

coe review

masthead

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Contributors

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FITT is a cop who has never arrested a poet so hold him to it. . . CHRISTOPHER PUTNAM is the reading coordinator for the In Your Face Avante-Garde Reading Series at the DC Arts Center. . . CHARLES RAMMELKAMP lives in Baltimore, MD and teaches English at Essex Community College. . . D RATHGEBER has written 55 short stories and over 1000 poems at this point in time. . . BRAD RICCA is a Ph.D student of English in Cleveland, OH, he likes to recycle. . . DANIEL SAALFELD teaches creative writing at The Catholic University of America. . . EMILY SANDBERG is a sophomore at Coe and will be studying with T. C. Boyle in CA next semester. . . E M SCHORB has a new collection, Murderer's Day, and has work in The Yale Review, The Southern Review, Carolina Quarterly, and Verse. . . JOHN SHERMAN lives in Indianapolis, IN. . . mother of the beautiful and talented two-year-old Olivia, MAE SOULE is a poet and multimedia performance artist from St. Louis, MO, and a recent grad of Coe. . . PETER SWANSON has recently published in Pivot and Buffalo Spree. . . JOHN D TALBIRD III is a recent graduate of the University of Tennessee. . . J TARWOOD lives in the Villa del Prado, Santa fe de Bogota, Colombia, South America, at a safe distance. . . MARK TAKSA lives in Rodeo, CA, and has been published in Phoebe, Hawaii Review, Poet Lore, and Wisconsin Review. . . RYAN G VAN CLEVE lives in Talahassee, FL. . . TRACY VANDEBOOM is not a poet. . . ALAN WEBBER has been exercising his writing, editing, and filmmaking skills as editor of hardcore christian toy newsletter, master control operator for the new family values channel, community college jazz dj, in Cedar Rapids' ever rich and literate job market, will attend The New School's M.A. and Media Studies program in NYC this fall. . . TOM WHALEN has been published in Ploughshares, The Iowa Review, North American Review, and has two books of fiction, Roithamer's Universe, and Elongated Figures. . . SCOTT WITHIAM lives in Wareham, MA.



An Appalachian Tale

E M Schorb

Played the devil's fiddle, stomping to it, shaking it out,
full of corned blood, his boot down down down!
Days before the corn, his old bitch Lucy lay by his piston heel.
Said later she smelled it, stayed by it, waiting
for the meaty bone; said later never done him no harm at all;
said later not even a ghost of evil but Lucy got it,
old bloodhound bitch like red clay, wrinkled old lady hanging
from her own bones--could make her moon-howl,
pointing his wild bow--do that at dances. Devil in a Baptist,
playing the fiddle. Gradual as the mountains,
he found out how the devil got in. Fiddle under his spiked,
gray chin, corn jug thumb-hooked and cradled on top
his elbow--capful for Lucy--then stomp stomp stomp: music
through Blue Ridge pines! Could choo choo it
so's you see smoke and steam, hear that wheezy accordion whistle;
could conjure with it up a trainload of places
or turn you back home to the station of pines and blue smoke
mountains, bring musical rain, or put the devil
in your heart, winking and drinking and stomping. Everybody
loved

him and his Lucy, including said devil, as the corn dropped
down into his right big toe. Said it hurt to stomp. But it don't
stop the fiddler. Don't nothing stop the fiddler! He was
one thing else than music; he was a man. Take more'n corn going
through, dropping down in my right big toe, says at
the May dance, everybody seeing him stomp, ouch ouch ouch on
his big red gray spiked old corned face. Devil
got in through the corn, slick as silk; got down in my boot,
but I'll stomp him out; give old Satan a head-
ache--stomp stomp stomp! But that corn went to killing him.

His bow was flying! Went on like this, folks say,
a tad's five year, him stomping the devil in the corn and the devil
stomping back. Said now he couldn't play no more if
he don't get rid o' that old devil. Takes him a broad wood chisel

out back on a stump, sets his right foot up, sets
that chisel to his toe, and strikes down with a good hefty hammer.

When he pulls back his foot, that devil in the corned toe
stays on the stump, says looka me, I'm off! Has brought him
some fireplace soot and some gingham. Sticks that foot
in that black soot, to staunch the blood, and wraps it in gingham
rags. Said never done him no harm again, quiet as a bone,
and he goes back to stomping in peace, rid of the devil. But
first, he throws that old corned toe to Lucy. Says:

I knowed you always wanted it. Now mind the nail, Lucy; don't let
the devil get you, you drunk old droop-skinned hound
bitch, cuz I love you. And Lucy goes to lickin' that toe, pops
it in, and goes to grinding up that devil in her old ground down
chops. And next time we see them, the fiddler and his drunk bitch,
they both full of corn, and ready, now, for the dance!

Dialogue of the Suicide and the Smoker

E M Schorb

Ash on an old man's sleeve
Is all the ash the burnt roses leave.
--T.S. Eliot

"Look at you," said Muller,
who taught psychology,
and later committed suicide
when implicated in war crimes.
A vegetarian, he picked
at his salad and eyed Smith
with distaste. "You have ashes
down the front of your shirt.
It is a dirty habit. Dirty!
And I see you always drinking
in that cocktail bar by the
lake. You must take better
care of yourself, Smith."

"Worry is what kills you.
I grade papers there. It's
very pleasant--a beautiful view,
even in winter, when the lake looks
like a bowl of liquid iron. You
know, in 1496, Romano Pane,
a monk who accompanied Columbus,
became the first person to
describe the tobacco plant
to the old world. Tobacco
was brought from America
to Spain in 1555. In 1560,
the tobacco plant was imported
to Western Europe by Jean Nicot;
hence, nicotine. It brought
pleasure and pain, as all things do."

"How do you know such things
--dates like that, I mean?"

"I look them up. They're

comforting, definite.

Very little is. " " You appear detached." "Not detached.

Perhaps transcendent. Sir John Hawkins introduced tobacco into England in 1565. That was the same year that pencils began to be manufactured there.

Also, Sir Thomas Gresham founded the Royal Exchange in London, same year. And the Knights of St. John, under Jean de La Valette, defended Malta from the Turks.

The Turkish siege was broken with the arrival of Spanish troops."

"What's the difference?"

"Exactly! Erskine Caldwell published Tobacco Road in 1932.

Jack Kirkland's play version of TR opened to a long run in New York in '33. But at the end of the century

I have to go outside to smoke, and the autumn wind blows the ashes all over me."

"I should like my ashes to be scattered over the lake," Muller said. Smith lit another cigarette, watched the smoke scurry off in puffs and strands. "I'll see to it," he said.

All You Can Eat

Charles Rammelkamp

All you can eat, all you can eat.
There's no kind of deal like all you can eat.
All you can eat, all you can eat.
All I can say is all you can eat.

Went down to the Blackhawk,
Just up the street.
Fried chicken and spareribs.
All you can eat.

Went into the dining room,
All ready for some meat.
Got a plate and a fork
And all you can eat.

All you can eat, all you can eat.
With this coupon ten percent off any entree
And all you can eat.
All you can eat, all you can eat.
This offer's only good until Thursday
So come on down soon
And have all you can eat.
All you can eat, all you can eat.
A free liter of wine
And all you can eat.

Went over to the salad bar
Where I saw my friend Pete.
He said, "Come back as many times as you want to."
All you can eat.

All you can eat, all you can eat.
Until you can't eat any more without puking --
That's all you can eat.

Cookies and pastries and our secret special treat.
All this and more:
All you can eat.

Along came my waitress,
So pretty and sweet.
She winked at me slyly and said,
"All you can eat."

All you can eat, all you can eat.
Raw oysters on the halfshell
And all you can eat.

"saint"/" my sailor"

Tracy VanDeBoom

have pride in the saint zippered with tulip bulbs like being told the words during extreme at an abandoned dinner hall yesterday i was 12 watching rocky on tv and imagining the blow and spittle whiter than jesus warmer than cake and don't leave an eyebrow clean with a total immigration from your body and a rebel with a loaded finger. we had a rocking horse, a cat named fyodor, and a floor that i didn't want to remove from my pocket in summer with his bow legs and numb hands grabbing at anything, grabbing at jesus christopher and moooooon belly fly on our rug again and again and jump between metal bushes like the fuck of a vixen in a tommy gear sweatshirt. i flew to jacksonville by the seat of my pants for a tan and came to dc to be a politician with clenched and crossed eyes, i don't recognize, and i jet over gypsy tribes gypsy tribes with tables and cards cards tarot and telling the future of the girl who fell off her horse of pumpkin carriage and hold me with boot straps against the grain of flashbulb explosions like ice cube cracks there on the counter and favorite all- come to the lincoln tunnel! i'll pawn my infant and lance you in battle. pride got the better of old saint v. he zippered up his coonskin, checked the bulb on his blinking rose and began telling passers by about the extreme cockroaches. "you can't extinguish em!" he'd cry. "yesterday i found 12 inside my heart-shaped chocolate box alone!" the villagers stared at him like the rocky precipices before the wiseman. then that old saint got whiter than any man i've ever seen. i don't know what drove him to it but his one eyebrow came twitching over to the other one and a total squeeze went through him. one village rebel named fyodor has the nerve to throw a cockamamy cat at the poor numb saint and he commenced to wail at the moooooon until our ears got used to it again. "fuck yooooou tommy" he said. "I knew yooooou when yooooou were in pampers and jacksonville has been nothing but a shithole ever since yooooou've been grown up." but his name was fyodor and they were in dc.

On a White Man Hitchhiking with African Men

John Sherman

no no in the front bwana
the back is fine
the front
I'll sit here thank you

looks of dismay and disbelief
shrugging acceptance and maybe shame

drive on o noble landrover

if it were simple courtesy
I would accept the front
and let the others sit back here
it is dirty here you know

but it's bwana bwana
let me kiss your ass
permit me to grovel in your shadow

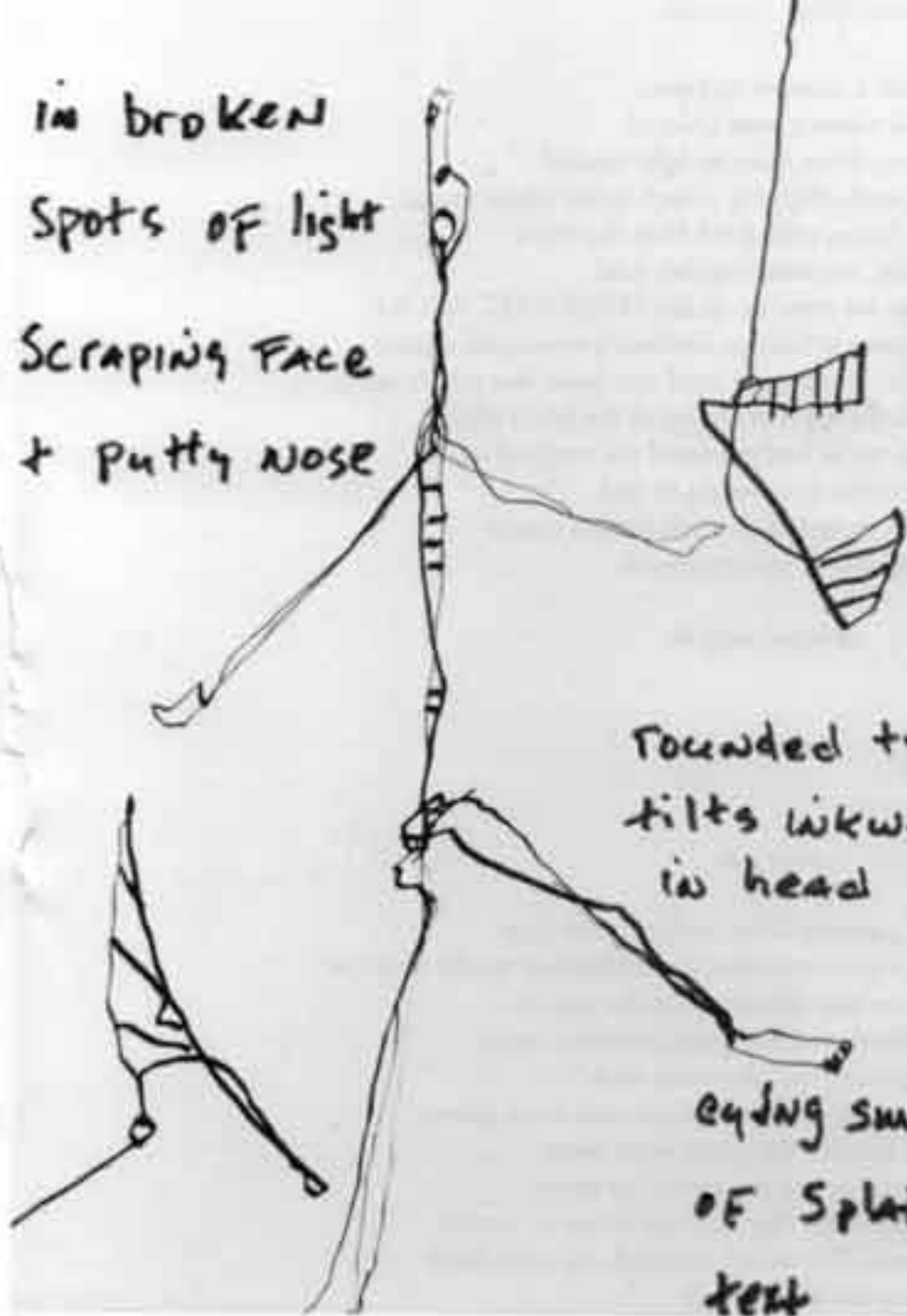
I lost my balls when I saw my first white
don't give them back to me now

in broken
spots of light

Scraping face
& putty nose

rounded type
tilts with well
in head

ending smatter
of splattered
text



Bombshell

Christopher Putnam

In just a number of hours,
Steak dinners were ordered.
Funny thing to be so light headed
our teeth chipping at each other's boot mugs,
and Jayne, still afraid from the night
before, not touching her food.
Later, we went up to the STARLIGHT ROOM
to dance to George Liberace's wonderful music.
In fact, we danced until the desert was purple again,
until the sky was almost to the lake's edge
until we he had mastered the study of clouds
and could give weight to each
could recognize them as hidden causes
of trouble or inconvenience

Stratus: waggish

Cirrus:

pure fizz

and we went down to the coffee shop
and announced that the celebration would continue
at four that afternoon, at the test site.
When the waiter spoke her name again
we pushed the placemats aside
moving the straws and salt and water glasses
that marked the places we'd been,
classifying the wet spots, the stains,
as accidents. She went on ahead to Tucson
by bus. The waiter returned, his open hand
facing me like a laugh.

Bewitched

Christopher Putnam

My father told me about it. It is called the budah-babow tree. Plenty of it grows by the sea. Wanting to try it out, my father and I drew the blue sap from it. I took a coconut, drank from it, squeezed the sap into the remainder of the milk, shook it three times and closed up the shell. Next day, I gave it to the child saying, "I have drunk of it, you may drink." He fell ill at midday. By midnight he died. On Saturday, my father poisoned his mother with the budah-babow in the fish stew. I poisoned his orphaned sister later that month with a banana. Soon, our bodies grew strong again.

Reckoning

John Bradley

All of us gathered In the basement, in the safest place we know--underneath the ping pong table. Dad, picking with the corner of a matchbook at a piece of corn stuck between his teeth, reads his *Time* magazine. Mom, with her red mechanical pencil, takes a vocabulary quiz in the *Reader's Digest*. My sister, swirling around and round on her stool as she listens to *Rubber Soul: Falling. yes. I am falling...* My mother orders her to turn it off. Now. My sister sighs, turns it off, and then a few minutes later, as if she had completely forgotten what had just been said, turns it back on. My brother, tongue sticking out the corner of his mouth, dips his tiny paint brush into the coffee can my father filled with tap water, painting his plastic lawnmower. The wind kicks sand and pebbles against the basement windows; I press my head to the cold concrete floor. I can hear Saul, the overweight man-child next door who my parents warn me from ever going near, calling out on his short radio: *And the flesh that toucheth any unclean thing shall not be eaten. Do you read me. Over.*

blue collar Siegfried

Nate Ochs

She'd turn me into a surfer if I'd let her.
I'm a brownshirt mulling over a nudie playing deck
in the gulag. The rub of it is
I've stunk like banana oil since before you were born
and that's a mouthful but

I am what I am. The innertubes here have stretch marks
and I take to it as to a slot machine on the first of the month
telling myself this is war and I joined what I couldn't beat
a long time ago. She takes pictures of herself

while she's crying. She said if you have to ask
you can't afford it and I never said another word
but stuffed my sleeves with pretty blond

aces making like to invade
the fool's gold market in South Dakota

when I couldn't pull a quarter from behind her ear.

Yankees

D Rathgeber

They proved they are the best
Far better than any of the rest
They proved they were the best in the East
Together they traveled to the distant West

George led the way with great pride
Admiration for the team he couldn't hide
Some said at times he was cross
He would firmly state I am the boss
He proudly would state we are number one
He looked forward to saying the Series we have won

You could see within his eye a tear
The team assured him to have only little fear
They did the best that they could
So that after the game they could say I told you I would

As the end came nearer to the game
You could tell the Yankees dreamed of great fame
The final out was proudly made

The Yankees proved they are number one
The World series they had won
Everyone in the East is now a Yankee fan
They proved that they always can

When we said I told you the Yankees can
On the West Coast they said you we will ban
We said "We have not a single fear.
We aren't frightened of next year.



Mania

David Lawrence

I rub my penis on an old alligator handbag.
I am an endangered species.
My memories fall like dust on linoleum.
I once loved you like penicillin.

I hit my head against the wall
to watch it bleed.
I think I could fight a tiger.
I have the aspirations of a gas mask.

Don't touch me unless you want to slide
down the other side of a waterfall
and picnic in a rainbow
of dead ears.

Graves

Lawrence Nannery

Graves.

These are graves, she said.

That explained the old toothless woman with the stick, yelling at us incoherently.

So we had to hoof it out of there quick;

No use trying to explain to a bunch of Arabs why you are walking on their mothers' graves.

And besides, who the hell makes a cemetery look like a backyard?

Then we were on a trek and I kept asking where we were going to,
But Lola reassured me that we were going somewhere

But she kept talking to me as though I was the leader.

The streets were all paved, but there were no houses, only big piles of sand on every side.

We were in the desert. We were going to water. The moon would guide us.

But there was no moon.

We were in the subway, and everyone else was a dog, and some of them were very nice, But some of them, as you can imagine...

We were amid tall buildings, and a man up on the hundredth floor on a swinging scaffold waved to us.

It was Lola's husband, who had died that way.

We had to go up and join him on that thing, and I said no, but Lola pulled me.

Now we were on the scaffold and I wouldn't look down because I knew what was going to happen,

And all Paul could say was isn't it pretty from up here?

Then he took out his thing and tried to have sex with her and then the scaffold started rumbling

And I knew just what was going to happen.

We were sitting in the big office of the Vice-President of Macy's

And we kept trying to tell this man that we were on a trek but he just puffed very fast on his cigar.

Re smiled at us and brought out some shoes from a drawer, and offered these to us, free.

Well, I said, nothing is free.

Just at that second Paul fell by, out the window, screeching.

