

# *juked*

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WILLIAM WALSH

## *Boothgirl*

YOU DON'T LIKE to rent tapes to play at home. There's no thrill in that. Every girl you know has done that at least once. You get off going to the video booths at Sunrise Arcade, Route 2A in Ampersand Falls. It seemed daring the first time you did it, and it has never stopped feeling that way.

In artsy R-rated movies with erotic content, they show the woman naked presenting herself to a seducer. They show foreplay that's either meant to be awkward or pass as adventurous. They may show tight closeups of the woman's body and they might even show her seducer's ass. But there's a fadeout as the sex begins. You don't see the lovers again until morning. The woman's nudity then is never as flattering as it was during the seduction. She makes attempts to cover up with the sheets. She's disheveled, and he's a little distant. They're in an inexpensive hotel room. When she walks across the floor to the bathroom, she does so without grace. She takes heavy steps and appears a little wobbly on her feet. She's not a kitten anymore. She's a cow. She's heading for the pisser and the only question is will she close the door behind herself. (You hate these movies but you watch them on cable late at night, wishing you could go to the booths to watch something real.)

WILLIAM WALSH

The video booths at Sunrise Arcade are on the second floor. The staircase up is narrow and littered and it is not good to meet anyone coming down the stairs. The men coming down the stairs come down the stairs at a fast clip, almost running. At the top of the stairs is a large room with black walls and a row of black lights overhead on a low ceiling. Porn movie posters are on the walls. The booths sit in the center of the room like an island of doors, four doors on each side. One of the doors has a sign that says, Personnel Only. This door has a different kind of knob on it—one that locks from the outside. Behind this door is not a television screen and machine that takes five-dollar bills. Behind this door is a bank of VCRs connected in some smart way to the eleven televisions in the eleven peep booths.

You bring along a smart little flashlight the size of a pen. Just one AAA battery inside. You always have a notebook. You are Boothgirl and you are a poet. MFA from Wadsworth University. A few dozen publications in small but respectable literary journals and a chapbook entitled *Crooked Cleavage Blues*. You're always able to get some writing done in the booths—mostly revision work. That's rare for a writer to find—a place to revise. You don't push it. You bring along one poem. Take it apart a few times in the booth, half-watching the video that's playing.

The men standing outside the booths always seem surprised to see you there. A girl. Mostly they ignore you. Pretend they don't see you. Some of them will nod to you as they nod to one another, but that's it and you don't know what that nod means. Never any conversation. You want to tell them, confidentially, I come here to write. And to play with myself—like you.

Boothgirl earns a living teaching freshman composition and, when you're lucky, an introductory course on literature—The Modern Novel, The American Short Story.



Inside the booth. Fasten the hook-and-eye latch. Insert a five-dollar bill in the machine, and in a few seconds a video will come on. You love most of all the movies of Wax Williams, and it's a special treat to find one showing in the booths. But that's rare. Usually playing are unknown performers. Obscure titles. Lowdown productions. Amateurs. Videos that nobody buys.

A pretty woman with bad skin is sitting alone on a hotel bed. Only the bottom of the seascape above the bed is visible. The fixed shot appears designed to capture the loneliness and horniness of the setting. You feel stupid for noticing such details, but you want to find some deliberate creative thought behind each video. After ten seconds pass, you conclude that the only reason why this woman's legs fall below what can be seen by the camera is because she must have bad legs. You don't want to wait to see this woman's heavy legs flailing in the air while some fatty humps away on top of her. You advance the channel to a gay video. Two slim men stand side by side, masturbating, kissing, giggling. You watch, wondering how long it will take them to start blowing each other. You won't be able to watch much of that, you think. At one time you wanted nothing more than to see that, but once you had, you were bothered. To your mind, men didn't do it right, which was a big surprise. You had expected to learn new techniques and to witness a love for the act and a level of professionalism that you weren't always able to muster. What you saw in your first boy-boy video was disappointing. One guy closed his eyes too tight when he did it and the other guy hardly ever took it in his mouth—it was more of a hand job with some weird licking. You had figured that gay guys were the only ones who gave earnest blowjobs. Wrong.

Boothgirl takes out a notebook and begins to write:

Girls like you aren't born until  
highschool. Born at sixteen years old.  
You give birth to yourself, you

glamorous creature, you beautiful girl.  
But you're so young. Baby woman. You  
just started menstruating. You like it.  
You like menstruating—you are that  
young. Last week your pee-pee had been  
an inert slit. Now it's an open mouth, a  
gaping open wound, dripping. A  
weeping eyesocket with no eyeball. And  
hairy. Always wet. Slick. Touch it.

You estimate the dimension of the booth to be four feet by six feet. The walls are painted flat black, and the only lighting in the booth is a forty-watt recessed bulb in the dropped ceiling. The television screen is twenty-seven inches. The television sits in the wall about chest high. There's a thick plexiglass protecting the television screen. Guys cum on the plexiglass. Some of them wipe it off and toss the used tissue and napkins from fast food restaurants and donut shops on the floor. There are built-in seats in some of the booths. They're a bit low for sitting comfortably, but they're at the right height for you to get a leg up.

Boothgirl tells the class, Question every word, every choice. You tell them, Complete poems are sometimes not quite really done. You tell them, You can love a word and find that you have to part with it in the end.

All through high-school your panties were perpetually wet. Soaking wet. The only time your panties were dry was when you weren't wearing them. You thought about sex all day long and masturbated constantly. You looked at porn and read erotica. You liked porn better. You stole three XXX videos from the adult section of the video store, and hooked up the family VCR to the old black and white TV in your bedroom. You faked being sick for a week so you could stay home alone from school and watch these three tapes all day long over and over.

Your first time at the booths you saw nobody, but you knew that you weren't alone. The next time, there were three men standing outside the booths. They each stood alone, but your instinct told you that they had arrived together, all in suits and ties – working men from the offices downtown. Finally they each entered separate booths. The doors from a few closed booths opened then and the men in those booths stepped out and began jiggling the handles of the occupied booths. Some of those doors opened, and the men stepped in. Then you had a stupid realization – something you should have understood before you ever stepped into Sunrise Arcade. Men came to the booths to meet up with other men. It was a cruising spot. They blew each other in the booths.

You went to Tijuana once for spring-break and saw a donkey-show. Everyone was talking about the donkey-show, You gotta go see the donkey-show. And there were so many strip-joints and hookers all over the streets. The donkey-show was at a dirty club that was more like a barn. The show was a woman fucking a donkey. It was insane to see. So loud. Screaming loud. You felt sorry for the woman and sorry for the donkey. People watching, drunk, whooping so loudly, and the donkey was just crazy. Hay on the floor. The woman was pulling on the donkey's tail and his cock, and then she swung herself under the donkey and this old guy strapped her ankles across the donkey's back and guided the donkey's cock into her. Fucking crazy.

Not just damp or moist or humid but slick. Slippery. Syrupy. So you touch it. You rub the middle finger of your left hand against your clit. Then you slide your hand under your panties. Put your pencil behind your ear. You think, rub my hole. And you slip your middle finger inside. Rub. Finger. Finger in your hole. Christ. You feel your whole body heat up. Dark booth. The movie on shows two girls sharing a doubleheaded longdong, their legs like mating scissors.

You like to compare yourself to the women in the videos. You could be truthful with yourself and very objective in seeing that most of these women were built in a way that you weren't. They were almost all very skinny and with big, fake tits. You didn't hold that against them, didn't look down on them for getting boobjobs. Augmentation. Forgetting the tits and the skinny waists and tiny asses, you think your face compares better to almost every woman that you've ever seen in an adult film. You had better hair, too, better styled, at least. Hop, skip, and jump. You could be one of these women. These women like sex and so do you. They had no inhibitions – look at what they did for a living – and you were as close to having no inhibitions as a woman can get and not be in porno.

Boothgirl writes in a little notebook:

The little girl in the picture stood a few feet from her mother with her hands on her hips, just like her mother. She had inherited her mother's facial features and many of her mannerisms. She always listened closely when grownups were talking – she liked hearing what they said, and she used her new words with her playmates.

It was like you had a fever. Your teenage pussy was on fire and you felt your face getting flushed and you sweated too. You couldn't wear makeup most days because you sweated so much, and makeup seemed to make things worse and cause you to sweat more and break out. One day a pig of a boy called you a sweaty bitch. And another boy named Michael Glass stood up for you. He said, Girls don't sweat; they glisten. Oh, you wanted to take Michael Glass home and watch dirty videos with him and fuck him. You wrote in your journal, He has to get inside my wet hole. Michael Glass. My drenched twat. My hot cunt. Michael Glass.

Some days you felt silly being there. In a booth. A poet with a notebook and a pencil, come to revise a work in progress and look at a few dirty movies. Five dollars for every fifteen minutes.

One day in your junior year you wore no panties to school and a short skirt. You could feel how wet you were. Dripping. Dripping pussy. Slippery wet. You wanted to open your legs and let every boy in class fuck you. You took a desk in the back of the classroom and sat in such a way that your skirt was not under your ass. Your ass and wet pussy were right on the chair and the chair was still warm from whoever had sat there during the period before. You could squeeze the muscles in your thighs and ass and feel the lips of your vagina pucker against the warm chair.

And Boothgirl cums. Forget the pre-historic notion that promiscuous women – especially professional sexworkers, strippers, hookers, porno queens – are not orgasmic. Boothgirl is orgasmic. Multiply so. You feel it in the soles of your feet if you're standing. You feel it deep in your still-virgin anus. Your forehead. Your ears. Across your chest. Your puffy nipples. Running up your throat.

You hadn't even menstruated once and you were in the tenth grade. Late bloomer. No tits either. Then when you started getting your period, it didn't come every month. You got it like once every three months, and your friends told you that you were lucky. But your periods hit hard. Not cramps, more like a weight pulling on your pussy. Your legs went numb when you stood. But you liked it. You liked getting your period. Your mind was crazy with thoughts of fucking boys. You ate like a pig. Salty stuff. Sweet stuff. You just wanted a boy in your mouth.

You had a dream about being naked in a booth, so on your next visit you took your clothes off and stood naked in the tiny booth. It did not turn you on. You decided to stay undressed until you

could understand why you weren't turned on. You lit a cigarette—your first in the booths. Fifteen minutes passed. Your television screen went blank. You were going to feed another five-dollar bill into the machine, when you realized that the absolute silence in your booth meant that none of the other booths were occupied. You had a sudden urge to step out of your booth, naked. The thought seemed to be an instruction—a dare—from your dream. You undid the latch on your door and opened it. You stepped slowly out of the booth and walked quickly around the perimeter of the empty arcade.

You heard about Wax Williams from some boys in your algebra class. His cock was as long as his arm and he made porno movies. You stole a copy of the *Well-Hung Jury* from the video store and watched it every day after school. You thought of nothing but Wax Williams all day long. He was from Ampersand, Massachusetts, a college town.

College was freedom and boys who kept their mouths shut and knew better than to talk about girls behind their backs. College boys, you found, would do what you told them. All the girls in your dorm were horny all the time, so you didn't feel like a freak anymore. Your first roommate wanted to kiss you, but you said, no thanks. You said, I'm strictly dickly, and the girl laughed, so you kissed her anyway and then you let that girl eat you out all night long.

Boothgirl makes a list of other places she could go: apartment, a bar (any bar), cemetery (that's a place for poets to go and write), library, shopping, the park, gym, coffee shop. You have to be somewhere.

You wonder now if you'll ever get out of Ampersand. You'd come as a Wadsworth freshman. You stayed to get an MA in creative writing, to work with Jeff Hector and edit his literary journal,

*Folded, Stitched, Glued*, and become one of his lovers. Then you'd stayed on after finishing the writing program. You taught freshman composition at Wadsworth and at a community college a few towns away. Then Wadsworth expanded its graduate writing program and began offering an MFA in creative writing. So you enrolled in the program again and started fucking Jeff Hector again. He has a long and very thin penis—just like a pencil—because he's such a writer.

You give your class writing exercises, prompts, to get them started. Nobody knows what to write about. Write about what you know, you say. Or write about something you don't know. You have them stare at photos and write on a sheet of paper without looking at what they're writing. You tell them to begin their stories at the end of one day and end them at the beginning of the next day. You tell them to take a familiar, time-worn phrase and substitute a key word in that phrase to make a new epigram. There's no place like \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ is where the heart is. The heart is a lonely \_\_\_\_\_. Your students look at you and then look at one another, suppressing their shrugs. You want to give up on them. Finally you say, Just write something that I can grade.

You were good at figuring out which guys had big ones. You could just tell. A knack. You were hardly ever wrong. And you were lucky in your fucking. You never attracted any freaks, and you never got hooked up with boys who weren't strong enough to get dumped. You fucked whomever you wanted without regret or complications. You had a perfect knack for finding the ideal, well-hung, disease-free guy whenever you needed one. And it always went the same perfect way for you. Meet a guy. Catch his eye. Lure him from his friends (or girlfriend). Take him someplace and give him the fuck (or suck) of his life. Then part with a happy farewell. The guys always left when you wanted them to, and they always came back when you wanted them to. None of your

girlfriends had this luck. They all had bad dates with pricks who charmed the hell out of them, screwed them (usually poorly), then lingered in their lives in complicated ways. Stood them up. Cheated on them. Or, the complete reverse, they dated guys who didn't know thing one about how to seduce a woman. Guys who dated them and dated them but never put the moves on them. Guys who then couldn't get the message that they didn't want to date a man ad nauseum, but that now their opportunity to get laid had passed. And these guys didn't go quietly. These were guys with heartaches that they couldn't heal and lusts that they couldn't implement. These guys wanted girls out of their league, and they thought the best way to win these girls was to ingratiate themselves. These guys went bald and had little dicks. These guys illed women and gave them gonorrhoea.

Boothgirl writes:

She was good at judging knobs. She could predict what kind of knob a guy had before he whipped it out. She could look at guy and know in three seconds if he had a big knob or not.

You would say that yours was an imaginative and varied love life. Rich with Richards, Bills, Tonys, a few Bruces. You fucked half a hundred guys before you were eighteen, didn't get a single STD. No crabs. Not even a raw pussy. You had a cast iron pussy. Built to withstand lots of activity. Resilient to disease and baby-making sperm. You're not afraid of big cocks. No. Listen: Put three fingers in my pussy now. Sorry, my hand is already there. Yes, those are my fingers. You'll find a battery-operated phallus in a shoebox under my bed. Load it with fresh, longlife D-batteries, also in the shoebox. Ivory-shaded dildo with imitation foreskin. A little cold on initial entry. But warms up quickly – physical principles of friction. That's what it's all about.



You hear a man enter the booth beside yours. You hear the machine accept his five-dollar bill. You hear his television come on to the same movie that you're watching. You hear the man advance the channel past three other videos. He turns the volume up very loud. The bass soundtrack vibrates the plywood walls separating your booth from his, and above the volume of groan and the bass soundtrack you hear a hum and suddenly a large drill bit comes through the shaking wall followed by a penis. You look at this cock sticking into your booth. Then you look at the video on the screen. Girl-on-girl. Already you're writing about this cock. Purple. Bruised-looking. Old. The oldest cock you've ever seen. Fifty, sixty years old. Big. Purple. Can't forget that it is purple. You remember reading once that steroid users have purple skin. This cock looks like it's been through a war. It's sticking through the wall. Half hard. Alive. You'd have been less surprised if this thing had entered your booth through the television screen. That wouldn't have been scary. Through the wall the man says, Come on, man. Come on. And you say, What? though you hadn't meant to speak at all. Then the cock disappears and you can see the man's eye through the hole and then his mouth. He says, A girl. You say, What the fuck? And he says, Get the fuck out of there. He's mad, and his anger makes you want to laugh. He pounds a fist against the thin wall. You unfasten the latch, open the door, and make your way to the stairs. On your way out of the store, you stop to look through the discount bin of previously viewed tapes. They're all marked down in price. Two for one. \$9.99 and up. You buy *DormitOrgy*, *A Tale of Two Titties*, *Cuntraption*, and *Pornacopulia*.

AMBER NELSON

## *American Heritage Dictionary*

BEGINS WITH "a," strangely. A little bit twisted, like a spiraled orange peel or a curly fry. Say it: "a," or "eh," or "ay." A little bit like chewing. The sound like a sesame seed stuck in your teeth.

Or the feathers of a marabou, tickling the back of your throat. What language feels like, a sort of giggle, or a ride in a post-chaise, rocking and cranking. Not quite natural.

I was going to tell a story here, but I know that when I say that the man looks gray, you'll think of skin tone or brain tissue when all I wanted to say was that he has a slow manner of speaking. And that his jaw crunches when he eats French fries, especially when they're twisted, like the letter "x" or the word "gerrymander." And that the old man lives in one of those jumbled districts of misshapen words and muddled accents. And that the gray man has trouble understanding, which might be a matter of brain tissue. That it's aging. Too long past the buggy. Too far, dragged behind the horse.

The horse only stopped to chew cud, which stuck between his teeth. The morning was gray as the letter "z."

ROBERT SHAPARD

## *Bare Ana*

Tattoos are just one more thing we cozy middle-class American types are appropriating from native cultures. We do that, you know. We usurp native expression, replicate it and wear it in this ridiculous alpha-dog display of dominance.

—*Michael Tsai*, from "The Magazines"

WE'RE IN CHINATOWN, above the harbor. We make a great discovery. An ancient tattoo parlor. Get this, it has 2-D photos on the walls of tats from back in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We're on a delayed honeymoon, I'm more in love with Ana than ever. She's eight months pregnant and we're here to get a pre-natal tattoo for our unborn baby. The parlor smells wonderful, like the ocean, like clove, with a hint of rotten banana. In other words gene serum. We call hello and a woman's voice in back calls Be there in a minute. Ana peers through the beaded curtain. There's a lab with a recliner and kitchen stool with a pulsing tat string hanging off it, held in place by a coffee mug. She looks panicky and I say are you sure? She says yes.

I have to tell you about Ana. She's unusual, not because she's so pregnant. You've heard of people who don't have tattoos but probably never saw one. Ana's completely bare. As for me, I'm normal, I was dark with tattoos by the time I was ten. When we fell in love last year in college, Ana said it was me she loved not my tats. I had to laugh. I said how are my tats not me?

They're me more than anything. I chose them, whereas everything else about me is a pre-nate gene correction including my straight teeth. I don't say that's wrong. If our parents didn't do that we'd probably all get diabetes or schizophrenia in our teenage years. Ana never had a father. Her mother was beautiful, covered with tats like vines that were really cursive letters of all the names of her huge family where she was no longer welcome. She was Malayan or Irish or something. Anyway she died young, and made Ana promise to never get a tat.

The tat woman from the back comes out wearing hospital scrubs. She looks African and has lavender Celtic spirals on her jaw that bring out the shape of her face. When she sees Ana her eyes widen. We want a pre-nate, I say, half-expecting her to warn us it's too late to be safe but she smiles, palms together in *namaste*. She says what's the child's name?

Ana flares, I don't want my baby's name tattooed on her like a label. She turns away quickly as if looking at the 2-D photos. The tat lady's eyes blink at me. She smiles again, did you have an image in mind? I say no. The tat lady goes to the stem in the middle of the room and tries to get it to work. The place is really ancient. She has to bump the stem with her fist—at last a holo rushes into the air, trembling. It's just a commercial. Drat, she says, just give me a minute. Ana sits on the bench by the window. It's supposed to be a joyous occasion but she looks like she wants to cry.

I'm not pushing her into this. Last year she told me what it was like growing up. People staring at her like she was a freak with some kind of skin disease. She said she didn't want her child to go through that. She and I know a pre-nate tat is a priceless gift. It's your identity at birth, it says your parents care. Anyway there's the negative to avoid—we all know what it means to be "born bare."

But call me crazy, I don't care. If it's not right with Ana I don't want to do this. I say let's go, but she says wait. She says I want you to choose a tattoo and don't tell me what it is. *I don't*

want to see it. I say Ana be serious. Most parents decide these things together. But she's pleading with her eyes and I think okay, so we're not like most parents. I see the logic. Refusing to choose, she can be true to her mother. Yet by letting me choose, our daughter can be born normal.

I like it.

I try to think of an image. Of course there's our daughter's name in *kanji* but that's writing and Ana just told the lady she didn't want that. So I start thinking of classics like Maori arm bands except in class last year Ana was against usurping native expression. I think of ancient images — panther, heart, rose — and nothing seems right. I begin to despair but just as I'm glancing at Ana something strange happens. Her face begins to glow from the sun in the window. Until now it's been dark and raining all day. What could be more romantic, sunset over the harbor, Chinatown. As the clouds break apart the sunlight streams through like a fiery dragon, flying ahead of the night. I'm completely excited. This is the image for our daughter's pre-natal tattoo. It's been given to us. I know Ana sees it, too, but we can't talk about it.

