aboard the *Great Republic*.
Or perhaps to Portland on the *Belle of Oregon*.

The story of your people in the inland Northwest
is like the gold you sought at Dead Line Creek.
Concealed. Buried under many layers. No one knows
if you, too, left a wife behind. If, like thousands,

you laid track for the Northern Pacific Railroad.
Poling a *bateau* into Hells Canyon, your hands
would have blistered from the ropes when you
pulled it through rough water. We know only

that when bodies with bullet holes and limbs
hacked off began to turn up downstream,
they were anonymous. Perhaps Kong Nhan
was among them. Or maybe yours was one

of five skulls found at the massacres site in 1910.
Should we be surprised by these bones?
Shocked by savagery? What hoe can resist
unbroken earth? Like the Nez Perce,

driven from the Wallowa country ten years
before outlaws cut down over thirty Chinese
in the canyon, you were an exotic rather than
a cultivated plant. An invasive weed to uproot.
Above you have found what the Chinese
wished it to remain when they sold it:

a pleasant place. The view of the Clearwater
pouring into the turbulent Snake,
of grasses glazing the far side like lacquer,
a fine enamel, is one you knew by heart.
How many times,
watching a fiery ball scorch the horizon,
must you have felt it burn

a path across the sea to Guangzhou?
Chinese who stepped won the gangplank
bearing bamboo poles over their shoulders
bore another weight: buried untended here,
they would be forced to wander forever.

You have invaded my mind,
not as a body shot and cleaved with an axe,
but a spirit aggrieved.
Now unearthed, fluid as the creek you panned.
The gods you invoked with incense
and liquor, with fervent

supplication, failed to protect
your crew from a murderous gang.
Or the temple, itself but a memory.
What did yarrow stalks show the final time
you consulted the *I Ching*? In the third hexagram,
Difficulty, one finds the pitfall of water above,

the movement of thunder below. And its top *yin*,
a message inscribed like the canyon's pictographs:
Not going forward Weeping tears of blood
In the West, even deities have learned
that to survive
it is sometimes best to go armed.

Joan Colby

Honor Flight for WWII Veterans

Sixty-seven years since you
Were released from the stalag.
Twenty years old. A waist gunner
Shot from the sky. You hung
In a tree until a farmer
Cut you down and handed you over.

One hundred pounds when they
Liberated the camp. You returned
To real life, law school, five wives,
And now with prostate cancer and
Leukemia, still spry, you're taking
Off. The letter says this will allow
Time and space to recall long-buried
Memories. You speak of hunger
When you talk of it at all.

You'll have a guardian, a military guy
Who will escort you to the monuments
And finally the Memorial.

One hundred veterans on this flight
Back in time. Some can't walk,
Some are blind. You'll get to talk
As old men do, garrulous or silent
But for a nod and a wry
Twist of the mouth.

Joey

A room of camouflage and rifles.
It was here that he learned.
At seven, he killed his first deer.
His dad smeared his face with blood.

He could take it apart blindfolded.
Load and reload in a blink.
They got their quota in season.
Jacklighted otherwise. Venison
In the freezer. Jerky.

Redbone hounds. A target
Tattooed with bullet holes.
You got to practice if you want
To be a sniper. All his family
Joined up after high school.

He was Christian. Proud to be a
Redneck. He got a Bible
When he was baptized the right way,
Damn near drowning.

Over there, they told him
Soften up these guys.
They have information.
Think of 9-11.

He'd gotten to like
Beer and pot—a cash crop
Where he comes from. That girl
Took his picture with the dog
And the naked Iraqi. He had to laugh.
The guy was almost crying.

He wore camouflage just like
In Kentucky when a hunt was on.
Said “yessir” the way he did
His dad, respectful. Patriotic.

He hung that one from the bars
With his arms twisted behind.
That had to hurt. His buddy
Jabbed him and grinned. The girl
Snapped another photograph.

Joseph Benevento

After All

I find myself mouthing the same
words over and over, the song of my regret
in the middle of my mistrusting thankfulness
for all the calamity I have
so very far been spared.

For I have made a pact with a God
I do not love enough not to believe in:
if I continue in the far right lane
of loss, getting there slowly
and without surprise,

I will almost gratefully accept
all my defining failures: mediocre
levels of achievement, recognition, income;
the inability to love any woman
wholly and well; the middle-class hypocrisy

of my level of compassion for the poor;
the languishing of my days professing to know
more than my many students would ever guess
I don't, in this tired, small town, so far
from the broken promise of my past, and I will long

to believe my children
will figure me out sufficiently to make
fewer of these mistakes which are not
inevitable, while still maintaining sympathy
enough to keep loving at least

some silver haired vestige of my golden intent.

Bessie Coleman Flies One Last Time

From up above
the fields are quilted
green and gold.
I can sew clouds
together
with a stiff pin,
a sliver of silver
plane. Follow
my plume.
Not underground
nor railroad
but free.

Clouds aren't cotton
when I fall through them.
I won't land
soft
but free.

The History of Telecommunication in the Bay Area

“The mind is the connecting organ” – Richardson

The mind is the connecting organ

Yet yours

Does not fit

Mine. No matter –

Cock like

A cathode

Blue tube

Lights up this

Amateur operator.

You adjust

the frequency, I come

In many channels

Speaking in static

Breaking air, I ask

For input

Two digits, my body

Translates glee –

Where am I?

The morse code you tap

On my sweet

Transmitter.

(Our) Western union

telegraphs bliss across

continents of crushed cotton,

endless blank expanse

of bed and the bill

is exorbitant

for bits of paper

glued in place.

Later you’ll watch

For the signals

My smoke sends.

Peace or renewed

Bloodshed?

We want young men

And orphans for the Pony Express.

Missing and presumed

Dead when the message

Finally fails

to arrive.

Barrel of Bones

Georgia O'Keeffe sent a barrel of bones back to NY from NM.

In the fifth month
I stopped. I couldn't
face it – the cleaving,
the rib tent
of bones, covered
in its cloth of flesh
and blood. Under
my white apron
the homesteading
thing in me grows
taking territory
under my heart,
so heavy – more
than I can move.
I shift my frigid belly
like a smothering
snowdrift.

When she comes and asks
in her strange black
suit. *A barrel of bones
collect them for me.*
I stare and say
Dogs? No, no meat
I want only
white bones. She stares
right back. I know she sees
bones. She says
I paint. I want
to say
take me. Soon
this skin will
split. Have mine.
Paint me. My bones
will be clean. No animal
can show you
emptiness like
I can.

Pretty Shield Grieves Ants

They call me Pretty Shield.
I know my name
is a gift from
my grandfather. His shield
was a wheel. Now it turns
to me as our Crow world
flies away across
the prairie. I saw it move
on the backs of buffalo.

Beauty can not defend
me. I hold my hand
up in front
of my eyes so the sun
becomes a black ball.
I throw it far and chase
after it. Caught in the same
hoop of days that took
my children away from
me.

I ran in circles then
like a dog, confused.
Their scent was there,
and the smell
of buffalo blood. The hunters took
the tongues only.
Yet the beasts
still spoke to me and their speech
meant more
than the words of humans.

The grass is full of husks,
the cocoons of bison.
They have left. They are
butterflies in some other
world. Can I crawl
into a skin that's shed
and emerge
an animal other than
I am?

If I lie in bones deserted,
in carcasses abandoned,
if I pull the hide over my eyes,
will I survive?
When she shows me –
that ghost – when she
takes me to the ants,
what am I to that
squirming heap but an
iron foot, the promise
of their dissolution?
All of them scurrying
with their pale eggs,
each carrying
the seed of its
own grief.

Leah Sewell

Unlatch

Mother in her cloistered afternoon,
dust motes orbiting her face in the drapes,
watches daughter solo on the teeter-totter
miles of a fall below.

Teen in his attic black bedroom
touches the glass where the same
girl walks home from Drama

(her red hair the river,
her dark eyes deep barrels)

The unseeing ghost of the orderly
signs the clipboard
at the asylum window's before-place
above today's bald swath
of demolition aftermath,
tile and blood-brick dust.

With the rain,
little rivulets mar and mix.

New Asphalt

Dusty men pulverized
the street with jackhammers,
all Fall making
the noise of cracking
skull candy.

The pumpkin faces
slumped in a feast for heavy flies
and the pine needles
swished into the quarter round.

You'll never scarecrow
your shadow on my block
again, only cars,

sliced by sunlight
between the grave
white homes, and piled
into fuming rows
along the cones.

Come spring
the road is laid out
like a clean dinner plate
at my doorstep.

My sundress is a blue
napkin in my lava lap.
The oven
is too hot for this blacktop
smelling day.

Roast your own
furious supper,
wherever you are.

Unexcused Absence¹

Did I miss anything in class today?

Nada. I was cumbersome as usual
in my lumbering lectures on the subjunctive
and some slumbering students fell off their chairs.

Just a bit. I spit on the front row just a little
and a student had a fit when I said the preterit
and the imperfect would both be on the quiz.

Everything. The unifying theory of the universe
became obvious as we conjugated verbs
in the pluperfect subjunctive on the board.

Nothing. We sang Macarena, played
lotería, danced rumba, tango and bachata.
Ate totopos with salsa and flan con nata.

Un poquito. We saw a powerpoint of Quito
and fixed mojitos and looked for simbolismo
in old commercials for the Frito Bandido.

Muchísimo. Penelope Cruz and Antonio Banderas
showed us outtakes from Volver and Desperado
Profe Barr passed out yelling, “¡Brava, Bravo!”

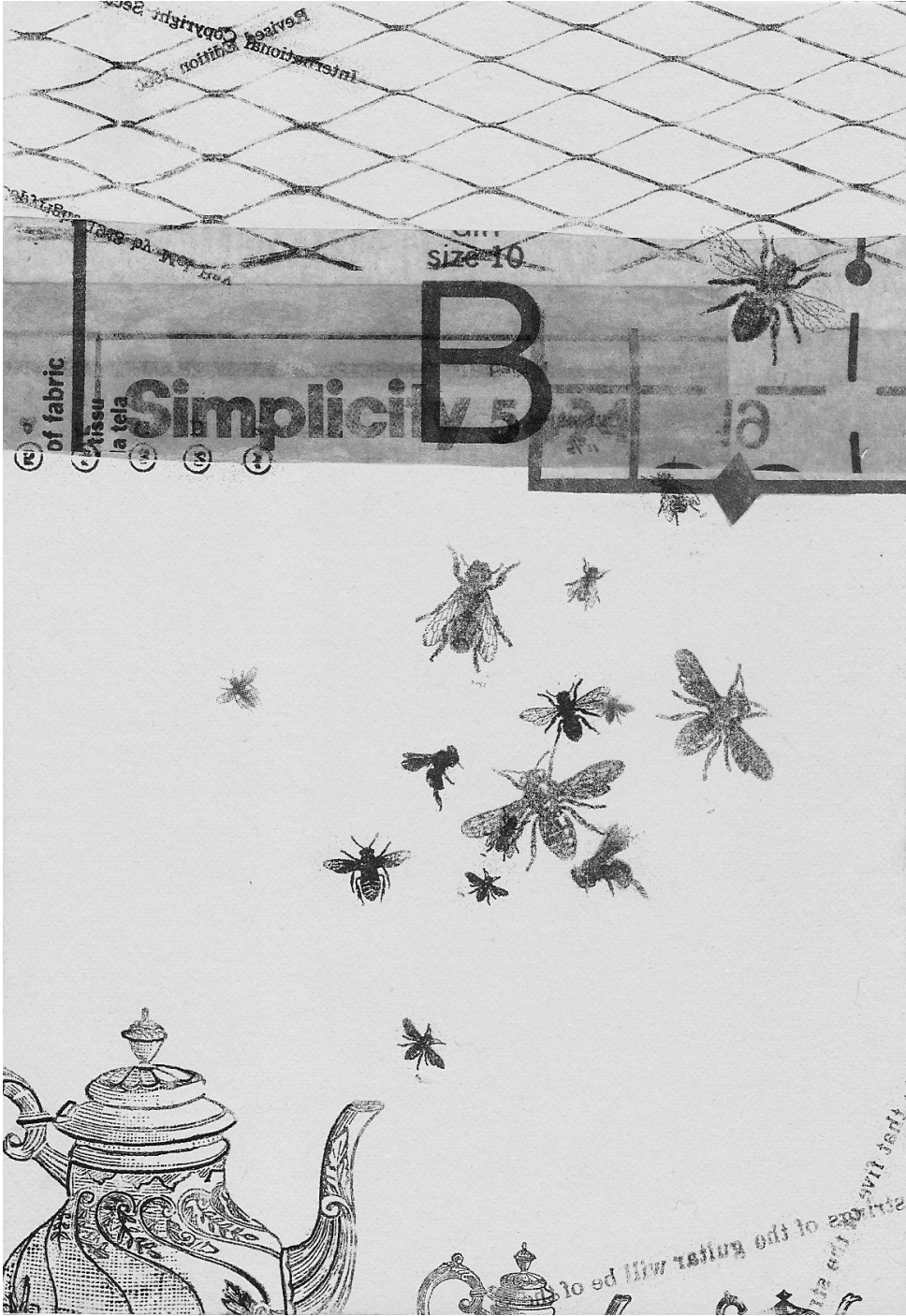
So I didn't miss anything?

Nothing you won't find on Google or Moodle.
The class had a thousand likes on Facebook.
Our “Third Semester Spanish Love Song”² went viral.

¹ Thanks to Tom Wayman's outrageous poem, “Did I Miss Anything?” from *The Astonishing Weight of the Dead*. Vancouver: Polestar, 1994.

² If you haven't watched “First Semester Spanish Spanish Love Song” on Youtube, go there at once.

Swarm



It's Usually this Dark by Now

(Here's the thing. I never took her money. Still, I am a man-slut. For a woman who calls herself Celeste Santana. I should say, "I'm a gigolo." But the word doesn't fit. I'll give her whatever she wants, whenever she wants it. Nothing in return. And that puts me in a situation. It's an old story, I know, sex traders who fall for their clients—I've seen *American Gigolo*.

If I had a choice, I'd take it.

This is strange love, something I don't understand but something I know, okay? Her? She gives nothing away. Only she knows what she knows. But man can't help it. That would be me. That makes me, and maybe you, a trollop with hanging parts. That makes me stupid people who do stupid things for a woman. That makes me a man. Her co-conspirator, her accomplice, her partisan.

This for a woman who will never love me. A woman I can never really know.

Okay.

Okay.)

I'm sitting in Union Square on a sunny Sunday afternoon watching the Bay Area Argentine Tango Association dance. They're all decked out, the guys dressed like cutouts from Coppola's *Godfather*, the women in red crinolines and black stockings that invite you to look all the way up, starting with their four-inch heels. And this, I remind you, is the Tango.

The sun dips into that place where San Francisco becomes all light and shadow, and my eyes do that slow celestial dance between the two, that momentary pause when time takes a deep breath, that visual lapse in judgment. And that's when I see her.

She's wearing these big white-framed sunglasses like from an old Bridgette Bardot movie. The yellow sunlight on her red hair giving her face a radiant blush, making her full lips luminous. She's wearing a thin black leotard top that hides nothing, jeans and sandals. And stretched low in her chair, the full length of her strikes this kind of do-me pose, legs that go on forever crossed at the ankles, sleek feet that end with a splash of bright red polish. A martini glass hangs loosely from her hand.

It takes me a minute to comprehend that she's not alone. Another woman sits at the table with her. But even before the grand jury I couldn't describe her. All I can say is the other woman is a looker too and that she wears a man's hat, a fedora, which I assume she's appropriated from one of the gangsters performing on the large, open stage.

My girl doesn't look at me, but she's watching me. You don't think you understand that, but you do. Picture yourself sitting in the audience at a play. The actress speaks to you, and your awareness is what you see. But the performance is in what *she* sees. Example number two: Remember the woman at the cocktail party long ago, the stranger in that black dress with spaghetti-thin straps, the one with her naked back to you, the one you wanted so badly? You

stood across the room and radiated your will upon that woman.

And she turned and looked at you.

Although I'm a hundred feet from her, this woman's got me. All of me. Example number three: You know how a dog whistle works? That's what she's doing to me. I have no choice. I rise. She's homing in. And me, I'm just doing what I'm wired to do.

Something not quite a smile forms on her lips as I near their table, and when I get there I don't realize at first that she's speaking to me, not to her friend.

"The answer to your question," she says, "is 'fly fishing'." I just stand there for a second. Then she tilts up her face. (The sun's reflection in her glasses still haunts me.) She looks away and fingers down the white frames. Her eyes are green in the yellow light. Then those eyes slowly track down to my whammy bar. "Fly fishing," she says to my buddy. Her friend laughs and reaches down into her purse, lifts a chrome shaker and motions for my baby's glass. She pours them both pink drinks. Baby says, "Just kidding." She looks over at her friend as if to ask if she should take another big slice of devil's food cake, and her friend nods yes. "Sit," my girl says. I extend my hand. "No thanks," she says. "We're operating on a need-to-know basis here. I don't and you don't want to."

"You're wrong about that," I say, taking the chair beside her.

"Okay," she said. She lifted her martini glass and I followed it to her lips. (I lingered on those lips.) "So," she said. "What's it worth to you?" I gave her a look. "What's it worth to know my name?" I looked at her friend for an answer. What I heard was the ticking of a time bomb. "Would you give your life? Cause that's what it would cost you."

"Where are you from?" I said. "The accent, I mean."

"Ohhhh, Daaaalyyn," she said, "you disssapoint me. I'mmm from South," she drew a deep, labored breath, "Ca-O-liiii-na?"

(You wouldn't know it now, but at that time I still had a little pride. Enough to remind me I was bait for their amusement. I no longer possess that quality.) I stood and said, "Nice to have not met you." My baby drops the exaggerated accent when she speaks to her friend while scanning me top to bottom. "He is a pretty thing, isn't he?" she said. And her friend said, "Yes, he is."

She said, "If you'll sit, I'll share my drink and answer your second question." She offered her glass but I passed. "I'm going to kill her husband," she said, nodding in deference to the woman in the fedora. "That's what brings me to San Francisco. He's been unfaithful to her. And now that—by your very presence—you've committed to the cause, I'll tell you how I'm gonna do it. You have till the count of three to walk away." I never was strong in math. "From this moment on, you are my accomplice," she said. "Why?" Our eyes met. "Because there's nothing in the world you want more right now than to be my partner in crime." I couldn't fathom, not then at least, the possibilities that lay in the depths of those green eyes.

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(When I was fifteen, I sat in church with my eyes closed and the back of my hand resting snugly against the thigh of the first girl I loved, a blonde with green eyes. She smelled of fresh soap. Her tanned thigh was hot to the touch. Sweating and crying surrounded us, and the Pentecostal rhythm in the preacher's words, words I did not hear, pulsed through the room like a deep thrusting. "Rise up and up!" he shouted. The music soared. I cracked open my eyes and followed the rise and fall of her breasts. "If you want us to pray for you, raise your hand!" Her hand pressed my hand into her naked thigh. An involuntary force sent my free hand rocketing up. The scent of her filled me and the heat from her bathed me, and when someone grasped my wrist I rushed blindly to the altar and fell upon my knees.)

