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Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions via email of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between August 1 and April 30 (closed May through July), and writing about writing year-round. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

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The following works in this issue of Segue by Bryan Walpert have been previously published. Segue is grateful to Bryan and the editors for permission to republish them.

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**Author Notes**

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No Metaphor

A tuba and a man stroll through the grass, a pretzel of flesh and brass you could say, I guess, except it’s only a man wearing a tuba beneath late autumn reds as blackbirds flock overhead. The tuba is cold metal fact, and this fellow bears the weight on his back less like a broken-hearted lament than a bulky instrument. This sight, it’s true, might remind someone less sensible than you of a duet, of a girl, of the year that has unfurled since the touch of her hand, of a melody that fluttered last fall then collapsed to earth with no sound at all, like the sudden absence of a breeze.

But, please: A tuba and its man are merely crossing a park at bright noon, absent a band or a tune, and there is no need to notice, no need for a word about the blackbirds, which ripple to earth behind the man like the folding of a fan—just not as final or as fast and, overall, more like birds landing in grass.
Horse Story

The thinnest horse of my life stood in a paddock by Lake Tekapo. It was white and its ribs a drying rack for skin, its body an in-drawn breath. You walked ahead to take a photograph of two kayakers on the lake, our car parked precariously by the side of the highway. Naturally I thought about desire and its various manifestations. For example, there was a story someone told me once about a horse. A joke, really. Something about a farmer trying to save on feed. It will come to me. The horse in that paddock by the lake was, miraculously, eating. Grass, I guess; I don’t know much about horses. Its head bobbed, down below the fence line, then back into the air. While you pulled out your camera—I’m assuming, as I couldn’t discern detail from that distance—I stood before that paddock and wondered what color life might be if emptied of all memory. No yearning would be its corollary, which would wipe this horse from existence, were it merely symbol. Or perhaps only yearning. I don’t know. In the joke, the farmer feeds his horse a little bit less each day, one of those barely discernable differences that is cumulative, until you must decide you notice, that it is not your imagination, like the silvering of your own hair or a distance emerging between, say, the two kayaks on the lake as I turned from the horse to see what was keeping you. You had started back towards me, growing larger and larger, like a much-anticipated square on the calendar that felt once like it would never arrive. When you did, I tried to talk to you about the horse, but it no longer stood in the paddock. Are you sure, you asked, that it was really there? Look, no one breaks into blossom. Here’s how it ends: The farmer had the horse eating nearly nothing, but it died.
Laughter

As physically defined, a peculiar agitation of the body, an organical titillation, as it were, which rising suddenly and irresistibly, like memory or its opposite, the sensation of having forgotten, affects at once the face and throat, thorax and abdomen. Although this physical phenomenon is usually more or less loud, it can be nearly imperceptible, traceable only by a slight muscular motion of the face, a conspiring look in the eyes or the pressing of hand to mouth while a lover whispers, Shh, my father is just outside. However simple the corporeal phenomenon, the nature of the mental state and the object by which it is produced have generated great debate, some insisting it is not definable (Quintilian) vs. those who, like Hobbes, suggest it to be ‘a sudden glory arising from the conception of some eminency in ourselves,’ pride, conceit, the ego’s waking dream, as when one is in love and has yet to confront certain realities about the object of desire’s desire or when one thinks oneself among friends. It has produced agitation in certain other circles, among whom this phenomenon is considered an inappropriate activity, for example as considered by Quintilian, adverting the opinion of Cicero, in the province of public ridicule, e.g. as a response to the accidental attachment of excess paper product to footwear on exiting a lavatory or when someone widely disliked, primarily due to a surprising sensitivity for his age and gender to rhythms of feeling, fails to complete the simple act of sitting, the chair having been removed behind his back, on which an acquaintance may further have taped, with great discretion, a slip of note paper embossed with the word asshole. Some children have this physical response temporarily suppressed through the application of certain pressures, e.g. a stern glance by a parent, or irremediably removed by the sharp scent of gin which spreads daily through the house like the static from a clock-radio knocked from a bedside table and left on at low volume as the parent, in stuttered syllables of breath, sleeps. Some adults, too, suffer its sudden absence, as in opening a drawer or closet to find it empty of someone’s clothing. The titillation, if suppressed often or long enough
through a closing of the thorax or of the neural network
linking experience to joy, may bubble like the gasses
of certain champagnes to the brain and manifest itself
when the subject is alone, as he often finds himself to be,
as an irresistible howling at an object which it is not necessary
to name but which recurs nightly and is wholly unreachable,
is in fact an appropriate response to the unfathomable ironies
of the cosmos—for such is the effect of temperament
that a Democritus will laugh where a Hericlitus would weep—
or as the feeling of finding it on one’s lips upon waking
only to forget who was speaking or how in the world
of the dream it was possible to have been so happy.
In the Photograph

that I have never seen,
the one my wife refuses to show me,
the one in the frame hugged to her chest,
she stands in a crowd, as I imagine it,
her hair larger, and looks ahead
to a future she has no idea includes me
imagining in the past
framed by this photograph a bird
sits just barely discernable in a tree
behind the voluminous mane of her head.
It has a red beak or, if the photograph,
which I may have mentioned I have not seen,
is black and white, it is a beak one might
have to imagine to imagine to be red.
I may be making too much of the beak.
The tree might be what most matters
in this photograph, the way its skeletal
branches importune something about
winter sneaking up behind her,
like the future she thinks
she’s looking into, so young,
younger than I’ve ever known her.
It’s a group shot, but the photographer
has noticed her. Not her hair,
which is beautiful, but the red line
of her lips, the smile he commands
darting too quickly across her face,
a bird alighting on a branch
then flurrying away, like the present,
as if noticing it has been noticed
by someone who wants to say to the person
beside him, Quick, look at that bird,
but that person will say, What bird? What tree?
Anyway, she’ll say, this person beside him,
the person putting the frame face-down
on the table, then placing a book on top of it,
she’ll say, Anyway, it’s winter now,
and what’s gone is gone.
Smoke unrolled from their cigarettes
in patterns that wavered and shifted
like the topic of the talk they’d been
having all night, the one they’d
agreed they had long needed to have

about a relationship whose structure
seemed solid, like their intentions,
at the start but proved ethereal,
between them yet beyond either, as it
shifted and wavered until they agreed
to talk on that damp deck overlooking
the beach, and while she paused
to take a drag, he waited for her to finish
the sentence he wished to interrupt to make
the long last point meant to undo all she said

he had done, the smoke meandering across
a moon whose pattern was as fixed as
his memory would be of that conversation
whose turns could not hide its turning
into the one with the usual subject,

a change one sees that the other does not,
or sees and does not wish to see
the other see, the one in which what was
unclear becomes as clear as the morning
promised the day would be along the line

of shore they’d left that deck to walk together
one last time as they spoke, or she did,
and to watch the waves roll, unroll,
arrive and slip away like something
that started as what they’d meant to say.
Thank You, Persia

You’re sorting through the useless crap
    that flows like a river through the front door.
    Never mind why, you have a job to do:

    the gifts sent free in the mail, the perfume
    sample, the one-serve shampoo, all the free stuff:
        key chains, stickers, throw-away camera,

    mini picture frames, the birthday gift from someone
    who says, Oh, he’d never buy himself that, though
        maybe you did say you like cows, might be your

    fault on every occasion there is a grin fit
    to burst the banks of the gift-giver’s face:
        a ceramic cow statuette or cow mug or cow calendar

    or cow clock, the one where the animal makes
    an unlikely leap over a celestial object.
    And the poems that arrive in the mail, slipped

    under a door, tucked into a bag. Oh, you appreciate them,
    every one, even if it is the third time you’ve received
    this particular translation of some half-baked bard

    from ancient Persia going on about lute this or goat that.
    Though you’re guilty, too, aren’t you? Your friend
    liked shot glasses embossed with the names of the states,

    so when you’d fly on business you’d pick one up
    for him at the airport—this is before you thought
    as carefully on this subject—and it was around

    Minnesota that his wife took you aside
    and did you a favor. Then one day you find yourself
    reading that passage where the shepherd boy

    abandons his goats to play his lute by the river beneath
    the brightest moon in Persia, a moon balanced like an egg
    on his palm, and who on his way home fills his bucket
with what turns out to be (you’d forgotten this) pure light,
and setting aside for a minute what impure light
might be, the purity of that light is so clear,

so indescribably clear—you’ve never noticed
how good this translator is—it reminds you
of the face of your friend’s wife when she

married your friend at a ceremony in a meadow,
the reds and yellows of the wildflowers so vibrant,
the sun so bright, you had to rub your eyes to make sure

you were awake. She looked up at your friend
in the purity of that light, and this is before
he’d fill his shot glasses, lined up along

the coffee table nearly every night, before
the late night phone calls to ex-girlfriends,
before the light drained from her face

the way it slid behind the hills the evening
they were married, first the colors of the wildflowers
giving notice, then the hills, finally the color

of the sky slipping from the party for a rendezvous
with day on the other side of the earth, maybe where Persia
used to be, since even there a shepherd must wake

to the musical bleating of his flock and be grateful
for this sudden gift of light, which makes your friend
an idiot for holding up his shot glass to look through

the thick amber at his wife, a stranger, makes
you grateful for every stupid gift, though you
would trade it all in for someone to look

at you as she did at him, just once, someone
to shepherd you and all your useless crap—your
key chains and mason jars, your tendency to be critical
of others because you see in them yourself—
from one difficult day to the next, to wake
to your bleating in the dark, to tell you the sun will rise,

to hand you a poem someone has slipped under the door
that contains only one word over and over,
your cow-shaped clock ticking, its tail swishing

the seconds, which is where you come in,
where you walk downstairs to sort through all the key chains
and egg slicers, where you take it all, all the crap

you’ve accumulated over the years—the guilt and regrets,
the resentment and righteous indignation—
take it all to the garage, throw it in the trunk, drive

past the meadow and the wildflowers, then dump it all
in the river, even sell your car, maybe not today
but soon, then walk, as the streetlights shudder to life,

you walk through the shortest, coldest days to where
you’re going, to the moon, to Persia, it doesn’t matter,
the trip is free, all you’ve got.
A History of Glass

The sound is a dull throb. Make that sharp. Can a throb be sharp?
It is like a beak
through the brain, like he is
crafting his own image in sound.
I should kill him. Nearly have,

every morning.
Think of the axe in the garage.
The chickens would miss him.
Sentimentality,
says my friend,
who has both chickens and children.
We’re at a party, on the deck, the light
wobbling, sinking over the hill.

I’d kill him,
the rooster, I mean,
but I forget during the day,
it fades, becomes memory of
memory, like they say
about childbirth. Try
to hold a memory of pain.

Here’s one:
body against glass.

Don’t like that one?
Return to the rooster,
a fucker
called Victor. I didn’t
name him, but it sure
makes killing harder.
Names, I mean.
I don’t mean
for the children we’re still
trying to conceive.
How did we get onto children?
Can a throb be sharp?
A man buys a house,

inherits chickens,
didn’t ask for them,
but accidents happen:
A man walking
across a street, late, toward
early morning, a black shirt

like he is not there,
then is, against the glass.
Then isn’t.
Fault is just philosophy.
They wouldn’t give me the name.

Just the image, then: a man
on the ground by my car,
breathing. Heavy,
like he is trying to catch
his own body.

Sometimes, the image
of his voice breaks into
a dream. Victor’s voice, the rooster’s.
Someone starts to scream, but I wake
to the crow before my brain

can weave a narrative.
Some stories don’t want to be told.
Not a sound from his mouth.
Just a thud against glass. Though
the brain wants to add texture,
imagine distances,
movement, voice, blood.
Some people do it
without trying. How?
Children, I mean, happy accidents.
They’re meant to be eaten,
says my friend (meaning chickens),
pointing with his third bottle
of beer, the party alight
beneath the stars, the other bottles
clinking at his feet, glass,
a supercooled liquid
that lets in light
and sound. Close the window
against the cold and still
hear the call of first light.
A history of glass
is sand and lime,
narrative of containment. To see
but not feel. To hear a little.
A lattice of lines spreading
layers of street light.
I inherited the axe
and its narrative,
clean, but not spotless,
I imagine. When
you have children,
what do you tell them
about what you’ve done
and what do you leave out?
It’s like any story. My friend
tells me to kill the bird
or I can hire someone.
I’d rather do it myself.
Or feel I should rather.
I’ll do it tomorrow
or Monday.

It’s easy, he says,
dropping his arm in pantomime,
a swift motion in the dark.
Regrets

That there are several names
for the same thing does not mean
they are the same.
The white heron, for example,
known also as common egret,
great egret, Kōtuku.
Or try compunction, disappointment,
misgiving, remorse, rue.
There is a risk of frivolous wordplay
here of the kind to which you
accuse me of resorting
as a kind of distance.
I would say a kind distance.
There is a distinction to be made
between playing with words
and making a distinction.
Perhaps some back story:
Say a man and woman fly
10,000 miles to a new life,
only to bring the old arguments with them.
Is it the right decision? How much
control do we have over
migratory patterns, shifting
geography of memory?
An image would be nice about now.
Say, the description of actual egret,
not just an idea in the form of information.
There is much I would do for you,
but some things are beyond us.
In New Zealand it has only one
breeding ground, the Okarito Lagoon.
Call it egret, and it is endangered.
Call it Kōtuku, and it is rare, valuable.
Half-full, half-empty
of loss. Each year they return
with their various names
to Okarito, solitary feeders
that nevertheless pair for life.
For better or worse,
there is the distinct danger
of metaphor here.
What do you call egrets that return?
This is where I would place
the pun of the title,
but there is not a single one
in this poem.
“Like the ball in the car you're going to sell.” This is how I explain the pronunciation of my last name, Balcárcel, to bank tellers and airline representatives, my self-defense instructor and my students. My mother invented this phrase after hearing her married name mispronounced as Bar-carcel, Ban-carcel, and Balcar-kell almost daily. I think her trick works pretty well at demystifying the name. The phrase jingles on the tongue, and most people appreciate a hand. In fact, when I graduated from high school, I tried to help the announcer by writing out Ball-car-sell. I thought Mom's stratagem would work as perfectly on paper as it did in person. I printed my name, accent and all, then wrote Ball-car-sell underneath in parenthesis. I imagined the syllables ringing through the auditorium in pure pronunciation tones. It backfired, and I was almost off-stage before my parents realized, “That's our daughter up there shaking hands with the principal.” The announcer had mumbled something unintelligible; Dad snapped a photo just in time to hear Barker, the name of the next student. We laughed about it later, but I admit to some disappointment. I didn't gasp—no surprise that the predictable happened—but I did sigh. Practiced as I was at not letting mispronunciation bother me, it pinched a little. It reminded me that even the progressive educators who loved having a Latina in class, and even the announcer-speech teacher who prided himself on crisp consonants and a broadcast-worthy baritone couldn't step into another language easily. And though I had attended school in this district from fifth grade on, no one had quite figured out Balcárcel.

Every first day of school had been a name nightmare for me. The teacher would start calling role at the front of the room. When a long pause followed a name like Anderson, Scott, I knew the teacher's brain was stalling out on mine. Added to her distress at seeing Balcárcel, my nickname Bequi appeared next to it. Bequi is pronounced “Becky,” as people with some knowledge of Spanish might guess, but the combination—Bequi Balcárcel—stumped every teacher I had.

As a girl, I coped by disassociating myself from my name. I couldn't afford to take every mispronunciation personally, so I pushed my name out of myself into its own realm. There it could be stepped on, twisted, or ignored without me feeling stepped on, twisted, or ignored. I didn't want to impose on people by coaching them on my name. It took too much time, and yielded flawed results. The wrong syllable stressed, the hard c pronounced soft, the soft c pronounced hard. I waved away the sounds and took this approach: people could fumble with my name like a doorknob, and I'd let them in just to hear the rattling stop.

I don't blame folks for stumbling over three syllables and an accent mark. I agree: Balcárcel looks intimidating. The accent, especially, seems to snuff out most people's will to even hazard a guess. But if someone does try, I now applaud the effort no matter what comes out. The knob-rattling bothers me less than it used to. My local grocery store wants its employees to greet every customer by name. Every week I say, “Close enough” with a smile. My own children don't have the pronunciation mastered, so I'm not expecting the grocery staff to catch on anytime soon. Maybe
I'm mellower because I'm letting my name creep closer. I've brought it in from the back shed and given it a place in the living room. Instead of distancing myself from my name, I see it as a fun facet of who I really am. It's no longer painful to hear Bancursel. The complexity of my name reflects the complexity of my identity, and no one can know me or my name fully on a first encounter.

Despite the difficulties, or maybe because of them and the attention they stirred, I kept my name when I married. My Guatemalan father always joked that I'd marry an American named Smith and lose my heritage. In fact, I married a man named Stith. I could have changed my name and stopped chanting “like the ball in the car you're going to sell,” but I couldn't face going from three syllables to one; just listen to that monosyllabic thud after the three-syllable “Rebecca.” Besides, I liked my name. And maybe Dad has a point. My name might be the most Latin thing about me.

Growing up monolingual in Iowa did not instill much fiesta flavor. My Spanish was spotty, and though I knew some lullabies and phrases like “I am ten years old,” I couldn't hold a conversation with my grandparents. When they visited one year, flying all the way from Central America, I sang for them and smiled a lot, but I couldn't tell them about my teddy bear collection or read them a story I'd written. For a week, the adults volleyed words over my head. It felt like verbal keep-away. Later, equipped with four years of high school Spanish, I visited Guatemala. My grandmother was no longer with us, but I was able to tell my abuelo about college plans and my hope of learning guitar. For two weeks I played Latina, but I'm still more salt than cilantro.

