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Snake River in Late Winter

Art must make nature eternal in our imaginations.
—Paul Cezanne

I
Sunset, and suddenly those crests beyond
brighten one last time as a late slant of light skids
across the horizon and ridge lines show through
the new snow, shadows pooling in the recesses
between them, all falling toward that soft cascade
of white banks above the river still twisting ahead,
but now turning silver in this winter twilight.
The sky moves from ice blue to violet, and green
streams of pine seem to reach down each slope,
darkness roosting once more among their branches.

II
Every sharpened outcropping appears subtly
sculpted; even gray boulders rising from underwater
beds of red stone seem shaped the same way.
Our paddle tips disappear, angled and guiding us
as we slide forward, listing slightly in smooth
but quickening currents, with soothing movements
that may ease our aching tonight when deep
in sleep. We want to believe today will remain
always, these images will stay with us, just as
we know all this will continue on when we are gone.
Ridge Fires

I look up from my notebook to check the sky
as a pair of black helicopters hums overhead
toward crests spreading west. Three months
of drought and now another cloudless summer
day is about to be nudged shut, but with its lit
sunset smudged this time by a few new plumes
of smoke rising high over that broken horizon
above the far side of the river, lifting from files
of wildfire kindled by the dried timber, aspen
and pine riding along rough edges of an uneven
ridge top. Already, the flashing white beams
of far-off headlights are coming on, one by one—
pickup trucks crossing a trestle bridge, arriving
back home from the front line—and throughout
this rich valley the brighter stitching of city
street lamps has just begun its run once more.
Noon After First Frost in Echo Canyon

As cottonwood and aspen swell the slopes
       at either side, those narrowing ends of a lone

       birch tree’s upper branches extend above me
             in this sunlight like fine lines of filament wire,

       each shoot bending briefly with every sudden
                 swirl of southern wind. Already, my memory

       of morning’s meager birdsong is fading
             in this midday silence. Even the unexpected

       heat seems to sweep away any recollection
             of translucent frost that only hours earlier

       had glazed those wet stones glowing
             along the river bed, its current now slowed

       to a trickle, and had slid a thin sheet of ice
                 fitted like a sleeve of snakeskin onto fallen,

       twisted limbs in the chilled dawn air.
             And though this was not yet winter’s coat,

       but just a dress rehearsal, as one season clings
             to life all across this little timbered canyon—

       another furrow cut into these mountains
             by a glacier ages ago, as accurate as the slit

       a sculptor could chisel out of granite—
             the last few wildflowers are opening again.
At an Abandoned Chapel

I

All that morning we were driving through
the river valley where a brightening sky

was trying to clear itself of cloud cover
as if to offer a break before more of winter’s

poor weather returned from those far
northern slopes looming ahead. Our road

angled into the distance and disappeared
among pine tops, green arrows now raised

as though in defiance against the remaining
grayness of that day. The current running

beside us flowed low over its slick bedrock,
washing each stone with thin veneer, creating

a kind of clarity one could only imagine
as artificially designed, the way an artist

paints transparencies across a canvas—
water in a glass or light reflected on a window.

We were one week away from everything we’d
hoped to keep behind us, and in the afternoon

we stopped to visit that abandoned chapel—
more than two centuries old according to those

worn but still barely visible numerals
chiseled into its cornerstone—a refuge set off

by meadows where rows of grain once were
grown, now open only in summer for tourists.
Merely four square walls, its bolted door
topped by a gothic arch, and with stained-glass
windows rinsed by early rain, we were left
to peer through the clear temporary repairs
of a few broken panes. We could see its
simplicity: no larger than a garage, in this
season nearly as empty as grounds around it,
paneled in pine, a wood stove at one end, a plain
pulpit at the other, a stray table on which hymnals
may have been placed, an empty granite pedestal
where the sculptured statue of a patron saint
would have stood, the dark imprint in the shape
of a T where a cross had been hung above
an altar as unadorned as the people who first
must have worshipped there. Everything of real
value had been removed, auctioned to antique
dealers. But above we saw a primitive ceiling
mural, nothing more than an awkward drawing
of bright sky with sun and clouds surrounded
by stars—perhaps some poor parishioner’s
personal offering. In an unguarded moment,
finally, we felt we could appreciate the grace
of such a place; at last, we almost believed
we’d be able to hear hymns once sung there.
Approaching the Confluence

All morning, our canoes and kayaks
followed the slow-flowing current,
at times almost as if enclosed except
for a thin shaft of sky, as expansive
bands of slotted rock—tan, yellow,
red—layered along an entire length
of canyon walls like fields of color
cutting across a Mark Rothko canvas.

Sometimes sandstone slabs emerge
from the tamarisk thickets that edge
this slender stretch of stream banks
as if anchoring the landscape amid
the river’s cool and smooth waters,
separating it from the white egrets
and gray geese flying freely above,
from those few clouds now floating
over everything. By late afternoon,
the sun’s heating not yet done, we
will at last arrive at the confluence
campsite, where both those branches
of vast bottomland suddenly come
together, where this narrower gap,
about to spread open again between
outcroppings or cliffs like a fantail,
finally flattens out in front of us,
then widens toward a broad horizon.
Landscape and Lyricism

As my accompanying poems (“Approaching the Confluence,” “At an Abandoned Chapel,” “Noon After First Frost in Echo Canyon,” “Ridge Fires,” and “Snake River in Late Winter”) in the current issue of *Segue* suggest, I regard a sense of place as an essential element in much of my writing. Within its descriptive passages I usually find my lines of lyricism and the language tools used to subtly allude to various issues or to learn further about a few of my own reemerging concerns.

Charles Wright has remarked that all of his poetry involves recurring concerns: “There are three things, basically, that I write about—language, landscape, and the idea of God.” Yet, when pressed, he confides everything begins with landscape and one’s surroundings: “Landscape, like form, is everything to me.” Wright employs vibrant images of landscape in lyrical language to initiate associations or memories that lead toward forming more thoughts and a succession of events: “Narrative does not dictate the image; the image dictates the narrative.” Similarly, almost all of my poems originate in natural images, actually glimpsed or merely invented, that introduce emotional responses and elicit contemplation concerning experiences or observed incidents drawn from my memory or my imagination.

Like Wright, I have a great fondness for landscape artists, particularly those painters whose works evoke difficult universal issues commonly confronted by humans—the inherent temporality of life or the transience often witnessed in natural beauty, the acceptance of change and the acknowledgment of one’s own mortality. Discussing one of his favorite painters, Wright once offered: “Cezanne has a way of looking at a landscape that I find particularly innovative, revolutionary, and pleasing to my spirit. He breaks down and reassembles the landscape the way I like to think, when I’m working at my desk, I break down and reassemble what I’m looking at and put it back into a poem to recreate it, to reconstruct it.”

Just as in the work by Wright and many other post-Romantic writers, the poems I write seek to express my perspective and that of my personae indirectly, attempting to achieve this result through an ability to use landscape for symbolic or connotative purposes. In this manner landscape or its natural imagery becomes a means toward a more interesting revelation rather than simply a subject unto itself. Again in agreement with Wright, I would like to unite “the mental landscape” with the tangible presence around me, to “merge the physical and the interior landscapes that we all have in our lives.”

An early influence on my attitude toward a sense of place in my poetry certainly can be traced back to my student days and a first reading of Richard Hugo’s *Triggering Town*, where the poet opines in the volume’s opening chapter, “Writing off the Subject”: “I suspect that the true or valid triggering subject is one in which physical characteristics or details correspond to attitudes the poet has toward the world and himself.” Indeed, one might properly conclude that the physical characteristics do not need to be only those found in a familiar natural landscape, but they may derive from drives during which the speaker journeys for visits as an outsider traveling to various towns, the way Hugo would do. Additionally, I would include a number of more urban authors among the ones whose work depends upon a sense of place, especially those poets readers readily identify with individual cities, such as Philip Levine’s Detroit or Frank O’Hara’s New York.
In his book of literary history, *Imagined Places: Journeys into Literary America*, Michael Pearson mentions the ways various fiction writers demonstrate for readers “how place informs our understanding of who we are.” Alfred Kazin premised his book of literary criticism, *A Writer’s America: Landscape in Literature*, on an evaluation that American literature is “haunted by the sense of place.” Indeed, as an example, whether one encounters Walt Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” or Hart Crane’s “The Bridge” or even Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s *A Coney Island of the Mind*, my birthplace of Brooklyn looms as a constant reference for readers.

A section in Dave Smith’s book of commentary on contemporary poets and the art of poetry writing, *Local Assays: On Contemporary American Poetry*, investigates the crucial contribution of place in one’s work for a number of poets and novelists or short-story writers, including Joseph Conrad, T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, Flannery O’Connor, and Robert Penn Warren. Smith proposes: “The writer who imaginatively claims a place as the foundation for vision knows something about the illusions by which it is both possible and necessary to live.” Farther on, Smith continues to a conclusion: “The writer of place can’t help reaching through image to vision.” For many writers, including myself, the location for a poem or story itself becomes a separate persona or character with which readers are asked to view through the façade of imagery in the piece’s setting and to perceive anew a fresh or alternative vision of the world presented for them.

During the composition of my poems the details in a lyrical description of the landscape or other objects within the imagery are carefully chosen to create not only the superficial characteristics and the specificity of a locale, but also to establish possible emotional intensity or even a bit of intellectual depth arising out of an atmosphere containing ambiguity. Moreover, the sequence of images in the scenery of a poem is deliberately arranged much the way brush strokes may be swept across a canvas, drawn beside one another and layered, to hint at the narrative of an ongoing life or a passing stage in nature’s sustained transitions even while the moment is frozen within the frame of the painting.

As the Cézanne epigraph at the start of “Snake River in Late Winter” states: “Art must make nature eternal in our imaginations.” In the same manner, poems often ought to indicate to readers an implied past and a potential future for the present represented on the page, as well as for the natural occurrences or human activities stilled within the lines of poetry. Obviously, this tactic has been around for ages, and its effectiveness has been verified conclusively by the Romantic poets of our past. In fact, in my literature courses I frequently reveal my belief that many of today’s writers are in some ways still evidently children of the great Romantic writers, and they continue to carry forward a few of the major principles indicative of that era.

Therefore, I believe one way a poet like myself may hope to accomplish the task of telling narrative through imagery, involving the past and the future in a portrayal of the present, would be by again blending keen observation and innovation of language, merging an accurate rendering of the physical details in a landscape with an imaginative, evocative, and lyrical vocabulary. When created correctly, such a time-tested technique might invite readers to perceive even familiar territory from a different angle and maybe more poignant perspective, perhaps just as a landscape painter may request that viewers peer through the vivid yet static scenery caught on a canvas to grasp that unseen spirit sometimes lurking unsuspectedly underneath, suggested simply by the artwork’s composition when it displays a deliberate arrangement of structured shapes depicted in rich colors.
What’s a mother, anyway

Samantha keeps picking up strays

Jordan and his dog amble up cement steps to Samantha’s kitchen door, slap things with hands and rangy tail, knock over milk cartons, jars of toothpicks, and mugs of steaming coffee.

Samantha shoos them away but never uses a hand fiercely, can’t stand the physical implementation of anger, having seen hands sometimes worked into fists coming at her too quickly.

Calling

For years, Samantha thinks about adopting a girl, almost a goddaughter, a Mary, until the Mary, she imagines, is either dead or on another path. She looks through old phone books and eventually finds a number that could work.

She takes a deep breath.

The first attempt yields nothing, just an empty ringing. She tries again in the evening, perhaps a little late, she thinks, as she glances at the phone book and back to the phone, her fingertips pressing buttons, her ringless fingers flabby, she notices.

Mary picks up after one ring, recognizes immediately Samantha’s voice, calls her Auntie Sam, calls her “godmother,” the way Sam has been imagining it. Sam, Sam, Marzipan. A food, it will turn out, they both love.

Samantha says: “Would you like to come here and see me?”

This girl could be a godsend; she’s neglected the children of the world.

Mary does something not fully articulate into the phone.

“If that meant yes, I’ll put a ticket in the mail.”

Mary’s Life

When she arrives, Mary explains that she once had a priestly father and a down-at-heel mother, a twin brother with perfect pitch, and a younger one who, even older, continued to drool.
“I eat in colors, throw up in rainbows.”

**Marzipan**

Samantha brings a small white paper bag of candy shapes that Mary prefers to look at until she’s overcome by the desire to taste them. By the end of the week, the small gaudily-colored sweets are gone.

**Willing Herself Lost**

Mary needs to be lost beyond the lost she is now, which is a lost of her own making.

She’s alternately obsessed and chasmed by want.

**New Name**

Mary asks Samantha to call her Amber.

Amber, she says to the girl as if in offering, but also in query, and too, a little delighted. *Like the color or the gem? The amber that keeps old things new. But really, just the fact of its thingness. And that it’s not a saint. Right. Who wants to be named after a saint.*

Because Samantha says it rhetorically, Amber trusts her. It’s the first stage in abandoning Mary.

**Swimming**

At first, Amber refuses to do anything but swim in a pool. Samantha lets her do what she wants; her wanting seems to cover so little in the world.

Each day, they gather their things and walk to the pool when the sun is highest.

**Chew**

Amber can’t keep her hands off Samantha’s objects, the things she’s collected, painted, sewn. Soon, Amber’s mixing food of every color. Samantha tells her to chew, to breathe between bites.

**Worried?**

The next thing you know, Samantha thinks, Amber will be pushing her hands through flour and water, making the dough ball of a pizza pie. Will Amber be selling pizza on Samantha’s quiet, tree-lined suburban street where, behind ordinary walls, children have epileptic fits, refuse to eat, throw tantrums and heavier things, with real weight?
Hurricane

The boy, Jordan, like a brother to Amber, almost a son to Samantha runs through, a hurricane, past the two of them, their arms in dough. He knocks over cans and jars, picks up the broken pieces, bloodies his fingers.

It’s not the first time Amber’s felt that quick stab—jealousy—and is eager to do something with it.

Collecting

How is it that Samantha, until now a collector of men, is gathering a collection of children?

The sudden awareness of the area near her heart is not exactly a flutter—it’s more like a tiny trapped animal.

What Amber can do

Amber waits easily, knowing that look will come. It does, and she’s off. Around a corner, down an alley where, for small change, she does what she can do.

Past Midnight

Samantha drives around looking for the girl (what’s her name?) but every girl looks like the one she’s aiming to find. This isn’t how she planned to spend her evening.

Is this what owning a house does to a person?

Smirking

*How can you do these things with men you don’t know?*

*But I do know them.*

*For five minutes before pulling out their penises and sucking?*

*It’s another kind of knowing.*

Samantha can’t help smirking.

Samantha, Trembling

Amber’s face has gained something that makes it more interesting but also harder to look at. The knowledge makes Samantha tremble. She needs a glass of water but isn’t sure she can get to the sink.
When Amber comes close with a glass, Samantha notices her plumped sore-looking lips, her reddened skin.

Months later

Samantha pulls a cigarette from her bag then realizes that she can’t light it here, in the hospital. She’s had abortions, but for years now there’s been no need.

Her abortions were sad and small, the embryos undergrown. But Amber’s baby is strong.

Samantha holds an unlit cigarette while a small vacuum cleaner sucks away the small holding-on baby.

What’s a mother, anyway?
The duck’s ass haircuts had given way to bald spots and silver ponytails. Lanky builds had become doughy. Street drugs, booze and other ignorances that defined the lives of these guys couldn’t be denied. Yet Phil looked fairly unchanged, not much older than the out-of-step sixteen-year-old he’d been at Funland.

In the funeral home with so many ride operators, all now twenty-some years older, memories of that first job came back and Phil could almost hear calliope music, smell hot dogs and the sweat of a summer Sunday. Phil still felt like he didn’t fit in. He wasn’t streetwise and tattooed. No comb-streaked Elvis hair. But he had reasons to hold kind thoughts toward his old boss. When he read that the man died, a routine death at 84, he decided to pay his respects and perhaps redeem himself. He was a lot cooler these days.

This didn’t start well. Upon arriving, he indulged in a glimpse of Clarisse’s cleavage. She was the boss’s assistant, a bombshell way back when, but still hot. Phil bent over to take her hand as she sat in a plush chair. He said he was sorry about the boss. But staring at her bulging breasts was unavoidable and she caught him, nailing him with a hard look.

In the chapel Phil joined the reception line waiting to greet mourners who sat in the first row accepting handshakes and kind wishes. Phil anticipated a chance to console them and outshine the others with poise. This uncultured herd couldn’t have acquired the groove Phil attained in college, business, life itself. He wasn’t the kid he used to be.

Phil thought back. A mid-summer Sunday, Funland’s ten-to-ten, an unconscionable shift for a sixteen-year-old in the world of jobs for the first time. He started in morning sun and ended in the buggy neon night twelve hours later. He remembered things that made him feel comically, sometimes frighteningly, out of place. They might have happened during that one Sunday or they might be scraps of memory from other parts of the summer. They came and went, these memories, flashing and disappearing, then reappearing again like the world as seen from one of Funland’s spinning rides.

What a loser I was, Phil thought. Maybe he still was. Maybe when the time came to shake hands with the grieving widow he’d freeze and say something weird like he did when the dead boss helped him off the ground. No way. He arrived in a Beemer. Phil was confident he’d be articulate in expressing modest sympathies. There were two guys being buried today. The dead boss and the inept Phil.

Actually, the new Phil was a lamebrain because of what he will say in a moment, but he didn’t know that yet. What he did know is that he was a coward once because he let a thug ride Funland’s roller coaster without tickets. He was a horndog because of his downshirt experiences. And he was a spaz because he couldn’t hop a fence.

Other ride operators flipped their snake-thin bodies over the waist-high fences encircling rides. They’d grab the rail, kick out, go over and land on both feet. Every cool ride operator, and they were all cool with their rockabilly hair, Levis, cowboy shirts and boots, could do this. Phil
tried it on an overcast afternoon when Funland was nearly empty and fell on his back, slapped breathless by the sudden ground. And there was his boss, the future dead guy. This man knelt over Phil and helped him up, brushing away bits of gravel in a fatherly way.

“You okay, son?” the man said. Phil replied, “Yeah, fine. Thank ye.” Where had that come from? Thank YE? Sure, there might have been some head trauma from the fall. But no, it was just his tongue being as un-coordinated as his body. He couldn’t negotiate the flip, and when flustered by the boss, he couldn’t negotiate the word “you.” This made him sound like a Quaker, which still causes Phil to flush.

What a name, Funland. It was no fun. It was a lot of fun. A dumbed-down Disneyland on Chicago’s busy 95th Street where there was a head-on crash late that Sunday. Casualties lay in roadside weeds holding T-shirts to cut faces. Their shirts grew red, lit by the neon of the Ferris wheel, which Phil broke seconds before the crash.