Instead I tell it quietly, so Ana won't hear, to the tat lady waiting at the stem. She brings up a series of dragon holos. I pick one — not Disney, not gothic, but Malayan, in honor of Ana's mother. We work on it, darkening lines, adding pearlescence — then there's positioning, *eeny, meeny, miney, moe, ears, buttocks, belly, toe*. Ana lets out a yelp. She's not looking at us but smiling to herself. Wow the baby really kicked, she says.

In the lab behind the beaded curtain we put Ana in the recliner. We inject the gene line and fix it so it's not uncomfortable. There's no problem keeping her from seeing any image, especially on the old equipment this parlor's got. You know the rest, basically a few keystrokes.

We pay and go out into the evening, laughing, feeling wonderful. It's like the excitement you have as a kid when you get tatted at the mall. Your parents tell you calm down, you won't see a thing for weeks. That's how a gene tat works, they say. Nothing

but bare skin while it grows deep inside you. Then because you're a kid you get bored and almost forget until one day on the schoolbus or in the mirror – *whoom* – there it is, the tat blooming in your skin. Of course for us that happens to the baby in the womb, not me or Ana, but the excitement's the same.

The funny thing is, over the next few weeks I start to worry. Ana says don't worry, nothing horrible will happen. It's true we don't believe that epigenetic stuff you hear, how methylation can warp an unborn's tat if you wait too late in a pregnancy. It's just with a pre-nate you can't be sure of anything until the birth. I wish we could delay it a week or even two. Instead, the baby comes a day early.

We rush to the hospital. All night nothing happens. Then in the morning it's moving fast again, Ana sweating, pushing, breathing, the baby's head crowning. I'm holding Ana's hand when the baby is born. I can't see because the nurse is in the way, but I hear the baby's tiny coughing cry. At last the doctor holds the baby up.

The dragon seems alive. The baby's scales are shimmery green, black talons reach over her shoulder and neck, fangs frame her forehead – I'm stunned, it's exactly what I wanted.

The doctors says in a hearty voice, congratulations, that's a fine dragon, pulling his gloves off. The nurse murmurs, yes it's the best one this week, not interested in the tat but in getting the baby into Ana's arms.

Ana doesn't say anything for a moment, looking at the baby. She seems exhausted by her labor, almost sleepy. Then she whispers, "Oh, she's beautiful."

But I know she's not even seeing the dragon. I start seeing things through Ana's eyes, like I'm on some kind of high. All she sees is the baby's little fingers, which are perfect and bare. The baby's little wrists, mouth, eyes, all bare, bare bare.

KIM CHINQUEE

## *Doctor Protar's Tomb*

THEY GAVE HIM his own tomb at the end of a dirt road. After studying a handbook, the islanders began to address him as a doctor, letting him make up his concoctions, curing their infections. He'd worn a long wide beard that spread from one earlobe to the other.

In 1892, he'd come to a cape of the island on a boat after leaving prison. He'd been a civil engineer, born in Estonia, lived pretty much all over. He was a known man on the island, planting up a garden in his yard and fixing up his chickens. He patched his patients up for nothing.

You can walk into the tomb and lie there, staring at the copper plate that is now green and mossy. His face will look at you and words call him heaven-sent, adding that he never failed us. There is no date or name engraved, except for the road sign that directs you.

You can sit on a rock and look at him straight. His tomb is surrounded by a forest, and you can hear birds singing high and low and chirping, and at late hours owls hooohooing, hearing the wind rustle in the branches, and you can let the bugs eat up your arms and legs, feasting mostly on your skinny little ankles.

I put a piece of paper up to the engravement, running my pen over the inscription, wishing I had chalk. I only succeeded in

obtaining the signature of the artist who'd engraved. At the doctor's home a mile away, I'd looked into his windows, finding his hard chair and the desk he probably worked at. I sat on his porch and put my hand up on a table that his friends might have put a pie on or a request for some salvation. I looked at the same trees he might have looked at every morning, noon and evening, at the front pine with its leaves sagging very badly, and then I stepped to the backyard to the old building that was probably an outhouse. All the doors were boarded. I looked back at his house, at its behind, the rotted siding, up at the roof in need of the repair it would never be receiving. I found a little pile of stuff and ran my shoe along it, crushing some remnants of what looked like rusted metal cans that he might have used to test his chemical equations. I found a piece of thick and orange ceramic and I bent down and touched it with my fingers, rubbing off the dirt and then only feeling smoothness. I looked for more and saw some glass, probably the bottom of a bottle. I read the writing: Patented. Imperial, April 20, 1887. I closed my eyes and saw the face of the old man, imagining the roughness of his fingers. I picked it up and put it in my pocket, rubbing a sharp edge on my thumb.



KIM CHINQUEE

## *Kingdom*

THE ROCK DIDN'T have a name and sat in the center of the island. You got there on dirt roads, but almost every road was dirt there, except for the main one and a few in the island's only town, which was named after the Mormon who'd crowned himself king. He'd brought his whole group over, hogging from the Irish. The main road was called Kings Highway and others were called things like Sloptown Road and Miss McCauley, Orr Err Og. Some Mormon foundations were still standing, just their wood with nothing on top, abandoned after the king was shot five times and six weeks after that, dying in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

The stone was in the forest, alongside Fox Lake Road, yet not quite on the gravel, and it was grayish black, its shape mostly round like most rocks are and should be—yet its top was almost at an angle. You could climb it if you wanted, but it was only seven feet high, surely not a mountain. Tree roots hugged its base, like not letting go, yet fighting for space.

Now everything was wet. Branches dripped in clumps from last night's sprinkles, and I sat in a dusty van staying dry. I was there with eight students and a driver. Now they were writing, part of their assignment. I wondered if they felt as uninspired as me. The day before, we went to Protar's home and then his tomb and I couldn't get enough, wanting to know

everything about him. We traveled the dirt roads, the dust flying everywhere around us, and I tried to breathe, keeping my mouth covered with my sweatshirt. We went to a lighthouse on the island's southern end, where we walked to the top, then down again, and while my students wrote, I wandered down the lakeshore, picking up pink rocks, filling up my pockets. On a cape, I found a big stone with an engraved plate that read: Dominick Gallagher August 7, 1867 to December 24, 1953. Keeper of the Light. I stood there looking until I'd had enough.

Later on, my chauffeur drove us to the northern end, Gull Harbor, the place known for its fossils. My students looked worn and tired and I dug around the ground, getting excited. I found a bedrock with a perfect shape of something looking like a seashell which I couldn't name and my chauffeur told me what it was, and I tried pronouncing it then gave up. Later on, at supper, I asked a biologist about it, and he said it was a trillion years old.

Now, at the big rock, students hopped in the van and I heard scribbling, pen on paper, glad to hear that. It was our fourth day and we had three left. It was an honors course and some had been to the island before. I hadn't, but you can write anywhere, and all we'd do was drive around and find things, write, then drive and write some more, quiet along the way.

An owl kept on hooing and other birds sounded far off. All the students were in the van now, and I asked if everyone was ready. No one said anything. No one ever said anything. We would ride and write some more, ride and write, ridewrite. We left the boulder. We would ride some more, looking for the biggest birch in the state.

KIM CHINQUEE

## *Mainland*

THEIR LAST DAY on the island, they went to Miller's Marsh, where they walked the trail, looking at brochures, matching the stations with the numbers. They read about red maple. Students took pictures. The yellow birch, which didn't look yellow, you could scrape the bark and smell wintergreen. Michigan Holly and the Princess Pines looked like miniature villages of Christmas. Students walked ahead and the instructor stayed so far behind that she couldn't even see them. She lifted rotting branches, finding salamanders crawling underneath, picked up mushroom fungus that had fallen from white birch, and sat staring at the tree stumps that beavers had had their way with, like wooden knives, blades straight up that could kill you if you stumbled. After the one-mile journey, the instructor saw her students already situated, writing in their places. By now, she knew that Alex would write in questions and Fred would write something funny. Rochelle would surprise the instructor with compassion. She was a smiling girl, sweet and honest, making the instructor want to go back to twenty again. Kyle would write something purple-ish, which the instructor would have a hard time correcting, and Emma would write about God. The others sat in the van, and the instructor sat on an outstretched root of a red maple. The past two days had been stormy and they spent time at the museum, at the Mormon

print shop. The instructor hadn't written anything those days, but sat in the office looking out, since the museum was closed for the season, and the curator told her she could have the office and to just turn off the lights when they left. She sat and stared at the books, wondering what was in the files, what secrets resided in the cabinets.

The birds chirped and sounded off in treble, the woodpecker a drum, the wind and sky conducting. She thought of her boyfriend, a pianist, composer. She tried to write about his sounds, comparing them to now, and then she wrote about their history. She'd been trying to call him all week on her cell phone, but the service didn't work well on the island, and they kept getting cut off. She thought about being next to him. She looked around, then read what she'd written, thinking she could never write exactly how she felt. She heard rumbling, a big truck, which turned up the gravel road. It sounded like thunder. She put her notebook down and watched the lilies floating in the pond, watched the rippling water. She watched for a very long time.

Later on, the students would share their writing, but she'd keep hers to herself. They'd sit in a room and after reading their marsh stories, they'd get ahead of themselves, talking about the dead deer they'd seen at the lakeshore, wondering why it hadn't decomposed. They'd ask their instructor if they could end their discussion early.

The deer had turned over. Part of it was buried, on its other side and you couldn't see its head or its limbs. They tried to dig it up with a stick; they wanted to see its face. This side had no fur, just skin, almost see-through and the body was bloated. Some students were too grossed out to come. The instructor remembered the deer from earlier, when she'd come out for a run after her cabin-mate, another instructor, had told her there was a dead dog there, or maybe a deer. It didn't smell, but she didn't look at it long enough then, not as long as she'd wanted. Then the storm came.

They turned back, giving up. Poor deer, some of them said. They'd have snacks: chips with salsa, Coke without fizz, and then they'd pack, notebooks tucked away, deep. They'd think about the next day, looking over the deck, then out the dirty windows, hear the giant choo then rumble. They'd fall asleep and eventually wake, stepping off.

SPENCER DEW

## *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Pregnancy Test*

1

Remnants of grits, hardened in a half moon at the edge of the bowl. She kept waiting for her period to come.

2

The Jewel-Osco bag dangles from the naked tree branch, edges tattered as meanwhile, always, the mechanical kitty in the window of the sushi joint waves its hand up and down, wafting good luck, good luck, all the goddamn day.

3

Thirteen American flags fly through the snowy night outside the gas station where that soldier got shot last week, home on leave, which is also where, by coincidence, I bought a pack of cigarettes, a carbonated herbal energy drink, and a pregnancy test.

4

One day the sidewalk is littered with tiny white tampons, like bullets, and then it rains and they swell, like dead laboratory rats.

5

The line between installation and performance is so vague, permeable. Everything is a membrane this season, or can be described through membranous metaphors. Is it possible that infidelity, too, fits into the function of the gallery? "That's what openings are for," someone says, and someone else responds, receptive.

6

A display window where the mannequins are draped in string lights, flashing, blue and white. Across the street a clerk on a cigarette break screams into her cell phone.

7

At the Golden Angel Pancake House, 3:23 am on a Wednesday, the waitress is crying as two cops — one male and one female — tell her how her daughter was discovered.

8

It is hard to read about the ambulance accident and not laugh, at least a little, at least silently, at least on the inside.

9

The red onion found, a week after she threw it, in the little closet that is called a pantry and that is full of empty bottles that she

SPENCER DEW

plans one day to recycle.

10

The last thing you scream at me before everything falls down is that you are trying to urinate in a straight line.

11

History is formulaic, all stories determined in advance by the characters involved. While you sleep on the couch, I lie in bed awake, for hours, thinking about your sister.

12

The decision never to consider lost options, never to regret . . . It is like New Year's every instant, with these stupid resolutions. The best I can ever do is write letters that don't get sent.

13



C.L. BLEDSOE

## *Hydrocodone*

HE WOKE BECAUSE of the phone. He'd been lying on his side, his cheek pressed to the couch, forcing the sore side to bear the weight of his head. He stood up stiffly and lumbered into the kitchen to answer.

It was Amy. "Feeling any better?" she asked.

"Been asleep all day," he said. His tongue kept trying to creep back to the hole in his jaw where he'd had a wisdom tooth removed the day before. The stitches tasted like mint.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. You sound pretty bad. Have you been taking your pills?"

"Like clockwork."

"Good. Well do me a favor and take some stew meat out of the freezer so I can make some soup when I get home," she said.

In the background he could hear someone in her office saying, "Amy, Jen's looking for you."

Outside he could hear voices. There was some kind of noise coming from the front of the house.

"Dan?" Amy was saying.

"Yeah?"

"I've got to go. Don't forget to take the meat out, I hope you feel better."

He hung up the phone and went back into the living room. The clock on the DVD player said 3:32. Another half hour and he could take a pill.

The voices were louder in the living room and they were moving. For a second he felt as though he were under water, the waves carrying the sound away from him. The shades on the windows were down. He couldn't remember if he'd done that or not. He went to the door and looked out through the peephole. Kids were walking by outside. Some were in groups of twos and threes, some were alone. He watched them pass for several seconds before he realized that a school bus must've dropped them off nearby. They'd lived in this house for six months and he'd never noticed the bus stop. He realized this was the first time he'd been home at this time of day on a weekday since they'd lived here.

He kept his eye pressed to the door. A girl walked by—he wasn't sure how old she was, maybe thirteen, fourteen. Her hair was black. He couldn't see her face. She was wearing a short black skirt revealing pale legs. A couple of boys were walking with her.

One of the boys said something and she turned, revealing a shock of red hair, and slugged him in the arm. Dan thought he recognized her vaguely. He watched her pass on the sidewalk, then moved to the window and peeked between the slats of the blinds. They left the sidewalk at the edge of his yard and went in the house next door.

He couldn't see any more of them. He moved away from the window, wandered through the house and finally decided to make something to eat in the kitchen. He opened a can of soup and sat at the table, swallowing. Some noise started outside, this time coming from the rear side of the house. He slid open the glass door and stepped out onto the deck in the back. Steps led down to the yard which dropped away from the house. There was a wall around the back yard next door, but on the deck he could see above some of it. The girl and the two boys were on the other

side of the fence. He'd forgotten that the neighbors had a trampoline. When they jumped, their torsos and most of their legs cleared the height of the fence. Then they fell back down and he could only see their heads. He stood in the doorway watching them. She was holding her skirt down while she jumped, giving her an awkward, stiff look. The boys were teasing her, he couldn't quite make out all of what they were saying, but she was laughing. They were urging her on, and while he watched, she jumped high, throwing her hands up so that her skirt rode up, revealing the white of her panties. She dropped back down and he remembered the freezer and went and pulled the stew meat out, then took another pill and sat in the living room again.

During dinner, Dan's eyes kept going back to the glass door, but he couldn't see anything but the deck. After dinner, he and Amy watched another movie and waited for it to be late before allowing themselves to go to bed. Dan slept awhile longer and woke later, hurting. He spent some time in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet, his cheek pressed to the cool surface of the wall beside him.

It was quiet inside the house. He wandered out into the living room, then the kitchen, dug a towel out of a drawer and filled it with ice and pressed it softly to his cheek. He was hungry, or at least knew that he should be, but he wasn't up to the idea of eating. He caught himself staring at the glass door again, and realized that he'd been staring at a lot of things. He was trudging around the house like a ghost. He went back to the bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror. His cheek was puffy, definitely swollen. It made his face look lopsided. He touched his cheek softly, felt the tenderness and the prickle of hairs. His eyes were a little puffy, too. He didn't look too bad, though, he decided. He held the ice pack against his cheek and sat on the toilet again until he was tired, and then he went back to bed.

The next morning, Dan lay in bed listening to Amy's frantic ministrations, opening his eyes for the peck on the cheek before

she left. The pain in his jaw seemed somehow worse. The muscles in his cheeks and neck were sore, as though he was about to have a charley horse. He lay in bed, trying to ignore it, but the pain killers were only taking the edge off. He drifted in and out of sleep and found himself somewhere in between, thinking about the girl from next door. He remembered her walking by the front of the house, her skirt barely covering anything. Her hair had to be dyed. Seemed a little young to be dying her hair. He remembered her on the trampoline, popping into the air, holding her skirt down, then not holding it—and rolled out of bed, went to the bathroom, and then went into the kitchen and made himself another bowl of cereal. He watched the flakes dissolve into the milk.

He couldn't stop fidgeting. He found a DVD and about halfway through he turned it off. He tried to find a project to keep himself busy, and settled on cleaning, something they neglected during the week. He cleaned the toilet in the bathroom, gathered the clothes and started a load in the washer. There weren't enough dishes in the dishwasher to run it, so he did them in the sink, finishing just in time to switch the clothes over to the dryer and start a second load. He went into the living room, feeling lightheaded and satisfied with himself. He flipped through channels on TV and glanced out the window every few seconds while he waited for the dryer to be done. Then he moved the wet clothes over and folded the dry ones, and seriously considered vacuuming before giving up and calling it enough.

He had made a point of not looking at the time but now he glanced at a clock and saw that it was a quarter after three. They didn't have a lot of books and the only magazines around were Amy's, mostly having to do with home decoration, weddings, fashion. He picked one up and flipped through it. Skinny girls in ugly dresses smiled at him from the pages. He threw the magazine back on the table and stood in the middle of the room, swaying quietly, and finally went over to the door, peered out

through the hole and tried to think of something to do to keep himself busy.

Outside, the street was empty. His car was in the driveway. He could go to the store. He wasn't sure if he should drive on pain killers.

Across the street they'd planted a bush he had always liked. There was a cherry tree in their front yard, as well, and he liked the way the peep hole made them look small and distant, yet compressed and rounded. He studied both of these for quite a while until the yellow mass of the school bus passing interrupted his contemplation. It stopped farther down the street where he couldn't see it. He watched as the kids walked by in ones and twos, some walking slow, some running back and forth, full of energy. She was near the end. This time she was wearing jeans and a low cut top. Her head was down and she walked slowly. He wondered if something was wrong, why she was alone. He moved to the window and watched her until she was out of sight, then he went back to the couch and stared at the TV that he'd turned off earlier.

He thought about her all weekend. He could hear them outside on the trampoline, something he'd heard plenty of times before, but never thought about, but Amy was around and he felt strange about watching them again. On Saturday night he and Amy went to a movie. There were some kids talking a couple rows down, and a few minutes into it, Amy nudged him and nodded towards them. He shrugged back at her and spent the rest of the film watching the backs of their heads, trying to listen to what they were saying.

Sunday they went out to a park Amy liked on the other side of town and walked around, watching dogs play in the grass. She took his arm and leaned on his shoulder.

"How's your tooth?" she asked.

"Better," he said.

"We should get a dog," she said.

"You're allergic."

She shrugged.

"They have those hypo-allergenic dogs, now, don't they?"  
he said.

"I think so," she said.

"Or a cat. We could get one of those bald cats."

"Hairless," she said and laughed.

"We should've brought a blanket," he said. They sat in the grass under an old gray oak tree and watched the squirrels. Dan leaned back against the tree and drifted into a doze, until Amy nudged him awake.

"Look," she said, pointing. A terrier was chasing the squirrels, barking up at the trees. They watched it until a girl called it away, and then they rose stiffly and walked back to their car.

That night, they sat on the couch watching reruns on TV and she lay in his lap during a commercial. He thought about the girl, and the last few days. In the morning, he staggered out of bed.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yeah, got to get back to it," he said through stiff teeth.

"Why don't you take one more day?"

"No," he said. "I'm going loopy in the house." And headed for the shower.

Half past three, Dan was in his cubicle, staring at the clock on his computer screen. His jaw ached but he was afraid to take a pill. He was running low on them anyway, and had survived the day on ibuprofen. He'd been very productive; by noon he was already caught up with the work he'd missed Thursday and Friday, and now he was nearly where he should be for the day. He hadn't so much as glanced at a clock, until just a moment ago, and now he couldn't concentrate on anything but the time. It ticked over 3:32. He fiddled with his computer. He had a bid for a headboard on an auction that was nearly over. Amy really wanted that headboard.