As much as I love my Balcárcel family, the music, the food, and the all-night dancing, I'm a visitor, not a native. My bi-lingual cousins live in the States—kids whose parents both immigrated. Priests conduct their weddings in Spanish, and they make homemade tamales. They include me, but I stand on the other side of a border. Instead of tamales, I make a green bean casserole that appears in church cookbooks across the Midwest. Their homes feel foreign. My name is a valid passport, but the country isn't home.

I used to be comfortable staying on my side of that border. With an Anglo mother, I grew up able to pass for white. Further, people rewarded my whiteness. My perfect English, my punctuality, and my way of telling a story directly rather than taking a long, winding ramp marked me as Americanized. Perfectly assimilated. In school and on the job, this works beautifully. I blend into the dominant culture like a top-level spy. Except I'm a double-agent. I truly am white in most ways. When my parents first tried to teach me Spanish, I wouldn't speak it. Embarrassed by the too-colorful dresses and the trumpety mariachi music, I ran from my heritage. When I wanted to rediscover it, I found it difficult. Balcárcel is a slim link to a world that I, for the most part, lost.

A few years ago, I learned something else about my name. The byline that goes with this essay shows my first name as Rebecca, but it was supposed to be “Rebeca.” My parents wanted the Spanish spelling. My father laughs at English’s use of doubled letters. “Two c’s?” he asks. “Why not three?” My middle name, too, is misspelled on my birth certificate. Lee should read “Li.” Again, the English version won out. According to family legend, this is an family friend's unintentional doing. Somehow the paperwork went through her hands rather than my parents'. So I'm Rebecca Lee instead of Rebeca Li.

Sometimes people ask why I don't correct my legal name. A Latino poet recently wanted to know how to spell Rebecca before autographing his book for me. When I explained the mistake, he looked over his glasses and said, “What are you going to do about that?” He's a big man, with a commanding presence; I told him to inscribe the book to “Rebeca.” However, at home the name
looked odd, like a pair of shoes that seem to fit in the store, but turn out to be the wrong size. I am so used to the misspelled version that it feels more appropriate. Maybe “Rebecca” is more appropriate. The poet wanted me to embrace my heritage by changing my name, but my full name, as is, reflects my heritage pretty well. My English name first, my Latin name last.

My perfect name would be Rebecca Li Balcárcel, combining the two languages. Actually, this is what I thought my name was until I received my social security card at age sixteen. “Lee” looked awkward then and still does. It also pricks my heart because Li comes from my father's nickname, Lico, pronounced Lee-coe. With this tie to my father accidentally cut, I feel even more unmoored. I wince when I sign legal documents that require my full name. I found myself telling the Li-Lee story to the mortgage broker. She simply handed me the pen. The names should sound the same in the ear, but they don't to me. I imagine that I can hear the correct spelling when I say my full name, and that the written version is wrong. It's only one letter, a single line of ink and a dot, but it makes me my father's daughter. I might speak Spanish only in present tense, and I might never learn the love songs my grandfather wrote, but Li is my rightful middle name. Still, to change it would cost more money than I can justify, so I'm letting that layer of Anglo lie on my name for now, a dusting of bleached flour on a browned pastry.

These days I go by a few other names, such as Mom and Professor. These spare me hearing the mispronunciation of Balcárcel. In fact, I tend to be on a first-name basis with the world, asking folks to call me Rebecca as soon as I meet them. I don't want to get rid of my last name, though. As long as people can imagine a ball in the car they want to sell, I'll keep letting folks give it a try. Maybe I agree with Shakespeare; a rose would smell as sweet even if called a rosse. I can live with an extra c in my first name and the floundering over my last name. Even the Lee. I've learned to embrace the mess, the beautiful bang that resulted from my parents' collision. I'm picking up the pieces I like and making collage that suits me. When people ask my name, it leads to conversations about Guatemala, my mom's Peace Corps service, the Northern regions of Spain, and my father's immigrant story. Then I hear about their ancestors or their love of soccer. My name gives us a kick-off, and an exciting get-to-know-you game begins.
The Dark Night of Synecdoche

However we follow the printed directions of sex.

—Philip Larkin

I Diaphragms

She discovered it in my brother’s dresser, stuffed beneath the tube socks, only partially concealed. She’d been putting laundry away, lost as usual in the etherized loneliness of housework, when the saucer appeared, darting between the cumulus socks and stratocumulus underpants. “It’s here to take me away,” she cried, “a UFO!” Or so I imagine, the pathos of the incident pushing back, these many years later, against the comedy.

And take her away it did. When the object’s actual identity at last imposed itself on my mother’s consciousness, she felt faint. She had to lie down on my brother’s bed, the very spot in which the saucer had landed. A diaphragm? Her fifteen-year-old son was having sex. Her fifteen-year-old son was having sex with his fourteen-year-old girlfriend. “Good God,” she whispered, as if trying to keep the revelation from herself. Little did she know that an even greater shock lay ahead. Although hardly in bed with her progeny, shouldn’t she have sensed, lying atop his comforter, this final outrage? Wasn’t there something about the diaphragm she ought to have recognized?

Standing in the master bathroom, manipulating the unfamiliar object, my brother had envisioned a catcher’s mitt: his girlfriend squatting over home plate, ready to stop even his most errant fastball. The Thurman Munson of sex, only better looking and obviously feminine. (My brother loved the Yankees.) The goal was to score while somehow striking out the batter. He hadn’t a clue that one size doesn’t fit all or that a prophylactic substance must accompany it. Remember that disgusting goo, which you had to apply in the throes of passion, making sure that you were done, completely done, with the oral part of the program? A friend in college actually burned his tongue lapping at the leaves of grass—forgive me, I taught Whitman this morning.

Nor did my brother understand the hygienic, let alone the Oedipal, implications of such an act. “What’s the big deal? You weren’t using it,” he’d yell. And by that he meant she wasn’t using it presently, though the fact was she wasn’t using it at all because she and my philandering father were estranged and maintaining separate bedrooms. The remark would slay my mother: the woman had been humiliated enough, if this time only inadvertently.

Beyond the humiliation, however, lurked the shame of that universal taboo: incest. Theirs was a metaphoric violation to be sure but still not something my mother could get her arms around. By the transitive property of sexual contact alone—his penis had touched an object that had touched her vagina—the two, she believed, had slept together.

Segue 8: Fall 09 23
My brother, you might say, was criminally incognizant, and he’d remain so for years, even after he’d grown up, gone to college, and bedded countless other women. Well into a career as a financial consultant, he’d ask, upon hearing that my best friend had cancer and would have to have his testicles removed, “What’s a scrotum?” As a boy, his favorite book had been *James [his name] and the Giant Peach*. When I think of the story’s fuzzy, testicular resonance, I want to laugh. I want to make a case for the unconscious. Apparently, as with the grammatical parts of speech that comprise language, you can deploy your genitals without knowing their proper names. I say “apparently” because having read my students’ prose, I can only imagine their lovemaking.

Though a year younger than he, my brother’s girlfriend was a willing, if equally ignorant, accomplice to this sexual adventure. For weeks, the pair had planned their raid on virginity: a trip by bike to the local drug store, condoms procured under the cover of darkness or, rather, under several boxes of *Jujubes*, the girlfriend’s favorite candy. The raid, however, proved unsuccessful when the cashier turned out to be our former Sunday school teacher, and the love-bird commandoes had to abandon their mission. Clueless though he might have been, my brother understood the Catholic prohibition against pre-marital sex—this much the Church had drilled into him. “Abort! Abort!” he actually whispered into his girlfriend’s ear, but she’d begun eating the *Jujubes* and wasn’t paying attention—the candy stuck to multiple molars.

It was only on the way home that he had his epiphany, recalling the unidentified hanging object in our parents’ bathroom. If not the mother of invention, necessity is certainly the mother of remembrance because our hero, with almost as much fuzz on his face as on his ripening peaches, suddenly retrieved a fragment from health class. “Isn’t there, you know, some rubbery whatchamacallit we can put in you?” he asked. It was as if he’d come up with the answer to a question on a test, an answer he had no right knowing since he hadn’t studied, hadn’t even been paying attention, when the unit on reproduction was presented. This lack of conscientiousness, however, in no way prevented him from feeling euphoric, and he immediately sensed some movement in his loins.

And so, Oedipus climbed the stairs and entered the master bath. The diaphragm hung from a peg for all the subway tiles to see, like a girl backed up against a gymnasium wall while everyone else is out dancing on the floor. Or like a bag lady (what my mother feared she’d become if she ever left my father) stranded in the underground as love’s purposeful commuters rushed by. I knew way too much about my mother’s unhappiness. For years, I’d served as confidante and coach. Once, I dreamt that I had to lug the heaviest of backpacks to school. I mean I couldn’t even lift it off the ground. Upon arriving, I unzipped the pack and out popped my mother in her nightgown. “Hi, Mom,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

To my brother, the diaphragm was simply an object to be used. He was flexible; it was flexible. Still, he worried that he might not be able to get such a large object inside of such a tiny girl. Having inspected his girlfriend, he found the opening especially small, and he had to console himself with the image of a bat folding its wings and compressing its spine in order to enter a house. The girlfriend informed him of the need to break her hymen before the bat could go anywhere. “Pull up! Pull up!” she screamed. No—that’s what the cockpit voice recorder shouts when a plane encounters windshear. Here, the injunction was “Pull out! Pull out!” following the unceremonious rupture.
At last, opening day. Catcher’s mitt in place, my brother strolled out to the mound and readied his first pitch. He was at once like some dignitary who can’t reach home plate and a Cy (very) Young Award winner. Absent an umpire in that arena, no one could say whether the mitt had stopped the millions of descendents he’d sent its way. The inning had lasted just ten seconds. In the midst of his “Wow, that was tremendous” and his girlfriend’s more private disappointment, the sound of a car could be heard. My mother was home. The catcher’s mitt-turned-spaceship never moved faster, finding its ultimate refuge in the clouds.

When, some two days after first discovering the diaphragm, my mother divined its rightful owner, she took to her bed, crying. Even though he’d been caught having sex, my brother had kept quiet about the object’s origin—not because he feared the significance of his action but because he adhered to a strict policy of never disclosing anything to his parents. As a result of my mother’s frequent tirades, information was released on a need-to-blow basis.

She had been sitting on the toilet, looking up at the wall, when she noticed the unencumbered peg. The peg, let me state unequivocally, was delighted to have been relieved of that unbearable weight. What followed I almost can’t describe: the screaming and hollering, the nearly incoherent allusions to Freud. (A cultured person, my mother often sprinkled her conversation with the greats—and semi-greats—of western civilization.) She couldn’t fathom my brother’s cavalier attitude, telling her to sterilize the thing and then reuse it. “You’re just like your father,” she barked, “totally oblivious and insensitive!” And yet, his obliviousness seemed willed. Even after he’d been tutored in the finer points of Freudian psychology, he remained as indifferent to her hermeneutic as he was to her suffering.

My mother’s horror, of course, was predicated on the principle of synecdoche, a figure of speech in which, as I explained this morning to my gaggle of freshmen, a part of something stands in for the whole. “You have a nice set of wheels,” we used to say when complementing someone on their car. “What do you think you’re doing when you call me a dick under your breath?” I asked, trying to be funny. I didn’t tell them about the diaphragm, itself an example, albeit a tricky one, as the object isn’t technically part of the woman, though it is—ha, ha—a part for the hole. (Puns are like children in a Catholic family: there’s always another on the way.) My more fastidious colleagues would insist that the diaphragm is a metonym, a figure of speech in which something associated with an object or person stands in for it: “The White House rejected tax cuts,” say. But how about a compromise: either a postmodern synecdoche or a metonym overcome with longing?

The night of the second shock, my mother dreamt that she’d been appointed to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and charged with the disposal of some very dangerous waste. Because my father had done some work for Reagan, this element of her dream seemed totally believable. While her family slept, she dug a deep hole in the backyard and lined it with concrete. Then, she placed her diaphragm inside, hoping against hope that the meaning of mother might somehow be contained. “Motherhood is radioactive,” read the talking points. “Mothers can pollute our drinking water.” Though she didn’t agree with the policy, she executed it faithfully. “Why have I taken this job?” she thought, struggling to emerge from her dream.

Enter my brother, waving a tube of spermicide, in a clever inversion of the facts. He was a hundred feet tall, Godzilla with a fire hose, spraying the disk on which civilization had been written. “Never again will the world be pregnant with meaning!” he cried. “Sex means nothing; even sex with your mother means nothing!”
Thus, Jocasta awoke even more alarmed than before. Clearly, a son with Oedipal urges was preferable to a son with nihilistic ones, and she appeared to have spawned the latter. When she thought about it more, she decided that she wanted him to want her. What was Freud anyway but a metaphor for lost intimacy, a desire for connection? The woman had given up everything for her kids, and her kids—her parts—had forgotten her.

If I’ve moved from the synecdoche of the diaphragm to the still more complicated synecdoche of children it’s because I now understand what was at stake in this crisis. A shattered pot cannot abide the presumption of the piece, parading its independence. To my mother we were ungrateful synecdoches—even I who tried to fill the absence in her life, an absence both synonymous with my father and far in excess of him. To riff off of her dream, she was like an X-ray machine, a giant MRI tube, into which I was repeatedly inserted. How much motherhood can a person take? How much before the cancers come? “I still remember you coming out of me,” she’d say whenever I seemed most distant. At such times, I could feel a phantom umbilical cord around my neck.

II Diagrams

Until this point, I’m sure I’ve come across as especially unkind to my brother, exposing a most outrageous *faux pas* and enjoying myself in the process. But I am in fact an egalitarian in matters of ridicule. Not six months after my brother’s transgression, a letter arrived, addressed to one Ralph Savarese. Thinking it belonged to my father, after whom I’d been named, my mother opened it. Unfolding a sheet of notebook paper, she saw a drawing in pencil—indeed a kind of diagram. The words “vagina,” “labia,” and “clitoris,” each with an arrow pointing to what clearly was a representation of the female genitalia, glared at her. In script below appeared the phrase “If you can’t find the clit, you can’t find the girl.” Enraged, my mother believed that one of my father’s lovers had written to criticize his performance. The fact that my father had been such an ignorant and selfish lover only encouraged this line of reasoning. The old man had rarely found the girl, and when he had, it was largely by accident. All of this my mother had shared with me in agonizing detail.

At dinner that night she pounced, producing the diagram as if it were an extra vegetable. My father protested vehemently. “I haven’t a clue what this is. Besides, I know what I’m doing in that arena,” he yelled—before recognizing what he had copped to implicitly. And then, as if desperate, he added, pointing at me, “He’s named Ralph, too.”

I knew I was the intended recipient; I had recognized the writing on the diaphragm—I mean, diagram. It belonged to a girl I had taken out the previous Friday: a beautiful, cosmopolitan Pakistani girl way beyond her years and my experience. When my mother saw me blush, she knew. “O my God, you’re just like your father!” she shouted, an accusation I abhorred. I felt like answering, “But I’m a beginner. I’ll learn.” My mother’s tone implied betrayal: both in choosing someone other than she as my lover and in revealing an apparently hereditary lack of technique. Suddenly, my name—a source of resentment but also of secret, Oedipal strength—suggested an unavoidable fate. I looked like the man, even spoke like him. Why shouldn’t I be as unaccomplished and insensitive in bed? Her dream of having me take my father’s place—or what felt like her dream—wilted on the spot.
Aafia, my mother’s chief competitor, was the daughter of a diplomat. She had stunning skin and hair and the most acerbic tongue I had ever encountered—even after it invaded my mouth. She went to my sister school. I’d been confused when she asked me out because everyone knew she was dating a girl, and when I fumblingly alluded to this fact, she quipped, “Tell me you’re not bound by conventional sexual mores? I like sex. I like girls and boys. Get it? Pick me up on Friday at six-thirty. You can take me to dinner and then…” Her voice trailed off. I imagined a bone-white blouse hitting the floor.

Not three blocks from her parents’ house, she told me to pull over. We were in front of a park. I knew, or thought I knew, what was about to happen. “Let’s get in the back,” she said, “there’s more room.” Before I had even closed the door she was pulling my head into her lap and hiking up her skirt. To my shock, she wasn’t wearing any panties. “Lick,” she commanded. My first scuba diving lesson and instead of receiving a gentle introduction to the pleasures and perils of this new sport, I had been thrown right into the ocean. No oxygen check, no mask, no flippers, no spear should a shark approach.

Aafia’s “rose-wet cave” (to borrow a line from Adrienne Rich) threatened to engulf me. I knew nothing of this space, nothing of its contours or depths. This was my first vagina. (Well, technically my second.) “Lick,” she repeated, and I did, though without much direction or strategy. After a while she sighed, “You’re no good. Let me show you how to give someone pleasure.” And then she proceeded to undo my belt, at which point… “You’re pathetic,” she declared upon discovering my dampened underpants.

I’d get better, of course, at scuba diving, though not with Aafia, who dropped me for a college student. The rejection only made me want to prove her wrong about my talents. And so I practiced every chance I got. I read up on different techniques, found a copy of the Kama Sutra and devoured its diagrams. Halfway through my second year of college, I passed the open water diving certification test with a girl who, strangely enough, would also become an English professor. O the bubbles we made! Only later would I recognize that even sexual proficiency could be marred by a persistent ignorance and egoism. However enthusiastically I attended to my partner’s pleasure, the act was finally about me, about my getting off. A curious idiom “getting off,” one that suggests, in its secondary meaning, not paying the proper price for a crime. Here, the phallus would be akin to a slick, well-paid defense attorney.