The other woman pulled down the fedora so that I couldn't see her eyes. "It's worth it," she said. Then she turned to my baby. "Believe me, it's worth it." She poured the remains of the pink stuff into my baby's glass then stood. We both watched her walk away. My girl lifted her drink.

"Who was she speaking to, you or me?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

A little cat and mouse, a little obtuseness, I can go for that. And I don't mind a puppet show—so long as I can't see the strings. But this mystery act had become a little too theatrical for my taste. I stood. And this time I didn't say anything. I just turned and walked.

"You can't imagine how easy it is to blow someone up," she said. She was doing that dog whistle thing again. Looking at the Tango Club dancers but speaking to me. "With little more than a screwdriver and a pair of Needle-Nose pliers, you install a detonator to a water faucet." Her words stopped me in mid-stride. "The C-4 goes in the medicine cabinet. At that range, enough to fill a small tube of toothpaste will do the trick. Don't you just love that: 'Medicine cabinet?' You leave the water dripping." She raised her chin and tilted her ear toward the stage. "That song," she whispered, "it's the theme from *Last Tango in Paris*." She turned and looked at me, applying a second coat to her South Carolina accent. "You know, most people just can't *stand* a drippy faucet." The music stopped. All the dancers froze in place. Time stood still. "Boom," she whispered in a puff of air. She smiled. The dance resumed.

"I quit smoking years ago," she said, "but sometimes, like now, I find myself wanting a cigarette. I wish you'd sit down." I sat. She took my hand and I felt my insides constrict. "Or this," she said. "Are you into toys? Say yes. I'm into toys." She let the unveiled message hang in the air for an extra beat. "Here's how you make a trigger. You've seen those sound activated toys, you know, the little figures that dance or whatever, right? You clap your hands, the little fellow jumps. So, you leave the toy behind the intended's alarm clock or near his telephone. If you want to make it impersonal, the alarm clock is your choice. Want a little human touch? Dial him up. What you won't hear on the other end is the word 'hello.' For hubby here," she nodded toward the empty chair across from her, "I'm thinking of a customized job. When he wakes, he's

gonna find a bullet-shaped vibrator, a big one, resting beside him on a pillow. He's gonna take it into his hand, hold it up for inspection, tilt his head and squint up his face. Then guess what he's gonna do?" She stood, taking both my hands. I stood. She pulled me in close. I felt her lips on my ear—and her breasts against my chest. "Let's call it a twist of fate," she whispered.

The bartender delivered our first drink at the Zoetrope bar.

She said, "I will have sex with you on two conditions: that you do everything I ask in bed and that I pay you for your services. I will allow you to fall in love with me upon one condition, and one condition only. That you will accept the truth when you hear it. There is no true love apart from truth. And there are only two truths. Do you want to hear them, the two truths?"

(Look, you need to know this about me. I've been around the block, okay? I've never been a womanizer or a gamer. I don't keep score. That's because I never needed to. I feel at ease in the company of women, often prefer their company to the company of men. And they sense that. They respond to that. I'm not prideful or vain. Mine are not cultivated qualities. This is the way I'm made, like some people are made left-handed. I love women. I love loving women. Always have.)

"This is bad theater," I said.

"Then I invite you to leave," she said.

"I'll finish my drink first."

She opened her purse, refreshed her red lipstick, dropped the tube into the bag.

"I told you my trade," she said. "What's yours?"

"Landscape architect," I said. "I always wanted to design parks, but I found work in private estate landscaping."

"Before the crash, of course," she said. "Now?"

"Now I play guitar in a house band, in a bar not too far from here, the other end of Haight."

She signaled to the bartender to bring us another round.

"Do you want to kiss me?" she said.

"Yes. But I'm not going to."

"Why not?"

I looked into her eyes. "Because I don't like you."

"What are your standards for sleeping with women, bigger tits?"

"No. I have to want to kiss them. And I can't kiss them if I don't like them."

"That makes you a prude and a hypocrite," she said. "I retract the single condition for your loving me. You're incapable of hearing the truth. The truth would kill you."

"Maybe," I said, reaching for the fresh bourbon.

"The prude in you can be healed; I'm not so sure about the hypocrite."

"You look like the cure, all right."

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“Now I can’t sleep with you at any price,” she said. “My only standard is not sleeping with liars. Which is what you are.”

I called to the bartender. “Check, please.”

“You say you can’t sleep with a woman if you don’t like her, but the truth is that what you most want to do with her are things you’d never do with a woman you like. I’m the woman you want to do those things with. Am I right? Yes. And the woman who wants to do those things with you is the woman you will come to love, correct?” She opened her purse, pulled out her wallet. “You may go now,” she said, “if you wish.”

I tossed back the rest of the bourbon.

“I’ll take that,” she said, reaching for the check.

I set down my glass and stood. “Maybe I’ll see you around,” I said.

She took my hand. “In the future? You mean in the future?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Let me tell you about that,” she said, her fetching eyes looking up at me. “That future begins when you walk out that door. And before you get to your apartment you’re going to wonder what tonight could have been. What you could have had, what you have never had. What you never will have. When you close your eyes tonight, you’ll see it in high definition. You’ll smell it and taste it. And by morning, you will be Hunger and Want. And in fifty years, you will remember this moment as vividly as you see it now, and you will die with the barb of everlasting regret buried inside you. That is the future you are choosing.”

At some point, my soul returned. I’m not sure where it went or how long it was gone.

The hotel room was dark. Her body a perfect silhouette of female beauty framed by the bathroom door, the light behind.

She pulled back the sheet and I felt it, my soul as it lifted off. And when it returned, I opened my eyes to see beads of sweat fall from my chin onto her breasts. Like rescued drown victims, the two of us smiled and panted for breath, our words staccato utterances.

“Well,” she whispered. “Couldn’t you—” her lacquered breasts heaved as our bodies moved into one another like the meeting of two gentle tides—
“couldn’t you just sort of . . . act like you’re having a good time?”

My last ounce of strength drained off as I slowly rotated down, pulling her over next to me, her head upon my chest.

“Couldn’t you,” I said, “maybe . . . liven it up a little?” I felt her smile form upon my nipple.

The even synchronicity of our breathing filled the silence.

“So, what would create an extended moment of sexual ecstasy for you?” she said.

“That would require your help.”

“Sorry. I’m the one paying. What could I do for you?”

“Return my brains. I don’t know what you did with them.”

“Too bad,” she said.

She sat up on the edge of the bed. The room was dark. I touched her back, running my fingers lightly across her shoulders, working my way down.

“What’s this?” I said.

“My shoulder blade.”

I fingered a four-inch slanted welt-like ridge of raised flesh. “No, this.”

“A scar,” she said. “There is a matching one on the other side. Work related. On-the-job training.” She stood, taking the tumbled sheet with her, wrapping it round her. She switched on the tableside lamp, pulled open the drawer.

“Who did that to you? Who hurt you like that?”

“Everything comes at a price.” She lifted an envelope and set it on the table. “For you,” she said. Then: “I’m taking a shower. When I come out you’ll be gone.”

“Wait,” I said, but she ignored me. “What’s your name?”

She reached for the bathroom light, then turned. “Celeste,” she said.

“Celeste what?”

“Celeste Santana.”

I smiled. “Santana?” I said. “That a common name down South?”

“If you go down far enough, everybody knows it.” She turned again.

“Don’t you want to know mine?”

“No,” she said. Then she closed the door.

I didn’t open the envelope until I got back to my apartment. No cash there. Only seven lottery tickets.

Fortunately for me, by the time I was old enough to experiment with drugs—pot excluded—hard drugs were so dangerous, I’m talking crystal meth, crack, and that old standby, heroin—that I found it easy to say no. But in the days that followed, I looked at the panhandlers and junkies, the hookers and the homeless with a new understanding of their condition, their desperation. I saw their eyes looking back at me from my medicine cabinet mirror each morning, that look of hunger and want.

I returned to her hotel but she had checked out. I searched the faces at Union Square. I drank alone at the Zoetrope bar. I read the accounts of murder in the Bay Area.

Our band is called All Aboard The Vegetables. The name combines the spirit-of-unity myth of the 60s with the ravaged products of that age. We were the house band at The Afterlife, which had another name before Jerry Garcia died. Our audience was third generation Deadheads but our music was mostly 90s grunge.

The interior of the bar smelled of forty years of stale beer, beer that had stained the thin red carpet nearly black. From the stage, the floor looked like a

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giant dry blood spoor. The ragged table cloths were red, the cheap candles upon them red.

Despite the grim decor, when I closed my eyes, I felt lost in the music, and lost is where I wanted to be. So we played extended jams, fifteen or twenty minutes sometimes, in what our fabulous drummer Kenny Soule termed “going off.” There is a spiritual element in “going off,” that feeling when the music takes over, giving rise to a separation of body and spirit that feels like freedom. At these moments, I’d see her like a vision and the music would soar. For as long as I could sustain its ascent Celeste was with me. When it was over at the end of the night, an almost debilitating melancholy settled into me.

I was packing up my gear when Chet, the club’s new owner, gave us our notice. “I’m replacing you with a punk band,” he said. “Nothing personal. Business is business.”

“Who?” I said.

“Who what?”

“Who are you replacing us with?”

“The Pricks,” he said.

When I unlocked the door to my van, I saw Celeste lying in the back seat.

“What are you doing here, how did you get into my van?”

“I’m parallel parking,” she said. “That’s a euphemism for having sex.”

“With who?” I moved back for her to step outside.

“Flying solo. I couldn’t take it any longer, you know, waiting for you,” she said. “This time I have money.”

“How did you get into my van? It was locked.”

She stepped in close. “Is that the question you have for me?”

“That’s the one I’m asking,” I said.

She kissed me. And I mean really.

“Do you want to hear the truth, there are only two?” She kissed me again. “I thought not,” she said.

It was nearly three in the morning. Not much traffic. Nobody said anything. I reached for the radio. Aretha Franklin.

“I know this song inside out,” she said. “I know about chains and fools.”

“What made you want to become a bad poet?” I said.

“Nobody wants that,” she said. “What made you want to become a landscape architect?” She sat knees bent, bare feet up on the dash. Transparent pink panties.

“I wanted to create living art, not dead art like a ceramic pot or a painting—an artifact as soon as it’s complete. Trees, plants, flowers. Gardens. They go on living.”

“You’re a believer in life-after-art,” she said. “Even bad art?”

“Your bad art is word games.”

“And yours is creating Gardens of Eden?”

And now I looked at her. “You could use one.”
(She smiled, but I didn’t know what that smile meant.) “I already have one,” she said.

“What do you want from me? Why are you here?” I said.

“I want you to be free. I want you to have what you want. I want you to be who you really are, not what you are now.”

“Okay. Let me put it like this. What is it you want me to do?”

“I want you to do what you want to do. And if you want that—what you want to do—you have no choice but to love me.”

“Oh, really? Why?”

“Because I am the answer to your dreams.”

There must have been food, drink, sleep. Certainly there was. There were, I remember, alternating periods of light and darkness. That I remember. Everything else was the smell and taste of Celeste, the slick writhing of our flesh, the temporary reentry into consciousness but never the ascent from it, the waves of simultaneous machine gunning of our locked and loaded tangled bodies, the resulting moment of death, followed immediately by the climb back to that summit of ecstasy.

This for days.

And then I slowly awoke, but not from sleep. My body was like a tuning fork, my senses keen. The light outside crisp, the morning song from birds arriving from miles away. The smell of her filled the room like an erotic bouquet. She lay spooned against me, her breath upon my shoulder. I traced the slope of her hip up to her breast. My fingers settled upon the raised flesh, like a thick welt, near her spine. I thought of a red hot poker, a branding iron.

“Who did this to you?” I said.

“Truth?” she said.

“Tell me.”

“It may be too painful—for you.”

“I’m ready,” I whispered.

“You have to be very, very sure,” she said. “You can’t know what you’re saying.”

“I want to hear the truth,” I said.

“Then don’t begin by lying.” She sat up, pulling the soiled sheet for cover. “You don’t *want* to hear the truth. You have no choice.”

“I love you,” I said.

“Then say it.”

“I have no choice.”

“Say it with conviction.”

“Then you’ll love me?”

“At the moment, that’s impossible. But I’ll give you what you truly want, freedom, if you understand that you have no choice. I’ll give you freedom. And for that your love for me will be unyielding.”

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"I accept that."

"Accept only what you know is true," she said. "Otherwise you'll blame me for your suffering. I didn't create this situation, this condition. I can only illuminate it."

"Okay," I said.

"Truth number one. I'm going to tell you about your father," she said.

"You never—"

"He was a liar. As was his father." Maybe she felt my body recoil. She waited before she spoke again. Then: "You can never know the failures your father felt, those things he just couldn't tell you; those things that are true, things that might help you understand; those fears he knew would hurt you. All fathers lie to their sons. Always have. They must."

"Not mine."

"It's not what they say, it's what they don't say. There are lies of commission and lies of omission. He loved you. Fathers who love their sons can't bring themselves to tell their boys that they are disposable. That is the first truth."

I pushed back the covers and searched the wreckage of the hotel room for my trousers. "Thanks," I said. I stood and pulled on my pants. "Ohhh. That was sooo deep."

"You're not listening," she said.

"Because we aren't friends, I understand that you can't say we're friends with benefits. Why don't you just say, 'We're great fuck buddies, but all good things come to an end.' Where the hell is my shirt?"

"Because some things never come to an end."

"I hope you're prepared to pay in cash this time. The seven lottery tickets? They were losers."

"Take me to a 49ers football game."

I still couldn't find my shirt. "Fuck you," I said.

"I'll show you what I mean."

"I don't think we have a communication's problem, sweetheart. *Disposable?* I can deal with words of four syllables or fewer."

"The receiver and the defender collide, midair. The receiver goes down. Doesn't move. The stadium falls silent. They bring out the stretcher. No sign of life there. We cut to a pizza commercial. We come back. The neck brace looks like a horse collar. As the golf cart leaves the field, the applause is tender. Cut to a beer commercial. Because in an unconscious act of denial every man in America *needs* a beer now."

"No," I said. "What they need is to get back to the game."

"Then you do accept the truth."

"They love the game."

"Why?"

"Money. Fame."

“No. The game is just a morality play for what men want—love, a woman’s love. And this game, this display, is how they earn it. By falling to their knees at the altar of disposability, they make themselves worthy. And that is why NFL players are heroes among men and desired by women. They make disposability a virtue. The euphemism for disposability is ‘courage.’ The men on the field are proxies for every beer belly who owns a TV.”

My socks were in my shoes. I pulled one on. “You’re full of shit,” I said. “You’re nuts.”

“Insanity is continuing a contest three minutes after somebody has been paralyzed. In ancient Rome, women paid a premium for gladiators’ sweat, that most potent of aphrodisiacs, derived from the titans of disposability. Did your father tell you that?”

I was nearing the door. “Bye,” I said.

“When you leave,” she said. “Where will you go?”

“Given the disposability factor,” I stopped and turned, “what difference does it make?”

“Let’s suppose you stop at that diner near the hospital. It’s crowded now with nurses and visitors. You stand in line to order a sandwich. A meth freak crashes in waving an AK-47. The woman you love—that would be me— isn’t there. Is your mother there? Your sister? Not likely. Is there even one woman you know there? But when the shooting starts, what do you have to do?”

“Dive under a table?” I say.

“That is a choice. And if you take that choice—.”

“I’m a coward.”

She pulled back the covers, an invitation. Her nipples were hard again. “I didn’t create this situation. Neither did you. I’m just telling you what you already know.”

“Well, thanks,” I said. I turned the knob.

“Wait,” she said. I stopped but I didn’t look back at her. Something told me that if I did I might not get out the door. “This is for you.” I had no choice.

She stood, wrapped in the sheet, holding out a brown envelope. She came to me. “Here,” she said. I looked inside. At least two thousand dollars in there. I felt her looking at me. Our eyes met, and I knew.

“This is front money, isn’t it? You want me to do the hit, don’t you?” She didn’t have an answer. She didn’t need one. “I won’t do it,” I said. “I won’t kill another man.”

“Okay,” she said. She dropped the sheet.

“You think I’ll do it because I love you.”

“No, I don’t. I think you’ll do it because you need for me to love you.”

“Well, I won’t.”

“Okay.” She turned her naked back. For the first time I saw them, the two purple slanted scars just below her shoulder blades.

“I have free will.”

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She turned, cupping her breasts like an offering. “No,” she said. “What you have are choices. Free will—that comes at a cost.”

I looked again at the envelope. I tossed it back to her. “I won’t do it.”

“The tree of knowledge begins with the root of all evil,” she said. She motioned toward the envelope. “And that’s not it.”

She shut the bathroom door behind her.

“What is his name?” I said. From where we sat in my van, the man appeared to be about my age, only clean cut, well dressed. He stood outside the hotel watching the traffic, waiting to cross. He spoke to the doorman and they both smiled.

“He doesn’t have a name,” Celeste said.

“Takes two to Tango,” I said. “Why aren’t we killing her? Who’s to say she’s not the deserving party?”

“Could you do it?” she said.

The man crossed to his Lexus, which was parked at the curb. “I’ve never seen his lover,” I said. “But I could spot her when she leaves.”

“Of course you could.” Celeste ran her hand up my thigh. “The question is could you kill her. The answer is no. You could never, even at the cost of your own life, kill a woman, no matter how savagely she mistreated you. That’s what makes you a good man, at least in your own eyes. The sad truth is that you can’t kill him either.”

The Lexus pulled into the traffic. Its driver smiled at Celeste when he passed.

“Even if I kill him, you’ll never love me.”

“No. I want to, but I can’t.”

“I would have to murder him to prove it, to prove that I am worthy of love.”

“No, you could choose to go on being my whore.” She opened the van door and stepped out. “But you won’t. Goodbye, stranger,” she said.

I watched as she walked away. And I saw the doorman’s face as he opened the hotel door for her, that sorrowful look of hunger and want as he watched her walk inside.

It’s not uncommon during hard times for struggling musicians to share information about how and where to buy and sell stolen goods. I traded my Fender Telecaster for a Glock 9mm and binoculars. I parked a safe distance from the hotel entrance. I followed him to his apartment. I followed him to his office. I followed him to his Wednesday night poker game. I followed him to his lover’s hotel. I made a list of love songs with the words “death” and “killing” in them. You’d be surprised.

When I realized how simple a murder can be—at least this one—and how little risk was involved—no viable connection between killer and victim—the issue was no longer whether or not I would get away with the crime but in-

stead if I was man enough to commit it.

I planned a dry-run. His parking space was on the third deck of the garage across the street from his apartment building. He left the poker game between 11:00 and 11:30 every Wednesday night. After he parked, he'd take the stairwell down to the street and across to his apartment. For ventilation, there was a tiny window at each landing, one that looked out onto the street.

That's where I was standing when I saw Celeste leaving the apartment building with the woman from Union Square, the woman in the fedora.