The collision made a sudden gunshot of sound. Kids cried. Adults jostled popcorn, grabbed their chests. Phil got an instant toothache. It hurt so much that he had to go to an emergency dentist the next day. In a bloody procedure, the man gouged out a wisdom tooth that he’d diagnosed as the root of the problem, but Phil felt the crash was the cause.

The memory of this accident was linked with sexy thoughts Phil had before he broke the Ferris wheel. He even worried that sex caused the crash. This seemed improbable, but during adolescence there had been confusing signals about what God wanted versus what the body wanted. He’d been lost in carnal musings, then broke the Ferris wheel. Maybe drivers saw this and drifted from their lanes.

The sex in Phil’s blood got there not entirely because of downshirt sights, and probably not by his flipping up the dress of a pretty lady. That had been an honest accident. And not even by the exchange he’d had with the hot mom on his merry-go-round. It came from a daydream Phil had during a dinner break in the Funland kitchen where calliope din still found him. This daydream, while Phil was relaxing, filled with fries and slightly sun stroked, became a sleeping dream in which he answered the door to find Clarisse.

The dead boss’s assistant was in her twenties then. She was famous with the ride operators for being built like a “brick shithouse,” a term Phil hadn’t heard prior to Funland, and never entirely understood. She wore nothing, sweet swarthy Clarisse, casually naked. She had breasts he could clearly see, and that little mystery fluff. Phil was naked, too, in the dream.

That was the sexiest part. Naked Phil and naked Clarisse looking at each other, smiling; nothing more. Phil woke in the greasy kitchen warmth with the feeling that he’d somehow turned a corner. He went to his shift on the Ferris wheel, which he’d soon break. And the cars would crash giving him an unforgettable toothache.

The Sunday-dressed funeral line inched along. Soon Phil would be at the mourners’ couch where he’d pay quick respects. There was a good feeling here, a comradely vibe, though somber, a sense of being part of Funland again.

The room’s closeness lulled him back to reverie of that long Sunday at Funland. Seeing so much hand clasping as guests and grievers came together, he was reminded of a hand clasp on his merry-go-round. It was unplanned, happening when he saw that the hot young mom who lived on his block had boarded with her two kids. She was hoisting them onto the wild-eyed horses that would rise and fall, accompanied by tunes that started out festive, but grew into a musical water
torture. Since she had kids, she must have done whatever it took to get them. She knew the ins and outs of going all the way, even looking so young, she knew.

Phil started the ride and hopped on from the operator’s area in the center. He walked against the wheel’s motion, cool and swaggering, a wrangler of horses, and riders handed him their sweaty tickets. Phil must have collected sixty or seventy. When he reached the hot young mom, she recognized him from the neighborhood and said, “Hi” as she offered her tickets.

Phil ignored these and instead gave her all the tickets he’d collected, holding her hand firmly for a moment as he made the transfer. Over lilting calliope he whispered, “Here, it’s okay.” The tickets were worth a quarter each depending upon how they were purchased, individually or in streams of twelve that made them somewhat cheaper.

She looked flustered. Phil, taller than she and feeling at home on the moving ride, was uncharacteristically assertive and closed her hand around the bundled tickets. She whispered, “Gee!” Later, as riders streamed off and new ones crowded on, a young balding man called out to Phil, saying, “Hey!” It was the hot mom’s husband, and when Phil looked at him the guy said, “Thanks!” And gave Phil a thumbs up sign.

Phil didn’t know why he’d implicated this young family in dishonesty, a Chicago act of clout. He didn’t talk about it with them after that day and doesn’t remember seeing them again. He recalls that he’d felt momentary pleasure, at the time, in seeing that the young husband was balding. Phil winces at the unkindness of this, although a smile creeps in. Not cool, he thinks, shaking his head in the funeral home.

And what kind of guy would give into the downshirt game? When he operated the little cars, boats or planes, moms would seat their kids and secure the straps. Or, at ride’s end they’d reach in to unstrap. Phil would hover nearby, overseeing the safe loading and unloading. This was a job requirement, entirely innocent.

Yet when the moms bent forward, shirts invariably fell open revealing bras and breasts. Phil couldn’t help this. It was physics. He was obligated to be there so he couldn’t look away. Often, he’d see more than breast tops. He’d see darker, pinker points and this became a guilty pleasure. Sometimes he’d keep a tally. How many nipples, half-nipples, almost-nipples. Phil at sixteen, shameless exploiter of women. No, exploiter’s not fair; admirer’s a better word. But, then and now, he felt—and could it be wrong?—that the women knew what he was doing. Did Clarisse, minutes ago, know? She threw him a look that said “shame,” but this carried a hint of playful “boys-will-be-boys” indulgence.

Phil’s dream of nude Clarisse at the door might have been brought on by the downshirt moms. But Phil didn’t see the connection then, unaccustomed to self-analysis let alone dream analysis. And maybe it wasn’t breasts. There had been the upskirt incident by the little boats. Accidental, but it did give Phil that unforgettable view of a cheeky butt in tight panties as the day faded and neons lit up Funland.

Phil had been so tired. This was the time in a twelve-hour shift when ride operators hit the wall. He’d received word from the dead boss to switch to the boats so their operator could break for dinner. Phil arrived, and there was the fence that every other ride operator could hop. He figured he’d do a “false jump.” Anyone could do it. Just put a hand on the rail and swing one leg over, then the other. For a second his crotch would hurt as it took his weight, since no actual jumping was involved. But this worked.
Up on his toes, leg-extended, big kick. This time, instead of getting his foot over the fence, he got it caught under the dress of a young woman who’d picked that moment to cross in front. Phil’s shoe lifted it quickly until her backside was revealed.

She felt this and screamed. Nothing like the noise of cars crashing later on 95th Street, but jarring. She spun, pushing her skirt down, facing Phil, angry but showing a bit of shocked smile. She was with a fit-looking guy whose expression went from confused to dangerous.

Phil said, “Sorry, sorry, sorry!” and waved his arm, a time-out signal. “Sorry, it was an accident!” He explained everything, the silly truth blathered quickly, how he was putting his foot over the fence. “An accident. Sorry.” And he said he was sorry again.

Phil got away with it. Later, leaning against the entry to the little boats he thought about the girl’s butt, curvy on both sides below tight, low-rise panties. And the look on her date’s tough guy face. The surprise in his eyes. That was close.

The boyfriend reminded Phil of a tough guy who’d extorted roller coaster rides the night before. It had been lightly raining and the park was nearly empty. Phil was waiting for the boss to close early. Then he’d turn off the ride and drop its canvas walls. Even though he was paid hourly, closing early was a treat.

But the rain eased and the park was open when a known hardass named Duke showed up with friends. These were gangland guys who carried brass knuckles and switchblades. Duke was their leader, famous across Chicago’s South Side for ferocity in rumble. He vaulted into the front seat of the empty train (showing a maddening grace that suggested he could easily jump any Funland fence if he’d wanted to) and his friends took seats behind him. Duke waved with dangerous friendliness, saying, “let’s go, c’mom.”

No ticket was offered and Phil didn’t ask. Besides, Funland was empty, the night a washout. Phil pushed the handle, releasing the train. It rolled down a short incline then onto a slope where the undercarriage was grabbed by a clanking chain that pulled it to the top. When the train returned, Phil pulled back on the handle but Duke yelled, “Keep it going!” Phil let them go five times, maybe six. Duke and his buddies didn’t leave until the loudspeaker announced that Funland was closing. Then they ran down the ramp, ungrateful.

As he secured the roll-down canvas, Phil thought he saw his old boss in darkness behind the ticket booth. A cigarette glowed orange there. Phil remembered the man brushing gravel off his back. Maybe the guy had been watching. Maybe he would have stepped in if Duke got rough. Maybe he hadn’t even been there.

Phil’s shift on the little boats ended. Sunday was winding down. The sky over Funland’s neon turned orange and purple. The calliope tape played Elmer’s Tune for what must have been the hundredth time in that twelve-hour day. He took a break in the kitchen where he dreamed the Clarisse dream, then headed to the Ferris wheel, relieving a guy so zonked from spinning lights and pushy riders that he said nothing.

The wheel was at the edge of Funland, rising above 95th Street so traffic could see it spinning, an ad for fun. Riders sat in swaying baskets with bolted doors that were opened from the outside at the loading platform. Phil would stop the wheel by pulling on another of the day’s handles, unlock a basket, let riders out and wave new riders in, take tickets, bolt the basket, grab the handle, move the next car into position and so on until the ride’s population had been turned over. Then he’d let it run before doing it all again.
The spokes of the Ferris wheel were lined with colored neon. One glowed red, the next yellow, green and so on. There was a white one, too, and when it came around, Phil’s face grew ghostly. Then Phil turned green or whatever was next. The wheel kept spinning, the music kept playing, the kids kept coming.

Phil had been running the wheel for an hour. He fought off sleep as the ride ran, and was daydreaming about naked Clarisse again. Suddenly parents were yelling. The door on one of the baskets up high was swinging, banging into metal and glass. He hadn’t locked it. The basket was rocking and still rising. Its door slammed into the neons, splattering them onto Phil, then caught in the wheel’s support structure. Metal locked horns with metal. There was the squeal of machinery. Kids were crying. The motor stopped, reeking of hot ozone.

Then the two cars crashed on 95th street, head-on. As though naked Clarisse, the broken wheel, crying kids and panicking parents all needed a cymbal clash to underscore the chaos they caused in Phil’s tired world. Crowds ran to the fence, bypassing Phil’s broken Ferris wheel for a better spectacle. His young passengers cried more loudly. Their parents saying, “do something, get someone!”

The serious dead owner of Funland and his maintenance guy, a creased ex-Marine named Red pushed into the heart of the problem. They had tools and knew what to do. Phil felt tears coming but held them back. When he read Kipling’s, “If,” years later, the idea of “keeping your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you,” brought this moment back and made him feel somewhat better. He hadn’t cried.

The dead owner of Funland put a hand on Phil’s shoulder and said, “Take off, son.” No anger, just a guy doing a job. All in a day’s work, a night’s work, a long summer Sunday’s work, a life’s work. “Go, it’s okay.” Phil wasn’t fired, just relieved. He moved away and joined the crowd looking over the fence. Phil’s toothache filled the world, his exhausted, neon-lit, buggy, horny, darkening world with accident victims in weeds.

That shift would end but Phil wouldn’t be the same. The tooth needed fixing. He was lessened by last night’s cowardice with Duke. He’d need to figure out a way to get girls like Clarisse into the picture. He’d stop looking at accidents. The blood was sickening. He’d learn to hop a fence. And he’d have to stop thinking of himself as a loser.

Today Phil’s no loser. He might have been one during that summer at Funland. But he soared past those guys. Unlike them, Phil’s life hadn’t been made of lateral moves. He went to college, worked in tall buildings, wore ties, made money, got style. He didn’t get tattooed and doped. Didn’t get beat up and toothless. The only tooth he ever lost had been that wisdom tooth, yanked after the crash twanged a nerve. Phil was a smooth operator now, not a ride operator.

The receiving line petered out, with not many standing behind Phil. Instead of moving on, well-wishers lingered above seated mourners, quietly talking. Phil watched as old ride operators greeted the family. Then Phil was facing the dead boss’s wife, a nice-looking woman who appeared younger than her husband’s 84, though tired.

Phil took her hand as others intruded on the privacy he’d anticipated. This might have thrown the old Phil, but today’s Phil didn’t mind going public as he said the simple words he’d rehearsed during his approach to the couch. He planned just two words in order to keep things short and sweet. These were “my condolences.” Nothing original, just a mature, well-modulated
expression of heartfelt dignity. Phil looked into her sad eyes, smiled warmly—as he really did have warm memories of her husband—and said, “My congratulations.”

She nodded, having been primed to hear so many perfunctory sentiments. Then Phil’s comment registered. She squinted up at him, her face somewhat twisted into a wordless “huh?” He backed away, smiling. Then the echo of his words hit. “My congratulations.” As he moved away from the couch, away from the wife, curious looks, frowns and smiles followed him.

Did he say that?

“Congratulations” was a word of similar construction to “condolences,” beginning with the same hard “c.” And it was spoken when shaking hands with people in the spotlight. Explainable. But excusable? No way. Phil pivoted toward the wife. He had to set things right. To say, “Sorry! Sorry! I meant My condolences.” He said this under his breath, needing to get it into the world, on the record.

But the crowd moved toward him, against him, into him, as people dispersed to take seats. A eulogist appeared and was tapping a microphone, signaling the beginning of whatever was to come next. The reception line had run its course. Any chance of returning to the widow was lost. This was an irrevocable fact, made clear by the presence of a pony-tailed former ride operator, a guy all width and bulk, who stood in Phil’s way.

This man was shaking his head, grinning slightly as he moved them both toward seats. Phil imagined the big guy getting together with ride operator buddies over shots and beers later that day, laughing about how not to console a widow.

Phil saw that he couldn’t get past this wall of a guy, couldn’t undo his slip of the tongue or anything else, and he just had to keep moving. There was no going back.
Raimundo

Sometime after midnight Raimundo wakes to the thump of a heavy bass outside his window. He has been dreaming about the first woman he ever made love to, a housewife who lived next door to him as a boy in Mexico City. Something was always baking in the oven when they had sex, filling the house with the sweet aroma of baked bread or cookies, so that to this day he can’t step into a bakery without getting a hard-on. He was about to kiss her and unhook her bra when his eyes popped open.

The sound is coming from two cars, low riders, parked in front of his house. Wearing only boxers and a ribbed undershirt, Raimundo barefoots it across the sidewalk and taps on the passenger side of a restored, sky blue, 68 Buick. A man with a shaved head rolls down the window. Tattooed on his neck is a dagger stabbing a heart with a trail of blood running down his neck.

“Do you know what time it is?”

“Go back inside, papi,” the man says.

“I have to be up in the morning. I can’t sleep in all day like some people.”

The man pulls up his shirt. Tucked inside the waistband of his shorts is a shiny black revolver. “Go back inside, papi.”

Raimundo’s face blanches. He turns around and his feet carry him back to his house, up the front steps and into his bedroom. Lying down on his cot, he tries to think about the housewife from Mexico City. But as much as he tries he can’t picture her. He’s too scared.

In the morning he calls the police. The dispatcher says the same thing he always does. They will be sending an officer over shortly. But they never do. They’re too busy pulling over speeders or patrolling the malls. What about his street? Instead of waiting around for the police, a year ago Raimundo built a chain-link fence around his front porch and put bars up on his windows. His home looks like a prison now, but at least he feels safe at night.

Next time he should try calling when the crime is underway, not the day after, the dispatcher says. Day of, day after, what difference does it make? Raimundo hangs up.

Last month a police cruiser was parked in front of his house. “Finally,” Raimundo thought. “They’re taking me seriously.” He went outside to greet the officer. The officer was in street clothes and was getting something out of his trunk. Raimundo thought it was evidence, but it turned out to be a black trash bag. The cop tossed the bag into the vacant lot next to Raimundo’s house.

“Hey! You can’t do that. This isn’t a dump,” Raimundo had said.

The cop looked at him as if he was a small dog yapping at him, and drove away.

Because of this business with the police, and because he overslept, he is running late. He dresses, locks up the house and catches the bus to work. The bus is full. Anyone lucky enough to find a seat is sleeping. Everyone else keeps moving to the back to make room for more passengers. Hanging from a roof strap, Raimundo watches a woman apply makeup to her face with the aid of a compact mirror. She applies blush, eyeliner then lipstick by smacking her lips together. This
reminds him of the housewife from Mexico. She used to redo her makeup after they made love. He liked watching her from the tangled sheets on the bed while she sat at her vanity, painting her face. It made him feel like her husband.

At one of the stops a woman in a wheelchair is waiting. To let her on, the bus driver has to get off, wheel her chair onto a loading ramp, activate the ramp and strap her in so her chair doesn’t shift during the bus ride. The whole process takes a solid ten minutes. Raimundo wonders why a woman in a wheelchair has to take the bus so early in the morning. Does she have a job? The only people in wheelchairs he has ever seen working are the greeters at HEB, and all they do is sit there and blink at you coming into the supermarket. He resents her for making everyone on the bus late. But at the same time he feels sorry for her. It isn’t her fault she’s in a wheelchair. But then again maybe it is. Maybe she is someone who tried to kill herself by walking into traffic or jumping off a balcony and only ended up paralyzing the lower half of her body.

By the time the bus drops off Raimundo in front of the Seven Eleven, he is fifteen minutes late. The parking lot is full of Ford F-150s and day laborers looking for work. Raimundo finds his foreman and his work crew, who are already piled into the back of a truck.

“Sorry boss. There was this woman on the bus…” Raimundo starts to say but realizes there’s no point going on. He gets in the back with the others. No one says anything to him, not even Carlos. Raimundo pulls his cap over his face, crosses his arms and tries to get some sleep before their first job of the day.

At the apartment complex, they unload the mower, weed-whackers and leaf-blowers off the trailer. Raimundo hates apartments. There’s always a lot of grass and a lot of dog shit no one bothers to pick up. Dogs chained to balconies bark at you. You can forget about anyone ever offering you a drink, either. People who live in apartments don’t care about anyone but themselves. They certainly don’t care about their neighbors. When Raimundo first moved to San Antonio from Mexico, before he cashed in his savings to buy a tiny ramshackle corner house, he shared a three-bedroom apartment with seven other men. Everyone worked during the day. They only slept, ate and showered in the apartment, so they got along. But Raimundo would never want to live like that again. The neighbors were loud and rude and if you complained they’d threaten to call INS. Kids played in the stairwell and there was always a party at the pool so you couldn’t swim unless you wanted to tread water with twenty other shouting and screaming kids.

At noon they break for lunch. They sit in the shade on the cut grass, eating whatever their wives packed for them that day. Raimundo doesn’t have anything to eat. Usually he makes a few tortillas for himself before leaving the house, wraps them in tin foil and stores them in a cooler, but not today—he was in too much of a hurry. So everyone breaks off a piece of their lunch and gives it to him.

Raimundo likes all of them sitting in the shade, eating the lunches their wives made, talking and laughing. But it also saddens him because he doesn’t have a wife at home to make him lunch. He wanted to marry but never found the right person. No woman he ever met reminded him of the housewife in Mexico City. She was something special. Sometimes he likes to wonder what the housewife is doing now. She would be an old abuelita by now, with grandkids and dentures. What if he tracked her down after all these years? Would she still give him a boner when she wore an apron and bent down to pull a cake out of the oven?
Their next job is in Alamo Heights. There are no cracks or weeds in the sidewalk, no potholes in the street. People bring in their trash bins after collections, as if a bin sitting in plain view is a source of shame. The houses don’t have bars on their windows. No dogs are chained to stakes in the front yards. People don’t let their grass grow until they have to wade through their yard with a machete to get to the front door. Raimundo would’ve have liked to have bought into a neighborhood like this. But all he could afford was a fixer-upper on the south side of town. He bets that when people on this street call the police a squad car arrives within minutes. He bets the officers are polite and respectful and don’t dump their trash into the vacant lot next door.