In seeking to get off, I was also seeking, I now realize, to get away from my mother, which meant renouncing emotion. Her emotions seemed less like a dark cloud that followed me around than a giant, chemical plume unleashing its rains. To be close to a woman, I concluded, was to drown in need and, especially, sorrow. I wanted none of it, having already sunk to the bottom of that pond.

I remember one Easter morning wheedling my way into an acquittal. My girlfriend wanted to read the paper and then go to Mass. She thought it tacky to engage in premarital coitus on the most important holy day in the Catholic faith. I made an awful joke about resurrection, and then pointed at my tented underpants. “Let’s have a revival here,” I said. I drew out the long “e” in “please” while kissing her neck, which seemed to do the trick. “Please? Just a quickie.” She went and got her diaphragm. (Yes, that horrible object returns). “We have only twenty minutes,” she reminded me, and I complied. I complied with minutes to spare, demonstrating the schoolboy’s cheerful alacrity.
After we were through, I heard, from the bathroom, a shriek, followed by an expletive. When my girlfriend sat down to pee, the diaphragm emerged with a vengeance from her vagina. It became airborne and then landed under the sink: a truly ultimate Frisbee. Some sort of suction phenomenon was apparently responsible. No fan of the miraculous, the philosopher Spinoza remarks, “As nature preserves a fixed and immutable order, it most clearly follows that miracles are only intelligible as in relation to human opinions, and merely mean events of which the natural cause cannot be explained by reference to any ordinary occurrence, either by us or, at any rate, by the writer and narrator of the miracle.” The coincidence, however, was extraordinary: on Easter morning a diaphragm, of its own accord, fled the tomb of its imprisonment. “I’m gonna fucking kill you if I get pregnant!” my girlfriend announced, and so at the conclusion of Mass we went to the student health center where she took a morning of pill. The whole way there, I had to suppress a laugh as I visualized the airborne diaphragm. Obviously, I still had some work to do in the sensitivity department.

Reflecting on the adolescent foolishness of the brothers Savarese, I’m reminded of what my mother said a couple of years ago: “I’m done with sex.” She had finally divorced my father, and I had asked her during a visit if she intended to date again. “If you think I want another man, you’re nuts!” she yelled. “Who needs ham-handed bravado and a fear of intimacy?” Though no longer oppressively miserable, she carried with her that turtle’s shell of unfulfillment, which offered protection from future disappointment precisely by ensuring more unfulfillment. I’d held out hope that someone might still find the girl. I hadn’t meant just sexually. And I hadn’t meant just me. Actually, I hadn’t meant me at all. By this point, I’d escaped my mother’s melancholic clutches, or so I’d thought. I didn’t understand that in refusing to be found, or at least searched for, my mother was, in effect, sending a message: *Meet me in the garden when the clock strikes twelve and the moon is a medallion of love.* Nor did I understand her connection to the thing I’d become: a literature professor.

This morning in class, while discussing section #6 of “Song of Myself,” a kid blurted out: “You don’t really expect us to like this shit, do you?” And when he did, I felt as if I were a police officer who’d been shot with his own gun, my customary sarcasm missing from its holster. Or, rather, I felt—and I don’t think there’s any other way to put it—like someone whose mother had just been insulted. “Let’s take this outside,” I wanted to say. In the figure of the grass, I’d suggested that Whitman was playing around with synecdoche: trying to find not so much the girl or the boy but the nation. (With Whitman, of course, America is one big erogenous zone.)

After writing of the “beautiful uncut hair of graves,” the poet laments, “I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,/And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.” “Don’t you get it?” I responded. “Doesn’t this move you?” We are *all* offspring taken soon out of our mothers’ laps. We chase a dream of wholeness with our bodies and our words, never quite catching up to others or ourselves.

Even as my mother approaches the end of her life, I see that she’s still holding me—or trying to. Indeed, I see what she’s bequeathed: this love of literature, this mother poisoning. I picture men in Mylex suits preventing the spread of poetry. “Hurry up, evacuate!” they moan through their Martian ventilators. Why relish what makes you sad? Why try to piece together what can’t be made whole? Hair of the dog, we tell someone with a hangover. And so, I’m not the least surprised when my mother shows up in class, as she did this morning, ready to take on that kid—a
guest, or is it a ghost, lecturer? I no longer even have to unzip my bag; she manages to do it from within, emerging, like a magician’s assistant, in her familiar nightie. “Hi, Mom,” I say, though my back has long given out. “Glad to have your company.”
You can’t worship under water. That’s what Shirley says.

The sound keeps coming at me, through the wall, pouring continuously. They’re releasing all the water, from all the planet, just pouring out the tap, the neighborhood water, the state water, the oceans. All of it back to God.

∴

I remember the day those two moved over here.

Neville and I were putting up chicken wire along the base of the fence to keep the cats out of the yard. We were fools, really. Down on our hands and knees in the dirt, in the cat turds, sweat pouring off us. And all the while those cats purring and weaving and rubbing against us like we were their best friends. Neville threatened one of them, threw the wire cutters at it, but it just blinked its ice blue eyes at him and curled up next to his knee in the dirt, flicking a black tipped tail.

After we got done, Neville stood up, crossed his arms over his chest, and said, “That-a does it.” He was just imitating what men do, you see. “What about the cats?” I asked, because they were still frisking around the yard, taking dumps under the porch, and half climbing the tree before falling off. Neville picked them up, one by one, getting all clawed up, and dropped them over the other side of the fence.

We were the stupid ones, though. Those cats just climbed over the top of the fence, jumped into our dogwoods, and landed right back in the yard.

We were putting up that chicken wire when two guys walked right in. They acted like it was the most normal thing in the world to come into our yard. For a moment, I wondered if it was going to be one of those things like you read about, where someone is robbed and it’s not at all like in the movies—no guns, no masks, no threats. Just two well-dressed young men who calmly walk up to you, in no hurry at all, and tell you your life is about to change forever.

I looked at Neville, but he was just staring at them too, his mouth hanging open like a screen door. Aren’t men supposed to be vigilant about these things? That’s what I asked him later that night in bed. He grunted and threw his pants on the floor. “Baby, you worry too much.” That’s what he said to me, like there’s just the right amount of worrying, or a scale to measure it, and I’m weighing everything down with my big, fat head. That’s Neville for you.

They said something like “good day” or “good morning,” something normal like that, but then they walked on by, ignoring our stunned silence, walking in that way that they do, kind of loping-like. The cats, tangled up in the unrolled chicken wire on the ground, got up and followed them like zombies. “Neville, aren’t you, I mean, shouldn’t we do something?” I asked. Neville just went back to building our already futile fence as if they were from the UPS. “What are we going to
do?” he asked with a shrug.

At that moment, I remembered where I had seen them before. Neville and I had gone for lunch in town at the diner, and I had a milkshake. I was slurping it down to the last drop, I guess maybe making a little too much noise because Neville sunk down in his chair a bit, when there was a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and found myself facing two whitebread-looking guys in dress shirts and black ties. “Excuse me, ma’am,” they said. “Would you like to hear about the prophets?”

This took me off guard. Usually when someone taps you on the shoulder like that at a restaurant, they are from outta town and want directions, or they think what you ordered looks delicious and wonder what exactly it is. I just stood there looking at them all bug-eyed, still holding my empty milkshake glass in my hand like a torch, when I heard Neville clear his throat. “No thanks,” he said. The guy who didn’t say anything looked kind of sheepish, and both of them put some money on the table and left.

They can’t go anywhere by themselves, except maybe the bathroom. Did you know that? It’s some kind of Mormon law. Shirley told me about it. They have to be together all the time. I don’t know if it’s so one of them doesn’t accidentally go have sex or drink caffeine or what, but they can’t be separated. I used to think that was kind of weird. Then for a while I thought it was beautiful, like a marriage. Better even.

The Mormons came and lived on the opposite side of our duplex, and they never asked us about prophets again.

We were the stupid ones, alright. We had been living here six months, and we never even realized there was another half of the house, empty, waiting to be filled.

Neville never had a problem with them. When they came for the mail, he just threw his hand up like they were old friends. How he even recognized them individually I don’t know; there were two of them, but they changed every few weeks. They all looked similar, as if they were frozen in perpetual youth, as if their features had yet to catch up to their lanky bodies. When I talked to them once or twice, there was something not quite right, and I found myself staring at them as if they were being broadcast via satellite and there was a two minute delay. Their faces looked like a four-year-old’s, I swear. Once a Chinese one came around Christmas time. When he walked through our yard, he always stopped and stared at the Christmas tree as if transfixed.

I don’t think the Mormons had anything to do with Neville abandoning me, but I can’t be sure. He used to talk to them sometimes. Who knows what they said?

He left around the time that I got my diagnosis. Neville wouldn’t go to the hospital with me; he’s afraid of them. He thinks you go in there well and then you don’t come out. This is because his uncle went in after coughing up blood into his handkerchief, and then he died two weeks later in the same hospital bed. This is silly, you know. Neville just thinks this because he was a child at the time, and the uncle looked alright on the outside, but inside he had tumors as big as potatoes. Plus he had probably been coughing up blood for weeks and didn’t even tell anyone. I don’t understand why Neville can’t step outside of his childhood point-of-view.
Anyway, the doctor pushed on my stomach, asked me about the pain, and then sent me into one of those cave-like machines where they can see your insides. The nurse told me before I went in that it might be overwhelming if I was claustrophobic or if I had trouble staying still. She had music piped in, a man’s smooth, high-pitched voice that sounded as if he was singing with the last air available to him, as if he was trapped inside a glass case. He sang about how he was all out of love. I asked for Luther Vandross, but they didn’t have him.

I was scared, but when I got in, I realized that it was like when I was a child and used to go in my closet and lie on the floor, just to feel the small of my back go flat. I almost fell asleep. “Shoot,” I told that nurse when I got out, “that was like a vacation.” She laughed at that one, but I could tell her laugh was fake because she was doing something funny with the corners of her mouth.

Afterward, I sat on the table to wait for the doctor to come and talk to me. I hate those tables. I always feel like I’m wrecking everything because my ass is too big and I can’t lift myself up, so I end up ripping that white paper they have under you. Damn it, Neville, I thought. At least I’d have someone to talk to instead of sitting here staring at a glass jar of cotton balls. He was probably shooting the breeze with those Mormons, talking about prophets or whatever.

“Well, Mrs. Mather, I’ve got some good news and some bad news,” the doctor said, talking to me out in the hall, even before he came in the room. “Which do you want to hear first?” He seemed cheerful and carefully pulled out his white doctor jacket before sitting down, so I assumed nothing was too bad-wrong. He’d at least try to look sad, wouldn’t he, if I was dying?

“Go ahead with the bad, I guess,” I said, trying to get myself comfortable but ripping more of the paper.

“You have a growth on your ovary. A cyst, actually. That’s why you’ve been having cramps in your abdomen.”

“Okay,” I said. I wasn’t going to say anything or cry or whatever until I got the complete picture.

“The good news is that, in a post-menopausal woman such as yourself, a cyst isn’t much of a problem. It’s not cancerous, and unless you were trying to have a baby, it’s not going to interfere with your life in any way. I’ll give you some medication for the cramping.”

“Medication? You mean you don’t want to cut it out?” The paper crinkled under my thighs.

“Well, I really don’t see any good reason to. I like to avoid surgery when possible.” I saw him sneak a peek at the clock on the wall.

“But it’s not supposed to be there, right?”

“No, but it’s not dangerous. Just a dermoid cyst, made of extra skin and tissue.” He got up and pulled a book down from the shelf. “Here, you can see for yourself. It’s just a cluster of cells that got the wrong idea and started growing. See?” He pointed to a black and white photograph.

“That ugly thing? That’s inside of me?” I stared down at a white, greasy glob with wiry hair sticking out on the surface.

“That’s a dermoid cyst, dermoid coming from ‘derma,’ the skin. Those are follicular elements on the outer shell, and these are dental extrusions.” The doctor placed his thin white finger on the picture where two tiny deformed teeth-like things were. His wedding band reflected a golden light upon the cyst.

“Dental? You mean teeth? Good Lord!” I jumped down off the table.
“Now, Mrs. Mather, don’t get too upset. It’s not pretty to look at, but I promise you, it’s harmless. Let me go write you a prescription for your medicine.”

After he left, I just stood there with his book of atrocities in my hands. I stared at this cyst with its gray-looking hairs and three little teeth. Finally a nurse came in the room and frowned at me, leading a nervous woman behind her in a paper gown. She took the book away and closed it with a soft snap.

Driving home, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Growing hair and teeth inside me. It was like the ugliest baby you ever saw. And for some reason, the more I thought of it, the more I envisioned it hanging desperately off my ovaries, destined never to be born, smiling a half smile but with no eyes, the more I got used to it. The more I liked it even, just being there.

Those Mormons were showering when I got home. They had gotten where they were showering three and four times a day, sometimes more. I couldn’t stand it. Sometimes when I was putting my makeup on or brushing my teeth, I would pound on the wall with my fist until Neville came in and yelled at me. “You wanna make enemies with our neighbors?” he’d ask, puffing his chest out. “They ain’t even our neighbors — they’re on the other side of the wall!” I would shout back.

When I came in, Neville was on his back watching the T.V. He didn’t even look my way when I came in or ask how it went.

“Neville, I gotta tell you something. Something the doctor told me.” I came and sat at the foot of the couch. He didn’t make room for me, so I ended up sitting on his shins.

I could hear the Mormons turning off the faucet on the other side of the house, and the pipes were suddenly quiet.

“I told you no good would come out of it. I told you to take the damn Tylenol and forget about it,” he said, looking past me to the television.

“Tylenol doesn’t do anything for cysts on your ovaries.” I made my voice all dramatic-like, hoping to make him feel guilty.

“What’d he say then?” Neville met my eyes.

“So you wanna know? You are interested?” I leaned forward and blocked the T.V.

“Stop playin’ around. Just tell me.”

So I did. I told him there was a dermoid cyst living inside me, and that it was kinda like a child in a way, an ugly child, but still something almost human-like, with teeth and hair. He made a face while I was telling him, and I guess I didn’t do a very good job telling it either, but the thing was, right in the middle of my story those damn Mormons started showering for the fifth time that day.

“Goddamn Mormons!” I said, getting up.

“What are you doin’? Finish what you were saying.”

“How can anyone concentrate or hear themselves think when those guys are showering every five minutes?” I went toward the bathroom.

“Mona, wait—” Neville jumped up and followed me. I was already in there, hanging away on the wall.

“Stop running that water!” I shouted, pounding. Neville grabbed my wrist and held it.

“Are you crazy? Forget about the water!” At that moment, the water stopped, and we could hear the sound of the metal rings on their shower curtain as the Mormon drew the plastic fabric
back. I imagined one of them standing there on the other side of the wall, dripping and naked, his little wet penis dangling down, a wet bar of soap covered with pubic hair on the shelf, a few tiles separating us from his damp nudity. It made me want to throw up.

“Neville, wake up. You ignore every problem and pretend it’s going to go away. I can’t do that. I’m a doer. And I’m sick and tired of living across from those guys. Don’t you even care about my mental well-being?” On the other side, the shower curtain screeched closed again.

“That ship has sailed,” Neville said, turning his back.

“Where do you think you’re going? I can’t believe you’re talking to your wife like that. Your wife with a tumor!” I followed him into the bedroom.

“You said the doctor said it wasn’t anything serious. If you want to know the truth, I think you like having it! You think you’re going to use it against me, don’t you?” He stood there in the doorway looking like a giant robot, all squared-off. “But I ain’t gonna let you.”

“Tell you what. I do like it. It’s mine, half a person even, and none of you, thank God. I think I’m gonna name it. She’s Shirley, that’s who she is. And she’s all mine, how do you like that.”

Neville went into the closet and pulled out his suitcase.

“Oh, nice,” I said. “Real nice.” I stood there with my arms folded. He was bluffing; he had to be. I could feel some tears coming, but I swallowed them back.

He threw his stuff in randomly, as if he were going to a garage sale. A razor, a notebook, a few belts, a pair of pants, and a sweater and his bowling trophies.

“That’s real nice, Neville. You’re abandoning your wife.” My insides felt like they were being shaken loose as he struggled to zip the suitcase closed. It kept getting stuck, so he had to put his finger in it and guide the zipper along. If only he had ever shown that kind of patience with me.

Then he picked it up as if it were an extension of his arm and pushed past me out of the bedroom, down the hall, and toward the front door.

“Neville, for God’s sake —” I started.

“Tell Jason and Philip I said goodbye,” he said, motioning toward the wall and opening the front door.

“I can’t believe this…” My voice was small, like when I was in the cave-thing at the hospital and they asked me if I was okay.

He stopped and turned around to look at me.

“I ain’t abandoning you. You got your new friend, right? Your little tumor religion that will sustain you. You and Shirley.” He turned and shut the door behind him.

I haven’t seen him since.

∴

It’s been three weeks. I haven’t talked to anyone and no one’s talked to me. I don’t see anyone except those damn Mormons, walking through my yard to get the mail. Loping, you know the way they do. Completely at ease with themselves, just swinging their arms and legs around like monkeys.

The only time I go out is to get my groceries, and I don’t even bother washing my hair anymore. People watch me in the aisles as I pick up boxes of macaroni and mashed potatoes,
whatever it is that Shirley wants for the week. Then I hurry home, but it takes me forever to struggle up the stairs with all the heavy bags. Sometimes I just bring them as far as the first step and leave them.

I could move, I guess. But it feels strange, the thought of leaving, like I’m a bookmark holding a place in some great big book. What if Neville comes back? And even if he doesn’t, what else is out there? This side of the house is all I have, for me and Shirley. I’m like a single mother now. Besides, I can’t stand the thought of Mormons taking over this side too, cats everywhere.