While they waited for a cab, I hustled back to the van. I followed them to Celeste's new residence, another hotel downtown. They had a drink in the bar before taking the elevator to Celeste's room. Thirty minutes later, the wife waited for a cab outside. She paid the driver from a brown envelope. And then as the taxi pulled away from the curb, she tossed the fedora from the window onto the sidewalk.

Their final prep, I thought. I would have to act.

The next Wednesday night at 11:45, on the second landing of the parking garage, I stepped to the side when the well-dressed man with Scotch on his breath nearly fell into me. "Pardon me," I said. He didn't speak.

He was going down. I was going up.

The following Wednesday night, I waited in the bar of Celeste's hotel in a booth that gave me a clear view of the elevator. I had ordered bourbon, a Makers Mark. I drank.

(There is no real comparison to the act of murder, but I'll give you the only one I have. If you have been a football player you'll know what I mean. There is of course the mental preparation, when you rehearse every play, every block and every tackle. At the end of this lies that period of nausea, when you face your own doubts and question what you're made of. But at the transcendent moment of kick-off, all of that leaves you. Everything is automatic. You feel nothing.)

In every moral sense of the word, I had already committed murder. I had a gun. I had a plan. I had already killed him a dozen times. The only thing left was pulling the trigger, which felt like a formality. The deed was done.

Celeste was wearing a yellow sundress. Crossing the lobby, she spotted me in the booth and instantly turned back for the elevator. She pressed the up button. I was beside her when the doors opened. I stepped on with her. The doors closed.

"I don't require your services tonight," she said.

"Maybe not. But I require yours."

The doors opened. I took her arm.

"What's this about?" she said.

"Love," I said. The doors closed.

We were gliding through the downtown traffic.

"Do you know what tonight is?" I said.

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“Is this a trick question?”

“You know what I love about you?” One of the thin straps of the sundress had fallen from her shoulder, exposing the white crescent of one breast.

“Everything. That’s what you love about me.”

“True. That’s true. But aside from the sex, what ranks right up there is that you’re so damned quick. ‘Trick’ question. You know, a question from your ‘trick’.”

“Brilliant, isn’t it?” she said.

“Wednesday,” I said. “Tonight is Wednesday night.”

“Is that as in every Wednesday night or a special Wednesday night?”

“Yes,” I said.

“You’re a fast learner,” she said. She lit a cigarette. “If not, we’d never have had a second date.”

“There you go again,” I said. “‘Date.’ You are the queen of euphemisms. There’s something to be said for that.”

“What’s this about?” she said.

“Well, it’s about this long and it’s about this wide, and it’s about this song about which I’m singing about.” I gave her a big goofy smile. I just felt like it. “Do you want to know what the best thing about making love to a woman is?”

“Do you mean me, or any woman?”

“Any woman.”

“What?”

“Being there when *it* happens. I want you to know that feeling.”

I pulled over a block from the apartment garage. She suddenly realized where we were.

“What are you doing?”

“Not I,” I said. “We.”

I reached across her to the glove box and the Glock. “Come on,” I said. “You’re about to witness the ultimate act of love.”

“There is no such thing,” she said.

“Come on,” I said.

“It’s off,” she said, lifting another cigarette from her bag. Lighting it, Celeste motioned toward the apartment building. “The contract, it’s void. A few days ago.” She blew a white string of smoke. “Some wives, they like the idea of killing their husbands, just the idea. They can’t follow through. I keep the up-front money, expenses. Let’s go someplace for a drink.”

“No,” I said, shoving the Glock into my back pocket.

The Lexus, its blinker flashing, entered the garage. I opened my door. “Come on,” I said. “Come on!” I charged up the sidewalk.

“It’s off,” she said. “Don’t you hear me? It’s off.” I’d have to hurry.

“Business is business. Don’t you hear me?”

“I’m not doing this for money,” I shouted.

“Then why?” she said. I stopped and turned. She stood silhouetted

against the halo of the streetlight. “You know I can’t love you,” she said.

“But I’m willing to do it, and to take the bullet,” I said. “That’s what you’re looking at, right?” I rushed back toward her. “That’s what you’re seeing here!” She turned away, extending one hand like a traffic cop.

“What I see—is a doormat,” she said. “The moment you become disposable, you become a doormat. That is the second truth. Don’t you get it? I could tell you a story of chains and fools, slaves and masters, but you wouldn’t hear me. Nobody can love a doormat. You are Need and Want. Which makes you utterly unlovable.”

I felt my lips tremble. “What are you saying?”

“I didn’t create this situation.” She spoke in a whisper. “Neither did you. This is not of our making. Blame the master, blame the slave if you want. You have your choices. That’s all you have.”

I offered my arms to her, lifting them high.

“No,” she said. “Not until you choose to accept the truth, the second one.”

“What choices?”

Again she motioned me away. “To love without being loved.”

“No,” I said. “I won’t do that.” The man was crossing the street, returning to his wife. “No way.”

“This is my punishment, too,” she said. “You can’t imagine the things I’ve done. The things that have been done to me.”

“No,” I said. Dredging my pocket for keys, I staggered toward the van, then glanced over my shoulder. I stopped.

Celeste stood alone inside a shaft of stark halogen, her face raised to the blinding light, that column of brilliance wrapped in a shroud of absolute darkness. Slowly she turned away, hugging her arms round her body, pulling tight the backless sundress.

Ascending from the horizon of the dress, the two thick slanted scars shimmered like bruised neon upon the naked flesh.

“I won’t do it.” I looked away, picking up my pace. I would not turn back again. I would not take that chance. “I won’t,” I said. “I won’t do it.”

(There was nothing left for me. I would not look back. There was nothing to go back for. I would find the key in my pocket. I would stop outside the van. I would look down into my palm. The key would be there. I would be free.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Okay.”)

Emily Bobo

Fantasy: Georgia Does Laundry

Squat down on the bottom of the Chama River Valley, bar of lye clutched in one veined hand, rock rising high in the other, Pedernal cowering before her, New Mexican sun glancing off her skin: I hear the stillness of the red desert and her breathing, small grunts, followed by the thud-thud-thudding of stone against wet cloth, and the bubbles bobbing downstream.

The Love Song of Mason and Hamlin

“I am old, I am old. My feet grow cold.”
The piano is afraid of dying. No more

do the women wander to and fro, diddling
her keys, dallying her strings. Her action’s

stiff, her pins are loose, her whites
are chipped and dingy. She’s too afraid

to see the tuner. He said last time
had to be the last time. “Abuse is

abuse,” he’d said. Twang, clatter, clunk.
She has lingered long in the chamber.

Not even Cage would now claim her.
Nick, bump, thwack. No more time,

no more time, the women all have come
and gone, no more time, no more time,

no more cheap hotel bars, no more time,
no more time, no more *Michael*, no

more *Angel*, no more do, re, mi, *lo*,
no more doo-wop, no more lift, no

more hands, dropping, to sing her face.

Growing up Kansas (for those of you who didn't)

It's being bruised and scared and on your ass in the arena. It's feeling dust caking the snot in your nose. It's being dumped by Justine—that's right, Justine, your three-year-old gelding—for the third time in one night and your brother laughing:

“Come on. What? You gonna be a girl about it?”

“Being a girl about it” is what you try your whole damn life to avoid. A girl. He might have just said pussy. That's what he means. Don't be a pussy about it. Don't cry. Don't quit. Don't go running home to mama. Just brush off your boots. Get back on the damn horse.

So that's what you do. It's what you've always done.

It's what you did at five, when, on a dare, you spent the night in the chicken coop. All night. You squatted in the shit-caked hay and tried to stop your ears against the chickens stupid clucking—their incessant scratching, scratching, scritch in the hot, dry dark.

“Not being a girl” is what you did at six when you swung out of the big oak tree on a ski-rope. First from a low branch, then higher and higher to prove that you could be less of a “girl” than Johnny, the neighborhood bully. He quit when his knees hit gravel, when he scraped his shins across three feet of crushed rock, drug his belly in the grass, planted his face in the dirt—big deal. He didn't even break the skin. Not you. You swung on. Swung until your arms burned in their sockets, your fingers bubbled, and your bare feet bled numb. He wouldn't make a girl out of you. No way. You could swing with the big boys.

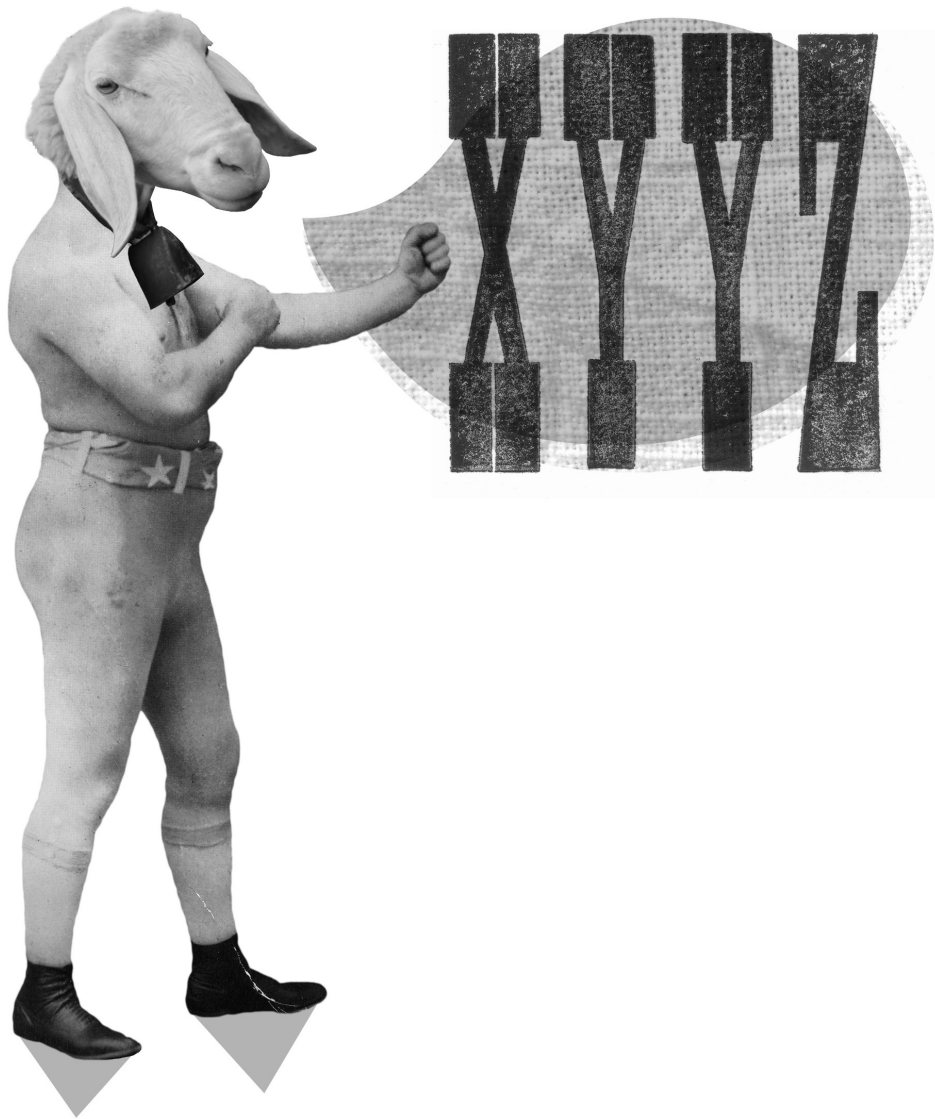
You'd started early enough. At two, three, four, your brother would zip you up in a sleeping bag, stuff you in a pillowcase, drag you up and down the shag-carpeted stairs. At five, you were doing flips off the high dive, no matter you didn't know how to swim. At seven, you were piling nine kids onto your red-and-white, tandem Schwinn and steering the whole damn lot down Highway 50. At twelve, you were chugging your first beer from a red plastic cup in a random wheat field, smoking a Marlboro Red, puking in the ditch, then rejoining the keg line. No one held your hair out of your face. No one asked if you were alright, if you shouldn't lie down, go home, sleep it off. And you didn't drink no fu-fu, umbrella-pink shit either. It was hair of the dog for you.

Because when you go on a snake-hunt, you don't want to be no pansy-ass pussy holding a billy club or Indiana Jones whip on top of a horse. You want to be the one, squat down in a muddy river bank, hands on your knees, eyes squinted against the noon-day sun, probing the pond dam, hole by hole, the first to catch a glimpse of that flat-eyed sonofabitch, the first to spot the black-snakes writhing en masse, all roiling bellies floating on a pile of sticks and grass downstream, the first to shout “SHH!” 'cause you heard Death's rattle in a hay bale.

So, yeah. You'll knock the dust from your boots, mount that pansy-ass bitch, and ride him back to the barn, because you can, because you survived

chickens, scritchng, in the dark, and because you, at least, aren't gonna' be a goddamn girl about it.

Against All Odds



Jane/I One

Jane opens the dryer door and cusses the F word four times. The shirts are dry but heaped and wrinkled. She swears she didn't hear the buzzer buzz. She twists the buzzer knob back and forth, back and forth and says out loud, would you just F-en buzz?

As if the buzzer would really make her leave the Sunday newspaper to fetch the shirts.

She thinks, a new dryer, the steaming kind, is the only way to solve this problem.

As if she would answer the buzz of a new steaming dryer.

The other night, at the Applebee's TGIF happy hour, Rose Anderson said Jane and Jane's pals were privileged and cozy. Rose Anderson would know because Rose Anderson has been a Peace Corps volunteer and worked with very poor people who were nevertheless quite happy. The very poor people sang songs to heaven and wore bright colored scarves.

Jane sipped her martini and thought but did not say, There will be poor always.

Jane sipped more martini and did say, I wonder if we are the only species who spends even one minute caring about its starving brethren.

Rose Anderson gave Jane a clenched mouth stare. The other friends, Cathy who worked the news desk with Jane and Rose, and Hope from the sports desk and Juliette Robinson who had won a national award for her series about inner city schools, they all looked at Jane in a way that made her think she should volunteer at the food bank right away.

Juliette Robinson said, well, we are *human*.

Jane spreads organic peanut butter on organic 8-grain bread, then drizzles organic agave in a spiral over the top of the peanut butter. She remembers she forgot to feed the dogs. The dogs do not buzz and seldom even bark. That day they look at her with four very dark and hungry eyes. The boy dog's eyes are bigger and more persuasive. The girl dog's eyes are bossy. The girl dog requires a special pill with her food because her chi is unbalanced, she has too much female, which instead of making her sweet and comforting, has made her chew holes into her skin and pant like she can't catch a breath.

Jane hides the pill in a dollop of peanut butter and says to the dollop, no more female dogs. Ever.

The dogs eat every kernel of food in under a minute.

Jane eats her peanut butter on 8-grain with agave sandwich in under five minutes.

Jane thinks, If poor people become better off they will think a good day is a day when they catch the dryer on the first buzz.

Jane/I Two

Jane sorts her socks because she does not want to watch another Law and Order. Because the piano is too loud and what she wants is privacy. Because the sock drawer is in the dresser and the dresser is in the closet and the closet is just tall enough to hide in.

Jane's socks are a mess, singles wound around mates that do not match, pairs worn thin, too many tights she never wears. So many with holes. Many socks with many holes. If she was Bohemian she would like her holey socks. But she does not like holey socks and so she is not Bohemian. Jane lets out breath that sounds like longing.

Jesus was holy but wore no socks, holey or otherwise. Buddha either. God is usually barefoot in all those gaudy paintings. Jesus washed the feet of lepers. Or was it whores?

Jane's mother was barefoot the last time Jane visited her. Her mother held out a pair of fingernail clippers and pointed to her bare toes. Her mother's toenails were thick as coins and sort of yellow and curled so much they dug into the edges of her nail beds.

Her mother's room was white and the nurses' names appeared on a white eraserboard. Her walker was maroon and in the corner and Jane's mother could not stand without it. She could not bend over from a standing position, with or without the walker. She could not bend from sitting either.

Tears made Jane's eyes see everything all wavery. Something hurt. Perhaps her mother's curled-up toenails. Or her mother, sitting so stiff on the edge of her bed. Asking. Barefoot. Her mother's puffy ankles. Her mother puffing to lift one foot.

Jane could have done it, but wouldn't. Or she would have done it, but couldn't. Looking back, she is not sure.

Isn't that the nurse's job? she said to the woman who created her and stood by watching while the doctor's sewed thirty-four stitches into the fingers Jane very nearly cut-off in a meat grinder. Jane couldn't look at her bloody fingers and held them in a fist against her palm and until her mother arrived to stand by her, she could not open her hand.

Her mother's old face was pale and her eyes were a color that used to be dark brown. The gray circles around her pupils seemed wider and darker and almost pewter-blue. And it was like Jane was in junior high again, wishing her mother was not so fat. Or wishing that her mother was more organized and more brave. Or wishing that her mother was the mother she sometimes can remember –whose *too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra* made bedtime much less boring. And the mother whose *baby's boat's a silver moon* made Jane forget the wallpaper peeling from the wall. And the mother whose *itsy-bitsy spider* dug-in and can't be clipped away.

Jane/T Three

Jane lifts her chin for the otolaryngologist. She cannot believe she just spelled that word right without a dictionary or spell check. The last time Jane went to the otolaryngologist he was called an ENT. A few days ago, she had looked him up in the yellow pages under ENT. The yellow pages said, “see Otolaryngologist” and she thought *oto-what-ologist?*

Jane entered the beige cubby of an examination room and sat on the padded examination table. In walked the doctor formerly known as ENT and Jane asked him how to pronounce that oto-word and he said the first G is hard and Jane was surprised. Gologist, like Golly-ologist. Otogollyologist. Otomotolarynlayrngollygollyoxenfree.

The oto-doctor has warm fingers and presses them all round Jane’s throat with a pleasant press that almost tickles. That pesky nodule on her thyroid. It’s grown again. It needs another biopsy.

The oto-doctor’s warm fingers make Jane think of his wife. Jane does not know the oto-doctor’s wife but even so, assumes she has long, smooth hair. The oto-doctor’s warm fingers wander through that hair. His warm fingers press into his wife’s throat, they touch her breasts.

Jane thinks she must have sex soon, and the doctor’s warm hand wraps around her cool hand to shake good-bye, and Jane does not change her mind.

Jane goes home. Her partner is working in his study. She hears his voice talking into the headset he wears eight hours a day. She thinks about creeping up on him and kissing his ear so he can’t say no. Then she remembers she hasn’t had a proper shower. Would he mind? She thinks they should talk about that some time. Cleanliness. Does it matter. How much? Which areas, so to speak? Jane begins to wonder how she can be so shallow. But then she remembers his strict ideas about passing gas. He can be shallow too.

This breaks her heart for him. It breaks her heart for her, too. The way that clean can matter. And youth. She wonders would he leave her? He promises no, never, and with that deep voice that sounds born for proclamations. He takes his virtue seriously. She wonders if that is good for her or bad for her.

Her mate emerges from his study and makes her a cheese quesadilla for lunch. He makes tea for himself and a slice of pie. Peach pie. Jane doesn’t see him walking toward her, and he doesn’t see her stepping back and they crash into each other. Tea, hot tea, spills over his arm and through his shirt and onto the white of his tender-skinned belly.