He went back and forth between that and the clock. The selling period ended at 3:35. Now it was 3:33. Someone had outbid him and Dan snapped back to attention and upped his bid by a few dollars. He kept going back to the girl. Back and forth between her and the headboard. Black hair with red streak. Another five dollars. Short skirt, thin, pale legs. Another ten dollars. Then it was 3:35 and he'd won the bidding. He called Amy and broke the news. The girl dropped from his thoughts and the rest of the day went easily. On the way out, he dropped the nearly empty bottle of pills in the trash. They celebrated that night with pizza, and the next day at 3:32, he hardly noticed the clock, and the day after, he didn't think of it at all.

BOB ARTER

## *The Old Folks*

THEY ARE SERE and withered from the desert sun, all of them saddle-brown, creased and cracked like ancient leather. Through slits like lizard eyes they peer at their feet, unwilling to look directly into the silent fury of the blazing star above.

This is Mojave Springs, a spa, cratered for millennia with steaming, bubbling mud holes. And these are the old, the aged, young enough still to make the pilgrimage, but well beyond the age of family gyms and fitness centers, where the iron-pumping, treadmilling young or middle-aged wage unending war on calories and carbs and accumulating fat—that they might rejoice in the glow and juice of youth. The old folks trekking across the badlands no longer seek thin thighs nor taut breasts; such gaudy baubles are from the long-ago, the once-upon-a-time. They come only to be preserved, desiccated like jerky, not yet willing to surrender themselves to the convalescent home, the hospice.

Thus they creep along, led by some improbable Moses with a whistle on a chain; they murmur in the wilderness of Baal and Mephistopheles. Blinking like iguanas, some cover their bald or thin-haired heads with gym towels as they approach the main complex that houses them on these expeditions. Having spent the morning parboiling in cracks in the earth, potholes through which the planet interior's hot juices escape to the surface along with



billowing sulfuric clouds of barely breathable air, they now return for showers, for grapefruit and prune juice lunches and a bowl of pretty capsules: vitamin C, Echinacea and a varying assortment of Eupatorium, Goldenseal, Inula, Ligusticum. Dinner will feature vitamin A, beta-carotene and zinc, but the nice-looking young man in the short-sleeved shirt and tie, healthy, hairy arms akimbo, warns them, "Don't try anything with Astragalus as that is long-term, not short-term. I like Wise Woman's Phytoguard, but Herb Pharm, MediHerb, and Gaia Herbs are also excellent and will do the job. I've never seen the bargain herbs work effectively."

Stretching exercises and massage, courtesy of a bobbed brunette bursting with vitality. Yoga with yogurt and afterward, with evening's onset, a shuffling conga line of toothpick men and corn-husk women. Still later, the nice young man slips away to the room of the pretty girl – her slender hips! her firm breasts! – who leads the stretching and does the massaging and raises the gentleman geezers' blood pressure, and who can say whether he will inject a life-force fluid into her body and whether she will writhe and buck and bounce and strip years from him as well?

Listen, was that her primal wail? Or just another coyote?

But these days too are gone for the old folks, memories as faded and falling apart as the black and white photographs they extract from wallet or purse or pocket and sort before them like tarot cards: here are Death and the Devil, the Chariot and Star, here are Lovers, a Hermit, the High Priestess, and this, this last, most recent, I suppose you could call it current, is the Fool.

And they trade these totems to days long past at night, in the Great Hall, and the wind whistles and hisses across the desert sand and the fireplace crackles with the pop of boiling sap, requires another log, and then another, until finally all the memories have been traded and put away and they totter off to bed, their own life-force guttering like a candle at wick's end, and their only lullaby is the wind outdoors and the within, the pretty girl's final, dying cry.

MATT BELL

## *The Present*

THE MORNING OF our anniversary, Emily handed me a present wrapped in purple and gold. I tore the wrapping away to reveal a gift box filled with thin, crinkly tissue paper. Inside was Emily's left hand, cut off cleanly at the wrist. The fingers were curled inward, each nail polished red and filed immaculately. I looked up and saw that she was bleeding, staining the sleeve of her pink fleece bathrobe.

I asked, "Have you been bleeding this whole time? Why didn't you say something?"

Emily said, "I didn't want to ruin the surprise."

I nodded, appreciative. I liked surprises. "What am I supposed to do with it?" I asked.

"Anything you want," she said.

I said, "I think I'll use it as an ashtray. Your palm really is the perfect shape for one." Emily wasn't pleased, certainly not then, and not later either, after she had returned from the hospital, when I showed it to her full of ashes and spent cigarettes, her hand not spilling even a single gray flake.

SEAN KILPATRICK

## *Thank You, Steel China: My Panic Is Your Panic Too*

### **Thank You in the City of Steel China**

My mother aborted me on someone's doorstep.  
I dreamed of coat hangers. I cried at thrift stores.  
The people who raised me worked in oil.  
We ate vats of it for dessert.  
We were accused of minstrel antics.  
We were accused of playing violins.  
They cut us a little bit and promised more.

At the hospital, the doctor showed me slides.  
"These are slides of what you would look like if you were better."  
They were slides of road kill, slides of pregnant women killed  
by fire.  
"Everything drips if you hate it long enough."  
"I want to go," I said.  
"You big tease," the doctor said, "Please cough for me."

The window showed buildings without spines.  
In a bomb space, children cornered their dinner.  
Dinner was shaking and drawing them a treasure map.

SEAN KILPATRICK

Children in Steel China are not tickled into believing.  
Dinner lost its hind legs first.

I used mine to walk home (what was left of home)  
and worshipped random objects.

I thought I was funny.

Someone saw me in the backyard  
and threw a large rock at my lap.

I dreamed of a girl who had a bruise between her legs  
where something else was meant to be.

**Dear Inventor of the Triple Tree, Steel China,  
Surgeon's Hall,**

"Imma boo hoo up and down the street for those that hang,  
dress my tears in little suits and call them you and you and  
you . . ."

— from "Fight for Steel China"

Your landmines watch us sleep, doctor.  
The sky crossed with bombs. We love you  
here. We're your biggest fans.

Economy was your thing back then.  
Your dreams were made of whispers. (We keep them numbered.)  
I know, I know — Commission from the mayor,  
oil knives for feet, make the prison shine.  
But have you seen three people dropping into the noose hold  
hands?  
It fills your heart with good silverware.

We send you letters from the stove.

In Surgeon's Hall it is cold and bombs announce their arrival.  
We give them what little of us we can spare.  
Our meat is so valuable. Our meat  
is so valuable because we wear it.  
Even our mirrors are shaped like dollar signs.  
But don't worry, everyone's paycheck involves  
disembowelment, castration, bad music.

But we are poor here and tremble  
in closets. We bite our arms and swallow  
all day. We go to your statue  
and cry, come home, starve some more.

SEAN KILPATRICK

But Thank You is teaching self-defense to the cows.  
And just the other day Mr. Ostrich robbed a convenience store.  
He was bored.  
And look, even this girl's suicide note reads:  
learn to sing.

Yours quite literally,  
The animals of Steel China

## **My Name Is Thank You**

Heavy tax fees were no longer fashionable in Steel China.  
Instead, the citizens were allowed to plan which five years  
of their lives they wanted to spend in prison.  
This was economical. This was fair. This worked.  
I chose puberty. I filled in the box.  
They came to the house and escorted me out with batons.

They said, "These handcuffs are gold, all yours.  
In them, you would be even more beautiful as a skeleton.  
We might feed you today or in three months.  
The chair has caught fire and you must sit down.  
Water might drip into your eyes for a long time."

I killed a man for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.  
I killed a man to eat and stay alive  
and for every man I killed  
they gave me another death sentence.  
They walked by the cell  
(there was only one cell)  
jiggling nooses, electric chairs, dogs, family portraits.  
They walked by the cell with steak and shaved labia.  
They walked by the cell spraying mace  
and I tried desperately to eat the clouds,  
tongue stuck past the bars.  
"Thank You," they said, "please die."  
They were polite about how  
they killed us  
and always  
knew my name.

## I'm Sorry

Most abortions in Steel China were performed through  
interpretive dance.

The high school debate team always turned into a masturbation  
contest.

At my probation hearing, I showed them my talent for throwing  
knives.

I was released immediately and given a free house  
filled with taxidermy heads and bombs that had stopped ticking.  
Everyday I watered the landmines, went back in, and stared at a  
different head.

Small country presidents, former popes, animals  
— but those were too beautiful to watch stuffed.

They looked like they were going somewhere.

"Would you like a sandwich?" I asked them.

"I only eat sandwiches now and sit down when I want."

Black jaws in the living room showed me outside.

A girl was running through my landmines.

She had big red fist prints from punching herself.

She was naked except for a yellow blanket around her waist.

"Stop," I said. "There are bombs where your feet want to be."

"I know," she replied. "This is how Steel China girls pick suicide."

"But my lawn . . ." I said.

"I can already tell we're in love," she replied. "So, instead, I'll come  
in."

"Let me draw you a map of the landmines."

"If they love me, they love me," she said. "You should let them  
have me,

if they want me that bad, and stop whining."

I winced every time her bare foot touched the ground.

Since this was love, and we were to be married,

I knew a tragedy would come soon and be great.

The first tragedy was that her toes were painted black.



"Dear, what have they done to you?" I asked.

"There is almost nothing left," she sighed. "And I'm sure you'll  
want the rest."

"I have to write you a love poem now," I said.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Is that your name?"

But she had already stopped talking to other humans.

SEAN KILPATRICK

## **My Panic Is Your Panic Too**

We sleep inside a phonograph  
that sings our dreams.

You say we are moving. There is a house.  
You close ten fingers and it is night.

Our music grows perfect  
only when you are made of fists.

I found my panic  
when you extended your hand.

Send love bulletins  
every minute, every day.

We can only forget Steel China  
when music plays in our dreams.

The phonograph gives cute  
death rattles when we conceive.

## **A Boring Place**

I'm Sorry drew a cartoon of me with that poem floating up from my ass in a bubble.

She re-titled it: "Meaningless," "Too Cynical," and "Cliché Love Crap."

She only talked to the taxidermy heads of animals.

They sunk down the wall, carrying her problems and advice.

I had to hire a psychiatrist for the animals.

He paced back and forth with big pills cupped in his hand.

They gobbled them and looked at me and laughed.

They told me that I'm Sorry cries before and after orgasm.

They threatened to run outside and jump on the landmines.

"You don't have the guts, quite literally," I said, being cute.

They showed their teeth and said: "My guts are in your pocket."

The psychiatrist had told them to distract me so he could go hump

I'm Sorry.

My birth musician called on the phone and told me to jump back in the womb at seventeen o'clock.

"Yes, sir," I said. "Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir."

"You're acting like a child," said the psychiatrist, changing positions.

I grabbed a head by its whiskers. We tongue-kissed till it vomited the pills down my throat.

"I will disappear into a boring place called Hate where nothing ever dies and sit there like a big plant, watering myself with gibberish," I said.

"It is sad because everyone goes there," the head replied.

SEAN KILPATRICK

**I'm Sorry's Dear John Letter (originally published in  
*The Paris Review* and that's how I found out she was  
gone),**

Your heart is something nosed around by dogs.

Do you think this knife looks good?

I fooled you. It's just my hair.

Don't you think your heart bores my pets?

Put my hair in your chest instead.

Cross your toes.

It will improve you

if I say

it will improve you.

Love,

I'm Sorry.

**There was also a Dear John painting by I'm Sorry on display in the Louvre. The real title, before they shortened it:**

'Up-skirt Library Shareholders  
Feeling Violent, Yet Strangely Blanketed  
by Congregating Hours of the Advancing Day  
and Cascading into Existential Lust  
with Thoughts Like:  
Here Is the Plain with Kicking Infant.  
Here Are the Towns, Parading Murder.  
The Short Judge Who Raps.  
Candles Shaped Like Vertebrae.  
A Venereal Disease Xylophone.  
Bullhorns Filled with Plastic Dog Shit.  
A Neck Bloated Loose and Wind  
Singing Through the Hole, Singing This . . . !

SEAN KILPATRICK

## Goodbye Steel China

I felt like my own bacteria were tired of my voice.  
Or they were listening, but they were listening with headphones on.  
I laid money on my chest and told them to take it.  
I pretended there was a catalogue from which I could order  
tiny microphones. I watched through a microscope.  
They were constantly eating. "Chew me faster," I said.  
"You're so petite."

So,  
the girl was answering Steel China's prayers.

So,  
the girl was out there parting her smile around another cock.

So,  
I donned a blindfold and tangoed alone.

So,  
all over the front lawn I went with my indignant shoes.

So,  
I dreamed people had guillotines instead of torsos.

So,  
no one had any hands left to pray.

So,  
things got better.

So,  
I condemned myself to sitting and grew a beard.  
The rent was cheap inside my beard.  
Still, everyone refused to live like that.

DOMINIC REHAYEM

## *Archaeology*

THERE IS NO girl to be found with whom a man could lie on white sheets, clothes piled high at the foot of the bed in a heap; a girl whose pale skin a man could admire in the light of the moon with his hands, clever monkey hands. There is no girl to write dramatic monologues about her love for Pre-Raphaelite secularism, or the hunted protagonists in film noir. She does not think to tell the world about the time she climbed into an old church and spent an hour lecturing on the savagery of Gothic architecture. She does not tell of her love of old churches, about the smell of faith, how it waits patiently in the dust, quiet and confident with centuries of piety under its belt. Even less a girl who would smile a dreamy smile as her skin was gently dotted with silver rhinestones bought that day at the dollar store. With a girl like that a man could smile and explain how, in his dreams, this girl's eyes couldn't dim her starlit skin. He could kiss her, this man. He could whisper that in his dreams, they could spend all night under the light of a winter moon, but he would still wake up hot and thirsty for the mouth of a girl clothed in stars.

DOMINIC REHAYEM

## *Exotic Like That*

I LIKE PACKAGES. Brown paper packages, tied up with string. Everyman fare. Mystery houses built on sand, woefully unprepared for the elements: fragile dun pagodas, barely sheltering impatient contents: a throwback to an earlier time, a more innocent time, the undeniable sensual appeal of brown paper.

Fragile.

Fingers rasp along the box, gently tugging at the corners, drawing out the undressing.

And the color of the brown. Saharan sand, Moroccan mud huts. Exotic like that. A jaw dusted with stubble.

I'll breeze into Marrakech. I'll book into the Shiva. My mood will be broken-down but still enthusiastic. It will be there for me, under the reedy but tenacious protection of a scrawny Moroccan. His smile will match the gleam of his forehead, his hair long gone.

"This for you," he will say. And there it will be. The package: the possibilities of crumpling. Each one of my brown fingers will vie to match the elegant hue of the paper. The crevices, the inviting whorls and fissures, presided over by stern, sandy cliffs.



My fingers will slyly move to the side, the shadowed one,  
to tug at the folded-over corner, the Moroccan all but forgotten.

I will take the package and repair to the chair in the  
corner, set to brashly profess a love of the sleek: a love of the  
officiously professional splashed with red and blue ink; the  
invulnerable plastic; seamless, space-age coating.

Slick.

How much better to have received something in perfect  
condition.

I will kick off my boots, curl up with the package under  
my head, and listen to what's inside.

CLAUDIA SMITH

## *Virgins*

THERE WAS THIS guy who slept with my roommate the summer we turned twenty. His name was Johnny Walker. We loved that name, Johnny Walker. We thought he'd invented it, but no, he showed us his birth certificate, which for some reason he kept in a chest in his closet. His mother was Edith Walker, his father David.

Johnny would come into our room, which was across the hallway, to borrow soap. He wore a towel wrapped around his waist so that my roommate, Tonya, could see his chest. We agreed it had just the right amount of hair on it, and that he was fit but in a way that didn't look like he was too vain. Boys in that house were always coming into our room, lingering. They came for Tonya. She had the face of a supermodel; classical, lovely, interesting. Her eyes were bottle green, and her hair, when the sun lit it from behind, was the auburn of expensive chocolates. Someone was definitely going to write poetry about that hair, someday. I was happy enough with my looks, but I had to admit, it would have been something to switch off with her for a day. I'd get a lot of free stuff, and people would just assume I was soulful; they wouldn't have to dig.

Anyway, I was feeling annoyed with her one day because a boy I liked had met us for pie at the diner and he was smitten.

"You didn't have to wear the pink tank top," I told her. She blushed. It wasn't her fault. She was that old-fashioned word, fetching, when she blushed.

"You could have said something to him, Bea," she said.

"I did. But as soon as he saw you were there it was like you were lit up from beyond. All *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. I hate it. You don't even look bad in bad lighting."

And then of course Johnny Walker was standing in our doorway. You could see he'd heard our conversation.

"Hey Tonya," he said, "I'm going to campus. Come with?"

She didn't. We walked to the corner store and Tonya bought a dime bag. I felt embarrassed when she did that. At home, I'd been born again. I drank, but that was about it. We walked along the side of the winding road, talking. We talked about God, about hell. I didn't believe in it, but wanted to live as if it were real, because, I said, you should be good for the sake of being good. Tonya believed in hell, but didn't know why. It's a matter of faith, she told me. She said she had faith in hell. These were the kinds of conversations we liked to have, figuring everything out as we talked. The light was turning the old Polaroid golden that came with the fall before twilight. We weren't worried about being stuck in the dark. Tonya kept a flashlight in her backpack. She pulled it out and walked ahead. I stumbled over a pebble. I felt a little drunk and sad. I wasn't drunk, but I felt that way.

"I think I'm in love," I said to her.

"With Toby?" she asked.

"I don't know. I can't even talk about it. I guess I'm not. But if he walked me along the water, and sang a song to me on his guitar, and even touched me, no, even grazed his hand against my shoulder, or brushed my hair with the tips of his fingers, I would be."

"Oh, Bea," she said, "You're such a romantic."

Tonya and I were far from our homes, and we fell into the rhythm of each other's lives almost immediately. We shared

toothpaste; we traded clothes. We knew one another's childhood secrets, and treated them tenderly. She'd told me about the time she'd heard her father having sex with her mother's friend Judy, when she'd come home from band practice early one Saturday. The creepy part was that he'd kept calling Judy his little girl. My deepest secrets, the ones I'd never said out loud before I knew her, were about my brother peeing on my head when he was angry with me, and the fact that my mother would bite my fingertips and call me a damn nuisance when nobody else was around. My brother was a pretty good brother overall, but my mother; well, it was hard to explain. She was decent, but distant. Tonya agreed. She's a refrigerator mother, she explained. Our childhoods were something we were to overcome, before we graduated and moved into glamour. We would live in skyscrapers and drink mimosas in the mornings with famous men. These men would never know that Tonya had once played the tuba, or that I spent my prom night playing Trivial Pursuit with my brother.

We hated each other's enemies, wrote papers together, read the same poetry. We decided Emily Dickinson was too exquisite for words, and Ashbury was overrated. We wished we'd met in junior high; no, in kindergarten. We spied on the professor who'd fucked her, then bumped her from his class. We broke into his office and put shoe polish on the seat of his chair. We were going to be famous, but we told nobody else, because it sounded arrogant. Neither one of us had ever had a best friend until now.

Back to this night I was talking about. At the end of that walk, we came upon Johnny Walker sitting on the porch. He stared at Tonya. He took a match and lit it with the sole of his boot, keeping his eyes on her all the while. This was always a hard thing for me to read; either Tonya wanted me away, and fast, or she wanted me to make up some excuse for her to get away. She hated to be mean. I didn't care.

I left. I went upstairs and read Madeleine L'Engle. I read about Meg, a girl who wore glasses and traveled through dimensions. That was another secret we shared, love of young

adult books. We had been lonely adolescents, something I'd found difficult to believe at first. How could someone who looked like Tonya ever be lonely?

She woke me before sunrise, opening all the windows.

"You did it with him, I gather," I said.

She opened our little fridge and pulled out powdered donuts.

"Let's go to the Vanderbilt Mansion and read the New York Times today and talk," she said, "I don't want to see him again just in case this feeling goes away."

And she told me about the night before, how they'd been held together by an invisible force, how everything he'd said to her made sense in a way that nothing had ever made sense to her. He'd played a mixed tape, filled with songs of love and redemption, and he'd tried counting the smattering of freckles on her shoulders, but gave up, deciding they were infinite. It was like counting the stars in the sky.

"Sounds like the drugs talking," I said.

"Don't be a pill," she said.

And then he'd played that Eric Clapton song for her, the one about a girl who combs out her long blonde hair and asks how she looks, and Eric Clapton says she looks wonderful tonight. Tonya had left him sleeping on the mattress, and he looked like a little boy, with his head buried in his pillow.