Sometimes I stand in the window and watch them. They’re regular, like clockwork, about everything. They’ll come to get their mail at three sharp, even though sometimes the mail guy is late and doesn’t show until four. That makes me laugh, but in a kind of scary way that shakes up my insides. I like to watch them standing out there like fools after noticing the box is empty.

They’re like that about everything. Shirley knows, she sees, even though she has to intuit it all from her muffled spot deep inside. At ten in the morning, they put their letters in the box. Then they put the little red flag up, and for some reason, like idiots, they open the box back up to check to see if their mail is still inside. Like it might have disappeared magically. That sure cracks Shirley up.

And the showers. Shirley and I have a bet about whether they’ll be one minute late or early, or if they’ll be on time. Ten at night for the first Mormon. Then at quarter to eleven, the second Mormon climbs in the tomb still wet from the first one. And in the mornings, showers at seven. And at nine. There is no end to their showering.

I have begun to hate them. Reverend Littlejohn always told me I hold too much hate in my heart, and he was right. Neville used to say that too, but he wasn’t worth a damn, so I never took it coming from him. Shirley likes to hear the sounds they make. She smiles and shows her little teeth, and she listens until her curly hairs stand on end, but I can’t stand it. Shirley can laugh at the world in a way I can’t. I stand at the window, days dripping by, as new Mormons come to take the place of the old, new letters in the mailbox, more water to pour.

∴

The water has been running all night.

The sound keeps coming at me, through the wall, pouring continuously. Those Mormons are finally gonna flood the place. Gonna drown me with them. See how it doesn’t stop? All night. It won’t stop. They must be crazy. It’s gonna stop soon, isn’t it? They’re releasing all the water, from all the planet, just pouring out the tap, the neighborhood water, the state water, the oceans.

Shirley makes a little sound inside me. Glub, glub, she says. I stare at the clock so I don’t lose track of the hours. They can’t be showering; the hot water must have stopped hours ago.

Don’t they know the water is running? Perhaps it is a pipe in the wall, ruptured, leaking. But they have to call a plumber. They must do something before the water drowns us all.

If Neville was here, he’d know if it was a pipe. Not that he’d do anything about it.

The city will notice. There must be a gauge, some device which measures water output. Surely it has registered by now that enough water for the entire city has been drained by 240 West Elm. Men in hard hats with lights attached will be coming in the yard any moment now, ready with
crowbars to turn off the water to the street.

It must be that one of them has died. Slipped in the soapy shower, cracked open his head. The water must have run out of the tub by now, submerging the linoleum and soaking the carpet.

Or one of them has slit his wrists. He has had enough of living with the other one, their sad marriage, being attached to each other day and night, unable to go and lie down alone in a closet for even a minute, and he has severed the flesh covering his veins. He is floating there, on the other side, with the water pouring as if to take him back where he belongs.

Finally, at four in the morning, I sit up. Shirley says to forget about it, to be quiet and still, like it is inside my body, but I leap out of bed and run into the yard. There is a distant light coming from a section of the sky; I can see the day approaching. As I scurry to their side of the house, I expect there to be an ocean, to have to swim. What I see instead is a small sprinkler spinning, spraying water in tiny beads across their lawn, turning continuously all night.

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My friend Barbra calls me the next morning. She is the first person I have talked to since Neville.

“Mona, something wrong with you?” I can hear her bird screeching in the background.

“No. Who told you that?” As I hold the phone to my ear, I can hear the water running through the wall.

“Well, no one. Nothing. Never mind.” That bird keeps screaming like someone’s putting it in a pillowcase. I told Barbra where I read that a bird screeching is a sign of sickness, but she won’t listen.

“Oh, spit it out. What are you calling about?”

“Well, it’s just that everyone knows that you and Neville…” Her voice wanders off like it’s looking for a new mouth.

“You mean that Neville left me. Is that what you mean?” Just at that moment, a bird flies toward the glass window. “Sweet Jesus!”

“What happened? Are you okay?” Barbra is breathless.

“Yes, I’m fine. Relax, for heaven’s sake. A bird just about flew into my window. Probably heard your bird crying for help through the phone.”

“Well, Mona, the thing is, Neville told Sandra he’s worried about you.”

“Nice of him to tell her and not me.” There is no sound for a minute. Barbra makes a frustrated little whistling noise with her lips.

“So, are you?” Barbra asks.

“Am I what?”

“Are you okay?
“I’m fine. Shirley and I are just fine.” As I go to hang up the phone, I hear the bird, and then Barbra’s strangled voice.

“Who’s Shirley?”

Okay, I confess. Sometimes I wish it was Neville here instead of Shirley. Not that he wasn’t pure selfishness for abandoning me the way he did. But he did fit just right on the other side of the bed. Sometimes I have nightmares about Shirley trying to get out of me, and I nearly toss and turn myself out of the bed. At least Neville was always something soft I could roll into.

I have no idea where he is. I could probably ask someone, Barbra or Sandra or somebody, but I feel like a fool. I feel like those Mormons standing outside when the mail guy hasn’t yet come. How do you go about looking for your husband?

I wonder if he is somewhere, standing with his chest all puffy, the way that he does. I wonder if he is looking at all his old bowling trophies, polishing them with the edge of his undershirt and holding them up to the light.

I go outside and get on my hands and knees down by the chicken wire at the base of the fence. The wire is cool to the touch. I try to remember when it was still warm from his fingers, and Shirley makes a rushing noise inside, like it is all getting away from us. Whoosh.

On Sunday, two months after Neville left, I am out in the yard checking my mailbox when I feel something wet and soft under my foot. I nearly scream when I lean over and look at it, all red and bloody. It is a piece of raw meat, a dripping chunk of beef. I don’t do anything about it, just leave it sit there. As I walk up the porch, though, I notice a flicker of movement, and then I see them. Four of the cats are on it, tearing off pieces of the meat.

I stand at the top of the stairs, my mouth open. Their tails flick and twitch, and their whiskers drip blood onto their paws.

They start doing it at night. The Mormons come out and throw raw meat into my yard, leaving it for the cats. They stand there in their white shirts and skinny black ties in the dark and toss the meat about in the grass, sending a spray of blood from their fingers. I am careful that they don’t see me standing in the window. My body shakes in horror and turns cold, and I pull my robe tight around me.

I can’t sleep all night, just thinking about it. In bed, Shirley whispers listen, listen, and if I concentrate, I think I can hear the cats chewing in the darkness. I can hear the Mormons praying under water. I can see Neville fitting himself inside his suitcase, and peering his head up out if it.

Mona, zip me up, please.

I am up just before ten, full of anger. If Reverend Littlejohn could see me, he would shake his head slow from side to side, the way he does, and his glasses would slip down to the end of his
nose. Inside me, Shirley just shrugs, as if to say, don’t worry about it. Live and let live. But I can’t.

In the yard, the grass is just a little pink in places, and the cats have eaten well overnight, so there is nothing left for me to step on. I pull my robe tighter and follow the sidewalk around to the other side of the house. I know they are there because the first one just stopped showering.

I follow the chicken wire as if it will lead me to my destiny. Above my head, one of the upstairs windows is open, and I can hear their dumb laughter echoing, falling in sharp pieces down against my scalp. I clench my fists, and two cats approach me from the opposite direction, as if they are sentinels.

As I come around, I find myself facing their living room window. I do not see them standing there, watching me. Instead, directly at eye level is an illustration of Jesus Christ, blood trickling down from his crown of thorns. Their Jesus has wet eyes, as if it were slowly dying from stomach cancer, like Neville’s uncle. It just looks poisoned, as if you took all the hate in the world and ground it into rock and threw it as hard as you could at it. I am paralyzed, staring at it, seeing those eyes, feeling the silky rubbing of the cats against my ankles under my robe.

For the first time today, the pipes are silent. There is no water.

The door snaps open, and though I know it will be the two Mormons, letters in hand, I half expect to see Neville standing there, his suitcase still hanging off him.

He will tell me that he’s been secretly living over there all these weeks, showering, praying and weeping lukewarm tears. He will tell me he is ready for me to be his wife again, to accept our new daughter Shirley into his heart, to build things with me on our hands and knees, if only I can make room in my own heart for the prophets. If only I can release it all back to God.
One spring Bob Thompson caught a cold. He waited for it to go away, but it did not go away. It stayed on and slowly began to pull him down. Soon as he came home from the campus, he would take a nap, drag himself silently through dinner, watch the news, then go back to bed. “You really don’t feel well, do you?” his wife said finally. “It’s that cold you’ve got. Doesn’t seem to want to leave you. Maybe if you started drinking more orange juice, some vitamins.”

But nothing seemed to touch this cold which kept him in a kind of thoughtless, aching daze. In the past he had actually enjoyed the feeling of a cold coming on—he liked the vulnerable quality of being slightly achy, slightly feverish, and the tenderness his weak eyes evoked in his wife, but this cold alarmed his wife. She was an anxious woman naturally who put on a good act against her many fears while he knew she felt mysteriously in touch with some tragedy ready to befall them—something that lay just out of sight, arranged and sleeping, that when they least expected it, would be goaded by fate into stirring.

But no tragedy had befallen them. Their miseries were ordinary miseries—not enough money from his salary at the college. Not enough publications to his name. His mother and her mother—both widows who came to visit too often, who fought with hatred over the best way to make potato salad (the potato skins should be left on, soaked in cold water! No, soaked in vinegar is the only way!). Not much different from the hostilities that flew back and forth at work among his colleagues when he thought about it.

Then there was the time he had been mugged. At the downtown branch where he taught a night class. Jean had to drive through long distant crumbling slums to go get him at a dingy emergency room and bring him home with his nose swollen and bloody. A teenager high on drugs, flashing a knife near Bob’s face, had made him take off his coat and give it to him after finding Bob’s billfold had only three dollars in it. The mugger had been highly insulted and cursed him while he rubbed his coat in the snowy street, kicking it viciously. You tryin’ a act like I ain’t no good or sumpin, hu? Like I want somebody’s little shitty three dollar bills? I’ll kick your three dollar ass what I’ll do.

Bob had tried to let the coat lay there. “But I had to go back and get it,” he told the police, “I couldn’t just leave it. It looked like me, you know, lying there, I guess.” He had laughed as he talked to the young policeman who didn’t look up at him, or even seem to be alive although sweat stood out on his forehead as he wrote down what Bob was saying, as if he found him a nuisance.

“That cold has been going on a long time, hasn’t it?” Jean said again. She was running the dish washer, leaning on the sink with a damp cloth under her hand. She believed in decisions, and she wore a decisive look on her face now. She was a good looking woman in her late thirties, always watching her diet and taking walks. She wanted to start working again now with the kids in school. But then she was terrified of driving the car. Of doing something wrong in traffic. Being bawled out by an angry motorist.
They had three children. They took up all her thinking. Steven, the youngest was nine. Big for his age. And arrogant. A monster at times really, but sought after by the other kids at school. Very popular. The phone was always for Steven, never for the two older children, Debbie and Cole, who were whiny and unimaginative and thought their mother should explain their every complaint in long patient psychological jargon.

Because Jean had experienced something like a nervous breakdown once, from her bad childhood, she feared all her children might have one too, and she was extraordinarily careful with their heads least she damage them forever. So they tormented her. Why didn’t they have all the nice things other kids had? Why did Steven get all the good clothes? Why didn’t the good kids at school invite them to their parties like they did Steven? Why didn’t she at least try to understand what was going on in this town? They needed skate board lessons. Why couldn’t she drive them? Why was she so afraid of the highway? If anything happened to Bob and she had to drive it would be a painful crisis.

“I suppose I should go see about it. It’s been twenty-seven days now,” he told her about his cold. 

"Twenty-seven days? Then it must be an allergy,” Jean said optimistically. “Not a cold. But it won’t hurt to have the doctor take a look at you.”

The doctor’s office was just down the street, on a corner Bob passed each day on his way to the train. For years he had been aware of the white wooden doctor’s sign, Dr. Peter Jergland, M.D., painted in discreet antique lettering to match the neighborhood, the old town area with large homes like the one he and Jean rented. He had been aware of the doctor too for years, and as a healthy vigorous man, proud that doctors were unimportant to him. Proud that he lived outside this doctor’s orbit, defiantly well. But now on a Tuesday afternoon he sat in Dr. Jergland’s office, an uncomfortable body delivered up to the doctor, along with maybe everything else he owned. Once you come into a place like this, he thought, it’s like being in an airport: they own you. You cross a line where your power ends and another power takes over. You had to submit. His head ached behind his eyes and made him sweat.

The doctor was a young man, younger than Bob certainly, who was forty seven. The two men shook hands, yet were dismissive of each other at the same time, as if none of this would matter in a few hours from now. “How did you hear about me?” the doctor asked.

“Hear about you? Oh, I didn’t. I live just down the block,” he motioned over his shoulder, nervously. “Saw your sign. It always sort of worried me,” he laughed, “your sign. As if it were waiting for me. I come this way. To reach the train stop each morning.”

The doctor stared at him with a slight smile.

“Oh, yeah? Well, OK. Sit down there,” he directed Bob in a confident voice. “Let’s get some information here. See what’s happening.”

“Well, something’s going on, that’s about all I can say. Your blood pressure for one thing—”

“Low huh, “Bob said. “It’s always been low.”

“No. It’s not low. It’s out of sight. You’ve had this cold how long now? Weeks? A month? We’ll have to do some tests. No, it won’t take long. But I can’t do anything until we find out what’s wrong.”

The doctor lifted his gaze to the patient suddenly, as if to get to know him. As if it might be necessary after all to get to know him, and their eyes met for a second in which Bob felt his heart
wake to danger and a new angry need to get away came over him, or as if he had forgotten something, left the water running in the bathroom. Or his keys? Where were his keys? But it was impossible to get away. The doctor wanted to know everything. He had to go back over Bob’s life. The diseases Bob’s body had fought. The Mumps. Measles. Yes. No. Nothing more. A fall in gym class. Pushed by a boy who hated him for no reason. Tall ugly boy trying to frighten him. Bob hurried away from the office as soon as possible, down the street towards home. The doctor was exaggerating. He had nothing wrong with him, he was certain of it, nothing serious. He told his wife he had to get some tests, some sort of tests. “If you don’t have something wrong, they’ll find something for you,” he told her with a kind of haunted look in his eyes. She watched him climb the stairs pushing himself with vigorous bolting steps.

That night he dreamed the doctor was sitting in his living room talking with him. He wore a surgical cap and gown. A knock came on the door and the doctor went to answer. Bob recognized with alarm the voice of the teenager who had mugged him months ago, taken his coat and kicked it. He could never mistake that angry rambling voice. He tried to jump up and go confront the intruder but could not move. He could hear his name being called. The guy wanted to see him, but the doctor would not let him approach, he pushed the powerful dark body to the floor where they began to struggle and wrestle. Why did he see the man now as black? Not only black, but nude like a powerful dark marble statue come alive. Bob could see the doctor’s strong hands go around the black figure’s throat, squeezing until blood ran down between his fingers, dark thick blood over the man’s chest and on to the floor. Bob tried to move and yell. “Honey, you’re dreaming,” Jean said. “What’s the matter? You’re all sweaty.”

“So what is nephrosis exactly?” Bob asked, stunned. “What did you say—nephritis? I don’t know what that is. I’m a historian,” he said as if he had been singled out by some mistake. “An economic historian, you see. I study population. Population as an economic variable, you see. I’ve been doing a lot of studying on Eighteenth century population.” The doctor looked up at Bob who had begun to speak rapidly. “You know the English did a famous census in 1848,” he continued more slowly. “And from studying it I think the west industrialized due to its reproductive behavior. Family limitation. That’s my argument. That’s the book I’m writing. I’ve got to finish the book. The hard rational decisions people in the west made about family limitation. You see the question is this, why did the west industrialize and not the east?”

The doctor was listening to him with respect. When the kidneys failed to function properly, toxins built up and affected the mind and nervous system. Patients were often delusional. “That is,” Bob continued, “if times were bad, if crops failed, populations in these western regions did not increase. However, in the old civilizations like India, China, and Africa, you see, even now they keep up a steady stream of reproduction no matter what. no matter what happens they keep on with the high birth rates. People talk about birth control. Modern birth control methods. But birth control has always been around.”

“Right. There were methods, always a way, if people wanted a way,” the doctor agreed. “Yes. Family limitation has always been practiced in the West. A culture thing that the west can’t force on the east. So the old cultures are going to keep right on producing. Arabs and Mexicans going at over four per cent, and that’s an underestimation,” he said, as if warning the doctor of a catastrophe, and with such a warning, with its edge of educated fear, the doctor would have proof that he, Bob, was worthy of being saved. “This sort of mind set, to plan—plan ahead—
was all important to the industrialization of the west. I’ve got to make this message clear in my book.”

“I see. That is very interesting. And hard work too, I bet. I hope you make money from your ideas?”

“No. I don’t make any money at all,” Bob said slowly. “I’m ashamed of that.” The doctor looked at him. “I’m ashamed of everything,” he added, as if to himself.

He remembered something then—certain photographs of people with fatal diseases, faces plastered on cans in supermarkets. Slots for coins. YOUR COINS CAN SAVE THIS MAN! He thought of his own picture on a collection can. People dropping coins into a can, a container shaped like his skull.

The nurse spoke to him as he was leaving. “Mr. Thompson, the doctor will need to talk with your wife as well. Your wife will be in need of instructions. I’ll have to make an appointment for both of you. Is Tuesday a good time?”

“My wife? Jean? You mean Jean? Hey, I don’t want my wife upset, you understand,” Bob said quickly. He leaned over the counter in a confidential way. “She’s not like other women.”