Fuck! he hollers.

Oh! Jane says. Oh no! I’m so sorry. I didn’t see you. I didn’t hear you.

She gets some ice and cuts a leaf of aloe from the plant.

You screamed much quieter than I would have, she says.

Yeah? He says, But I said Fuck.

Jane remembers that he almost never says Fuck, hardly ever. She says Fuck a lot. She’s even said Fuck you.

Jane squeezes aloe juice on the red burns and says, I know you did. That’s really something.

Spooky Action at a Distance

Take, for example, the Star Spice, he would say when someone asked how he had gotten into astronomy. At twilight in autumn, it is the brightest light in the constellation Virgo, just above and to the right of the orange dot of Mars. If they were outside, he would point it out. It's a bright star, what astronomers call a star of the first magnitude, 260 light years away. And that's what had drawn him to astronomy, the idea that the light you were presently seeing actually shone long ago. It wasn't the answer people expected. They expected him to talk about the future, or the vastness of space, or other worlds. But for him, these things were secondary to what he loved most about astronomy. He liked to think of himself as an Intergalactic Historian.

He was a research fellow at a privately funded observatory on a perpetually cold and windy mountaintop outside of Taos, New Mexico. The observatory consisted of a dozen huge satellite disks the size of small homes pointed up and south. There was a nondescript, windowless, warehouse structure where he and five others in varying shifts poured over information in the form of jagged graphs in different colors of a distant galaxy officially known as XG-274, but referred to around the shop as The Light Bulb Galaxy, as it resembled a sideways 60 watt bulb. XG-27, and everything in it, once turned clockwise, but recently (a million years, give or take), it had begun to spin the other way.

It was an impossible development, headline-grabbing on its own, but the shift in direction was only half of the story. The other half of the story was this: After 13.7 billion years of the universe expanding, there was evidence in the form of increasing background noise from compressing Dark Matter that the whole thing was now contracting. These discoveries were top secret, designated as such by none other than the head of NASA. The contracting universe was potentially dangerous news. The world would panic.

For the past year, all correspondence had involved their designated aliases. Taken from a universe even less well-known to them than the shadowy ones they studied—the distant world of hip-hop. The head of NASA was Ghostface Kills, and the five men and one woman at the observatory outside of Taos were: 2 Pac, Snoop Dogg, Heavy D, Ghostface Killah, 50 Cent, and Missy Misdemeanor.

These were exciting days around the observatory. Sometime he sent e-mails just to use his nom de plume, 2 Pac. Everyone spoke in hushed tones. When they met at the Quasar Bar, they sat in their little constellations of two or three, smoking with their backs to the wall at a dark corner table sipping the drink of choice of astronomers everywhere: vodka. Like 70% of the universe, vodka contained an absence of anything visible. A liquor such as whiskey was known for color and taste and a myriad other subtle characteristics picked up from its years aging in charred oak barrels. A real astronomer could be shunned for even considering a Jack and Coke.

He once knew a girl named Angel. She was his girlfriend's cousin and he met her twice—once on thanksgiving and a month later at Christmas—at the

grandmother's holiday gatherings at an old farmhouse in the middle of endless fields in Central Illinois. Now, he couldn't remember the girlfriend's name unless he wasn't trying to. But the cousin, he would never forget. Angel was from Kentucky—tall, brunette, wearing the same tight forest green cashmere sweater at both gatherings. She was so beautiful he could not look at her except in sideways glances. He had never met anyone from Kentucky before and was confused by her genetic, cultural niceness. He had believed she might have sex with him out of pure goodwill.

Though he couldn't remember the girlfriend's name, he thought the relationship must have been fairly serious. They had driven an hour north on Highway 45 to spend all day with her extended family in that old house with thick plastic sheets stapled over all the windows to dampen the stiff wind whistling across those impossibly vast and flat fields.

Angel was in her last year of high school. She wanted to be a psychologist. More than twenty years later, he would think about her for no obvious reason. He'd be in a bar playing pool or simply walking down a sidewalk where he would apparently walk into a memory, and he'd think, "I once knew a girl named Angel." He would think about her for a while in that pretty sweater, and then he would notice his sweaty palms, nervous to be in her remembered presence.

Quasars are bright, distant, highly energetic stars, but the Quasar Bar was a dimly lighted, converted A-frame house that was a supper club for its first two years, and then sold in 1970 to a ski pro who now lived in the upper level. Now, more ski lodge personnel drank there than astronomers, the maintenance crew who kept the satellite dishes working free of snow. In the early sixties, the area had promised to someday be full of telescopes and apparatus trained skywards, but that idea fizzled when it was found that the drier air (and cheaper land) of Arizona, Chile and Puerto Rico, was better for receiving information from the heavens.

He had met Cheyenne at the Quasar. She was an attractive divorcee bartender who had clear braces made out of some nearly invisible space-age composite. He had found that fact endearing. She was also attending the local community college in the hopes of running a preschool someday. Or, she also liked aerobics. So, either one.

She had seemed like a sexy, experienced free spirit, and the two of them developed a flirting relationship. One night, he stuck around as she closed the bar and he walked her to her rusty, yellow Datsun. He pointed out constellations, the chalky smudge of a nearby galaxy, and Mars, Venus, Saturn, usually Jupiter was out but wasn't visible this time of year that late at night. They made out, and the next night he went home with her, two weeks later, she was planning a solo trip to Las Vegas, thinking, she said, she might like to try a change of scene. He went with her and after a dozen vodka tonics at the Bellagio's craps tables, they found themselves in a nearby chapel, standing on a stage in front of a Molly Ringwald impersonator who held a script for *Pretty In Pink* in

Curtis Dawkins

place of a Bible.

“Married?” his co-worker, code-named Heavy D asked the Monday after. Heavy was actually thin and white, with a buzz cut and big ears.

“I don’t know how it happened,” he said. “I think I might have been drugged.”

“You were drugged alright—the most powerful drug known to men. She must be a real pulsar in the sack.” Heavy was at his desk, looking at last night’s record of the static pouring from a white dwarf in the Light Bulb Gallery. “Someone as smart as you. A Ph. D.”

Heavy had warned 2 Pac about the bartenders at Quasar. “You ever seen *An Officer and a Gentleman*? Those women who hang around the base looking to hook a pilot?”

“You’re saying the women at the Quasar are astronomy groupies?” He hadn’t believed him. Now, he thought perhaps he’d been played. “You know, there should be a waiting period for marriage. A cooling off period like there is for purchasing firearms.”

Heavy really had no room to talk. He had been married three times and two of those marriages were to the same woman. Luckily, they weren’t hired for their ability to maintain healthy relationships, but for their forward-thinking theories regarding astro-physics, their grasp of the nascent field of quantum mechanics.

As a team, Heavy D and 2 Pac looked at the computer-generated graphs from the information gathered from the redshift, light wave radiation and other data of the night before. They made notes and presumptions that may or may not become part of the permanent record regarding the observatory’s sole subject for the past decade, Galaxy XG-274. An example was this pithy bit of prose 2 Pac and Heavy D were especially proud of: “Apex of graph point of 27 July 2004, when compared with ALL existing data on XG-274 White Dwarf 2 suggests a loss (or reversal) of at least one of heretofore gravitational-exerting bodies.”

The next day that note was typed and highlighted, pinned to the observatory bulletin board with a bright silver push pin. Underneath were these double-underlined, bold words: “We concur !! Signed, Ghostface and 50.” They had framed the note and comment, fixing it to the concrete wall next to a famous quote from Einstein: “God doesn’t play dice,” and a retort by the noted physicist Niels Bohr: “Stop telling God what to do.” The exchange was part of a discussion about the troubling action of atoms in a theory called “Spooky Action at a Distance.” One atom tended to affect another in strange, unexplainable ways.

2 Pac and Heavy’s discovery was a turning point. They couldn’t physically see planets circling the white dwarf, but they could determine from the graphs that a usual wobble present on the white dwarf was no longer pulling on the light of the star. It was the beginning of the realization that the planets, and galaxy itself was revering.

At home, Cheyenne was working part time at the Quasar, spending her free time preparing for and attending night classes at the community college. They lived in a small house of a main road in the dark and quiet acre of pines. She cooked an unvarying combo of corndogs and potato wedges seasoned with paprika and garlic. Would it kill her, he wondered, to fit a cooking course into her schedule of classes? And, she was never home when he came in. It would be nice to come home to some warmth after all day living in the graphs of the cold vacuum of the distant past. Somehow, his disappointment came down to those braces on Cheyenne's teeth. He felt he really should have known better than to get involved with a forty-year-old woman wearing braces.

One Wednesday in November he came home to find a poem taped to the oven door behind which the corndogs and wedges lay warm and dead. Besides poetry, she was also Statistics, which seemed to be nothing more than some pony-tailed clown performing card tricks, fleecing his students of all their pocket money:

I hope you had a good day exploring the universe.
I have gone to the college to study verse.
When I drive away, I will creep slowly down the road like a hearse.
Only to have to return because I'd forgotten my purse.
Which wasn't the first
time my perfect plans had burst
like a balloon. It could be worse.
I could live under a curse
as does my friend the nurse
who you often describe tersely
as the good fairy Florence Nightengale because of his bright
green bonnet.
I'll see you soon—now ends this sonnet.

He sat at the kitchen table, chewing on his corndog. Through the sliding glass door, he could see two of the family of fox squirrels chasing each other around the tall pine trees. He took the cookie sheet of potato wedges out the back door and tossed them. He lit a cigarette, watched the two squirrels sniff the potatoes, then chatter one another and into the trees as if trying to decide what to do. He went in and sat on the couch, eating chocolate ice cream. He became engrossed in a show on PBS about the Venezuelan Jungle Eagle, referred to as the harpy. The male was twice as big as the North American Bald Eagle, and the female was a third larger than the male, with razor-sharp talons the size of a person's thumb.

The nest the birds made for their young was the size of a king-sized

bed. They were fascinating, dangerous birds. When cameramen climbed the tree to position a small camera, he had to wear actual riot gear. The female tried to kill him. If not for the protecting the helmet, he would have died.

He fell asleep in the couch, the empty container of ice cream sitting on the floor, the spoon sticking out like a little flag. At midnight Cheyenne stumbled in, smelling of rum from the mai-tais she drank at the after-class outing.

He woke with the light from the TV flickering throughout the room. Cheyenne straddled him, grinding him slowly, “Ooh, yeah,” she said. “Me Likey. You Likey?”

“Uh,” he said. He was confused. The last thing he had seen was the jungle eagles snatching a howler monkey the size of a dog from the high branches, shredding the dark brown primate meat for her young.

“We’re working on villanelles next. You know about them?”

“A little bit. I had poetry at the U of I.”

“Robert Frost said, ‘Poetry without a racket—tennis without rules was poetry.’” She giggled then kissed him passionately and he pressed into her. She leaned up. He had begun to notice she exhibited strange behavior once the passion began to flow, something that hadn’t happened during their short, super-heated courtship. She had also begun tearing up at sight of swing sets. “You would love our instructor,” she said. “He wears funny hats and bright yellow socks.”

“Maybe I’ll get to meet him someday.”

“You will- tomorrow night. The entire class is coming over—well everyone except this snooty woman who no one wants to come anyway. Can you believe they’re coming here? I’m so popular.”

“No, I can’t believe they’re coming here.”

“Now I remember: ‘Poetry without nets was like tennis without referees.’”

He had remembered Frost’s statement about free verse. The poetry professor at the University of Illinois had vehemently disagreed. He had said, “Form poetry is the Fascism of literature. It’s like playing baseball in a car.” He told Cheyenne that now.

“Oh, that’s good,” she said, standing up. “I can’t wait to tell my class that. Did Frost say that, too?” She didn’t wait for an answer, stumbled toward the kitchen to get an old corndog.

After the crowned Christmas lunch of ham, green beans casserole, and mashed potatoes, the under-twelve set had begun opening presents. He had quietly slipped out the back door to smoke. His girlfriend smoked too, but there was no way she was going out with him to return to her non-smoking family smelling like an ashtray.

He walked around the side of the house to his car—a Dodge Daytona, third in a long line of cares in the muddy, gravel drive of the old farmhouse. He smoked Marlboros, the girlfriend, Salems, which he sometimes likes to try--and did now—anticipating the refreshing menthol. He leaned against the car’s hood.

He looked out the vast field in front of him. There was a thin layer of snow in the lower furrows; the higher rows were brown, topped in perfect lines with the short dead stalks of the harvested corn. The stalks would be plowed under next spring, but now their lines met somewhere in the distance, just past the horizon. He had that feeling of coming face to face with immensity, like an ocean. Far in the distance and to the right, was a lonely island of trees surrounding an old farmhouse probably identical to the one behind him. There would be another family in the distant house, opening presents, talking about things he wasn't part of. He suddenly felt lonely, as if he were in a tiny boat on a vast sea.

He heard the front door close and from the corner of his eye caught the green of Angel's sweater. She didn't see him until she opened the door to her father's car, retrieving a maroon high school yearbook. She walked up to him, wearing someone's large, unlaced winter boots. Over the two holiday gathering they had become, if not quite friends, then friendly—part of that generational club that similar ages (he was twenty, Angel seventeen) form at family gathering. "I wish I could take a drag," she said. He held the half-smoked cigarette out towards her free hand. She shook her head. "My dad would kill me. He'd smell it the second I stepped in the door."

"That's a dad for you."

She stood there a little below him on the slope of a shallow ditch just off the edge of the driveway. He took a drag on the Salem, blew a blue stream into the gray December sky. She looked at his lips and he knew beyond a doubt what she was thinking: If his lips touched mine, I'd get that bite of nicotine, the taste of forbidden smoke, not enough that anyone would smell.

He would not have kissed her had he not been smoking the menthol. He wanted to share that cool mintiness—Christmasy somehow, and refreshing in the cold air. He took half a step towards her at the very edge of the driveway and firmly, yet softly, planted his lips to Angel's. He backed up. She licked her lips. Her eyes were wide. "Wow," she said and clopped off in her big boots.

He finished his cigarette. He smiled slightly, twisted out the cigarette's cherry onto the frozen ground, slipped the butt into his pocket. He could hear the kids inside cheering about something, maybe dessert or a good present.

He walked to the back door where his girlfriend stood just inside the kitchen, her arms across her chest. The little necklace he'd gotten her for Christmas—a fragile, golden heart with a little diamond in the corner on a thin gold chain—swung just under her chin, over her green turtleneck. "You need to leave. Right now," she said.

"What? What for?"

"My grandma saw you kiss Angel. She is mortified."

"I didn't kiss her—I just—"

"She saw you. And Angel is upset. She was shaking."

"Your grandma can't see out of those windows. There's five inches of thick plastic of them."

"She was at the front door, fuckhead. I knew you had the hots for her."

Who wouldn't have the hots for Angel, he thought? "Are you kidding me?"

"Do I look like I'm kidding you? Her dad wants to kick your ass. She's been getting really weird phone calls from some perv in Kentucky. She's really freaked out. You better leave."

"Well, there are a bunch of cars behind mine. They're going to have to move them."

"They are."

"Well, okay then," he said, turned around and went to his car.

The kiss had seemed so innocent, nothing really. But now, as he waited in his on the family of the instantly estranged girlfriend to move their cars, he didn't know how he could have been so stupid. He had really thrown a wrench into this poor family's Christmas. Angel's car was immediately behind his. He waited for her dad to come out. The other car behind his was already idling alongside the road, waiting. Angel's father was stout, of sturdy farm stock, had a mustache and shoulder-length hair. He hopped down the front stairs, strode across the yard and stopped at his dodge. He tapped the passenger window with a large turquoise ring. "Nice going," he said, his surprisingly white teeth set in an angry sneer. He snapped the ring against the glass again, and then went to his car, aggressively backing down the driveway.

He put his car in reverse. Through the two tall front windows of the old farmhouse he could see the colorful smudges of the family's festive clothes, the white ovals of their faces, trying through the opaque, thick plastic of the window's windbreakers, to glimpse the departure of the deviant who had just been among them.

Angel's dad hadn't given enough room to pass, so there was only one direction he could aim his car toward. He sped off. "Is this the right way?" he wondered, already lost on the unfamiliar road between those infinite fields.

All day he dreaded that night's poetry party like some impending invasive dental procedure. To make the day worse, last night's graphs recording the Light Bulb Galaxy was faulty—instead of sharp mountains of data, the graphs were shallow valleys. There was a problem somewhere, a blown processor perhaps. So, when he really wanted/needed to lose himself in the study of the past, all he could think of was the future of that night's party.

Once, a raccoon had curled up and died under the spike of the sensitive probe of dish #9. It was a week before a maintenance man found the problem, fishing the rotting coon out by his tail. On a day when 2 Pac would have paid to have to work late, it was going to be a job just to stretch the work day past noon.

At his desk he sat for a while looking up at the wall where a marked poster board spelled out the placed bets of the observatory betting pool regarding the reversal of the universe's expansion. There was a \$10 entry fee, three possibilities: 1) Nothing will happen; 2) Every known action will reverse; 3) This is the end. In the case of a tie, the winner would be decided by the roll of

the dice. #3 would be a hollow victor, though half of them had voted that way. The other half voted for “Nothing.” They are secretly hoped # 2 was the answer, though there would, of course, be no way to collect the money from an event in the present when all that was left was a future of the past.

He could generally kill a lot of time thinking about possible ramifications of collapsing universe, but today, all he could think about was 1) People were going to read their poetry while drinking wine – there were probably more effects, but he couldn’t get past #1. His mind could not wrap around the possibilities of other sorts of torture – such as a musical instrument, or party games.

His only hope was to get drunk and make the best of it. At 4 p.m. he put his hand on Heavy’s shoulder (he was reading an Internet article on the shrinking, unrenewable, formerly abundant resource of helium), “Whish me luck,” 2 Pac said.

“Eat some hummus for me.” Heavy smiled. “Or couscous. Why don’t you write a haiku –”

“Alright! Have some sympathy, will you?” He left, got in his ’83 Chevette and began the winding road down to Taos. He stopped at a liquor store and picked up a \$45 bottle of Kremlin Heritage Vodka. The top was sealed with black wax, an impression of some Soviet Era bird of prey on top.

See? he told himself. That’s how you do it. Give yourself something to look forward to. He had never tried Russian Heritage. He looked forward to a glass, a single ice cube snapping and popping, like a severed electric line, in the room temperature liquid. He could mainly stay in his own universe. He would be calm and courteous and only have nice things to say about everyone’s poems. He never knew, maybe they would be really good.

“That’s the spirit,” he told himself over the sound of the rusting muffler. The radio/cassette player had died a decade ago. The amazing part of the Chevette was the perfectly functioning analog clock in the dash between two heater vents. He looked at it. The clock had stopped. He topped the clear plastic cover. The second hand ticked back for five seconds, then froze again. “I’ll be damned,” he said, pulling down the dark tunnel of his shaded lane.