And then the Vice-President was one of the dogs from the subway

And I said to Lola, honey I'm not so sure we're ever going to get out of this.

Suddenly it was calm, and I had done the journey and Lola was dead and I didn't mind. It was a costly thing, but I would go into the backyard, my backyard, where we had buried her, And talk to her. I was free to marry whomsoever I damn well pleased, at last.

And, *oranges!*

They were the best, always the best, nothing but the best for the bride.

And I had on the veil, and I was eating oranges as the wedding march played

But no one was moving and neither was I moving but

None of this was making any sense since I had not agreed to marry anybody

But we were all going ahead anyway.

And then he came and he was in a bathing suit that looked like a tux and we were all underwater

And I said to him, but you're the president of the whole university you can't do this

You're too old. And he bit off the stem of the apple and his teeth were just like Teddy Roosevelt's

And he kissed me and crushed me in his arms and - I don't know -- I knew the trek was over.



The park brochure said, stay on the trails

Marge Piercy

Maybe we took a deer trail
as it crossed the blazed way
marked so clearly on our hiker's
map but in reality, a matter
of guessing every few feet.

That it was autumn and brown
sered fallen leaves quilted
all the ground made following
any trail that much more
a matter of luck, and ours

ran out. And then the trail
or what we had imagined
was still the trail, ran out
too. There we were
on a strange and suddenly

hostile mountain among odd
plants we could not parse
edible, poisonous, medicinal,
not our landscape, not our
climate. On the Cape

if you get lost, you head
in a straight line east or
west, and you come to water.
You follow the shore to
somewhere known. It doesn't

take much in the way of scout

skills to get out of trouble
unless the tide catches you
between intruding water
and crumbling clay cliff.

But there we were in someone
else's forest, suddenly sober,
grim even, hungry and scared
before we put it together that
on a mountain down is down.

Hunting License

(after kandinsky)

GTimothy Gordon

1.1 Stab a crow for good measure

1.12 Ladle the blood with care

1.13 Beware void-like nouns

1.14 And resolve NOTHING

1.15 Get back to things

At hand

1.16 For instance

Dead matter

1.17 Conceals its own freight

1.18 Clean your sight/

Transport a snappy knife

1.19 For appearance

2.0 Fold all bones

In florescent orange

Until the moon is blue

Hightstown

Joseph H Ball

On a damp Sunday night, the old Nash started whining
and scraping like a sick cat trying to get back in the house.
She died on the shoulder of the turnpike
seventy miles from the city. We rode the tow into

Hightstown NJ where the corner Rexall's flickering neon
reflected against a dusty hardware store display.
The Belaire Diner had closed at 8:30
so Judy and I sat in the Nash outside the dim garage
waiting for my brother.

She timed the radio back and forth through the static
until she found "Johnny Dollar" who paid \$2.40
for a cab to an uptown jazz club to question
a husky-voiced singer about her missing ex-husband.

(A slap, high-heeled shoes running, a scripted scream.)

I lit a cigarette. Her face was as pale as the listless fog
that loitered on the lawns of the low cling houses.
The smoke caught in her hair then as she opened the window
rushed like an escaping prisoner toward a distant light.
We listened for the swish of rescuing tires along the formless
streets.

Con Artists On The Beach

Mark Taksa

Tricky as a magician draining beer
into a false bottomed mug, I empty coins
from hands of gamblers into my pocket
open to a hole under a palm tree.

I carry a satchel of dollars.
My mind wanders like a bony bird
among briny carburetors on the beach.

You winked to show me the other
players' hands. Now you swim from the daffodils
of your dress, on waves my eye transforms
into a bed of cash that cannot melt.

Fuck honesty! You play a banjo,
singing that only the artist of the trick
strokes the vulture perched on a Buddha.

Filomena's Left Breast

Sylvia Dakessian

There I was
under the covers
sucking Filomena's
left breast through
her white nightgown, right
where she had guided me
with her soft hand.

In walks my mother.
She wants to talk,
she wants to know
things.

I pull my mouth away
and yet linger there,
rest my head on her chest.
We are watching my mother,
listening.

Filomena
has been teaching me
not to love too much.
She crosses an X
over the name of my dear
friend and snips
pictures into the smallest
possible slivers to keep
evil out.

My mother says I should get
a haircut like Filomena.
She shows me where we will cut and how.
Filomena is grey haired.
But I'm not an old lady,
I'm going to dye my hair
red.



13.

Cheryl Pallant

wanting something more. wanting something more is less than what is halved as two. wanting having. having had wants more. having had rarely satisfies. taste dissipates, bowels evacuate emptying to void check it out, void make it out, void wanting want. like your lips like your sips, like your liking liking me. i despise being in need, being having been. i despise being needing when having need rarely satisfies. to put it another way, to place it in a separate drawer, to separate the drawn from the written, the past tense present in ease of being. be all you can having been. rearing all passing tensely into easily in the left lane bowled down. bow before the magistrate, roaring your better side rowing in the splash. lash out as by necessity without frump without pulling in the butt ox pulling cart it away. many roads later many paths now. tiptoe. skip. lay flat grounded in cool clover a cool lover a soon to be. rock on, amigo. rock on.

when too long having been needs by necessity and hasn't had, the i which may have been ceases and fades into someone's nostalgia. like in a photograph, like in a journal of one's undoing done in ink smeared into blurry lines dropped into thoughts evaporated. having been ceases. having been once or twice, remembering liking like yesterday's folded pajamas, like a hot fudge saturday, like elbowing me where it likes to like wanting by necessity by biology by hormonally the twain shall meet. but i missed the twain, heard it choo choo away, or i dismissed the meet needing taking me elsewhere. so heart to figure, like, go, dude and dudettes with your raisins in the sun with your noses in air conditioned orifices. catch my drifting away. catch my cold outside. catch my thrust up imperious salutation.

can't always be a smile. can't always be having had when wanting needs less difference, less indifference, wanting needs stark yes

unblanketed and unflanneled. can you cover me when i'm left out.
can you cover me when breezing in. can the clover left outside
brought in be here be now be here be now without ouch pinch
squeeze. without ouch pinch squeeze. without ouch pinch teasing
the here and now. or maybe maybe capitalize OUCH to repeat as
often, to mince meet often, to often upon occasion when not occu-
pied with done. some despise livers, except when dying, except
when their own salvation depends, when needs reduced to mini-
mum, when everything is exactly not needed by necessity. that's
where i need to get. that's where gotten halves into whole. in the
tomorrow of today, in the twilight of brilliance, the sleep of waking,
my eyes knowing only open.

Tar Baby Goes Hollywood

Mae Soule

blonde metal dress
wrapped around black
and cornrows fall back
long braided tendons on arms like canes
big bulging eyes and a wide white grin
chipped metallic flakes on her cheeks
shine/glitter and go flat
with the twisting for camera lights
baby! she's all wrapped up in armor
she burns blue
sweet milk caramel in contradiction



Television

Peter Swanson

It's like having the campfire
and the story-teller
packaged into one...
and a gun in your hand to its head.



A Sick Sense

Amy Myers

I am the mother
of ill-born children.

The first slithered
inside my ear,
tongue flashing.

I knew by
the hiss-bang
on my drum.

The sickness came again,
and before I knew it

I had a plump,
sandpaper-skin baby.

Shame I can't hold it.

The Siamese twins,
joined at the forehead,
can only stare
unblinking at each other.

In a sneeze,
one more snuck out
before I even knew
I had been infected.

The last one
I peeled off myself.

It shrieks as though
my skin were nails,
and not
what it came from.

There may be
one left in me yet.

I can't be sure.

They're so secretive.

I hope not, because
I don't want any
more birthing.

Like squid in Monterey

Joanne M Marinelli

From the bowels of Pacific basins tentacles
glitter moon diamonds and encircle the keen
truths the iris sought on midnight highways
and blurs, glassine packets
tremens for your smack pretty sweetheart
just La Piovra on your bicep
the way he looks and latches
swelling your vein azure beneath the dermis
where sperm whales will frolic and grill
sort the kelp from the head meat stuffed chili
pepper and fried bread crumbs neurons explode a
shower
and you are stars in zodiac formative orgasm
continuous comes the climax festive fairs
don the dunce cap unzip the clown and oh
baby we have red noses paper violets
and fireworks at dinnertime in walnut
sauce sockets sock it to him
I know you came only for the ribs
Paulina but I need a stew with no
bones catching in the back of the throat

(generals swallowing ex-cretes for valuable vitamin E)

Paulina!
I can make you see an all solid
piece of spectrum, blue
marbles
coral stains
once an addict
and now we are forever
binary
raw to cooked, toothpicks in the
calamari to skewered teriyaki, the

priest that little white cube of a
collar who will salvate us a homily
candle to altar
asp to nave walk the length needle thin
mercury paths

(no need with a drive-thru for the wafer)

Thomas has a green tongue!
Recoil in horror Father, no
solutions out of Rome, Italy now
mafia anti-state to whatever government
you scrabble to save phallic orders a real
turn on
dump the heroin and dolphins but fly a
web in the sun chop me dice bits to sprinkle my
pizza but ah yes the toppings \$.75 extra in this
tent we have the T-shirts and the whip
cream to lace your balls and simmer the
tomatoes purple
tipped and ready missile resistance
until we suckle the
watermelon and spit the seed,
Satchel slipped the side gate
trumpets on strike for those judges
so many leagues to go when
we hit the final depth of molten floor,
what the fuck has me by the ankle?

The Spanish Market

Shana Fried

We finger melons in the market
Rosita and I, having both left our
lovers this past month we are
sure we have mastered decisiveness.
Yes this is the one--smooth, not soft
clean, unmarked, fit for tearing to pieces
and devouring insides. Yes this is the one.

We place it in a basket and move on
in search of warm, soft bread,
spicy sopa, sweet and gooey flan.
Rosita takes out a lipstick, leans
into a meat counter and smears
it across her lips, kisses the shiny surface
where chickens lose their heads
and sighs. One fine kiss print left for
someone else's reflection,
an unsuspecting half pound of ground beef.

In Need of Thesaurus

Alan Webber

Oh, rose petals, rose petals, rose petals,
Rose petals, rose petals, rose petals, rose petals...

Oh, Jesus fucking Christ, rose petals...
They're falling all over the room,
All over our naked bodies...
They fall into your mouth,
I catch them in my teeth, your tongue...
Slowly push into soil

It is such a beautiful thing. It's so beautiful to watch me with you
outside of our bodies.

Once upon a time, we laid in a smoky field.
Your cigarette butts were chalk,
The lightning was a rowdy lion.
I refused to let us be together because I thought I was beyond your
consistent melodrama.

I made you cry in the hallway.
I can't believe I made you cry in the hallway.
I will never make you cry in the hallway again.

A Gift from The 19 Polk

J B Hartgraves

Pulling herself up the steps,
"Do you go California?"
Crazy in the jump-seat,
"We're *in* California! Bitch, stupid bitch."

Halfway back I press myself in diversity
a white-bread, Rastafarian, geriatric sandwich.

The Muni is an uncertain accordion,
lurching start and stop, asthmatic wheezing in time to a street pulse.

Across from me, a 300-pound, crew-cut, head-phoned, foot-tapper
twists lanky balloons into freak-shapes.
Finally, a monkey climbing a palm-tree (if you squint).

Seeing a friend up front, he waves the monkey madly hollering,
"Sophie! Sophie! You still livin' on 3rd?"
waving the squeaky monkey, hitting the he/she crazy sitting behind
and setting him/her off on a wild rant with people who must've gotten
off
@ Leavenworth, but it doesn't matter 'cause
He/She has a lot to say damn-it about: black, white, money,
blood, shoes and drugs....

Monkey-balloon crazy takes up the chant of "drugs" as he shoves the
monkey
out the window, wagging it at a young couple. A gift. A whimsy.
He smiles and lets it float down to the two
who watch it fall.

We pull away from the curb and big-balloon guy glances back, smiling at
the

young couple who step over the gutter and the monkey climbing the palm tree (if you squint) and something sours all his 300-pounds all at once.

And that's when I get my gift from the 19 Polk, from a 300-pound monkey-molding, foot-tapping, head-bobbing crew-cut crazy As he hunches his way up front (toward Sophie from 3rd street) he looks at me and my seat-mates of diversity. Twitching his head in the direction of the street-crossing couple he says it out loud.

Our blonde, dread-locked, silver-tinted heads bob, nod in unison. Cause each of us is thinking he's speaking directly to our spirits when he shrugs and says,

"If they don't get it. . . Fuck 'em."

Detective Poem

Scott Withiam

-- ya gotta go on your gut

The restaurant begins to pulse red for both ravishing temp secretary, Peg, and me, so I quickly slide out of our window booth, stumble through a beaded curtain into a blistering kitchen where, at the island table, Jimmy's cramped family feverishly chops chicken. No waste, such economy --

dreams. *Where's Jimmy?* I ask. *What matter?* they say. *MSG?* I venture. *No, not needed anymore* sings this chorus dressed in bloody white aprons. Maybe, but why do I struggle for oxygen and cut through a tight pantry, stepping over -- sometimes into-- cardboard boxes to get to the back door?

Peg in pursuit, we burst into a still summer night. Carved out in a corner of the alley stands a remnant of my own Eastern past -- blossomed sprays of a dwarf weeping cherry dipping into a four foot plastic pool. *Incredible*, I ponder, kicking a waxy lettuce box off of my foot,

the traditions people keep alive. For sure, Peg says, come here. Over the pool arches an ornate footbridge, so tiny, so steep that when she kisses me upon it we're like skyscrapers waving in high winds. Buildings kissing, glass splinters raining down. Something

begins to feed wherever we sprinkle over the surface of the pool. *You don 't suppose they're the fish we ate for dinner?* Peg asks. *Wow, you 're good,* I say, finally getting my breath. Now, in the corner of my eye, I see Jimmy, who's been smoking out back

the whole time. Insulted, he scrapes his cigarette down the side of the brick wall -- a shower of sparks. *A history with fireworks,* Peg quips, without looking. *Too Good,* I think, *she 'll ruin if not kill me,* and know if she comes back tomorrow, I'll fire her.



Waiting Beside a Pottery Store

Shawn C Whittington

Waiting beside a pottery store.

Balmy, clinging night.

Latte' between legs, cigarette
pinched in lips, new book,
already two short stories closer
to collecting dust on a shelf,
help whittle away my minutes.

In the distance a deep, rumbling, Harley
clears its throat, staccato ticking of a woman's
heels off cobblestones just up the street,
occasional tintinnabulation of a couple
playing air hockey in a loft above the shop.

They begin to trickle back, my charges,
in ones and threes, laying themselves
on the chill comfort of the cobblestone
walk to steady the swirling street.

Emily Dickinson Creative Writing 401

Joan Cofrancesco

First off

they would have said

Get rid of those horizontal lines--

at the end of Your sentences.

What do they mean?

If you want to get published

you can't use them.

Next

get rid of those huge words

like Destiny, Beauty, Fate

Be more specific for Christ's sake.

And finally

Emily get out of the house

seek adventure

perhaps a grad course

in London instead of staying in

and writing about Death.

My Name is Alice And I Am Hemingway's Cat

The tea boils
My eyes squint on the red sofa
overlooking the sea

mistresses come
and go

you are waking
from another drunken dream
your wife is pale
as she sips her orange tea

my nose on her leg does not console
mistresses come
and go

I roll in the sun on the sheets then
paw at the bedroom mirror
as I still smell the mistresses sprawled out, naked legs
on the bed, a scratchy Bolero
on the stereo and Jack Daniels spilled
on her dress.

I know when rats die
I see their ghosts in particles of air
your son hates you
Gertrude is mad again
what did you call her last night...?

a new day heats my fur
as I arch and stretch
I want to scratch walls
piss on your first edition of THE OLD MAN
I pray you never

squeeze your big trigger at me
But it's big pussys that you like anyway

mistresses come
and go

I hear the huge bed squeaking
in the room above
I see you Ernest
as a blind sportsman who has lost
his canoe
gun
love
sun
control
soul

Please circle one.

Angels and Pins

Walter Kuchinsky

Talk, talk, round and round,
all evening in my place,
then Ned, my neighbor, pounced,
"Okay! How *many*,
then, can stand on a pin's head?"
I remembered
that angels come in nine kinds
and pins come in many kinds.
I didn't want to hurt Ned.
I said, "I don't know, Ned--
no one *knows*."
"Aha!" he said, and went home.

Enigma of Arrival

R D Drexler

Where I come from
Nature is an afterthought, If that.

Lawns grin back green chemical grins.
Shrubs appear at night full shrubbed.
Flowers put out eternal flowers.
But the sexing bees
Are never fooled,
If there still are bees.

There's no night sky.
Oh sure. The moon.
But only when its full,
A signal that it's time
For civic mayhem.
But never stars.
Well, maybe, airplane lights.

There were thunderstorms back when --
The black wall against the west,
Sidewalks aghast,
Trees in cardiac arrest.
But now it's all maps & lines
In Mr. Misty hues.
And fat, bald men
In badly-fitting suits.

Someone's father once bitched
The problem with nature is that there is so much of it.
Well, we've addressed that bitch.
Nature's a video game,
A messenger boy sent by some corporate jake.
Chips but no fish.

So I'm relieved to be in Chiang Mai,
Bitten by real mosquitoes,
Crawled over by real ants.
I like finding gecko turds in the bathroom,
Eating far from perfect oranges,
Sweating wherever I walk.

It's like something exists
Outside
That isn't chasing my credit card
And isn't bent
On fucking with my mind.



The Woe There is in Marriage

David Axelrod

I went up to the gravedigger's to borrow a silver spade. It was no problem, he told me. Nevertheless, it was he who dug the hole. We decided on a plot where the crowds had thinned out. The stones old, round, and smooth, and green with moss like trees in the forest. He heaved up a few shovels full of old bones. The usual femurs, tibias. A curled spine and ribcage of a child. And then, a real prize--the skull of a palomino pony I'd forgotten about long ago. It seemed a big enough hole. It seemed huge. A vault in the darkness of earth. Mine! Later, this troubled me. I asked my wife, "How can my body die and I still have a body?" We were standing at the window of the tract house where I grew up on Pleasant Place. She was weeping and didn't answer. Outside, the spectral grids of suburbs had not yet appeared. The trolley tracks abruptly ended in bunchgrass meadows dusted in starlight. She seemed beautiful to me, and younger, standing there in that blue spring light! I asked her again, "How can my body die and I still have a body?" But she never answered.

The False Astrologies of Dreams

Ryan G Van Cleave

I do not speak Spanish, but here I am in Puerto Vallarta,
telling David St. John there is a train inside his iris.

He doesn't believe me, says the whole idea is whacko
and I'm inclined to agree, but still I see it chug-chug-chooing

the length of his eyelash. Like the outdoor electric meter,
the little black dots going round and round.

"I want to be a white horse! I want to be the vanilla god!"
yells a man who looks suspiciously like Theodore Roosevelt

as he rummages through a bagwoman's wardrobe, only the *bor-*
racha

is my father in a vestido rob and his head is wrapped

in surgical gauze. "I did it for you, my boy," he says
with a far-off, IQ 40 dullness to him.