That day I felt jealous, but I couldn't tell why. I thought Johnny was kind of a cheeseball, but I wouldn't tell her that. We rolled down the windows, played Cyndi Lauper, and talked all about how great it was to be. I felt a contact high; I wanted this thing with Johnny to last for a while, to be hard and heavy. I was a virgin and I wanted to fall hard, too, but I wanted to learn about it first. Tonya was good at preparing me for things. She'd taught me a lot, about how to look sexy without looking slutty. Like, keeping two buttons undone with a push-up bra, and either wearing eye makeup or lipstick, but not both. About how to

highlight books in the first read, before you formed your ideas for papers. Even how to fold socks so they didn't lose their shape.

We sat under a knotted old tree, on a checkered blanket, talking instead of reading. "It's like when you wake up from a really good dream," she said, "And you know if you don't write it down you'll forget it." We talked about Johnny, about his brown eyes and his thick sweet voice, and, talking about him, I started to see him in a way I never could when I was looking straight at him.

A few nights later, Johnny came home with a freshman. We heard them giggling.

"Go out there," Tonya said, "but don't let them hear you."

"He giggles like a hyena," I told her.

I could see the black light go on under the crack in his door. And then that song, the Darling You Look Wonderful Tonight song, started to play.

When I came back to our room, Tonya was vomiting in our toilet. I sat on the edge of her bed. She flushed, washed her hands. I listened as she swished with mouthwash. When she came out she was smiling.

"I heard moaning," she said.

"Yes, there was some moaning."

"I wasted it," she said.

"You didn't know," I told her.

Every Saturday, he played the song. It got to where Tonya would duck her head inside the car when we pulled up if he was in the yard. She'd get home from class, or work, and go straight to our room. She didn't even use the kitchen anymore.

"I don't know why you are doing this," I told her. She cried every night, wringing her pillow with her fists until they turned purple. She never made a noise.

"Shh," she said, "he'll hear you."

It was just that he wanted to fuck her, before the others did. That's what she said. I told her it was okay. I told her it probably wasn't true. And Johnny Walker, he was just a guy who liked sappy songs and maybe even thought he was sincere.

We decided to move out at the end of the semester. Neither one of us could afford to fly home for Christmas, so we were going to have the house to ourselves. We painted a Christmas tree on the wall, and cut out colored paper from magazines. I made paper angels and pasted movie stars' heads on them. She made a mosaic, a portrait of me, out of cut-up magazine pages. It looked sort of beautiful, in oranges and blues. She used newsprint for my eyebrows, which arched starlit style over swimming pool blue eyes.

We worked double shifts at the diner, and then spent our money on booze for me and pot for her. We spent the whole break watching old movies. We discovered Kim Novak in *Vertigo*, and decided it was the most perfect film ever made, ever. Ever. Tonya dyed her hair blonde; well, we meant for it to turn blonde but instead it turned tomato red. Which looked great on her, a little punk. The bright red turned her eyes into emeralds.

We discovered Billie Holiday. She sang as if she were singing her heart out of her body. We, like Billie, felt love was a great big bruise. We went for long drives, blasting songs about men who must be loved. Next semester, Tonya met Johnny Walker's brother Tim at a townie bar. She took him to the movies, kissed him on the fifth date, and broke his heart.

I gave Toby my virginity under a railway bridge. It was cold, so we kept our clothes on. In the dark, he could have been anyone. I held onto the sleeves of his bomber jacket and wrapped my legs around his waist as tight as I could, but he kept slipping out of me. He said my name, rasping, and when he said it I felt like someone else. Beatrice, Beatrice, Beatrice, Beatrice.

After, he asked me if I was cool. Cool as a Hitchcock blonde, I told him.

KAREN ASHBURNER

## *A Beautiful Stripe of Red*

IF YOU CAN find an old brick in your back yard, or a piece of slate, you can break it up with a hammer. You can throw it down on the cement driveway, duck down below the silver bumper of your mother's Dodge Omni, and smash it to pieces, bit-by-bit, sending fragments of slate into the neighbor's daisy garden, flinging bits of red brick into the corners of your eyes. When you are done you can put the pieces into an old glass mayonnaise jar and fill it with water, careful not to cut your hands with the sharp fragments you gather into a pile with the palm of your hand, careful not to let the gray and red dust seep into your bony lungs. You can screw the lid on tight and shake the jar with everything you've got. You and your friends can take turns shaking: ten, twenty, a hundred times each. You can open the lid from time to time, and see that the sharp edges of the brick and the slate have become smooth. This is what happens to rocks that are tossed about in the ocean: carrying and dumping, carrying and dumping, in rivers and streams and oceans all over the world, day after day, year after year, over and over again . . .

There is no relief; there is no stopping for cookies and playing jacks in the corner of the living room floor. There are only more rocks to break down, hard and glassy. There is only the ocean's waves crashing against the rocks, along the shore, breaking



them into pebbles, grinding them into sand and mud, carried by the rivers and streams, finally rushing down to broad valleys and open seas, banging and chipping each other as they go, finally settling on the ocean floor. Perhaps as you are shaking you can think about what might happen to your bits of slate and brick in a million years, when the trees in your backyard fall into swamps and are covered by mud, when glaciers move slowly through your little town, gouging out a U-shaped valley, broad and flat, its sides rising straight up, holding onto rocks deposited far from where they first formed. Maybe you can think about your own small body, lying in a bed of clay and settled to the bottom of the sea, covered and squeezed by layer upon layer, hardening under heat and pressure, crystallizing, buckling and folding until you are made-over into a beautiful stripe of red, pushing up into the high, high cliffs, now becoming yellow, now readily burning under the sun, now cracking and splitting into another thin, flat layer.

KAREN ASHBURNER

## *And the Woodpeckers with Their Beaks and the Owls in the Night*

HERE'S A VERY noisy picture for our little girl. Everywhere there is sound, ticking and steaming in the kitchen, whirring and rapping, back and forth, in the basement and on your rooftop. Do you hear it, girl? It never stops to even brush its teeth or say goodnight to its mother. It does not need to be tucked in or say its prayers. It is strong and willful. It will wake you with a clank, it will grate its teeth upon your walls and the panes of your windows, dripping and sloshing. It will grow roots in your bed and scatter its seeds with the wind, its whistle so shrill, its bell going bong-bong. What do you hear at night, pretty baby? Everywhere the cows are mooing, the pigs are squealing, the hawks are screeching as they fall from the sky with their talons and their beaks. And you can look away if you want, sweet baby, but they will still fall long and hard for their dinner and the songbirds will keep chirping and singing to themselves and the woodpeckers with their beaks and the owls in the night, they all know nothing of it. Only you, only you with the big blue eyes can hear the unzipping of zippers and the moaning, the soft, quiet moaning in the next room.

*And the Woodpeckers with Their Beaks and the Owls in the Night*

There's the phone, someone wants to talk to you, dear girl. There's a train, coming down the track. Can't you hear it, pretty thing? Can't you get the hell out of the way? Can't you tell the sound of the ticking tic-toc on the clock in the hall from the click-clack of a train? It wants to run you down; it wants to scrape its shiny wheels against your pretty insides, turn you into a machine that bang-bangs through the night. It wants to see you marching in time with all the other little feet; the wind rustling in the leaves, the rain tapping on the windows. But you are not a machine just yet, you are still just a sweet apple, changing your shape every day as you hang from the tree. You are still just a pussy cat, purring and mirawing when you are hungry, hissing at the dark when you are tired and afraid. One day you will learn there are many other animal sounds you can make. One day you will find all of the sounds and make them for yourself, in your own noisy picture. One day you will roar and chirp and paw and clickety-clack like a drum; you will blow hard and long into your trumpet; you will boom and crash and wham and crunch, metal against metal, until your hands are stained red like the beak of the hawk, when the rest of have long gone to sleep, when the rest of us hear nothing but the constant ringing of morning in our ears.

KAREN ASHBURNER

## *In the Center of That Red Chaos*

I DREAM WE are watching television, a funny show about two people who are in love but won't act on it. You say nobody wants to see a happy couple. You kiss my nipple. I moan. You laugh at the television. I say my heart is breaking. You whisper something in my ear. There is a slight pain in my head that feels like a reversible trench coat. I ask you to read a poem to me, something sad, something with a tinted nuance. You say I shouldn't use words like tinted nuance, that no one will understand what I am trying to say.

I say the whole world will understand what I say if I repeat myself enough. You say the world isn't listening, you say their hearing is superficial and flighty. You kiss my nipple. I moan. Do you know that I am half edible? There is a slight pain in my head that feels like blue summer daylight. I say read me a poem about sex, something written when sensuality was still in everyone's blood. You say you don't understand but you know a poem by Kenneth Koch. You don't know the name but you have a part of it memorized.

I tell you I have no boyfriend. I tell you I went to the beach yesterday. I was wearing a green sweater. I say there were origami birds in the sky. You say you won't ask questions about

the other boys. I say there are no other boys. You say you won't ask questions. There is a slight pain in my head with a silvery tint. I tell you to slap my face. You laugh and pour yourself some juice. Slap me, I say. Bite my nipple. Don't you know I'm half edible? You laugh and drink your juice. I suggest we start a romance, my hand in your back pocket, your hand in my shirt. You say, didn't we do that already? I say no, we were only pretending.

Across the street there is a farm. I say is that cow wearing a pink organdy frock? You laugh. We are animals, I say. Let's have sex in the tall grass and pretend it's the edge of the world. You suggest a shoebox. I bite your nipple. You slap my face. We are swimming from leaf to leaf. We are drawing jerky, zigzagging lines across a blue sky. Nothing I say is really what I want to say. There is a pain in my head that feels like Kenneth Koch. You kiss my neck. I think about sending a handful of sand in the mail, shells and broken bits of coral. I imagine us on a green blanket, your warm hands on my back, your mouth on my neck. I imagine a sweet wind, and a sky of white origami birds.

MIKE YOUNG

## *A Certain Chapped Place*

Barbie leapt into a brawl  
with a belligerent couch  
and my patient lips  
wired to my slick teeth  
shackled by sinew & blood  
all the way up to my  
frumpy panicked caffeine addict  
of a brain

who keeps insisting  
to see the manager, saying  
Michael, she'll tell you again  
she prefers handsome men—  
but for you, she is making exceptions.

Well, Mister Worrywimp  
don't you think I know that?  
Isn't it always like this, when the pillow  
is vodka curdled  
and Saturday lurks in the ticks  
of an overlooked red clock.  
Tiny right now as a daydream,

it'll be a diner  
where we're still a little drunk,  
making jokes about honey packets,  
or how the coffee tastes  
like carrots soaked in dish soap,  
where I will wonder two things:

first, if the waitress  
with the faded tattoo on her neck  
smiles bits of leftover prayers  
from a certain chapped place in her heart,  
or if I'm imagining things.

And second, if anyone notices —  
I bet they don't.

Because after the finishing line,  
which is coming out soon,

(just as soon  
as we clear out another couple  
teenage legionnaires  
from the spare bedroom,  
after their filthy scant slivers  
of a holy spectacle  
have shriveled)

after that line, when all is said,  
(but mostly done)  
I'm not as compassion peppered  
as I pretend to be  
to get laid.

Look, they're coming out now.  
Look, Barbie, you slut:

MIKE YOUNG

he's as ugly as me: a worried wimp.  
She's a future waitress with a bloody neck.  
Why, they're basically us.

I think our hearts are stopping,  
and show no signs of letting up.



MYUNG! JOH

## *Her Father, the Pope*

YOUR GIRLFRIEND'S NAME is Angela Bloom, and today you are meeting her father, the Pope.

You wait together outside a coffee shop down the street from the Mall. The two of you are meeting him in half an hour outside the Washington Monument. She keeps telling you that he is a very nice man, that you shouldn't be worried or overly concerned that you will make an idiot of yourself. You ask if he's going to be wearing the hat.

"No," she says. She looks very pretty today, in a white sundress with lace along the modestly high-cut neckline. You begin to wonder how her bra and underwear aren't showing through the white cotton—these myriad delicate tricks all women seem to have—but then you quickly stop yourself. You're meeting the Pope in half an hour, and here you are thinking about his daughter's undergarments.

Angela seems calm enough but you can tell she is nervous because she is smoking a cigarette, which she rarely does unless she's drinking. She blows the smoke far away from herself; a tiny flake of ash lands on the back of your hand, white and delicate as a snowflake. After she stubs her cigarette out, she pulls a piece of gum from her purse and sticks it in her mouth. "Dad hates it when I smoke," she says. "Smell me?"

You stick your face next to hers, near the warm place where her shoulder meets her neck, and inhale deeply. She smells of soap and shampoo and clean sweat, and only the slightest dry

tang of smoke. You want to kiss her neck, but you draw back. Her moist, dark eyes, which are almost too far apart, make her look young and breakable right now. "You're fine," you tell her.

"You are, too, mister," she says, smiling at you. "It's going to be a good day."

"So, do I need to talk Latin or what?" you ask, getting back to the matter at hand. You hope not. The only phrase you can recall from your high school Latin days is "*ad astra per aspera*," the state motto of Kansas. This will get you nowhere with your girlfriend's father. "I don't remember shit from Latin—"

"Calm down, dumbass," Angela says patiently. "He's from New Jersey. People from Trenton don't speak Latin to each other, do they?"

"Okay," you say. You wonder if it would be tacky to ask your girlfriend's father for an autograph, and decide to play it by ear when the time comes.

Thinking back, you realize you were waiting for something like this to happen. She was too perfect to come without emotional baggage, or some sort of pathology, or a pontiff. You were on guard from the day you met her, and got increasingly nervous as time progressed and nothing went wrong. You couldn't force yourself to believe that this thing was problem-free. You started to worry constantly that she would dump you, because especially compared to her, you are so neurotic and altogether useless. Your ulcer came back and you began to break out again for the first time in years.

Angela is a successful public interest lawyer. Every day, she hits the hard, gritty streets of D.C. and saves poor single mothers from being evicted by the arbitrary cruelty of crooked landlords. You, on the other hand, are currently doing freelance writing from your apartment for an aggressively mediocre sitcom, *Call Me Daddy*, which concerns the trials and tribulations of a divorced father living with his two daughters and flamboyantly gay older brother. You once sat down and tried to make a list of

jobs that contributed less to society than your own, and failed. Even "Bookie" and "Phonebook Editor" strike you as more functional than "Sitcom Writer." Sometimes it still depresses you to see your old college volumes of Shelley and Blake on your shelf, bristling with Post-It notes that highlight what you once thought was the evidence of your brilliance. You made peace long ago with your punctured dreams of becoming a Nobel laureate, or at least a hotshot English professor wearing tweed at some university. But when you spend time with Angela you are newly disappointed in how you've let yourself down.

Furthermore, Angela is the type of person you have always secretly called "Milk-and-Honey Women" when you've seen them on the bus. What gives them away, these champions of public transportation and organic yogurt, is how clean they look, like they've just come from a long bath and left all their grime like a second skin floating in the tub. You used to scorn them, but have finally admitted to yourself that you are just plain intimidated. You can't believe a Milk-and-Honey Woman could date someone like you for very long — dirty, helpless, hopeless. Something was bound to be wrong either with her or, more likely, with you.

So in a way, the day Angela told you about her father, the Pope, was the day you had been fearing from the start. You were in bed with her late one morning, holding her and feeling completely content, when she grew quiet and serious. You thought *This is it* and knew she was going to break up with you. Then she dropped the holy bomb.

Your response was incomprehension, followed by disbelief, and then sheer terror. You made her put her clothes back on before you would continue the conversation. What are you doing, she demanded as you shoved her out of bed and threw her shirt at her: I'm trying to explain here.

Explain over breakfast, you said as you leapt into your boxers and pulled your pants from the lamp where Angela had flung them the night before. The truth was that even though you

are an atheist, you had the slightest smidgen of concern that there might be a special place in Hell, an extra-hot brimstone cavern, for those dirty bastards who screwed the Pope's daughter. But you didn't want to say so, of course — you might sound ignorant.

Over untouched cereal and grapefruit halves she explained everything: how her mother had died when she was born, how her father had quit teaching theology and joined a seminary, and how eventually she had been adopted by her aunt and uncle. Her father rose through the ranks and then that was that, really. She still remained close to him, but out of the attention of the media. She didn't tell you until now, three months into the relationship, because she didn't want to scare you away like the others. Her eyes began to brim with tears as she told you this last part, and you could see how much she feared loneliness.

What's there to be scared of, you said, and put your hand over hers. But to yourself you thought, *Now things get hard.*

Angela looks at her watch and says, "We should start heading over now." You nod. She takes your hand and you leave a five on the table, and together you begin walking.

The Monument, sharp and white against the blue of the sky, looms larger with every step. It looks like a giant nail thrust through the ground from below. You are reminded of a poem in which Wordsworth, as a young boy, is rowing his way across a lake at night, and looks up to find that the mountain that seemed so far away is towering threateningly above him, closer and closer with every pull of his oars. The sublime, you recall, is something so vast in size or scope that it transcends human comprehension — it is the source of both beauty and terror.

"There he is," she says, gripping you more tightly. You swallow. "Dad!" she calls.

Yes, there he is. Even from this distance you recognize his face from magazines and TV, but now he is dressed in a cardigan instead of flowing, gold-embroidered white robes. He is about

your height, maybe a couple inches shorter, and he is smiling at the two of you. He is not wearing the hat.

You feel weak with nervousness and an unexpected giddy excitement. You are about to meet the Pope. God's ambassador on earth. First-name basis with Yahweh himself. Probably the only man alive who's got a guaranteed ticket into heaven. Because you forget, for now, that you are pretty much an atheist, and that you have never believed in anything but yourself. Maybe this will be the turning point. You imagine shaking his hand, and feeling divinity flow through you like a stream of liquid electricity. If there is a God, meeting the Pope will be as close as you'll ever get to Him.

When the two of you are a few yards away, Angela separates herself from you and runs to her father, the Pope, and they embrace. You feel awkward as you hover in the background. He looks at you over her head, and you immediately feel that he *must* know you have been sleeping with—*fucking!*—his daughter. Even regular fathers can tell, and you figure this one is at least partly omniscient. He pulls away from Angela and regards you a moment longer.

"*Salve, et pax tecum,*" he says.

Before your palms have time to get damp, Angela rolls her eyes and pokes her father—the Pope—in his ribs. "Dad, cut it out—nobody ever finds that funny." She looks embarrassed.

You laugh nervously in a "Good one, sir!" kind of way, and instantly feel like an asshole.

The Pope chuckles. "I always think it's pretty funny, myself. Pleased to meet you." He shakes your hand with a firm grasp, like a politician or a high school principal.

Over the next half hour, you and the Pope walk slow, large circles around the perimeter of the Monument, getting to know each other. Angela walks between the two of you, with one arm linked through yours and the other through her father's. You realize that if you blow it now, you've definitely lost Angela for good, and the very thought of it nauseates you.

MYUNG! JOH

"Angela tells me you were an English major in college," he says. "I majored in English and Religion, myself. You're a writer now?"

"Uh, yes," you say uncomfortably, praying he won't ask you what you write.

"Writing is a fine and noble art," he says, somewhat vaguely. "Expressions of the human soul calling out through the ages." You wonder what he would say if he knew that last night's episode of *Call Me Daddy* involved the comic hijinks of a transvestite babysitter.

The three of you pass a juice vendor on your fourth trip around the Monument. "Angela," the Pope says, "would you be a dear and grab us a lemonade. I'm feeling parched."

Your own throat goes dry. "I'll get it," you say a little too quickly.

"Don't worry about it," says Angela, "you got the coffee earlier. I'll catch up with you two in a second." She withdraws her arms and you watch her walk to the end of the juice line, which seems to have suddenly grown to an interminable length. She waves, smiling. You look at the Pope, whose friendly gray eyes have taken on a shrewd edge.

"It's okay, son," he says. "I don't bite. Let's keep walking, shall we."

"Yes, sir."

He does not invite you to call him by his first name. "I don't know how much of Angela's unusual situation she's told you about," he says as the two of you continue your walk.

"Not a whole lot. I mean, just the basics."

He nods. "Yes. So you know about her aunt and uncle."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, let me tell you something, son. It broke my heart to let them adopt her. But you understand, growing up as the Pope's daughter would have been incredibly limiting. The Vatican is no place for a young girl."

"I can understand that — "

"I mean, think about it. Being in the spotlight like that, traveling all the time. It would have been awful for her, not to mention dangerous —"

"Yes, I totally agree —"

"— but it wasn't an easy decision to make. I made it because I felt I had an important calling. We all have our callings—our reasons to live, if you will. I had mine, and you have yours."

You wonder for a moment whether that is true, but out loud you say, "Of course, sir."