The nurse looked at him—this fresh young nurse, dark hair, perfect teeth. Smooth skin. An herbal scent rose from her movements. His eyes were on her in a strange way, this germ free woman who one day would put in her files that he was dead. Robert Thompson (deceased). He knew she would do that, maybe already had the file out, a folder edged in black, marked fatal. But first he would get to her, upset her, this beautiful woman. Clean as lye. He reached for his handkerchief and wiped his nose. “Jean is seeing a psychiatrist now, you see. She has been seeing him for years now. She tried to kill Steven when he was born. That’s our son. She tried to kill him. And when he wouldn’t die she tried to give him away. Carried him out to the street and tried to force him on strangers. She’s just now getting better. She won’t drive in traffic. Won’t ride a bus. I don’t want her upset by all this.”

“I’ll see that the doctor knows all this,” the woman said openly, trying not to be shocked, but her large eyes were lifted to him in solid concern. Bob knew she was proud of her professionalism. Her skinny waist in the white uniform. Half her life was reserved for sex he suspected, probably with the doctor, the other half with thinking about it.

He and Jean no longer slept together. It was too uncomfortable for her. In the night the pain came to him as it never did in the day. It was worse then, in the dark, and he sweated in the dark. His swollen joints ached and his dreams were lurid, inflamed and rambling. He dreamed once he was in a sun-drenched wheat field, running alongside giant farm equipment that cut the wheat in wide swaths; but the machine operated on coins, and Bob had to keep up with it, panting and sweating as he put in the coins. Then too he dreamed of Niagara Falls. Of being transported across the wide roaring water in a tiny wicker gondola suspended from a pulley cable with the kids beside him, rocking it and laughing. He began to fight with the children, yelling until their laughter was replaced by fear.

Spoiled brat faces! Why did Jean always treat them as if they were ready to break? Well, he would see if they broke, if they splattered, he wanted to slap them until their eyes rolled around in their heads. He began to pull their hands lose from the sides of the basket while he screamed, “I’m dumping your guts! You’re going over the side! You’re going to hit the rocks like a glob of shit in an outhouse. You’re going to die!” he yelled, waking himself and clutching the side of the bed to
halt his dizziness. The room stopped reeling. Had it actually been moving with him? He sat up and reached for the water Jean always kept by the bed, like a thoughtful nurse. Why did he want to hurt the children? It wasn’t their faults. Yet he resented them, he admitted it. At times he even hated them, they were so greedy and whiny after life, wanting things to consume, their wants and greed never ended.

A light was shining under the door. Someone was awake. His wife’s voice streamed quietly, talking to someone on the phone. He looked at the clock by the bed. Only ten o’clock. So early! The entire night to go! Who could she be talking with? And laughing? What was so funny? Could she be laughing at him? He rose on his swollen feet and stood at the door, listening. He could make out only certain words. Swear words. But lightly said. Jean didn’t swear as a rule. She was very careful of her language. She was a mother, a woman who was proud, but again he heard her say something foul. “The goddamn people on the department. They want Bob to go on disability. So they can put in Rosen. Well, Rosen’s ass. They are trying to force him to take this disability just because he is on dialysis. So the dean had to step in and shut them up. The dean sure shut them up. He told them, You can’t fire a man just because he’s on dialysis. Sonsofbitches, they just want to see somebody die. Sure, just give it up, just like that! After all he’s gone through. All that grad school. All that money we paid those sodomites at Columbia just to get fucked around. I’ll tell you something funny,” he heard his wife saying.

There was a special instruction class they attended together with other patients who were to receive kidney transplants. The women patients he noticed became enormous. Grossly obese. But not the men. The men were thin. It was a mystery to discuss with the doctor.

A terrible restricted diet had to be followed or everything failed. There was to be no frozen or canned food. Everything must be fresh. No alcohol or even soft drinks. He let Jean take the notes.

She wrote down every word from the instructor and asked questions. She wanted to fix the best meals possible. What about potato salad? Was vinegar or cold water the best when you soaked the potatoes? She washed the fresh vegetables and fruits several times, to make sure no insecticide was left on the leaves. She made special bread so there was no doubt as to what went into it. No salt. She measured and weighed Bob’s food. She knew he was going a little crazy. Almost any little thing would set him off. If there were too much butter on the peas he went to pieces and frightened the children.

At times he seemed to enjoy frightening them. Telling them terrible things. He told them he had canceled his life insurance policies, so there would be nothing when he was gone. And that he had dropped his payments to Social Security. They would have to get jobs when he died, how did they like that? Only Steven he couldn’t frighten. Steven was made of stronger stuff than the others. He loved Steven most. He didn’t care if the other two knew this. A good scare was good for them.

But he couldn’t help his anger, Jean knew this. It was best to let the children have their meals apart, upstairs. So they carried their food everywhere in the house. Leaving dirty dishes on the stairs and in the hallways. What did that matter? As long as they were out of Bob’s sight.

She was perfect at fighting this battle. A real little warrior with that thick straight blond hair swinging. So blond that people didn’t believe it was real, but it was real. Jean was Swedish
somewhere in her background. Her maiden name was beautiful, Martindale. What a beautiful name for a woman, for a wife. Martindale. A dale for martins.

And Bob had never seen her more alive and radiant. He often walked to the upstairs window to watch her drive off. She was no longer afraid of driving, apparently. His illness had forced her to connect to reality so she had no time for her own fears. But he knew not to draw attention to this. He had heard a friend say once, *With these neurotic couples—they’re all the same. When one of them gets down the other one gets up. It never fails.* But what if...what if it were all an act? What if she were happy because she believed he was about to die? And she would soon be free? And all this kindness was to smooth a guilty conscience? What if she had someone? A boyfriend? Someone who kept asking her how much longer must he wait? Was that possible? If it wasn’t possible why was she always talking to someone on the phone?

Well he would fix that little game. He knew someone who was in love with him. Someone in the dialysis room. A woman who in fact had been one of his students several years ago. Very heavy then, overweight but brilliant. She had laughed at his jokes and was fascinated with him. Now she was slender, unrecognizable, but still in love with him. She had become a medical student after losing a hundred pounds. They wouldn’t let her into med school until she lost all that weight. Conda had a few problems but who didn’t? He would ask her to marry him. He would divorce Jean who had become so happy looking, so competent at helping him die. He would show her. He and Conda would run away together. But not until he had received his new kidney. His brother would give him a kidney. Jim would have to give him a kidney. Until then, Jean must drive him around. But he was so afraid of infections he seldom left his room. When he did, he wore plastic bags over his shoes, and left them outside the door for Jean to collect and burn. He insisted that they be burned. He had to fight this thing that was taking his life.

There was no urine when he tried, standing with his legs apart over the commode. He shook his penis as if to force out a few drops: he strained his abdomen, but there was no urine. He walked back to the bed and lay down again, his feet were so swollen they were beginning to crack. He called his wife and she did not hear him. What was wrong? Where was she? On the goddamn phone again? Talking to Jim, trying to get him to give a kidney. But Jim’s wife was against it. So his brother no longer came around.

He closed his eyes. Again he stood at Niagara Falls. It was wintertime with a howling gale beating the iced trees. Beating his face. Sea gulls flew and screamed in the swirling wind. He threw a piece of bread and the gulls dived in the white windy mist after it. Then someone was trying to get in his window, pounding around the frame. They were going to carry him out and throw him over the icy ledge. The gulls would swoop after the frozen crumb of his body. *No! don’t throw me over! Please, oh, great god, no!*

He was yelling with Jean’s hand holding his, trying to quiet him. “Bob, honey, you’re all right! Everything is fine. The new kidney is in and working, working perfectly. They’ve got a great match. To hell with your brother! Soon as they hooked it up, they say it turned pink and started to make urine. It’s a miracle, honey,” Jean whispered. “Oh, god, how I’ve prayed for this day!”

He thought he was in a cathedral somewhere. Praying. His wife praying in a secret compartment, her knees resting on a stone floor. Praying quietly. While he was attending service elsewhere, in the Canterbury Cathedral under the tall, windswept ceilings where a crowd of silent people sat in attendance, all the women in large beautiful hats, like English women wore so well.
Or was he back at Columbia? Listening to lectures? Hearing his papers praised? Now he remembered. Yes. He was in the old Public Record Office in London, where he had done most of his research, actually recounting the entire census of the 1840’s. The room was round and darkish, like the bottom of a bottle. Pale, long nosed assistants carried in the census record books to him, old large volumes with rotting calf skin that crawled with little watery mites when he opened the dry pages.

No one had ever used these pages, never even counted this census, he realized with disbelief, yet volumes of theories had been written about these figures. The English assistant stood over him, disliking Americans mucking about in their old treasures. In each parish the curate had to sign the returns, and in the parish of Harworth it was signed by the then cleric Patrick Bronte, father of the great Emily.

He would tell the doctors about this and make them proud that they had saved his life. He would embrace these men and let them know he was at one with them, one of the good men who marched against the darkness of ignorance, the kind who pulled this world forward with one hand tied behind his back. The thrill caused his mind to charge ahead with ideas. Excitement for living jumped through him, a train in a dark tunnel, that was his mind. He could feel his wounds as the blood beat against them, over and over, like so many little waves against the patched sea walls of his battered body.

So the hospital would discharge him soon, this very afternoon. Just days after the operation. They were finished with his body at last and gave it back to him, along with a bill that was in the millions. After all it had been four years since he had become ill. Four long years in which he had become someone else, in which he had been delivered over to strangers who had studied him, watched him like a fetus in a bottle. Now everyone was flushed and talking about his homecoming, as if at a birth, a christening.

Jean prepared a big reception for him inviting all their friends. The children were excited. They had cleaned their rooms, wrapped gifts, and written letters to the doctor thanking him for saving their father’s life. But why had not someone paid more attention to Steven! Why had they not noticed how overwhelmed Steven was? Just the other day he had cried out in anguish, “Dad looks like some old worm they’ve stepped on. Those old worms you see crawled up on the sidewalk after it rains! An old half dead worm!”

Why had no one paid attention when he wept and screamed at his friends, and then stayed by himself for hours. Had they paid attention they would have understood that when his father had come in the door from the hospital, walking stiff legged, but pink and smiling, the boy had become overwhelmed, overexcited, and in his excitement, did not know how to respond. So he ran to his father and hit him in the back as hard as he could with his fist. His fist hit the incision. Bob fell to floor with everyone screaming Steven! Oh, God No! No, Oh, My god, No, Steven!

Jean was beside him immediately. She knelt as if he had been gunned down, bending over him in terror.

It was too much after all the work! She had worried herself sick. Talked about kidneys and tried so hard to be cheerful, and now this! Now this! This childish incident. She began to bawl openly over him.

But Bob was smiling up at her, holding on to her.

“Oh, well, honey,” he said, “you know how it is. Easy come. Easy go.”
She looked at him with tears on her face, shocked with joy. “Then you’re not hurt? You’re laughing and you’re not hurt?”
“No, I’m fine. Not hurt at all.”
But he was.
ERIC MARONEY

Not My City, Not My People

Haifa, 1948

Abu Abdullah sat on his arm chair until his family told him it was time to leave. The chair’s wooden back bore an engraving of an emblazoned sun, its rays stretching forth in a multitude of slender arms, either rising or setting, the old man could never decide. The chair was important only as one star in a constellation of other furniture in the spacious rooms of the Abdullahs’ town house. An end table crafted in Damascus. A rug woven in Baghdad. A bureau hewn from a solid slab of Cedar of Lebanon. In his youth Abu Abdullah had traveled abroad on business: Tripoli, Beirut, Istanbul, sometimes even Paris, and he had a certain acquisitional fondness for well-made furniture, and continued to ship such objects home until he retired. Now at ninety, he sat completely blind, nearly deaf, his lawyer grandson yelling in his ear that it was time to go, the war had come to Haifa, that there was no time to pack anything but clothes, that they would come back when the shooting stopped, when the Arabs retook the city from the Jews. And then for the first time in a decade, the chair was empty.

Lieutenant Gad Shapiro considered shooting over their heads. But his Captain, a man named Kleingrosser, who had a mop of flaming red hair perched atop his head like a brilliant flare, told him to put his pistol down.

“You fool, Shapiro, what goes up must come down. You’ll kill some innocent Jew.”

“But how do we stop the looting, Captain?”

“Looting?” Captain Kleingrosser answered, squinting into the afternoon haze. Haifa lay before them, unguarded, like a giant who had fallen to the ground and was being eaten alive by a colony of ants. “Where you see looting I see expropriation.”

“But this order…” Lieutenant Gad Shapiro held out a regimental order typed on a piece of faded paper. Captain Kleingrosser waved it away like a gnat.

“HQ can’t keep up, Gad. You know what the established custom is, which they are now accepting? If you put a bed in a flat and spend the night, the flat is yours…”

“And what of the flat’s possessions?”

“We are supposed to inventory them…” the Captain explained as he waved his finger about the street, counting, “…one table, two chairs, a chest of drawers…as you can see, we don’t have the manpower to do this.”

So the Captain and his Lieutenant watched as the contents of Arab Haifa’s homes and flats were removed. Right before them floated a rug woven in Baghdad, a bureau hewn from a Cedar of Lebanon. It all evaporated into the haze floating in from Haifa harbor, was loaded onto drays and
trucks, carried on shoulders and carts, and was taken to other parts of Haifa, to Tel Aviv, Ramat Gan, Rishon-le-Zion, perhaps as far as Jerusalem. Only a chair remained on the sidewalk where the Lieutenant and the Captain stood. The heat was remarkable. A piper cub flew low overhead, taking pictures of enemy positions to the south. Lieutenant Gad Shapiro began to sway unsteadily in the heat.

“Sit down before you fall down, Shapiro,” the Captain said, as he gently pushed the chair forward. Shapiro barely had time to look at the sun on its back, either rising or setting he could not tell. He sat for a moment and then fell to the ground. A leg, no doubt wobbly to begin with, had broken. The Captain laughed as he offered Shapiro his hand.

“Well, at least we have discriminating looters.”

Meyer Hoffmann cobbled together a living any way he could. Buying here, selling there, squeezing out a meager profit from objects moving through his bony hands. He had arrived in Palestine in 1947 from a British internment camp in Cyprus, as thin as a reed from dysentery, and had been immediately sent up to the army.

He knew Hebrew from a Zionist youth group, so he worked as a quartermaster’s assistant for a brigade in the Negev, helping to squeeze the Egyptian army into an ever narrowing pocket, like a hoard of jackals killing its prey by slowly taking nips at its heels.

When he was discharged after the war he was even sicker than he had been in Cyprus. The Government Custodian of Abandoned Property in Haifa assigned him a small flat with a storefront facing the street, since he repaired furniture in Prague before the war. But men came in twos and threes and demanded to inspect the flat and the storefront, asking brusquely to see the lease, claiming they were Jewish Agency officials. He quickly realized that these people were imposters trying to bully him out of his legal property.

Hoffmann went to the police, but they were too understaffed to investigate. One night a rock was thrown through Hoffman’s store window. The next day he took a board and sawed it in two pieces. With one half he covered the broken window, and with the other he wrote in careful, large Hebrew letters: MEYER HOFFMAN FURNITURE REPAIR, and then beneath it, in smaller letters, he wrote the same in German, in deference to the many German Jews in the neighborhood.

That afternoon a man came into the store and told Hoffmann that it was a disgrace to have a sign with that language after what that nation had down to our people. The man had no doubt that Hoffmann would suffer grave consequences if he continued to so brazenly display that language, the tongue of murderers.

So Meyer Hoffmann took down the sign made from the board which he had sawed in two, and sawed off the German portion. He took the long scrap of wood and broke it against his lean knee, then silently propped it up against the stove in the corner for kindling.

Later that day, his first customer entered. He left four pieces of furniture: a small chest of drawers badly chipped on one side and missing a board on the other, an ottoman with its upholstery ripped and its stuffing hanging out, a desk with holes he imagined were from bullets, and a chair standing on only three legs, with a sun, either rising or setting he could not discern, emblazoned on its back, and the broken leg sitting on its seat.
Hoffmann supposed the furniture was looted from some Arab’s house. His suspicions were confirmed when he opened a drawer of the desk and found a bundle of papers written in Arabic. A deed? A lease? The stamp of the British Mandate Government adorned each sheet of paper, and a page in English had been attached to the back. Hoffman did not know either language, so he put the papers near the German sign, thinking, now I have paper to light my kindling when the cool breeze blows in from the harbor at night.

The chair was the simplest repair, so Meyer Hoffman picked it up in his thin arms. He examined it through the veil of cigarette smoke rising from his lips, then felt dizzy at the exertion of holding the chair aloft, and had the terrible urge to retch. He was not a well man, but he had to make a living.

*Haifa, 1950*


Tzabar Ben-Eli, formerly surnamed Eliovich, carried everything he could to the flat, spent the night on an army cot, and then told his wife to come in a week. Later that week, men from the Jewish Agency came and asked for a lease. Ben-Eli would not be fooled. He told them to go away, that any jackass could say he was with the Jewish Agency, that he was a veteran who would not suffer fools lightly. The men showed Ben-Eli a lease on Jewish Agency letterhead. The flat was reserved for a couple from Poland.

Ben-Eli waved his discharge papers at the men and showed them his field medals, non-stop talking all the while. After much wrangling, the men agreed to lease the apartment to him retroactively. His name was added to a long list of such after-the-fact occupancies, and the men departed.

All the furniture Ben-Eli had brought to the flat had been damaged. When he was stationed in Haifa, he had taken it all from empty Arab flats, one of them quite grand, and hid it out in the countryside.

He could not bring his new wife to this flat, with its broken furniture and nauseating smell of disinfectant. So he spent all his discharge money on items for the apartment and the repair of the furniture. He took the furniture to the Hoffmann fellow down the street who only charged a pittance for his services. Ben-Eli almost felt sorry for him when he handed the man his meager payment. But Hoffmann was a greenhorn, and they all had to learn about life in Israel the hard way. The furniture gleamed. The sick man was truly a craftsman.