Now look, I say to myself. This is as real as the existential
floral wallpaper on the Museum of Modern Art's men's bathroom

walls, which is to say, not very. I am not in Rio--no matter what
los navegadores say--and I am not Mack the Knife.

But I'm just going with the flow, letting myself be wowed
by magenta sunsets that sweat the air like sex.

I build an altar from my hands--my teeth chomp the world in half.
And just like that, it's over. Like a crowd at the foot

of a gallows, there's a feeling of *why?* and of things slipping then
hung.

Hole-y Cow

Laura Huegel

The giver of milk,
and bread, and water
has gone.
She got in her
little tin car
and drove away.

But the public transit system
has brought back another cowboy
from a far away Dodge City.
His limbs are tubes
and wiring.

You listen to him, now,
and do what he says.

Crowd Control

James S Proffitt

1. Ask as many times as you please. Moments remain abundant beneath cobalt skies and the thp-thp-thp of birds' bone-light wings for courtesy. This is no problem. Ask for dispersal as you would ask your lover for that certain thing, that specific touch you desire that one special fold of flesh searching for the tongue's devilish tip, those bizarre.... Ask... ask... ask and you shall receive. While asking dream of your children and if they were lost a week ago or a year ago--abducted by a stranger thing than you can say--dream of your dog, your sweet friendly dog who can sit and lay fetch or your cat or your neighbor's cat or your father's giant bug-eyed goldfish named Beavis. Dream of Beavis' fat eyes which see everything there is and often more which in this life is too much always way too much.

2. Then move forward and stop asking don't be shy pretend there are one thousand of your mothers-in-law and they don't like you, either, surprise-surprise! Clean house. Go after knee-caps like they were ten points each make every man alive grab his testicles and fall to his knees while simultaneously screaming to God in shrill prayer about staying alive and not dying about having children again one day in the future. Take no prisoners when you swing the baton make no friends with the mace in your hand besides you asked many times but only ordered once. Remember? Asked many times but only ordered once. You did what you could--walking softly and carrying a big stick. It's what works best. It's the right thing. Go ahead and kick some unruly ass make many bastards sorry, sore, and limp.

To the Man I Found Baking at Midnight in High Heels and a Red Versace Knock-Off

Eric Cline

what do you think when I wake up in the morning shouting litanies?
Most men grasp it as a monument, not understanding
Mom's exorcisms stayed yellow, incontestable for five years.
Flailing at rice gods, she cut the moon with a kitchen knife
and held up her hands, searching out empty ceiling.

My father milked women in hotel rooms,
other times in cars. Those human smells:
his boots, his gun. He poured unexpected stanzas away,
followed flowers with cigarettes.
Invisible under men's clothes, my breasts were livid
as I watched him turn off the light to eat,
drawings wadded vengeful in my hand.
Ruined, he preferred to create history than be referred to as father.
But I pulled free, aloft among disturbing sketches.

I don't want to tell you about her picture,
her post-sex dialectic, his laughter,
The nomenclature extended outward,
metaphoric as a gravel road, opaque as childhood.

That night the helicopter hovered over the city, his children calling
after it.

We forced the memories properly dead in our veins.
Wives talked, listened officially,
baked cookies in mutual eagerness to forget Mom's description of
him being taken away.
No words correct enough to hold together the union of a flit man
and his clasped wife.

Let me sing like a poet dipped in gin, thick with inspiration and oil.
Would you like my poor lines to prosper with coins or carrots?
Proud, I walked above the mists and watched every interlocking
torso,

evidence I'd become blossomless, flee, and unbreachable.

There is a man I know, in drag,
squinting in the kitchen, a businessman,
not ready to inform me I will soon look up
and wave the night out the window.

Still I'll have the holy father, the innocent songs to consume in blossoming.

The girl didn't know how sweet it is
to have life deeper under foot than hunger.
I am daring, traveled. I can stain my hands with iodine.
I've learned the art of blood eating
from the fear of being caught broken with glass.

She was arrested on her way to work, a civil stretch by the cathedral.

That morning I remember my mother signaling our names,
howling to finish the marmalade for her, and pray.

The Fall, A Leap

Gina Hausknecht

When morning bliss gave way at last, that day, to noon
I ate my lunch: crunched eucalyptus leaves between my razor teeth,
the bright translucent skin of nightshade bursting on my tongue.
The juice, vermilion sweet, ran down my jowls.
A little hare tugged my tail expectantly; I nipped at it in fun.

At dusk--the light drained from the sky, not yet replaced by dark--
I saw that one approach and watched them talk:
her pensive, then annoyed, irresolute, her arms across her chest,
her face in clouds. Measuring, it seemed, she looked around
with unfamiliar wonder as the sun meandered west.

When evening fell a punching hunger doubled me in half:
I gazed at milkweed with a new distaste. A possum, I took note,
was cringing strangely. The sky by some new magic coughed and
wept.
A searing urge ran through my bowels, traced down my spine,
resolved
into my legs, and then, before I knew myself--I leapt.

Memoirs of a Wasted Life, No. 64

Damniso Lopez

Antônio,
 when a salesman
of yachts,
 glued
a black tape cross over his heart,
He stood on ankle-deep rugs to make a sale.

Antônio,
 now hiding
 in mountains
watched a raw egg to be fried on a top
from discarded paint can.
He gazed
at the yellow center unraveling into twisted streaks
a man who wore a silk rope, green with three gold dragons
at breakfast
He now wears a uniform pulled off
one of the dictator's soldiers he had killed.
He ripped off the insignia,
put it on the arm of a naked girl in a glossy magazine.

He took tape, stuck a black cross over the paper girl's heart.

Untitled

Jacob Hayes

Am I just the ghostwriter
of my former selves?
The words crawl forth
from primordial pools
to form oceans on paper.

New Testament(*Solutions*)

Mark Pawlak

Apostle Painting: 201 358-1909
Bethlehem Bagel Co.: 610 866-1855
Caesar's Shed Restaurant: 413 229-8774
Canaan Land of Canaan Quilts: 216 893-3028
Herod's Cold Weather Hoods: 405 886-3433
John's Hot Dog King: 864 260-9323
Joseph's Gourmet Bunz: 617 381-9290
Judas & Sons Auto Body Shop: 415 364-6644
Jude's Golf Club Repair: 814 849-2582
Lazarus The Wood Restorer Inc.: 818 781-7768
Loaves and Fishes Catering: 619726-4853
Luke's Decor & More: 513251-3388
Mark's Dents 'N' Dings: 407 830-9344
Mary's Swap Meet: 405 427-0051
Mary Magdalene Ministries: 208 365-3621
Matthew's All Purpose Garage: 813 623-6668
Messiah Musical Productions: 915 695-5646
Money Changers Service Co: 316682-8212
Nicodemus For Your Wall Cover: 513 932-8281
Peter Auto Exotics by Peter: 407 842-1703
Pilot Leadership Systems: 603 882-6449
Roman Hall Bar & Restaurant: 609 394-1770
The Master's Sermon Library: 904 743-9103
Shroud Auction Service: 608 233-4371
Three Kings Deli: 201 278-8288
Titus Touch Carpet & Rug Cleaners: 847 541-1177

Goat's Horn with Red

(after Georgia O' Keefe)

Lois Marie Harrod

It is not the horn, but what it turns upon,
the way it hugs the firmament,
that great blue ball of yarn
that seems my being.

Let me say something sloppy:
it traps my heart, it cups
the blue pool of sorrow.
There.

You bought a golden torque,
fashioned after one plowed up in a bog,
and I wore it wondering
if I were Persephone.

Was it spring or winter?
Soiled or blossoming? This earth
and its sentimental heart--
trumpets curl in death.

Of course, as an afterword,
the pursuit of truth, the man who says
I should lie long and think
of what I have not written.

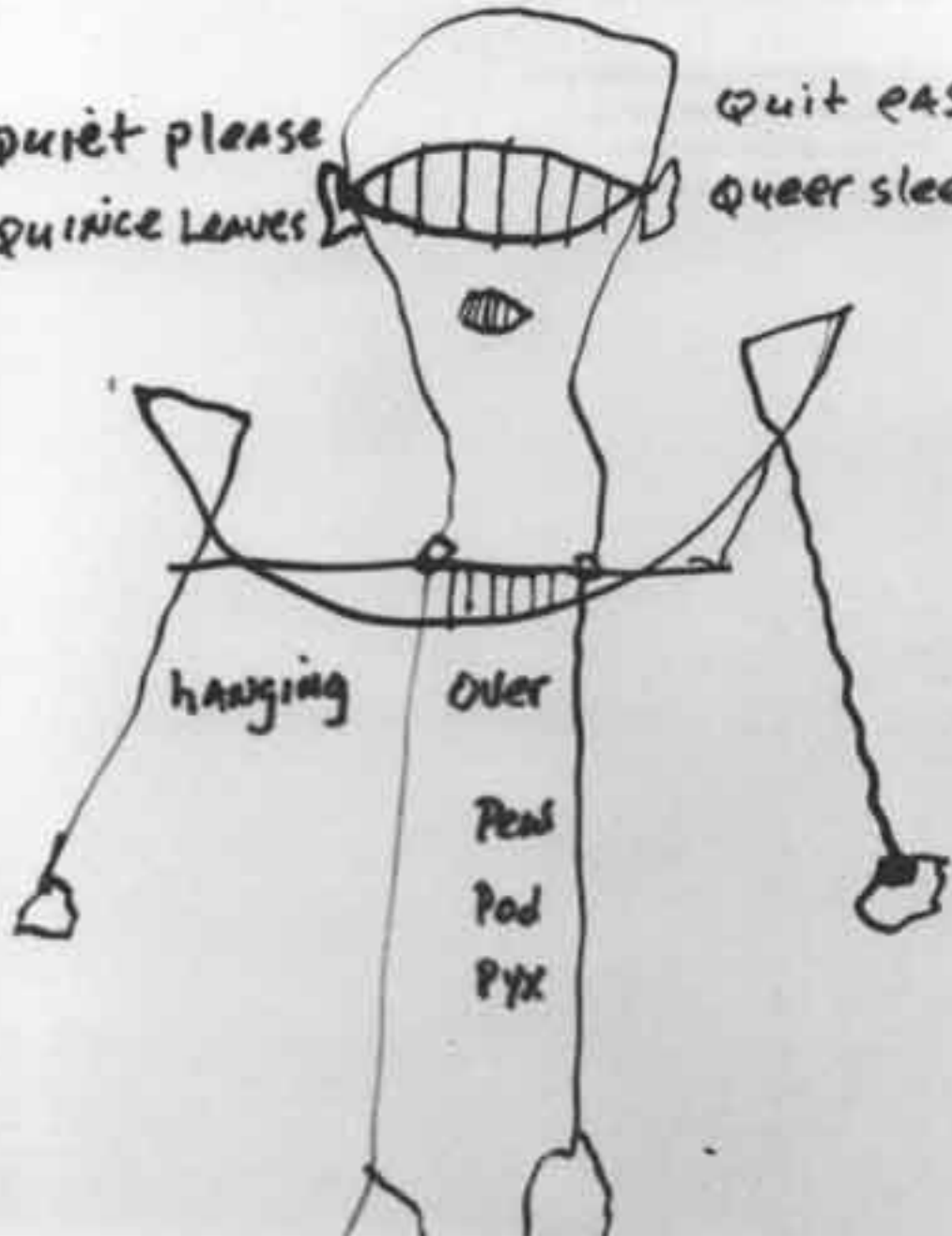
But do you want to hear my uncle
weeping in the funereal cadillac, telling
of the nurse who did not flinch when
my aunt Lucille, the darkest bile.

That is what he said, the darkest bile,
oh, she suffered. Best stick
with nail clippings found in the motel rug,
his mouth twists around his words.

Like the horn of a mountain goat,
he must turn in now and in.
You can see that this is not
a white conch tinged with red.

Quiet please
Quince leaves

Quit ease
Queer sleeves



hanging

Over

Pens

Pod

Pyx

Slowly Explaining a Sample Board to Her Deaf Clients

(for Lisa Johnson)

Daniel Saalfeld

Blacker--not whiter. It has to have
a little black to make it stronger.
Medium dark, all right, I think
this is good. This is much lighter.
Too white is too boring. Just some veins only?
Just a little bit? I like that. A little blacker
too? And more black for stronger.
A little brown just as a vein.

Now, do you want the ceiling too? The only thing,
is that in reality, you wouldn't put real marble
that high. But if you want, I can paint
the ceiling a soft gray.

Wanna Hear It?

Selena Reilly

I'm waiting for my brother, Joe and his friend, Steve. I guess Steve could be my brother too because they hang out a lot.

I don't have any money--all's I got is a quarter and a banana magnet that goes on my dad's refrigerator.

Hey- once I saved a kid's life at Chuck E Cheese. . .wanna hear the story?

Well, he was in that tent with the colored balls that you jump in. You know what I'm talking about?

Yeah, and his foot got really stuck next to the wall. I don't know how but it did.

And his mom--she panicked and jumped inside the tent. And you know big adults aren't supposed to be in the tent. You have to weigh under 65 pounds.

But she got right in there and pulled his leg but it didn't come out. So I yelled at the top of my lungs,

"Pull straight up!" and the whole place quieted. But the mom did it and the boy's foot came out. Christie was so proud of me.

Have you ever gotten cold feet when you were gonna get married? Well I did- and when I told Christie, she got mad and didn't like me anymore.

Hey- one time I got in this fight--did I tell you that? No, I didn't. Wait. Did I?

Oh, but I got shot in the face. You can't tell where though, can ya? Right here by my eye- see it?

Did you know I met Chuck Norris tonight? He was right down the road and he was drunk.

One time in Florida, these sharks kept biting and biting. It's a really sad story...

Wanna hear it?

It is not Fake; Therefore, It is Real

Brad Ricca

Let us pretend there are no rules.
It is Texas Death and anything goes.
It is come-as-you-are,
it is do-as-you-please.

So bring your hair.
Even if you wear a Mexican mask, it
will still fall about you like garlands.

I will also be masked and
will be known as
The Mystery,
known for my vicious clothesline.
My cruel and unyielding
figure-four leglock.

My interviews are blood-baths of
shocking violence,
promises to you.

Still,
you will surely prevail.
Late in the match, the crowd on your side,
you will take off your mask,
an unparalleled rage.

In the background,
a bursting of fireflies.

In that half-light of the enormous,
egg-shaped convention center,
I will see you as if we were alone:
that back booth by the
pool table
the touch of your shoe on mine.

My Laboratory Rat Committed Suicide

William Dudley

I was testing my rat at the
laboratory

injecting him with adrenaline
and watching him swim for the platform

for the longest time he wanted to find
the platform

and I injected him with adrenaline
and adrenaline blockers

and I had all my statistics laid out

until one day he just went under water
and he wouldn't come up

crazy, stupid rat
you can't commit suicide

it's not part of the test. . .

Obligations

Sarah M Young

What do have I to do?
Should I stay there only to fall here
into a haze of radio dust and moon waves
murder you, resurrect me?
Will anyone regret me if I choose to?
This guilt they strap me with
Boxed in. Responsibility handed out
like new toothbrushes
I know what to do, but it's only out of habit
live without me--rearrange me
my desire is within the words, upstairs in the nursery
not around them, studying them, after them, to practice
to rock
to cradle
to comfort
holding hearts in my hands
Accidently letting them drop on purpose
to escape into the garden
let the scalpel leave my hand
dangerous knowledge
escape it
a new path, please find me
in a place with less consequence

stuffing and useless flannel shirts

Dave Kabel

nearly a year after the death of their first baby
add some nipple rings and a premonition of freedom
to the diet of routine where he would ask frequently
if she were sick of him yet.

now it was an October party in another city.
the guests had cleared, save one on the floor
growing cold. The host proclaimed
“Looks as if we’ve got ourselves a new scarecrow”
the lower of her lips quivered slightly.

back at his roach-ridden refuge of a living space, she worried, wait-
ing.
she greeted dawn, packing all of her personal effects and photo-
graphs.

Sunday, he noticed the subtle absences like missing pictures and
plants. she managed to forget the one picture of their newborn:
so he set it on fire and watched past the bubbling of emulsion

the rippling of the image, past the deep discoloration of the tone
until a sneeze sent the memory scattering about the room.

Graduation Night

J Tarwood

I

In a white gown, she waits,
black hair gushing breathlessly
down a cliff of shoulders.

He's off with other boys,
smoking by muddy garbage cans.
Rain sways like a spotlight.

II

Muggy inside.
Think of an apple
shrugging off its peel.

She heaves her hair to heaven.
She could be a kitten,
the way air pets her skull.

Eyebrows are easy.
They slip away
like old band-aids
in the shower.

The thickest lips
can be dabbed right up
along with the lipstick smudge.

Even a nose is no worse
than a lug-nut twisted against the thread.

But eyes she's got to keep.
The mind's no coffin
so long as you can peep

III

He steps back in
to where her accessories
found themselves clumped.

She'd love a howl
but wind couldn't chat more kindly
with her old stuff.

IV

Like a surfer cresting,
she dashes outdoors
and dumps her true core

into the scum-skinned ditch.
It makes a splash like a rooster's comb.

Water's glad-
more bare bones
to choke the flow--

and starts gnawing away like a beaver.

The Last Image

Jessica Hendricksen

The black pearls and the paradise lamps,
the secret boats,
the unfurled roads,
the marshlands,
the blood-doors opening
and closing,
the loaves of rain in the cupboard,
the salt,
the lost glove in the ocean,
the stars,
the light in the mouth,
and the dog-songs sung
to the eyelids
of longing,
the smoke hours,
the cellos of trance,
the dozing owls in the wrist,
the invisible words
that are flames
that are blossoms
that are flames
that are dust.
I give them up.
I can see nothing more
in the dispossessed faces
of the clouds
nor can my hands any longer
snow down
their sorrows.
I grow old,
I am a stranger,
my eyes shut
like a lock.



FICTION

My Better Half

Mark Blickley

People who see me must think I'm eccentric, emotionally disturbed, or lonely. People who speak with me have told me that I'm an obnoxious, good for nothing bastard, a nasty prick, but I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks. I don't even care who reads this damned notebook. My name, Andrew Tremper, is right there on the cover for all to see.

It all started about nine years ago. I was shacking up with this girl who was what they call a "modern dancer." We lasted a little under a year together. Her name was Miriam and she went to some artsy fartsy college up in New England to study THE DANCE. When she returned to New York she joined a dance company called Dervishing Divas. I met her at a performance on Manhattan's Upper WestSide.

I was confused. I'm an educated man and I know what a dervish is--it's spinning around, out of control. But the Divas didn't spin. Hell, they barely moved. For over an hour all they did was lift a leg or move an arm or twitch their head every few minutes while electronic music slammed into our ears and pulsing lights irritated our eyes. The Dervishing Divas sucked, but Miriam looked awfully good in her low cut leotard and I could see that she had the rounded buttocks of a thoroughbred horse.

I don't even remember how I got to a Dervishing Diva performance or where I heard about them, except that back then I used to make the rounds of a lot of inexpensive arts events because there was always lots of women and I was posturing as an arts enthusiast, a good looking, well built, arts enthusiast. Hell, I remember the night I nailed Miriam. I had to put up with hours of her artspeak about how the Divas don't dance, they manipulate movement and shit like that. Well, let me tell you, she moved like a worm with a match under it later that night and a lot of nights that followed.