The light through the quarter mile long drive was the dark green of sunlight filtered through the seventy feet of pine branches, often reminding him of the cashmere sweater Angel had worn. It occurred to him that this green-tinged lane might have been one of the reasons he bought this place a decade ago. There also had to be, he thought, a connection between that fateful, smoky kiss and his desire to study the past of space. He never saw Angel again. The girlfriend had broken up with him that night on the phone. Had he assaulted Angel? Had she been bothered permanently by the memory of that day? The smoke-imparting kiss had seemed, at the instant he’d landed it, the perfect thing to do. Would he do it again? He didn’t know. That kiss had been the single bravest thing he had ever done, but he hated to think that he had hurt Angel in the process.

He shut the car off then walked into the house. “Honey, I’m home.” He

peeled the wax off the bottle top. Something was baking in the oven – Something that defiantly was not corndogs – something seafoody. Through the sliding-glass door, he could see Cheyenne watching the family of squirrels in the trees. He saw a large red squirrel fly through the air, landing on a lower branch, a cloud of needles and pine cones showered Cheyenne. She applauded. He smiled at her back, walked over to the fridge, setting the bottle on the counter.

A few years ago a Russian had come to the observatory as part of an exchange program. He had learned some Russian, but one phrase was all he remembered: “ewe no craKaHuNKy,” (another glass each). He repeated the phrase now. He got a glass from the cabinet, set it next to the bottle and opened the freezer door. He slid the ice tray out, turned it over to try and knock out a single cube. Cheyenne, thought had already loosened all the cubes and when he turned the tray over, a dozen crystal cubes crashed to the floor. Not one remained in the tray. He would have simply drunk the vodka straight, but he liked the ice in it to add a little chill, a little life.

He stared at the floor, the cold tray in his hand. And then an overwhelming sense of déjà vu overtook him as the ice cubes lifted off the floor in a shining fountain and fit themselves back in the tray that he slid back into the freezer. It wasn't déjà vu, exactly—it was a sense of familiarity, as if part of his brain had, somehow, always expected this. He spoke his Russian phrase, then found himself back at the sliding door, watching the cloud of pine needles and cones return to the tree as the squirrel flew upwards. “Honey, I'm home,” he said, sealing the bottle with the black length of wax, then walking out to his car, back through the sweater-colored tunnel and into the past.

Owl and Piece



The End of Mankind As We Know It

One morning the world woke up and they were gone, just gone, gone without a trace. No socks crumpled on the floor, no toilet seats left up, no razor stubble in the sink. They were disappeared. By habit the women roused themselves, returning from the kitchens with coffee in slogan mugs, Carpenters Do It Straight, and I Heart Power Tools, but the men were gone. Just doggone gone. The sheets were still tucked in with hospital corners. No snores disturbed the dust motes streaming over the beds in rays of sun. They were gone. History. Vamoose. Flown the coop.

The women set down the mugs on the piles of unread sports magazines on the night stands and crossed to their windows. They raised the sashes; they stared through the tattered screens. No men. They peeked under the beds. No men, just dust kitties. They sniffed the air suspiciously. No odor of cigar, car oil, yesterday's T-shirts. No dropped workboot or shoe. They were vanished.

A few checked the refrigerator for notes — golfing or fishing perhaps. But there were no notes. Some drank the mugs of coffee themselves, padded around the sunlit morning rooms in their fuzzy slippers and souched cat sighs of lazy contentment, took long baths and giggled. Others called their friends. "Say, have you seen Jerry?"

"No, you seen Paul?"

"No, I guess they're gone."

To be sure, they checked the garages and the tool sheds and barbecue pits. But there was not a man to be found anywhere. Not a man in sight. Life went on. The women waited.

A few met for coffee, surprised at how quickly they'd adjusted. They painted their nails and tuned in CNN to see if there was any news about the men, their whereabouts, where they might have gone. But there was no news of the men, very little news at all, in fact. Lots of fluff pieces about hemlines, pesticides on pears, separation anxiety, toxic chicken, but nothing about the missing men.

"You know my Jerry. Probably got himself lost. He won't ask anybody for directions."

"Paul, too. He needs a map to cross a street."

So they brushed each other's hair and ate ice cream and listened to CNN. No one fought over the remote. The party went on for days. ESPN went off the air. The women had time on their hands. Some wrote symphonies, built bridges, kept journals. Some mopped under the beds. Others quilted. Others just watched the news, but not much had changed. War still raged somewhere; it had just gotten more gossipy, and the soldiers dressed better. Immaculate headpieces, polished epaulets. But still up in arms about something or other. It was hard to say what; they didn't speak English. But the news continued. Starvation, war, floods, mudslides. But no sports, and crime fell. As did stocks. The women didn't mind.

Fashion generally improved. As did house plants. Gone were the fuzzy slippers and sweat pants. Rubber trees and African violets thrived, turning living rooms into lush gardens. Beer sales nose-dived; herbal teas skyrocketed. The women cleaned the closets, alphabetized the tools, aired and ironed the bed linens.

Some, timid at first, advanced hypotheses about the men's absence. "Chasing skirt — it's always another woman." But all the women were still home.

"Alien abduction, I'm sure of it."

"Hunting camp."

"The Superbowl." But it wasn't the right time of year.

Panelists held forth on CNN about the survival of the race. Eloise Erudite hinted that mutation might be possible, some sort of adaptation to permit asexual reproduction. In the kitchens, the women sniggered and shredded their napkins and threw them into the air like confetti. To hell with that, they said. Sexual reproduction had been quite enough, thank you very much, and the diapers and runny noses, and lost mittens, and cookies to bake and snotty science teachers at PTA meetings, and scouting fund-raisers. Pardon me, dearie, but no thamn dank you. But still there was time, time... Time to fill, time to kill.

So they went to aerobics classes in droves, became sleek and stylized and wore black clingy dresses and impossible shoes. They changed their names to Thelma and Roberta and Theda and Lauren. Drop dead names. Names to die for. They descended on libraries and had stat sheets of car accidents en route and nibbled chocolates in latté bars and sprinkled blue cheese on their salads, and performed delicate brain surgeries, and bought handsome attaché cases in natural grain leathers, and talked on mobile phones and cell phones and car phones in a world gone suddenly articulate, and their ambitious hairstyles crowned their faces like Brancusi sculptures. Let's face it, they were having a field day.

But they glared at their boys, daring them to grow into men who dropped socks. They dragged their daughters to dance classes, and seminars, and operas. They simpered at each other. This was swell. Or almost. A few, even many, wondered about the men. Had they just woken up one morning and thought, "We've had it," as one mind? Had some genetic Y2K bug come to term and made them all rise, tired of wives in fluffy slippers, tired of being asked, "What do you mean by that?" Tired of pay stubs and car repairs and college funds, dog tired of the whole shebang? Had they risen in pale pre-dawn half-light and shoved their feet into their kicks and marched to the front door which needed a new screen, and stepped outside and quietly queued up, then marched like Lemmings dutifully off to the vanishing point? Perhaps. Perhaps. It was not a pretty sight. And the tension began to show.

Skirmishes broke out at one of the soufflé classes when Marlene made a crack at Uma's effort which refused to pouf, and Uma countered with a jibe about women who wear elbow length gloves to cooking classes. Suffice it to

say, egg shells cracked. Utensils flew. But the set-to's ended quickly. Still, they betrayed duress. Something missing. Something not quite right. And they tried to communicate it. And no one could get a word in edgewise.

Esmeralda claimed that she had spotted a man in the rotting lumberyard, fondling a tablesaw. But most felt that her aerobic imagination had gotten the best of her. The harsher opiners pronounced her delusional. But truth to tell, Esmeralda's delusion secretly quickened a few pulses, perhaps even hopes. Could it be? A man still among us?

Some of the sleek had surreptitiously taken to daubing motor oil and beer on their wrists in lieu of Eau du Brioche before they went to bed. Some practiced snoring. A few left experimental stockings on the floor, but the whisper of silk could not compensate for the thud of a balled crew sock. Uma built a shrine on the workbench with a deflated football, a Clint Eastwood movie, a couple of stogies and fliptops and some linty change, then doused the small pyre with Old Spice and lit it. But her husband (whose name she had forgotten, Burt? Brad?) did not materialize.

Dark shadows began ringing some of the women's eyes, and the smudges were not mascara. Pretending nonchalance, they clinked spoons in their teacups and asked, "Do you think that Jerry will come back? I mean, ever?"

"Paul?"

They shrugged. They shook their heads. They studied their rose-patterned silver teaspoons.

Some of the women began exploring the attics and basements, tossing around the boxes and baby furniture to see if a few of the men might be crouching down there or up there, malingering, tinkering, futzing with the furnaces, leafing through old magazines or resurrecting high school track trophies. But they failed to turn up any men. Marlene organized search parties, and they spread out with leashed Lhasa Apsos and Pomeranians yipping, combing the junk stores and corner bars and sports arenas and car lots and bowling alleys and VFW Halls and video stores and hardware stores and baseball card and comic book stores — but all to no avail. Uma found an offset screwdriver which she placed in her breast pocket and patted tenderly. But no men and no other tools were found.

They started measuring their boys, praying for growth spurts. They began to stir their cups of coffee listlessly until they grew cold. Their feet sprouted fuzzy slippers again. The impossible shoes gathered dust under the beds, heels atilt, toes curled. In private, quietly at first, they asked each other, "Do you miss them, the men I mean?" and then, more loudly, "What do you miss?"

And the litany of deficiencies poured forth. They missed warm breath and body odor and tissues linting the clothes in the dryers and tools left on the stoops and shouts and the smacks of basketballs and raised toilet seats and baffled eyes and dirty hair and torn blue jeans and socks everywhere and unread sports magazines and beer bottles and beer bellies and stubble and miscommu-

nication and unhung storm windows and leaf-littered rain gutters and revving cars and air guitars. Yes, they were surprised to realize, surprised to admit that they missed everything, everything that made life such a glorious mess and muddle. The other. The other. And they scuffed to the stale closets and inhaled deeply for the last faint trace of men scent.

It was the end of mankind as they knew it. They started skipping aerobics classes, ate from cartons with the refrigerator doors propped open with pajamaed knees, staring at the burned out appliance lights. They quarreled with their children for control of the remotes. But all the channels were shopping networks anyway. Variety was gone from life like the lid from an expired carton of plain yogurt. Some wept. Some just turned mean.

And then the men started creeping back, just a trickle at first, one here, one there, with no explanations about where they'd been. Blinking a little as they blundered into the kitchens and bedrooms, searching sock drawers vacantly for God alone knew what — car keys or checkbooks. Uma's husband first, and not looking the least bit sheepish. ("The nerve of that man," she said.) Then a few others, a garage mechanic here, a plumber there, a personal trainer and an insurance salesman somewhere else, doctors and lawyers, and cowboys and wannabe cowboys and rock stars, all resuming their lives and propping their feet up on the coffee tables as if nothing had happened. ("Just like a man," they said.) And the women welcomed them home. At first. For a while.

But it was just a matter of time, a dropped toilet seat, a sock or two, a secretary's name, before the women began meeting again in their secret societies in kitchens everywhere and griping and grouching about the return of mankind as they knew it. Griping and grouching, gossiping and giggling with enormous grins on their faces. Huge grins. Shark grins. Grins sleek and wide and sly enough to skin a man alive. The men were in their places, and all was right with the world.

The Song You Were

1.

I arrive
late in the rain
your voice owns my name
the sweet familiar
pulls me
into your arms
as so many things
I was planning to say
you silence
with your kiss

2.

you turn away
too soon
amble toward your truck
casting promises
over your shoulder
like a bare-chested boy
wandering
into a boundless afternoon
down at the river
with a crooked stick
a string tied to its tip
the dangling end
swinging free

3.

I watch the rain
filling in the shape
left by your pick-up's
dry underbelly
oil rainbows swirl inside
the outline of your absence
the song you were
whistling
now in my head
a housefly trapped
in a ceiling light

Lines from the Tag on an Easy Chair

Let no one say I was not generous.
Someday, when I can no longer hold
the weight of a body, my once sturdy curves
will give way to gravity
like the rest till then,
my lap is always open. But *Notice*
the secret of my underside:
Only the resilient filling
contained in this article
meets flammability requirements.
Care should be exercised
near open flame.

Candle neck, don't make me
want your warmth.
Sly light, don't set the mood
too much. I came with
a warning, no guarantee
my fabric will resist your touch.
Just let me watch you dance
from a distance. Let me see your swaying
silhouette, the shadow of my desire
thrown against a wall.

Don't come so close
I know the way your hot blue heart
can wear down the wick, melting
its wax resolve. I've seen the way
tinder succumbs under tongues of fire,
the way a pine twig in its moment glows
red like the inside of orange, red
like the letters in a neon sign, then
bends like a piece of metal wire and
surrenders itself to you.

Do you think I haven't noticed
how a mere breath excites you,
how your nearness brings water to surface,
how even water reinvents itself for you
as air, transformed by your intensity?
Everything but stone
is susceptible to flame, though some of us

Emily Hazel

are more easily consumed.
When my turn comes,
my cover will be gone in an instant.
Let this resilient filling
burn a little longer.

Royalty in Repose



Martha Marinara

Farmer's Wife

Awake before five,
she crawls heavily from under
her grandmother's quilt patterned
in brown and green squares
laced with diminutive, even stitches
a miniature fence holding in the fields.

Later she will feed the chickens.
They'll peck about her toes and ankles
swollen as the womb that fastens her youth.

Before lighting the stove
she stands on the back porch
hand on cheek, she imagines the rough
stubble of her husband's morning face
and how he will want breakfast soon.
Biscuits, she thinks, bacon, coffee with sugar.

The stars have slipped behind the morning
and from the late autumn cornfield
swallows rise in a harvest of black wings.

She watches them stretch and float
until they are thin dark dots
wisps of smoke in the blue dawn.

Navigating the Heart

Our merciful Sunday afternoons
glow with prayer warmed air.
Your smile expands my day.
I reach the depths of your body
through layers of grace, muscle, bone
blood that rivers a baptism
in your small white hands
the flutter of little bird souls.

Always you ask, “why do you love me?”
You want a list, answerable attributes
numbering the what of love
as if love were locatable.
Your question erases the geography of desire.

As if to navigate the heart
you need only the knowledge of river
where you are,
where you are going,
and all the obstacles in your way.

I gather the music from your breasts
unformed sound silvers and
falls in flashing strips
like rain caught in the porch light.

I know sailors can plot patterns in the sky
charting, naming the stars
Big Dipper, Little Dipper, Orion’s belt
Cassiopeia’s Chair.
Bows and arrows and goats with fishtails
hold no meaning beyond what
we are willing to imagine.
But through the jumble of lights
the North Star’s always the way home.

Martha Marinara

White Marsh Island, October

The live oaks drip leaves
wax from a candle falls year long.
Like fine hair caught
in a morning's brushing,
winter's baldness is only a threat.

A Georgia October blooms in subtler light.
The marsh's soft blaze sleeps the curled brown of old photos,
the forest's veneer fades from emerald to peridot,
a breach in the fierce green summer.

Only the dogwood trees seem to know
what the change in light, the advent of shadow means,
the thin branches promise to complete the autumn charade
with hard red berries that are eaten
by grackles long before it grows cooler.
Their satisfied bird cries echo over the inlet.

Moon Scales

On the thick paper of a child's scrapbook
you have pasted a photograph of yourself holding
a fish, caught, then forgotten before the autumn passes.
The plastic fishing line wrapped
around your fingers bends your elbow
so the fish is a thin bellied stripe
marked in the white center of the photo.
Your face frames the pale green curve of eye and a chin
sharp with the meager fish breathlessness
and erases the finned grace and translucent scale:
once the photo was taken, the fish succumbed to desire.
Now that I know your face by heart
I doubt my blurred photo, the lines of my thin frame
and want the melody of your hands and lips
reassurance that the flesh of my neck and arms
my breasts still breathe in firm measures.
But our movements of physical misdirection
all your small potent gestures of hair and cheeks
turn my heart round and round like a Ferris Wheel
caught in the mechanical ruthlessness of fate
as you initial success with the low moan lodged in my throat.
My history lies heavy on your spring thighbones
reminding me that the noise of rockets
makes possible the silent steps in moon dust.

Running With The Devil Dog

It begins with silence, the mind empty, not a word. All out! Everything stale, everything used, everything easy. Out with ideas, notions, formulas, doctrine, all that second hand stuff. Let the mind start over, let it see, hear, feel, taste. Not words but what words represent. That bee, circling in the garden, that drop of cold rain that fell from the awning to your cheek, the dense blue exhaust from a passing truck, the hum of traffic on the distant expressway; as these things come to you, let your story come. You already know it. It is in your blood, it already exists.

A girl was once raped here. Down this trail. In this forest preserve, not a half mile from the parking lot. That was at a time when the moldering earth was sprouting mushrooms as large as your head. You could kick them and watch them explode. Kids were taking them home to frighten their mothers. Here. Raped. By a man whose bland likeness, drawn by a police artist, was posted in nearby apartment buildings and convenience stores. Drawn from the victim's description (her own lips swollen, her own eyes blackened and filled with pain). He would be older now, ten years older, could be in prison, could be dead, could still be raping girls. The woman locking up her car at the end of the parking lot thinks of this always. She knows the area well, here often in her running shoes, her shorts, her Old Navy sweat shirt, her graying hair tied back in a ponytail. She feels safe, does not run alone, she has DeDe to run at her side. DeDe, half Doberman, half Shepherd, almost twelve, gentle and harmless, but what rapist would care to chance him? She has contempt for men who attack women. It will never happen to her.

"Come along, Devil Dog," she whispers. She keeps him on a leash until they are out of the parking lot, and then not. The rule is always on a leash, but she doubts she will ever meet a Ranger on the trail, and you cannot run properly while holding your dog on a leash.

A girl was raped here. She knows the story well, heard it from a boyfriend who worked in the ER, a boyfriend almost forgotten now, but his story remains. A story meant to frighten her, but she does not frighten.

To run on hard packed earth. Sometimes to turn and run along the river, sometimes to chug up along the slope, sometimes to keep going till you find that animal trail discovered only last year a narrow pathway very few know, overgrown in summer, snowed over in winter, perfect for this spring morning. DeDe likes it, likes to snuffle about in the moldering leaves, sometimes comes up with small dead animals she must pry from his worn teeth. His only bad habit.

So. When did you yourself last walk such a trail, so personal, narrow, and secluded? Deer bed here, trample down little nests that are always empty when your runner finds them. Branches clutch at her clothes, scratch her bare legs. She must be a tough woman, bright too, she can name the woodland plants you can only look up in books, can point out the nasty invasive species, buck-

thorn, mustard, loosestrife, can recite their Latin names and gladly will. She especially loves this secret place in the heart of a great metropolitan area, so close to the expressway, so close to the airport. Whistling jets almost seem to stir the trees. Running is difficult here, the surface soft, the path laced with naked tree roots, fallen trees, and broken limbs. Here she can be alone.

At what point does it happen? At what moment does the dog find the grave?

“DeDe,” she calls. “Devil Dog! Get away from that.”

He’s off the trail, in one of those little deer beds, digging, and will not be called away. When she reaches him she sees what he has found and her blood runs cold.