Ben-Eli placed the chair with the sun, either rising or setting, he never had time to really ponder it, by the only window with ventilation. After his wife had their daughter, she would nurse the child on the chair. The infant would feverishly suck and suck until she was forced to take a few breaths, and then do it again, until she fell into black slumber.
Nazareth, 1952

Elias Abdullah was a lawyer of excellent repute. In the Mandate days he had represented British, Jewish, and Arab clients in the courts. Now, from his cramped office within the “Green Line,” or the area set as Israel’s border at the conclusion of the 1948 war, he filed a flood of petitions with the Israeli courts to gain possession of his family’s properties. These included an orchard and vineyard on the north slope of Mount Carmel, a town house in Haifa where his grandfather had lived until the city was emptied of Arabs, and even some plots of land in west, and hence Jewish, Jerusalem.

Elias Abdullah believed he had an excellent case for the return of most of his lands, even though he knew they were already in use by the Jews. He was forbidden to enter Haifa, but he was informed from some former Jewish colleagues that his grandfather’s house in Haifa had been looted—every pin carried away to the four winds—and divided into flats. The agricultural land on Mount Carmel had been annexed by an adjacent kibbutz. The plots in Jerusalem were close to the No-Man’s-Land between Israel and Jordan, and therefore garrisoned by the Israeli army. Although nearly all of his family had fled abroad to Cairo or Beirut, he had remained. They were officially “absentees” under the new laws, so their property was considered forfeited and state-controlled. But Elias had never left and even had Israeli citizenship, so he had hope of getting back at least some of his family property.

At first, his case seemed to be moving at a brisk pace and he had no doubt he would get a favorable conclusion by late 1952 or perhaps early 1953. Then he began to encounter roadblocks. His friends in various government agencies began to loosen their associations with him in a direct proportion to how hard he pushed to get the family land back. Then some were juggled around in a shakeup of the various departments of the Land and Property Bureau. His hold on matters was slipping. Sometimes the phone in his dingy office would ring and no one would immediately respond despite his repeated hello, who is this, in Arabic, English, and Hebrew.

After three years of motions, Elias Abdullah was finally given an official status. He was a ‘present absentee.’ He had fled his home and properties, even though he had remained in Israel. Despite the fact that he was an Israeli citizen, he had no right to the family land. He had become both ‘present’ and ‘absent’—a paradoxical, even dangerous legal situation, that practically meant he could not redeem a single olive from the family land.

All along while struggling to get back his own land, he had taken on similar cases. One particularly thorny issue was the seizure of properties overseen by the Waqf, or the Muslim religious authority which maintained religious sites, shrines and land. If Waqf lands had been abandoned during the fighting, they became Israeli Government property. Under Islamic law, all Waqf land belongs to God, so in open court Elias Abdullah asked “So has God now become a ‘present absentee?’”
Tzabar Ben-Eli was called up to active duty. The duty officer who arrived said it would be a short assignment. He tied his boots on the chair with the rising or setting sun, picked up his rifle where it leaned on the window sill, and reported to the garrison. His squad was met by an Army intelligence officer. They woke up an Arab man in the middle of the night and allowed him to pack a bag of clothes, but did not let him change out of his pajamas. The truck drove east until they reached a bridge over the river. They watched the man until he had crossed over into the Kingdom of Jordan. And in this way was Elias Abdullah deported from the State of Israel.

*Haifa, 1956*

When the period of mourning was over she removed the black cloth from the mirrors, took a nice cold shower, packed some bags, and dressed her little girl. She would no longer live in this flat.

“But what of the furniture? Your things?” her mother pleaded.

“I’m having them all sold. I don’t care. I’m sad Tzabar was killed, but you and I both know this was not a happy marriage.”

“Shhh,” the mother leaned forward. “The child. Your husband’s blood is still fresh in the sands of the Sinai, and you say such things. He is a hero of Israel.”

“He was hit by a jeep, mother. An Israeli jeep. Mother, you must close the door. The agent will sell this shit.”

The agent kept reminding the small crowd of buyers that the man who had lived in the flat had died in the Sinai Campaign, that he was a hero, and that the widow was so desperate she was selling her prized possessions to keep clothes on her little girl and buy bread for her empty tummy. But this did not help at all. The agent walked away from the auction with money much below his expectations. The commission had hardly been worth his time.

*Ramallah, 1967*

“Goddamn it! Shit! Amit, get the hell in here!” The police chief howled, and a young man poked his head in the door. His blue police shirt was stained purple from sweat at the armpits.

“Yes, chief?”

“This is it, huh? The new chair?”

“Yes sir,” Amit replied. “Better than the old one, no?”

“Absolutely not. What the fuck. A sitting room chair? I feel like I’m in an iron maiden -- or on a bed of nails. And it stinks. The top smells like borsht and the bottom like onions. Where did you get it?”

“It was shipped from Haifa, I think, along with some desks and tables,” Amit replied.

“I want it out of here by day’s end. I want an office chair. A proper office chair that swivels, with wheels, so I don’t feel like a mummy in a tomb. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.” Amit answered as the chief began to squirm.

“Actually, get this piece of shit out of here now. I mean right now.”

“But we don’t have any more chairs…”
“Amit, you are a real basket case, you know that? Do you understand Hebrew? We are an occupying force. This is the West Bank. Go to the mayor’s office and requisition one.”

“Just like that? OK, boss. It’s not my city, not my people…”

“Damn it, man,” the chief got up and roughly dragged the chair across the floor. The legs screeched against the pine boards of the Quonset hut. He cursed a myriad of curses and hauled the chair, puffing and sweating, out to the road which led to Nablus. He threw the chair, and somehow it landed on its legs. In the bright sunshine, the chief noticed a crack in one of the legs: an old repair which was beginning to fall apart. He lit a cigarette and picked the chair up. His father had been a carpenter in Fez, and the chief had spent much of his youth surrounded by wood, covered in sawdust. Now that he did not have to sit on the blasted thing he noticed that the workmanship was fine. Under the patina of age and misuse, the bones were strong. Even the repair was old but sound. All that was required were five minutes with the correct tools and glue.

The chief placed the chair carefully on the ground. He wouldn’t sit on it in the office. Sending the thing here was an affront. Police work required proper equipment, including chairs. He pushed the chair out at arm’s length, careful not to put pressure on the cracked leg, and squinted at the carved sun through a veil of cigarette smoke. Amit walked by, limping slightly, as if he had a pebble in his boot.

“Amit, get the hell over here,” the chief called without looking at the boy. “What do you think, is that a rising or a setting sun?”

On hearing this, the boy grew nervous, fearing that in the flip of the coin that was his answer, he would call the wrong side and bring down the chief’s wrath.

“Setting?”

“Jackass! It is rising!” the chief spat. “You are a ‘half-empty glass’ man, Amit, and you’d better cut that shit out now. If you have a glass that is only half-filled with lemonade, you still get to enjoy it, even on a foul, hot day, in a place like this, the armpit of hell. So it is half-full, you dimwit. You don’t even drink the empty part, it doesn’t exist. Therefore if you have a chair like this, a fine piece of craftsmanship, and this beautiful carving of a sun upon it, which must have taken someone weeks of patient labor with a skilled hand, why would it be setting? A sun as beautiful as this has just risen, and it has a full day of beauty before it…”

“So you want to keep the chair, chief?”

“Damn your bones, Amit! No! Stop dawdling and get me another chair.”

As Amit limped away, the chief sat heavily on the chair. In front of him the road was clogged with civilian traffic, in cars, trucks, drays, on foot, streaming back to Nablus after the fighting. The hot sun broiled the chief’s bald head, so he returned to his office. He worked for five minutes standing up, shifting from foot to foot, until he bellowed for Amit.

“Did you stow that chair away, under lock and key?” the chief asked.

“What chair, chief?” the boy asked.

“By the road. Damn you!”

Amit stiffly stood aside while the chief stepped around him and outside. The chair was gone. The chain of Arabs continued to spool up the road to Nablus, with no end or beginning in sight.

“Amit, you imbecile. I told you. If you don’t nail it down, these Arabs will steal it. Even if you nail it down they will try to steal it. I lived with them in Fez for most of my life, so I know.
Even if it’s nailed down, they’ll try to pry it off. A beautiful piece of work, and some peasant will use it to roost his chickens. A pitiful waste. Now get me another chair!” and the chief pushed Amit toward a row of parked jeeps.

The chief worked standing up for ten minutes until his legs cramped. Then threw down his pen and marched away. Standing there wasn’t worth the effort at all.
JAMES SEPSEY

Scanners

I was on my way to return Scanners when I first saw the man in the overcoat. I had only watched part of the movie, the part where the two men have the scanner duel and one blows up the other’s head. I was going to ask the clerk at the video store if they had any kind of guarantee on movies that you enjoyed in high school but when you watched them twenty years later the novelty had worn off. I thought that would be a funny thing to ask. And that was how I felt about Scanners.

The man in the overcoat actually looked like a character out of Scanners. Which seemed so typical of my life. Balding, thick glasses, a mustache, an overcoat, burgundy slacks. He didn’t stalk me or expose himself, which was nice. He kept a safe distance and stood motionless under the marquee of the movie theater. In our town we have just one movie theater, still with its original marquee from the 1930s, still with just one screen.

I watched the man watch me enter the video store. Without looking outside I told the video-store clerk there was a man in an overcoat watching me from across the street, under the marquee of the movie theater. When the clerk looked out the window there was no one there. I then looked out to confirm this. And soon let it go.

Scanners did not age well, I said.

The clerk raised a hand over his head and said he begged to differ. He said Scanners was one of David Cronenberg’s most stunning achievements. The older, he said of Cronenberg, the better. Then added that The Fly was the beginning of the end.

Then you’ll remember Rabid, I said, Cronenberg’s first film.

Actually Shivers came before that, he said.

I didn’t remember Shivers but I wasn’t about to let my guard down to some know-it-all nineteen-year-old. I played along like I knew that Shivers had come first and I’d just mixed the two films up. I was one of the few girls in high school who watched horror films. My boyfriends were frightened by the videos I would bring over. But if they couldn’t stomach my movies, good riddance.

In eighth grade I even used to write and edit my own little horror magazine, Graphic Violence. I’d type out reviews to all the horror movies I’d watch on HBO. Thanks to HBO I was able to see the R-rated horror films that my parents would never take me to see at the theater. This would have been where I first saw Scanners. Someone at school who’d seen it in Los Angeles told us all that a guy’s head explodes. There was nothing else in this world I wanted to see more than that.

Doesn’t even look like you watched the whole thing, the clerk said.

I asked what he was talking about.

He showed me the videocassette that I had neither watched to the end nor rewound. My goose was cooked.

I should probably give it another chance, I said.
He agreed that would be the thing to do. He said he wouldn’t charge me to re-rent it. It was on him so long as I watched it through to the end. I promised to do that.

When I left the video store I didn’t see the man in the overcoat. It would be over a week before our second, closer encounter.

That night I had the first of many migraines. I’d had my share of headaches before, but never so severe, the type that make you nauseous. I momentarily joked that the man I had seen in the overcoat was a scanner who had accessed my mind. After the third migraine in less than a week I didn’t find that notion so funny anymore.

During the week I managed to watch Scanners almost thirty-four times. I called out sick for work one day and watched it almost eleven times in a row. I couldn’t tell you anything about the plot or characters—but the gore certainly aroused me. When it came time to return the video I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

I called the video store and spoke with the clerk. I told him I wanted to buy the videocassette of Scanners. He said he couldn’t sell it because it was the only copy in the store, kind of a collector’s item. He said he could get it for me on DVD but I said I didn’t want it on DVD. I liked handling the videocassette. I liked opening the brown plastic box and running my fingers over the dust in the ridges. I was nostalgic for this particular copy and wanted no other version. I decided I would keep it.

A few days later I felt guilty and decided to return the video. On the way I saw the man in the overcoat, under the marquee of the movie theater reading a newspaper. For whatever reason I wasn’t afraid of him anymore. I returned the videocassette and decided to go and meet him.

I crossed the street and when he saw me coming he folded his newspaper and put it in his pocket. I said hello and he took off his hat and bowed to me. He had on black gloves that I hadn’t noticed before. I told him my name and he said it was a nice name. He did not tell me his. He asked me to put out my hand. When I did he pretended to put something in it. Then he squeezed it shut and said not to open my hand unless I saw no other way out. When I asked him what he meant he put his hat back on, made his way down the sidewalk, around a corner, and was gone. I would never see him again.

That night the migraines returned. For dinner I had planned to only eat two pieces of sourdough toast, no butter, and a plum, but as the migraine worsened I started looking for other things to eat. I ate bacon and a bowl of Life, then decided I had to have a steak. But I didn’t have a steak so I drove to the butcher and bought a three-pound filet mignon. When I got home I cooked it in olive oil with a little garlic but I couldn’t wait for it to finish so I ate it half-raw, like Mia Farrow as Rosemary in Rosemary’s Baby. And after all that I still had a migraine.

I knew I had to see Scanners again. I had to go back and rent the exact same copy I’d just returned. I had to watch it again and exorcise the pain from my brain. After all I’d eaten I was still famished. I put a handful of Triscuits in my purse, some salami, and headed out. Each step made me dizzier, more nauseous. I tried to open my eyes as little as possible—the tiniest strand of light made me want to puke.

I got to the video store a little after ten. They were already closed. I looked inside and saw my young clerk. I tapped on the door. He saw me and waved, came to the door and opened it. I stepped inside and he told me he was closed and I told him I knew that. I just need to rent Scanners again, I said. And I’ll pay for it this time. Handsomely. He reached behind his neck to scratch it.
Then he brought his free hand over and gripped the elbow of his scratching hand. Then he said, You know what—someone tried to rent it just before we closed. And for some reason I told him no, I just knew you’d be back. I asked my young clerk to explain this someone. I don’t know, he said, he was bald, had glasses, an overcoat. Kind of creepy and intense.

As my clerk went after the video I looked out the window and saw what I thought were snowflakes. But they couldn’t be snowflakes—not in July. When I got a closer look I could see they were ashes. Falling from the sky. From the clouds. In place of rain. They were sticking to the window like snowflakes and sliding down leaving sooty streaks on the glass. I looked at my young video clerk and he just shrugged. I don’t know what the hell is happening to this world, he said. I rented the video. We said goodbye.

When I got home I put on Scanners and poured a glass of beer. I watched the movie and sipped my beer and started to feel relieved. But as soon as the movie was over the migraine returned. I rewound the movie, watched it again.

On the third viewing the videocassette broke. Long loops of videotape came spilling out of my VCR. I pulled the videocassette out and watched in horror as the tape snapped. There was no way to put it back together. No way to ever see it again.

I sat on the couch as the migraine returned. My temples throbbed and a wave of nausea washed over me. I thought about the man in the overcoat. I thought about what he had put in my hand, how he had said to never open it unless I saw no other way out.

I saw no other way out.

I opened my hand and found nothing there. I took it and put it in my mouth. I swallowed it and lay on the couch. The migraine was gone. I shut my eyes and felt my way through a warm fog of blood. I went to places I would never see again. I walked high above the ashes.
She can’t remember who she is. Being toppled will do that to you. Statues of bronze, terra cotta, marble hit the hard ground, shatter. The headache lasts for millennia.

Here’s one scenario. She wakes up in a dark room, hands pressed against throbbing temples. The door used to be locked but the hinges have rusted off. She pushes it open and staggers out into a passageway.

Courtiers and guards see her, throw themselves cowering onto the stone-paved floor.

Oh get up, for earth’s sake, off your knees!

They flutter around her as she walks, she’s trying to get her bearing, steadies herself against a wall, one of them is saying, “You’re probably annoyed about the divorce,” which makes no sense. She comes to an enormous chamber lit by torches. Slowly her blurred vision clears and she focuses on a small figure sitting on a throne: a minor sky-god, she seems to recall.

Far-away humans, tiny as ants, rattle spears and march into battles. The sky-god is on their side, they think, their piled-up corpses are sure to please Him. They don’t see His glassy-eyed indifference, don’t know that all those bodies are hardly enough for a matchhead to light a torch in His throne room.

The courtiers watch her anxiously. “He’s not deliberately misrepresenting the facts when he says he’s single,” they say. “He genuinely has no recollection… it was long ago…”

She is nauseated. Back in the small dark room she squats against the wall, she needs to plan her strategy. There is a sword strapped to her hip—has it been there all along? It’s heavy, and the hilt is rusted. She pulls it out and the blade is as bright and sharp as you could wish for in any epic.

Why am I telling you this? Stories are a crucial element of the universe, no matter how you name the ingredients. Earth, air, fire, water, and stories.

Cosmic dust, superheated gas, stories.

Matter, energy, stories.

Think of me as the ultimate omniscient narrator.

They gather in secret, pore over blueprints of the castle, which is conveniently full of secret passageways and trap doors. Her followers bask in righteous anger, they’re going to right a wrong, unseat a usurper. Their queen is everything they could wish for in a goddess-warrior: flashing eyes,

They fight their way to the throne room. She knocks the cutlass from the sky-god’s grip and backs him against a wall. The point of her sword is at his throat, she has only to lean on it to drive it in.

“You told them I never even existed,” she says.

He mumbles excuses, eyes glazed. “I have no recollection of that,” he says. “That statement is now inoperative.”

There’s something she’s been trying to remember since she first woke up in the small dark room, it nags at her like a thought interrupted. If she had a little quiet she could chase it down, but who can concentrate amid shouts and stomps and clanging swords?

“Silence!” she roars.

She closes her eyes. Breathe. Pulse.