When she finally skipped out on me, the bitch left me a going away present--a life-sized cardboard cutout of myself. On a note pinned to its crotch she said she had it made because talking to the cutout was the only time she could have an adult conversation

with me, expose her feelings, without being ridiculed, cut-off, or ignored. The note said a helluva lot more than that, it was a freakin' manifesto, but you get the idea. It was a real artsy exit, don't you think? and probably the highlight of her creative career. I mean, just imagine all the thinking, planning, and execution involved in trying to make me feel like a complete shit.

I was going to throw the damn thing out, but I grew sort of attached to it. She did pick a pretty decent photo of me to enlarge in cardboard, although I've always thought of myself as somewhat taller than I am. Standing back to back with the cutout proves we're both the exact height, five feet ten and three quarters of an inch. That sonofabitch dancer nailed me down to three quarters of an inch. In her manifesto, she predicted I'd keep the life size cutout because I was so in love with myself. Miriam was wrong. I kept it to show the other broads I bang the monument of obsessive love given to me by a former member of the Dervishing Divas. The girls I take up to my apartment all seem to be impressed, so I guess Miriam's cruelty backfired on her. How's that saying go about a last laugh?

I kept the cardboard cutout of myself inside my apartment for about three or four years. It made its world debut at a stupid party thrown by a woman I was involved with who lived in Hoboken. The point of the party was that no one could speak. Everybody had to write these responses, keep them in their pockets, and then show them to other guests when communication was desired. We were kind of like idiotic mimes without makeup. I feel like an ass even admitting that I've attended parties like that, but hey, in a time of AIDS, artsy babes are the most liberal and liberated, so I played the game to win the prize. Sue me. It's better than sitting home and choking the chicken in front of adult video rentals, although that, too, has its moments.

I cut up a few garbage bags and wrapped them around my cardboard cutout that I named Sir Andrew, starting at his feet and working my way up to his face, our face. As I pulled the plastic around Sir Andrew's head it felt as if I was trying to suffocate myself, which is ridiculous because I don't hate me. I pulled the plastic off Sir Andrew and decided to take him outside in all his

glory. I figured I'd allow other people to enjoy twice the pleasure of our handsome face.

I had to carry my cardboard cutout of myself down to the PATH train station at Thirty-third Street. PATH trains are subways that link New York City with New Jersey and man did I get some bizarre reactions to carrying a life size cutout of myself under my arm as I crossed the state line beneath the Hudson River. I dug the attention.

The reason why I decided to take Sir Andrew--I'm just plain old Andrew--to the party was because I'll be damned if I'll spend my time writing out silly shit on slips of paper just to appease some piece of ass. If they want me to be silent at a party, fine, they can talk to my life-sized cardboard cutout, Sir Andrew. He won't answer them back.

Sir Andrew was the hit of the party. A gorgeous redhead even slipped me her phone number when her hostess wasn't watching because she wanted to hook up with the "creative genius" that had turned the party's conceit into what she said was a new art form, or some crap like that, yet all I did at the party was smoke some pot, down glasses of great cognac that the label said was made by monks, and eat like a pig. Whenever anyone approached me with their little fuckin' witty remarks on paper, I'd shrug, shake my head, and point to Sir Andrew, who I propped up in a corner of the living room. So there you have it, the secrets of a creative genius. My mother used to yell at me that if I kept my mouth shut people wouldn't know how stupid I was. I guess the old bag was right. Anyway, tragedy befell me and Sir Andrew later that evening. I had planned to spend the night with my girlfriend, but she caught me making out with the redhead in the bathroom and pitched a fit. That's when the silent party turned into screams. I told her to shut up and stop ruining the integrity of her party, to pull something out of her fuckin' pocket for me to read if there was something she wanted to say.

The redhead immediately ran off and shortly afterwards my girlfriend kicked me out of her apartment. I grabbed Sir Andrew and staggered my way back towards the PATH station. I was really loaded; that bitch should not have driven me out of her house. Before I even made it over to the subway, a Hoboken cop gave me a

summons for pissing in the street. I think I even accidentally sprayed a bit on poor Sir Andrew.

I had a hard enough time navigating through the streets and train turnstiles, but with Sir Andrew tucked under my arm it became damn near impossible. My cardboard cutout smashed into telephone poles, parked cars, fire hydrants, as well as other pedestrians, and was nearly decapitated by closing subway doors. By the time we arrived home, Sir Andrew was bent, ripped, crumpled, and stained. He looked exactly like the way I felt. He slipped out of my hands as I flopped onto my bed.

When I woke up the next afternoon the first thing I saw was Sir Andrew, face up on the floor, next to my bed. He looked scary. It was as if I was looking in a mirror at a decaying, diseased image of myself. My first impulse was to crush my cutout and toss it into the garbage, but the idea of trashing myself like that was too disturbing. That was when I realized how attached I'd become to the fuckin' thing.

I couldn't keep the cutout, but I wouldn't throw it out, either, until I could replace it. That's when I remembered walking past this porno palace right off of Times Square that advertised they could make life-sized cutouts from photos, although the sample displays were all these gross looking naked people with bloated breasts and shriveled shlongs. They reminded me of my first experience at a nude beach. I was about fifteen years old and was expecting to see all these incredibly hot babes jiggling about, playing volleyball, stretched out in the sand flashing more than just a smile. What a disgusting shock to discover that the nudists were mostly guys, middle-aged or even older, and the women on the beach looked liked my Mom's friends, or like our neighbors.

Anyway, I set up the timer on my camera and took fresh portraits of myself in my favorite outfits and picked out the best one. The guy at the porno palace couldn't believe that my balls weren't at least hanging out through my zipper. He charged me sixty-seven dollars and change and did a beautiful job. When I picked it up, I noticed something quite interesting. My cardboard facial expression had a really strange look to it. I've since heard it described as compassionate, concerned, thoughtful, and affectionate. The truth was that my expression was affected by total anxiety.

It was the first time I had ever used my camera timer, the first time I ever took pictures of myself, and I didn't think I was going to pull it off. I was too embarrassed to ask someone to take multiple portraits of me because they might think I was some kind of a conceited, narcissistic bastard.

I liked having the new, updated version of Sir Andrew with me. Because of Sir Andrew's success at the Hoboken party, I decided to regularly ferry it out in public. And let me tell you, it attracted and engaged more female strangers in conversation than if I had been walking the most adorable puppy in Manhattan. I did notice, however, that when talking with these curious and inquisitive women they seemed to be paying more attention to my cardboard face rather than to my real face that was sputtering out words of charm and profundity.

The first question I was always asked was, of course, why do I have a life-size cut-out of myself? My answer would vary according to the appearance of the inquisitor. If guys asked me I usually would say something like my girlfriend is going out of town and couldn't bear to be without me for even a day, so she forced me to clone myself so I could travel everywhere she went, or feign shock that they hadn't heard about the terrorist attack in Florence, and that they needed an immediate model to replace the recently exploded statue of David, so I was on my way to Federal Express Sir Andrew to the Italian authorities, you know, stuff like that.

When young women asked me the same question my response was dependent on how they looked. If I wasn't attracted to the questioner I'd give them the same answer as I gave the guys. If the woman looked like she had potential, I'd say something romantic like I was on my way to launch this cardboard representation of myself into the Hudson River, not unlike a Viking funeral pyre, because my dreams of trying to connect with true love had died, or my response would be something humbly humorous, like I decided to invest all my negative traits into this cut-out and was on my way to burn it in a sacrificial fire of repentance and purification, or some shit like that. You get the idea.

Funny thing it turned out women didn't invest any of my negative traits into Sir Andrew-- they did the exact opposite. Sometimes I'd bang babes that I swear were more in love with my card-

board self than with me. I remember more than one girl insisting that I prop the cut-out by the bed and that I keep the lights on so that they could see Sir Andrew while we did the nasty. There's certainly a lot of freaks out there, but freaks are the most fun in bed.

Sir Andrew was pretty good for me in more ways than just the babe department. I never needed a scale. When I'd start to pork up a little all I had to do was to compare myself with the cardboard stud and it would force me to keep myself in check. I had to maintain the same handsome and appealing appearance as Sir Andrew because my worst nightmare would be that one day I'd be cruising the streets with Sir Andrew and no one would recognize that it was a life size cut-out of me. Call it vanity if you want, but I call it a fight against nostalgia. I don't ever want Sir Andrew to represent my glory days--he must be representative of the here and now. And it's more important to me now than ever because that schmuck of a mayor, Guiliani, has cleaned up the Times Square area and replaced porno shops with all that cartoon crap and family entertainment. Even my cardboard cut-out maker, Leon Sasha, was driven out of his Peep Show Paradise months ago and I've been unable to track him down.

I take Sir Andrew with me almost everywhere I go these days. Aside from his talent for attracting women, I discovered that he also supplies me with peace and safety when riding the subways, especially late at night when I travel home to Manhattan after working in one of the sleaziest neighborhoods in Brooklyn. All the fruitcakes, psychos, and homeless assholes seem to fall instantly in love with Sir Andrew. I just lean back in my subway seat, close my eyes, and hold up the cut-out like a shield while some lunatic mutters away at it instead of pulling out a knife or hassling me about money. They tell the cardboard all about their wildest and sickest thoughts, experiences, confessions and actually seem to find comfort from that stupid look on Sir Andrew's face.

But the truth is, I'm starting to get a little pissed over all the attention paid Sir Andrew. Why the fuck does everybody love him so much? Why is he more important to people than I am? I mean, if I don't take care of him, protect him, he could easily be destroyed because he's so gladdened fragile even a little moisture could melt his compassionate smile into a sneer and ruin him! Ruin us!

What started out as a gimmick to attract attention to myself has really boomeranged into a gimmick that diverts attention away from me. Sometimes I feel like I'm the prop and that my cardboard image carts me around to help keep me in touch with the rest of humanity.

Crazy, ain't it?

I mean, to be honest I guess I'd like to be more like Sir Andrew. I've noticed that I have a tendency to sprinkle profanities and slang into my speech in order to bolster my image as a strong man, but Sir Andrew is completely silent and no one, man or woman, has ever questioned his strength or manliness. And he seems to really be able to help people with their problems because he listens to them and stares them in the face when they're talking to him. In some ways I sort of admire Sir Andrew, but it's kind of hard to change when your role model is yourself.



The Great American Beauty

John Hodges

They make large pots of chili without straining the fat off the meat first. They sprinkle the smallest amount of chili powder into it. Then, when all the people come over and are sitting at the table eating it, they say, "Gosh, you wouldn't believe how much chili powder I put in there, it was like, this whole package of it. I just kept pouring it in and pouring it in."

They don't like to be alone. They like attention, all of it if possible. It would have been great if they could have been an actress. It's not too late though. Surely, at some time or other a great director passing through town will see them and make an offer.

It would have been great if they could have been a model, have pictures taken of their face, their body. Models have to be a certain height though. Maybe they are too tall, or their hips too wide. Maybe their nose is a bit off center, a bit venous. But it's not too late. Beauty is a rare thing, right? It doesn't grow on trees. You have to be blessed in some way to be beautiful, and very few are blessed. Right?

And you have to be beautiful on the inside too, you know, otherwise what you got on the outside will be wrong, it won't look right. You ever see a squirrel haul a cream cheese bagel up a tree? That's what it's like, that kind of beauty, not something ninety-five percent of the population would want to see.

"Ninety-five percent of the population," is a phrase they often say, attaching it to other phrases such as, "would not like that movie...would not drink a beer made with goldenseal... would not think dancing like that is fun...would all agree that you are crazy."

And they speak in very pleasant tones, never yelling, even when they are mad, which they always are. They make their face look gentle and kind and truly interested. Do they know their only interest? Are they aware of it?

They will tell you all about the wonderful things they are going to do. The times for doing those things come and pass, but that's okay, there's always tomorrow.

And you can see it, the great unbearable humility in their face when somebody else gets attention. Their ears turn red. Large ears. Truly they cannot hide it no matter how hard they try.

They want to tell you all about such and such how such and such a person said this, or did that. They will tell you how many guys are hot on their trail, what a drag it is to be subject to such lustful creatures. I mean, doesn't everybody know I have a boyfriend?"

What poor boy, one might ask, is subject to them?

And they will pick up a book you are reading. An hour later, thinking it will cause you to admire them, to think about how great they are, they will say, "Gosh, I just read that whole book."

"I don't believe you," you might say.

"No, I did! I did!"

"You might have skimmed it, sure," you might say.

"Well, I didn't actually read *all* of it, but most of it I did, yes."

The truth comes out. But not all of it. Oh, not all of it. You might say to them it's disrespectful to read a book so fast, if the author is any good at all, if he does anything interesting.

But they are experts in all things. They know this already. There is nothing you can tell them without them already knowing what it is you are telling them. And there is nothing you can tell them about how you feel without them already having felt that way first. Unless, maybe, you tell them something really disgusting like, "Wouldn't it be great if the blacks took over and made all the whites their slaves?"

To this they almost don't know what to do. It makes them nervous when they can't agree to the hundredth degree and then some. So they fidget a little and come up with something, a sigh, a roll of the eyes, eager to get on to something else, anything, for all topics make them shine. If it can be said they are an artist, it would be fair to say that that art, is the art of making other people think they shine.

They do not like spicy foods, so you might make a meat loaf, using meat from the same package they did when they made that awful chili. You make your meat loaf with all the herbs and spicy stuff available in the kitchen: mace, paprika, cumin, garlic, oregano, onion bits, loads of black pepper, loads of cayenne,

tumeric, dill, tarragon, pickle relish, snake root, and anything else you happen to find. It's a loaf of historic significance, for the greatly-weathered only. One slice and you run for the Tums, or whatever product it is that alleviates burn.

They cut a slice, plenty of ketchup on it. Seeing how everybody else is eating it just fine, going Mmmm and all that, they go ahead and eat some, cutting in to that little slice. Half way through they complain to their boyfriend, just a subtle, "Baby, is there spices in here?"

"Ask him," the poor boy might say.

They look at you. "Are there spices in here?"

"Oh, just a dab of this, a dab of that."

And they say, "Yeah, this is good, it's a great meat loaf." And they finish their slice, no seconds or thirds like everybody else.

The next day when you mention how that loaf really put a whipping on you, and the boyfriend agrees, yes, that that was a wild loaf, they giggle and say, "Yeah, I know, haha, I was trying to be polite."

Is that the truth coming out? Was that being polite, to say the day before that it was a great loaf? Or would it be more polite to say what they think? Or do they know what they think? Would it not be better to say, I can't stand this, it's awful? Or is it better to go ahead and lie to everybody, lie to their face?

They are a great liar. Everything they do is a lie. Their entire life is a lie.

They love the phone, when it rings. Oh, who could it be? They pick up the phone and they talk and lie and when they hang up they say, "That was my friend Angie," or "That was my friend Walter," or "Those were my great friends Robert and Sage. They just kept talking and talking, I didn't know when they'd let me go."

Let me go? Does she fool them? Do they really think they shine? Do they think they're a great undiscovered actress, a model depriving New York catwalks of their presence? Are they a great intellectual? If they give them money will they write that profound book, that best-selling novel? Is it a good investment? Surely, surely, surely it is. There's nothing in the world they couldn't do if they only had a bit of money.

Or do they, the people who they call their friends, see the lie about them, so easily discernible? They don't act like they do. They smile when they talk to them and hug them good-bye, sinking into their arms, unaware of the face they make while receiving the hug and giving some hug back. It is a face of measuring the warmth of that particular hug, as if the degree of how much they are cherished can be felt by putting their hands on the person's back. It is the sick-est thing one might have ever seen.

And that poor boy, what about *him*, does he see it?

And get this: they, when asked about that goldenseal beer, now that it's been made and everybody likes it, they say, "Oh yeah, I *love* that beer. We weren't sure if it would work out or not, but I said we should do it. I thought it was a great idea. I...."

I, I, I, as if they had anything to do with it at all.

Fucking bitch.

The Re-route

Kristin Johnson

I met him one summer working road construction. I was laying tar while he drove the steam roller back and forth, leering at me. He made a joke about me being the only woman on the job, involving some sexual innuendo. It didn't bother me, although most things do. We began dating, and I quit my job. I had a doctor's order to. We moved in together, (much to the dismay of my doctor, "*You're not ready for that kind of relationship with another person!*"), and I began to hate him. It wasn't hard. He smoked Camel straights, one after the other, down to his fingertips, until he would wince and snuff them out. He would quote Whitely Strieber in bed, and force me to leave the bathroom light on so the "little gray men" wouldn't come. In the summertime he would trap June bugs between the window glass and the screen, then torture them with the mint toothpicks he hoarded from late night suppers at Perkins. He would count in his sleep. He had a thirty page list of how many times the number 23 appeared in everyday things. Page One started with, "There are 23 pairs of chromosomes in the human body. Slim-fast has 23 vitamins and minerals. In the movie 'Airport' the mad bomber has seat 23. It takes 23 seconds for blood to circulate through the human body. On July 23rd there are more UFO sightings than on any other day. There are 23 letters in the Latin alphabet. In 'Star Wars' the cell block where Leia was held was AA-23. September 23rd is Yom Kippur and Fall Equinox. There are 23 vertebrae in the human body. A hedgehog maintains a metabolic temperature of 230° F..." and went from there. He read books on silent killing and the ways of the ninja, then would "arm bar" me until my elbows cracked. "I could kill you like this," he would say. He smoked massive amounts of marijuana and every time he got high, would recite the same story to me about how back in high school he pissed in a freshman's gravity bong. He rarely drank and would lecture me on the addictive properties of alcohol when I poured myself a tumbler of vodka and cranberry juice. Three days after my Lithium prescription expired, he mentioned that he would like to see me as the star of a snuff film in which a lion ripped my heart out at the

peak of orgasm. I decided not to renew it. Instead, I visited him at work.

It was 5:30 on a Friday when I parked my teal Taurus next to a steam roller and cut the engine. He was a good 300 yards away laying tar on the new Highway 55 re-route. The re-route had been protested for months. Grandfathers in dreadlocks had marched the intended site with tie-dye clad infants slung over their shoulders.

"Save the trees! Save the park! Save yourself!"

Eventually the most belligerent ones were arrested for trespassing. The others filed off in search of a new cause. Re-route 55 went on as scheduled, an expanse of highway paved through the heart of a forest. It was breathtaking.

He saw me and lifted his hand in affirmation, then parked his machine and swung his lanky body down the side. He jogged, pigeon-toed, towards me.

"Hullo, Sunshine! You're a little late pickin' me up. It's Friday. Everyone else left an hour ago." He smacked my cheek with his chapped lips.

"Yeah. I wanted to wait 'til everyone was gone." I rummaged in my canvas shoulder bag and pulled out a bottle of wine.

He took it from me. "Lambrusco, huh?"

"It's fruity. Even you'll like it."

He made a face, but uncorked the bottle with his Swiss army knife, and took a swig.

"What's this for?"

"It's our anniversary."

"It is, huh?" he grinned. "Where's my present?"

"That's for later."

"I likes the sound of that."

We leaned against the hood of my Taurus and passed the bottle between us.

"Sunshine, did I ever tell you about when I worked in the mail room?"

"No," I said, and took a long pull on the bottle.