The foreman reminds everyone to do a good job today. This is an important account. No skimping or napping. That means you Carlos. Everyone laughs. Carlos can sleep anywhere. He can sleep riding a mower, he can sleep in the bed of a pickup, he can sleep on his own two feet, wielding a weed-whacker.

They pile out of the pickup and fan out across the neighborhood, like soldiers on a search and destroy mission. A weed-whacker slung over his shoulder, Raimundo sizes up a one-story ranch style home with a Spanish-tile roof. Its number is spray painted on the curb in perfectly stenciled letters. A leaning oak tree dips over the driveway, cooling the pavement. A green garden hose is coiled neatly around a peg on the side of the house. He starts with the hedges. A woman waves from the big picture window in the living room. He waves back, wipes his sweaty brow on his sleeve. After he’s circled the house, after he’s trimmed the hedges and curb, she comes out bearing a tall, sweating glass of ice tea on a tray. In it a lemon wedge is floating in a sea of ice cubes.

“Thanks,” Raimundo says, taking the glass. He gulps it fast so she can go back inside. Standing in her apron, she reminds him of the housewife who once lived down the street from him as a boy. In fact, they could almost be the same woman, same height, same build, same dark hair, same everything, except Raimundo is no longer that spry sixteen-year old. He’s old and wilted. His back aches from bending over all the time. His hair is ashen, his face bears more lines than a map. Even if they were one and the same—which they aren’t—what could he do? He can’t marry her, can’t support her. Her husband is probably a doctor or a lawyer. And who is he? He’s a man who mows lawns.

Downing the last of the tea, ice cubes rubbing up against his lips, he pictures her spotless kitchen, a jug full of halved lemons and tea bags sitting on a windowsill, soaking up the sun, her mother’s recipe (one tablespoon of sugar for every cup of water) posted on the subzero fridge. He hands her back the glass, smiles and gets back to work.

At the end of the day, the workers ride in the open back of the foreman’s pickup. The sun has dipped below the tree line, yet glares every so often through a break in the branches. The wind is whipping through their hair. They are too tired to talk. A feeling of accomplishment, of a day seen through to its logical conclusion, settles over them. Carlos cracks open a cooler, reaches in past his elbow and fishes out a can of Tecate. The ice in the cooler has all but melted and floating in it are twigs of grass. Carlos holds out the beer to Raimundo. But he shakes his head. Next time. Carlos shrugs, tilts back the can. Everyone is quiet.

In the parking lot at the Seven Eleven, they line up beside the pickup while the foreman counts out their wages. When it’s Raimundo’s turn in line, the foreman hesitates.

“That woman said you did a real good job on her house.” The foreman pauses. “Did you fuck her?”
Raimundo shakes his head.

“Good.”

Raimundo pockets his pay, a thick wad of bills, ones and fives mostly. He needs this job, but doesn’t like the foreman telling him who he can and can’t fuck.

On the bus, it’s stop and go all the way to his house. The bus driver is new and has a brick for a foot so the bus lurches forward and comes to a halting stop every few seconds.

It’s pitch black by the time he swings open the gate to his yard. He stops at the mailbox, which is crammed full of utility bills and Smart Shopper ads, stuffed willy-nilly by the letter carrier. As he stands there, going through the mail, a police cruiser pulls up behind him. A car door slams. Through the fence Raimundo can see a young, clean-shaven officer with a buzz-cut stride up to the house.

“Evening. Do you live here?”

Raimundo nods.

The officer pulls out a pen and a note pad. “We’re responding to a call about a possible narcotics deal committed here last night. Did you happen to see the suspects?”

Raimundo stares into the officer’s blue eyes. He doesn’t see a fresh recruit who, while in the Police Academy, wrote a twenty-page paper extolling the virtues of community policing. He doesn’t see an Anglo married to a Latina. He doesn’t see a man who once pulled a drowning boy out of a swimming pool. Instead, he sees the foreman telling him who he can and can’t fuck.

He shakes his head. “No me recuerdo. I don’t remember.”

The officer puts away the pen and paper. “Did you see any identifying marks such as a tattoo?”

“No,” Raimundo says.

The young officer hands him his business card through the fence. “If you remember anything, give me a call. My cell phone number’s on the back.”

Raimundo accepts the card and looks at it as if it was a hundred-dollar bill. When he turns it over, there is indeed a series of hand written digits.

“Have a nice night,” the officer says.

Raimundo nods and sits on the porch of his house. The cop pulls away from the curb. Raimundo tucks the card under some old magazines. He leans back and shuts his eyes. The enveloping darkness presses up against his eyelids as he waits, waits for the housewife to appear in his dreams.
Poppies

One of my early memories is of red paper poppies being sold in the streets of Brisbane, Queensland on Armistice Day—November 11th. My father came home from work in gray three-piece suit and wide-brimmed felt hat, a poppy in his buttonhole, and as he came into the house and removed his hat, he laid the poppy down on the sideboard where it stayed for the next week. I had never seen those red corn poppies growing, but the two pieces of red construction paper, joined in the center by a black button bore no resemblance to the poppies I knew.

Other poppy memories from when I was small are the gardens full of Iceland poppies in the front yards of Queensland houses. Pinks and yellows and oranges, big cups of crinkly thin petals that let the sun through, long hairy waving stems, lots of yellow pollen. We didn’t grow them in our garden, though my mother was a keen gardener and grew other plants in herbaceous borders; *poppies are too common* she said, meaning that they were beneath us. I never discovered why she thought that.

In my house in the Arizona desert I have a small gouache picture by Charlotte Mensforth of real scarlet poppies, a sea of red blooms among olive trees in some Mediterranean country, bringing back memories of holidays in the Spanish countryside. My first sight of that brilliance was an unprecedented exultation of color as my husband, Reg, and I picnicked by the field. The singular experience was impressed into indelible memory with that clear blue sky, warm sun reflected on massed red flowers, patches of gray olive trees, a bottle of Rioja, a loaf of dry bread and a hunk of hard cheese—memories floating in my head, returning tears mixed with delight. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t seen the real red poppies before, I had several times seen them as red dots among the wheat fields of Salisbury Plain, and as strings of red in the vineyards of Provence, but never before had I seen a solid mass of them, a world of scarlet.

We had rented a car in Malaga and driven off westwards, soon leaving behind the last of urban life and entering the hills and villages of Andalusia. The sight of those poppies as we drove made us gasp, and we decided to stop among them and have an early lunch, drinking in the spectacle as we sipped wine, and we must have rested there for a couple of hours before continuing on our journey.

As Reg dozed I lay and dreamed of flowers and colors and how they had affected me as a small child. I remembered how, when I was seven, I had been allowed to cut flowers from our garden in Brisbane, and I was with Mama sorting through the lovely multicolored array at the kitchen table. The clarity of the scene after more than fifty years is testimony to the highlight that it
was, an occasion on which all the colors and delicate shapes made me unusually dizzy with happiness. And even more so that I could touch and examine and organize and arrange, make delicate mixtures of the pink phlox and blue forget-me-not, or bold arrangements of yellow pansies and orange wallflowers. Then, to make the morning perfect, Mama admired. Her soft green eyes looked and adored and her brilliant wide smile loved, and we both knew our closeness. Working together. Our shared love of flowers.

I picked up a little sprig of lobelia, that very intense saturated blue kind that makes everything else look a bit washed out. Something happened then that defies understanding, but it had happened before and still I am not too old; the color captivates, overwhelsms and possesses all the senses, as if only color, this color, is the essence of being alive.

I said to Mama, “This color makes my brain go funny and shivery.”

She stopped and turned abruptly to me. I saw her eyes, hard now, and alarmed. Her mouth had become a thin line, twisted at one end. That’s what I remember most, that dreadful ugly frightening twist. She didn’t say anything though, and the moment passed, but the enchantment of doing flowers with Mama was never quite the same. Some things had to be kept secret, those strange feelings must not be told. I often went into the garden to look at flowers and repeat the thing, go through the feeling I had that morning and embrace the mystery, feel the wonder of color.

Driving on a particularly steep hill after our Spanish lunch among the poppies, where sheep grazed at a ridiculous angle, I said, “Just look at that scene,” and Reg turned to see the hillside, and not noticing a rock in the road, ran the front axle into it causing it to bend enough to prevent further driving. We were crestfallen to be stranded so soon in our vacation, and remained silent as we walked the mile or so into the next village, which turned out to be Santa Maria del Rosario.

Our first task was to call the car rental agency. In the only tavern in the village we found a telephone and were promised help by nightfall, and with nothing else to do we wandered around the tiny, pretty place built on a hillside, with views to higher mountains. There were perhaps fifty houses and a central square, and on the hill above was a bullring, but we saw no sign of shops. Tired with walking and waiting, we sat silently on the roadside at the lower edge of the village in the afternoon sun, watching people pass by. I could sense Reg fretting about our dilemma, but for my part, it seemed at least worthwhile trying to enjoy the scene. Two men and a boy in tattered clothes walked in from the fields, followed by another man leading a sheep, I assumed for slaughter. A woman with a small girl walked by and the girl smiled shyly as they passed us. A skinny man on a donkey with a three-legged dog. A large woman with a basket of hay. A young couple with a baby. A thin man with a three-day beard.

The sun went down and there was no sign of help; we would have to find somewhere for the night. Returning to the bar we saw no indication of accommodation available there or elsewhere. Then, wandering into the square as dusk gave way to darkness we finally realized that there were shops here, but they were unmarked and inconspicuous. Looking down into a basement
area in front of a house on the square we saw piles of cigarette boxes, matches and soap through the windows and presently someone emerged with a basket and climbed the steps to the road.

“We must go in and ask about where to stay,” I said.

Reg was reluctant and it fell to me ask in broken Spanish for a *cama* for the night because of an accident in our car.

“So,” the woman behind the counter said, looking us up and down unsmilingly, and some twenty minutes later she beckoned us to come with her as she went out, up the steps and down a side street. She took us into a small two-storey house with an attic to which she led us and we smiled our *gracias* as we asked *cuánto cuesta?* All of us knew that price was not the issue, and in fact we agreed to a high price more like the cost of a hotel room in Malaga. We walked back to the car to get what we needed for the night and as we returned to our attic the woman was sitting sewing with a young girl, both of them with rugs draped over their laps.

“Carne, carne,” the woman said insistently, and I thought that must mean meat and looked at Reg and said, “Maybe she is asking us to eat.”

“Si, si,” we replied in unison and made eating movements.

“Carne,” she repeated frowning, and made a square shape with her hands, and eventually we realized she was asking for our identity cards. We produced passports, but these were evidently novel and not satisfactory, and a difficult few minutes passed as we tried to think what to do next. It was Reg who had the idea of offering his business card, which fortunately served the purpose, and the woman retreated to her needlework; we were dismissed.

Reg and I looked at one another. We needed food, and went out again to search the village. We found no restaurants, so after beer and tapas at the bar we went early to bed for a cold night with too few blankets. Morning found us searching again for food. Rounding a corner by the square we smelled fresh bread, and soon after felt the heat of a wall and I pushed open an unmarked door into the warmth and delight of a bakery with fresh loaves of bread laid out on shelves. How that warm yeasty smell was better than it had ever been!

Back at the bar we called the car rental agent once more. Although there had been something interesting and enjoyable about learning a little of life in the small rural village, the novelty had palled, and Reg’s anxty was finally having an impact on me as well.

“You said you would come yesterday afternoon.”

Oh they were so sorry. Oh there had been a misunderstanding. Yes there were actually two places called Santa Maria del Rosario and they had been to the other one. So sorry. They would be with us as soon as possible—within three hours.

By midday we were being towed to Jerez. The rental staff there were kind.

“You hit a rocka, si, si, the weather bad eh?”

“Yes,” we lied.

“Si, si, si.”

And we had a new and better car for the remainder of our holiday, which meant a celebration that night in the top Michelin Guide restaurant in the town—wonderful food served in a building that had been a medieval monastery. Reg declared his strong-smelling pheasant to be the best ever, and I found my leg of lamb unsurpassed and surely from a herd feeding on the herb-covered Spanish pastures. The anxiety of the last thirty hours faded as we ate and drank and I look back on the time as an interesting adventure, though Reg never wanted to be reminded of it.
We were to pass many poppy fields during the vacation in Spain and later vacations there too, and the memories are forever mixed with scarlet poppies, masses of red among olives, patches of them in wheat fields, armies of them along roadsides. Each flower made more brilliant by the black center—a shiny spot of jet black at the base of each petal and the dense black stamens. A flower to remember. A flower for Armistice Day.

There is extensive writing about the use of the scarlet corn poppy as a symbol of remembrance, though stories of its origin vary. All agree, however, that a poem written by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae in 1918 was significant.

The poem is said to have moved Moina Michael so much that she decided to wear a red poppy as a way of keeping faith, as McCrae urged in his poem. Michael worked for the American Young Men’s Christian Association and at an international meeting of YMCA secretaries in November 1918, she discussed the poem and her poppies. Madame Guerin, the French secretary, also inspired, approached organizations in allied nations and persuaded them to sell poppies to raise money for widows, orphans and needy veterans. There were real poppies, silk poppies, and eventually, paper poppies—the sort my father wore on Armistice Day.

A few years after a poppy-filled holiday in Spain, Reg and I saw Mensforth’s painting at a small gallery in Bond Street, London. Because she lived for years in the south of France, I suspect the poppy field she painted is a French one, and there are also white and yellow flowers, and trees too bright to be olives. Beyond and to the left is a hill village, typical of southern France, and on the right in the distance are blue-tinted mountains. The light is bright and the feel is luminous and Mediterranean, the sky is pale in the manner of certain very hot summer days. Red is the brightest hue and the most opaque color in the picture. It revives memories of those Spanish vacations, decorated with corn poppies and the simple thrill of seeing so much bright color in one place. And the painting gives a feeling of summer and hot days, of how it really feels to want to lie among the poppies.
It was after I immigrated to the United States that poppies took on a fresh meaning, to match a new world. Around Berkeley, California poppies grew here and there, and on the roads west of the Berkeley Hills one saw them on the roadside. Even more than corn poppies, these flowers are blindingly bright, and their orange color remains somehow in the back of one’s eyes when eyelids close. Perhaps more than any other color experience, this one was most extravagant, and I am definitely not alone in my enjoyment. Even people with no interest in flowers, no knowledge of plants, know the California poppy, which is a native wild flower in many warm sunny environments of South and Western United States. It has, in recent years, become a nursery special, now even adapted for English gardens.

Living in Tucson, in the Sonoran desert, I see related poppies somewhere every spring, though it is only in the good years, when winter rain has been early, well spaced, and plentiful, that carpets of them may be seen in patches on the desert floor, though the colors seem less saturated in Arizona. And because rainfall is geographically so unpredictable, one must travel to see the best shows. I went one year some forty miles west to see the acres of orange, mixed with blue lupines and smaller numbers of other wildflowers. In some places the little plants come up in the fall and further rains fail, so that by springtime, miniature plants here and there have miniature flowers and many other plant species are totally absent. Even so, the tiny blossoms retain their orange (or sometimes yellow) brilliance.

Above all, poppy memories are about the spring of 1989. It was a rare year of great rain in the southwestern United States and the deserts were massed with color. We drove to Death Valley and saw the normally barren expanses covered in yellows and whites and blues and reds and a few orange poppies too. But it was when we drove on to Antelope Valley that we saw one of the sights of a lifetime. This wide flat valley of more than two thousand square miles in the Mojave Desert, northeast of Los Angeles, was completely orange with the flowers of California poppy. I was glad Reg was driving because my head reeled and my brain felt overloaded with the orange sensation. It was a cool windy day and the flowers were not fully out, but they were so dense that the orange was still almost solid as far as one could see, right up to the Tehachapi Mountains in the distance. Walking among them, one could see blue lupines and yellow daisies here and there, but the brilliance of the poppies turned them into insignificance.

I wanted to roll in the orange, to be a part of this extraordinary place, but of course did not. For hours though we feasted our eyes on orange and I can bring back the picture now in all its gaudy detail; the smooth clear color of each petal, the perfection of each flower, the waving mass of orange, the strange excitement in my head, wondering if there were enough insects to pollinate the millions upon millions of blooms, thinking of the massive seed banks in the ground that could wait and wait for such a year.

My painting is of red corn poppies (Papaver rhoeas) but it stands for bright color as well as for the corn poppies. And so it stands also for orange California poppies (Eschscholzia californica). The picture is on the wall in my dining room, opposite windows to the desert and Tucson Mountains. On hot dry summer days, when the desert is mostly brown and the only flowers in sight are the few remaining white blooms on the tops of giant saguaro cacti, I can look at a painting of a gentler place, where red color comes each summer and I can think of all those poppies—scarlet corn poppies in Europe, orange California poppies in the United States—and relive the ecstatic delight that was mine in Spain and California for those hours, days, weeks.
Oliver Sacks writes, in *The Island of the Color Blind*, “For us, color normals, the richness of
the vegetation was at first just a confusion of greens, whereas to Knut [who had no ability to see
color] it was a polyphony of brightnesses, tonalities, shapes and textures.” Elsewhere he explains
that Knut doesn’t miss color, but has built up a world of beauty, color and meaning on the basis of
what he has. With my emotional response to color per se, this is so hard to imagine.

I wonder if there are upper or lower limits to the ecstatic experiences we have from our
senses and just as individuals lacking one sense have increased sensitivities in others, perhaps
reduced possibility for emotional pleasure in the brain induced by one sense is made up for by
increased emotional pleasure in other domains. And I wonder if individuals have proscribed levels
of pleasure that are expressed or felt by whatever complement of senses they have, whatever sense
may be absent from birth or lost during life. In any case, I feel lucky to have such joy of color
vision. How rich my visual life has seemed, how many epiphanies brought on by delicacies,
intensities, varieties of colors. My emotional, perhaps even spiritual, response to color may be
replaced by something else if I lacked the cones on my retina that allow perception of it, but for
now I am very conscious of the magical biology of my eyes and the optic lobes of my brain
whenever I see blue sky and new green leaves, clouds painted by the last rays of the sun, the blue
lobelias of my first home, sulfur butterflies, red poppies, orange poppies.


i In Flanders Fields

In Flanders field the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.
The five Americans were without a care, drinking wine from plastic, liter bottles as they walked through the forest. In a glade in a glen, they came upon a group of mustached men. Each man wore a dark green hat. The men were laboring to push a cart loaded with wood up a slope.