She would like a change of scene. So would I. Let’s do that.

∴

She sees herself hobbling away from the castle. She relaxes, feels herself expanding, multiplying, and it’s time to picture a new scenario:

A conference room, polished oak table, upholstered chairs. Dry-erase boards on easels.

The Executive Committee.

Coatlicue makes a gavel appear, slams it down. “Can we get this meeting started?”

“Where’s the agenda?” someone says, and they all laugh. Being deities, they’re not good with imposed organizational structure.

Carafes, thermoses, and glassware are still being passed around, goblets for ambrosia, mugs for coffee.

Baal tastes a doughnut and grimaces. “They’re greasy,” he says. “And heavy. Can’t we manage to produce fluffy doughnuts?”

“The oil wasn’t hot enough,” Morana says. “If it’s not 365 degrees Fahrenheit, no amount of godliness will keep a doughnut from being heavy.” She points to a dry-erase board and on it appears the List of Immutable Things, the fourth item of which is:

Temperature of Cooking Oil for Doughnuts

Brigid looks around. “Someone’s missing.”

The Wife rests her head in her hands. The headache still hasn’t gone away. She’s not sure who she is. Someone calls her Asherah, which sounds familiar, but then again, so do Anath, and Astarte.

And it’s hard to concentrate. Beside her the Trickster keeps changing shape, he’s Raven, he’s Eshu, he’s Anansi.

Also distracting is the cross-chatter, the kind you’d expect at a confluence of divinities:

“Have you tried incarnating as a bull? I recommend it.”

“You know what I never get tired of? The aurora borealis.”

“I like the solar winds myself.”

Muyingwa nods toward the empty chair of the minor tribal sky-god. “Where’s he gone to?”
Gyhlddeptis shrugs. “Is he gone? I hadn’t noticed.”
“I heard him say our organizational chart is too chaotic,” Pan bellows from the other end of the table.
“Organizational chart?”
“That’s what I said.”
“I’ve seen a press release.” Kuan Yin waves a small leather-bound book with gilt-edged pages. “It appears he’s claiming he’s some kind of Big Boss, and anyone who doesn’t believe that gets eternal damnation.”
“What is?” says Yemayá.
“Not sure, maybe it’s in the appendix.”
“What an ego trip,” Osiris mutters.
They can’t help giving sideways looks at Changó, another virile, male, bolt-hurling deity.
“Hey,” he says, “we’re not all alike. That guy has no sense of humor. And he can’t dance.”
The Wife realizes that the worst thing about the small dark room is that she’d forgotten these others, caught up in her domestic drama. A particle flung off from the whole. She’s been on the front lines. The others don’t even know there is a front. They don’t know they’re in danger. Her headache is subsiding now. All she can think about is how much she wants to protect them.
“He’s claiming that the rest of us don’t exist,” she says. “And that he’s the equivalent to Ultimate Reality.”
Murmurs of astonishment.
They decide to form a subcommittee. Atabey and Mithra start a sign-up sheet.
“He’s only been gone five minutes,” Athena says. “How much harm can he have done?”
Soon they’re bored. They start levitating the conference table.
.
Back at the castle—no, are you tired of the castle? So am I. Let’s have a scene on the beach. Sunshine, white sand, crashing waves. You fill in the details.
The Wife sits at a rolltop desk just beyond the tide line, reading page proofs of the minor sky-god’s press release. The desk is made of quarter-sawn oak, stained golden and varnished to a high gloss, the kind you see in museum-houses where the furnishings of great men are preserved, so perfectly solid and ponderous, so authoritative. But it only seems that way, because remember the crashing waves? Inevitably they will smash the desk to flotsamy bits or wear it down like they do with rocks, so if someone were to analyze the sand on this beach one day they would find microscopic grains of stone, pulverized shells of sea creatures, bits of rolltop desk.
At her feet sits a follower, a foolish little person, who wants to write a story about the fall of a male sky-god.
“You think I have no right to be angry?” the follower asks.
“I didn’t say that.”
“I’ve been cheated. Growing up, no one ever told me about you.”
“I was there, shrunk to size. In stained glass and tapestry. In stories.”
Stories, the stuff of the universe. She speaks to gods, births a god. In a garden she reaches for fruit, defies unjust orders in her hunger for wisdom. She spreads a cloak full of red roses.

The Wife examines the page proofs. She’s going to make changes in the new edition. If generations of monk-scribes could do it, so can she. Rifling through the pages, she finds a place where the god is jealous, angry, hurling threats. Go ahead and dance for the golden calf, she pencils in. I’m the calf, the gold. The dance. The dust your feet kick up. Gentle, motherly woman with blue cloak and halo? That too. I also dance in cemeteries, naked except for necklace of skulls, headdress of snakes.

“You keep changing shapes,” says the foolish little person.

“That’s because you’re not sure what I look like.”

“Shouldn’t you decide that, being the deity and all?”

The Wife flips through the pages some more. That garden story, she always felt it could use an alternate ending: You can’t throw me out, I’m leaving!—something like that.

The follower is sulking. She kicks her toe at the sand. The waves churn up, leap toward them. She scrambles backwards on her elbows, water swirling around her.

“You can’t just change the pronouns, make me Boss Lady,” the Wife says. The desk is starting to float. “If I topple him from the throne, the throne vanishes too.”

The follower gives up and lets the waves grab her and twist her around before tossing her back on shore, limp and bruised. She sits up, picks the seaweed out of her hair.

“And maybe he needs to be rescued,” she tells the foolish little person. “Have you thought about that? Maybe he doesn’t want to be up there in the sky, he’s woozy from the height. Waiting for someone to help him.”

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**Memo**

From: Executive Committee
To: You
Date: Today

Think of an eyelash, a fingernail, a lung cell. Why should your eyelash worship you?

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The follower doesn’t have a polished-oak rolltop desk, but at least she had a notebook, a pen. No more. She needs both hands to climb the ladder.

She has only one question, and it couldn’t be simpler. Why?

But the sky-god’s busy trying to construct people out of different materials. He tries particleboard. He tries bread and honey. He refuses to answer her and she’s annoyed at his arrogance, but maybe the wind stole her voice, she thinks, maybe he’s confused. He keeps changing shapes: burning bush, scowling marble sculpture, fresco of white-haired man.
She waits till he turns into a simple wooden statue with fading paint, then she grabs him and tucks him against her hip. She looks down at the vast amniotic ocean from which they came, the warm, dark, salty tides. They jump.
Yes, I was the one on the dock who didn’t wave, clutched her purse grim-lipped til the boat was a bobbing dot. Perhaps you think me cold. Not a modern lover. An unfortunate from that generation taught true ladyship must avoid all public expression of feeling. It’s not the case. I didn’t have a purse. I had to hold down my skirt in the wind lest I bare the thick calves that happen to be the particular affliction of my family. We buried my father the week before with his red handkerchief and a jar full of the ashes of days, and I just wasn’t up to joy. Actually, my hands were over my stomach wondering if anything was there growing in the dark—knitting and knotting nothing into shape. Or consider this: his fist already growing a shadow on my left cheek. If you are a slave to the truth, he and I are only acquaintances bumping around the same faded furniture and teacups. I had nowhere else to go. He coughs up phlegm every night and once a splotch caught on his collar. I miss my mother. My ferns wilted on top of the radiator. The first time he patted my shoulder I saw afternoons, marching all in a row, and myself there, old and ineffectual, a riddle no one any more cares to guess standing in front of the kitchen sink tentatively digging a bobby pin deeper and deeper in my drying scalp.
Outside My Window

leaves hooked to
trembling catch
cups of light, and call out
to the books on my shelf.

When the final shout comes,
even the sixth edition of Modern
Theatre will jump
out of its spine and fall, fall,
fall back into green and gasp.

Punctuation
washed away.
Til then, everything
is bound.
Everything waits.
Confession

I have plain eyes and a plain face
no one lingers on
to praise or pity.
I do my weeping behind closed doors
and keep the midnight hour
at midnight (near enough).

I like to rise before the sky stirs
and get in the car and drive and drive
to where the houses are scars
taken root in the earth
and the trees around them keep
growing silence—
new places for the light and dark
to try on each other’s hands.

I love breakfast far away.
Knowledge of another country
before the eggs are awoke
—startle white in the pan.
T-Pain and the Robots

"Robot voices" became a recurring element in popular music during the late twentieth century. Several methods of producing variations on this effect have arisen, of which the vocoder remains the best known and most widely-used.

—Wikipedia

Most days he would just stare
into the red reflectors of his toy robot’s
eyes until he got dizzy. At breakfast,
he would pretend his Cocoa Puffs
were meteors floating in the Milky Way.
At night, he’d sneak into the kitchen,
steal the aluminum foil,
and wrap it around his arms and legs.
He painted his Little League helmet silver.
Built an interplanetary army
out of old spark plugs and mufflers he lifted
from the auto body’s dumpster.
In the summer, when his mom brought
out the fan to shoo away those sticky Tallahassee
nights, young Faheem would sing straight
into the whorl of blades for hours.
T-Pain and the Fistfight

The boys picked on his song, caught him in moon boots smuggling a shooting star. If women could squeeze a hard-jelly-bounce into their chests, slide a chemical slug into the top lip, then Faheem wanted the vocal chords of a space ship. He wanted to sing like *The Jetsons’* housekeeper. He wanted a smile like a pencil sharpener. But the taunting cut deeper each day, so Faheem recycled 6 bags of cans & bottles, and bought brass knuckles for a punch like a robot’s. His aluminum baseball bat was his space sword. He was only eight, too young to know about comas. Too young to register losses. When they finally pried the bat from his sequin-gloved hand, there were still four bullies standing, and they beat asteroids into his blue-black face. They beat him until his lip opened like a thundercloud, and bled ball bearings all over the outfield.
Up In the Treehouse

In the summers of our youth
when it was perfectly fine
to drop drawers and swim naked
in a stream off the Kangamangus
as a troop of Brownies crossed
the wooden bridge, I didn’t
know “the big deal” till a few years
later when one of us got a hold
of Playboy’s fluffy tail
and we had to build a treehouse
for those magazines to perch on
in plastic bags like gold fish—
and this was the beginning
of getting into things
like going down to the boatyard
in the winter where the boats
were hibernating on cinderblocks
dreaming of fire hydrants
and we’d break into those boats
and let the sharp liquids in crystalline
decanters burn our tongues
or we’d steal knives and machetes
and big metal fishing hooks
(that must have been severed pirates’
hands), and for some reason we buried
them behind my mema’s house
hoping they would grow
into the sharp warriors of our dreams.
Hard to love a woman: a poem for cons, hipster doofuses, ex-baristas, etc.

lance
It's hard when you're in the pen and she's eating fluff
sandwiches cause she misses your hand
tats, she used to be so upper class and she'll be all fat by the time
you get out. So you carve Prada and comme des garçons
outfits from your own skin and walk the runway after lights out.
Hip, knee, toe, elbow, thrust, elbow. Again.

baby making
My room's white, no, it's taupe, no, it's actually not even 3-D; it's a linear plane and you're stuck on it.
(with me)

Trotskyite
A pickaxe in the eye's still a pickaxe even when it meets membrane, when it penetrates. A pickaxe in the eye, even when it wobbles, still stays. A pickaxe in the eye lobotomizes, sometimes. A pickaxe or a railroad spike. That's what she said when she would talk to me and she was talking about her heart maybe.
some kind of metaphysical
You’re drinking
Red Bull and Vodka &
she’s drinking
Red Bull & Vodka & she deserves
all the ampersands in the world. You lay them
at her feet at the bar in front of
everyone and,
to get another drink, she just
drums them down. There’s no sound like it, you swear, ever.

generic movie felon
Smoking GPCs. No letter for me. Damn
bitch. I’m going to,
I’m gonna find Jesus in the rye toast today.

auguring
Mildewed bathroom ceiling means success. Hairy
toes means bad breath. Bad breath also
means success. And riches, don’t forget
the riches. & the toes. But,
ceiling fans will never make you Mickey Rourke. And bars,
well, bars, you know…

mickey rourke felon
I can’t help it, I like to punch, the impact of knuckle. My cell-mate wears his own skin
at night, sometimes he borrows
mine. Can’t you see, he strips
me down; he flows and twirls. I’m bone; I watch
him, I can’t help
it: I’m so
naked
and alone.
To get her through, the PARIAH snorts

to get her through, she snorts up anything not 
completely toxic, anything 
semi-toxic, or just plain dust

to get her through, she flirts with girl bouncers

to get through, she rents a room but leaves early 
in some kind of fog 
a fog you can’t smell or feel 
a cliché fog with some kind of feet 
some kind of velvet 
    Aquavelvet; her hair is so tall  
    and crusted by noon

to get she does things and those things are done and she gets things done but things are never done and there’s always things to get and she’s done with plastic or maybe she has so much debt and this is so asthmatic; the pollen goes right the pollen goes left it fills you up it’s better than sex

snorting milk giggles she remembers vague cereal and sugars. spilled sisters in lunchboxes spooning mornings to sun. those sisters were close by 
closed by bologna/butter on bread 
somehow meat made its way into dairy everything blurred 
and they were gone.

or maybe

sandwiches in baggies were always their fate. Forever ever she carried them

as a child; there was nothing else to be done.
Wherein the PARIAH plans to put her dog down

She doesn’t call the vet cause she’s not allowed
a phone plan. She bangs two
rocks together in some semblance of honeybee dance
code, but the bees don’t care. They’re too busy
disappearing and she wonders what gives
them the right and how
does one stay gone. So long,
she says to her loyal mutt then kicks it off
a convenient cliff.

Falling, the mutt grows wings and stripes
and antennae and backward knees
and does the beegirl dance through clouds through the Grand Canyon
above Route 666 over the Navajo Nation and
the mutt has the audacity to kick up windstorms in Death
Valley; of course the mutt’s on its way to California: rumor
has it there’s oranges just asking to be plucked – they’re about
falling, too and
sweet sweet nectar and wine. The PARIAH needs
another shot of something quick. She gets
out her syringe, but it grows glossy
wings and fuzzy
stripes and hovers just within sight
for a minute before hoofing it up mid-air then
poof gone, just like those bees no one cares
about.
An arrow pierces a diary
with unmarked pages

as the day hasn't happened.
At least with that there is nothing

to say when nothing
can happen because it can't

happen and this is different
than past lives. How can I explain

when all I can say is I'm sorry
for confusing compromise by letting

everything in like the time
he said he didn't have a problem,

that he didn't need help
you'd be forgiven for thinking

time held its breath, that night
had a punctured lung,

the sound of a man coughing
blood. It hit the walls, splatters

the floor on a day not even thought of
let alone born.
The Front Man Moves In

For him it was a career move, for her a shiny new crucifix, something to believe in,

someone to love and eventually,
someone to hate. The trouble was he arrived there first although she refused to read the clues he was a front man and a front man never leaves and a front man always stays in that secret world and that secret world is an open secret of what will occur. She'll be asleep and he will be watching as the moon falls into the maiden hair fern, as the darkness comforts, as the darkness is a shroud. Nothing will happen but the magic of the slightest movement, a chair, her book open to a different page.

The windows will open, the lights turn on the times she is out and no one will harm her.

She is safe, protected unless he gives the word and the word will be silent and the word will be bound and gagged, tied to a tree, the rich red soil as moist as a bruise on a bruise. The noise is the wind howling, then the quietest cry through a body unrecognisable dead or alive

and she can sleep any time she likes, pretend she didn't hear the front man who watches because always will as he carefully leaves messages to remind her of everything she's done,
everywhere she’s been and she sleeps with
the lights on and she sleeps fully clothed. She's not

really sleeping watching the maiden hair fern,
the fronds uncurl and dead bark breaks like a raw

new song the day she decides to talk and maybe
die. Nothing happens. He always did lie.
Time Warp

Even when he collapsed on the couch,
his face turning a Buddha blue, drool
escaping his pale white lips while I turned
him over, in the coma position,

checked his airway, called an ambulance,
waited when they rushed in, placing
oxygen on his face as he slowly came
back to time well before his memory
ever did he couldn't remember who
I was although something registered in
the reptilian part of his brain and he
knew I'd never hurt him and he knew

I was safe and while he couldn't remember
my name he mouthed the word 'wife'
in amongst the precious gift his drooling
smile he had the strength to decline

an invitation to the hospital which left
me with no choice but to work night
duty at home I watched his breathing,
checked his pulse, moistened

his lips and it was as grand as a brand
new day beaming hope and all good
things when he woke, staggered to the
shower, lost in the steamy forgetfulness

except there was one thing he couldn't
forget and just when I was making coffee
I heard the car pull out the driveway and
he was gone, just like that he was gone

so I waited and while I waited got sick
of waiting and resented the time of waiting
a frozen morning frozen in my mind when he
complained he was tired and out of reach
taunting as he swallowed a bottle of sleeping tablets and the staggering toward a time I didn't know and he fell into it, I call the ambulance again and I didn't know men were capable of swooning and there he was, he kept swooning or it could have been one big swoon captured in time and it was too soon he refused to go to the hospital and I left him to find some time and found him in a dark and dangerous mood, furious I may have a different time than him when I asked him to leave he kept phoning and I learnt with time to hang up until the day there was something in the timing of his voice and I knew I knew I knew it was terribly wrong and I knew he was losing it and losing time and when the hospital rang to say he was in ICU, not expected to live 24 hours, would I like to come in, say goodbye and didn't they know time and time again I had said goodbye and didn't they know I saw him under white sheets, tubes coming from and entering his mouth, his chest, his belly and he was white as well and I said goodbye to someone who wasn't listening, who was frozen in time like the rabbits on the road on my way home I didn't hit any, everything was cool and cloudless as I walked in the door my heart smashed the day I don't know if the tears were some sort of relief I wish I could delete.
be a mediator!

for the record: —between your perceived generation
    and any generation
    that hasn’t found itself yet

for stimulation, kicks: —as a famed duck equivalent
    but more in-jokey, like a talking numchuck
    or a singing slice of ham

for poetry: —like a you a coupla folks knew
    in a gas station once: a spent wishbone: a plotless boy
    with near-verbal abilities

for now:  lull the present into being true
    and take a picture / pizza / pulse  by gum, heaven
    may never interject
Lemon drops, or lack thereof

Oh, these subliminal congeries in the mind-matter of the artist!