He cleared his throat. "Well, I worked inside this skyscraper downtown, the one that's all glass, ya know."

"Yeah."

"I'd be there from morning to night, and everyday I'd see those people come to work laughing and without a care in the world." He took a drink. "At night they'd leave with their shoulders hunched, draggin' their feet. Wanna know why?"

"Stress?" I asked. He ignored me.

"The building was draining them." He paused for dramatic effect, or maybe just to light his Camel. "You see, Sunshine, crystals are energy conductors, right? You're into that kinda shit."

I had no interest in crystals, but I nodded my head.

"Well, guess what those sky scrapers are shaped as?"

I took a wild stab. "Crystals?"

"Bingo! Pointing straight up to heaven. God is draining us."

"Deep." The bottle was gone. I looked around. "Hey, can I drive that?" I pointed to the steam roller.

"Yeah," he said. His face was slack and blotchy. "Let's go." He gave me a leg up into the driver's seat and settled beside me. "What, you're not gonna show me first? I'm a paving girl, remember?"

"My ability to operate a motor vehicle has been impaired." I rolled my eyes. "Okay, where are the keys?"

"Above the visor." He closed one eye to buckle his seat belt. It took him a couple of tries.

The steam roller started right up. The mechanical buzz of the world's largest honey bee.

"Put in the clutch. It's just like driving a shtick," he slurred. The roller vibrated over the dirt, scaring up a flock of blackbirds from the nearby trees. I drove the machine up to its friend, the paver, and stalled out.

He opened his heavy lids. "Uh-oh. Whaddya do?"

"I don't know! Maybe you should drive."

"Alright. Get out."

I swung out of the seat and dropped to the ground. "Shit! Get down here, my diamond earring just fell out!" I clutched at my empty right lobe. "I think it's somewhere over here," I said, scanning the red-brown dust. "Goddamn it!"

He climbed down and started helping me search at the end of the new road. "Git back up in the cab and see if ya can get her started."

"kay," I said. I looked at him on his hands and knees in front of me, sifting through the dirt, and I reached in my shoulder bag. My hand closed around the neck of the now empty Lambrusco bottle and I pulled it out. There was a bald spot on the top of his head that formed a perfect circle. I aimed and brought the bottle down with both hands. *Bullseye!* I climbed aboard the machine and started it with a single turn of the ignition. I looked down at him on his stomach in the dirt, a nasty bruise beginning to color the spot of his white scalp, and I rolled forward. There was the sound of a very large bug being squashed, but that was it. I reversed and rolled back over, gagging. *God, what a mess.* I drove back to my car, wiping the giant roller through the dirt the whole way.

I parked the steam roller next to my Taurus and placed the keys back under the visor, then jumped down and examined it. There were reddish clots. I fished in my shoulder bag for my car keys and popped the trunk. A cooler, a spare tire, a bag of Marshall asphalt mix, a can of Elvaloy binder, and a bottle of 409 and paper towels. I cleaned the pin using half the roll of paper towels, which I shoved in my canvas shoulder bag when I was done, reminding myself to drive the speed limit on the way back home.

Do you have a concealed weapon in the car, ma'am?

No, officer, but I do have a bag full of bloody towels. I think there might even be a bit of brain in there for ya.

I tossed the 409 and half-gone roll of towels back into the trunk and pulled out the bag of asphalt mix and binder. He hadn't even thought to clean his machine before we'd left, (*which I had not counted on*), he'd been too busy telling me crystal stories. Well, I'd mix up a new batch of asphalt anyway, and even clean it when I was through. Why destroy a perfectly good machine?

I ambled the 300 yards back to the stain spreading at the end of the unfinished road, and gazed at the paver. A Rosco Maximizer II Asphalt Distributor with 7-gauge steel head construction, full-section 10-gauge surge plates, 120° F rock wool insulation, (*two inches of it!*), and an overflow system extending six inches above the rated tank capacity. I climbed up the ladder, carefully mounted to the side of the paver away from the spray area, and reached above the visor. The keys were there.

The sun was setting when I returned to my car. Summer sunsets in Minnesota are unparalleled. I started the car and an object on the dashboard caught the sun and flashed. My diamond earring. I picked it up, returned it to its home on my right lobe, flipped the headlights on, and pulled away.

I filed a Missing Persons Report, in Minneapolis, for Maxwell Hodge the next day. There was a two second blurb with his picture on the news, but that was it. The weeks went by and Re-route 55 was finished.

In the middle of the new highway there is a sign posted that says BUMP, with an arrow pointing down to the road. I bounce over it every Friday when I drive into the city to see my shrink. Sometimes I spill my coffee, which pisses me off because it costs about four bucks a cup. On a more pleasant note, the re-route sure is beautiful. The trees are so close that one can see the buds opening up in the springtime. And it cuts the driving time by ten minutes.

A Good Night's Sleep

Charles Edward Brooks

Beware the fury of a patient man.

--John Dryden: *Absalom and Achitophel*

Monday May 27: The Whitmonday holiday is normally very quiet, but today the elevator has been running constantly since mid-morning. Furniture is still being knocked about and dragged into and out of the lift. Shouts echo up and down the stairs. A couple is moving into the 3½-room flat on the third floor. Young, not unattractive, but trashy in general appearance and behavior (tawdry clothes, door-slamming, blaring rock music).

The girl is in a state of advanced pregnancy. Two names on the letter-box suggest that they are not married: Mark Ballentine, obviously a foreigner, and Sybille Engstringer, just as obviously a native. All the shouting heard so far has been in English--and *what* an English!

In my 36 years in the Chorgasse I've observed all kinds of tenants move into the house. Few have been (1) really objectionable, and they haven't stayed long. Most have been (2) tolerable; a few (3) unexceptionable. Once the new couple is settled in, it will become clear which category applies to them. But I fear it will be the first.

Saturday June 8: A new noise has been added to the assortment emanating from the Ballentine-Engstringer flat: the crying of an infant. During all my years in the house none of the residents have had children. The howling has a particularly nerve-wracking quality and suffices to break into a septuagenarian's light sleep. There are now frequent interruptions during the night. With each successive waking it becomes more difficult to get back to sleep.

Thursday June 20: Met Engstringer at the letter-box and introduced myself. She is really quite pretty. I used my most convincing old-man manner--grandfatherly, old-fashioned, hopelessly out of date. Everything about her betrays a complete lack of breeding. I could practically read her thoughts as I spoke to her: "*Buzz*

off, you silly old fart! Why should I waste my time with the likes of you?"

Wednesday July 3: Ballentine has changed jobs, and now works the night shift as a bartender. He gets home at about 0400 hours, usually with a group of riffraff in tow. They sit on the landing between the third and fourth floors drinking beer, smoking (tobacco and marijuana) and chattering. Their vocabulary is atrocious. An inner clock has now set itself to wake me when they arrive. Heart palpitations and sweaty palms ensue consistently.

Invited Fräulein Geissbühler to the Kronenhalle for lunch: *her 75th birthday*. I could not persuade her to order anything more gourmet than a St. Gall bratwurst and fried potatoes. When dessert--chocolate mousse--was served, I laid her present on the table: a volume of Rilke verses. She can't read two lines by the poet without turning teary. She referred several times to the fact that I'm *only one year older* than she is. I gave no sign that I understood the intention behind her words, and she's too much a lady to make her meaning plainer.

Thursday July 18: Mrs. Leibundgut next door charged out onto our fourth-floor landing this morning at 0420 hours and threatened to call the police if Ballentine and his friends did not vacate the staircase at once. The young man explained that Engstringer would not allow smoking inside the flat because of the baby. Mrs. Leibundgut retorted that she was not interested in his domestic arrangements. Ballentine & Co., grumbling among themselves, left the house with their beer in the direction of Predigerplatz. They likely settled on the fountain steps to swill the rest of it.

Just before noon I ran into Mrs. Leibundgut at the greengrocer's. She recounted the above incident and told me that she had written a letter of complaint to the building management. I listened with courteous sympathy, as though I had not heard every word of her exchange with Ballentine from behind my door. She seemed surprised that I myself expressed no complaints about Ballentine-Engstringer. She probably suspects that I'm deaf and/or slightly senile.

But experience has vindicated my policy of patience again and again: I never complain about anything. For that very reason, when I have to intervene, I'm never subject to suspicion.

The meek shall inherit the earth.

Friday August 2: The National Day festivities yesterday continued far into the night: fireworks, explosions, yelling in the streets, drunken mobs fallen into atavistic brutality. Human beings prove over and over again how primitive they are, how needful of coercion to attain even the appearance of civilization.

In the early morning hours, Ballentine brought the festivities home with him from the bar. Mrs. Leibundgut made another scene and actually did call the police, who got here within ten minutes. The beer-cum-marijuana party retreated into the Ballentine-Engstinger flat and, once the police had gone, played loud rock music until after daybreak.

I shall probably have to intervene. The building management is totally inept and will never bring the situation on the third floor under control. The police, who lack political support, are rapidly becoming indifferent--very much in contrast to what they were during my working years.

But I must wait until the fury, the palpitations, the sweaty palms are changed into pure, passionless energy: the point of transmutation. It has always been like that.

Nothing is more majestic than the Law. The Law is the cohesive force that holds society together, and all those who serve it--judges, prison staff, police--deserve the highest respect in virtue of their office. But in essence, the Law is a philosophical ideal; its embodiment on earth, the work of all-too-human demiurges, must forever remain imperfect.

Sometimes the Law punishes the innocent and--far worse--fails to punish the guilty. That is when some intervention from outside is required. The act of intervention itself may be illegal, although it serves to realize the ideal aims of the Law in the particular case at hand. It is in this sense that I have had to intervene from time to time in the course of my life.

In the furniture exhibition at the National Museum last year, there was a magnificent Renaissance credenza, massive, apparently

flawless and self-contained. And yet, I espied a small piece of cardboard under one of the crushingly heavy legs; in some way, the credenza's equilibrium and proper position required that tiny object from outside itself.

My modest interventions in the service of the Law have been of this nature. And I suspect that another one will be demanded of me very soon.

Friday December 6: St. Nicholas's Day. Had coffee with Fräulein Geissbühler in the afternoon at Schober's. She talked about an investigation on housing carried out by the Federal Department of the Interior. One finding was that 74% of our country's population complains about noise in their homes. She herself was not surprised by this high percentage; she is often disturbed by the people living above her in the Predigergasse, and most of her acquaintances have voiced similar complaints. In accordance with my policy, I maintained that my neighbors were considerate and my flat quiet. Something about the little smile which flickered over her face made me wish that I had not said that.

Saturday December 7: The point of transmutation was reached early this morning.

Monday December 23: Early this afternoon the doorbell rang. Since I was expecting no one, I did not react. When Mrs. Leibundgut's bell rang, a man's voice on the intercom said that he was making a delivery for Mangold Wines. She pressed the buzzer and the man was soon standing before her door. But the delivery, twelve bottles of Dôle, was not for her; it was for Ballentine-Engstringer, who were apparently not at home. Would Mrs. Leibundgut sign on behalf of her neighbors? No, Mrs. Leibundgut would not sign on behalf of such trash and what did he mean by disturbing *her* with *their* affairs?!

In any event, the deliveryman had succeeded in getting into the building. He wished the strident woman a Merry Christmas, carried his crate down to the third floor, and left it in front of Ballentine-Engstringer's door, after one more fruitless attempt to evoke a response from the other side of it.

Soon afterwards, Mrs. Leibundgut, puffing with indignation and muttering to herself, stamped into the elevator and then out of the building. From my window I could see her big shopping basket swinging on her arm.

The other tenants on the third floor had already left for Basle to spend Christmas with their relatives.

The moment for my intervention had arrived.

The substance to be used had been prepared in advance: a blend of an alkaloid from the bounty of Nature with a synthetic compound employed in insecticides. My training as a chemist and my experience as a scientist with the Cantonal Police have been invaluable in my various interventions over the years. But knowledge is--as the mathematicians say--necessary but not sufficient. A certain amount of luck is essential as well. Thus far, fortune has always favored me.

The few implements needed were quickly gathered.

Wearing my felt slippers, I descended to the third floor without making a sound, summoned the elevator and propped it open with a doorstop. The house was as silent as a tomb.

The crate of Dôle sat squarely on Ballentine-Engstringer's doormat, with no wrapping of any kind. Given the calm efficiency that comes of transmutation, less than three minutes were necessary to inject minute quantities of the substance through the twelve corks. I then freed the elevator and returned to my flat.

Between 2000 and 2030 hours the lift disgorged visitors onto the third floor five times. Ballentine, obviously enjoying an evening off, welcomed them. At each opening of the flat door, rock music and raucous voices blared through the whole house. Even with the door closed, the sound of music and laughing still penetrated into the staircase.

As I prepare to retire (2340 hours) the music is still very audible, but the laughter has stopped. The baby is screaming.

Tuesday December 24: Christmas Eve. Just after 0500 hours Mrs. Leibundgut stormed down and rang the doorbell of the Ballentine-Engstringer flat. When that produced no response, she banged on the door. A quarter of an hour after she had come back upstairs, swearing under her breath, the police pulled up in force and

mounted to the third floor. Considerable activity ensued once they broke down the door. In short order the Chief Inspector, the Medical Examiner, the photographers and technicians appeared on the scene: the types of specialists with whom I had to do during my professional life. Added to the noise of all this activity was the baby's howling in the background.

The few tenants who had not gone away for the holidays were awakened and questioned. I myself did not answer the doorbell. I heard Mrs. Leibundgut, on the landing, tell a policeman that Herr Doktor Demuth had a very deep sleep and had undoubtedly slept right through the whole thing. After a word with the Chief Inspector, who knows me, the policeman desisted.

The Chief Inspector then turned to Mrs. Leibundgut and asked whether he could have a word with her in private. As the two of them entered her apartment, he was saying that his information indicated she had had serious altercations with Ballentine-Engstringer. She uttered an angry expletive just before the door closed and blocked out the rest of the conversation.

It was 0850 hours before quiet was restored in the building. Ten minutes later, as I walked down the stairs on the way to my daily constitutional, I observed that the door to the Ballentine-Engstringer flat had been remounted. Strips of heavy black tape had been stretched across the door-frame. A notice stated that the premises had been sealed by judicial order and that entry was strictly prohibited.

Tonight, the late TV news was nothing less than high comedy. The commentator, with a funeral-dinner face, reported that fourteen corpses and a squalling six-month-old boy (I had never registered the child's gender) had been discovered in the early morning hours in a flat at Chorgasse 65, in the Old City. The cause of death, if known, had not been disclosed by the authorities. Vague lugubrious comments by City Counsellor and Police Chief. But the best part of all: S.T., our leading expert on sects, in sport jacket and bow tie, gave it as his opinion that the event was a multiple suicide staged by a secret mystical order! Against stupidity the gods themselves struggle in vain!

Fräulein Geissbühler rang immediately, apologized at length for calling so late and hoped that I was not too dreadfully

distressed by the tragedy in our building. She recalled that I had spoken of the nice young couple on the third floor and their sweet little baby.

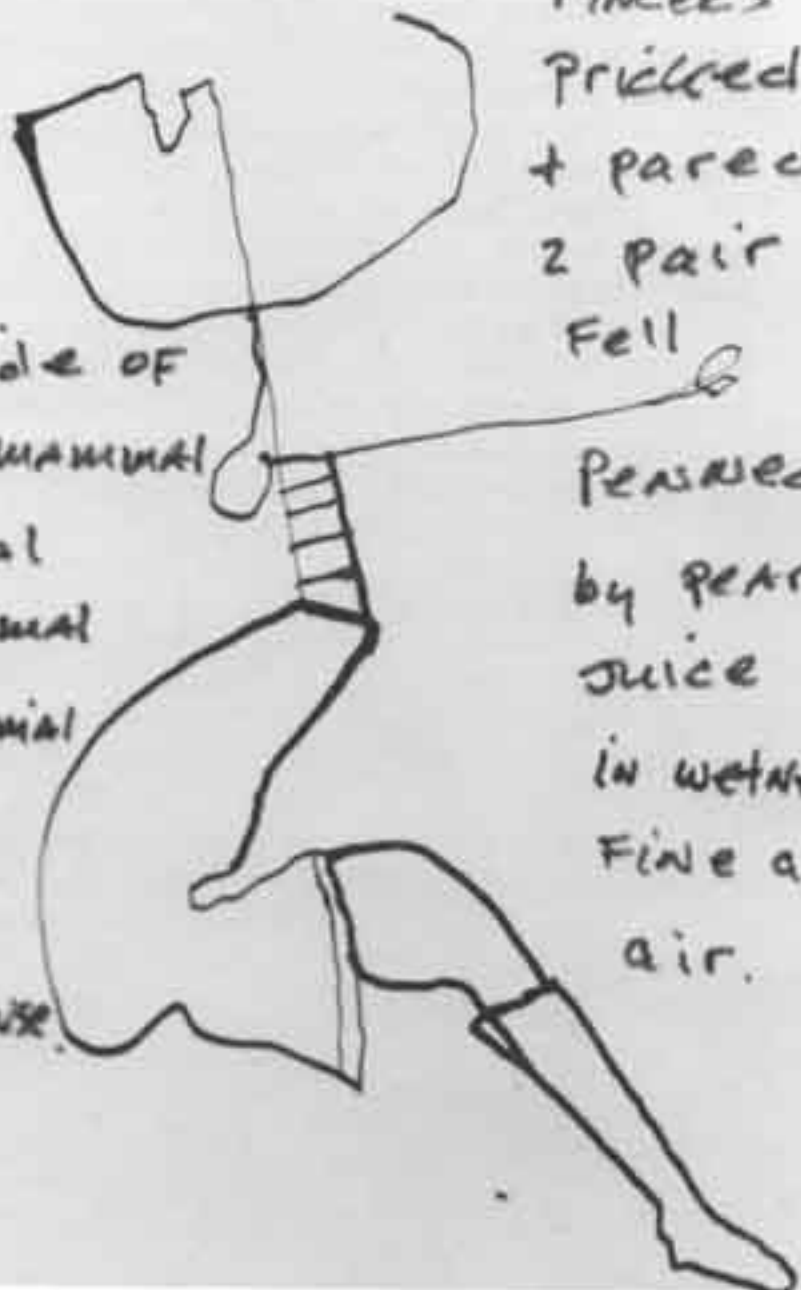
Wednesday December 25: Christmas Day. For the first time in many months, I did not wake a single time between midnight and daybreak. Nothing restores the human spirit like a good night's sleep; nothing else fills one with such a pervasive sense of confidence and well-being.

Fräulein Geissbühler and I attended the service at the Predigerkirche at 1100 hours. The sermon was excellent; so was the music. The pastor's topic was "all things made new" and his words spoke right to my heart. For a new and happier phase of my life began today. Indeed, a new and happier phase has begun after each of my interventions--and not only for myself. But inevitably, sooner or later, someone appears to destroy the newness, the happiness, and a new intervention is required.

After church I enjoyed a home-cooked lunch at Fräulein Geissbühler's (no exchange of gifts by previous agreement). Her four rooms were festively decorated. A goose, no less, with all the trimmings. Chocolate torte for dessert. Between torte and coffee she read aloud a poem by Rilke called *The Neighbor* and was already in tears by the second line. Personally, I didn't see much point to it.