Something large has been buried here and covered with leaves and branches and now DeDe is scratching through . . .

You must rest your story now. It will come but it needs time. Sleep. Dreams. Memory. In these things there is magic. All wrong turns, false solutions, quick conclusions must have time to dry away. The mind (dare we say the subconscious?) examines all, sorts all, opens spaces where none exist. Tomorrow will fill them, and when it does you will have this:

“Stop it,” she commanded, but she had to snap the leash onto his collar and pull DeDe off the grave. As sure as she knew her name was Emily, she knew this was a grave, and she did not want to see what was in it. She fingered her phone and came very close to calling Alex, an idea so clearly impractical she scolded herself. 911 did not seem much better, nor did it turn out to be; the operator immediately wanted her exact location. In the woods. Down the trail.

“You say you found remains?”

“It’s a grave. My dog found it. He wants . . .”

There was silence. Then the operator was back. She sounded bored, even skeptical, or was our runner only imagining that? A few more questions. The name of the Forest Preserve. The street. “You don’t actually see the remains?” She should return to her car. A ranger would be dispatched, and she should wait. The operator did not seem to be open to further discussion.

A forest-green ranger vehicle was already heading back toward the entrance when she reached the parking lot. She recognized it, knew it contained a K-9 officer who had threatened to arrest her the next time he saw DeDe unleashed. He had never seen DeDe unleashed, and she only reluctantly raised her arms to signal him. “Back here! Back here!” she cried and he kept on going away until he reached the gate where an old man rose up from a picnic bench and stopped him, pointing back in her direction. By the time he reached her and rolled down his window, she had DeDe safely back on his leash. Yes, it was the same young man she remembered from before, but there was no way she could be sure he remembered her, expressionless as he was behind his mirror bright dark glasses. “You got to keep that dog . . .” he said, and she said, “I know, I know, but I had to run back or I would have missed you.”

The young officer was driving a dark green SUV, freshly washed and

Paul Pekin

polished, parade ready. There was a red and blue light-bar bolted onto the roof, the insignia of the Forest Preserve District affixed to either door, and a metal cage for the dog mounted just behind the driver's seat. He, the young officer, stepped out crisp and clean in his sharply creased uniform and patent-leather shoes, but with him came a faint odor that could only be described as the odor of dog. Our runner sensed DeDe bristling at her side.

"Maybe you better put that dog into your vehicle, Mam," the young officer said. He was hatless and his bleached blond hair had been cut close to his skull. He was going to be trouble.

"I'll have to take you back down the trail to show you," she said. "I can't be locking my dog in my car."

She could not read the young man's expression. Behind his glasses, he was invisible. He may not even have been listening to her. Without a word, he turned aside, walked off a dozen steps or so, and began speaking softly into his radio. Again she was tempted to call Alex, but what had seemed only impractical on the trail, now was clearly ridiculous. Alex was a talker. You couldn't get him off the phone, even when you called him at work where supposedly he was busy nine to five. Dealing with this young K-9 officer and Alex at one and the same time would be more trouble than she wanted to think about.

DeDe never had that smell. This was the smell of a large dog kept hour after hour in a closed squad car gathering up his own stench. She had seen the dog, the K-9, the last time she encountered this young officer. It was a brute of a creature, dark and bushy, with unnerving yellow eyes; she would have guessed it a mixture of several large breeds. She remembered thinking that the animal, panting, drooling, muzzled at the end of a strong leather leash, was probably in need of a friend.

The young officer did not seem much of a friend. When he had finished talking on his radio, he turned back to Emily, our runner, and said:

"What makes you think you saw a grave?"

"I'll show it to you. And you'll see."

"People bury all kinds of things back here. Probably a dog."

A very large dog, she would have imagined. And why would anyone carry a dog that far into the woods just to bury it?

Clearly he was reluctant to start down that trail, and if she had to guess why, she would have guessed it had something to do with dogs, his dog and her dog and why they must not meet, even at the ends of their leashes.

"I can't lock him in the car," she repeated. "It's not air conditioned. He won't annoy your dog."

The young officer turned his mirrored sunglasses at her, as if to suggest he had heard something he did not believe. "I'll follow you," he finally said, his voice dry and mechanical. He folded his arms, spread his legs slightly, and waited for her to go ahead.

On the trail, DeDe made it clear he expected to be unleashed. He tugged, dragged, wound himself around saplings, and stalled at every imaginary

scent. This was not his idea of a walk. At first it did not seem that the young officer was following, but after several minutes it became clear that he was in his car. Somewhere behind her, Emily could hear the big SUV laboring through the brush.

He'll not get far, she thought, but there were old tire marks on the trail, and ruts dug deep in the soft earth, other vehicles had made it, perhaps not recently. Who was to say this young officer did not know what he was doing? For certain, he would not make it down that animal trail, so narrow and densely foliated even she had to watch close for the entrance. He would have to get out and walk. When she reached it she stood by until his vehicle came lurching into sight. "This way," she signaled. She did not wait to see him follow.

This second time down the trail was no fun at all, either for her or her dog who quite simply refused to forgive her for the leash. Fighting off branches that seemed more numerous than before, slipping on mud she had not noticed when she was were running free, she was surprised to hear the young officer's car crashing stubbornly through the brush behind her. Did he not know he would have to back out? There was a moment of panic when she imagined she was taking him down the wrong trail, there were so many in these woods, but then she recognized a great fallen tree DeDe had given much attention to, and had to be dragged away from again. She was sweating, had mud up to her socks; mosquitoes were rising from the damp leaves. You would have to want very much to hide something to bury it back here.

Twice she mistook breaks in the woods for the patch she now wished DeDe had never entered. She was wondering what she might say to the young officer if she should never find it again when DeDe set up a sudden keening. He was an old dog, but there was nothing wrong with his nose. She shuddered (it was as if she could smell the death herself), let him drag her into the clearing, and there it was, the grave. "You don't want that, Devil Dog," she said, but oh, he did, he really did.

She could no longer hear the young officer's car. He must have reached a point where even he would have to admit he could go no further. She resolved to wait outside the clearing rather than track back for him. "This is all your fault," she told DeDe who was straining to get back at the grave, but there was no sign of the young officer, not for several long moments. Finally she heard voices approaching, one of which clearly belonged to a woman. "It's a dog," this voice was saying. "They bring their fucking dogs back here and bury them and then we have to dig them up." The other voice was indistinct but Emily recognized it as the young K-9 officer's, and he was saying something about leashes. Seconds later they came into view, the young K-9 officer without his dog, and the woman, an officer in the same forest-green uniform. She was hatless, her dark hair pulled into a bun, and she too was wearing mirrored sun glasses.

"It's back there," Emily said. The young K-9 officer flinched when DeDe moved to sniff his trousers. The female officer, on the other hand, did

Paul Pekin

not mind DeDe at all. She immediately squatted down and took his great head into her hands.

“Oh, what a honey,” she said. “Come on, sweetie dog. Give a kiss.”

DeDe was only too happy to oblige.

“I wish I had a dog like that. My landlord won’t even allow a Chihuahua. What’s his name?”

“DeDe. But I like to call him Devil Dog.”

“Is him a sweet devil dog,” the female officer cooed. “And he found a body?”

“Fucking dogs,” the young K-9 officer said, beneath his breath, yes, but he very clearly said it. “So where is this so called grave?”

While he was examining the so called grave his partner took down Emily’s name, address, telephone number, and story. When the officer removed her glasses it became clear that she was older than she had first appeared, her pale gray eyes deeply lined, the brows plucked away and penciled in, her dark hair likely dyed. “That probably is a dog buried back there,” she said. “But don’t you worry, Emily. We’ll check it out. How old is he?” DeDe was shamelessly lapping at her hand; yes, she had his number.

Whatever the young K-9 officer found to do in the clearing, it did not seem to have involved digging. He was back in minutes and immediately drew the female officer aside for a whispered conference, glancing back at Emily from time to time as if to say, none of your business. She was very glad that it should be so. She had come to the woods for a run, a simple run, and look what it had turned into. When the young officer had finished his conference, he walked back up the trail without a word, leaving his partner to explain.

“We’re done with you, Emily,” she said, stooping to pet DeDe’s huge eager head. “What a sweetie. If anything comes up, they’ll call you, but I wouldn’t worry about it. You’d be amazed what we find in these woods.”

Walking back up the trail, Emily was amazed indeed to find the young officer’s car buried up to its axles in the mud. Immediately behind it a second squad car was parked on slightly firmer ground, engine still running, the driver’s door swung open. The young officer was behind the wheel of his car, talking into a microphone, and the caged dog behind him was restlessly clattering its claws against the metal floor. Neither seemed aware of her passage. “Come along, Devil Dog,” she whispered. “There’s nothing here for us to see.”

Nothing. And this is exactly how it would have happened if it had happened. Our runner, Emily, would end up in the parking lot fingering her phone. She would not know if she had really found human remains at the end of the trail; she would not know how or if that young officer would get that vehicle out of the muck. Tomorrow she could come back and revisit the trail, examine the tire ruts and see where they had dug, and tomorrow she could know, but that knowing would not be part of this story which ends right here in the forest preserve parking lot.

She wipes DeDe’s paws with a soiled towel she keeps for that purpose.

She helps him onto the passenger seat of her car. It would be better if he rode in back, but he prefers the view up front and tends to climb the seat if he does not get it. He's as good as a person, he thinks, and she sees the logic in that. Scraping the mud from her shoes, she thinks of that young officer and his patent leather shine, and she smiles.

Then there is another man, not quite as young as that young officer, standing next to her and where he has so suddenly come from you and I will never know. He is in blue jeans and a hooded sweatshirt and has a bland featureless face no one would pick out of a crowd.

"Police," he says and somehow he places layers upon oily layers of meaning into that single word. A cloud passes over the sun, or maybe it doesn't, and our runner, Emily, briefly considers reopening the passenger door, but DeDe has already curled up out of sight. She can, she decides, manage this stranger on her own.

"You shouldn't be on a trail like that alone," he says, exactly as anyone should know he would, and there is no right answer, not at the moment. He makes no move to follow when she circles the car and brings out her keys.

"Don't you know," he says, just as she is sliding into her seat. "Don't you know that a girl was raped here?"

"Really?" She turns the key, hears the satisfying response from the engine.

"Oh yes. Oh yes she was."

And there you have your story, and now it is time to let it go, just as you let it come.

When you do that, what you will have are these pages. Now add two final words — the end.

Karla Linn Merrifield

Like Widescreen

Tune in with me tonight to Petroglyph TV,
see what the Ancient Ones are up to in their cliff houses.
On the Fremont Channel it's bubble-headed sci-fi reruns;
among the Chaco chic, *Bighorn Parade* is the full moon in-thing;
and Mesa Verdians prefer *Mule Deer: The Sequel*. Again.
Or how the Homolovis react, glued in their faulty towers,
to the snake, the sun, the water spiral on the Late Anasazi News Network.
If you wish for tricksters, take in another exciting puebloan
episode of *Kokopelli of Chinle Wash*. Mr. Kool Dude.
Dig his reality show's fluty theme song sung in stone.
Commercial-free, even during clan election season, and sponsored
by the Universe, it's PTV, Number 1 in rockin' rad programs.

1564: The Virgin One

If an Everglades goddess reigns,
she is a Calusa spirit,
a woman of oyster mounds—
the pearl who never saw
the glinting Spanish
hack a kingdom out of bones.
And she is the limestone full moon,
clasped by slash pines;
she is the purple gallinule,
a rainbow of gems in the marsh.
She is the prairie's opalescent periphyton,
mother of all.
She is the gold river of grass;
she is the silver, liquid light.

Phone Tag

If I picked one invention to destroy forever, it'd be the cell phone. I leave home to get *away* from annoying calls. Now damn near everybody packs what amounts to a tracking device. If you must, I mean absolutely *must*, carry a phone, does it have to play some annoying pop song? Must it have Internet access? Can't we find enough porn on our home computers? And who, in the name of all that's holy, needs a camera phone? Who wants to look at a bunch of itty-bitty pictures in the middle of a conversation?

I hate cell phones in restaurants. I hate cell phones in theaters. And I really, really hate cell phones in cars.

Now I admit I own a cell phone. I view it as a convenience. I carry it in case my car breaks down, not because my friend Dray might possibly call to tell me about a sale on large eggs at Rudy's Market or just in case my girlfriend Carol might want to discuss how, oh my God, her sister just totally took her favorite sweater without, like, even *asking*. I carry it if I'm in the middle of negotiating film rights, since my agent might call with time-sensitive information. But even then, I usually set it to vibrate. If I annoy my fellow human beings when they are trying to drive down the road without being sideswiped, I do it unintentionally, not because I'm an inconsiderate jackass.

Sure, at times I've missed my cell phone. Once I got stuck out at Parrott Pond, a few miles from town, and I really could have used it. I had to hike all the way back to Parkview. Acquaintances drove by, waving like idiots, as if I were simply out for my morning constitutional. You'd think someone would have stopped just to check on me, but no. A phone would help in a case like that, assuming you can get a signal. For the most part, though, I'd just as soon never see another one.

I've got to admit, though, that since I'm basically a misanthrope at heart, I like my voice mail. People can say they got in touch with me without my actually having to speak with them. It's like the wingman you take to the bar; it makes all the annoying conversation while you get drunk and eat pretzels and watch the Astros with the sound off. And because I love voice mail so much, I use it liberally. Carol and I argue over why I never answer my cell, even when I'm carrying it. She said,

Michael, I don't think you've ever actually answered your phone. Do you even know that you're on the line when you open it?

and I said,

Yes, I happen to know that, smartass.

As it happens, I *didn't* know, but I wasn't about to tell *her* that.

Most of the time, voice mail is my friend. But it does have a drawback, known colloquially as phone tag.

Back in the old days, meaning approximately fifteen years ago, phone tag seemed fairly innocuous. Oh sure, it could bite you in the ass in an emer-

gency. I mean, if you needed a kidney or somebody to bail you out of the Red-neck County Jail's holding tank, getting a busy signal or a series of unanswered rings could be catastrophic. But the worst that ever happened to me in the days before voice mail? I had to call somebody back. It didn't exactly stack up beside waterboarding.

After answering machines became so popular and we could leave each other messages, the frustrations of missed connections were easily articulated and impossible to miss. Messages progressed from

Hey dude, it's me. I need to holler at you about that business deal we talked about last week. Give me a call, 'kay?

to

Hey man, it's me. I called earlier. I'm just checking. Thought maybe my message didn't get through or something. Call me. It's important

to

Where *are* you? It's been two days. I know you must have gotten those other messages, man. Look, it's just my *life* here, right? *Call* me

to

Fine. Fuck you, motherfucker. I hope you die.

Answering machines intensified conflicts because we left messages at the moment of our greatest emotional peaks, the deepest valleys. We had no time for decompression, for re-thinking our words and tone. I firmly believe that answering machines increased the divorce rate, homicide statistics, and felony assaults. And cell phones made it all worse, because the whole point of a cell is that you can carry it with you almost anywhere. They took away the one excuse we had for not returning calls—not being home. And people only believe you for so long when you claim that the officers of the court or the doctors in the burn ward would not allow you to turn on your cell. Sooner or later, you've gotta leave the building.

When you play phone tag, all the frustration is doubled, because both parties are trying to call someone who won't answer. You both think the other is at fault. You both boil and seethe, and sooner or later somebody explodes. I know. I've been there.

I had traveled to New Orleans for a book signing on the weekend of Carol's thirty-ninth birthday. She was depressed because her biological clock was sounding its alarm, or at least building up to it. I was depressed because I had no time to goof off in the Quarter, even though my hotel sat smack in the middle of it. I wasn't exactly suffering, though; I was staying in the *Maison Homme Blanc*, with its feather four-posters and private courtyard. I woke up in the morning and inhaled the aroma of fresh blueberry croissants and breakfast tea. I read my complimentary paper and lounged at my table in the courtyard, listening to the muffled voices from the street and the previous evening's rain dripping from the trees. My cell was packed away in my suitcase. I knew I should call Carol right away, but for all I knew, she wasn't even up yet, and I

Brett Riley

didn't want to wake her on one of the few days she might sleep in, birthday or not.

Like I said, I'm not a jackass.

After I showered and dressed, I dug my cell out, turned it on, and waited for the annoying beeps and boops that would signal the presence of somebody's message. But nothing happened. No one had called—not Carol, not my mother, not even my agent Darlene, who had set up the signing and was probably scared that I was planning to destroy her network of friends and acquaintances in the greater New Orleans area. So I turned the phone off again, stuck it in my pocket, and headed to the lobby, where I waited for the car. It arrived half an hour later. I was due at a bookstore located somewhere in the Central Business District, not too far away, but traffic in New Orleans generally slows you way down.

Sure enough, we hit a traffic jam on Royal. A delivery van sat on the street near one of the hotels, while a bunch of tourists' cars choked the garage. Trucks and cars and minivans sat waiting to be driven into the city or valeted to a nearby lot, clogging the hotel's breezeway like metal kudzu. So the delivery van sat on Royal, honking its horn in long braying blasts, while I languished in the car directly behind the van. I too let off some long braying blasts, curses and epithets that I invented on the spot.

An elderly gentleman driving a boat-length Cadillac walked out and tried to move his car, the one nearest the street—blocked from the front by the five driverless cars in front of him, blocked from the rear by the delivery van, my car, and the eight or ten tourist-driven gas-guzzlers lined up behind us. This poor old guy could only shrug his shoulders and mouth the word sorry, because really, what could he do? At this point, it would have taken a hotel fire or a convention of traffic cops to disentangle us, and neither of those events seemed likely. So, with some time to kill, I tried to call Carol.

Now remember that I was trying to be the good guy, to do the right thing. But I also felt pressured, like two strong hands were squeezing either side of my head. One signing won't make or break a writer with any kind of reputation, but you don't want people to think you're flaky, either. You don't want to be the Axl Rose of the novelist set—the guy who schedules an appearance and then doesn't show up. All this preyed on my mind as my call got dumped to Carol's voicemail. I patiently waited for the beep, and then I said

Hey baby, it's me. It's—Jesus, what time is it? Oh God, it's nearly 11:20! [Sound of car window rolling down] Hey pal! Nobody's gonna move those cars! Get that van out of our way! [Sound of the window rolling up] Sorry about that, honey. Anyway, I'm on my way to the signing—at least I will be if this stupid asshole in the delivery van will ever get the hell out of our way—and I just wanted to call and say . . . uh oh, hold on a second. This guy's yelling something at me. [Sound of window rolling down] *What?* You got something to say? [Muffled, angry voice. . . the words prick and assrag can be heard] Screw you, buddy! Come over here and say that! [Muffled shout] Yeah, and your

mother too! What are you, stupid? You think everybody in that hotel is gonna run down and move their cars just because you say so? Get the fuck out of here! [Muffled shout] Oh yeah? Well, it takes one to know one! I—what? [Muffled voice] Well...yeah. As a matter of fact, I *am* Michael Seymour. [Muffled voice] Yeah, me too! I have to get there in like twenty minutes. [Muffled voice] Oh, you're a fan? Well I tell you what. If you can move this van, I can hook you up with

At this point, the voicemail cut me off. But given all that was happening, I still think that my first attempt could have gone much worse.