The Americans weren’t aware that the men were Gypsies. The Gypsies supposed the Americans were from Germany. Had the Americans spoken, the Gypsies would have guessed they were from England—but not America. It was possible that no one from America had ever come to that remote place.

The Americans—three women and two men—set down the wine and their packs and helped the Gypsies push the cart. The load rolled right up to the path that angled through the glen. No word was exchanged, not even, “Kősnőjük;” “Thank you,” in Hungarian.

The Americans were English teachers on a weekend excursion from Budapest. Of all of them, Lucy knew Hungarian the best. She had booked them a room in Új Huta, the village of their destination. Their plan for the following day was to wake up in Új Huta, take acid and trek to a castle.

When their wine was nearly gone, they realized they had lost the path that was supposed to lead to Új Huta. Ascertaining the stenciled trailmarkers they had been following must have been on felled trees, they squatted down and hunched over the map. Since they couldn’t determine which way they had come, they studied the map’s topographical lines and matched them to their surroundings. Several times they used this method to guess the direction of Új Huta.

The group marched over hills and through pathless valleys in search of the village. As fatigue set in, Justin or George, in flurries of frustration, would race ahead of the women to the top of the next summit, hoping for a sign of Új Huta, but none came forth. Exhausted, ridden with ticks and running out of daylight, they hiked back to the town where the bus had left them that morning. They had been looking forward to the trip for weeks. Returning to Budapest was out of the question.

A sudden storm drenched them as they entered the town. While they laid their things on the sidewalk to dry in the brilliant late afternoon sun, drunken townsfolk emerged unsteadily from their dwellings. In a country accent, a man informed them that no buses were leaving from there until the next day, nor was there any place for them to stay, except on benches in the train station.

On their way to the station night fell, and the temperature dropped by several degrees Celsius. George’s teeth were chattering. Eliza was feeling signs of her Crohn’s disease coming on. Inside the draughty, unheated station, the group was shivering. A teenage passerby noticed them, hearing their English and George’s chattering teeth. She kept on going into the night, wondering what English speakers would be doing there. It occurred to her they must be stranded.
She returned, hesitantly looked them over and then asked what they were doing. Lucy explained the situation in her passable Hungarian.

The girl was overcome with maternal feelings for the stranded souls in the cold night. She phoned her mother from the station’s pay phone. The group did not understand she was saying, but her tone of compassionate ardor was clear.

The girl’s mother soon arrived in a tiny car and drove them, in two shifts, to the nearest inn, which was in the next town, ten minutes away.

At the inn, the girl went with them to their room, to make sure they got all the way there. To express their gratitude to the girl, Maxine gave her a ring, right off her finger. They hugged. The girl swooned and was tearful. How important it is to appreciate noble girls.

George and Justin went to the inn’s lobby/bar to buy cigarettes. Mustached thugs in track suits were at the bar sullenly taking shots of Unicum. Such men at bars were common in Hungary. George was afraid of them. George was always afraid when people dressed and behaved the exact same as each other. Such people were governed by unpredictable forces.

In the morning the Americans hitched to Új Huta. Új Huta was one third of a tri-village area that included Őhuta and Harom Huta. A “huta” was a kiln. The prefixes to the village names meant “old,” “new” and “three.” The American’s village, New Kiln, was a dreamy, alpine place, aloft in the cool air of forested hills. The hotel they had planned to stay at was an aristocratic, turn-of-the-century chateau. They stopped and looked at it for a moment, lamenting yesterday, the day they had lost their way because Gypsies had felled the trees with the trailmarkers they had been following.

Sitting around a white table beside the local büfé (snack bar), they breakfasted on mimosa with white wine instead of champagne, hot dogs spiced with golden-brown mustard, and thick slices of bread. Afterward, they got a load of locally made wine that came in multi-liter plastic jugs and set out for the castle.

Beyond the outskirts of the village, they stopped by the side of the road and dropped the acid. A few minutes after it began to take effect, George had to poop. George always had to poop when he was in nature. Nature was like a laxative for him.

After explaining the situation to his friends, George traipsed into the woods. Once the road was out of sight, George perched his bottom on a small, fallen tree. As George relaxed through a cramp, he got distracted for a minute contemplating the organic spirit of American Indians. George was prone to such reveries. They were symptomatic of latent psychosis.

George had been worn down from the wars fought to free himself, first from his parents, who had pulped his identity—and then from his pulped identity. He had spent years harnessing his mind in order to participate in society. He had to be rigidly self-controlled to manage it, but had the persona of someone who was not. He had long hair, wore secondhand clothes, smoked, drank coffee, liked to party, played in a band, spoke frankly about bodily functions, and loved people enjoying being alive.
Sitting there, on the log, George focused on staying focused on pooping. George didn’t want his friends to have to wait for him. George’s bowels were gurgling. He had hot flashes and cramps. He moaned and leaned forward queasily. When the poop was finally on its way, Lucy yelled George’s name. His anus clenched up, burning hot. “George! George! George!” she kept calling through the woods, sounding like a car alarm.

“AAAAAHHHHH!” George screamed to make her shut up.

When George rejoined the group, George asked Lucy, “Why were you yelling for me?”

“Because you were gone for so long,” she said, laughing crazily, her pupils dilated. Lucy was his girlfriend.

Walking on, they emerged from the pine forest to a scene of gentle green hills rolling out to the horizon. The hills were well-proportioned for making echoes. For a while, they amused themselves shouting and listening to the hills their bouncing voices. Following the echoes, they left the road and walked into the hills. In a few minutes the world behind was out of sight and nature enveloped them.

In a spacious hilltop meadow they tumbled in the grass and invented games. They called the meadow “the alien landing strip” and played in the sunshine.

They had to reach the castle a few hours before dark so that the Lucy, Maxine and Eliza could find accommodation and so Justin and George could locate a train to Budapest to make it to work on Monday. Too soon it was time to leave the meadow to follow responsibility back to the serpentine road turning through the hills.

A kilometer back toward civilization, they came to a hamlet called Mogyórocska (Little Peanut). The local folk were drunken, elderly and wearing black mourning clothes. A Polski Fiat coasted to a stop in the grass beside the hamlet shop. A collegiate-looking couple stepped from the tiny car. The boy was suited, in black, and the girl had on a black dress so short it was up to her fender. Her legs were clad in nylons and black, chunky high heels. George marveled at the pair, juxtaposed with the age of the locals, the mark of death in their colorless clothes, and the elysian hills extending all around without end.

Justin and George stepped inside the hamlet shop. Behind the counter, two schoolgirls came into view. They wore everyday clothing. Women in black, as old as roads, were looking on from chairs backed against the walls. At first, the Americans didn't see them because their pupils—dilated even outdoors—were slow to register forms in the dearth of light. Being American guys on acid, they were totally alien in the shadowy environment. In a subtle way, there was no guarantee tripping Americans had the right to exist there at all.

George and Justin were not really men, but useless children pretending to be men so that people wouldn’t be mean to them. The most they could do to honor the women in the shop was use proper forms of Hungarian address in greeting, but they were tripping too hard to try. Their goal was to keep themselves together long enough to get what they needed and get out without seeming too weird. Edgily, they purchased wine and cigarettes.

A half hour outside of Little Peanut, Eliza and Maxine took off their shoes because their feet hurt. They continued barefoot on the pavement. From the cool shadows behind a large hill, the group emerged onto a sunlit summit. Twenty meters further they came upon a donkey fettered to a slab of concrete embedded and encrusted with rusted metal. The women thought the creature was
swept. It spooked George. When the women approached to pet the donkey it jerked at its tether and brayed with alarm. “It doesn’t like us. Let’s stay away,” Maxine said to Eliza and Lucy.

After the next turn in the road, the group was looking down into Fony (pronounced Foñ). All the structures in the village were cracked and eroded except for a whitewashed church that jutted indifferently into the sky, its steeple many times the height of the surrounding rooftops. The villagers themselves were way more plastered than their dwellings. A number were lying on the dirt streets. Others were eating grass. It was the type of place that spawned Budapest myths about country-people; myths such as the practice of cutting off a finger to get five thousand forints (thirty dollars) from the state health insurance.

As the strangers watchfully proceeded, the eyes of the village lingered on them with ire, as if there was something unacceptable about them. No one uttered a word. Once they were safely through, Justin said, “That was a crazy place.”

A few minutes later, three teenage boys, all on one bike, rode up from behind and stopped alongside the foreigners. Two of them hopped off. The shortest one made their acquaintance; asking where they were going, where they were from, what they did in Budapest and so forth. Lucy did all the talking. She liked meeting new people.

The short one did all the talking. He asked Justin questions, but Justin didn’t understand anything he was saying. He moved on to George, positioning himself between him and his friends. George tried to converse with the teen, but most of what he said was unintelligible to George. When he said so, the teen asked rhetorically, “You don’t understand?” and went on talking all the same.

Finally, George just ignored him, provoking a refrain of, “Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello! Four eyes! Hello! Four eyes! Hello!…” until George acknowledged him again. He demanded a cigarette from George. George obliged him.

The teen showed Lucy his tattoo. It read “King,” in English. He asked her, “What’s that say?”

“King,”
He said, “Who’s the King?”
“I don’t know.”
He leaned his tattooed shoulder toward her to make it more obvious who the King was, and repeated, “Who’s the King?”
“You’re the King,” she said.
“That’s right,” he said, “I’m the King…Who’s the King?”
“You’re the King.”
“That’s right. I’m the King. Who’s the King?” The game continued until the King was bored with it, He moved back to George and commanded another cigarette. George handed him one. The King tried talking to George, but George ignored him again. “Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello! Four eyes! Hello! Four eyes! Hello!” the King repeated.

For a half hour the King moved from one foreigner to the next, baiting and intimidating. The two, bigger boys just looked on. One of them was actually a gentle person. The other told Eliza and Maxine he was going to “fuck [their] feet,” which were still bare. They put their shoes back on.
There was a break in the harassment when all three boys crowded onto the bike to take advantage of a down-slope and rolled ahead of the group. They stopped to figure out some course of action. The King’s lackeys were bigger than Justin and George, the King smaller. It seemed very possible that the boys would become violent. Justin said he was a “chickenshit pacifist” and couldn’t fight. Otherwise, no one showed any fear. The wheat-colored countryside extended to the horizon in all directions. On the map they saw there was no intersecting road between Fony and the next village, called Vilmány. The decision was made to stay put and hail a car to ask for help, but no car came.

The teens doubled back, two on foot and one on the bike. The King shouted an order to stop to the one on the bike. He did like a disciplined soldier. While this was going on, the gentle boy made a circular motion near his ear, referring to the King for the group’s benefit. It was the vaguest consolation that he was aware of this.

The group started walking again. The harassment intensified. With Midwestern innocence, Lucy sternly told the King, “Please, be quiet. We are in nature.” This really agitated the King.

Maxine gave the boys granola bars as a peace offering. They were excited to get the treats. The King took a bite of his and spat it out. He said, “This isn’t food. It’s shit.” His lackeys spat theirs out, too, but sort of forlornly

The King announced had a pistol back in Fony. As the Americans gawked helplessly at him, imagining being murdered on the vast, yellow plains, Maxine urgently alerted everyone that one of the boys had touched her breast.

The King had already gotten five cigarettes from George. He ordered another. This would have meant opening a new pack, which the King didn’t know George had. George said he was out. He muscled up to George and pounded his fist into his palm, threatening, “Give him another cigarette or I’ll beat your fucking face in.” George maintained he had none to give. George would rather have taken a blow than gone without nicotine.

As they passed over some train tracks, Vilmány came into view. The time to terrorize them was ticking away. The King said he was going back to Fony to fetch the pistol. He pantomimed drawing it, waving it around and firing.

A stone’s throw from the village, the King got in Lucy’s face, on her left side, and told her he was going to fuck her like a whore. It made George feel sick. He took hold of Lucy’s right arm to show them both that he was ready to protect her. As they entered the village, the King warned they’d be waiting for them and the boys backed off.

Straightaway, the group located a bus stop. The schedule showed that no more busses were coming that day. The first person they saw was a mild man in raggedy clothes, with few teeth, what Hungarians called a “peasant.” Lucy told the peasant about the boys. Almost in tears, but too proud to cry, George added that the boys were, “nagyon bunkó,” meaning something like, “very loutish.” Immediately after uttering the words, George worried they sounded effeminate or genteel. The peasant took all this in, but seemingly without concern and did not respond. Lucy told him the police should be alerted. He then led them to two women to whom Lucy explained everything once more.

The women, nearing middle-age, wore loose shirts, leggings and clogs, and smoked long, women’s cigarettes. They seemed more connected to the village than the enigmatic peasant. They went to look for someone to drive the panicked foreigners to the next town, but came back saying
everybody was too drunk to drive. Lucy reiterated the seriousness of the situation, and pointed out
the boys, who could be seen in the distance, waiting for them.

“Are they black?” the women asked in a sensible tone.

The only black people the Americans knew of in Hungary were African students in
Budapest. “No,” Lucy said, “They are from the village, Fony.”

“They are Gypsies! That’s what ‘black’ means. They’re black! Why didn’t you say so?
Fucking Gypsies!”

“What about the trains? Do trains come to those tracks?” asked Lucy, pointing to the ones
they had crossed en route to Vilmány.

“I don’t think so. Not now,” one of them said. Just then, at the corner of the horizon, the
other spotted a short inter-village train with one passenger car. “My God! Look!” the village
women exclaimed, “Here comes the train. If you run, you may catch it. Run! Run fast!”

As George was taking off for the train he dropped his pack so he could run faster and
spouted out that he would make the train wait if he caught it. It was about a half kilometer to the
stop. George sprinted heroically, as if chased by the murderous spirit of the Gypsies, but he didn’t
come close to reaching it before it stopped briefly and pulled away without anyone getting on or
off. George bent over with his hands on his knees and caught his breath, waiting for Justin to catch
up to him. They continued to the stop and looked at the schedule. Another train was coming in an
hour. They lit cigarettes and walked back to the village.

After they related the news about the train, Lucy reiterated to the Hungarian women that it
wasn’t safe for the group to wait alone at the stop because the boys had threatened to harm them
once they left the village. The women said, “We understand. You should have told us they are
black. Fucking Gypsies.”

The sun was going down behind Vilmány. The women escorted the Americans for a few
dozen meters, and then stopped to keep a watch on them from there till the train came.

At the stop, the group rested on the platform in the gentle evening light with their feet
propped up on the rails. It was like heaven to be out of hell. They took photographs of the scene
and spoke of feeling bound for life. Once they saw the train, and then boarded, their relief was
deeper yet. The conductor’s eyes neutrally shined with sobriety and education.

At the station at the end of the line the group had a six-hour wait till the next Budapest-
bound train. No workers were on duty at the single-room station. The room was spacious and
clean. Hungarian train stations were always clean.

Outdoors there was no streetlight, headlight, house light or moonlight to speak of. The
only indication that they weren’t in space was a saloon’s neon glaring fifty meters away in the pitch
blackness. They would be able to buy cigarettes there. Justin and George tentatively stepped from
the station into the darkness, wondering whether they ought to check it out. They saw silhouettes
running through the glow of the neon and decided against it.

A fair-skinned, bearded man with a pack came in from the night. The group made his
acquaintance. He was Polish, traveling by himself. They told him some of what happened earlier in
the day. He said, “Yes. This is a wild place. It is like the Ukraine.”

Three boys, immediately identifiable as Gypsies, entered the station. They were a couple
years younger than the threesome from before. An older, drunken Gypsy man followed them in.
One of the boys smacked him in the face and the man went right back out. The boys shouted and
beat on garbage cans and the plastic windows, stalking menacingly around the room. Two Gypsy
women with a baby came in. They huddled in a corner and shielded the baby from the boys. One of
the boys walked up to the Americans and Pole to stare at them. He began ominously whistling a
tune. The group pretended not to notice. George was thinking, “Fuck, fuck, fuck…” They were
looking at six more hours of wrath—but the boys didn’t stay much longer. After all, it was
getting late.

A train pulled into the station. Justin looked at the schedule to see where it was bound. It
was going to Ukraine. Since it was an international train it would have a snack bar. The group had
no food or water and their cigarettes were running low so Justin and George rushed aboard to
purchase supplies. The train only sold junk food. They picked out a cake, some cookies, a two-liter
bottle of Sprite and a pack of Marlboros. The prices were in deutschmarks. The cashier wouldn’t
take their Hungarian money.

To his surprise, George had eight dollar bills in his pocket. There was no reason why he
wouldn’t have known they were there, but he didn’t and there they were. The train could have
pulled away at any moment. Had they dallied calculating the exchange rate of dollars to marks,
there was a chance they wouldn’t be able to get off. George tossed the American money down on
the counter in a crumpled pile and asked, “Okay?”

The cashier looked at the money as if it wasn’t what he really wanted. George and Justin
turned and hurried off with the goods, touching down on the platform just as the train
started moving.

The group passed the evening playing cards on the smooth, clean, concrete floor of the
station and getting pasty mouths from the sugary sustenance.

When they arrived in Budapest the next morning, all except for George went home to their
flats. George hustled to the underground and got on the subway to go teach. Thanks to the city’s
first-rate public transportation, George was only five minutes late. He entered the classroom
frazzled, dirty, and unshaven.

After finishing telling his class about the dramas of the weekend, George wished them a
good summer and told them they could go. Before parting, the students presented George with a
bottle of pálinka, a plum brandy, the national spirit.

Later in the day, standing with some ex-pat friends on a landing overlooking a quiet
courtyard outside their flat—a flat George eventually moved into—he detailed the weekend from
beginning to end, illuminating it with other stories from his life and reveries about the nature of
evil. His friends listened attentively.
Mark Cunningham

Weeping White Birch

This sentence demonstrates life, which means it's alive or a model of life or protests against life. Pool water shows what quantum theory tells: between the diver's entering the water and her climbing up the metal ladder, her body scatters, reforms, scatters, reforms.
Or simply “searchlight distributes sky.” The hidden assumption was that there was an overt assumption. You can't stop time by looking at a field of cows: after a moment, one of them will move.
Hell, yes, I’m serious about our relationship: I offered to dedicate my car to her. After we switched to the twenty-four hour clock, it was easier to start drinking in the afternoon, because two o’clock was now 1400 hours. I wonder if Luke Skywalker’s light saber had a “tingle” setting? Even if I step outside at noon, I’m coated with star dust; maybe this explains the little cough I have before I say something.
Have I been involved with magic?

Have I talked back?

Did I consent to passionate kisses?

Was I immodest in behavior?

Am I guilty of impurity with myself?

Have I written graffiti?

Did I reveal secrets?

Did I neglect to control my imagination?

Is my heart greedy?

Adapted from an inventory of questions distributed to Catholic secondary school students prior to reconciliation.
The soul walks behind herself.
If she could only catch
The slender figure up ahead

(Every day more slender)
Perhaps she could face the pain
That’s grown beside her

As she has hunched lower
Year after year.
The soul has no time to wonder.