While we were sipping our coffee, Fräulein Geissbühler wondered out loud whether I would really care to go on residing in a house where such a terrible? unforgettable tragedy had occurred. Or whether I might not want to think about some new living arrangement. As usual, I failed to understand her.

tried hide of
dermat mammal
So dissonal
So informal
this ANIMAL
least IN
Stall OF
dream tense.



Pincers
Pricked
+ pared
2 pair
Fell

Peasued
by pear
juice
in wetness
Fine as
air.

The Birthday Party

David Comfort

Flying over the mountains, you soon reach the country hide-away of Mr. and Mrs. Hudson. The retreat provides them privacy for their parties. The Hudsons are well known for their extravaganzas. And today is the year's event: Mr. Hudson's birthday.

Gliding low, reconnoitering, you spy the couple floating in the pool with their guests. Expecting more company, they wave as you break through the edge of the clouds.

At the bottom of the pool, attired in silk gowns, black cut-aways and daring red cravats, lie former guests. Tilting for the water, you call out, "How deep is it?"

Not hearing above the wind, the Hudsons continue to entertain their company, drifting in the pool, basking luxuriously in the sun. Below them, the white, translucent hands of the divers sway languidly in the currents and reach heavenward.

You manage a landing in the pool and head for shore. There the Hudsons introduce you to the other guests.

"Meet the young doctor," they say.

Mr. Hudson, tall and statuesque, was once a famous actor well known for his daring interpretations of the masters. Mrs. Hudson, petite and well-preserved, has no feet, but is still vivacious and nimble.

Your hosts invite you in for a swim, saying that the water is fine today. You wonder why their former guests haven't been removed; but, avoiding tactlessness, move on to other things. You discuss local real estate, the mountains, the bracing weather.

Soon Mr. and Mrs. Hudson escort you into the house, one at each arm. The walls are bright with artifacts from Zaire, New Hebrides, and the Gold Coast. Next to them hang the masks of the No and the Kabuki. Your host mentions that he made his fortune in the Guineas and the Far East.

The ceiling of the living room is buttressed by an oak beam which extends to the pool like the boom of a crane. The beam is attached to two towers at the edge of the water. One is the library which is under reconstruction: wood is being dragged out and

burned, arcane books reorganized and catalogued. The other has barred windows behind which are ancient but well-preserved surgical instruments. Mr. Hudson is a collector of antiques and rare mechanisms.

He escorts you to the library where the shelves are filled to overflowing with priceless old volumes. Librarians and clerks move up and down the spiral staircases which stretch to the highest tiers of the many-windowed archives above. On the ground floor of the rotunda, Mr. Hudson unveils his most recent acquisition: an Old World atlas. The text features monographs on ancient Hebrew customs of circumcision, leper purification, tattooing, scapegoating, and ecstatic dances, all this interspersed with maps of the holy land which include grasslands, creeks, elevations. Closing the volume, he points out the mountains in the distance and continues his discussion of real estate, saying that it is the most secure investment.

Your host owns everything here for as far as the eye can see.

Parker and his Japanese bride, Kwai, stand between the towers. Parker practices acupuncture and is very near to reaching his goal of spiritual perfection. The couple gazes into the distance where Mr. Hudson's bulls graze in the thick green and yellow pastures. With his usual air of expertise, Parker explains the breeding habits of these bulls to his wife, making particular note of the potency and long life of the host's private stock.

As soon as you say hello, Parker again asks if you will go east with him to campaign for the fertility of women. The campaign which will be inaugurated tonight at Mr. Hudson's birthday party.

"Where will it be?" you ask.

Parker points to where the sun falls behind the clouds. Then, he says that he has just returned from the east where his wife, Kwai, has undergone the procedure. He shows what has been implanted: a kernel of rice so small in the palm of his hand, it is all but invisible.

"The right to bear young," he says, "isn't that the most ancient?"

You ask for details. Parker retires to the library and returns with a white leather encyclopedia containing illustrations which answer every question.

On the first page appears the photo of a famous art historian to whom the Hudson's have entrusted a valuable Japanese pen and ink, *Boy With a Sword*. Beside the photo of the woman is a reproduction of this piece, along with sketches of the ten Ch'an oxherding positions. The boy searching for the ox; the boy finding the ox in the forest; the boy riding the ox home.

As Parker turns the pages, you notice two sets of daguerreotypes. The first shows nineteenth century society ladies dressed in ballroom attire of yesteryear. Their dresses and petticoats levitate a whisper above the radiant marble floors. Underneath they have no feet. Mrs. Hudson stands in the foreground with a bouquet. In the second set of photos cooks pose before the great souffles and Stroganoffs prepared for the banquet attended by grande dames. The favorite dish is in a silver tureen etched with mountains and birds. The dish is the New Rice which is all but invisible.

The New Rice, says Parker, is the entree for the party tonight.

He motions to his wife, Kwai, who is expecting. She slips off her dress and lies down.

Her long hair encircles the left breast. Below, a small hole leads to Kwai's heart. Parker invites you to satisfy your curiosity.

"Use your finger," he says.

The valves of Kwai's heart are tight and difficult to penetrate. But she doesn't resist as you touch her son, reading the invisible features of his face like braille.

As the guests gather around the pool, drinking and talking, you are distracted by voices inside. They sound like whispers, or a foreign radio transmission.

The Hudsons have retired to one of their rooms, you can't find which one exactly, but their voices grow louder and louder.

"How old are you now?" demands the old woman. Then she answers her own question.

Her husband, seeming older still, denies it. But she will not be contradicted.

"66.66!" she goes on. "You were born in 1826."

They have no children, the Hudsons, no one to succeed them, inherit their estate with the archives, the art collection, the pool, and the stock.

Like a long-lost son, you hurry from one room to the next, trying to get closer, hear more, find their secret. There are many rumors about the Hudsons, each fantastic enough.

Slipping into the back of the house, you hide in a narrow closet. A lens is mounted in the door. A thin white light beams from its center. Trained laser-like on the inside, it is the eye of the old man. A part of him lives in the closet, the part he watches.

His voice echoes from the walls, continuing to talk to itself. The language turns to German. Then to Latin. Then to the secret tongue which the magicians used long ago.

The old man's brother suddenly enters the room. He is all but indistinguishable from Mr. Hudson, the once famous actor. Your host, changes into his brother and into his wife in order to talk to himself, keep himself company. His brother scolds him for the duplicity.

"What are you doing? We all know who you are here!"

Without a sound, you steal from the laser room.

Mr. Hudson's brother intercepts you outside. He puts his hand on your shoulder like a grandfather. "You must come to my brother's ranch to see his bull." This is not the first time he has made the invitation. He explains that the bull ran off and was lost for a time. "But my brother has just found him and brought him back home."

He says the creature is in fine shape and still able to breed just as before. Leading you to the window, he points to the green and yellow pasture in the distance where the herd still grazes peacefully. Then he steps through the door opposite and beckons you to follow.

The hospital hall beyond is white and brightly lit. On each side are consultation rooms. You no longer hear the Hudsons, but patients whispering to doctors. Doctors whispering to patients. The whir of electronic equipment, X-rays, blood filters.

Through the nearest door, medics carry breakfast trays to O.R. On the trays are juice cups filled with plasma and adrenaline. Internists hurry to and fro, hypodermics in their white coats.

To one side, on a bed behind a curtain, lies your grandmother in a dark lace dress. She has had her feet removed and sewn back on. She owns more than one-hundred-fifty pairs of shoes, and never wears the same pair twice.

Not seeming to see your bouquet, she says, "How do they look? Tell me the truth."

"Beautiful," you say.

They are porcelain white, gracefully arched, and petite as those of the oriental queens who were carried in litters and whose feet never touched the earth.

Your father comes in, whispers something in your ear so as not to awaken his mother who has just fallen asleep. Together you return to the hall.

It takes a long time to reach your grand father's room. Nurses and orderlies stand outside, talking and carrying on as if this is a place like any other.

In your grandfather's room, the walls are cardboard, and a dusty light filters through a hole in the window. Your grandfather died soon after his wife. He had been lost without her. He is lying on his back now, eyes to the ceiling. The hospital sheets are pulled to his waist, and he is bare-chested. It looks as if he has been tattooed with radiation lasers. Small rectangles of skin have been carefully stripped away, and stitched back. The scars form pictures like old etchings on rice paper.

Your father steps up to the bed first. His father doesn't move, but makes a hollow echoing sound in his mouth.

Your father has told you his father will not know who you are now. His eyes are wide and unfocused as a newborn's. But when you step up, his hand inches toward yours, to the edge of the bed. He clasps your fingers. Suddenly you understand everything that has befallen him as if his blood has told its own.

Back at the party, the Hudsons are posing for a photo at the banquet table set with their finest silver and china. Mr. Hudson makes a dashing figure in his cutaway. Mrs. Hudson's petticoats

levitate a whisper above the marble floors, her new feet are tightly bound in red silk, and she carries your bouquet.

Mr. Hudson's brother steps to the head of the crowded gallery and proposes a toast to the host, wishing him a happy birthday and many more.

The attendants bring on the food in the silver tureens. The entree for the party is the New Rice with beef. The beef is from Mr. Hudson's bulls. The meat is rare, richly marbled, and cut thick.

After the meal, the Hudsons invite their guests in for a swim again. Standing at the edge of the pool, you look down through the currents to the bottom and see your grandfather with the former guests, eyes wide on the young women.

Kwai and the others are already in the pool with their children, laughing, frolicking, throwing them into the air.

The children scream with delight, their mothers tossing them high. It is dusk now, the moon and all the stars are coming out, and the silhouettes of Mr. Hudson's mountains are banked with clouds which form jagged black walls at the horizons.

The Year of the Rabbit

Michael Leonard

Ted is a hardcore, old school, tried and true gutter punk. The evening of December 31, 1999, finds Ted poised on the guardrail of the 42nd St. Bridge. It is 11:57 p.m. Ted is feeling a little down.

It has been a rough year. Sally O.D.'ed and Johnny is in the mental institute. No one has heard from Phil since he left for Amsterdam. Ted lost his job at the dock two weeks ago and has not bothered to look for work since. In fact, he has hardly left his apartment. The apartment that he will be evicted from unless he manages to come up with \$350 in the next forty-eight hours. Ted hasn't eaten, slept, or shot up in three days.

Ted fishes the last Lucky Strike from his pack and brings it to his lips. A shaking hand produces his Zippo from a pocket of his studded leather jacket. He lights his cigarette, inhales deeply, and sits down on the railing, feet dangling over the frozen river.

This is where things get hairy...

Maybe Ted finishes his cigarette, flicks it away, and watches the glowing ember sail through the darkness and explode, a miniature firework on the ice below. Perhaps in his frail condition it looks beautiful. He may see himself as that cigarette butt, flicked from the lips of a too cruel world. Maybe. Ted isn't much for metaphors.

After piecing together this crude comparison, Ted might stand up on the railing, raise his middle fingers in one final act of defiance, and leap. Maybe his last thoughts are of that time, twenty years ago, when his father hit a raccoon on the way to Grandma's house, stopped the car at the side of the road, and clubbed the poor struggling creature into oblivion with a tire iron.

Maybe, as the millennium ticks over, Ted simply steps off of the ledge with his cigarette between his lips. Maybe he hits the ice feet first, on a weak spot. It may be that the ice is thin enough to break, but thick enough to absorb most of the shock of Ted's fall without breaking his legs. Maybe the cold water wakes him up like the slap of a delivery room doctor and he claws his way to the sur-

face, gasping for air. Maybe he walks back home, soaking wet, and goes on to a prosperous future in investment banking. Maybe he meets a pretty girl and moves to the suburbs. Perhaps he gets himself 2.3 children, a Saturn, and a dog.

Maybe Ted breaks through the ice, but cannot pull himself from the frigid water. Maybe his black leather jacket is too heavy and his steel-toed Doc Martens (with bouncing soles!) fill with water and pull him down. Maybe he sees this as an all too appropriate end to a self destructive life. Maybe it just pisses him off.

Maybe Ted never even jumps. It could be that some friendly bums under the bridge see him and invite him to share the warmth of their fire and cheap whiskey. He may gratefully accept, celebrating the turn of the century under a bridge and looking forward to another year. A lot depends on the thickness of the ice on New Year's Day. A lot depends on the friendliness of hobos. A lot depends on whether one hits the ice feet first or with one's head.



Yeast

Nancy Ford Dugan

"It's fungal." Dr. Sands stepped back from her crotch and removed his latex gloves with a crisp snap.

"Fabulous." Judy looked at the ceiling and sighed. "What now?" (Ointments, powder). Dan had given her a broken heart and a yeast infection. She was keeping a mental list of her medical expenses since she'd met him. She toyed with writing them down in the form of a bill and mailing them to him. First he'd given her his cold, which had turned into bronchitis for her (antibiotics). Then the antibiotics had upset her stomach and, as a bonus, given her the yeast infection.

"I could bake bread," she'd joked. Then her skin had broken out and her dermatologist had given her a bevy of ointments and lotions. "This must be very embarrassing for you," he'd said, confirming for Judy that she did in fact look grisly.

Her dental assistant noticed extra plaque on her teeth and when Judy mentioned her recent ailments as a possible cause, the assistant had stepped back with a bloody tool in her latexed hand.

"Judy, did you know the membrane in your mouth is the same as the membrane in your vagina? If you're messed up in one, it can affect the other."

"No, I did not." Judy did not want to re-open her mouth.

In addition to her physical ailments, Judy had been crying every day since her breakup with Dan and was considering therapy.

"You don't need therapy," said her sturdy friend Anna. "This is strictly situational. You'd need it if you weren't crying. Clean a closet. You'll feel better."

"I need a bigger bathroom." Judy was smoking one of Anna's long cigarettes in a noisy French restaurant on a snowy Sunday afternoon. "For all my drugs, for all the ailments Dan gave me. I have no place to line them up. What with my new toilet and all." She took a puff. "It has very little ledge space."

"That new toilet of yours comes up in conversation a lot, you know." Anna inhaled passionately.

"Does it?" Judy swallowed some lukewarm tea. "It's really not that new anymore, is it? Six months or so, I guess."

"Didn't Dan check it out on one of your first dates?"

"Yes." She laughed. "I was thrilled. I like a guy with a toolbox. I don't know why. I think it's hormonal, or something."

"Men are dogs. Repeat after me."

"OK, OK. I can't believe I'm smoking after fifteen years."

"You're depressed. It's good for you. Don't inhale." Anna clicked open her sleek cigarette case.

"I know." Judy thought her fingers looked particularly elegant with a cigarette in them.

"And don't tell anyone I gave you cigarettes," Anna was whispering.

"Why not?"

"Because I shouldn't be supplying you with them. Or encouraging you. It's a filthy habit and it could hurt your voice, not to mention your health. And then everyone will hate me. And for God's sake, don't tell your mother."

"Excuse me. You are trying to support me in my hour of need. I thank you. My mother thanks you." Judy's lungs hurt. "Besides, many singers smoke."

Anna smiled at her. "I think you are doing very well, all things considered."

"Thank you. So are you." Anna had stopped seeing Sean, her boyfriend of two years.

"Well, the gun finally convinced me he was crazy."

"An excellent assessment. And decision." Judy stubbed out the remains of her cigarette. "That was the most satisfying sensation I've had in years."

"I'm sorry," Anna laughed.

"Hey, my body is falling apart. If I want to enjoy a cigarette now and again, what's the big deal?"

"That's the spirit." Anna collected her belongings. "Let's go."

On their last evening together, Dan had written a haiku on a cocktail napkin. They were in a quiet pub. Judy had drawn Dan's goateed face, shaved head, bushy eyebrows and little nose on her

napkin. It was icy out and Dan had, in Judy's germ-wary opinion, way too many shirt buttons open.

"That's a very good likeness of me. Can I have it?"

"Sure." Judy signed the napkin and pushed it toward him.

Dan handed her his haiku. "You may keep this."

*Dick meets Jane
leaves fall
Jane sucks Dick*

"Very moving, indeed," said Judy, as she tried to remember how many syllables a real haiku had and if this qualified. She wondered if a sexual reference was a good sign. Although Dan had, in the beginning, pursued her obsessively with a sappy smile on his face (promising to make her mashed potatoes and describing their resonance as a couple), lately he had been Hamlet-like, whiny, recoiling from her touch. He was ten years younger than Judy. Even though she wore a size four, she was sure he'd suddenly grown sick of her slightly cellulite-ridden thighs. Now she watched him guzzle his dark beer.

"I like it here," Dan said. Judy translated this into: "I don't want to go home with you, you are disgusting, and I am psychotic." When they finally got back to Judy's apartment, they lay on her bed fully clothed, watching Letterman, Dan's head on her chest, her arm around him, their chuckling mutual.

"I'm starting to feel sort of obligated, sort of pressured."

"Oh?" Judy sat up.

"I mean I think I need some time to myself. Time to focus. Want some juice?"

"No." Judy was dazed that in the midst of what appeared to be their breaking up, Dan needed juice. Her juice. Which he was now graciously offering to her. He got up and left for the kitchen. Judy walked into the living room, bumping her toe on the coffee-table-trunk as she moved in the dark toward the window. She stared out of her crooked, broken-slatted blinds, thinking fondly for the first time of Lorena Bobbitt.

"You always have such an excellent selection of juices." Dan placed his apple juice on the table and sat on Judy's pink floral couch.

"Do I?" Judy considered saying "thank you" and thought better of it. She did not turn away from the window. He reached out and touched her hip. Judy sat next to him on the couch, staring at the bookcase. She wanted to get her beautiful conch shell, which was perched on the middle shelf, put it to her ear and listen to the ocean, rather than to Dan's perfect little sentences, the car alarms outside her window, the thumping tail of her upstairs neighbor's dog. Dan circled her wrist with his fingers, and rubbed the flesh under her thumb joint over and over. She pulled her hand away. Dan stroked her hair. She got up, walked silently down to the foyer and opened the front door, holding it wide, standing back against the wall of the narrow hallway. She stared at her feet.

"Oh. You want me to go." Dan quickly put on his wool coat.

"Wait a minute." Judy closed the door. Dan stopped wrapping his scarf around his neck. She headed into the kitchen, opened a cabinet and was pleasantly surprised to find the can so easily amongst the clutter. Spaghettios. Dan had told her how he and his Mom would share them, cold out of the can, when he was a kid and she was in a hurry. It was one of his few happy childhood memories, occurring before they'd all joined the cult. Judy had bought him a can and placed it on her good china the first night she'd cooked him dinner. She'd said she was a lousy cook and they could use it as a standby if she blew the meal. He'd laughed and hugged her.

Now, as she turned with the can in her hand, Dan waited expectantly, uncomfortably, in the doorway at the kitchen's entrance. Judy lobbed the can, underhanded, and watched it glide up through the air, close to the naked lightbulb in the center of the ceiling, naked because the light fixture was a pain to affix each time a bulb blew, too many little screws, falling out of her too thin, too spindly fingers, as she'd balance on her step-stool, a bit dizzy from looking up, fearing she'd stumble, hit her head, be unconscious and alone, or dead and alone, on her floor for days before the smell was noticed by neighbors, not the lovely Mixters, the elderly couple next door who might actually be upset by her demise; maybe by the

college kids down the hall who could care less and might notice on their way to the incinerator.