Thanks to a half-dozen autographs, the delivery driver finally moved his van, and the traffic snaked down Royal and out of the Quarter with my car at its head. My driver knew the city's rhythms; he managed to deposit me on the sidewalk in front of the bookstore before my deadline. But as soon as I stepped onto the concrete, the store manager appeared, grabbed my arm, and rushed me inside. Apparently the staff wanted to take pictures and get autographs. They requested

To my best buddy

or

To my number one reader, all the best, hope you have a great career in publishing

but I just used my standard autograph, which said

Best Wishes, M. Seymour.

By the time they let me go, the doors were opening, and I had no time to check my messages. My phone sat in my coat pocket, forgotten.

A radio call-in show appearance was scheduled for that evening, so I barely had time to wolf down an oyster po-boy before dashing into the studio and plopping down in front of the microphone, breathless and exhausted. Physically, I felt like I had run wind-sprints with the Saints all day. Mentally, I was nearly catatonic. I had slept poorly the night before and had spent the day talking, signing, glad-handing a bunch of people I would never see again, half of whom wouldn't remember what I said to them by next week. And still the radio show—an hour with a snarky host who always thought that he knew more about literature than the great unwashed, and callers who proved him right. One caller said,

So Mike

They always call me Mike, as if I'm their best friend and we're having a beer in our favorite pub.

So Mike, your books seem to get more and more ambitious in scope, in other words longer, but I'm not sure that your themes have changed. What are you really trying to prove?

and I said,

Well, I

and the host said,

Oh please. In case you've just joined us, Fred from Metarie has just asked Mike Seymour what he's trying to prove in his books. Folks, Michael Seymour has won more awards than Gore Vidal and Robert Penn Warren combined.

This wasn't true.

And he's got more on his mind than proving something to *you*. If you look at the contemporary writer from a purely post-structuralist perspective, then you have to admit that...

This went on for some time. Before the host was done, he had name-checked Hegel, hermeneutics, ontology, Derrida, and, somehow against all reason, Milton Berle. I knew his story. He was a grad-school dropout, a guy who dreamed of a university's hallowed halls, of engaging in deep and meaningful discussions with starry-eyed students. But he couldn't understand the theory or keep up with the workload or pass the dissertation defense, so he dropped out and took a job where he could talk about literature as much as he wanted and hang up on anybody who knew more than he did. I rolled my eyes at everything he said, but he paid no attention to me. I probably spoke for ten minutes, tops. And some of the callers didn't even care about the book, didn't seem to know me at all. One wanted to know if I were married to Jane Seymour, the actress. I said,

Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. We vacation in Taiwan every year and pay the local girls to fistfight in a tub of butterscotch pudding

as the host made shushing noises at me. Another asked me about my favorite writers. I said,

What, are you crazy? I don't read.

I played a different kind of phone tag with them. They pretended to have something to say; I feigned interest and made up answers. It was give and take, tit for tat, *quid pro quo* Clarice all the way. All I really wanted to do was get the hell out of there and call Carol. By this time, only a few hours of her birthday remained, and I had to get hold of her or risk sleeping on the couch for a month. And when the show finally ended, I ran out the studio door while the snarky host was still plugging my book.

I hit the sidewalk and looked for my car, but it was gone. I hoped the driver had just decided to circle the block. So while I waited, I tried to call Carol again. I figured she wouldn't pick up, but then I heard her say,

Hello.

It's always a statement with her, never an interrogative. Hello. Like she's telling you it's her conversation, right from the get-go. She puts a lot of people off, but I'm used to it. So I said,

Happy birthday, babe.

I waited for her response—the recognition, the warmth creeping into her voice, the connection between us bridging all the miles and the cell towers and the yellow taxicabs taking people to dinner and the bars and the houses. I

waited, and I waited. Then she said,

Hello.

 Emphasis on the final syllable—curt, annoyed, her voice clipped and harsh, like a spatula on a frozen windshield. Louder this time, I said

 Happy birthday, babe! It's me, Mike!

 On her end, only silence. I tried again, but before I got past Happy, she interrupted and said,

 Look, I don't have time for this. If you're going to say something, *say* something.

 Obviously we had a bad connection. I could hear her; she couldn't hear me. I could shout until I was blue in the face and my throat bled, but it wouldn't help. I said,

 Fuck

 and hung up. I called her back again, but she had turfed her calls to voicemail. She must have been in the middle of something—cooking dinner, a favorite show, drinking her celebratory bottle of Pinot Noir all by herself. Briefly, my paranoia whispered dark things in my ear—she was mad at me, she had decided to leave me, she was seeing my best friend Dray behind my back and in no position to talk. I had had these suspicions before. But they had never brought me anything but trouble, so I tried to put them out of my mind. I left a message that said,

 Hey, babe, happy birthday! I've been thinking of you all damn day. I wish you were here, and I'm hoping you had a good time doing whatever it is you decided to do. Can't wait to hear all about it. Love you. Bye.

 Of course, I *could* wait to hear all about it. I really needed some sleep. But you can't say that to your girlfriend, especially when you're traveling on her thirty-ninth birthday, when she's in southeast Arkansas hopefully alone and you're standing on a sidewalk in New Orleans, wondering if your car's coming back or if you need to ask the jackass DJ to call you a cab. You say Can't wait to hear all about it, love you and pretend you mean the first part because you really do mean the second part. You play the game that everybody plays and you hope for the best. And when your stupid car service abandons you before their job is done, you try not to take it out on the cabbie.

 I called Dray to ask if he had seen Carol, but I really wanted to find out what he had bought her. We'd all known each other forever and the bastard always managed to get her better presents than I did. Plus, I was jealous, because I was traveling and he wasn't. I sat in a hotel room—a nice one with a great mini-bar paid for by some accountant, but a hotel room all the same. I drank little airplane bottles of hard liquor and ate expensive macadamia nuts out of cheap-looking packages and watched a ball game on ESPN. I tried calling Carol twice more before I fell asleep on the bed, on top of the covers with my clothes still on, the combination of alcohol and exhaustion too much for me.

 At 11:30 I snapped awake like someone had thrown water in my face. I

Brett Riley

had been having a terrible, vivid dream, the kind where the colors seem to bleed out of your closed eyeballs like tears and the sounds seem so real you can practically feel their textures. I had been wandering down a New Orleans sidewalk, listening to the sound of a street-corner jazz band, the music drifting along with me like a light breeze. They were playing Celebration by Kool and the Gang—not exactly a jazz classic, but I definitely recognized the melody. The day was bright and sunny, the kind of sky that hurts your eyes even when you're not looking up, the sidewalks so bright it's like they've been sandblasted and polished. I strolled along until this homeless guy came out of nowhere and threw his arm around my neck like we were best pals. He hadn't shaved in years; squiggly things cantered about in his dirty beard. His teeth were black and his eyes dull, his breath blowing out of hell itself, and he said,

When was the last time you heard a busy signal?

I threw him off and started running, sudden panic rising in my throat like bile, and as I ran the sky lost its luster and turned black, the clouds boiling over the tops of buildings, dropping lower with every step I took. But this was no storm, because the people I passed seemed unaware, their hair unruffled by the same wind that pounded against me and threatened to lift me off my feet. It was pushing me along toward something I couldn't see, a blurriness in the distance that was neither city nor horizon, more like a blank place in my imagination, the place where lost ideas crawled off to die, and as the wind pushed me harder and harder toward it, I realized that Celebration had transformed into the theme from *Jaws*, and every bass note brought me closer to whatever oblivion lay in the heart of that blankness. I tried to scream and the wind whipped the sound away, and as the music got faster and faster I finally yanked myself awake.

I sat there panting and stewing in my own sweat until I realized that I was hearing an intermittent beep, the kind that my cell phone makes when I have a message. Someone had called or texted and I had slept through it, and before I even looked, I knew who it would be. I dialed my voicemail and listened to the usual menu, waiting to assess the damage. And when Carol's message started to play, I knew from the first word that I would, as Ricky Ricardo used to say, have some splainin to do. In a tone that suggested sharpened rusty knives, Carol said,

Hello, Michael. It's me. I guess I missed your calls earlier. Dray stopped by and we watched *The Notebook* together. It was his idea. He always knows what fits the mood, doesn't he? A movie about romance and heart-break—perfect for a birthday I didn't want to have and a lover who isn't here. We drank a few toasts in your honor and Dray defended you every time I got pissed about you not calling me back. You must have had a good reason, he said, and I had to admit that you at least made the effort. That's an improvement over some years, isn't it? I guess we're making progress in spite of ourselves. I'm sorry if I'm coming off like a whiner. I don't mean to. It's just that this birthday has been tough on me. I thought I'd be married with a family by now

and proving the great feminist credo, that you can have it all if you want it. Not that I'm pressuring you. It's just—oh shit, I don't know what it is. This isn't the message I meant to leave. I'm sorry for rambling, and you shouldn't feel guilty about anything. This is my deal, and I'm really pretty much okay. It was a decent day. Thanks for calling. Love you, and I'll see you when you get home. Bye.

I hung up, thinking that I had gotten off pretty easily. But as I tried to go back to sleep, my conscience kept jabbing me in the ass, making me turn over and stare at the ceiling. I really hadn't had a great reason for not calling her again. For the last few hours I had been sleeping in a terribly uncomfortable position and brewing up a good case of skunk breath, a mixture of closed mouth and bourbon and vodka and macadamia nuts. Hardly a crisis, right? I couldn't wait until morning to call her back. It was only 11:30. So I speed-dialed Carol and hoped for the best.

By the fourth ring, I knew that I was going to get her machine yet again. So I hung up and speed-dialed her cell. Again I imagined her snuggling up to Dray in our bed, her leg thrown over his, her hand on his chest. They were both naked and sweaty, his limp dick lying across his hip like a dead garden snake. I shook my head as hard as I could, my brain rattling against my skull with a swishing sound, and as the image dissipated, I heard Carol's goddam voicemail message. It said,

Hello, I can't come to the phone right now. If you'd like me to call you back, leave a message after the tone or try me at Michael's numbers.

I've never understood why people say they can't come to the phone right now. I mean, the whole point of a goddam cell is to carry it with you. You might as well say that you don't feel like answering or that you're screening your calls to avoid telemarketers and relatives. But when the phone beeped at me, I did my duty and left the best message I could think of at the time. It said,

Hey babe, it's me again. I guess we're just going to play phone tag all night. This last one is my fault. I made the mistake of sitting down on the bed to watch TV, and the next thing I knew, I woke up after eleven. Look, I'll make sure Darlene never schedules another appearance on your birthday again. And I'm glad Dray was there for you. I'll be home as soon as I can, and I'll make it up to you any way you want. Still love me? Because I love you. Bye babe, and again, happy birthday.

Not exactly Shakespeare, was it? Some of it sounded sappy, and in other parts, I lied; for instance, I was *not* glad Dray stopped in. I wished he would have stayed in his own goddam house and gotten his own goddam girlfriend. But I sure couldn't tell *her* that, or that I was still half-drunk and depressed and felt like I had worked road construction in Nevada all day. No, I had to use the old stand-bys, the same ones that have been failing couples for years, the I love you's and the I'm sorry's and the Whatever you need is fine with me's. Sitting in that hotel room in New Orleans, my bank account and reputation growing every time someone I'd never meet bought my new book,

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my belly full of decent liquor and good food, I felt lonelier than I had in years. But I couldn't say any of that, either.

I lay back against the pillows and put the cell phone beside my head, even though I knew it wouldn't ring again all night. Whether she was with Dray or not, Carol would be in bed by now. She had to work the next day, and soon enough, she would have to pick me up from the Little Rock airport. I closed my eyes and listened to the beat of my own pulse, the rush of blood in my ears like the ringing of a phone, the absence of her voice like the disappointment of a lost connection.

Back There

In the house of leftovers
the carpets offer their signals
of ruin. Moonlight enters
the east windows and shatters
the glass.

What is a walk through a past
that swings from the shadows
as though to tell your story.

Wasn't there laughter before.
The trees ready to join
the party around the wine
and Gouda and willing crackers.

Voices were everywhere. Roses
grew in the suburbs hiding
the guns.

Memory they say memory is
a door opening into the secret
places you might have
visited but didn't.

Doug Bolling

Remembering

for Megan

My best loved horse weakening
in the shredded fields of autumn,
time of giving up,
letting summer end
in destined dearth.

The order in things,
nature plotting the rises
and falls in things
letting breath and not
flow along side by side
or in alternating measures
like the perfect violin

in the silken room where
rapt listeners lay aside
their sorrows, the rough edges,
the bent life under
the wheel.

But Carrie my horse.

I rub her withers and flanks
seeing the lapsed world
in the gelid eyes
that surely know more
than I with only words
that bargain and deceive
and fail.

I watch the intricate legs
slowly settle into
the waiting bones
of themselves,
coffins that outlive
unfaithful flesh,
the fire in the nerves,
innocence of eyes.

I remember her from my youth

by the barn,
in the steaming grasses
of the upper slopes.
I remember promising her
she would live as
long as the sky.

Doug Bolling

A Day, A Parsing

Morning & evening huddled together.
Two sides of the encrypted coin.
We launched in a future and circled
back gathering the grapes the pods
the latest noir flick at the Empress
Theater wasn't it.
But life is cool we said in our cups
after ordering out for Chinese
and closing the drapes.
You kept your diary I mine. Pages
that burned with a diminished flame
after so many years of navigating
the afterthoughts the spillage from too
many ancestral clocks.
Listen they said life is a passion
that must be pursued in and out
of the potholed world the cosmic gasses
the temptations of Freudian/Lacanian
chronicles.
It was getting later in the long halls
of belief of calculation the trashing
of the golden abacus.
Brain you said brain. Our hat,
a kind of umbrella, a type of suitcase
wherein to house the collected works.
But we were weary of so much travel.
The ganglia the taut blood vessels
the mush of a remembered past.
You insisted we go to the museum
for the red wine the Gouda the drenched
canapes the crisp chats making up
stories of the purloined art pieces.
What is it with you they said that
you cringe before a Rene Magritte,
burst into tears at the Miro.
But it was too late. Images coming in
a rush. Wasn't it Arthur Dimmesdale
leering at Dido in the almost tomb.
What the desperate truth of a day's
geometric.
Goodbye goodbye a man in a 70s leisure
suit, plaid, called out as we charged

the streets in a terrific rain that
might have been hail.
If to believe after all in flowers
you said.
If to launch the ship in a nearby
estuary.

Richard Holinger

L8R LUV TEDDY

hey bro thanx 4 ride. hope u got 2 isu ok. met roommate. baseball playr. rudy. offerd beer cn u belev it? Tty l8r teddy

hi went 2 bed midnite. rudy in @ 3 am drunk w/ frnds. lites music action. offerd beer, no thanx. tried 2 slp no way. frnds lft @ 5. tired 2day. L8r teddy

rudy apologizd 4 last nite. offerd beer no thanx. classes startd. met meghan @ campus coffehous 2nite. plays tennis. from scarsdale, dads mayor. 1 am no sign of rudy. gts luv t

omg its 430 am im in downstairs study rm b/c my rm b party centrl. 1st class 9 am bio. do i go bck 2 sleep b-4 then? tc T

slept thru bio. rudy thru up on flr. i made it 2 english but barely awake thru lecture.

last nite good. rudy studied, no frnds, sd sorry about puke and cleaned up luv t

sorry about not riting. in2 classes & meghan. good frnd. says i shld transfer dorm/rmmate b 4 something else cn happn. i sd rite of passage, test 4 me 2 pass. she lold. college good! L8r teddy

he came afr me w/ a bat but not 2 worry. drunk as usual, stoppd by frnds. in morning sd sorry. i slept undr tabl in study rm. quiet but back hurts 2day. meghan sd manup & hit back show whos boss use ur wate. ma by teddy

lost 2 meghan in 3 sets. she let me win #3 i think. Drank v8 in her rm & got 2 no her bttr. good 2 talk 2 her abt rudy, got lots off my chest and well on2 hers?.t.

in infirmry dont panic not serius. last nite 1 of rudys frnds thru beer can & hit my eye. sd sorry aiming 4 yr 4head. many sorrys esp from rudy i moppd blood frm my cheek. patch comes off in 1 week. meg here gotta go

rofl. meg just left. she b mad! crying 2. think she likes me whadda u think luv t

woke up 2 c rudy in nxt bed over. nurse sez concussion. sez he musta fell back in his chair. not 2 sure.

rudy able 2 talk. sd something about crazy girl w/ tennis racket. more l8r t

scarsdale @ megs house. real nice. she got kickd out 4 assault & battry. not

funny but we lol alot. her parents mad but she sez she did rite thing. she wants 2 go in2 peace corps. me 2. meg sez hi 2 you, bro. wants 2 meet u. l8r luv teddy

Barbara Daniels

Phobias

A killdeer cries above the schoolyard.
Danger, desire? which is it?

A car brakes ahead of me, red mist.
I dread my recurring dreams,

breath of the dead on panes
of glass. I'm still afraid of animals,

crowds, darkness, illness,
insects, jealousy, blood,

frosted shadows angling back
from overgrown trees,

long bodies of crusted ice.
My car slides through wet leaves,

a twisting veil of fog over the roadway.
I fear crashes, strangers, love.

It's Easy to Lose People

He's next to you almost
touching and then in the crowd
he's stepped round a corner

or into a store, intending
that you should come too but
also forgetting as if you are

only the red blouse you wear,
the black velvet pants, shine
on your toenails the color of claret.

Search if you want to. He
eyes a mannequin, the curve
of her hand as it aches open,

strains for beauty and perfects it.
You have to walk now. Get up
off your knees. Stop feeling for

bits of the glass you broke,
stop searching the ground
for your empty white gloves.

Barbara Daniels

Moon Dress

I wear my net dress into the night
to air out its witchiness.
Leaves in the street look like

fists at first, then opened hands.
A broken moon, its pocked face
like mine in earth's long shadow.

I touch my snake bracelet's
flaring bronze tongue. In the dark,
I go scavenging, wrench coins

from the teeth of the dead
silver owl of Athena, gold wolf.
Shadows of nightbirds move

across asphalt. Light shines from
the lunar Apennines, crater of Pallas,
sea of clouds. I give sadness

its due, moving my mouth, singing
rather than crying. The dress
scrapes my breasts and knees.

Artful Architecture



If I See You Again

Setting:

The back seat of a blue Bronco.
Early or late summer. Night. Dark gravel roads.
Your neck pockets the side of my face.
Musk and rinse
of summer. We drive
to Lake of Twelve Oaks
to break into unfinished houses.¹

Or when we meet, you have short dreadlocks that stick up like spikes on your head. You drive a Honda with tinted windows. You smoke weed and blow it in my face to see my nose crinkle.

Or I can't remember where we drove. Or we were always driving. The back seat stuck to the backs of my thighs. My flip-flops slipped off. Your hand slipped up my dress.