There she is, just ahead,
The distance narrowing,
Then widening again.

The soul is almost out of breath.
She finds herself leaning
On someone’s shoulder.

Pain, smiling down
Like an older brother.
Taking her hand in his hand.
The soul feeds
On what she fed

When she still knew how
To be generous,

A source of light
Toward which the world

Turned on its stem.
Soul glowed world flowered

And no one bothered to distinguish
The feeder from the fed.

The soul feeds
As the world recedes

Along its wet green stem,
Flower into bud,

Bud into seed
The ravenous soul

Cannot reach.
Hope

It may turn out the soul said
That I don’t want to live
That my body is too far away
Too deeply buried

In the future
And the past

It may turn out the soul repeated
That what you call life and I call life

Is not life at all
But a strip of flesh

Ripped without permission
From the body of those

For whom I live
If I live the soul said

It may turn out
And now the soul is sobbing

That the past is the future
Into which I am dying

Without ever having—
Freezing

Like a river freezing
One degree at a time

Beneath her sheet of ice,
The soul feels

The eager feet
Of fears and hungers

That could never ford
Her waters when they flowed

Scratch and slide
Across her white

Unblinking eyes.
So much of her now is solid.

She thickens toward the bottom,
The muddy bed

In which so much of her is hidden:
Spores and bones, the bactrian passion

Of frogs whose blood has frozen,
The warm mouths

Of secret springs
Confiding limestone whispers,

The heat of molten rivers
That keep a trickle flowing

Beneath her thickening ice.
Bearing

for Nancy

Without much notice without a sound
The soul begins to change.

Her small unfinished face
Closed and wary like a child’s

Opens slowly
Into the open ironic face

Of a woman shamed
Only by her lack of shame.

Without notice without sound
Or with a sound

Only a soul would notice
The soul begins

To abandon her children
Her tender notions

Of bearing for others
Who refuse to bear

The soul that refuses
To abandon herself for them.

Notice the sound
The soul has noticed

The sound of abandoning
The life that abandons

Of sacrificing the sacrificial life
The sound yes of children

The children of the soul
Runny-nosed children
Running toward the soul
They see for the first time

Because she has abandoned
The abandonment of life

She bore in order to bear them.
The sound of children laughing and crying

Crying and then laughing
In the arms of the soul

Who bore them before she was born
Who is bearing them now

Who has not yet begun
To bear them.
Opening

for C

The trumpets
Of the soul become quiet

And the wounds of the soul
Like flowers opening under melting snow

Drink in the meltwater of all
The opening of the soul

Is letting go.
It only takes a moment

A moment made of years
Years that have opened in the soul

Like flowers under melting snow.
For years the soul was frozen

And now in a moment the soul has opened
And the snow in which it froze

Has melted into the soul
Leaving the soul open

Open and quiet
Like defeat, and triumph.
go                 girl                        from rock-cut dwelling
take her up      share                            well-drilled among us you summoned
drew up twelve     whose names are
and others around you a great crowd on the ripples stray leaves from an
autumnal              circling around you
of a theatre.
And rusted cymbals behind the gate past feasts fringe of a
life that flutters     in the cupboard oil in a
bottle
like milk and              who were they here perhaps in nightly
rites from where are they gathered from they are the
As if their bodies appear under their clothes like membranes under the light
strange confused all together a web that opens webs that seized empty
insects tremble in the wind take the spider watch it running between your
fingers it flees you to run behind the icons

God.  His mild cold eyes she who you came into now is
around me   you sprinkle the earth with fruit, eyelids with vinegar, our
cities    with    blood            secret cities secretly born
secretly mated hot eyes of an adulteress
like this church I wonder when did anyone sleep here, who
and the painted bodies will ben
            kindly faces to face just lately I know
I have never slept before on their monuments
    they expand their wings above me as if I were to see
your dress God was wrapped up there frozen expressionless
you would say there were thousands of eyes together all the crosses silver above
windmills grind from
below white caterpillars and dust
Inside the                  your breast they did not pass however
if I were to hold some of it the bread they gave me and a little meat too
That train was going out of the Zone remember what they told you something
about the exile’s
why do you always clasp your stomach just as you go asleep above you the saint,
horseman with the spear in his hands above you
Like a flute, a flute-player painted with fingers emaciated
she sews in the monster’s mouth
At the back paths go up to the rock a tree it too from a rock the
ivy which on her lips and climbs
into the most fertile God climbs, at the back the roofs the country that
they were saying after the evening
sleep all those around her a bed collecting the petals
a nest of hair around there your spider is weaving
its eyes your eyes mild still cold when
you share out his body, one piece to everyone
full of light steeped in the fire bouquets of thyme
and the dirge the crowd below they lift him up in their hands candles
twelve of the
    bastions and the men behind them in war
I think of you but not as I used to. My eyes open in sleep, a hand seizes me. And of the
sweetness of somebody’s touch. I am falling, and the same dream again of a child’s breast that
a woman holds in her arms. Lips on it, wet, blood-soaked her lips. I start upright. The others
are sleeping. Days walking uphill, view of an evergreen plateau, stay there. Quiet. Except
when the wounded mumble close to your ear. I took something that made me get over my
fears and then I didn’t care about anything. I did not care about anything. I couldn’t care
about anything, a knife cut took off my finger, and I couldn’t care about stopping the blood.
Nothing to stay for. The daybreak of a Pelre dawn without light. And around one side and
the other monasteries empty nests and a whole crowd there, a river between. And there were
a lot. They are singing, the bridal chambers are filled, holding hands. Below bodies the stream
hustles along, on the bank a row of them fallen face upwards, I run around like a madman
looking for you, a woman presses her daughter to her, poor, we haven’t eaten for days.
Gleam without hope still gleaming. In the dreams jostling the one in my other. As then a boy
on top of his mother, help me to lift her, he was holding her tight by her soaked rags, have
you got matches strike one, as if in her hands. Shows me black avenues and a door at the end.
My name that I saw written on it. First time I felt this kind of pain, like a bite. I saw, yet
another soldier fallen nearby. Tears in his eyes, called out where are you. Could not see,
black with the soil, don’t drink from this water, couldn’t hear, the march past blanked it out.
And it was the memorial chanted for us. On our backs, above us the poplars all round. For
what was lost, country and youth we had lost. For the horses rolling in blood. And then their
carcasses rest under the olive trees. When the sacrifice starts and they pour something over
us. Where are you. And they are all gone there are only the gods that take off their jackets
and give us cover. Dead holding on to images scattered until they too fade forever away. And
I see the others, do not go near leave them get up by themselves. Like the bare ramrod hitting
you in the stomach, a saw, an empty water-bottle. I recall. New Year’s Eve. And deep down
a knot. Sleeping beside me, who. As if to my words he whispers an answer. Now it grows
dark, I am a child, I encounter the gypsy. Who takes by day to the roads and sings. In distant
villages, in the graveyards for charity. They said he was dead. And during Carnival, in the
squares roaming about. Comes and asks us to light a cigarette for him. Deep down a knot,
memory, poor girl. Working all night, ruffling through uniforms. In the cloakroom of
travelling players, should you find something to change. Your face fading again, to hold your
head for a while, and your body is warm and when you are bending to kiss me you hesitate for
a moment, as if you catch the sound of them coming. Or the sound of water or wooden
fingers on drums. Beside me late flowers on your mouth and it is your kiss. The eve of the
lights do you remember? On the day itself I dig into the stone wall and bury there the crown
of a fir tree. Scapegoat, then, then we were together.
Cruel the evening again in the station the train and another station silent and the train tail of
an animal somewhere ahead, and another station alien eyes not on you yet you want to hide
again, a long narrow passage that flows away in the rain covers you. Sitting still you can’t
manage your thoughts cannot make you stand up you cannot go forwards or backwards. Socks
wet, take off your shoes, not yet, you stay still, almost as to abandon the world, the lights go
by, nothing but lights, nothing exists besides this. No thought moving your body not even a
pain. One by one all those that fled all those you left, pieces, pieces like ice breaking and
falling in front of your feet. And it melts before you can move. The rhythm of the metal
draws you with it a shadow out in the corridor lighting a cigarette the same tree that had
passed before you so many times. You smoke too. You take off shoes socks lie down. Cramp
in the stomach, the usual. You cover your feet with the pullover, fall face down. Chilly berth
that sticks on your face. You wear the pullover, you put the Bible under the jacket for a
pillow. Her breast, her half-opened mouth. Some life. You unbutton your trousers put your
hand in. A hand that holds you a body you stretched on top of. She is there you almost touch
her and she is gone again, saliva, pale light and the listless pulse of the body powerless almost.
You hold your breath, her breasts come, you press it hard, comes inside you, from inside you
squeeze as many drops as you can, from inside you. Stay still, calm, empty, darkness hides
you, then sleep. A nudge, you slip all but fall, you put out your hand, below the palm
crumpled paper, a dog-eared book open. Turn over the cover: The First Death. You would
smile. This too for a pillow, on top of the Bible. When you wake again two bodies entwined,
the flesh between them in pieces, that melt, breast onto breast, that fades one into the other,
fading out when you decide to stand up.
Unspoken

We’re doing 70 on 95
south of Rocky Mount.

A solitary glow rises
through the dusk: Café Risque,

folk art hanging flat
against an orange sky.

Aging pickups lurk
beneath the neon come-ons,

drawn by grunted rhythms
of the night. The old asymmetry

drives the Café pulse: her trade
on wasting charms against

the strut, the call and dwindle,
hard cash, the always more

replacing those now spent.
Rocky Mountain big horn sheep,

ewes at play on cliff walls,
their dancing legs,

the watching rams.
On the edge, where it’s risky,

where hope hovers like a cloud,
their luck may run.
Thin Ties

We visit when we want, or don’t, rummage
in a dank boxcar, freight stacked high:
chests and shelves full of mother-voices,
first slow dances, first ocean’s wave.
The train stands at our hometown station
like the circus that comes and stays
till the dramas still, the great tents fall.
We enter the clouded dim of the boxcars
through murky desire into a chilly
detachment where shadows shelter the shame
of junior high, absurdly thin ties,
wrecked cars and loves, long-lived echoes
not found with the fallen and the broken
mixed on the straw-strewn floor beyond our will:
the baby’s scent, the stride of a wartime friend.
What is the shelf life of her prom-night smile?
Her hint of dimple—I could write a book.
And there’s a teammate and the slippered shoes,
and the mat, its reeking sweat and blood.
There’s no climate control, so no visit’s as
vivid as the last, or fast, as colors fade,
clean lines fracture, and life releases
as slowly, once the air brakes blow,
as steel wheels ache into motion, tie by tie.
We don’t forget; there’s only the stagnant
forgetting and the smooth-railed roadbed
chasing west toward forgotten, till one day
we stand finally stripped, waving goodbye
in the withered roar of the parting train.
They made me leader,
(and I was the fittest leader)
because I stayed up nights worrying
we’d eat bark all winter.

Close to the summit,
witnessing
the campfires of others
in that passive, bewildered manner
of the early-old, the imbecile.

I would say, *You’re*
*a cigarette extinguished*
in *my arm.*

You would say,
*A hundred years seems sensible.*
So we went on fighting
for what felt like it.
(Or longer?)

A purple rash rushed
from nettles. Ahead or back
like an oxen in heat.

They made me leader.
Then I was captured by enemies

and what a relief that was,
needing only to carry
out the small acts of life.

*It’s out of my hands,* I would say.
*The river meanders,* I would
and it would,
and it makes its way;
little hills in the air as it goes.
Humming to Myself in a Voice I’d Never Heard

You have to cease believing
the world will end tomorrow.
On the cabinet’s ligneous surface,
the parking tickets marshal,
letters not-so-subtly hostile—
movies you refuse to return.
Morbid thoughts catch
in your whirlpool of unemployment:
*Into the ballroom of the west you came waltzing*
*and into the strip mine of death—*
you race this banner through
your cerebrum enough and, bam,
all the ducks dead from arsenic.
Evidently some company named Anaconda,
and for weeks representatives arrive
in the neighborhood like a smell of rotten eggs.
Each one wears a hardhat hung too low
and enacts for you
how the arsenic found its way
into Plummer’s Pond.
It’s perfectly safe now
they say. But no one really lets it go.
They look on dubiously,
hands on hips.
And you don’t know what to think.
You’re killing your mother.
The Little Number Attests

And when the world ended, we cast
lots for each other’s clothes. We hated
each other’s silence. We sat before your desert home,
counting the shadows of lean-tos.

How far, Little Number,
how sorry our pronouncements carried!

Always I thought of your skeleton,
muscles flared like hot gems,
knotting the troubled sails of your ship. We dreamed it,
together, with our eyes transfixed on the late eruption
of stars. But no testament existed to our lives. The knives
wailed and dissolved into thick solvents of dust.

And in the summer we ate moths for luck.
We cut our ears like women.
Venus Clothed by Distance

Originally arising from sash—*fashion*—or a fondness for softness typically associated with women.

During the era of Italian city states, rural debtors described the princely passions of dress as *sashioni*, only in the occlusion of their campfires. This, like most derisions was later adopted affirmatively by the rising families of Apulia and inner-Rome.

As the word migrated to the western estates of Kiev, plague traveled at its side, twining with the proto-Russian, *falluck*: to depart or to turn a jar till all contents, typically gypsum, reach a single end.

The connection between the two terms bore: *one which dies each season and rises with alms*, the current understanding of Russian fashion.

Then mighty Europe lapsed into its sleep of war. Such it was during the era of Industry and on.

Nowadays, we know (or believe we know) what perpetuates even after upheaval—famine, flu epidemics.

Fashion became a means to reorder death and life as baptism had been hundreds of years before: beauty in its time then the slow plod toward subsequent existence.

American have challenged such notions of the recursive as the cornerstone of fashion, arguing in favor of *saffion*, from the Portuguese, *a sometimes troubled clothing of the eternal*, as the true root.
The term’s lineage traces to some uses during the Roman Empire
to delineate the life of a soldier
from the immortal being of the emperor.

This is why American models are asked to refuse tattoo,
why fashion is so often associated with the search
for dark matter
which would evidence an ever-expanding universe,
though no evidence seems to suggest such.

Because the young hold such sway
in American fashion,
the fetish of the perpetual I surfaces.

They insist upon it like a mantra. A people un-phased
even faced with the inevitable,
though their land is stubborn and ill-suited
for the uninterrupted.

Such is the state of things in America.
Nyzhnyk’s teddy bear whispered knight takes queen, and so I did so.
It’s not like this comes easily, not like sleep or gravity, not like the words
To that one song, so simple, simple, so true, or was it the other way around,
Not to mention the tune, never the same twice, though differently than a river

Like the Hudson that ran beside us, smelling like we smelled, heavily breathing
Like we breathed. These brackish straits burning my eyes are not like
The harmony that was so easy and easily lost. Sport comes more naturally. Buy a

A lob followed by a hard, two-wall-corner-shot will usually do the trick, particularly
Lategame. Nyzhnyk’s brilliance is magic. His bear not so much so. Like wild horses
In a blazing barn, sugarless and neck-nuzzling, fuck or be fucked with shafts of fire
Which is less a choice than a low killer that doesn’t bounce, just rolls, and there’s
nothing left but momentum.
Flora

The agency in the colony opens
its exotic petals each morning
in fertilized homeland. Eyes stretch
a map as far as they and sea.
Snagged peninsulas sag to sharpen
a point for possible escape
though the sensual fish nets harness
a lust to please deep into farm country.
An ocean marinades and pickles
to inject a collusion cargo,
domestic animals, and a hint
of wild goose. When the paddies
and bogs produce mock ceremonies
with a smile, when legs sing without string,
longitude and latitude disappear.
Raw materials relax into the flow of things.
Arms put down and all embrace,
if ever loaded onto the trunk.
With inner resource, the island
reinforces the charts and oral description;
accommodation lacks hip movements.
Even sand spits enjoy their lot.
Evolutionary biology suggests
organs may not have survived
for original desires. However,
the flowering remains suspect.
Her Morning Gargle

Pickled in an intimate language
and encumbered in a pool
formed by stage lighting
without the cool cucumber fins,
whispers, amplified, stay within their lines.
Big girls feign death in a voice box
and douse themselves in vinegar
in the hops that someone nails it shut.
Before saturation boys don’t stand
a chance. Cores with motored mouths
order breakfast, battlefields, and all
the gears to line up for a smile.
If wrestling words pinned leading men,
the ten-year-old rat nest would have
Sir Lawrence Olivier dissected
and still under a glass case.

Sponges in their wild habitat
study salt and spit back some
other body’s deep thoughts.
Crisp energy drowns one thread
at a time until silk raises its flag.
The short story draws out a flowing curtain.
The petite echo chambers
protect with a distant father air.
The fight for a genuine larynx
settles sediment in the barrel bottom
where angling jaws place their hands
as though they own it.
Gretel to Naive

From ladle to grave her mother’s apron
blindfolded her while the Hansel young boy
in his father’s voice reassured
the peek-a-boo heroine of her
good fortune by telling horror stories
of what she was missing.
The parental faces parse par’s parcel
for the comfort of community.
Buried beneath the foundations
of other people’s houses, the intimacy
once possible for each cookie cutter character
never blossoms. Protest drives
up and down the avenue in a backhoe
merely excavate the expressway
to apartments waiting for bitterness
on different sides of town. On this late date,
the manicured front lawn tickles toes.
Frigid Air

Two huskies pulled the bride
over glacial lace and across the tundra grate
deep into the middle of no one. The throbbing
monotony senses ice castles and clowns:
mush, mush, and mush.
The global positioning units rolling
in two facial sockets congratulate the rest.
Before the prick and goose
down, generations of women
and a picture book fluffed
swan feathers and lined a mold
with fresh linen to ready the sledge.
Female breath that steam trunks hold
after the age of ten, fill with costumes
leaving behind a warm outline
that promised a whole. The snowshoes
and roseola nose, forcing a laugh,
coordinates skating on thin mirrors
and actress paint. Dwarfs and hunters
own their own igloos and side-by-side
comforters. Angel powder and puff
applications complete 0, and rescue
another question mark with isolation.
Magic by Design

Over mammary glands and hips,
the flesh chador dissolves the person
peering through the coiffure.
The old secret formula brand new.
A veil of skin melts the particular
and potential from the good senses of men.
Testosterone city saves the sin of knowing
for carnal examinations. Curves’
pores, texture, and fashion
stitch size to its power,
and a father gives away a fetish.
Dog owners and cowboys
understand their animals.
Dermatological hijabs bear
responsibility for exposing anything
other than sweetheart and bitch,
robe the spectrum in a baby-talk
shadow. Stoned into a squawk
the vanishing character beneath
nape and legs surrenders it scarf
to the release of brawn.
In order to remain a virgin to awakening
the burqa broad vaporizes the psyche
guilty of embracing its dream.
And so a frontier’s man again moralizes
drinking water’s reflection into tribes.
Accessories

Where woman have been a luxury for man…
—Adrienne Rich

Having purchased luxury for the passenger seats of their life journeys, the young drivers speed off as though warranties came with the navigator of nothing. On the crowded highway boredom’s sun and rain glancing off the precious goods requires the sweep and visors of distraction. Raking money into the backyards, arranging toys at the peripheries of property, at first the fun seems real. Then, the many dollars tickling cause calluses until vaults crush the vital V-8s of subtle perception and agony expresses itself by infliction. Of course the poor and defenseless masses pay first and a great price, but then possessions go through re-evaluation of their financial and accommodating worth. The leather upholstery now carries wrinkled cow hide satchels emptied of their prestige and giggles. Either another gift to blunted sensibilities comes along for the ride and Cubic-Z’s long face to the adventurer’s grave stays at home steaming curtains or the excessorized safari loses its caddy.
On my first trip, I came forward in time from the East Coast, then by boat from Tower Bridge.