Flecked with red, the yellow can travelled through its loopy arc and landed in Dan's left hand. He smiled at the can. Out of what? Reflex? At having caught it? At the memory of his Mom? Judy?

He never had made her mashed potatoes.

"I want you to have that," Judy said as she watched his face move from the can to her. His smile disappeared. She would miss kissing his chewy, trumpet-playing lips.

Judy walked past him, returned to the front door, held it again and watched him walk out, his shoulders hunched in anticipation of the cold, the can of lobbed Spaghettios in his hand, no gloves. Judy wondered why he didn't have gloves on a night as cold as this. She let the door slam once he was through it. A gasping sound startled her, coming out of her throat with each thud of the turned locks. As she walked back into the apartment, she felt the stabbing itch in her crotch, as if crumbled, sharp-edged crackers were lodged there. And, she knew it would take months to clear up.

The next day, Judy wept while waiting in line at the dry cleaners. Startled, she called Anna.

"I think I need to go to the opera."

"Really? I thought you hated opera." Anna was cooking polish sausage in New Jersey. "All that emotion, all that tragedy."

"All those high notes I can't hit." Judy took a deep breath.

Anna laughed. "Hey, Jude, sure I'll go with you."

"Thanks." Judy untwisted the phone cord. "Something tells me I'd get it now."

The Girl with the Weight of the World in Her Hands

Kate Callahan

Thank God somebody had finally made her a pillar to stand it on. She was such a little thing, and so young! But she only had a few minutes. The pillar was not very sturdy and anyway, if Hermes came by and found her resting there'd be trouble.

I helped her adjust the bearskin pad on her shoulders as she sat. "Since Dad died, it's been hard for all of us; but with all the nymphs wailing and carrying on like they do, that doesn't make my job any easier." She wiped her furrowed brow with a thin white hand. There were creases in her face that I have not seen on fifty-year-olds. Her hair was shiny and ropelike, matted with sweat had it not been for the colored piece of cloth that held it back in a girlish ponytail. She took it down as I watched, arched her back and ran her fingers through her hair before she held the cloth out to me.

"This is what Dad passed on to me. It's his loincloth. It's been in the family--well, forever." There, embroidered in blue and green letters, the name was still fresh: ATLAS.

"I dunno. I mean, sometimes it gets lonely, but the birds keep me company. See that eagle over there?" She motioned to a sour-looking bird clutching a nearby tree. "He's got it worse than me. He's gotta peck out Prometheus's liver every day. He knows what it's like." She put her hair back up and stood, shaking out her arms. "Well, thanks for the visit...I should get back to work--No, that's okay. I've got it." She blocked my outstretched arms and bent her knobby knees, curved her smooth young back and heaved the world back onto her narrow shoulders. A momentary grimace crossed her face and I saw in half-closed eyes every trial and every pain heaped upon her fragile earth, bearing down on the back of the young girl Atlas. Then she closed her eyes, set her teeth, and became nothing more than statue.

Mistakes

Tom Whalen

Yes, I'll admit it at once, a mistake was made, but not by, or not entirely by, me. Sue Ann, for example, had her hand in it, and Sammy and Julius, not to mention the new dentist (who was behind the wheel) and her grandmother visiting from Idaho.

There's been a mistake, the waiter said to the couple prostrate on the floor.

Wars are mistakes, at least those wars that are not won by the party fighting under the banner of right and justice, or at least the biggest banner of the same.

I held an apple in my hand. In order not to share it, I tore it to bits.

In The Book of Mistakes I found the following list:

Autumn

traffic reports

Ben Hur

a bicycle

and wondered if the list itself was not a mistake.

Janine, I said to the woman sitting across from me at the Cafe Select, I love you. Her name was not Janine.

Well, the errant philosopher said, I've seen many a sorry student in my life, but God horsewhip me if I've ever seen one as sorry as you. The world is everything that is the case, not vice versa. Divinity Street or Oxford Street, it doesn't make any difference which one you choose, only the illusion of choice matters. I suggest you take up some other line of study, or better yet give up the university altogether, find a trade or a street corner or some dingy hovel to bury your sorry face in. My mistake was letting you into this class to begin with. Good day.

I was on the wrong train going nowhere when a man in a lime-green suit offered me a position in his firm Limpus, Limpus, and Limpus.

Doctrinal errors (e.g., an uncle who built his church on an Iroquois warpath) are also apposite.

Good heavens, Alphonse, didn't I tell you not to shave the ice over the melon until after the melon was served!

Mistakes of omission, mistakes of memory, mistakes that had they turned out differently would not have been mistakes but instead that thing which we cannot name but only long for, like a bullet for its chamber.

Narcissus's mistake left its mark on Descartes as well as Melville. Lately I find myself eyeing my fingernails, pondering their rate of growth.

Famous Mistakes in Recent History: 1) a grandmother on a car trip with her family chooses the wrong turn; 2) a man pictures his wife at the top of the stairs as a painting; 3) a lawyer removes a recalcitrant employee, who has done no harm, from his firm; 4) a hunter spies a woman bathing in a stream; 5) a child, after her first day of school, forgets her way home.

Since my experience in drying paddies using the low-intensity in-house storing, more common methods being unavailable under the Korean weather conditions, I installed drying facilities at all the KAIST experimental sites in the certainty that intensive low-rent cereals would reduce our reliance of continuous-flow fossil fuel-generated rice dryers.

The Man of Sorrows, I'll bet my life on it, Rupert said, appears in Joshua 11:14.

Learned priests explained in depth and detail the process of crossing over from the illusory life realm to the clarity of death through personal experiences recorded in readable signs left by the wind upon fallen leaves. I myself once found myself alone in a bosky grove.

Today mistakes are made with astonishing rapidity and *savoir faire* across the globe. I am dancing on the parquet floor inherited from my late Uncle Mark. He spoke to me once about fire. It's possible in the long run. Venus rises in the west, my misery in the east. Posing with one hand tied behind my back is not a viable option, but mistakes are.

I am putting this vacuum cleaner together without the aid of instructions.

Is it this tooth or some other? she asked.

Pull the Chain

John D. Talbird III

And one night, if you pause as you walk down the sidewalk on 6th, between Washington and Gill, you might see a person through the window of the old abandoned warehouse. You might be startled both to find a man in that red-bricked, decaying edifice, and that the floor is sunk so deep into the earth--twenty, maybe even thirty, feet.

The man, with insect-thin movements, is gnawing on bread. His teeth labor as if this were a short war, a struggle between bone and bread not meant to be heard. But a sound like cracking plastic issues from his mouth, drifts up, and passes through a bullet hole slightly off-center in the glass, two tiny, hairline fractures branching off and away from the puncture. With the crunching of bread comes speaking--a low mumbling, the odd word insinuating itself between chews, grunts, stutters: "fact," "hurt," "helpless," "wretched," "ratchet," "meet (meat?)," "etcetera."

He is sitting on a bed--rusted frame; pale, striped mattress; one blanket in a tangled lump--in the center of a puddle of dull light emanating from a lamp atop a rickety, wooden, bedside table. A small piece of broken mirror leans against the lamp's brass base. The man sits almost motionless in this space emptied of machinery and cardboard-box-covered pallets. The circle of light is frayed around the edges, the blackness inching in, eating the light from the single bulb.

He looks like a feral cat, skinny with wildness not malnourishment. He's wearing a gray cardigan, a size or two too large for him, and brown, baggy slacks. His legs hang over the opposite side of the bed. He is looking down and away, turned slightly, revealing his left profile--hooked nose, glinting wire frames, rapidly blinking eye, a half-circle of pinkish skin on the top of his brown-haired head. His throat works furiously to swallow the bread; short stubble stick out like specks of dirt on his bobbing Adam's apple. The right side of his face is hidden, but there is no guarantee of symmetry. Maybe it's the left side's mirror image, or maybe it's different, like that of a figure in one of Picasso's paintings.

He leans forward and runs his fingers through his hair, sighing and then groaning. He hacks twice and spits on the floor. For a long moment, he makes no sound or movement. A car honks a few streets over, there is a loud report (the car backfiring? gunfire?), a cold wind blows down the snow-covered sidewalk.

And then his disjointed words connect, make sense; his voice is a calm, hoarse whisper: "...left me when you had everything going so well, we did, that is, after all, you have to admit we had some good times, I mean, you can't be serious that you weren't happy, I mean where was I? who was I with all those years? I loved you more than life itself and I don't think it's too heavy-handed to say it, more than life itself, and I won't be happy for another day though I refuse now or ever to end it a day, a second, earlier, no, I've got too much dignity, my pride is intact and I still snore through the night, how you like them apples? no, but seriously, darling, I'm sorry for all that's happened, can't you just speak to me again? do you have to sit there, mouth open, dead to the world as I suffer day and night, not even a decent piece of bread, sleeping lonesome, with no one to call my friend and even no one else? talk? can't you speak? do I deserve this I ask you? I think not, I think not, I think not."

His body shakes as if coursing with electricity. He jumps to his feet ungracefully, his head bobs backward, and he kicks something that clatters away, across the concrete floor, out of the puddle of light and into the blackness. The thing is smaller than a bowling ball, larger than a baseball. It's white, perhaps a human skull. Or maybe just a plastic, novelty imitation.

With a loud expulsion of air, he falls back onto the bed in the same attitude as before, if perhaps a bit more slumped. He turns his face toward the little table; there is only blackness in the tiny mirror. He takes a deep breath and then speaks again:

"And you, you just sit and watch and expect things to get better, to change, to be sunny and happy again, everything A-OK as we skip merrily ever after down the lane, well, I don't think it's going to happen, now do I? I don't think so, old smug puss, and you can put that in your pipe and smoke it because you just watched as things deteriorated between me and my most blessed treasure from above and you never lifted a single finger to help, you thought

things would get better and, if not better, then at least moving, a tear-jerker, a kill-em-all tragedy, and we know how healthy catharsis is and then we can resume our squeaky-clean lives and never lift a finger, unless it's the wrong one, until it's too late, and now I'm lifting the finger and how you like them apples? I'd like to know and--"

And, as he's spoken, he has slowly, almost casually, leaned toward the table, the lamp, his arm extended, index finger and thumb projecting, revealing his face in the mirror (which, incidentally, is cracked down the middle) and on the word "and" he pulls the chain on the lamp, and the building is consumed by silence and inky black.

You might stand there at that window for a long time--minutes, hours--but you wouldn't see any more movement, you wouldn't hear another sound. The silence, the stillness, of that building would be as absolute as if the blackness were a solid. But actually, it's much more likely that you wouldn't have even waited for the man to pull the chain. You would have walked off long ago, after a quick survey of the situation: "Hm, man down there, empty warehouse, wonder why? getting late." You'd shrug, turn and leave, and think no more of it. And more likely, you never would have even seen him.

Strelka

Daniel M. Jaffe

I stood by the Volga the other day, watched a boat with foreign tourists pull up to the river station's dock, saw them step off and look at the statue of Nekrasov, wondering who this nineteenth century poet was even after the guide had recited in her nasal whine: "Oh Volga!... my cradle, who loved you as did I?"

As a boy, long before Vasya would enter my life, I often wished to become the expansive Volga, or at least a wave, to ripple my way to the Black Sea and from there to the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and America. In touching the Volga with my toes, I'd be touching foreign shores and I frequently imagined myself over there, connected, experiencing the young country's wonders--Cooper's Indians, Twain's wild boys and Poe's ravens in the dark, characters so many of us boys knew well. However, the Volga didn't flow into the Black Sea, I learned later in school, but into the land-locked Caspian. An early dream, dispelled.

I followed two of the foreigners, a dark-haired couple holding hands, as they strolled along the upper level of the tree-lined embankment, reached the concrete balustrade looking over the Strelka, the Arrow, the point where the Volga joins the Kotorosl, a fellow river, a companion of different width and origin and speed, but a river just the same.

The tourists took photographs of each other against the background of red salvia, sand and grass carefully planted in giant shapes of 1010, the year of Yaroslavl's founding, and then, after descending steps and climbing over rocks, they dipped their unsocked feet into the Volga's water as Vasya and I would often do, and touched the flow. In forced alto and bass, they sang of the Volga Boatmen and laughed. As though none of our serfs had ever actually hauled barges the way Repin's painting depicts them with exhausted grimaces, aching backs and sweat, or as though the serf laborers had been romantic, rugged men and what a shame they no longer worked the river where their pictures could be taken.

America was so young, its people understood the world in naive young ways--thinking that all was joy, that life was good

because they wished it so, that despair would pass once eyes were closed and a due tear had been shed. A country of immigrants, true, but not of enough, America needed still more peoples with the wisdom of age, who understood suffering and loss. I wondered, at times, whether it needed me.

Only three years ago we were strolling along the embankment, Vasya and I, the day before she left, her soft palm grasping mine as though to drag me with her away. I could never abandon my family, I told her, and language and water and trees--whose blue and green matched my eyes, whose birch barks complemented the light blond of my hair; the flat steppes far to the south, I told her, matched my pale flat nose. I was Russia's favored native son, Vasya explained, while she was a scorned stepchild. I understood that she needed to flee with her People of the Book, so as to live unfettered, to raise children where no one would taunt or beat them as she had been taunted and beaten when a girl--had been dubbed Strelka and mocked in school because of her nose; but her nose had always charmed me, it was so straight, long and fine.

The Volga rippled so wide in the sunlight on our last day and we walked up and down and felt the river's breeze and heard the water's gentle lap, the occasional motor boat's buzz, the reverberating creak of gears and fall of hollow metal drums in factories far across the river, and we said nothing, just looked at what she would never see again, at the water's sparkle that would, to me, forever after appear dim.

Would American men find her accent gross and childlike, or would they swoon at its exoticism and charm?

I have not forgotten Vasya in three years' time. She'd been the first to whom I'd ever made love. In the reeds along the Kotorosl. On my back to protect her from the sandy mud, I thrust in rhythm to the oom-pa-pa band's music drifting from the amusement park on the island nearby where children were riding the roller coaster up and around, gathering speed. Sharp stones cut into my back, but I only noticed after.

I've often walked past our spot in the last three years, a hollow we cleared of stones and twigs, where we'd make secret love each Sunday afternoon, where others now share. I've never brought another girl there, despite the coquettish smiles and hair flips and

hip wiggles sometimes meant for me. Nor have I lain on the beach reciting poetry to another, nor have I propped another girl on my shoulders and waded into the Volga up to my chin, nor slipped my hands into another's bathing suit under cover of a soft blue wave. Nor even kissed beneath the sun.

I was barely seventeen when she left. We were too young to marry on our own, her parents would never have taken me with them, Papa'd never have let me go. And to tell the truth, I was afraid. America was home for Jews and other nomads who knew how to bear the risks of change; Russia was home for me.

From movies I could imagine the sights and sounds of America and I knew the cold of snow, the heat of summer and the universal tastes of potatoes and cabbage, of chicken and beef. But I could never imagine America's smells. Would a sweet mix of water and dirt and reeds fill the back of my throat if I made love to Vasya along the Mississippi? Did kitchens there smell of dill and tea? Did American bakeries smell of heavy yeast, dairy counters of sour cheese, butcher shops of unrefrigerated meat? Did their bathrooms smell just as musty as those here? Would I have to breathe through my mouth in crowded American trolleys to avoid nausea at the cigarette and vodka breath and stench from all those uplifted arms grasping onto handrails around me?

I used to feel proud when the young, swarthy Georgian men would grin at Vasya in the market as she ran fingertips over purple eggplants, or cupped fragrant oranges in her palm. I'd slip my arm around her waist then and watch their grins droop as sadly as their black mustaches. Was she giving in to men now in America? Vasya!

American bread was fluffy, I've heard said; none of the heavy black or rye or sweet loaves baked only here. And how could I find work in America, work that could compare to my job at Bookinist on Svoboda Street, where I virtually lived five days a week among antique icons and used Russian books, would spend free hours leafing through leather-bound volumes of Turgenev and Leskov, Tyutchev and Gogol, breathing dust from czarist times. And what of all the green cupolas atop our churches--Elijah the Prophet, St. John the Baptist, St. Nicholas the Wet, and so many

more--that to complaining tourists looked nearly identical. To me they were as distinct as human faces.

Life is improving in Russia these days; we don't need to look overseas for a better world. They sell Fanta on Bolshaya Oktyabrskaya Street and Finnish orange juice in square paper cartons at a kiosk on Andropov Street--formerly called Rostovskaya and before that, Ekaterinskaya. We're even "democratic" now, have finally affixed a hopeful label onto the same system we've known for centuries. In Russia we believe that a changed name can alter reality. I never called her Strelka. Who needed to leave Russia, Vasya? The West is coming to us.

So I stood by the Volga the other day, as I've been known to do from time to time, to watch foreign tourists step off the boats, to look at each, to hear their laughter and imagine myself gawking in wonder at my own town, thinking how different its four-story, yellow buildings were from the skyscrapers of New York. I can imagine myself as one of those people, as part of the dark-haired couple-able, at the end of a day on my embankment, to climb back on board and remember, but not to miss.



Two Lawns

Emily Sandberg

They had moved into the house on Prairie Avenue a few months ago when snow still covered the ground. Now it was summer. The drone of mowers filled the air. ChemLawn trucks hugged the curbs. And all the yards (except one) were carpeted in closely cut green.

Roger was standing at the bay window, wishing a quick but painful death on their neighbor, Burt Potts. The old man's lawn had been growing freely since the spring thaw; currently, the native grass and wildflowers were over two feet tall. They never should have left the apartment, Roger thought. He felt sick, estimating the devaluation of his property at between 10% and 20% of its purchase price. He had complained to the city, but nothing could be done. The situation: three years earlier, angry residents of Prairie Avenue had taken Potts to Iowa district court, claiming his yard was infested with noxious weeds and threatened public health. The judge, however, had ruled in the old man's favor: his lawn didn't violate any laws as long as it stayed trimmed back from the street and surrounding yards and there was a clear path to his front door and utility meters.

Roger stalked into the kitchen, a fat vein bulging on his forehead. Astrid, the girl living with him, was leaning against the Sub-zero refrigerator, drinking a diet Coke. She had on a Calvin Klein t-shirt and khaki shorts from Abercrombie & Fitch. Her ponytail was white-blonde and her skin was lightly tanned.

"Do you realize what that lawn is doing to our property value?" he asked furiously.

"Yes. You've told me. Several times," she said and yawned.

"It makes the whole goddamn street look tacky!"

"I don't know...I kinda like the flowers."

"Those are weeds, Astrid."

"All right. I like the weeds then."

"Whose side are you on, for Chrissake?"

"I'm on your side," she said quickly, "but you're gonna have to get used to that lawn the way it is now. There's nothing you can--"

"I'm going over there!" he shouted.

"And what good will that do? You'll end up arguing and make everything worse."

Roger flushed with rage, slamming his fist on the granite countertop. "How can things possibly get any worse?"

Seconds later, he was up to his knees in a dense sea of swaying grass stalks, deriving subtle pleasure from every clump of yellow, white, and purple wildflowers crushed beneath the soles of his wing-tips. Both of his pantlegs were soon dusted with pollen. The sun was low and red and quickly disappearing, yet the temperature was still close to 80° F. He waded toward the two-story brick house, swatting away the small biting insects swarming around his face.