"Let me tell you about a story I read once," he says, resuming the walk. "I read it some time ago, it was by a very good writer—his name escapes me now. It has to do with a father, a good man, who goes to tremendous lengths for his daughter. Tremendous lengths. At the end of the story . . ." The Pope drifts off for a moment, pensive. Your heart is beating hard.

"At the end of the story, he says that God never would have given His daughter to us. His son, sure. But never His daughter." He is looking at something far away and a shadow seems to fall over his eyes. "You see, daughters are different."

Suddenly he barks out a laugh. "What a writer! Could've had him excommunicated for that one, hey?" he shouts, and slaps you on the back with a force you estimate as being halfway between *joyial* and *unbelievably hard*.

He stops and faces you. "What you need to understand, son, is that I may be the Spiritual Father to many of God's children, but I am an earthly father to only one."

"Yes, sir."

"And I love her very, very much," he says slowly, lowering his voice. He puts his hand on your shoulder. It feels heavy. "Very much."

You nod.

"I like you, son. You seem like a nice young man. Just be careful with my little girl. Treat her as she *deserves* to be treated." A meaningful look is given.

MYUNG! JOH

"Yes, sir," you whisper.

The Pope pauses. "I'd like to know one thing. And I ask you to be honest with me."

"Yes, sir?"

He pulls you closer. "Is Angela smoking again?"

You are saved when you hear Angela behind you. "Hey, guys!"

The two of you turn to face her. She is standing before you, adorable, lit up by the sun, holding an enormous bucket full of icy lemonade with both hands. "It was a better deal than three smaller cups. I thought we could share," she explains. "I got three straws."

"Sounds just fine!" the Pope says heartily. As all of you lean in to take a sip together, you hope she won't notice the sweat that has formed on your upper lip.

"Mmm, that sure hits the spot," her father says.

"So was Dad bustin' your chops while I was gone?" Angela teases you. You smile faintly. The Pope beams.

As you and Angela ride back to your place on the Metro, you feel oddly disappointed. Everything went moderately well—it could have been a sitcom episode itself. He seemed to have liked you okay, and even gave you a conspiratorial wink as you and Angela sent him off in his limo. Certainly there have been worse meetings with the fathers of girlfriends. And Angela's father *is* the Pope, after all . . . As you reflect on this, however, you feel deflated, confused, and worst of all, the same as you did this morning.

But that evening as you curl up with your girlfriend, Angela Bloom, on the couch in your living room, you remember that you are happy, happy in a way that makes you grit your teeth and shiver on the inside because it is almost unbearable. She is so small that you can envelop her entire body. Her delicate bones make her feel like a tiny, perfect bird at rest in your arms.



ESTRELLA DEL VALLE

## *Shut Down, Baby*

I NEVER LIKED the story of Rosita Elvirez, a poor woman, she was murdered because she didn't want to go dancing, later they made her a ballad and then an example for all women, women, like me, who have got into despising men. That's why, I tell you, Mister, I don't blame myself, yes, I love to dance, here everything is so pretty, the lights, the people, when the MC announces, "Here tonight, we have the most important representative of Tex-Mex: Tish Hinojosa and her band," and couples go out on the floor to dance, get together, move away, get closer, one, two, look, *así, así*, a little bit closer, and well, everything is fine until you meet a gringo who wants to dance with you, and you pretend not to understand him, but he follows you and follows you until he forces you to be with him, of course, then he asks for a few six-packs and *zaz!*—before you know it he forces the beer on you, and you end up with a stupid face, just gulping down the beer and far from the table, everybody looks at you, but nobody does anything to defend you, everybody laughs because, of course, they know you're *hecho en México*, you're not from around here, you don't know how to drink with a gringo, and they force you to sit, and they laugh at you, your *Torreoneero* accent. You know how that feels, Mister, well, it's horrible, yes, you can't say no because this guy is stronger than you and takes you to the dance floor and

comes so close to you, puts his hands on your back and his hands go down, go down, Mister, until here, look, until here, and he doesn't let go. He drags you all over the floor and then whispers in your ear, "C'mon, baby, let's get cozy," but you don't like it, but he's insistent, and well, you go out of there, leaving Tish Hinojosa singing alone "Jesusita in Chihuahua" to cumbia, country, western, that pisses you off, look, because you buy your ticket to see Tish, not to go out with some tasteless gringo, well, like I said, Mister, you leave and they take you over there in the dark where they think they can take advantage of you, where you can't scream or ask for help. Don't look at me like that, it's true, these guys think if you're alone, they can do anything they want with you 'cause they're white and you're brown, that's why they take us over there and lift our skirt, tell us, "More, more, Spanish girl? Do you wanna more?" and you keep quiet, wanting to get rid of them, feeling their white breath mixes with mine, then I have to act in self-defense 'cause gringos want to go too far with me, they see me alone in a foreign country where nobody wants to speak Spanish and nobody does anything and I do like dancing, I have always liked it since when I was a little girl, Mister, but these guys, they're all the same, white or pocho, all the same, they don't know how to dance the way I like; imagine if a white girl were in my shoes, ah! true, then yes, poor little gringa, she's so alone, so pale, like Mennonite cheese, and then yes, you guys will justify what she does, but you're alone in this country, Mister, and that's why they abuse you and, well, at this moment, just at this moment when you remember my piece of Chamizal Park, the dead laborers, you remember you always carry the knife stashed in your bra in case something happens and well: zaz! suddenly this white jelly-like thing stays on your hand, it doesn't come off, it stays on your hand, you hear the screams, but you understand nothing, and you know the others can hear, but they don't pay attention because they always take me far away, away, where nobody hears anything, then I shut them up – zaz! zaz! – so that this thing on my hand comes off, so that you shut up once for all, so that I can go

back and keep on dancing 'cause I put on a new dress I bought in the mall to enjoy dancing and the damn gringo ruined it, but he keeps bugging me, his body follows there and you have to bury him, because in El Paso it's so windy and sand falls down and you can't bury them deep enough, the wind makes sure to leave 'em exposed. Now, will you let me go, let me go, no? No, I don't know how many, six or seven or more, all of them were white men like you, Mister, like you don't listen to me when I'm telling you I don't want to dance, I don't want your six-packs, I want nothing from you 'cause you speak only ingles and I'm warning you.

*translated by Toshiya A. Kamei*

P.J. UNDERWOOD

## *Sing Your Blues*

CAMPERS COME OUT here often, out to the edge of the long, low, shallow lake. They bring their GPS, their propane tanks, vacuum-packed gourmet dinners, bottles of wine, champagne, generator-run coolers, bug lights, bug spray, eighteen changes of clothes, the latest top-of-the line rod and reel with glinty, matching flies, and bottle openers. They like roughing it.

Greg and Bill like scaring the campers, usually young couples. They run down, shit matting their assfur. Greg will kick things over, throw some things out into the lake because he likes the splashing, while Bill presses his face to the mosquito-mesh tent window to oogie-boogie the cowering people. They come back, seven feet of tittering idiot apiece. Maybe one of them gets caught in a blurry picture, or in a grainy movie. They'll giggle some more, and then a bird will flit by, or one of them will hear a deer, or a turkey gobbles far enough away for one of them to hear. They lope off, leaving me alone.

Maybe later, I'll hear Greg tromping out in the lake, chasing moonlight-mercuried darts of fish, or the angry droning of bees as Bill attacks a hive.

I'll sit, and sometimes hear, just out by the edge of the camp, the woman sobbing and the man shushing her in whispered tones.

The tent, winking lantern light shadows on the inside, is framed in tall, dark-barked trees, the pines and cedars, and the

silvery, peeling river birch. And I imagine he's rubbing her back in soft circles or hugging her because he doesn't know what else to do but holding seems right. Her shoulders jerk and twitch, but she holds him back, elbows down, loose because her hands are shaking. She cries muddy makeup tracks on his neck and shirt, breathes a wet breath through her nose, and is comforted even though she is frightened. He wants to cry, too, but doesn't.

Eventually, the man will play brave and peek, like a baby breaching, out of the tent, head first, then worm out. Turning in a circle in the middle of their little civilization-away-from-civilization, eyes wide, he'll see that the brutes are gone, and they'll pack up — most often leaving all their things behind — and drive off in their gurgling metal truck, and, I imagine, swear to never come back.

And I'll go down to the camp, and dig through their things; sometimes I'll wear the man's hat or sniff at the food. I'll kick dirt over the fire. If there is a CD player or a stereo with batteries, I listen to it, sitting in the tiny clearing of their camp, pulling the earphones tight over my head or turning the stereo low. The songs they bring are sometimes romantic, soft and throaty, with velvety horns or piano. Maybe there are sad songs, but those are my favorites.

I'll sit and cross my legs, and I listen. And, always, the batteries die, music trailing off into night sounds.

There is a hollow stump southwest of the lake, and I take the CDs and stuff them there and leave. Then, I find Greg and Bill, probably licking honeycomb from their sting-welted fingers, and sit with them. When they doze off, bellies full, I stalk back to the stump and look at the disks, mirrored backs reflecting tree branches and stars.

And, one by one, I break them.

The sky pinks and I walk away from the stump, brushing over my tracks with a cedar branch. I'll find Greg and Bill, heavy chests rising and falling slowly, and lie down, and sleep.

ALAN ROSSI

## *Homecoming King*

JOHN LIPKIN TOOK a drag off his cigarette and rummaged through his desk drawer looking for some bud. There wasn't any. He remembered looking last night, but he looked again now. There wasn't a thing, just some stems and seeds. He rubbed his temples, thinking of his father telling him to get off pot and other things or, if he was going to stay on it, to pull the seeds from every bag because they caused impotence. He snuffed the cigarette out in the ashtray.

He could call JP. If he was home he might have a bag.

He could go over to Laura's place and smoke with her, but she was probably gone already.

He decided to make tea. There were enough stems and seeds for this. He went down the hall to the kitchen. On the way he noticed the pain in his ankle and saw that it was a little swollen. It wasn't bad. He tried to think of what he had done last night but couldn't remember.

Water began to bubble and he poured it into a coffee cup with the stems. The water colored green. It wouldn't taste good, but it might do the trick. He let the tea steep for a few minutes, the water swirling green, steam rising up into the room. He poured some vodka into the cup and looked out the window onto the main road into campus, waiting for the tea to cool. There wasn't a soul on the roads, not a sound in the complex. The campus was

empty. Everyone had gone home for the week. John had waited for a phone call from his father telling him when to come home for Thanksgiving dinner, but the call never came.

John stood watching out the window, the tea warm in his hands. He listened to the sleet on the window. He put both his hands around the cup and drank it slowly, letting it warm him up. It was okay, he thought. It wasn't so bad being there without anybody. There was a good freeze coming down. It was quiet. He had the place to himself and could turn up the heat while it froze outside. Nobody was there. He could use the kitchen and make a dinner. He could put on Bitches Brew and play it loud and late.

After he made another cup, stems and vodka and hot water, he put on his overcoat, his Lions hat, gloves and a scarf. He didn't know where he was going. He went down the four flights of stairs, tea sloshing out of the cup onto his gloves. The tea seeped through the gloves, burning him, and then outside the cold hit his hands. He let his car warm up, rubbing his hands at the vents before going.

On the road, John thought he saw JP's truck pass onto the highway. He followed, but when he got next to the truck it wasn't JP inside.

He got on the loop going north. They would just be putting the turkey in, he thought. His father would be drinking a whiskey, absently reading the paper and watching football. Aunt Jen and Uncle John wouldn't show up. The roads were too bad. He was going to show up though. He didn't know why. It hadn't come to him yet, but it would. He just knew he had already made the decision to go. His father hadn't called and he was going. Maybe he had quit school, but he was working now. He wanted to let his old man know something. He wanted to let them all know something. It was his family too.

On the freeway a few cars crawled to their destinations. He passed a snowplow and took the off ramp to Windham Lakes.

The golf course sparkled white green. The lake on eighteen was a dull mirror and he stopped the car and got out. He didn't know what he was going to do when he got there. His father would throw him out. Maybe he wouldn't do anything. Maybe he had called last night and John had missed it. He sipped the last of the tea and vodka and tossed a few rocks into the lake. They hit the surface, skidding on the ice, sometimes breaking through, leaving a small hole. He thought if you could be careful enough you could reach in that hole, gently pick up the thin surface of the lake and see beneath it, the fish swimming in the deeper, warmer parts, though there probably weren't any fish. He remembered that Superman once froze a lake with his cooling breath, then carried the huge icicle to a burning chemical plant, dropping it over the flames and saving dozens of important scientists. There weren't any fish then either. John tossed another stone and finished the tea on the way back to his car.

He sat in his car two blocks away from his house, watching it. He waited a long time, not thinking of anything except that he was out of the house and they were in it. It wasn't so bad, though. Sitting there, watching the street was okay at first. Smoke rose out of some chimneys. Then it began to get colder. He hadn't seen a single person out on the street and he could feel the temperature falling. John warmed his hands on the heat coming from the dash. The sleet was falling harder.

It was his family too, he thought. He hadn't missed a Thanksgiving in that house. It was his house too. He was a part of it as much as anyone. He had bought knives to cut the turkey one year. A set of good fucking knives. It was cold out and he was going in. He turned the car on and drove to the driveway.

He was all the way to the door before he remembered he had no key. The spare was gone from under the rug. He checked above the door, under the flowerpots. It was cold out and he didn't have a key but he wasn't about to knock. He stood there shivering for a moment. He didn't know what he was doing.



Then he tried the door and it opened. It was warm and smelled good inside. He could hear the television. Football was on in the kitchen and the family room. He rushed through the hallway. His father sat at the kitchen table with a whiskey, the paper in his hands, but really he was looking over it at the storm outside. John didn't look at his father. He went straight for the kitchen. There was an assortment of meats and cheeses, picked over and scattered on the countertop. The dog came up to him and smelled his crotch. It slowed him up, but he kept moving. His sister and grandmother sat in the family room with the TV on. His grandmother was asleep. His sister turned to look. The dog was at his crotch, nuzzling it. He pushed the animal out of the way, still moving through the kitchen.

What the hell, his father said.

He didn't listen. He didn't know what he was doing, but he was very calm. He was just doing it. He went straight for the knives. They sat near the toaster, the set he bought a long time ago for his father with his allowance. It had been a Christmas gift. His father used them to cut the turkey every year.

What're you doing? his father said.

John didn't answer. He grabbed the big carving knife. His father came after him. John held the knife out, looking at him, not knowing what he was doing. The dog was at his feet smelling them.

I'm taking this, John said.

You can't take anything from here.

I'm taking this. This is mine. I bought this for you and now I say it's no longer yours. This is mine.

His father came closer, and John held the knife out further, pointing it at him. Don't move, he said. I have something to say.

His father looked at him for a minute, then backed away and went toward the garage. Take it if you want, his father yelled. There are other things, too. How about you take those? All the shit that's yours.

I have something I need to say to you, John said.

Noise came from the garage, his father tripping over the toolbox. John dropped the knife. Without thinking he grabbed the turkey from the oven. His sister was in the kitchen now.

You're crazy, she said. What the hell are you doing?

He tucked the turkey under his arm like a football. It wasn't even hot yet. They had just put it in.

You're nuts, she said. You've smoked yourself into idiocy.

The turkey juices went all over his coat but that didn't matter. The dog jumped up, biting viciously at the bird, pulling off a small chunk and some of the skin. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his grandmother sit up.

Where's he taking the turkey? she said.

John went out the front door quickly. It was still coming down outside, heavier now, sleet and snow. He got in his car and put the turkey on the seat beside him. The garage door went up. He saw his father getting into the family car with a box filled with records, footballs, and old sneakers. John pulled out of the driveway fast, skidding on the ice, nearly knocking over the neighbor's mailbox.

He didn't know what he was doing but it all seemed very important, like it had to happen.

The streets were bad now through the neighborhoods. It was hard to drive fast without the tires slipping. His father was behind him. John didn't know where he was going. He tried to think of where. He tried to think of a good place to pitch the turkey with his father watching, just toss it right out the window, into an open trashcan or the goddamn lake. He watched his father's car in the rearview mirror. When he was sure his old man wasn't ready for it, he turned right, hard and fast, skidding on the ice, going up over the curb into a lawn, knocking over a plastic deer, coming back out of the lawn and heading toward his old high school. His father wasn't behind anymore. John drove past the school to the practice football field. He remembered being there with his father before, practicing for hours in the summer,

the grass green and dried brown in other spots. The field was white now, covered over in ice.

He took the turkey and went to the trunk. There were old footballs, baseball gloves and the tee he'd used when he was a place-kicker there. On the field the grass crackled under his feet. The field goal posts were glazed in ice, and behind the field the trees swayed and creaked in the wind. He took the turkey out from under his arm, lint and dust and dog hair on the bird. He teed it up. It took a while, trying to get that fucking turkey teed up, twisting it around, stuffing falling out, but it worked finally. The head fit on the tee okay. There was a little steam coming off of it. John took three steps back, two steps to the left and kicked it to the uprights, missing badly. He felt pain shoot up his leg and remembered that his ankle was swollen. This was a small bird and it was heavier than a football by a good deal and would probably hurt to kick even without a swollen ankle.

His father pulled up in the car. His old man carried the box and dropped the junk onto the field. The box thunked in the snow and a sneaker fell out. Then his father ran to get the turkey.

You want to kick the turkey, his old man yelled at him. Let's fucking kick it then.

I want to tell you something, John yelled back. I don't want anything from you.

I don't want to hear a goddamn thing, his father said. Let's kick this thing.

John watched him jog up to the tee. His face was red. His old man planted the bird on the tee, holding it with the tip of his fingers.

We'll have to move it closer, John said. It's too heavy.

His father moved the bird and the tee ten yards closer.

John stood there, watching him. Then he backed up, hearing the crunching of the icy ground, and kicked the bird dead-on through the uprights, stuffing flying out, the right wing breaking off at impact. His father ran after it and brought it back, a stub of wing-bone sticking out.

You want to fucking kick the bird, his father said. You want to do whatever you want. Fine.

His father teed it up again and John kicked it through again. Pieces of turkey flew apart, another wing, but it was a stubborn bird, knew which season it was, and it held together. The ice sheeted down now, mixing with snow. John's face was wet and cold. His father's hair was coated white. His old man's eyebrows were crusting over.

John ran to get the bird again. His father teed it up and John put it through. He got it again and brought it back. John was winded now, sweating, and it was cold. His right foot ached. The turkey was going to pieces. A piece of skin flapped around and the meat had shredded in spots. A wind picked up and John looked over at the pile of old junk, layered in ice. He started laughing.

His father was yelling through the snow and the wind, Again. Let's go again.

Pieces of the turkey were strewn across the ice, covered in the storm. John felt the cold on his face, and knew that his nose and ears were tipped red, the way his father's were.

You want to kick it, his old man said. Let's kick the shit out of it. Let's really fucking kick the hell out of this thing.

John took his normal drop back, just like he used to do, and got ready to kick it again.

It's time that I said something, he said.

But he didn't know what it was anymore.

He watched the snow covering his father's hands. They were shaking, holding the turkey, shivering. The box of old junk on the field was covered with snow and ice. John imagined that if you could find the perfect piece of ice and lift it up maybe everything would stick to it and come up easy like a scab, and you could see beneath the surface to some warmth. John watched his old man freezing there, and felt his own face and foot freezing, going numb, and decided to keep kicking as long as he could.

PATRICK WHITFILL

## *Character Development Through 69*

You don't expect it to happen now, when you're barely undressing your words, showing off the bikini lines of your imagination. This happens later, after you've smelled moonlight in her neck and dangled kisses like honeysuckled vowels. But then, yes, your face in her crotch and hers in yours and suddenly you're twenty summers rolled up and tossed into the backseat of the biggest car you could never afford.

ROSIE SHARP

## ZERK!

### A Spelunking Noise

Charlie called me this morning to ask if I wanted to go hunting for force loops with him. Would I ever! With all he's been telling me about force loops, there was no way I'd pass on the chance to actually witness them. Charlie has this idea that we can harness their power and then, according to him, we can "ride them anywhere." I don't know about that, but he's always had a stronger grasp on physics than I have.

Anyway, lately I've come to realize that if I don't stop crushing people's dreams I'm going to turn out exactly like my grandmother. If Charlie wants me to be supportive, well, that's the least I can do. It will be worth it just to see force loops up close.

I got slightly hung up deciding what to wear. Charlie said we'd be going underground and there would be rocks to climb, so I knew I shouldn't dress nice, but I had this perverse desire to look pretty for the force loops. I compromised, settling on tank top, sweatshirt, battered cargo shorts, and a little red hair bow with tiny white polka dots.