We walked from the foot-tunnel mouth, a cupola of brick and copper, past the Cutty-Sark’s hollow scaffold to the hidden pier. The walkway’s narrow, one side drops to shale, her river grinding brick to sand. Up right: a music school. The strain of rasps and creaks leaps from a drone to air gentle concordance from grubby stateroom window-sashes. Back through the park are tumuli, Bronze Age barrows humped beside the palace walls.

Pleasaunce, the hunting ground of kings has sunk underneath the paths and park-railings of naval buildings. Wren and hellish Hawsmoors’ nests, pecked over by those two wigged capons in their infancy, were sculpted under nodding plumage. Hawskmoor never went to Italy, but drew the navel of the Empire from plans of ancient Rome and temples of Solomon.

An isoline-century away, the nave of the church collapsed under a German bomb in the blitz, the explosion heard in 1892 by anarchists targeting the Royal Observatory, who were
caught like Fawkes, feathers drifting down,
and pinned to the pages of Conrad’s Secret Agent,

(unpicked and set free a contour later
by a lonely Oklahoma bomber).

Do you see there the hill, and its crown,
the Astronomer Royal’s perfect circle?

It is to table the motions of the heavens
and the places of the fixed stars. It
came in over-budget, the opening chord
of that other monument to time,

the Dome. Light pollution smothered it
and railways de-magnetised the dials
till she shrivelled, somewhere in between
Blackheath’s sand and loam and seams of clay,

and Deptford, where an agent in the service
of her Majesty was stabbed beneath

a water-spotted boarding-house tapestry.
But still the still centre of the world

remains to the rest of us in the laser beam,
that straight line of green, un-refracted.

Meantime, on the jetty, secrets of future maps
passed from raincoat to raincoat under low-lit

lamps and wet cobbles. Whether chipped
in palm-sized steel or chanted to the beat

of hooves on wooden bridges, all secrets end
with a meeting, a splash, and a scurry.
You cannot help but pulp them
    as you peddle to work
    While swerving to preserve

one's foulest odor
    another offers its oily demise
    On mornings cool and overcast as this

the world's suicides seem to surface
    or you begin to view everything as
    pre-meditation in your path

What I'd trade to once zigzag
    home and back without indictment
    I was twenty-nine before I saw a stinkbug

turn its weapon skyward
    the oddest of insect calisthenics
    I thought how pure instinct could be

that my own repertoire had grown certainly staid
    The obvious teaches us nothing
    How often have they noted my approach

How often have they soured the dawn air
    trusting their worn strategy
    would be enough to carry them across the road
Coleoptera

After day's heat
    after an evening of dirt
    hardened to soft stone

they emerge
    these weevils
    these righteous sons

awash in an unsuspecting land
    It is not difficult to spot them
    their yellow-black

their ambitious quietude
    their evangelistic nonchalance
    God bless their hideousness

God bless the way
    I have refused to accept
    my own certain decay
MATINA STAMATAKIS

Tiny Overflowing

butterfly-small collarbone
& lips

a cross-stitch rhombus
drawn piece-by-piece

as yarne
waving
water into

[falling through
those finer slits] the wreckage ship
continues to leak

oh torment

retinae like tender osculum
eyes to pump the cones
& portals
full of rain water

inside
a rickety shack
to catch the birds
that flow into

grisaille sky
that roofless
void
of wire gauze &
canvas wings

swallow
oceanic
faences
drowning dovetail
in clay slips — & lithographs
of shipwrecks
There Was Something Mean in the World
That I Couldn’t Stop

— from “Brownies” by ZZ Packer

Even years later, car parked behind the school, near the very spot
I used to climb to avoid knuckles crashing down like so many
cruel waves, to hide on the flat tarred roof above the first-grade
classroom and the big windows that let in the sun, even at nineteen,
veiled in the sweet smoke of all that trying to get away,
as we passed it back and forth (our brief ticket out), sucking
at the unlit end as if it were the teat of letting go, of maybe
I’m not so different after all, even then, as our blood changed us,
I could hear the names, could taste that red drip at my mouth,
and I flashed back to the day I stood above them, their tiny
balls of hate on the ends of every wrist, the way they cheered
as if I were some rock star on a stage, the way they opened hands
and called me to them, as if they suddenly realized I belonged,
and the teachers finally showing up from their parking lot cigarettes,
to find me, in the eyes of everyone, hoping that for the first time
it was love, but I knew, even as I jumped, the truth, the distance
between us enough to shatter bones, to make a crooked child,
and maybe more than my forever limp, it was what I gave them
that kept me reaching for the blunt, knowing, even years later,
there was something mean in the world that I couldn’t stop.
Isn’t that the sort of thing that does little good (learning of it, I mean), after the fact? Like in the movies, landing on that skulled-out island and walking, all innocent and going-to-be-an-actress like, right up to the hundred-foot gate, sticking your sweet blonde head in, and yelling, “Is anybody home? The door was open.” Isn’t what’s lurking on the other side of any new endeavor the sort of thing you need to know ahead of time? Like how, in the movies, not all puzzle boxes are created equal, and knowing how to open the wrong one doesn’t mean you’re a genius, but just the opposite, as you unleash Hell upon the world. How was I to know he’d react that way and invite me hunting, just the two of us, like in the movies? With you over there on the other side of the table shaking that head of yours, as if you thought that would get me to make an ass of myself and turn him down. I mean, couldn’t you have kicked my leg, or just subtly have said, the last guy he took into the woods never made it out with his heart? Couldn’t you have maybe hinted at that sort of thing, oh, on the drive down to see him in the first place? Or maybe before you moved in with me? How about then? Couldn’t you have told me how he’d get all Carrie’s mom and want you back in a closet with the good book in your hands, the one you haven’t even taken out of the packing box, the one in the attic? Couldn’t you have maybe even just dropped it in when you said not to talk about sleeping in the same bed (which, I guess, I could understand more than this)? Couldn’t you have told me, I don’t know, somewhere in all those times you’ve told me what a good listener I am, how all I had to do was mention it to your dad and his eyes would change, and he’d, oh, I don’t know, want to kill me, like in the movies? Isn’t that the sort of thing that could have used listening to? I mean all you had to say was, honey, whatever you do, don’t use the word love around my dad because ever since mom left him for the man who rescues cats he’s hated love, as if it were a virus, like in the movie with Will Smith,
where everybody’s been turned because of it into these hungry things
that can’t ever get enough, that need to have their hearts staked
or they’ll try to plunge their hands through your chest,
which is why he’s so protective of me, why you shouldn’t
say that word, right now, because it’s a door he rages against
like the sun, and if you open it everything you are,
everything we have between us, will turn to dust.
From the Sound of No-Sound
the Soon-To-Be-Beheaded Is Aware
the Steel Blade Is Beginning to Descend

—from “The Method” by Marvin Bell

It wasn’t the worst thing that could happen,
since it wasn’t her dad throwing his flash-
light in your eyes, since the officer hadn’t
shown up a few minutes earlier when you
were still wearing nothing but her, seat back,
her hands against the ceiling, head cocked
to the side as if weighed down by the pain
of all that feeling good, which neither of you
had known before, and since he didn’t get there
when you were breaking the ice with what
you kept calling “primo herb,” which just proved
you were trying something new, and since
she wasn’t the underage runaway sister,
since she was the one who stayed behind,
the one who didn’t end up under that bridge,
sixteen and silenced, unprepared for the cold
world, with all those questions—
had she been taken advantage of, killed
perhaps—and, though the answers were the best
kind of negative, the worst of it was the asking,
the waiting with all those wrong thoughts
in the head, which might have been why
you ended up in the parking lot during the storm,
snow covering your tracks, her need
to get away, searching for those few moments
of living, as if to remind her, as if to say
it’s okay you’re still here, and you oblivious
to anything but the chance, at the party, that came
with her, can you give me a ride home,
and since the officer said he’d been young once,
since he let you off with a warning, saying
he’d be back in ten, your heart beat again,
and, as he pulled away, she kissed you, reached
down, fumbling with your jeans, and you knew it could have been worse, much worse, you just didn’t think about how, until today, when you tried to remember her name.
Elizabeth Bernays

Elizabeth Bernays grew up in Australia then, in England, after some time traveling, she worked for the British Government, working on agricultural pests in developing countries. In 1983 she immigrated to the United States as a professor of entomology at the University of California Berkeley. Later, she was appointed Regents’ professor at the University of Arizona where she also obtained a Master of Fine Arts. She has published essays and poems in a variety of literary journals, and is the recipient of several literary awards including the 2007 X.J. Kennedy prize for nonfiction.

About the Work

The paintings in my house inspired me to write stories around them, and the collection of essays is called The House of Pictures. This one, about poppies, brought together many memories of poppies from childhood on, including nostalgic recollections of holidays, thoughts about war, lovers, and poppy-filled places. It also was inspired by my highly sensitive color vision, something that does vary among individuals. This fact is of great interest to me as a biologist, and I believe in influences how we enjoy art and the world about us.

This story flowed without interruption as I wrote, one memory or thought triggering another until I felt “poppied out.” The hard part was honing the finished product and in my view this is always the more difficult task. Resolving this meant real self-discipline to work and rework what I had written to make it say what I meant without clumsy construction or repetition.

The craft of non-fiction for me is the joy of expressing the thousands of inner thoughts and ideas that make up a head-full of memories and facts and emotions, which, when organized and articulated, make order in my life. It is, further, a way to communicate my thoughts and life to others, however few may read the work.

Elizabeth Bernays on the Web

www.summersetreview.org/06summer/sierra.htm
www.eclectica.org/v10n4/bernays.html
www.stonetablereview.com/2.1/bernays_canals.htm
elizabethbernays.com
Edward Byrne

Edward Byrne has had five collections of poetry published, most recently Tidal Air (Pecan Grove Press). A sixth book of poetry, Seeded Light, is forthcoming from Turning Point Books. His essays of literary criticism also have been published in various journals and book collections, including Mark Strand (Chelsea House Publishers), edited by Harold Bloom, and A Condition of the Spirit: The Life and Work of Larry Levis (Eastern Washington University Press), edited by Christopher Buckley and Alexander Long. He is a professor in the English Department at Valparaiso University, where he edits Valparaiso Poetry Review.

Edward Byrne on the Web

www.valpo.edu/english/vpr/
edwardbyrne.blogspot.com/
faculty.valpo.edu/ebyrne/homepage/
Mark Cunningham has recent and forthcoming poems in issues of Practice, Parcel, Otoliths, and BlazeVox. Otoliths has just brought out a book titled 80 Beetles, and Tarpaulin Sky Press will be bringing out a book titled Body Language, which will contain two collections, one titled “Body” (on parts of the body) and one titled “Primer” (on numbers and letters).

About the Work

In general—this is a straw figure, of course, but still—a poem is usually thought of some sort of “special” or “important” communication on the part of its author: a special form (not prose) and language that works at more than normal everyday conversation level, all together forming a piece of writing that attempts to set a unified, coherent tone and to deliver an "important" message. Fine, but I wanted to do something different. So these pieces use normal prose form and daily language, and the images usually come from things extraneous to what I was paying attention to—phrases overheard, ideas that popped into my head without apparent relation to what I was “really” thinking about. And rather than all working together, the sentences talk to each other, the second agreeing, disagreeing, contradiction, ignoring, or tangenting off from the first, the third from the second, and so on. Theoretically, any piece could go on forever—or maybe already has been going on forever.

Mark Cunningham on the Web

the-otolith.blogspot.com/

www.blazevox.org/

www.parceljournal.org/issues/two.html

righthandpointing.com/
In 1998, when Amy George was still male, she undertook a quest that led her to communion with a higher state of being. Two years later, while living in monastic seclusion, her unconscious self suddenly became conscious, precipitating her unanticipated identification as female. In the years following, Amy changed sex physically. Since December of 2006 Amy has been writing “Ask the Dream Queen,” a dream-interpretation blog, for the online edition of the Cape Cod Times. In 2003 an excerpt from Amy’s memoirs, “Palinka: Lost in the Hungarian Countryside,” appeared in the Cape Cod Voice. In 2007, Amy’s memoir, “Call Me Sister,” was accepted for publication in Tarot World Magazine, for which Amy also writes reviews. In January 2008, Amy’s essay, “Borat: On the Soul of Comedy,” was published in Eclectica Magazine. In March 2008, a summary of Amy’s life-story was published on the cutting-edge, higher-consciousness website Reality Sandwich. In May 2008 Reality Sandwich featured, “The Buddhas of New Zealand,” Amy’s essay on Paradise. In April 2008, a personal essay, “The Doctor and the Dominatrix,” was accepted for publication in In Our Own Words: A Generation Defining Itself, a collection of Generation X writing.

About the Work

Half of my writing is autobiographical and the other half is dream interpretations and essays on esoteric subjects intrinsic to my life-story. Being firstly a memoirist, I have been jotting notes on the salient episodes of everyday experience, including selected pieces of dialogue, since I was a child. The more I know my life-story, the more aware I have become of what to keep and what to release in my writing. My writing and I grow symbiotically.

I have scribed six thousand pages of unpublished memoir in all. Of these, five manuscripts recount my life from 1992 – 2001, my most dynamic era. I periodically return to these manuscripts to make revisions, and find less room for improvement every time.

Anais Nin and Henry Miller both have been major influences for me.

Amy George on the Web

www.amygeorge.net/
blogs.capecodonline.com/n/blogs/blog.aspx?webtag=cc-dreamQueen
www.eclectica.org/v12n1/george.html
www.realitysandwich.com/evolution_peacock_0
www.realitysandwich.com/the_buddhas_new_zealand
Anne Germanacos

Anne Germanacos' work has appeared recently in Santa Monica Review, Descant, Quarterly West, Blackbird, Salamander, Florida Review, Pindeldyboz, Agni-online and many others. She lives in San Francisco and on Crete.

About the Work

Samantha and Jordan had a story of their own called All the Men; Mary/Amber had her own story called Mary. But despite the fact that the stories were "finished" and published, the characters kept hovering nearby. I decided—as an experiment—to combine the characters in a third story. Thus, the genesis of "What's a mother, anyway." I'm pretty sure it was the first time I ever combined characters from different stories. I remember thinking that I would try to do the same thing with other characters from other stories but so far, I haven't done so. I've written stories about the same characters (older, younger, or a little different) but that's the only time I combined imagined characters in that particular way.

The form (short pieces within a larger piece) is one that came to me several years ago and keeps recurring in my work. It's a way of balancing the desire to use words poetically with the need to tell a story—or at least that's what it feels like to me. (Maybe it's simply neither here nor there...)

Consciousness sometimes seems to be a series of dots that may or may not connect. A story allows and also forces us to connect those bright dots of concentrated being. This form of writing seems to accurately articulate as well as represent the physical and psychological reality of that feeling.

At the same time, through the characters, I was exploring ideas about eating, identity, motherhood. Idea can be guide or afterthought.

Writing—both practice and product—needs to be playful. One can't achieve heights of inspiration and depths of insight and feeling without letting go of the commanding, domineering outside world. To write is to digest the facts of time and age while maintaining a fragment of childhood and youth.

Anne Germanacos on the Web

www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v6n1/fiction/germanacos_a/until.htm


thediagram.com/7_5/germanacos.html

hitotoki.org/newyork/018

www.sidebrow.net/2006/a062germanacos.php
Donora Hillard

Donora Hillard is the author of Romance (Maverick Duck Press, 2008), as well as Bone Cages (BlazeVox [books], 2007) and Parapherna (dancing girl press, 2006). Her fiction, lyric memoir, and poetry have appeared in NANO Fiction, Pebble Lake Review, The Pedestal Magazine, and elsewhere. She has been an instructor of writing at Harrisburg Area Community College and King's College, and she presently teaches in southern Pennsylvania.

Donora Hillard on the Web

www.blossombones.com/summer08/hillard_s08.html

www.dancinggirlpress.com/parapherna.html

www.realeight.com/rev/ezine/issue013/
Joy Ladin

Joy Ladin is on leave from Stern College of Yeshiva University, where she holds the David and Ruth Gottesman Chair in English. Her first book of poetry, Alternatives to History, was published by Sheep Meadow in 2003; Sheep Meadow published her second, The Book of Anna, a novel-like combination of poetry and prose, in 2007, and will soon bring out her third, Transmigration. Joy’s poems have appeared in many periodicals, including Parnassus: Poetry in Review, for which she is a regular reviewer. She has been the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship, an American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship, and a nomination for Pushcart Prize in Poetry. She is currently finishing up a new book of poetry, Coming to Life, and writing a book of autobiographical essays called Inside Out: Confessions of a Woman Caught in the Act of Becoming. Joy is the featured poet in this spring’s Emily Dickinson International Society Bulletin, and has essays coming out in The Southwest Review, The Robert Frost Review, Parnassus: Poetry in Review and The King’s English.

About the Work

I often tell my creative writing students that writing poetry is the most intense way I know of being alive. However, during the 10-month period in which I wrote the poems in this issue, writing went from a way of being alive to a way of staying alive. Traumatic upheaval had triggered an intense, months-long depression; whenever I came close to giving up, I wrote poetry instead.

Many students have asked me about the link between poetry and depression. When they are happy, they say, they can’t or don’t write; when they are depressed, poetry pours out of them. But though intense feeling can certainly spur the writing process, depression doesn’t in itself produce “real” poetry—that is, poetry whose value is determined not by the feelings of the author (did it make me feel better? did I express myself?) but by the responses of readers. “Real” poems written during depression might be about anything at all, even joy. For the author, the benefit of writing “real” poems is not self-expression but self-transcendence—escape into what Eliot called the “extinction of personality” that is poetry. It can be terrifying to open ourselves to that which is not us, to make ourselves a vessel for language rather than “using” it to “express ourselves”—and that is how depression can spur “real” writing. When the self and its dramas become unbearable, the extinction of personality that poetry demands becomes a relief.