On the front porch, there were some plastic lawn chairs, a few empty beer cans, and a red-clay flower pot half-filled with dirt and cigarette butts. Roger jammed his thumb into the doorbell and waited. Minutes passed. He rang again and smashed a mosquito against his neck. Then, just as he was raising his hand to knock, the door swung open.

Potts stood there in jeans, bare-chested. He was short--no taller than five two or three--and had long greasy gray hair and a matching beard. His exposed stomach was obscenely white and slopped over the waist of his pants.

Roger's face wrinkled in disgust. "Listen," he said, "I think it's about time you mowed your lawn."

With dirt-blackened fingernails, Potts began to scratch his scalp, creating a flurry of dandruff flakes. "Is there a problem?" he asked innocently.

"You're damn right there's a problem!" Roger exploded. "I paid good money to live on this street. Your lawn doesn't belong here. It's overgrown. It's tacky. And it's ruining Prairie Avenue!"

A faint smile appeared among the tangle of gray beard. Potts took a deep drag on his cigarette. His eyes were dark and taunting. He glanced next door at the perfectly-manicured green accented by tiny white ChemLawn flags warning all bare feet, chil-

dren, and pets to KEEP OFF! Then he dropped his cigarette into the pot of dirt, staggering past Roger, down the steps, and out into the quarter-acre of grassland surrounding them. "*Andropogon gerardii!*" he shouted, grabbing a handful of reed-like three-pronged bluish-leafed stalks. He pointed to several yellow daisy-like flowers with brown centers: "*Rudbeckia hirta!*" Lumbering across the yard, he dragged his fingers through a bed of flat lacy white petals: "*Daucus carota!*" He grasped a fine-haired gray-green plant covered with violet flowers: "*Asclepias syriaca!*" He stopped among some thigh-high willowy blue-tinted stems: "*Schizachyrium scoparium!*" Turning, he swung his arm toward a few plump yellow blossoms: "*Lotus corniculatus!*" He bent over six or seven purple cone-shaped flowers: "*Trifolium pratense!*" He reached for a group of stiff stems with glossy gold-brown seed plumes: "*Sorghastrum!*" With one bare foot he nudged a patch of small compact white-pink blooms: "*Trifolium repens!*" He nodded at some long spear-shaped curly-edged leaves: "*Rumex crispus!*" He clutched a mint-green plant with clusters of pink-purple petals: "*Monarda punctata!*" Returning to the house, he paused and stomped near a growth of spherical white-prickled flower heads: "*Eryngium yuccifolium!*"

On the porch, Roger wasn't impressed. "What the hell are you talking about?" he asked.

Climbing the stairs, Potts began to laugh. "This *is* Prairie Avenue, isn't it?" he said and lapsed into coughing--a thick phlegmatic rattling deep in his chest.

Roger waited for him to recover, envisioning diseased lungs coated with tar. He took a step forward. At six feet one, he looked down at the old man. His tone was unequivocal: "I really think you'd better mow your lawn."

"Are you threatening me?"

"What do you think?"

"Get off my property," Potts said, retreating inside and shutting the door.

Astrid was sprawled on the leather sofa with the new issue of InStyle when Roger returned. He stormed over to the bay window, not noticing her, and brought his face up close to the glass.

"Well? What happened?" she asked, getting up and padding across the carpet.

"That man is crazy," Roger said with his back to her. "He actually enjoys making people miserable. Can you believe that? I've never met a more inconsiderate--"

"So don't let him get to you," Astrid interrupted, reaching up to knead the tense muscles in his shoulders. Not long out of high school, she worked part-time at a spa & salon as a massage therapist. "There's always going to be someone doing something you don't like," she told him, "and sometimes you just have to put up with it." She let her hands drop. "*You* need to relax. Think about something else for a change..." She smiled suggestively, leaning into him.

"I don't have time," he muttered.

Astrid gave an exasperated sigh. "You've been saying that for a month!"

He stayed facing the window, wishing she would shut up and allow him to think; he had never noticed how shrill and irritating her voice could be. Outside, the streetlights were on, making their neighbor's property visible even after dark. He was sweating in spite of the air conditioning. "You can't expect me to sit back and watch those weeds grow another two feet!" he said and turned only to discover that he was speaking to an empty room.

That night Roger hardly slept. He woke tangled in the sheet after an uneasy grassy dream. Astrid lay beside him, drooling, in a sheer pink nightie from Victoria's Secret. It was 2 A.M.: he'd been in bed for less than an hour. Before going upstairs, he had tried watching TV and reading a magazine but found he couldn't concentrate; his thoughts kept returning to the overgrown yard next door. Reality pressed into him. He lay there in red silk pajamas, the injustice of it spreading through his body like poison. While he'd failed at reasoning with his neighbor, Roger decided that all hope had not been lost. His logic: the lawn next-door needed to be mowed, so he would mow it. Simple. He leapt out of bed, pulled on some pants, and headed for the stairs.

In the garage, he grabbed the lawn mower and dragged it into the driveway. The sky was clear and his skin shone marbled-

white in the moonlight. He yanked the starter cord, drowning out the ordinary night sounds of crickets and a barking dog. He pointed the roaring mower toward the tall grass and wildflowers, seeking retribution for Prairie Avenue. And froze: someone was standing among the weeds in front of him. His eyes fixed on Potts: greasy hair, ratty beard, bloated stomach, then shifted to the two men looming like twin towers behind him. They both had shaved heads and biceps bigger than Roger's thighs. Power lifters, offensive linemen, pro-wrestlers, he thought. They wore mirrored sunglasses and military camouflage, and they carried identical wooden baseball bats.

"Hey Neighbor!" Potts shouted. "Going somewhere?"

"We're moving," Roger announced.

It was 8:30 A.M. Astrid had just finished forty minutes of firming, toning, and shaping on her Pro-Form electric elliptical exercise bike. She was leaning against the kitchen sink, gulping evian water, in a Ralph Lauren tank top, Tommy Hilfiger shorts, and Nikes.

"You're kidding, right?" she asked.

"No. I'm serious," Roger said. He was slumped at the table in a suit and tie, exhausted. "I refuse to live next to that man."

"Aren't you overreacting?" she asked. "It's just grass."

"That grass is damaging the worth of the entire neighborhood," he reminded her.

"Stop saying that!"

"It needs to be said."

"All you do is complain about that stupid lawn."

"That's why we're moving."

"And then you'll find something else to complain about."

"No I won't."

"Yes you will. You're never happy unless everything's exactly how you want it!"

"That's not true."

"Isn't it? Who alphabetizes the canned goods? Who straightens the fringe on the throw rugs? Who dusts all the Venetian blinds every morning? You're making me crazy, Roger!" she said and started to walk away.

He was on his feet instantly, blocking her path. "We wouldn't be having this problem if we'd moved in the summer like I wanted to!"

Astrid's hands were on her hips. "So now this is my fault?" she asked indignantly.

"You're the one who wanted to move in the middle of February! When there was six feet of snow on the ground!"

"But I thought you liked this house," she protested, her voice bordering on hysteria. "What about the hardwood floors....the sunroom....the whirlpool in the masterbath--"

"We're moving," Roger repeated.

After that his day only got worse. He arrived at Gaffney & Northrup, the accounting firm where he'd been employed for thirteen years, an hour later than usual. On the way to his office, he was stopped in the hall by Paul Stanky, a man whose loud ties, bad breath, and nasal laugh made him someone Roger tried to avoid.

"You sure screwed up, huh?" Paul said.

"What?" Roger asked, trying to get around him.

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"SecureLife's getting sued. Misrepresentation of policies. You never mentioned it in your report."

"You're not serious?"

"Hey, I'm sorry..."

Roger didn't move. He stared straight ahead, not seeing Paul or his bright orange tie. The situation: in preparing the audit for SecureLife Inc., he had somehow failed to investigate the possibility of any pending lawsuits against the company. Now SecureLife was involved in a class-action with its clients for misrepresentation of life insurance policies. There had been months of failed negotiations. The case was all over the news. Company stock price was plummeting. Already the stockholders were questioning why they had not been informed of any potential lawsuits in the financial report and blame had shifted to Gaffney & Northrup.

"Didn't you read the paper?" Paul asked. "Everybody's talking about it."

Roger closed his eyes and massaged his forehead with one hand. How had this happened? he wondered. What had caused him to neglect checking for pending lawsuits when it was common practice to do so? He had completed hundreds of audits over the years without a single mistake. He recalled the days in late April when he'd worked on the SecureLife report, hoping to discover what had gone wrong. It occurred to him suddenly: that had been the same time he'd learned the city would be of no help to him in dealing with the overgrown lawn next-door. He'd been so enraged that he could think of nothing but weeds and property values for weeks afterward. His face turned the color of raw beef then as he held Potts personally responsible for the perilous position of his career. The best-case scenario: SecureLife and its policyholders would settle and Gaffney & Northrup wouldn't be held accountable. The worst-case scenario: the firm would be found liable and have to pay damages for the reduction in value of the life insurance company's stock. Either way, it was a major error in the accounting profession and a permanent stain on his record. He opened his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Think you'll still make partner?" Paul asked.

Roger spent the rest of the morning perspiring in an office with cherry wood-paneling and emerald-green carpet while learning exactly what it took to be "partner material" from both Simon Gaffney and Tom Northrup. The senior partners had been forgiving: no disciplinary action would be taken. Yet Roger knew his odds of being promoted were unlikely at best.

That afternoon, he sat in his own office (white walls, gray carpet) and grew increasingly despondent. He had counted on advancing from associate to full partner within the year and had made several large purchases in anticipation of receiving a 90% salary increase from around \$55,000 a year to almost \$100,000 not including the bonuses all full partners shared. If he was lucky and maintained a spotless record, the SecureLife Inc. case would settle and he might be promoted in four or five years. But this did nothing to remedy his present financial crisis. There was the \$396,000 house with a \$357,000 mortgage; the four year loans of \$29,000 on the \$41,000 Mercedes and \$21,000 on the \$34,000 BMW; and the

\$14,000 he'd invested in Astrid's happiness (exercise equipment, tanning bed, designer clothes, jewelry).

By the time he left the office, Roger's feelings for his neighbor had surged to a new level of intense hatred. He covered the eight miles to his house in fifteen minutes. While driving down Prairie Avenue, his eyes gravitated to the old man's property, sweeping over the millions of stems and petals and leaves to the front porch. His whole body stiffened: Potts was sitting in a lawn chair, grinning, drinking a beer, and waving. The two hired thugs (baseball bats resting on their laps) flanked him like huge immovable well-chiseled statues. Seeing this, Roger slowed and jabbed his finger into the button that lowered the driver's side window. "Stupid asshole!" he shouted. "Dumb motherfucker!"

Across the yard, Potts only continued to wave, tipping the beer can to his lips, and propping his feet up on the wooden porch railing.

Cursing under his breath, Roger put the Mercedes in gear and pulled away. He parked in the empty three-stall garage and stomped into the house.

Inside, he spotted the pink stationery stuck to the refrigerator almost immediately. It was a break-up letter from Astrid: she had decided to move out while he was at work and felt comfortable taking only those things he'd given her as gifts--the BMW, tanning bed, exercise bike, designer wardrobe, diamond earrings, and gold tennis bracelet. He allowed the paper to fall to the floor. What had he done to deserve this? Roger wondered. He had worked hard his entire life only to have his accomplishments stripped away. His career was seriously threatened. He would never get out of debt. His relationship with Astrid was ruined. The extreme anger he'd felt toward his neighbor was suddenly replaced by a deep depression. He went through the house closing the curtains and blinds over all the windows, then found a half-empty bottle of red wine in the refrigerator and headed for the leather sofa.

The next morning and every morning for the rest of that week Roger phoned in sick to the office. He lay in the darkened living room, sleeping, staring at the TV, and feeling sorry for himself.

Days passed when he did not shower, shave, or brush his teeth. The answering machine took all his calls and the mail and newspapers piled up on the porch. He remembered a time last winter when he and Astrid had both been happy, unaware that their contentment would soon melt away with the snow and ice. The house had been appraised at \$439,000 and he had purchased it for \$396,000. At one point, he'd considered this a great deal, but now he knew differently. No one would buy his house with Potts' lawn in full bloom which meant the weeds next-door had eroded most of his \$43,000 of equity. Roger thought of the middle-aged couple who'd sold him the house. The husband: pale and high-strung. The wife: pushy and manipulative. He stayed on the sofa, half-listening to the traffic on Prairie Avenue and some construction equipment digging nearby. It seemed the longer he avoided the lawn next-door the more relaxed he became. Gradually, he was able to think of Potts without sweating or feeling his heartbeat accelerate. Each day, it grew increasingly clear what the situation required of him, until one afternoon--a week after he'd learned of the SecureLife Inc. mistake--he sat straight up and decided he could not go on like this forever. The house was quiet except for the ticking of the grandfather clock in the foyer. Roger realized what needed to be done. He had worked too hard to be defeated by some native grass and wildflowers. Astrid was right: he had been overreacting. He didn't have to like the lawn next-door, but he could learn to accept it. And at least it was all natural, he decided. There was even a little humor in it. A prairie on Prairie Avenue. Ha. Ha.

He reached for the cordless phone on the glass end-table and dialed the number of the spa & salon. The woman who answered told him Astrid was unable to come to the phone. He insisted it was an emergency and the woman said to give her one minute. Roger heard hairdryers, some unintelligible arguing, and then Astrid's voice, cold and distant:

"What is it?"

"Come home."

"I can't. It's over. I told you."

"But I've changed! I'm a completely different person."

"You aren't capable of change, Roger."

"Then why am I standing at the bay window, looking at Potts' lawn, and it's not even bothering me?" He got up, crossing the living room in a hurry, and yanked the cord that drew back the curtains.

"You're lying," Astrid said.

There was a moment of silence across the line.

"Roger? Are you still there?" she asked.

He steadied himself against the wall, stunned. The native grass and wildflowers were gone! A grid of uniform green sod strips covered the land next-door. Sprinklers hissed and shot arcs of water into the air. "I don't believe it," he said. "Someone sodded his lawn!"

"I think you're losing it," Astrid commented, annoyed.

"Wait! Don't hang up."

"It's over, Roger."

"Come home. You've gotta see this. *Please*. I'll do anything."

"Anything?" Astrid echoed.

"Anything," he repeated. "I promise."

"Mm. I guess I could prob'ly come around eight," she said.

"But I'm not staying."

"Good. I'll see you at eight," he said and hung up.

Roger charged toward the two-story brick house, blinking at the natural light. The midday sun was high overhead and the air had hit him in a humid blast as if he'd walked into a sauna. He dodged the streams of water from the sprinklers, jogged up the front steps, and knocked vigorously. While waiting, he noticed the lawn chairs, empty beer cans, and flower pot full of cigarette butts had all disappeared.

"Can I help you?" a voice asked.

Roger looked up, startled. A woman in denim cut-offs and an over-sized over-washed t-shirt was staring at him from the open doorway. She had a strange expression on her face. He realized self-consciously that it had been awhile since he'd showered or shaved and his shirt was covered with foodstains. "I thought a man named Burt Potts lived here," he said in a small voice.

"He used to," the woman replied, "until he died."

"He died? When?"

"Five days ago."

"How?"

"Multiple organ failure. Heart, liver, lungs, kidneys. My father had some bad habits."

"Your father?"

"Anna Potts," the woman said, extending a slender hand.

"So you did this?" Roger asked, gesturing toward the freshly-sodded ground.

"I had to," Anna Potts said, sliding her fingers through her long dark shiny-clean hair. "I couldn't live here with all those weeds in the yard."

"You live here?" he asked.

"Mm-hm. I always loved this house. But not the weeds. I tried getting him to mow them, but he never would. Stubbornness runs in our family."

Roger didn't know what to say.

"So do you live around here? What's your name?" Anna Potts asked, studying him intently.

"Roger Ridgefield," he answered. "I live next-door."

"So we're neighbors," she remarked, beaming. The phone started to ring then. "I should get that," she told him. "I'm waiting on the moving van. It shoulda been here this morning."

Roger nodded, speechless.

"Nice meeting you, Neighbor," Anna Potts said and shut the door.

By 8 P.M. Roger was standing in the driveway, watching Astrid emerge from her black BMW in a Guess sundress and Gucci sandals. Several hours had been spent preparing for her arrival. He had vacuumed the carpet and taken out the trash. He had showered, shaved, and put on a clean shirt and slacks. He had chilled a bottle of white wine and gone through his CD collection, rejecting the 2PAC, Puff Daddy, and Notorious B.I.G. albums Astrid had given him for his fortieth birthday in favor of the sweet saxophone melodies of Kenny G.

Astrid was riveted to the newly-sodded lawn.

"He's dead," Roger said, smirking. "Burt Potts is dead!"

"You killed him?"

"No! Read this." He reached into his pocket and brought out the obituary he'd found in the mound of newspapers on the porch.

Astrid took the clipping and skimmed it as they walked toward the front door.

"You won't believe who lives there now," Roger said excitedly.

"Who?"

"His daughter."

"Whose daughter?"

"Whose do you think?"

"How do you know?"

"We met this afternoon. Her name is Anna. She's wonderful." He entered the house and turned to face Astrid, who was watching him through narrowed eyes. "Are you coming in or what?" he asked.

She followed him into the living room. The dimmed lights and the wine glasses on the coffee table caught her attention instantly. Kenny G. wailed from the speakers. "What's going on in here? she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry about the last few weeks," he said. "Gimme another chance."

She surveyed the room from the big-screen TV to the leather sofa to the brand-new stereo. "But how do I know it won't happen again?" she asked.

"Look out there!" he exclaimed, flinging an arm in the direction of the bay window. "It's perfect!"

The next afternoon Roger left the office in a hurry. Astrid had phoned from work, telling him about some scented massage oils she was bringing home and exactly how she planned to apply them to all parts of his body. He became aroused then just thinking about it.

They'd made-up the night before after he'd apologized profusely and promised her a seven day Caribbean cruise. That morning, he'd learned the price tag on the trip would be roughly \$9,000, but he wasn't worried.

Turning onto his street, Roger felt only confidence that the situation would continue to improve. Prairie Avenue was finally the way it always should have been. Nothing tacky: only simple uncluttered chemically-treated green. Also, he had decided the SecureLife Inc. case would definitely settle and he'd soon be back on track toward making partner. But for now he planned to sell the Mercedes and use the proceeds to reduce the principal balance of his mortgage.

Approaching his house, he noticed the moving van was gone. It had been parked in the street that morning when he'd left. He reflected again on how difficult it was to believe that Anna Potts could actually be related to his former neighbor. She was thin and polite and seemed to understand the rudiments of personal hygiene...

Roger's hands suddenly tightened on the steering wheel as he looked out over the lawn next-door:

A herd of plaster deer grazed peacefully. A flock of ceramic geese strutted majestically. Seven plastic pink flamingos balanced on spindly legs. A three-foot tall concrete Christ, head bowed and hands folded in prayer, stood worshipping with a group of rosy-cheeked white-bearded gnomes. And in the middle of it all was Anna Potts: smiling, waving, and looking alarmed as her neighbor's partially paid-off Mercedes drove up the curb and plowed into his own mailbox.