Of course it didn't matter, because once we got a few yards into the cave, it started to become so incredibly dark we

couldn't see a thing. Luckily, Charlie was prepared with one of those helmets that has a flashlight affixed to the front. We proceeded carefully, guided by the tight wedge of illumination.

"We're getting close," he said in a low voice, after what felt like a long time. "I'm going to have to turn off the light, so we don't disturb the force loops."

When he did, I was in the darkest place I'd ever been. I had my hand on the back of Charlie's shirt, following him as he crept forward, and I couldn't suppress the feeling that we were at the edge of a bottomless abyss.

"Charlie," I whispered, because it seemed like a time to whisper, "We're about to fall in."

"Shhh," he said, "It's OK. I know the way." He was climbing up now, and then he stopped very suddenly. Without saying anything, he pulled me up beside him, and steadied my hands on a rock ledge in front of me. I couldn't feel rock above the ledge, so it seemed as though we were peering into a vast opening, but it was so dark that it felt ridiculous to think of it that way. I longed to ask a number of anxious questions, but I sensed Charlie wanted me to be quiet so I kept them to myself. I was feeling cold and alone and a little hungry, but all that was instantly forgotten as the force loops came whooshing overhead.

There are only four words in the English language that end in "–dous" and all of them were invented to describe force loops. Though there was no change in the darkness, I could see the impression they left in the cave, like the rubbery flashes of light on the magnetic tape inside a cassette. But it was the sound of them, organic and unnatural as a zebra's cry, that paralyzed me with nauseated joy.

I knew then that Charlie was right – if we harnessed the power of force loops we could ride them anywhere. But he seemed to have forgotten about that. He took my hand in his and leaned close to me in the darkness. He whispered, "They like your bow."

## The Amputee

My most recent nightmare involved amputees and cannibalism. I was the amputee, and the cannibals were three dirty backwoods men and my mother. They were eating the parts they amputated from me. The excision of my body parts wasn't painful, but as I lay there on a filthy mattress following each physical reduction, my mind was consumed with panicked thoughts of all the things I would never be able to do again.

I woke up alone, shaky and profoundly distressed. Usually I like to sleep by myself, but at that moment I wished very much that someone were there to offer me comfort. With limited options available, I laid one of my pillows next to me, and assigned it a face.

"I had a terrible dream," I told the pillow.

"It's alright now, baby," the pillow said. "I'm here and I won't let anything happen to you." I hugged the pillow close and, vastly reassured, soon fell into a peaceful sleep.

In the morning, as I made the bed, I straightened that pillow into place with particular affection. "Thank you for last night," I said, "I don't know what I would have done if you weren't there." I gave the pillow a little kiss, and then smoothed it away. The pillow remained silent but looked at me as if to say its whole purpose in life was to make my sleeping hours more comfortable, I shouldn't even mention it.

That night I went to sleep with the pillow by my side, a preemptive strike against nightmares. I had no bad dreams, and woke to the pillow gently caressing my cheek. "Sorry," it whispered, "Did I wake you?"

"It's OK," I murmured, "I have to be up in a minute anyway."

"Don't get up," the pillow said. "Stay here with me today. Order Chinese food and finish the novel you've been reading at bedtime, and never leave the apartment or your pajamas." I wasn't going to listen; I even made it onto my feet. But the look the



pillow was giving me when I stood was too enticing, and I found myself right back in bed again. The pillow and I had a lovely day together.

Then it was the weekend. I had forgotten about my plans with Derek on Saturday night, and when I remembered I wasn't as excited as usual. He took me to quite a romantic little bistro, followed by an exclusive screening, part of the independent film festival. When he put his arm around me in the theater it felt unnatural, but I tried to behave as though nothing was wrong. The film had an original script and breathtaking cinematography, but my mind kept wandering back to bed. All I wanted was to lie down and press my face into the pillow.

Derek walked me home, and the more he tried to converse pleasantly about the festival's program, the more he tested my nerves. We stopped at my doorstep, and instead of inviting him in, or giving him a passionate goodnight kiss and an acceptable excuse, I told him that I thought we should take a step back. He accepted it more gracefully than I expected, and that was a great relief. I just couldn't carry on with him, having stumbled across something real.

I could barely wait to get to bed, didn't even bother to wash off all my makeup and brush my teeth.

"You've been with someone else, haven't you?" the pillow said.

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"Don't lie," the pillow said. "I can smell him on you."

"All right," I said, "I was. I swear though, I thought about being here the whole time. You're the one I want." The pillow was cold and silent, and I knew I had ruined yet another good thing.

## Xanhaar

As I was preparing to go away on a three-week women's backpacking retreat, Teddy said he was going to grow a beard in my absence. To be funny, I told him I was going to do the same, but once I got out there it occurred to me that I hadn't brought any shaving supplies. There were obviously no waxing salons in the Appalachians, and anyway, surrounded by women and nature seemed like a perfect time to "let my hair down," as it were.

Over the course of the trip I found myself increasingly proud of my beard, which grew more quickly than I expected, perhaps stimulated by the rigorous physical activity. One night, as we shared a jug of strong moonshine that we'd bartered off a native, I told some of the other women about the beard, and soon several of them had decided to cast in their lots on a beard-growing contest. We measured our progress during group swims. There was some strong competition, but at the end of the trip all agreed that my beard was the unquestionable champion.

By the time I returned to the city, I had mixed feelings about going back to a clean shave. There was something quite liberating about letting my body function as designed, and in general the trip had really opened my eyes to that which was fundamentally worth spending time and energy on.

Teddy was overjoyed to see me, of course, and we made love almost instantly upon my arrival, so the question of my new, more natural look was not addressed right away. Still, I felt it was on his mind in the following days, and sure enough as they stretched into weeks without any sign of depilation on my part, he finally worked up the nerve to mention it to me.

"So, ahm, about the beard . . ." he said during a commercial break, as we sat on the couch together, my feet in his lap.

"What about it?"

"Well, it's a little . . ." he seemed reluctant to continue, hoping I'd take the hint. I did not.

"Lustrous?" I asked. "Impressive?"

"Intimidating," he corrected.

"Well, I've always loved you for being such a secure guy," I reassured him. "I'm sure you can handle it."

"I don't like it," he said. "I want you to shave."

I looked at him from across the couch. If Teddy and I continued on course, he was surely the man I would marry, but I suddenly wondered if I knew him at all. What if I were to fall victim to some sort of total-body paralysis that rendered me incapable of hair-removal? Would he abandon me? "Teddy," I said as reasonably as possible, "Can it be *that* important? I'm still the same woman."

"It's me or the beard," he said. There was absolutely no question in my mind. He slept on the couch that night, and moved out a week later, once he found a place.

Perhaps I had some momentary regrets, but overall it made things much simpler. I didn't have to tell him about the Bigfoot I'd encountered near the peak of Mt. Katahdin and explain that I'd felt an instant, deep connection with him. Xanhaar loved me as I was, and with Teddy gone, we were free to make a go of it, despite the distance.

## The Ex

If I were younger, I would have ignored the rustling in the hydrangea bush. Would have told myself it was only the wind, or a woodland creature, or space aliens – nothing that intended me harm. But I'm not young like that anymore, and this time I wasn't falling for it. I reached for the best weapon my groceries could offer and walked up to the hydrangea, armed with a zucchini.

"You're not fooling anyone," I said. "You might as well come out of there."

He emerged looking sheepish and conciliatory, but I knew better. Around the eyes there was that look of a man who wouldn't be happy until we were lying together in a field with our hands touching and our brains blown out of our heads in a suicide pact.

"I told you to stay away from me," I said. I pointed the zucchini at him, to let him know I wasn't messing around.

"Are you making your zucchini fritters?" he asked, longing and menace carrying equal weight in his tone. "Who are you making them for?"

"I'm just making zucchini," I said, "not that it's any of your goddamn business. Why don't you get out of here?"

No one else would be eating my fritters, so he gave me his happy face. "It's good to see you," he said. "You look beautiful." It wasn't the truth. I had just come from errand running and I wasn't even trying to look presentable, let alone beautiful. But I'd achieved mythic, inhuman status in his mind, blinding him to the day-to-day particulars: zit, unshaved legs, two-week defection from the gym. This only made him more dangerous, apt to compliment me on those days I was dragging and needed reinforcement.

"You need to go," I said.

"I love your zucchini fritters," he said, as though he hadn't heard me, but we both knew he had. "I think about them all the time." He looked to see if compliments to the chef were softening

me up. "Dream about them," he added.

"I don't want to do this anymore," I said.

He looked at me and I could see he was hungry. I could see his salivary response as he thought about consuming me. And then I could feel it happening – my body starting to dissolve, the lines that defined me becoming thin and immaterial. I held up a hand and could see the street behind it. I was growing transparent again.

"Stop doing that," I yelled. "Stop making me imaginary." I gripped the zucchini with all that was left of me and hit him on the head with it. I hit him several times, eventually driving him to the edge of the property. When he got that far I stopped, not entitled to assault him with groceries once he exited my personal property.

I went inside and spent the next forty-five minutes regrouping my remaining existence. The best thing for that is wearing slippers with stuffed animal faces on the toes. When you look at your feet and see something so ridiculous, you know, no matter how it feels, that you must be alive.

## Squirrel Person

My last quarter of college, I had a poli-sci seminar series. It was the final requirement I needed to graduate and I'd put it off until the end because I don't like politics and I don't like science. But the main reason I hated the class was that the teacher was a witch.

Dr. Cloudsbain was an ancient lady with wrinkles around her mouth and white-streaked hair that was always pulled back into a tight bun. I'd have guessed she was somewhere around 300 years old, but like everyone else, was too intimidated to ask. On several occasions I distinctly heard a desperate *ribbit* come from her purse. I struggled to stay on top of my assignments, lest I be forced to attend her office hours, which were held in the woods that surrounded campus.

On the first day of class she pushed aside a rolling chalkboard to reveal a large oven, and said that anyone who came late to lecture would be cooked and eaten for her supper. Her tardy policy was effective—my classmates and I always assembled in a timely and orderly fashion. I found a shortcut through the woods from Remote Lot-C, and used it to ensure my punctuality.

It was from this footpath that I first noticed him. He stood out, even sitting low in the grass over by a fallen redwood. The next time I saw him I was leaving class and under no time constraint, so I walked slightly off the path, close enough to see what he was doing. He was holding a squirrel.

From then on, I saw him all the time. There was always at least one squirrel with him. They seemed to trust and adore him, climbing into his lap to take peanuts, and then sitting there to eat them. He would wrap his hands around them, holding them without squeezing. The squirrels always seemed peaceful, which is never how squirrels seem.

I began to wander closer each time. I wanted to know him. We'd never made eye contact, but I felt sure by now he must be aware of my presence. One day I crept closer than ever before, and he suddenly spoke.

"I'm Kai," he said, without turning to look at me. "I'm friendly."

I froze where I was, unsure whether to bolt or reply. I was late for poli-sci, but suddenly that seemed unimportant. His voice was captivating. I was filled with nameless fear, yet I found myself taking one tentative step after another, until I was standing almost next to him. I crouched on the ground, and sidled even closer. Without thinking consciously about it, I eased my way into his lap and looked up at him. He looked down and held me gently.

## Creature of the Day

It sat on the front stoop to the left of the door and stood when I walked out like it was waiting for me. It wasn't until I stopped to tie my sneaker several blocks later that I realized it had been waiting for me. The creature was behind me, standing about knee-high with a patient expression.

"Hi," I said.

"Mraw," it said.

I went to the sandwich shop, the creature on my heels. The sign said "No Pets" but that didn't apply to my situation — it wasn't my fault if the creature wanted a sandwich. As I walked to the counter I noticed Alan sitting in the corner. During the inevitable run-ins around the neighborhood since we stopped being friends, my policy has been to courteously pretend that at least one of us doesn't exist. Because I had the creature with me, it seemed like less trouble to pretend that Alan didn't exist. I made my usual order, the #18 with six separate modifications — which had always exasperated and embarrassed Alan when we ate here together — and a soda. I looked down at the creature.

"Chips?" I said.

"Mraw," it said. I added chips to my order and paid.

I waited for my sandwich, studiously contemplating the menu board on the wall rather than chance eye contact with the guy who wasn't there. He ruined the charade by walking up to me.

"Hey," he said. "How's it going?"

"Oh, hi Alan," I said, "I didn't see you there." I didn't tell him how it was going.

"Oh," he said, and looked at the floor, conversationally stymied, but only for a moment. "What's that?"

"It's not a pet," I said. "I'm just waiting for my sandwich, and then we'll be on our way."

"Yeah, mine hasn't come yet," Alan said. "I saw you there, and I thought I'd come over and say hi, but I can see you're just the



same."

"Never better," I replied cheerfully, as though he had just now asked me how it was going. The counter guy deposited a whicker plate at the corner table where Alan had been sitting. It was his usual—a #25 with no modifications. Alan didn't like tomatoes, but he always picked them off himself to make a point about how much more considerate of a sandwich shop customer he was.

"Never better," he said, shaking his head sadly at my sameness. "That about sums it up."

"And you," I said, "are still a real waste of tomatoes."

"Mraw," said the creature.

I picked up my order at the counter and left the sandwich shop. The creature came with me to the park, and hopped up to sit on the bench when I stopped to eat my sandwich. It was a windy-sunny day, the sky scraped clean of clouds and the light overbright. I ate my sandwich and drank my soda and squinted at the passers-by. The creature ate most of the chips and my pickle wedge.

L. WARD ABEL

## *The Heat of Blooming*

Two birds,  
prairie birds,  
have wandered far  
and ended up  
here.

A mating pair,  
 chests as gold as a Kansas wash,  
 they are resigned  
 to arrival,  
 home now in the Flint valley.

O, how they must've  
tumbled feverish  
through storm, night,  
sighing all along  
and off-course;

the heat of blooming  
can sometimes  
make lovers  
lose their  
way.

MARC PEACOCK BRUSH

## *Other Habits*

"YOUR WINDOWS ARE open."

I recognized the man but couldn't place him. When I answered the door, there he was.

"In the alley, I saw these windows, one-two-three, just wide open."

I knew him. I knew that I knew him. The slurred speech was part of it.

"You should be more careful, fine woman like you. I have a key somewhere . . ." and he patted his pockets like the discovery of a key would be important to me. Which it would, of course.

Of course. He worked for the landlady. We'd seen him painting the storage loft in back, but that was months ago. Hadn't she fired him? I'd heard that somewhere. We'd heard stories about this man from the other tenants.

"Damn it! Excuse me, my language. Look at these windows, no screens, but that's her fault, not mine, heh. You can see right in there, even," and here he lowered his voice to a wet whisper, "even in the bathroom."

Lou Diamond Phillips, without the diamond. He reminded me of La Bamba, that bronze baby face, only more down-and-out, less fresh. An older La Bamba, greasy and gaunt, as La Bamba might look after chasing a habit for some desperate

span of time. La Bamba smelled, sweat mixed with gin, and tottered in place. There was spittle stuck to his lower lip.

"Because you never know who's looking in there. Bam! Heh, it's just right there when you look."

I thanked him for his concern, to end the conversation. He twisted his neck to look inside the apartment, a clear expression of his desire to be asked in, maybe for a refreshing lemonade or a tall glass of ice water, but I shut the door and locked it in his face.

~

I was on the phone with Gabe's parents three days later when he came back. This phone call was a weekly tradition that none of us could stand to break. Gabe's mother did most of the talking, but his father always chimed in near the end of the conversation with a piece of advice: the basics of retirement planning, the necessity of frequent oil changes, how to fix a toilet, how to play husband and do the things that his son should be doing. Gabe's father was a godsend.

I put them on hold and shut the windows, closed the blinds. The trash cans for our apartment, plus the other three apartments, plus the two recycling bins, stood in the alley, all in a row beneath our bedroom window. When I parted the blinds, there he was, same baseball cap, same windbreaker and frayed jeans. I watched La Bamba cross the alley toward the neighbor's row of trash cans, watched him rifle through the contents, moving them from one bin to another to get at the stuff on bottom. He found three beer cans but only managed to crush two before tripping over his own feet.

Gabe hated our trash cans. Not the actual cans, but their location. I remember the first time he woke up, jumped out of bed and stood there naked, his body stippled with light from the alley. Sound rang through the middle of the night, like someone was in the room. It sounded like tin cans, plucked singly, thrown to the

pavement and crushed under the heel of some rude scavenger. We started wearing earplugs the next night.

I told Gabe's parents that I'd call them back and went into the kitchen to fix myself a drink. La Bamba was still there, passed out in a heap against the alley wall, and I watched him breathe for a while. Before the ice cubes could melt, he'd picked himself up and moved on to someone else's trash.

~

Gabe was a bourbon drinker. I'd always stuck to wine, but now he was gone and there seemed no point to propriety. When I told Gabe's parents about the drunk in our alley, they said, "Take care of yourself. It's just you now so you'll need to be stronger than before." Bourbon's a stronger drink. I certainly feel stronger drinking it.

~

The pastor came to visit after the accident. I tried to be nice but Gabe was the churchgoer, not me. Gabe was always the one to participate in things, to build friendly communities and get deeply involved in them. I made some coffee and offered the pastor a cup. We sat together in the living room for the better part of an hour while she offered condolences, her personal condolences and the condolences of her entire congregation and the condolences that Jesus might offer to someone in my situation. Most of the time, I thought about our new apartment. I thought about ways to make the rent until the insurance money cleared. I wondered what I should do with his clothes. I tried to remember how to program the air-conditioning. But I must have seemed appreciative, or at least attentive, because the pastor eventually left. She said, "There's a family waiting for you every Sunday," and handed me a book, a small leather book full of proverbs. Surely she meant it to lift my spirits, but it just made me feel

heavy, too heavy to lift something as solid as the emptiness where Gabe used to be.

~

The old storage loft wanted to be a luxury duplex but was slow to convert. The landlady lacked construction experience and she tended to hire incompetent people. We'd hear them fiddling with loud tools in the breezeway off the alley. Their radio carried on the breeze through our bathroom window, along with their sawing or nailing or whatever that day's project might be. I was sitting on the toilet, listening to salsa music, when La Bamba's mesh cap passed by the window. This was maybe ten days after the knock at our door.

"Ramon, you there? Ramon!"

I didn't flush. I wanted to keep quiet and watch them through the blinds.

La Bamba had a paper bag and they took turns drinking from it. Or I imagined them drinking in turns, after they turned the corner in the alley and all I could see of them were flashes: a sweaty back, a paint-splattered boot, a reaching hand. It was a good guess because five minutes later, La Bamba pulled an oversize can from the bag, crushed it underfoot and placed the collapsed metal in his pocket.

They walked farther down the alley, out of sight, no doubt toward a liquor store. When they were gone, I followed out the back door, down the steps, through the breezeway, down the alley and picked up the discarded bag. I dug my face in it and drew a deep breath. It smelled clean. It smelled like pressed paper and cold beer. A rough smell, but somehow familiar and masculine. I took the bag inside with me and placed it on the table next to the front door, the table where Gabe used to sort the mail. He'd go through and throw out the junk, make a pile for bills and another for everything else worth saving. This was one of his jobs, something he liked to do for us. The table had been empty for ten

months before I put the paper bag there. It sat there, creased and crinkled but still upright.

~

I'm not sure what the pastor would say about forming habits, coming to rely on them, but that's how I got by. I suppose she'd have to support certain habits, like prayer or Bible study, but not others. I continued to call Gabe's parents every week. Each night, I set our alarm clock, put in earplugs and tried to fall asleep without thinking too many empty thoughts. After work, I fixed myself a drink, at first white wine and later bourbon. And I made new habits when the old ones lost their hold. I started reading the book of proverbs again. The heaviness set in, but I found a way to lighten it. On my way out the door in the morning, I'd rip out a page and read its proverb – *For my husband is not home; he has gone on a long journey* – and I'd use this to jog a memory – Gabe packing the trunk for a camping trip, trying to fit a long tent in a short space. I'd write the memory down. I'd fold the page in half, then in quarters, then in eighths and toss it in the paper bag. *Blows that wound cleanse away evil*; Gabe with his thumb under cold water, angry after cutting himself with a kitchen knife. *Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off*; Gabe behind me, rubbing my neck and kissing the top of my head as I watched TV from the couch. This became one of my jobs, to fill up the paper bag with little scraps of memory, one little memory at a time.

~

About a month after that first knock, on a beautiful fall day with crisp breezes and all of the windows open, I heard a crash inside the apartment. More like a heavy thud. I grabbed the axe handle beside my bed, a gift from Gabe's father, and found La Bamba face down on my bathroom floor.