During the time when I wrote “The Soul Walks Behind Herself,” I lived for the moments when my self could dissolve into language, when my emotional maelstrom would be silenced by the voice of poetry. That voice sounded posthumous to me; it came from somewhere beyond what I was going through, from which my suffering was dwarfed by larger patterns of existence.

“The Soul Walks Behind Herself” began in the back of a car. I had been commuting six hours a week with a woman who had become my primary support. This week, though, we weren’t driving alone. In my state, I couldn’t make small talk. I curled up in the back seat darkness, sobbing quietly—and when the sobs kept getting louder, I started writing.

As so often during this time, the first words that came out were “The soul.” I wasn’t surprised. I knew I needed to imagine an aspect of humanness beyond trauma and triumph, demography and biography, an aspect that survives whatever makes up our lives. The character of
“the soul” offered me a way out of the isolation of depression into a sense, however abstract, of connection to humanity, to life. But now I wasn’t feeling connected. My attempts to stifle the signs of my suffering even in the presence of my closest friend intensified my loneliness to an intolerable degree.

Though *my* soul, if I had one, seemed to be spinning away from life, “the soul” I found myself writing about seemed to be pushing in the opposite direction. It was far away from life, falling behind, exhausted by the effort to catch up, but it wouldn’t stop struggling, because, unlike me, it could see life up ahead. In the despair-soaked loam of my personality, a counter-life was taking root. I was passive, defeated, spent; the soul, however frail, was determined to reach the life I’d given up on. And somehow, that determination, even if it was futile, meant that the soul was not alone. Someone was touching her. Who, I wondered, and instantly knew: it was pain. Pain would never leave her.

It was a bitter companionship, but it was more than I had been able to imagine, sobbing in the back seat—and by the time I had finished writing, I had been moved by the poem to another, quieter space where there were no sobs. The pain was still there, but it wasn’t an emergency any more. I didn’t need to end it. I could curl up with it, let it keep me company like my friend’s distant murmurs in the front seat.

Though “The Soul Walks Behind Herself” came out almost whole, revision took a long time. At first, every word seemed essential, even though I knew that there were parts that could, and thus should, be cut away. Repetition is central to the form of the poem, and my emotional attachment made it hard to tell superfluous from essential repetition. I glanced at the poem over months, each time winnowing, tightening, breaking and rebreaking lines until I found line breaks that created a doubling effect—a sense in the individual line that would morph in surprising but inevitable ways as the next bit of sentence was revealed. I wanted the syntactical motion of the poem to replicate the emotional and metaphysical motion I was trying to evoke, the sense of halting, shuddering but unstoppable forward motion.

As I winnowed and rearranged, I realized that the end wasn’t quite right. Though the soul realizes she is being accompanied by pain at the end, the relationship between them wasn’t clear. Pain was “like” something to the soul, but what? I approached the problem mechanically at first, generating lists of possibilities that would fit the basic shape of the ending: “Pain, like a mother…”; “Pain, like a lover…”; “Pain, like a slightly dishonest contractor…” By listing some of the innumerable possibilities, too silly and too serious, I began to have a sense of what was and wasn’t right, not only in the poetic sense, but in terms of the vision of existence the poem suggested. “Lover” was too intimate; the idea that pain is the soul’s lover tipped the moral vision of the poem too far toward desolation. Maybe pain would never leave the soul, but surely the soul could hope for a better lover. “Mother,” on the other hand, implied too much nurturing on pain’s part. I knew that souls can grow through pain, but I didn’t believe that souls are born of it.

After testing many possibilities against my musical and moral sensibilities, I settled on “older brother.” Older brothers can be present and nurturing, but presence and nurturing don’t define older brotherhood the way they define lovers and mothers. Older brothers can be a real pain and vanish for years at a stretch, but the “big brother” is associated with protective strength and a bond, however distant, that is never broken. It felt true to me to figure pain as older than the soul,
sprung from the same seed but distinct from it. I didn’t know if that was true in the sense of Truth with a capital “T”—but I knew that it was true to the matrix of anguish from which the poem had sprung. When the poem felt true to me, I knew it might feel true to others.

Joy Ladin on the Web

sheepmeadowpress.com/pages/author%20pages/ladin.html

www.new-works.org/9_4ladin/ladin_bio.htm

www.spertus.edu/programs/special/yom_hashoah_08.php

42opus.com/v8n1/losingyourbreasts

www.authormark.com/printer_736.shtml
Mike Lubow’s short stories have appeared in national magazines, including Playboy, and in prestigious literary journals in America, Ireland, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia. He also writes a popular column called “Got A Minute?” for The Chicago Tribune, and has recently completed a novel.

About the Work

About “Funland Elegy.” Some fiction is make believe, just entertaining lies. Some fiction is hardly fiction at all, because it’s memoir, the truth. Sometimes a story is a combination—partly made-up, partly true. That’s “Funland Elegy.” I was a teenage ride operator and lived through the day described in the story. But some things I made up. And some of the story’s moments came from other incidents in my life. I never said, “Thank ye,” to the boss of Funland. But I did say it—this confounding slip of the tongue—to the CEO of an ad agency where I worked as a nervous copywriter.

You might have noticed that the narrative spins around a bit, introducing partial descriptions of events that will only be fully explained later. And it repeatedly recalls events that were previously described. This gives something of a merry-go-round quality to the story that matches its setting and repetitive din of calliope music.

But that’s enough. Best not over-analyze. A story, especially a lightweight one like this, should not be stripped naked. It’s not fair to its sense of reality. It’s not fair to you. Let it be itself, just a simple moment in a place and time that exists in your mind as you read it. It’s supposed to entertain you.

It entertained me to write it. And since it’s out in the world now, in print, on the internet, I’m pleased to know that experiences I had (or made up) will live on somewhere apart from a corner in my mind. They’ll live on in a corner of your mind. That’s a good reason to write stories and to be grateful when they get published.

Mike Lubow on the Web

www.amarillobay.org/contents/contents.htm

www.ilurapress.com

www.salemstate.edu/arts/soundings_east.php

www.barcelonareview.com/56/e_ml.htm

Dimitris Lyacos was born in Athens in 1966. His trilogy Poena Damni (Z213: Exit, Nyctivoe, The First Death), written over the course of fifteen years, has been translated into English, Spanish, Italian and German and has been performed extensively across Europe and the USA. A sound and sculpture installation of Nyctivoe opened in London and toured Europe in 2004-2005. A contemporary theatre-dance version of the same book was showing in Greece in 2006-2007. Lyacos’ work has been the subject of lectures and research at various universities, including Amsterdam, Trieste and Oxford. Various extracts from the trilogy have appeared in literary journals around the world.

Translator Shorsha Sullivan was born in Dublin in 1932. He studied Classics at Leeds and spent most of his working life in England. He has a special interest in modern Greek theatre and poetry.

About the Work

The three extracts published in Segue are part of Z213: Exit, first book of a trilogy that bears the overall title Poena Damni. The trilogy has been written back to front, so Z213: Exit has been written last and is awaiting publication—it has taken me about fifteen years to complete the work, roughly about five years for each book. That is an indication of how inspiration came about: very slowly, from a very abstract idea—deductively, if I am allowed the use of the expression. Each book is permeated by a linear narrative; as far as the connection between the three books is concerned I would say that Z213: Exit bifurcates to Nyctivoe (second book) and The First Death (third book). One might well think that there has been a quasi-structuralist initial plan, and perhaps, one could now observe a very well defined form, but I would like to say once again: the whole thing came about very gradually from day to day work and occasional “sparks” that seemed to me satisfactory enough to be integrated into the project. About the initial idea, I think it was rather a cluster of concepts loosely related to each other, with the “scapegoat – outcast” theme being quite prominent in the beginning. Of course as one goes ahead with the formation of a text, a more detailed map of ideas, meanings and interrelations is drawn.

Bearing in mind the difficulties encountered by a long term project in every field, whether it be arts, science, or a more practical endeavour, I don’t think there were easier or more difficult parts to be generally mentioned. Simply, sometimes one would finish off a text faster than other times; if you take extracts from my books one by one and ask me which was easier and which was more difficult to write I will simply tell you I don’t remember any more; as long as one is satisfied with the text, one tends to forget those details and moves on to the next thing; however, I might mention Nyctivoe (second book of the trilogy) which, seven years after publication I did not find satisfactory, although the idea still appealed to me very much. So I wrote it again (initially I thought I would change about half of the book, but as I was going along very few lines of the first version remained intact).

Challenges were dissolved differently in individual cases, there was never a strictly methodical approach, although work and experience generally offer solutions to minor problems (of course one has more of an ear for complicated meters and is more quick and able on tropes after
reading and writing literature for a long time). But mannerisms should be avoided, and if one has 
set ways to resolve problems one becomes predictable. In my case, the way to resolve those 
challenges was to try and make clear what was it that I wanted to say and why I did not like what I 
had written so far -part of what we call talent is, I think, the existence of a gut feeling that tells you 
something is wrong; another part is to implement this feeling—not hush it.

So far in this interview, I have consciously avoided to speak about my work as belonging to 
a specific genre; one could say the texts in *Segue* are prose pieces, some others, considering the rest 
of the book, might speak of prose poetry, or be more descriptive, pointing out references to works 
of a similar form (and there is still a lot of room for maneuver if terms, like postmodernism, are 
being called to help). Well, the work borders on different genres, and to say that is also a kind of 
classification. As far as *Z213: Exit* is concerned I wanted it as less “literary” as possible; what one 
might conventionally call tropes in this book, were according to me the only means of expression of 
the author of this diary (the book is somebody’s diary)—he cannot find any other way to say what 
he wants to say, perhaps he might want to express himself otherwise but he cannot. Bringing this 
process to light, speaking in spite of the norms and my ( or the character’s) ignorance, in defiance 
of what literature is, or should be: like Woyzeck’s effort to explain himself and Nature to his know-
all Doctor by stuttering, struggling with words and snapping his fingers.

**Dimitris Lyacos on the Web**

[www.lyacos.net](http://www.lyacos.net)

[www.famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/dimitris_lyacos/poems/22681](http://www.famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/dimitris_lyacos/poems/22681)

[tinyurl.com/6n7hmv](http://tinyurl.com/6n7hmv)

Greg McBride

The 2008 recipient of the Boulevard Magazine Emerging Poet prize, Greg McBride’s poems, essays, and reviews appear in, or are forthcoming from, Bellevue Literary Review, Connecticut Review, Gettysburg Review, Hollins Critic, Poet Lore, Salmagundi, Southeast Review, Southern Indiana Review, and elsewhere. His poetry manuscript, “Back of the Envelope,” was runner-up for the 2008 Portlandia Prize, and his poem, “First Rites,” was a finalist for the 2007 Guy Owen Prize and will appear in the June 2008 issue of Southern Poetry Review. Three times nominated for a Pushcart Prize, he began writing after a 30-year legal career and now edits The Innisfree Poetry Journal, consults on transportation issues, and works as a freelance editor. The father of three and grandfather of five, he lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, with his wife Lois, also a writer.

About the Work

Perhaps because I came to creative writing relatively late—in my mid-50s—I find myself returning again and again to that near-lifetime of experiences that resulted in the series of selves I was who influence the way I now experience the world in its daily unfolding. Not that I haven’t written other kinds of poems, but the great majority are driven by or arise from memory. The question is always whether the resulting poem successfully transcends the narrative that gave it birth; if not, a story or essay might better suit the material. It does seem to me that poets write the poems they feel driven to write, those in which the poet has an emotional investment. That’s what I do; sometimes it works.

So I’m often mining memory. As the son of a career Army officer, I was moved about the U.S. and overseas constantly throughout my childhood—six months here, a year there, two years here, and so on; accordingly, life events for me are placed squarely within a chunk of remembered space. I think those associations of place have allowed me to keep alive events from my youngest years, though sometimes only in the faintest of memories.

Examples are the poems I’ve written about the adventure of crossing the Pacific on a troop ship late in 1947 with my mother and infant sister when I was about two and a half. We were joining my father, who was there as part of the post-war occupation force in Japan. That trip made such an impression that I have to believe some of what I remember actually happened. Even if it did not, by now the memories possess their own authenticity for me, as well as the power, sixty years later, to fire my imagination with a plenitude of sensations—the creak and groan of the ship, the goony birds and their calls, the endless skies, the deck shifting beneath our feet, the metallic quality of our cramped cabin, and so on. One poem, “The Occupation,” which appears online in the spring 2008 issue of Valparaiso Poetry Review, builds on a few remembered sensations as our ship docked in Yokohama. The bulk of this and the other poems is pure imagination, but imagination fired by tantalizing fragments of the remembered sensations of a two-and-a-half year old and, of course, the embellishments added unconsciously over the years in retelling the story to myself. To some never-to-be-determined extent, what I end up with are memories of memories.

Which leads me to the two poems in this issue of Segue: “Thin Ties” and “Unspoken.” The first is a poem about memories, the way we revisit them, the way they dim. There is a romance to
memory, much of it seen through rose-colored glasses. Even the horrors, with the passage of time, can soften somewhat, and our fear or regret can abate. With time, we can view failures and successes with some equanimity and place them within the larger context of all that lived experience now behind us. I for one am thankful for this process, as I’m prone to beating myself up for my boneheaded miscues for a very long time. For many of us, especially those of my generation and earlier, there is also romance in railroading. No doubt my use of the railroad as a trope for this poem arose from the fifteen years I served as an attorney with the Federal Railroad Administration, which occasioned riding the trains or trudging through rail yards with trackmen, carmen, brakemen, and engineers, all of whom delighted in passing on the lore and stories of railroading.

“Unspoken” arose from a memory of more recent vintage. Our older son lives with his family in Charleston, SC, nine to ten hours from our home in the Washington, DC, area. Lois and I happily make that trip two or three times a year to spend time with our grandchildren, Lynsey and Douglas, as well as their parents. Going and coming, the trip can be arduous, but we perk up as we near the stretch on I95 just south of Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Billboards begin to make announcements such as are rarely seen elsewhere on the interstate highway system: “Girls, Girls, Girls!” and “We Dare to Bare!” and “Topless, Topless, Topless!” Then comes a clearing to the east, and clinging to a gentle blacktopped slope, surrounded by a phalanx of pickups and SUVs, there’s a squat, windowless building topped by a large neon sign: “Café Risqué.” Sometimes a poem comes from nothing more than an image. This was one of those times. While “Café Risqué” seems to be a cultural marker of a particular part of today’s America, I remember similar redoubts in Southeast Asia in the 60’s. Probably as a result of the strait-laced, repressive home environment in which I grew up, such scenes have enormous emotional content for me, and that’s what I was responding to in writing this poem. For me, there’s a sadness, a kind of desperate tawdriness in that manufactured atmosphere, one that thrives by capitalizing on our needs and drives.

As for craft, there’s not a lot to say. I do not have a literary education, though I read widely, in part to compensate. These were both among my early poems, perhaps that’s why the term “folk art” found its way into “Unspoken.” I think of it as an example of folk, or naïve, art in which I wanted to capture the mood of passing an arresting scene at high speed and the associations, in the silence of the closed-window car, that scene might engender and the assumptions that might underlie the narrator’s perceptions. “Thin Ties” was also a piece of mood writing in which I sought to concretize the subject of memory itself by accessing an objective correlative, railroading, that arose from my own experience.

One thing I love about mining memory is that it can lead to unexpected results. Several years ago, I began doodling about my athletic career, a significant part of my life as a boy, hoping a poem might come of it. Many words later, however, I had a 5,000 word essay, “Wrestling through the Ages,” which appeared in The Gettysburg Review in 2003. I wrote it without doing any research, relying instead on forty-year old memories. What’s remarkable is how indelibly a peak experience can inscribe itself in memory.

And so to the question: Why poetry? I first note that I love to write prose, which strikes me as akin to a construction project: laying a foundation, hoisting joists, framing walls, etc. As a lawyer, I most enjoyed the challenge of constructing a written argument in such a way that it won both for the style of its presentation and the overall effect it achieved in the real world. I was one of those lawyers who take pride in the well-written brief or memorandum of opinion. For others, oral
argument was most rewarding. It seems me that it’s not until one grapples in writing with the nuances of how facts and theoretical arguments come together that one can have real confidence in the analysis underlying the positions being espoused. It’s the life of the craftsman whose material has intellectual heft.

Poetry, on the other hand, dwells in the land of sensation, of feeling. When my wife gave me my first book of poems, Mark Strand’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Blizzard of One*, I read it straight through, then immediately read it again. I was totally swept away, not that I could explain why to anyone. I felt compelled to read the poems over and over and to read them aloud to my wife. It was a feeling. I had the sense of new ways of seeing, that new worlds, or levels of being, were being disclosed and that, the way one peels an onion, they exist one within the other. This was not an intellectual response.

I wanted to do that. And I’m still trying.

**Greg McBride on the Web**

[www.homepage.mac.com/gregmcbride](http://www.homepage.mac.com/gregmcbride)

[www.valpo.edu/english/vpr/mcbrideoccupation.html](http://www.valpo.edu/english/vpr/mcbrideoccupation.html)

[www.valpo.edu/english/vpr/mcbridedead.html](http://www.valpo.edu/english/vpr/mcbridedead.html)

[adirondackreview.homestead.com/mcbride.html](http://adirondackreview.homestead.com/mcbride.html)

[www.american.edu/cas/lit/folio/2005winter_greg_mcbride.html](http://www.american.edu/cas/lit/folio/2005winter_greg_mcbride.html)
Kyle McCord is an MFA student studying under Peter Gizzi and James Tate at UMass-Amherst. His manuscript, *A Nesting Doll*, was selected as a finalist for the 2008 Orphic Prize. He has work forthcoming or published from Columbia: a Journal of Art and Literature, Fourteen Hills, Diagram, William and Mary Review, The Portland Review, The American Poetry Journal, and elsewhere.

About the Work

It’s difficult to establish really distinct links between all the pieces here, but certainly one common thread is the speaker’s relationship to the poem, the “we,” the “I,” the all too dangerous, “they.” I spent a good bit of time studying Durkheim’s theories on the construction of enemy identities, the “them” and “us” reflex; how the human mind uses division, differentiation to affirm identity. It’s why the cartographers have to buy so many different shades of ink to draw even the most localized maps. I think Moses is one of the first victims of this human trope. If he’s not defending the Israelites from Jehovah, the Israelites are trying to stone him or causing him to break tablets up on a mountain. Not only is there the “they” of the enemy, there’s the “they” of the leader distanced by responsibility, hierarchy. That’s one string I was playing with in “We Leave the Land of Our Fathers.” The wearying liability of actually being in charge.