Or my neck pockets the side of your face. You sing into my ear. *I will hold you close, if you're afraid of heights.*

Or you climb on the old train bridge. How you glide up and over a bar, cling with ease. Everyone calls you a monkey. Why am I always the only girl? I don't admit I like it better this way. When you take off your shirt I can imagine you over me. *How it feels to be inside you.* You swing on the rails of the bridge, shirtless. Showing off, I guess. You climb to the top. Your view is different than mine from there. We all watch you. The scent of charred wood still heavy here.

Setting:

The back seat of your Honda,
parked on a gravel road by the old bridge
Your friend falls asleep outside, waiting.
It's my birthday. Summer.
Crickets the size of hissing cockroaches that year.

¹ When we didn't meet at the corner of Broadmore and Livingston, we also didn't walk backwards down the alley, kicking our empty beer bottles just to hear them on the gravel, and we didn't kiss at the back porch with your phone vibrating in your pocket against me, didn't press our hands against one another, didn't rub or feel our tongues like snails in each other's mouths, didn't look at the sky and hope for rain. You didn't joke about getting a blow job on the concrete steps leading up to the back door. And I didn't laugh or feel my nipples burn hard beneath my shirt.

You: You have the most perfect breasts.
Me: I've heard that before.
You: No, really. Look at them.
Me: I've seen them.
You: You're lucky.
Me: Boobs are just boobs.
You: Not when they're on you.
Me: Pshaw.
You: Let me take pictures of them. We can send them into the radio station.
You would win.
Me: _____
You: Seriously.
Me: _____²

What we buy: a disposable camera, condoms, and chewing gum
The check-out lady says: *What a combination.*

I only have a mattress. An ashtray is knocked over on the floor next to it. You step in the ashes. Rub them onto the floor. When we sit, you unwrap the camera, lift my shirt. I sit there for a very long time, you just looking at me in the dark.

I can drink eighteen beers by myself in one night. Can hang with the guys. You've taught me well, you say to your buddies. Pick me up and I am over the keg, counting. The trick is to swallow slowly, not to gulp. I would stay up there forever if it meant one more high five with you, one more dimple on your cheek. Later, we leave drunk, your hands touch my waist and pull away. My car is not where we parked it. The beer is there inside me waiting for me to do something more than just stand there. I won't cry. Not in front of your dimples. I throw my keys onto the sidewalk. Sit. Like a child, I kick my legs. Yell things that are not words.

You laugh.³

It's a few minutes before I realize you are really laughing, laughing at

² You never called me on the telephone. I never pressed the soft buttons on the key pad without pressing send, never imagined your voice on the other side as if against my neck. We never played that game, where we memorized each other's phone numbers to see who could do it first. You never looked me up in the phone book. I never wrote your number on my dresser mirror in bright lipstick, hopeful.

³ You didn't speak my name. I didn't drink beer and call you by your first and last name. We didn't buy sex toys together and use them and forget about them. We didn't eat in bed together. You never watched me shower, never smelled the inside of my wrist after a long day, never told me I still smelled like me no matter what kind of perfume I wore. I didn't even wear perfume, then. I didn't have a scent and you were never drawn to it.

Mary Stone Dockery

my reaction, not at the missing car. And I know that it's somewhere around here. That you've moved it again. I imagine you sneaking out of the house while I played quarters with the guys. You put the car into neutral, had someone else push it. It would be around the corner or just down the street sitting beneath a street light.

To me, this is not bullying. *We could start again.* Your dimples remind me of the sun and of summer. I want you to laugh forever. There is no reason to be angry with you, especially when you take your lips and press them to my cheek, my neck. I feel like I have eaten the moon and its brightness pulses inside me.

Your tongue sits in my mouth like a scar, edged and ragged. I can feel where it's been. The lines and soft curves of her spine. The soft bulb of her ear. Her pink nipple. When you kiss her later, I hope you smell like my cigarettes, my diet soda. *My mouth.*

I want to gather orgasms with you in a jar called: yes

You planned a day for us, took me to the firework warehouse thirty minutes out of town. I watched you lift rockets and shake them, smiling at the ceiling as if you could picture the explosions right then before you, blue and red, the yellow spattering of light before your eyes. You bought so many fireworks I called you crazy, asked you to consider spending your money on alcohol that night, but instead, we drove out to the train bridge, just the two of us and lit each one, taking turns, leaning against one another to see how far a bottle rocket could go, to see where the pieces might land. You always kept your eye right on it, somehow, and I always ended up in golden wheat fields, feeling the small hairs on your arm against my lower back, the slow motion of your smile in the evening. You were creating new constellations, wishing they would hover longer.

Your mouth a bruise
against my collar bone
like thrusting my limbs
in ice buckets

her jeans, her name wrapped
around your wrist, crumbled
on your bedroom floor the smell
of black orchids dying
on a window sill

Her hip bones
sharp like axes slicing

you up.⁴

I play the radio and drive alone most nights, smoking cigarettes. You and I meet in Stone Crest, the neighborhood you grew up in, the neighborhood I imagined growing up in. You walk through the trees to meet me on a street other than your own. When you get in the car, you breathe hard. Ask me where we are going. You turn down the radio, look at the tape-deck and frown. *What the hell is this shit*, you say. I want to ask you how many letters are in her name. If it compares to the two syllables in mine, or are we the same. If you chose us for the sound of our names in your mouth. I can't ask these things. Instead, you put your hand on my leg and laugh when I kill the car and have to re-start it. You say something about women, about the smoothness of my upper thigh, about stick-shifts.

If I could, I would show up at your window wearing nothing.

Instead, you sneak her into your room each night.
While you sleep, I steal road work signs, collect
orange and white and blinking lights.

I stack them in your driveway,
blocking your car in.

Where were you on nights I drove by your house, no lights on, no messages at home for me waiting? Those nights I couldn't find you, I smoked more cigarettes than I could afford. The sky turned miscarriage grey. You appeared on other nights, a shadow before me, your skin dirtied by the outside. But the nights away from you, when the sweat of summer soaked my windshield, all I could do was drive by the places you might be, your house, the bridge, the half-built houses down the street. Eventually, I got up the nerve to drive by her house, and sometimes your car would be there in the shade, black paint glossed and dewy.

I would sit right outside her house, chain-smoking in my car, wondering later how big the pile of smoked cigarettes had gotten. If anyone had bothered to notice them, to sweep them up. Other times, you weren't there, and to me this meant you weren't anywhere, and the world felt slippery without you I pressed my hands to my body for you, remembered what you had touched. On those nights, I felt relief like I could never admit, stealing cigarettes from gas

⁴When we didn't meet in my house, in the kitchen, with the lights dimmed and the evening ready for sweat, swollen with cicadas and fresh-cut grass, our arms glistening, your cheek newly shaved against my cheek, our bodies fitting together soft and warm, we didn't rewind, and I can't find your hat because it was never left on the floor next to the bed.

Mary Stone Dockery

stations with my little sister, running red lights, driving in nothing but our bras. The night burst against my skin, blooming, black clouds surfacing near me, and I tried to pull one down with a fingernail, use it to wrap my cold limbs. These nights I wrote your name in the sky for my pleasure, feeling the swooping curves of your legs along each consonant, your fingers in each vowel, pushing, pushing. I clutched my stomach as if it contained something.

Where you put your hands that night
like erasing and forming at the same time.
You shape me this way and that way.
Charred wood lingers on the pads of your fingers.
Ridges in fingerprints are like rivers,
holding something deep within.

You fucked her here.
But I don't tell you I know. I lift my feet to the windshield. Place them, bare, within her footprints. Imagine the position. How uncomfortable for both of you.

Her feet are slender and flat. I am immediately jealous that my feet don't fit where hers have been. I want to know where else you have fucked her, where else I have sat without molding into her forms. Where else you have thought to place me.

Her toes are straight and uniform. Each foot the same size. I light a cigarette, wanting ashes in my eyes.⁵

When you say my name, finally,
it erodes from you in pockets
of dust, your mouth bending
its sound, as if the letter R
has split ruts across your cheeks.

You show up sometimes without calling. I'm not even sure you have my phone number. You drive your mother's car, the one that used to be a mail-truck. I love the idea of two steering
Some part inside is broken, gone.

⁵ We didn't meet beneath door frames. We didn't kiss with our mouths open. We didn't kiss at all. No one told me they saw you fuck my roommate in the bathroom at a bar downtown. I never found the cell phone records. You never used words to cheat, never typed out the word masturbation to a seventeen year old. I didn't see your message asking for spread eagle pictures from another woman. You never talked about anal sex with another woman. We didn't have to discuss your failures. I never told you how I sucked off your best friend, never giving you the chance to cry.

Or I imagine you drive by my house many times before stopping. I imagine you are more nervous than me. I imagine your girlfriend picking strands of hair off your shirt later, asking where you've been. *Silent.*

Or in my kitchen, you lift me onto the counter. We do a lot of staring at each other. The room dense with worry. Unsure. Your eyes thinking about her. I just want to touch your soft arm. *Start there.*

I stop writing about the moon.

It no longer fills me, its soft edges suddenly transformed into shattered glass, glass dimples, glass eyes.

I've known for a while now you prefer doll, lace, rum-coated words. Somehow we linger on opposite sides of a bridge. Are you smiling, still, over there in the shadows?

What do you call this invisible string that cuts up my wrists? I wonder if it will be years before I speak your name.

The soft lipped ache of your smile. It crosses over me and crosses over me with knives.⁶

Twenty Things I Will Want to Say If I See You Again

1. Hi.
2. Look at you, all Daddy now.
3. _____ (insert song name) always makes me think of you.
4. You were once my birthday present.
5. You're so mean by the way.
6. You've changed. I'm not sure I like it.
7. Do you remember _____?
8. What if _____?
9. I'm totally hotter now.
10. Do you have Facebook?
11. What's war like?
12. My husband kind of looks like you.
13. No seriously. He looks like you.
14. Would you consider dreadlocks again?
15. How many times has she threatened to kill herself since you married her?
16. My boobs are bigger now.
17. I still remember when you punched out that car window.

⁶ Clouds will not wrap the night in gauze. You will not thrust your hands in your pockets to keep from touching me. You will not feel the guilt of leaving. Guilt will not rock against me in flashes of her lipstick on your breath.

Mary Stone Dockery

18. What will you teach your son about women?
19. My husband really does look like you.
20. I've forgiven you. Some days.⁷

⁷ You never saw the tattoo on my side, traced your finger around its blooming edges, never commented on its fading color.

It's meant to fade, I never said.

It should be bright colors. Like the one we saw the other day.

I didn't want it that way.

You're so weird. I don't get you.

We can't always get what we want, we never said.

We never dressed with the moon warming our backs, the sound of corn never waving around us like oceans we imagined. Every time I saw you no new oceans formed inside of me. Mostly, I never even saw you.

You did not burn a hole in the passenger seat and I did not pass you the joint, never watching the smoke hang from your lips in soft arcs, not reminding me of anything at all.

Contributors' Notes

Lois Barr, a professor of Spanish at Lake Forest College, has published poems and stories recently in *East on Central*, *Mochila*, *Phati'tude*, *DuPage Review*, *Distilled Lives*, and *Art From Art*. Her flash fiction and non-fiction appears at the *Legendary* and *Flashquake*, whose editor nominated a story for a Pushcart Prize.

Joseph Benevento teaches creative writing and American literature at Truman State University, where he also co-edits the *Green Hills Literary Lantern*. He is the author of eight books and chapbooks of fiction and poetry, most recently the chapbook *Tough Guys Don't Write* with Finishing Line Press. His poems, stories and essays have appeared in about 250 places, including: *Poets & Writers*, *Bilingual Review* and *The Chattahoochee Review*.

Emily Bobo is the author of *Fugue*, published by Lost Horse Press. An Associate Professor of English at Ivy Tech Community College, she believes in the transformative power of writing to build community and to voice the individual. She treasures her students and their stories.

Doug Bolling's poetry has appeared in *Georgetown Review*, *Slant*, *English Journal*, *Earthshine*, *Karamu/Bluestem*, *Plainsongs*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Common Ground Review*, *Minnetonka Review*, and *California Quarterly*, among others. He has received a Pushcart nomination and has a recent chapbook.

Brooke Carter is a graphic design major and Honors student at Missouri Western State University. She will be graduating this May. She is highly interested in the relationship of images being brought together in the form of collage to tell a story. Currently, her favorite graphic designers are Mark Weaver, Tad Carpenter, and Stefan Sagmeister.

Joan Colby has published over 960 poems in journals including *Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, *GSU Review*, *Portland Review*, *Rockhurst Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Karamu*, *New York Quarterly*, *the new renaissance*, *Grand Street*, *Epoch*, *Mid-American Poetry Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Minnesota Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *College English*, *Another Chicago Magazine* and others. She's won or been a finalist for the 2009 Margie Editor's Choice Contest, the 2009 Nimrod International Pablo Neruda Prize and Illinois Arts Council Literary Award. She's edited the *Illinois Racing News* for over twenty-five years. She lives with her husband on a small horse farm in Northern Illinois.

Contributors' Notes

Joan Connor is a recipient of a Barbara Deming Award, the John Gilgun Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Ohio Writer Award in fiction and nonfiction, the AWP for her short story collection, *History Lessons*, and the River Teeth Award for her collection of essays, *The World Before Mirrors*. Her most recent collection, *How to Stop Loving Someone*, won a Leapfrog Press Award for adult fiction. Her work appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *Shenandoah*, *The Southern Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Chelsea*, *Manoa*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Journal of Arts & Letters*, and *Black Warrior*, among others. She lives in Athens, Ohio and Belmont, Vermont.

Barbara Daniels' chapbook *Quinn and Marie* was published by Casa de Cinco Hermanas, Pueblo, Colorado, in 2011. Her book *Rose Fever: Poems* is available from WordTech Press. Her poetry has appeared in *Mid-Atlantic Review*, *Solstice*, *The Literary Review*, and many other journals. She earned an MFA from Vermont College and received two Individual Artist Fellowships from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. With her husband, David I. Daniels, she wrote *English Grammar*, published by HarperCollins.

Curtis Dawkins has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and has had several stories in smaller literary magazines including *Foliate Oak*, *Hobart* #10 and #11, *Dislocate*, and this spring's *Oyez Review*. He also has pieces coming out in *cooweescoowee* and *Bull*, where he is the chief book reviewer.

Mary Stone Dockery is the author of *Mythology of Touch* (Woodley Press 2012) and two forthcoming chapbooks, *Blink Finch* (Kattywompus Press) and *Aching Buttons* (Dancing Girl Press). Her poetry and prose have appeared or are forthcoming in many fine journals including *Gargoyle*, *South Dakota Review*, *I-70 Review*, *Thrush*, and others. She lives in Lawrence, Kansas.

Phillip Gardner's more recent stories have appeared in *New Delta Review*, *LIT*, *Interim*, and *Eclipse*. He is the author of *Someone To Crawl Back To*, a collection of stories. Two new collections, *That Place Love Built* and *Somebody Wants Somebody Dead*, are forthcoming.

Christine Harris is a banker by trade and a photographer at heart. She has practiced photography for seven years. She enjoys nature photography and taking pictures of her five cats. She resides in Dearborn, Missouri.

Kayla Harris is a freshman at Missouri Western State University majoring in Graphic Design. Through her classes, she's tried her hand at many different kinds of art forms. So far, she's become interested in ceramics and drawing.

Emily Hazel was awarded a Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Prize in a national competition for emerging poets. Her chapbook, *Body & Soul*, was a finalist in the New Women's Voices competition. A graduate of the Oberlin College Creative Writing Program, she has worked as a creative writing workshop facilitator and mentors underserved teens through Girls Write Now, a nonprofit dedicated to nurturing the next generation of women writers. She lives in New York City and is an associate editor at Lee & Low Books.

Richard Holinger's work has received three Pushcart Prize nominations. A chapbook of innovative fiction is forthcoming from Kattywompus Press. His works have appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Boulevard*, *Chelsea*, *Cimarron Review*, *The Madison Review*, and *Southern Poetry Review*, among others. His degrees include a Ph.D. in English with a creative writing specialty from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and an M.A. from Washington University. He teaches at Marmion Academy, a college prep school, in Aurora, Illinois.

Brooke Kuykendall's award-winning poetry, fiction, and photos have appeared in *Canvas*, *The Mochila Review*, and other journals. She is a graduate of Missouri Western State University. She owns and operates Second Story Photography LLC.

Peter Ludwin is the recipient of a Literary Fellowship from Artist Trust. For the past eleven years he has been a participant in the San Miguel Poetry Week in central Mexico. His first book, *A Guest in All Your Houses*, was published in 2009 by Word Walker Press. A second manuscript, *Rumors of Fallible Gods*, was a finalist for the 2010 Gival Press Poetry Award and will be published this summer by Presa :S: Press. A Pushcart Prize nominee, his work has appeared in many journals, among them *The Bitter Oleander*, *The Comstock Review*, *Nimrod*, *North American Review* and *Prairie Schooner*. He is an avid traveler, and spent much of last August in southwest China and the Tibetan region of Sichuan Province. He lives near Seattle.

Martha Marinara teaches writing at the University of Central Florida. She writes and publishes both poetry and fiction, and has been published most recently in *FemSpec*, *Broken Bridge*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Xavier Review*, *Pelican Review*, *Awakenings Review*, *The Alembic*, *Estuary*, and *Calliope*. In October 2000, she won the Central Florida United Arts Award for Poetry. Her first novel, *Street Angel*, was published in 2006 by Fine Tooth Press.

Contributors' Notes

Karla Linn Merrifield has had work published in dozens of journals and anthologies. She has six books, including *Godwit: Poems of Canada*, which received the 2009 Andrew Eiseman Writers Award for Poetry, and her new chapbook, *The Urn*, from Finishing Line Press.

Crystal Ockenfuss first studied poetry with Robert Creeley SUNY Buffalo. Subsequent graduate work includes German and Anthropology at the University of Virginia, followed by a long detour in Europe. She lives, writes, teaches and translates in the San Francisco Bay area.

Paul Pekin is a retired police officer who lives in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood. Before he was a cop, he was a writer. He published his first short story in 1965 and his most recent one this year. His work has appeared in newspapers and literary magazines. He has won prizes from the Chicago Journalism Club and the Illinois Art Council and has taught fiction writing at Columbia College and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Brett Riley hails from south Louisiana, though he spent his youth in Arkansas. He holds a Ph.D. in 20th Century American Fiction and Film. He teaches American literature, composition, and creative writing at the University of Alabama. His work has recently appeared in *Folio*, *Big Muddy*, *Metal Scratches*, *First Class*, and *The Broadkill Review*.

Leah Sewell is a graduate of Washburn University with a degree in English/Writing and a minor in women's studies. She is the editor of *XYZ Magazine*, the founder and facilitator of the Topeka Writers Workshop and a freelance graphic designer. Her poems have appeared in *Flint Hills Review*, *Blue Island Review* and *Begin Again: 150 Kansas Poems*. She lives in Topeka, Kansas.

Mary Wharff's short stories have appeared in *Water-Stone Review*, *Room Magazine*, the new anthology *The Frozen Moment: Contemporary Writers on the Moments that Change Our Lives* and others. Her work-in-progress will be longer than a short story and shorter than a long novel.