He was pretty beat up. The exertion of pulling himself to the window ledge, a full five-foot pull-up, and the subsequent challenge of squeezing himself through the narrow wooden frame, these were part of it, but something else had gotten to him. La Bamba latched onto the toilet and looked up at me with a face full of cuts and bruises.

"Wide open . . . fine lady . . . careful."

Absolutely trashed. Wasted. I knew this man. I was beginning to know him too well.

"Gimme a hand here."

And I did. I held the axe handle high in my right hand and pulled him with my left. I asked him what he was doing in my apartment. I asked him what he wanted, but his eyes went wet and blank.

"Your windows are open."

We got him to his feet and I pushed him out of the bathroom, toward the front door.

"Hold on now, just hold it. One drink, gimme one damn drink."

I told him to get out and never come back, to stop with the trash and the windows, to go away, somewhere far away. I told him that he didn't work here anymore. La Bamba propped himself against the refrigerator and took off his baseball cap, scratched his greasy hair.

I could have beaten him over the head with the axe handle, and I thought about that, how good that might feel. Or the police. I thought about calling them and having him arrested. Or a hug, I could have given him a big hug and told him that everything would be okay. We stood there in the kitchen and these many options crossed my mind before I made a decision. I got a bottle of bourbon from the liquor cabinet, pressed it into the small of his back and started pushing.

At the front door, he stopped. I told him to open it. You can have this bottle, I said, if you open that door and walk away. La Bamba looked confused, but he saw the paper bag on Gabe's



table and this seemed to make some sense to him. He grabbed the bag, then the bottle, and put the one in the other. While I stood there breathing, shaking my head but not saying anything, he opened the door and stepped out to the street. He headed for the alley and I wondered if he would ever come back, and if not, would I grow to miss him too.

MATTHEW SIMMONS

## *Russell Edson Has a Riding Mower*

And a glass of lemonade. It is very important to think about Russell Edson on a riding mower, gliding over his lawn. It is very important to imagine what it would be like to be Russell Edson, straddling a riding mower, watching the grass being spit out of the back.

It is very important to drink lemonade through a straw.

It is very important to stick your hand into the blades of a riding mower, and watch your fingers widow your hand.

ELIZABETH ELLEN

*only bastard in town  
who prefers brunettes*

you're afraid I'll write about you, I say,  
that's why you won't fuck me.

no, man, he says, agitated,  
explanatory.  
I told you, I don't like blondes.  
nothing personal.

he tells me this at least once a week.  
I never believe him.

you have a preference for brunettes.  
that's all, I say, retaliating.  
but he's not looking at me.  
he's looking at the 5'3" bottle of ink across the room;  
the one who brings him his beer in a 32 oz glass  
and calls him truckstop:  
carrie, katie, bitchface, whore.  
she has a tattoo on her wrist  
and one on her back.  
added bonuses, he calls them.

ELIZABETH ELLEN

if she has a piercing somewhere we can't see  
that would be icing on the cake.

I have a fear of needles.

I don't go in for either one.

I have two white circles the size of dimes on the inside of my  
left calf,

like someone needed a place to put out their cigarettes and my leg  
was available,

only I can't remember who.

she has a fat ass, I say.

all the better.

you can't win with this guy.

unless, of course, you're a twenty year old  
fatass, goth whore. then you can't lose.

you're afraid, I reiterate, hoping repetition might get me  
somewhere

even though it never has in the past.

you're afraid I'll write about your dick—

that it's too small or too soft or grossly malformed.

you're afraid I'll write you were a lousy lay.

and then everyone will know,

even miss marilyn manson here;

you'll be damaged goods.

whatever, man, he says, completely nonplussed,

still not looking me in the eye,

still watching her fat ass,

making me want to fuck him all the more.

*only bastard in town who prefers brunettes*

you know, I bet you're the only bastard in town who prefers  
brunettes, I tell him.

I could wear a wig, I add.  
I could dye my hair.  
I'm not even a real blonde, for chrissake.

but he's not listening.  
he's not paying me any attention.  
he's hell bent on little miss goth bitch over there.  
next week she'll be twenty-one.

if this is some elaborate joke – I say –  
some drawn-out scheme –  
to get in my pants, make no mistake:  
I will kick your ass.

no, man, he says.  
it's no joke.  
I really don't like blondes. sorry.

you're a fucking liar, I say,  
staring him dead on/calling his bluff.  
you're a fucking scared-ass, pansy liar.  
you're not fooling anyone.

whatever, man, he says. whatever you say.

you'll come around, I tell him. you'll fuck me  
eventually. soon as you get your head out of your ass.  
soon as you remove it from miss goth whore's twat.

if you say so.

I do.

ELIZABETH ELLEN

well, okay, then, he says, pulling a few singles from his wallet,  
leaving an oversized tip on the table. I'll try and prepare myself.

ha. like I'd let you.  
after your dick's been in her.

what's the matter? you have an aversion to brunettes?

I have an aversion to motherfuckers.

fair enough, he says. ready to roll?

sure, I say. let's get out of here.

he walks me to my car, holds open the door.  
stands there a minute  
between me and it  
like he's got something to tell me  
but he doesn't say anything  
he holds out his hand instead.  
we shake like old friends  
and I guess that we are.

only I wish sometimes we weren't.  
I wish sometimes we were meeting again  
for the first time  
in some dirty bar, in another part of town  
the bartender yelling last call  
and free bird on the jukebox.

DAVE HOUSLEY

## *What the Cadillac Knows*

THE MAN: TALL, heavysset, thick in the bottom. He drives with the seat back, leaning away from the road like a hipster, a pimp, hands slung low at eight and four on the wheel. The man wears sandals year round, with thick, rubber soles. He goes heavy on the gas, heavy on the brakes. Tires squeal, brakes screech, gas is almost always low, oil is gummy and constantly in need of a change.

Today is no exception. The man throws himself into the bucket seat, grumbling about the woman and the appointment. He drives as if he is inflicting his will over not just the car but the landscape itself, careening through curves, barely slowing at stop signs, jamming the Cadillac through the morning commuter traffic by sheer force of will.

He listens to the sports talk radio, every now and then loudly agreeing or disagreeing with an exclamation in Russian.

The man is often angry.

Today he is no more angry than any other day, no more hurried, but there is a different mood, an unsettled feeling that lingers like the stink of nachos left overnight with the windows closed.

He careens to the 7-11, comes back with a package that smells like donuts and coffee, squeals tires out of the parking lot,

DAVE HOUSLEY

and slams back toward home. He does not wear his safety belt.

The man leaves the Cadillac running, and then they are both back in the car, both drinking coffee, eating donuts and wiping their hands on the bucket seats.

~

The woman: smaller, skinny, quiet, bony ass rigid in the passenger seat. She sits to the right, exhales smoke through a crack in the window. This makes the man angry, and he turns up the radio, grumbles under his breath.

You want me to put it out just ask, she says, her voice barely audible under the whoosh of air and the radio babble.

It is not even nine o' clock, he says.

The health nut, she says, he doesn't start smoking until dark.

This is the usual conversation.

The rest of the time, there is silence. Not silence like cornfields and open skies, long country roads. But angry silence, silence that feels more like waiting for an alternator to finally slip, a long downhill and a fragile brake caliper that's not going to make it much longer.

~

This morning the man and the woman drive to a large office complex in the suburbs. They are in the building for an hour and when they return the woman is excited, babbling, crying.

I really think this is what we need, she says. For us.

The man drives slower, his hands gripped tight at ten and two on the wheel. He leans forward in the seat, slows at yellow lights.

The woman does not smoke. She drops her cigarettes out the window, one by one, like confetti, or crumbs that will trace the direction home.



The man turns up the radio and stays in the right hand lane.

~

The other woman: younger, heavier, she smells like perfume and fried food. They meet in the back of a strip mall, behind the restaurant where she works. The man taps taps taps on the steering wheel, taps taps taps on the gas. After five minutes, he will beep the horn, first a gentle tap and then a full blare, enough that the other woman is often furious by the time she straps the safety belt across her full bosom.

Jesus, she'll say, calm down. She will turn the radio to the modern rock station, singing along. He will drive faster until they reach the motel. In the parking lot the Cadillac's exhaust pipes will tick the time away, oil dripping slowly from the cracked head gasket until they come back an hour or so later, smelling sweet and pungent, like driving past a cornfield on a hot summer day.

~

When he is alone the man drives to meet other men. They convene behind strip malls, in parking garages, the Cadillac ticking beside a quiet Audi or the businesslike hum of a BMW. The man takes an envelope from the glove compartment, returns with another envelope or a small package. These, he tucks into the spare tire reservoir in the trunk.

The men shake hands, sometimes with a laugh, other times a quiet word. They drive away in separate directions, the man muttering under his breath and gunning the Cadillac through traffic.

Under the passenger seat, he keeps a gun.

~

DAVE HOUSLEY

Once a month, the woman takes the car to a restaurant on the edge of town. After a few hours, she exits with another woman, similar age, shape, build, and they lean on the Cadillac and talk and smoke cigarettes and look at their watches until the SUVs and family wagons and convertibles have all vacated the parking lot. Finally one of them will sigh, mention the late hour.

The woman will get behind the wheel and sit while her friend's SUV starts up, moves toward the highway. She will turn on the radio, moving the dial until she finds an old song, and then she will make her way home.

~

Today the other woman is angry. What the fuck do you mean? she says. You have responsibilities now. This has to be over.

It's not the same with her, the man says. Not like this.

They are parked in the alley behind the restaurant. He has cut the engine and the radio is off. Crickets chirp and the highway makes a light hum in the distance.

Yeah, the other woman says. This is so great, right?

But it is, he says.

She gets out, slams the door.

He stays in the alley for a long time. Finally he turns the ignition and drives home.

~

Where are we going? the woman says.

To celebrate, the man says. He stays in the right lane, signals all his turns and eases to a full stop at all of the signs. They move out of the suburbs and into the country.

They drive for a long time in silence.

This is so nice, the woman says. Lovely.

The man grunts. He lights a cigarette.

God I'd like one of those, she says.

Go ahead, he says. My mother smoked the whole time, and look at me.

She takes a pull from his cigarette, cracks the window, puffs into the night air.

He takes a right and follows a gravel road that runs alongside a creek. He finds a pull-off and stops. He keeps the car running.

It is ten degrees cooler in the country. The creek babbles white noise.

Come, the man says.

The woman stays in her seat.

He opens the passenger door and stands. She holds onto the seatbelt strap. The man is breathing loudly, like a bear. The creek is churning. Finally the man shuts the door. He gets in behind the wheel.

I just wanted to go for a walk, he says. Like we used to. In the country.

The woman still clutches the seatbelt strap. Take me home, she says.

The man backs out and hits the gas hard. Stones kick behind them and the car fishtails into the country lane.

The man drives too fast, as usual. He careens toward the city, screeching through turns, daring the wheels to come off the country road. The highbeams cast shadows along the trees and brush, jigsaw monster shapes bursting forth and then slipping into black.

People shouldn't trust one another. Not really. This the Cadillac knows, has felt in every lurching motion, every quick stop and near miss in traffic, in the dents along its side and the long key scratch a business associate of the man etched into the right quarter-panel years ago.

When they get home the woman opens the door before the car has stopped. She jumps out, snakes into the house. The man sits, quiet, his hands still gripping the wheel, until the Cadillac has stopped ticking and the only sounds are crickets.

~

It is almost morning, light just starting to seep into gray sky, when the woman slips into the Cadillac. She opens the door quietly, drops a bag onto the passenger seat, edges behind the wheel, inserts the key as carefully as if she is picking a lock.

She lets out the brake, puts the car into neutral, and allows it to drift down the gentle slope of the driveway. When the car has stopped, sideways in the quiet street, she turns the key and the Cadillac grinds to life. She taps the gas and the car eases past the dark houses.

She stays in the right hand lane, stops completely at stop signs, signals turns well in advance. She maintains this pace, creeping, really, all the way to the highway.

TAO LIN

*i wanted to interview  
a hamster*

it was hard to convince the hamster community  
finally i punched the hamster's lawyer in the face  
and that solved things  
the interview would happen ten months from now  
ten months later, we were there,  
the president stood to my left  
and patted my shoulder  
i looked at the hamster professionally  
'why are you a hamster?' i said  
the hamster's face reddened  
i felt ashamed  
it was over  
my life was over  
i went home and hid in the closet  
after a while i left the closet  
it was only ten in the morning  
my life wasn't over, after all  
i made toast  
i carried the toast to the living room  
i carried the toast to the kitchen  
the kitchen carried me and the toast to the living room  
and the living room shrank to the size of a walnut  
and the walnut laughed

STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES

## *Zombie Sharks with Metal Teeth*

IT'S SUPPOSED TO be like killing a mouse, killing this mouse, that's what Ronald said, but it isn't.

"Ronald," I say, trying to make my voice loop over my shoulder to him.

He's in his chair by the specimen refrigerator.

"Just do it," he says.

"He's looking at me, though."

Ronald's chair scrapes, air hisses through his teeth, and then he's there, with me.

"You're supposed to be a research assistant," he says, taking the mouse from me, the syringe riding from its back like a tranquilizer dart, "not a trainee."

The mouse. I was thinking about naming him Mr Cheese. Or Danger Bob, from his trick with the wheel.

Ronald slams the plunger down and it doesn't even have to be sodium pentathol. There's enough of it that it could be water, or even more blood: it floods Danger Bob's internal organs, stretches his skin taut so that it's pink under his white hair, like an old man going bald.

Sodium pentathol isn't really standard for mice, but neither's what Ronald had been doing do it for the last week.

He holds it up to his face, watches it die, and I think maybe Danger Bob is going to whisper something to him finally, some secret of biology, of rodent psychology, but then, instead, all we get is a drop of sodium pentathol seeping out Danger Bob's right nostril, spidering down to the end of a whisker.

Ronald drops the mouse cadaver – his term, like with everything – into the red biohazard bag and looks around the lab for the next great experiment, his eyes narrowing on each station, each cage, each device.

I hate my job.

In the supply room after work I mouth a silent prayer for Danger Bob, and nod again like I'm watching his trick on the wheel.

The next morning Ronald gets to the lab before me, leaves the door chocked open. I walk in slow, trying to see everything all at once, and Ronald's in his chair by the fridge, watching me.

"Good morning," he says.

I nod, shrug, tell him to tell me, please.

He's already smiling.

It's Danger Bob, back from the afterlife.

I take a long step back.

"He was sleeping by the door to his cage," Ronald says.

"This isn't Bob," I say.

"Ask him."

I watch his eyes after this, not sure I heard right.

"Ask Bob?"

Ronald nods.

"You could have just painted that on his back," I say.

Ronald agrees.

"Ask him," he says again.

I don't want to but I do.

"Louder," Ronald says, like it should be obvious.

"Are you Danger Bob?" I say, again, and it's only because I've been here for four months now that I notice Ronald's right hand is behind his back. His trigger finger. The vein in his neck

rises with the tendons in his bicep when the mouse who isn't Danger Bob shakes his head no, and Ronald can't help laughing now.

There's a little white-furred, radio-controlled servo collar around Imposter Bob's neck, its copper leads wired into the neck musculature. So he can shake his head no.

"Quit fucking around," Ronald says, still smiling. "I've got something new for us today."

Some days I'm not sure who's the lab mouse.

The project Ronald was working on when he hired me involved applied telekinesis. What we would do is anesthetize gophers and moles and whatever else we could buy, sever their spinal cords up near their brain stems, then try to condition them to use their own bodies as puppets, lurch across the stainless steel exam table.

The servo collars were what Ronald had to finally use when the financial backers sent their people to check on their investments. It was then that Ronald told me the secret of funding: never do enough to make money, just do enough to get people to give you more.

He thinks when I empty the red biohazard bag, I empty it into the small green medical waste dumpster in the parking lot. But I don't. Instead I fill my pockets with dead rodents then go up onto the roof during break, lay the limp bodies in the white gravel. The hawks scream with delight, fall all around me, and take the moles and gophers and rabbits away. For the mice, because they're white, I have to push all the white gravel away, frame them against the tar. I tried standing them up with toothpicks at first, for dignity, but finally had to just lay them on their sides, their forelegs curled up against their chests.

We're going to hell, of course, me and Ronald. Not just for the animals we kill with truth serum and electricity and surgery, but for the birds that fall sick from the sky into the lives of ordinary people, far, far away, wherever they are.



What Ronald has for us today that's new is beyond telekinesis, beyond Danger Bob's faux-prehensile tail.

I watch him and listen and feel my face making expressions of doubt, then curiosity, then think of a green butterfly for a while, because now he's practicing his pitch on me. Everything bullet points, something Edison would have thought of if he'd had access to the formative experiences of Ronald's childhood. Or if he'd hated mice.

The green butterfly is an angel, of course. She has the face of a girl I knew in high school.

I nod for Ronald, and for her.

What we're doing today is removing a late-stage mouse fetus from its mother then immersing it in the oxygen rich solution left over from the experiment with the two squirrels. Immersing it in there so it can breathe.

"Nutrients?" Ronald asks, as if I'd said it.

I nod, as if I'd just been about to say it, yes.

"They're in there," he says, dismissing my lack of education, staring at me to be sure I get the point.

"Sorry," I say. "Go on."

He smiles, does.

After the mouse – I'm already calling him Zipper Boy – after the mouse is successfully transferred to his glass womb, the fish tank the squirrels had died in, too stubborn to evolve gills, after the mouse is in there, that's when the real science begins: his arms in the long rubber gloves, Ronald will remove Zipper Boy's cartilage skull, exposing the still-developing brain.

He touches the side of his own head to be sure I'm following, not picturing myself on the roof, holding Zipper Boy up in my palm, eyes cast down, a great, moist shadow darkening around me, the underside of her wings iridescent.

I touch my own head back, right in the temple, and Ronald stares at me, looks away.

"The folds," he says, "it's the basic mammalian characteristic, right? Why are they there, though?"

"So the brain can fit," I say back.

He nods, smiles, says it again: "So the brain can fit. Because, if it didn't fold, then the mother's pelvis would break and there would be no rearing of the young, and it wouldn't matter how smart we were, how many tools we could eventually make."

I tell him okay.

He shrugs, like I'm challenging him. "So what do you think we could accomplish without that limitation?" he says, low, still paranoid that the bats that were delivered by accident are actually industrial spies.

I'm supposed to be catching them, but keep not doing it.

"Anything?" I say.

He nods.

"Anything," he says back, and then for the rest of the morning I have to hold the suction tube to Zipper Boy's head while Ronald performs minor surgery. I'm supposed to catch the blood, keep the water clear, cycle in more.

"Scuba Mouse," Ronald says, through his mask.

I shake my head no.

Two weeks later, Zipper Boy's brain blooms open in the tank like the enhanced pictures you see of distant, exploding galaxies.

I find myself holding my breath each morning in my car, before I walk in. It's not enough.

By the forty-second day, the investors want to see what they're paying for. I lay on the roof looking over the edge. Their cars pull up just before lunch. The only thing different for them about Ronald is how he's bald now, shaved. The eye solution he uses to hide the red around the rims is his own compound. He offers it to me on a regular basis, and on a regular basis I decline.

I walk down the metal stairs in time to hear his latest pitch for time travel, how of course you can't send living tissue through any kind of disintegrating field then expect it to be reassembled properly on the other end. But inert matter, yes. Ronald's solution

is typically elegant: the time traveler should simply offer to be killed moments before passing through the field, moments after his team has pushed through all the medical equipment and information brochures the people on the other end will need to revive this dead man from the future, or the past.

I see one of the investors holding his chin, nodding, thinking of the tactical uses this could provide, but when he sees the way I'm looking at him he stops, rubs his cheek.

"Don't worry about him," Ronald says about me.

They don't.

Eight minutes later – the same amount of time it takes sunlight to get here – Ronald is demonstrating what they all saw last time: the modified television set he's learned to tune the future in with. One hour in the future, anyway. For the area right around the specimen table. He's not showing them the modified set so much, though, as what's on it's screen: the investors, all signing checks. It's really a tape of them from last time.

"Show us why, though," one of them says.

Why they'll sign. Ronald smiles, nods, is already standing amid all the bent silverware before Zipper Boy's tank, waiting for them to see it.

"Like he's a god?" one of the investors says, looking around for support. Like Zipper Boy's a god is what he's saying. One we bring offerings to.

Ronald shushes him, his teeth together.

"I don't think so . . ." another investor says, staring hard at Ronald, as if reading his eyes. "You didn't leave this for him did you, son?"

Ronald shakes his head no, his dimples sucking into a smile he's trying hard to swallow.

"No way," the third and final investor says.