History is full of these great stories just waiting to be couched in the personal. A few years ago the Black Maria’s featured a short pseudo-documentary, pseudo-propaganda piece about the International Workers of the World in Butte, Montana. Part of the story was that Anaconda, a copper mining company who badly misused the Butte population, had contaminated the water in the area to such a point that a flock of birds mysteriously died after drinking the water. I wanted to take that story, with fictional liberties of course, and couch it in this strange domestic, depressive mode of the speaker. I was studying under James Galvin at the time and was thinking a lot about drastic tone shifts manifest through narrative. Jim Tate always talked about the most successful poem being one where you can make the reader laugh then cry. That’s not to say I expected either particular emotion from a reader of “Humming to Myself…”, but instead to say I consciously tried to develop a poem where, like life, exterior circumstances interfere with an otherwise interior monologue in a way that produces unexpected and not wholly determinable outcomes.

In my preoccupation with religious narrative, I became equally interested in narratives or devotional works of the occult. Berryman was obsessed with surprise. With novelty. Not on an “Anxiety of Influence” macrocosmic level. I can’t speak for that. No, a line-level pleasure for the reader arising from invention, from unprecedented juxtaposition. Berryman’s writings were/are a big influence on me. With those two things in mind, I decided about a year ago I wanted to write a set of devotional poems to the Mark of the Beast. Not in a way that elevated, in a dishonest way, the character of the Mark were it a material being, but that elaborated like Psalms the character of the subject. Obviously, it was a weird set of ideas to hold in my head all at once and my effort is always to normalize the line-level clarity when I’m dealing with strange enough subjects. So the poems came out a little flat on first run. I got rid of the third piece and trimmed the other two...
down to what you see now, “The Little Number Attests” here and the other which was featured on Diagram a couple months ago.

As far as what’s central in poetry, besides novelty, I think a lot about balance. Eliot in “Verse Libre” talks about how no poem is a-metric or a-assonant. I’m always thinking “ok, the effect of this line is x so I’m going to either maintain or counter-act that tone with the subsequent line.” Only I’m thinking not just about balance of tone but balance of material and ideographic images, deceptions and altruisms, filtered emotion and unfiltered emotion, differing dictions, etc. Not always on such a short time line either. A good poem should make you its Dante, guiding you, letting you feel the real dangers, but never losing you altogether. Part of the seed of the last poem was a desire to abuse the reader-ly deferent—where the reader is asked merely to absorb the reportage as fact. History has some elements of fact, but it’s also a particular arrangement of events to derive an outcome. The scope of the events selected and the conclusions drawn from them are largely subjective and can, in a careless historian, lead to some very strange or hilarious conclusions.

Kyle McCord on the Web

dailypalette.uiowa.edu/index.php?artwork=898

thediagram.com/7_5/mccord.html

cratemfajournal.wordpress.com/category/kyle-mccord/
Hayes Moore

Hayes Moore moved from NYC to Cambridge to finish up a dissertation last fall. After a long hiatus, he began submitting creative writing last winter. He has had poems published in Graffiti Rag and MaryMark Press. Segue is his first on-line publication.

About the Work

“Gaming Romantic” came into its final draft through an unusually clear process for me. I was reviewing a collection of random poetic scraps, lines, images, anecdotes, ideas, and saw that I had accumulated a number of gaming motifs that seemed to reflect some truism or another about romance. I pieced them together and in that first draft I recall references to football, baseball, track and field, bobbing for apples, table-top RPGs, and of course chess. I tried mixing the images up in different ways, as non-sequiturs, maxims, a narrative, and as a sex scene told in sporty euphemism. Indecision ruled the editor and the more-or-less penultimate draft was a confused hodge-podge with a nice rhythm and some striking images that made no sense but seemed like they were trying to. I work-shopped it with the friendly and insightful people in Charles River Writers, a Boston based poetry club. I took copious notes during the workshop. As an experiment, I tried to follow every suggestion they offered. When advice conflicted, I opted for the suggestions that were closest to what I had already drafted. The result was the current, final draft.
Dan Moreau

Dan Moreau’s fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in Farfelu magazine, Word Riot and Clapboard House.

About the Work

Last year I read an article in my local paper about a Mexican immigrant who lived in South San Antonio and who was complaining about drug dealers in his neighborhood. From what he told the reporter, however, the cops weren’t doing anything about it. He was a landscapist and inhabited a one-room shack so he wasn’t exactly a high priority.

One day I was in Alamo Heights. It’s a rich White suburb of San Antonio with beautiful homes, well-tended lawns, and I thought: What the landscapist was complaining about would never happen here.

Other things that helped the story along: I live in a sprawling apartment complex. Every few weeks a landscaping company shows up with a crew of laborers. They usually come early in the morning so they can finish their work before it gets too hot. One day I came home at noon and saw them sitting in the shade, eating their lunch. They seemed perfectly content and at peace, men who had worked and who were now replenishing their bodies. I thought of my landscapist from San Antonio and imagined he was among them. Of course, he wasn’t.

In this story, I tried to imagine my landscapist’s life from the little bits of information I had and attempted expand on them. I thought about the story a long time before I actually sat down to write it. Usually I labor over stories for days and weeks, but this one practically wrote itself. Which admittedly sounds like a cliché. But sometimes—if you’re lucky—it happens. I had a really good teacher in college who had this piece of advice for young writers, which went something like: When the muses speak in soft whispers, who are we not to listen.
Rich Murphy has had three chapbooks published and has a book of poems, The Apple in the Monkey Tree, coming out this summer by Codhill Press. His poems have appeared in Rolling Stone, Poetry, Grand Street, The London Magazine, Trespass, New Letters, Confrontation, Aesthetica, The Argotist, West 47, foam:e, and Creature Magazine. His most recent essay appears in Reconfigurations: A Journal for Poetics Poetry / Literature and Culture. He teaches writing at VCU.

About the Work

Reading and listening to the conversations in literature, psychology, history, and philosophy have been of key importance to my writing because I have always been interested in ideas. I have approached writing poetry sensitive to metaphors that can be turned into ironic language that I might use. From there I take the language seriously so that I might have “fun” with it. I am interested in writing ironist poems, driving concrete surfaces to address oblique possibility’s express ways, giving direction to the distant relations to call attention to lost relations and family resemblances. Unresolved irony is my guide, and I try to bring unity around interrogation, commentary, or narrative that remains open at its close.

Postmodern/post-avant poetry has little use for beauty because harmony and justice are suspect. In fact, the difference between modern poetry and postmodern poetry may also be attributed to modern poetry’s putting forward the sublime as “missing contents” at precisely the right moment among beauty. The exercise is supposed to be a Wittgensteinian therapy perhaps. Usually the sublime moments are meant to substitute something transcendental, a oneness. Postmodern poetry ignores beauty and form to attempt to put forward the unpresentable. One is sublime while the other is aporia. Postmodern poetry is interested in Wittgenstein’s ladder.

The sublime relies on the ability of the poet to overwhelm the reader and for the reader to empathize with the persona. The reader is set up by the poet using the elements of beauty to encourage empathy and build contrast to what is to come. The sublime is where the poet brings the passion and compression of language in an attempt to say more than what can be said, to attempt to go beyond language and thus overwhelm the reader standing in the persona’s shoes.

The pleasure comes from a combination of the reader seeming so unimportant and insignificant and yet somehow a part of the sublime’s overwhelming experience. Romantic poets made great use of the idea of unity in the sublime. This oneness makes simple Emmanuel Kant’s notion that the experience of the sublime is the victory of reason over sensible being.

Postmodern sublime or aporia is different because the reader faces a gap, an abyss, something open and unresolved that inspires suspicion, doubt, and difficulty in choosing. Aporia is a suspicion of all frames reminding the reader that there are no frames except for the ones that are made, that the only conventions we have are the ones we make.

The poem is not going to lead the reader to a sublime moment but challenge the frames of the familiar, the beautiful, the harmonious at every turn of phrase. So when the familiar or conventional performs as a frame, aporia emerges. The frame promises convention while aporia disturbs. There isn’t an intimation of a transcendental oneness. Instead it attempts to present...
something unpresentable, perhaps the gap between fragments, the gap between signifier and signified. The postmodern poet’s text, like the philosopher’s text, isn’t influenced by rules that the poem is investigating.

The paradox suggested in irony is the tool that frustrates easy reasoning toward resolution, keeping the problem, the frame, the poem open. The effect reminds the reader of the limits of language that the medium isn’t going to pretend it is something it isn’t. This kind of sublime is another kind of overwhelming, the overwhelming of the apparent absence of meaning or what David Shapiro in his essay “The Mirror Staged” refers to as “deferred sense.” While aporia is the overwhelming of limitation, it is also the overwhelming of possibility; because if it reminds the reader of limits of convention, it reminds of freedom also, the freedom of possibility. This is its pleasure. Using aporia is not a one-time shot in the poem but a regular reminder of the limits of language and using those reminders to further the poem. The regularity of aporia in these kinds of poems may also be seen as recognition of the sublime that is ever-present. For Nietzsche’s cosmic dancers every moment is sublime in touching down and leaping again: Now, now, now.

The six poems for Segue are part of a larger manuscript titled “Voyeur.” They are examples of my ironist poetry. My chapbook Family Secret from the manuscript was published by Finishing Line Press. The book-length manuscript is a collection of poems on gender politics. I noticed that men’s poetry has rarely attempted to understand a woman’s sensibility. I was attempting to understand the dynamics of that sensibility in these poems, while also attempting to see the various power dynamics of gender relationships, heterosexual and homosexual.

“Her Morning Gargle” for instance was a reaction to The Scarlet Letter’s and Adrienne Rich’s notions that women do not have a language or at least a public language; they use men’s language. I at first see the grown woman pickled in silence or perhaps what men call intimate language. (What is intimate and for whom? Who made that word?) In the poem I am playing with pickling language, the before and after of the process, always recognizing the relations in ironic statements.

Gilles Deleuze reminds us that philosophy and art have long been in conversation, and so in this postmodern age art initiates and replies. In his book Ideology of the Aesthetic, Terry Eagleton suggests that the philosopher, Theodor W. Adorno coaches: “art may thus offer an alternative to thought, which...has become inherently pathological. All rationality is now instrumental, and simply to think is therefore to violate and victimize...Emancipatory thought is enormous irony...” Because theory and art are matters of a conversation, poems may use irony and the family relations of ironic statements to skate the concrete surfaces to address oblique possibility.

Try Your Hand:

Using concrete language, list ironic images around a topic, theme, or idea. Do not connect them and avoid making each elaborate. When you have a dozen ironic images, use one common topic, theme, or idea and begin composing in a direction that lends itself for continued writing. Draw on the other images and connect what you find would be effective to the poem’s direction. Use new ironic images if needed. Unresolved irony should be the guide. Bring unity around interrogation, commentary, or narrative that remains open at its close.
Rich Murphy on the Web

www.snreview.org/0206Murphy.html

www.poetrymagazine.org/magazine/0602/poem_30700.html

www.webspawner.com/users/richmurphy/index.html

www.friggmagazine.com/issueeleven/contents11.htm

finishinglinepress.com/2006newreleasesandforthcomingtitles.htm
Daisy Parente

Daisy Parente is 26. She lives and works in London, where she rides a clapped-out bicycle and spends more time thinking about gardening than actually doing it. This summer she has work published in Pomegranate and Fuselit.

About the Work

The two English poets that got me started, Ted Hughes and Simon Armitage, both come from a tiny part of a smudge of a country: Marsdon Moor in Yorkshire. I used to blindly believe that an almost blinkered relationship with place is the only way to write really good poetry. I reckon I got that wrong. Eva Hoffman, in her brilliant 1995 memoir *Lost in Translation—A Life in New Language*, writes about the Polish word *tesknota*, “a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing.” For Hoffman, nostalgia is ‘a source of poetry, and a form of fidelity.’ In my early twenties I migrated to Brooklyn, returning to London a couple of years ago. As these movements happened I began to see the idea of *tesknota* as the basis of writing. The gap between two places, between familiar and unfamiliar language, became painful and fertile ground, an area rich with new possibilities.

An American took me to Greenwich for the first time. We walked through the village and up to the Royal Observatory on a freezing April evening, and I was startled by the immediacy and clarity with which I saw the poem. For me, the mapping of Greenwich happened in three ways at once: I saw the place for the first time, I saw England mapping its Empire, and I heard the familiar voice of America, a new Empire, explaining my old home to itself. This trio of voices all spoke about one thing: time. I set out to write about the relationship between physical and temporal space, a sort of history concertina, folding and unfolding the sediment of the city and the anecdotal nature of colonial expansion. I think it was part of a real effort to come home to London. I was digging around in my country’s back yard.

The speaker of my poem is an American. Part of the exhilaration of writing “A Map of Greenwich” was the knowledge that I was really, for the first time, able to play with the poem’s voice. This was a new discovery for me. It’s probably a consequence of settling: I could suddenly inhabit the *reason* for a poem with confidence, and that appropriation gave me the freedom to write. Poetry is fiction after all.

Mind you, researching madly and writing at home, wherever that may be, is the only way you’re ever going to get anything done. Poetry is not—unless you actually ARE Simon Armitage—a way to make a living. It’s not even a way to be read, most of the time. Writing poetry in one’s twenties has no choice, quite frankly, but to be a reward in itself.

Daisy Parente on the Web

[www.pomegranate.me.uk/poem408.html](http://www.pomegranate.me.uk/poem408.html)

[www.pinznez.blogspot.com](http://www.pinznez.blogspot.com)
Jeff Schiff

Jeff Schiff is author of Anywhere in this Country (Mammoth Press), The Homily of Infinitude (Pennsylvania Review Press), The Rats of Patzcuaro (Poetry Link), Resources for Writing About Literature (HarperCollins), and Burro Heart (Mammoth Press). His work has appeared internationally in more than seventy periodicals, including Grand Street, The Ohio Review, Poet & Critic, The Louisville Review, Tendril, Pembroke Magazine, Carolina Review, Chicago Review, Hawaii Review, Southern Humanities Review, River City, Indiana Review, and The Southwest Review. He has taught at Columbia College Chicago since 1987.

About the Work

I began writing the two poems you see in Segue in, gulp, 1979. That’s a thirty year arc for these puppies. Such is not to say that I have been working on them ever since. Rather, it is to say that sometimes you have the chance and an urge to return to old insight with a bit of current stylistic energy.

“Coleoptera” (which is a fancy “beetle” reference I remember appropriating at the time) is a an ordered poem. It leans on song, but does so as a way of saying something, of preaching about self-awareness. So many of my poems do just that: use the natural world as a way of coming to terms with the inner world. Looking out to look in. It was what I was taught to do. Not art for art’s sake, but art in the service of awareness. As I look at it now, I think how uncharacteristically optimistic it is. In my fifties, I wish I could still say: “God bless the way/ I continue to refuse/ my own certain decay.” These days, I’d be lucky to manage: “God bless my own certain decay.”

The second poem, “Stinkbug,” is in many ways a WYSIWIG offering. What you see is what you get. Poet-speaker can’t help but kill bugs while cycling to work... In a minor minor way, it invokes the ethical/moral dilemma at the center of William Stafford’s “Traveling through the Dark.” I think he wrote, “swerving might make more dead.” As I look back on it now, I’m not sure that I believe what the speaker in my poem utters, “The obvious teaches us nothing.” Looking at the poem head on now, I must admit that I feel quite sad about the existential state of its 29 year old speaker—who, even at that tender age, was already fighting and fighting hard against the routinized, the habitual.

Jeff Schiff on the Web

www.colum.edu/Academics/English_Department/Faculty/Jeff_Schiff.php

www.arabesquespress.org/journal/jeff_schiff/

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Matina Stamatakis

Matina L. Stamatakis is the author of ek-ae: a journey into ekphrastic aesthetics (Dusie, 2007), Harmonious Hogwash (VUGG, 2008) with Jukka-Pekka Kervinen, Sensoria (Lulu, 2008), Phos (VUGG, 2008), and a forthcoming chapbook, Metempsychose (Ypolita, 2008).

Matina Stamatakis on the Web

www.moriapoetry.com/stama.html
mtdmagazine.tripod.com/matinastamatakis.htm
www.turntablebluelight.com/2008/02/matina_stamatakis.html
www.milkmag.org/STAMATAKIS8.html
After graduating from Spalding University’s low-residency MFA program, Lafayette completed a Young Adult novel, which is currently seeking a home. In the fall of 200, he began focusing more seriously on his poetry. He has started two Young Adult novels-in-verse and has had some recent success, placing about forty stand-alone adult poems over the past few months in journals such as Word Riot, Foliate Oak, Thick With Conviction, Stirring, Big Toe Review, FRIGG, and Boxcar Poetry Review, among others. Lafayette once worked as a production assistant on a low-budget movie featuring Amanda Plummer and had the good fortune of playing her dead husband in a scene that was eventually scrapped. His car, however, made it into the movie.

About the Work

Most of my poetry could begin with the line, *I wonder what it's like to be*, as I tend to write narrative poetry of witness, poetry that thrusts, perhaps, a brief moment from my own life into a life I have observed or into one I have imagined. I try to use that moment, not as recollection, per se, but as my way in, as a lens thru which I can examine the other life (as I envision what part that oft insignificant event might actually play in the other life). For a two week period, in April 2008, I added to this approach to writing poetry by taking a line or a phrase from a poem or from a short story and using that emotional thread as another way in, as a catalyst to my examination of some other life. I produced a dozen poems during this experimental time, including the three poems which appear in *Segue*: “Something Mean” being loosely, and perhaps a bit cynically, inspired by my own experiences with meanness and its seemingly inherent place in the makeup of the human species; “Beheaded” being inspired by the wonderful line by Marvin Bell and the idea of such a dramatic moment of epiphany that comes from a sudden awareness of imminent tragedy and how, in many of our lives, such awareness often goes unheeded, after the initial shock, until much later; and “Latch” being inspired by my love of movies and a curiosity in the concept that there exists a word which most people might perceive as innocuous, if not wonderful, but from which someone might actually recoil, to at least allude to possible reasons for such a reaction, to briefly explore a word powerful enough to begin or end a life. Despite being an extremely upbeat, positive person, my writing tends to focus on those kernels of thought which get stuck between my teeth, from time to time, and keep me from smiling. I like to examine the lives of ordinary people who endure, who overcome, who persevere, often times without ever finding that happy ending.
Lafayette Wattles on the Web

www.eclectica.org/v11n4/wattles.html

www.mannequinenvy.com/wattles.htm

www.sundress.net/stirring/wattlesl.htm

www.undergroundvoices.com/UVWattlesLafayette.htm

www.boxcarpoetry.com/014/wattles_lafayette_001.html