Ronald shrugs, is a carnival barker now, holding his hand out for the third investor's stainless steel, monogrammed pen.

Zipper Boy bends it into a nearly perfect circle with his unfolded mind, then, bored with it, allows it to clatter to the

ground.

The milky surface of his water bubbles.

He could live forever in there.

The girlfriend I choose, because I want this all to be over but for it not to be my fault, she's ASPCA. Militant, probably a vegetarian even. I wear leather to get her to introduce herself, then lure her to my car, to lunch, a series of dinners and movies and phone calls, until one day, not on accident, I leave an expired rodent in my right hand pocket, plan to pull it out to open my car door with, only notice it's a mouse when its nose won't fit into the keyhole.

The movie we see that night is about a submarine family chosen, for obvious reasons, to be astronauts. Which is all good and fine until the mother has her third child, her first in space. The amniotic fluid floats through the space station and into the ventilation system, then, with the help of alien spores or cosmic rays – a movie device – transforms the whole station into a womb in which the family gestates, emerging nine months later to look down on earth's blue sphere, and cry, the vacuum of space wicking their tears away. Finally, the firstborn son flares the new membrane around his neck out and it catches the solar wind and the family holds hands, retreats into the outer reaches of the solar system, still together.

My girlfriend – Mandy, I think, if I heard right – cries with the aliens, holds my hand, and I hold onto the armrest.

Afterwards, by the water fountains, I try to tell her about Ronald but fail, just lead her out to the parking lot for my charade, which fails too when I open my pocket and, instead of a dead mouse, pale green butterflies flutter up around us.

Mandy starts to catch one but I stop her, and my hand firm around her wrist is the beginning of the end for us: that I would deny her that.

The next morning Ronald asks me how my experiment went?

I'm tapping vitamins into Zipper Boy's tank when he asks

it, and I'm not sure if his lips move, or if they move with the words he's saying.

On the surface of the water, dead, is a pale green butterfly. Love is a spoon, Zipper Boy says to me in my head. Across the room, Ronald waits for me to answer, to agree. Zipper Boy's brain is seventeen times the size of his body now.

We're not sure what he can do if he really wants to.

The thing I notice about the silverware on the ground that afternoon is that it's real silver. Which should be less of a challenge, really. An insult. Another thing is that it's straight, all of it. I bend down to it, know instantly without wanting to that this is Ronald's mother's mother's silverware. And that the only reason it would be straight, now, on the ground, is that Ronald brought it to Zipper Boy bent.

Across the lab, Ronald is hunched over the circuit board of the echolocation device he's retroengineering from the dolphin head he had delivered in a cooler of ice. It cost four thousand dollars, is supposed to locate the bats for us somehow. When I opened the cooler, the dolphin had been smiling. But maybe that's all they know how to do.

I don't care about the bats, really.

But the silverware. The swimming goggles Ronald's wearing now, each lens sloshing with his compound.

Love is love, Zipper Boy says in my head, like he's finishing an argument.

Without looking at his tank I think back that he was never even born.

The surface of his water undulates with thought, and either he speaks back to me through Ronald or Ronald speaks back himself: "A mother's love for her unborn young is the purest love there is," he says. "Because it hasn't yet fallen victim to the large eyes of infancy."

I sweep up the bat guano until noon then climb the stairs

to the roof.

Danger Bob is waiting for me. I cry into my hands, think maybe the whole world can see me up there.

"It's okay," Danger Bob says from behind his three-inch exhaust pipe, and to show, he scurries furiously across the white gravel, invisible until the last moment when his small body is about to silhouette itself against the low, brick-red retaining wall.

I see whiskers, the shadow of an ear, then look away.

In my pocket now is all of Ronald's mother's mother's silverware. I don't know what to do with it.

Two days later I find the first draft of the article Ronald's writing for the neuromags. In it, Zipper Boy is Scuba Mouse, and I've been betrayed.

Beside me, too, I can feel Zipper Boy watching me.

It's something Ronald's tracked in his article—how his Scuba Mouse is now discovering his body, learning to use it, look through it. In a footnote, Ronald sketches out the helmet he's going to build his Scuba Mouse. It's filled with water, a failed diving bell. There will be no leash, either, no air hose, no tether. Just a mouse, teetering out into the world, wholly unaware what love is, even.

Already all the other caged rodents in the lab are dead, overflowing from the red biohazard container.

Ronald says Zipper Boy tells him it's not murder, because they were never really alive.

He's the one talking to a mouse now. I don't tell that to him, just shrug, look away, at a bat crawling nose first down the wall, stalking a cricket.

Ronald throws the dolphin head at it, misses.

My hand is shaking from something— from this.

When Ronald collects his precious dolphin head he finds the cricket lodged in the basal ganglia and stares at it for an unhealthy period of time. Embarrassed, I look away. Zipper Boy's water is 92 degree Fahrenheit. The phone rings fourteen times,

and fourteen times, we don't answer it.

When the human race ends, this is the way it will happen, I know.

That night I kidnap Mandy a little bit then sit with her – bound hand and foot in the trunk of my car – and watch the city bats coalesce above the three-inch exhaust pipe of the lab. Insects are swirling up out of it, clockwise, and I smile, rename the insects manna bug, moose beetle, and realize I can't take Mandy into this place. That I either love her too much or I could love her too much, which, really, is the same thing.

I inject her with a non-lethal dose of sodium pentathol and lead her into her building, careful not to ask her any questions, even in a disguised voice. Her doorman takes her without question, nods to me once, and I fade back into the night.

The green butterfly from the girl in high school was the one I found on her windshield one day at lunch, when I'd finally got my nerve up to wait for her, say something.

From across town Zipper Boy says into my head, in her voice, Hungry there? and I sulk away, my hands in my pockets.

Love isn't a spoon, I say back to him from the parking lot, the next morning, and this time when I walk in Ronald has the dolphin head on a long, metal stick.

"Scarecrow," he says, about it, then explains in his most offhand voice how bats are really just mice with wings, meaning the mouse part of their brains must still remember the long winters spent under the snow, walking lightly, because the coyotes were up there somewhere, listening, listening, finally slinking off to the water's edge, for clam, then fish, then they keep going out deeper and deeper, testing their lungs, until they're dolphins.

"Look at the teeth," he says, running his finger along the dolphin's jaw line.

I close my eyes to think.

"They – they weren't coyotes then, though," I say, pinching the bridge of my nose between the thumb and forefinger of my

right hand.

"Doesn't matter," Ronald says. "They didn't know they were mice then either, right?"

He stares at me until I nod, hook my chin to the tank.

"You fed him already?"

He shrugs—maybe, maybe not. This is kindergarten. The new title of his article on Zipper Boy is "Tidings from the Tidal Pool." Even I know it won't translate well—that, being a scientific article, it needs to—but before I can tell him, something pops above our heads.

Ronald doesn't look up from his paper. I have to.

"Security," he says.

It's a row of cameras, motion activated. Bat-activated.

"What?" I ask.

Ronald shrugs. "Scuby here says their REM patterns are—unusual for rodents. Like how when a dog dreams about chasing a car, its leg will kick?"

"Maybe it's having a karate dream."

"Whatever. It's a luxury bats don't have, right? One kick, they're falling . . ." He shrugs again, already bored with this. ". . . think it has something to do with circulation to their brain. Probably need to get an opossum in here to see, though—upside down, all that. It's a marsupial, though, I don't know . . ."

"I'm not doing it," I tell him.

"What?"

"Sleep upside down."

"I'm not asking."

"Okay."

"Well."

"Yeah."

I work at my table counting salmon eggs into vials, careful to keep my back to the leering dolphin.

Love isn't a spoon, I know. It's got to be something, though.



That night while I'm gone, Ronald somehow manages to spray the dolphin head with liquid nitrogen, to keep it from rotting.

Over lunch, from his office, I call Mandy's work number to report a crime but she doesn't answer. I hang up, hold the phone there for what I know is too long.

Through the plate glass of Ronald's open-air cubicle, Zipper Boy watches me, manages to rewind my memory to the movie about the submarine family then play it again, without the zero-g amniotic fluid. This time, the birth is achieved through a primitive but functional teleportation device: one moment, the baby isn't there, and the next it is, the mother's stomach already deflating, the father guiding it back down like deflating a raft.

I shake my head no, don't want to see anymore, but Zipper Boy forces it on me, in me, and I have to watch this infant grow into an adolescent who appears normal until we follow him into his cabin. There, he reads books on what appropriate emotional reactions are to certain social stimuli, then, as a young man, standing over the father he's just slain, we understand that the reason he is the way he is is that he was denied the essential violence of birth. That his whole life he's been searching for that.

It's Zipper Boy's story. He's never been born either.

I'm sorry, I think to him, but it's too late, he's dreaming with the bats again, flitting with them through their night made of sound, his small, atrophied feet perfectly still.

I envy him, a little. But the rest of me knows what's happening.

The mechanism I'm reduced to is ridiculously simple, as most are: I simply take Ronald's mother's mother's silverware down to the pawn shop, get a ticket for it, then leave it on the bulletin board.

Ronald sees it first thing after lunch, stares at it, and walks away, then comes back again and again, until he looks across the room to me.

"You do this?" he says.

"We needed supplies," I tell him.

Zipper Boy's water gurgles. Ronald looks from it to me.

"Supplies?" he says.

"Guess the lab fairy skipped us this month," I say back.

Ronald smiles; it's what he told me my first week here, when I forgot to pick up everything he'd ordered – that the lab fairy wasn't going to bring it, was she?

I have no idea what Zipper Boy is telling him.

Ronald shrugs, stands, looking in the direction of the pawn shop already.

"It wasn't really as great as you thought it was," he says, in parting. "Number four's trick."

Danger Bob, on his wheel.

My right hand wraps itself into a fist and I have to look away, swallow hard. Science isn't cold. Not even close.

Ronald laughs on his way out, trailing his fingers over his shoulder.

"Stay off the roof, too," he calls back. "I think it's shaking the cameras."

I stare at him until he's gone then track up to the cameras. Because there's no way in a world of brick and stone that my footsteps could come through the ceiling. But Ronald was just saying that, I see now; what he wanted me to see was that each camera is on one of the old, radio-controlled servos. That he still has the trigger out in the parking lot. That the guidewires their board is hanging from is the perfect antenna. That he's going to be documenting whatever I wanted him out of the lab for.

Zipper Boy smiles, with his real mouth. His teeth dull from disuse. From never-use.

But his mind.

I take a step towards his tank and the room fills with pale green butterflies, the dust on their wings graphite-fine, and I have to breathe it, can hear the cameras snapping me in sequence, one after another, down the board, and the butterflies start to fill me. Light-headed.

But no.

Like the girl from high school said, meant, I take the first one I can catch, take it between my teeth, and swallow, and then the next, and the next, until they're all gone, and I say it to Zipper Boy: that every experiment needs a control. Someone to exercise it. That I understand that now.

He's just staring at me now.

Love, he says in my head.

You understand, I say back. That's why I'm doing this.

Please.

In his water, for me, Zipper Boy tries to do Danger Bob's trick with the wheel, to save himself, but he's not a mouse anymore, and there's no wheel anyway, and it's too late in the game for gymnastics to save us from what we're doing here.

The tears he cries for himself are bubbles of carbon dioxide – spent breath, his infant lungs still new, uncoordinated. The bubbles seep from the corner of his eye, collect on the surface of his water, and he nods, looks away to make this easy on me, but it's not.

Through the cameras, in what will be time-capture, Ronald is watching me, a future Ronald, an hour-from-now Ronald, and I'm sitting by him, trying to explain, to keep my job.

Listen, Zipper Boy says, a kindness, and I do, and the-me-from-then knows, has it right: what I have to do now is what I can feel myself already doing – move my arms from the wrist, my legs from the foot, my head from the chin, so that, on film, when I take the salt shaker, empty it into the tank, it will look like suicide. Like Zipper Boy had made me his puppet. Chose me instead of Ronald because I was weaker.

It's a thing Ronald could buy. That he would buy.

But then, without meaning too – scientific curiosity, the reason I responded to Ronald's ad in the first place, maybe – I look too long an hour into the future, past him accepting my explanation for homicide, to the way he stands up from his chair smiling, holding one of the early bat-dream negatives up to the light, so that the colors are reversed. This is one of the images

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from the camera on the end of the board, which was aimed wrong. Instead of the bats, it had been snapping pictures of the dolphin head, only – looking along his arm I can see it in the modified television set – the dolphin's teeth in the reverse-color image are silver, silver nitrate, metal, and from the angle the camera was at the dolphin isn't even a dolphin anymore, but a predator that can never die, not if Ronald builds it right, this time. Not if it keeps moving.



## Contributors' Notes

**L. Ward Abel** is a lifelong poet, composer of music and spoken-word performer. His poems have been published widely in the U.S. and Europe, in print and online, in *White Pelican Review*, *VLQ*, *erbacce*, *Versal Two*, *Ink Pot*, *Texas Poetry Journal*, *Poems Niederngasse*, *Southern Gothic*, *Dead Drunk Dublin*, and many others. He has published a chapbook, *Peach Box and Verge*, (Little Poem Press), and a new full-length book of poems, *Jonesing for Byzantium* (UK Authors Press). He lives in his native rural Georgia, cultivating his latifundia.

**Bob Arter** has had work published in a variety of swell venues, including *Absinthe Literary Review*, *Bonfire*, *Foothill Journal*, *Gator Springs Gazette*, *Ink Pot*, *Lit Pot*, *Night Train*, *Opium (.com and .print)*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Zoetrope All-Story Extra*, and so on. He lives in sunny Southern Cal with a menagerie that includes the dim little brain of Gomez, the desert tortoise that adopted him.

**Karen Ashburner** lives in North Carolina. She is an elementary school teacher, and the general editor of *Dicey Brown* magazine. She has been published in numerous journals, in print and online. You can find a list of her publications at [www.diceybrown.com/k.html](http://www.diceybrown.com/k.html).

**Matt Bell** lives in Saginaw, Michigan. His writing has appeared in many fine publications, including *Hobart*, *Barrelhouse*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*. He can be found on the web at [www.mdbell.com](http://www.mdbell.com).

**C.L. Bledsoe** has work in over a hundred journals, including *Margie*, *Nimrod*, *The Cimarron Review*, *Clackamas*, *The Arkansas Review*, *Hobart*, and *The Potomac Review*. He was recently nominated for a Pushcart and is an editor for *Ghoti Magazine*.

**Marc Peacock Brush** lives in Denver, Colorado. He is the author of *Dear Mr. Pynchon* ([dearmisterpynchon.blogspot.com](http://dearmisterpynchon.blogspot.com)), and the editor of *Wandering Army*. He believes that the future of writing lives online, but submits to print publications with a wink and a smile. His recent fiction can be found at *elimae*, *Somewhat*, *Pindeldyboz* and *Eyeshot*.

**Kim Chinquee's** recent work has appeared in *Noon*, *Conjunctions*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Fiction International*, *Mississippi Review* and other journals, and is forthcoming in *Pushcart Press XXXI: Best of the Small Presses*.

**Estrella del Valle** was born in Córdoba, Veracruz, in 1971. She studied creative writing at the General Society of Writers of Mexico (SOGEM). Her most recent poetry collection, *El desierto; Dolores*, was published in 2003. She currently lives in Los Angeles, California.

**Spencer Dew** lives in Chicago, where he is at work on a novel. Some of his recent work has appeared in *Letter X*, *The 2nd Hand*, *Thieves Jargon*, *VerbSap*, *Wandering Army*, and *Word Riot*.

**Elizabeth Ellen's** chapbook *Before You She Was a Pitbull* will be published by Future Tense Press in December.

**Dave Housley's** writing has appeared in *Backwards City Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Gulf Stream*, *Hobart*, *Nerve*, *Sycamore Review*, *Yankee Pot Roast*, and some other places. He is one of the editors and founders of *Barrelhouse* magazine. His collection of short fiction, *Ryan Seacrest Is Famous*, will be released in 2007 by Impetus Press.

**Myung! Joh** is a writer hailing from Missouri and Georgia, entering her first year at the University of Virginia's MFA program this fall. This is her first publication.

**Stephen Graham Jones** has five books out. The two most recent are *Bleed Into Me: Stories* and *Demon Theory*, each of which, as with all fiction, has its own kind of zombies, its own kind of sharks. More at [demontheory.net](http://demontheory.net).

**Toshiya A. Kamei** is the translator of *The Curse of Eve and Other Stories* (Host Publications, forthcoming) and an MFA student in translation at the University of Arkansas. Kamei's translations have recently appeared in *International Poetry Review*, *Concho River Review*, and *The Modern Review*.

**Sean Kilpatrick** (b.1983) is a private investigator for Misogyny Inc. He maintains *The Anorexic Chlorine Sex Toy Museum* ([anorexicchlorinesextoymuseum.blogspot.com](http://anorexicchlorinesextoymuseum.blogspot.com)). His investigation transcripts have appeared or will appear in: *Wandering Army*, *Action Yes*, *Southern Gothic*, *Melancholia's Tremulous Dreadlocks*, *wire sandwich*, *Outside Voices 2008 Anthology of Younger Poets*, *Snow Monkey*, *Wicked Alice*, etc. Contact: [cauliflowersuitcase@hotmail.com](mailto:cauliflowersuitcase@hotmail.com) for information regarding your case.

**Tao Lin** is the author of an internet poetry e-book, *this emotion was a little e-book* (Bear Parade, March 2006), a real collection of poetry, *you are a little happier than i am* (Action Books, October 2006), an internet collection of short fiction, *Today the Sky Is Blue and White with Bright Blue Spots and a Small Pale Moon and I Will Destroy Our Relationship Today* (Bear Parade, August 2006), a real short-story collection of nine twenty-page short-stories, *Bed* (Melville House, Spring 2007), and a real novel, *Eeeee Eee Eeee* (Melville House, Spring 2007). His web site is called *reader of depressing books* ([reader-of-depressing-books.blogspot.com](http://reader-of-depressing-books.blogspot.com)).



**Amber Nelson** lives in Seattle. She is the poetry editor of the online journal *alice blue* ([www.alicebluereview.org](http://www.alicebluereview.org)). She likes words and fan mail and mechanical pencils.

**Dominic Rehayem** lives in Toronto. He paints red and black pictures of hell, and writes poems about a woman with beautiful blue eyes. He is willing to receive praise and/or tributes of fruit and grain for either. His shoes are worn. He has been previously published in *Dacey Brown* and *Word Riot*.

**Alan Rossi** is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Writers. He has work in *Ninth Letter* and forthcoming in *The Journal*. The only radio he listens to is Bob Dylan's Theme Time Radio Hour because Dylan's a storyteller, and if you listen just right, it's like he's talking only to you.

**Robert Shapard** lives in Hawaii. His stories have appeared in *The Literary Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *New England Review*, *Flaunt*, *Dallas Life*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Hawaii Review*.

**Rosie Sharp** began in California. Now she lives in New York. She has been published in *The Love Anthology*, *Marie Claire*, *Overspray Magazine*, and a number of online forums, including *elimae* and *Hobart*. Her robot love poetry is being collected into a folio called *The Robot Heart*. Orange tulips are her favorite.

**Matthew Simmons** lives in Seattle with his cat, Emmett. His work has appeared in *Hobart* and *Backwards City Review*.

**Claudia Smith's** fiction has been published in several online and print literary journals. Her story "My Lawrence," originally published by *Juked* online as "My Robot," will soon appear in W.W. Norton's anthology *The New Sudden Fiction*. A list of all her publications may be found at [www.claudiaweb.net](http://www.claudiaweb.net).

**P.J. Underwood** lives and writes in Hattiesburg, MS. He has contributed to *Product* and *Robot Minions Anthology*, and continues to work feverishly on two novels.

**William Walsh's** stories are forthcoming or have appeared in *New York Tyrant*, *Lit, Press, Rosebud*, *Crescent Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Opium*, and other journals. His work has also appeared online at *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Sweet Fancy Moses*, and *Tatlin's Tower*.

**Patrick Whitfill** is finishing his Ph.D. at Texas Tech University. His poetry has appeared in *The Concho River Review*, *Poem* and *Hawai'i Pacific Review*. His fiction is online at *Pindeldyboz* and *The 2nd Hand*.

**Mike Young** plays tennis with strangers in Ashland, OR. He co-edits *NOÖ Journal* ([www.noojournal.com](http://www.noojournal.com)) and *West Wind Review*. His work has appeared here and there. New stuff is forthcoming in *3AM Magazine*, *Avery Anthology*, *FRiGG* and *Main Street Rag*. His blog was named after a Frank Stanford line: [noojournal.com/blog](http://noojournal.com/blog).