So many forms of the noun _haphazard_,
nickel-and-dime-sized epiphanies
dropped into jukeboxes made of snow: _sussurus_sussurus

    *poof* . . .

Alas, if only memory were so cooperative.

Yet it is a _fact_ one imagines in a faint
hallway of uncertain vintage,
umpteen panels
from an all-too-numbered childhood:

    age six  grade two  teddies four  and _yes_: only the one moving backcloth!

Push a hand into its surface,
and isn’t it always
that welt
of sadness (two yin-yang cakes, minus whatever outer war)
crumbling into an everpresent lack: for me,

that hum blanketing perceptions,
soft-focus roses, tulips, whatever
they were?

I am so often speechless, and what do I say: everything happens.
When I think of ribbons, apparently I’m a girl

o glass,
all
the
dresses
in
your
store
(strip mall)
thin
and
widen
with
the
seasons,
svelte
heralds
copping
banners
of
our
blushes
and
(painstaking)
hips,
skin-
tight
and
pinned
with
eyes
that
peer
into
and
away
from
(not always a
friend)
(the margins of
the body), really.
Before my back went out
I’d jog the track at the rec center
with all the kids after school,
hoping their almost holy and excess energy
would anoint me some—
and it did.
Then I lay paralyzed for a week
and it took nearly three months
to even think of walking much less jogging.
At one point, in the delirium that is pain,
I think I wound up crawling.
Now that I have returned to the track,
but only to walk, or more like waddle,
to strengthen my fragile chakras,
I avoid the youngsters altogether
and arrive at codger time
when the maimed and ruined
come for their own reasons,
some equipped with oxygen machines,
others wearing full body plastic braces...
bad lungs, crumbling knees and hips,
twisted necks, arthritis, the manifold degradations.
Yesterday I notice an ancient, wizened man
hobbling along with a lacquered wooden cane,
an ornate green serpent coiled around
its shaft.
We happened to leave at the same time
and, gathering our coats from the rack,
I couldn’t resist, “Wow, what a nice cane.”
He looked into my eyes, at first bewildered
as if trying to decipher each word;
then the smile, blossoming like a sunrise,
his entire frail body proud.
“Yep, took a lot of hard work,” he said
softly, his voice a feather.
And I: “You made that? It’s beautiful.”
“Yep,” he said, “took forever, especially the damn snake.”
“Great job,” I said, heading for the stairwell.
I took each step slowly, with care.
I can make no more false moves.
Such knowledge is also a serpent.
After the Poetry Reading

Fidgeting in my cushioned chair, I think of Whitman at the astronomy lecture. But when the poet offhands that cancer of the throat has changed his voice, my ears bristle, and the horror of it forces me to listen intently for each rasp of catarrh, rattle, gasp—and suddenly I crave an even greater relief. Most of us hang in for the final thank yous, it was a pleasure, splendid, hope all goes well (though no one mentions cancer); some pick at refreshments—ossified cauliflower, mushy grapes, acidic punch, old burned java. I slip out of a back door, into the hallway, and rush for the exit into a breezy, delightful night. My car is parked behind the next building and I stroll a walkway between orange lights, resist the urge to pull out a cigarette. I cross the street, veer left and note that one of the side doors to the building is propped open. A group of students are inside playing instruments, a guitar, drums, flute, keyboard, saxophone. They sound intense but muted, a kind of mellow jazz maybe, and it’s nice to hear, though at the moment I’d prefer silence. Then I notice her. A young girl, another student probably, in leggings and leotard, her hair long and flowing, dancing under the full moon, alone, miming the music. Or does she follow her own inner music? I’m so delighted and startled by the sight I freeze and just gaze at her. She pays no attention to me whatever, doesn’t have to, doesn’t want to, may not even notice me, staring. She seems enraptured, joyous, her body a liquid congealing in shadows, leaping, twirling, bowing over, contorting in easy grace. She deliciously flows
and becomes the moment, is the moment, nothing else pertinent. Silent as she moves, blessed with youth, health...
what else can you call it but joy?
And prayer, she was prayer, for us all.
Cyrus McCormick

Our twelve-year-old trembles before us,
her parents and now inquisitors, stiff on the sofa,
to practice delivery of an oral report
on Cyrus McCormick for Social Studies.
She has labored all week on the note cards,
research, the writing itself, memorizing.
She has wept, cursed God, gone limp
with frustration. Right now she looks meek
and nervous, and she gulps as her mother
sets the timer. Two minutes, the Procrustean Bed
for this particular, severe, dour teacher:
“No more, no less…so pace yourselves.”
She wants to laugh but her lips quiver.
I convey a casual seriousness so she won’t think
the world will explode if she messes up.
Her eyes dart back and forth, focus on me
for a moment, then my wife, then at some safe point
in the room with no eyes. “Did you know,”
she begins, “that one person could change the world?
Well, Cyrus McCormick changed the world
when he invented the Mechanical Reaper.
He took up his father’s original machine
and improved upon it. In 1851 Cyrus McCormick
introduced his Reaper to Europe—wait…”
She forgets something and is embarrassed.
I noticed subtle gasps as she spoke and that she
swallowed hard every third or so word.
Suddenly I want that other Reaper to re-strike
Cyrus McCormick dead, a second time,
for the misery he was causing my child
and all those before and after.
What’s the point of this assignment?
“Did you know,” she begins again, “that one person
could change the world? Well, Cyrus McCormick
changed the world when he invented the Mechanical Reaper.
He took up his father’s original machine
and improved upon it. It could cut grain
when pulled by horses in a field. The grain
was then bundled and stored in barns…”

We listen to her repeat the story about six times before everything goes smoothly enough, within the two-minute scaffolding, and she can at last breathe easy and run off to horse around with her little sister. All the hours, the nights… And yet I know, given the nature of mind, that my daughter will remember him until the end of her days, and every so often he will spring forth, and the details, though blurred, will sift again like grain in a silo and reconstitute as a field of wheat, each stalk a single fact, a date, an event. What is the point of this assignment? When have we ever reaped as we sowed?
Tom

I knew this guy in Missouri,
a scrawny, ghostly man with fierce eyes,
who lived in a room at the Ben Bolt Hotel.
We admired him because he was a published writer
and had been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.
He wouldn’t have anything to do
with English Department types at the university.
You’d find him sitting in the hotel bar,
staring at air, nursing his whiskey and soda.
He was a drunk all right, but we read
his poetry, and it was pretty damned good.
A few books came out from minor presses,
poems and stories in all the little mags.
I finally moved away from that state
into the blurred future.
Entire decades burned at the stake.
Didn’t think too much about Tom
until one day I heard he had died at 54
of cancer, heart attacks, strokes, everything,
he had died of everything.
By this point no one remembered his name,
the publications had ceased years before
and, needless to say, no one read his stuff,
what he lived for, his passion, along with the booze.
He was damned good too. Better than
lots of the contemporaries they jam into
The Norton Anthology. Can we meekly
assume that he had no luck and wipe our hands?
Must we howl out the windows, It’s Not Fair?
Can we bear the staggering implications?
One afternoon, on a lark, I typed his name into Google
and found nothing at all, no mention of the man,
his stories, poems and that almost Pulitzered novel.
Finally, some fifty or so entries down,
his last name, a university site, his university.
They named a writing prize after him.
RICKY GARNI

Why Am I So Afraid of Sleep?

When I close my eyes, I see you so clearly
You are eight monks in colorful vestments reading
sacred scrolls beneath a naked eve tempted by the devil
One of you is looking in the wrong direction
Seven are looking in the correct direction
When I open my eyes, where do you go?
I hope that you all pray for me and that
only one of you turns around
I hope it is the right one
The one pointed in the wrong direction
Please keep praying
in my sleep
Cellini

I try to imagine you
and I in the bathtub.

Your back is against
the front. My back
is against the back.

Suddenly, I remove
a broadsword and point
it at your golden eyeballs.

Why golden?

Because somehow, when
you weren’t looking, some
joker, probably from ancient
Rome, painted us gold—
from head to toe. Cabeza a
pie. Think Cellini. Or
Goldfinger.

You almost cover your breast.
I practically hold a fig leaf.
That’s how much in love we
are. From bow to stern.

I can hear the ocean. It is an ocean
of love. Quite unusually, here in
the bathtub, it is quivering like a
baby.
Yesteryear

In the very old days of Old Japan, when a charismatic royal prince chose to follow his destiny, he would often have an affair with an uneducated daughter of a peasant fisherman in a rural village faraway from his kingdom, and he did so, with impunity, accompanied by a royal servant who followed his bidding without question, such was his loyalty and faith in his charismatic young prince. Such was the order of the day.

My day begins with a chocolate bar from the convenience store. It doesn’t matter if the cashier is uneducated, a peasant, a woman, or even knows how to fish: if I follow my destiny as I see it, there will be a rumpus.
That Beast in Waiting

Mama Seinke, I came here with the beast. I tied him to the rail outside your house, left him to munch on the seedlings, the red buds about to flower. True, we can hear his ceaseless chewing from your Victorian living room, but when I wiped my shoes on the welcome mat, it was to rid myself of the monster, to let you and your nervous house know that I’m coming in alone.

We can rumble through history if you like. You believe that word derives from “his story”. Papa Seinke’s, the one who trod the corridors of Auschwitz with a lock of your yellow hair in his pocket, his mind reverting to memory before becoming another tear on a country’s face. You tell me of the cottage in Hamburg, the busy tailor’s shop, his cannonade laugh. But all your creaky words are footfalls down the concrete steps, watched by men with grave-stone eyes. He lives in your stories but dies on the waver of your voice.

The beast barks at traffic, digs deep holes in the garden, stands on its hind legs, peers through the window at your weary eyes. You wonder how I can control him, how any of us can heel these animals. I lower my voice. That’s one way. I speak of fields, of children skipping rope, of lovers, of grandmothers on a park bench celebrating their brood with a long crackling sigh.
You begin to believe until the dream comes slamming back: the man writhing on the ground, his flesh torn apart by a thousand such mongrels. Each mouthful of blood snags away a little of your life. You start to wonder who I am, how anyone can be what they say they are when such a beast awaits them.
Reply

There was nothing
or there was great darkness,
silence but for the falling of
water over stones
or the calling of my voice
from a great distance.
There were the roots of trees
or the roots of my existence,
spreading without my body
but with a little of my light.

Choose, said the man
at the pulpit
though it was really the ones
who loved me
who should have been saying it.
It wasn’t sermons I was after.
I listened to Gale’s heart.
I heard the claptrap of the city.
Yes, one could so easily abandon me
but the other, surely,
would follow me to the depths
of the earth.

There was nothing
or it was me saying,
surely there is something.
Either she didn’t reply
or she is nothing but reply.
Smoky thoughts
lull the candle
of the body.

In feeble night
weary eye
lash fluttering,
flashes from a dim crevice—

horizons
with dim purple streaks
from a dull
seen as such
sun.
Miasma

I: Awake in Day

Below on the street, eyes
straight and glassy
a woman walks the summer
street of tar. She works from rage
that subsides with exhaustion
of night. Prone
on the oil-slicked road, pale
teats flat, eyes bled,
dead, a dog stares.

II: Watching TV

Gorilla heads, piled
with their mouths open
seem to laugh in falling rain
that withers into pools
where worms lie
in smiling curves. Men’s shaved
and bereted heads shoot
the flesh heap. While I stare at static,
somewhere, deer leap
through grassy fields
under the moon.

III: As I Cook Dinner

The doorbell chimes.
A thin man holds a sunflowery
dish of butterscotch candy, bows,
asks if my birthday
is today. Wind pricks
my arms. The TV drones
awfully gentle
Moving On

I plant
little seeds
in a cultivated
field
of cleft mountain.

Grass
at an ankle’s height
shuffle purrs, breezing wind
lifts
any cooled warmth.

In this shading oak
held moment
there is no knowing.
ALLAN JOHNSTON

Dawn

A socialist health takes hold of the adult,
He is stripped of his class in the bathing-suit,
He returns to the children digging at summer,
A melon-like fruit.
—Delmore Schwartz, “Far Rockaway”

The first boat
out in the water bobs along in the breaking up
of the surface, and holds the course loosely,
battered by waves but seeming to have
as its end a movement toward sunrise:

an orange-yellow, flat, plate-like recurrence
of light on the water encrusted with mist.
The sky has not even started to yellow
or blue, but retains its dull grayish wall-like

plaster of fog the light cuts through,
and so is seeming to come from nowhere
if not sudden. These boaters have brought
with them the expectation and the non-

expectation, the gear and the knowledge that somewhere
beneath this, there is something or nothing,
that non-directing is an aspect of life
as singing is a reversal for fish,

as lovely as drowning, but one never thinks
of that—The father is talking to his boys
with a fog of cigarette smoke as haze-bound
as the sun. His gear is as netted

and intricate as the mess he must work through
every morning, and so brings survival
into this instant of not really looking
forward, for the boat moves by happenstance,
water buffeting it in continuous
resettings of its non-direction
which is relying upon the sameness
and generosity of the sea.

What after all are destinations
for the entangling schools of fish
or wheeling, eyeing gulls, except
a moment of eating from the waters?
Pacific Palisades

That place teetered like a grandmother.
It seemed a mix of ash and flesh—
color, sentiment, and ancient sea.

I, a child climbing that face,
knew nothing about those cliffs
not found through finding and losing footing—

only how the coast formed
its hazard there, and fell toward oceans
in soft moldings of debris.

Here and there, random patches
of buried highway peeked from detritus
near the chain link fence

past which construction of the new road
continued beside a chameleon ocean
always changing, according to the sky.

What were these weathering fabulations
of mud? Hard enough to scramble on;
they powdered underfoot;

the scree slid as you plunged down
into the wreckage of the coast,
a soft announcement of the mountains

rising at the far end of the plateau.
Each year the rain cut off slices of cliff,
trying to push the sea away,

but water was always smarter and had
no sense of shame. It waited across the highway
while the road crews cleared out the rubble,

and above, the demolition teams
took down the houses left dangling over
or too near the drop for habitation.
That place was terraces, yarrow, chaparral, 
clad in sunlight, a rough skin of cracking mud, 
a constellation of pebbles in clay

that, like a grandmother, spent days remembering 
how the land and sea had once kissed.
Homeless

*After Anzen Sensei Sekei*

I say to you, "Look! Take this! It is yours!"
How can I pretend to have said anything?

Moonlight is drifting down a cliff
and the pine trees
seem infused with a glow.

The glow tells us something—
perhaps we are home,
though we cannot see where we are going.

Going itself might be enough
if one is ready to sleep at all odds
anywhere—
    where corn grows,
or beneath the marquee of some vast theatre.

We are all homeless in at least one way—
another way to say we are here.

We traveled, dreamed;
we know there is someplace
we still need to go,
but do not know where yet.

The birds are alive
and the first moon shines.

We seem to resemble the things we know.
the king cake baby jesus
lay plastic and outstretched
in a pool of messianic frosting
gone liquid
He lay on a plastic fleur de lis
His seams rough where He comes together
as if not quite a match
as if a Platonic joke
as if some Chinese Christian Laodicean
did not care to grind him smooth…

I found the king cake baby jesus
not by prayer or contemplation
but by cutting the cake in two no angel
to stay my hand this time I sacrificed
what I nearly loved best…
I found It like Oedipus and Creon to come without
androgy nous supplication this spongy pleroma
from where divine emanations speak…

I cut the damn thing in two and trenched it like Schliemann
I found Mycenean gold a face outstretched the wrong baby jesus…
I can’t help but take a bite this king cake delicious

They make their way these three kings in forever three-ness
from afar nonetheless
with over-the-top gifts—no diapers or strollers or lullis
gold, frankincense, and myrrh instead
in that misguided order
none of these on the Best-Buy list…

the king cake baby jesus missing his stall
swaddled in sweet crumbs and puddled sugar
hiding under purple, green and gold beads
I threw
them from the balcony at those young breasts feeding away
a throng gathers at the golden calf as if to worship
the success determined by the mess left behind…

I Saran-Wrap plastic baby jesus
in a shroud of kingly cake
and put Him in the freezer
where they will find Him years from now
like a mammoth in ice
when science is Rex or
when my luck runs out…
Sermon on the Mount

The breakaway gospel
on your doorstep the creek
full of bullheads the mud smeared monkey-art
staining the heart of things to be my torn white T-shirt
that fits so well in those old photos

dthis gathering of yours
outside so many to hear
Words already damp in Qumran caves
breathed on yet dry, read from right to left
you began saying
how silky blue the sky was
how vertiginous green the grass
how fat and puffy the clouds in Munich on that day
You said “Look forever at the clouds
especially in the night of things
as they puff and seek a mate, drift and billow they dance
and lift the skirts of night.”

This series of essays, publishable
the pundit who writes redux
not so much to reclaim or make amends
but to squander anew as the gates
swing open
for some kind of last time
with a creak and a groan,
a scruffy and carbon self
that leaves footprints like no one else.
It’s fusty,
I told him, but
he staunchly denied the existence
of such fugly descriptions.
That dew point didn’t help.
Fisticuffs prepared
to rear its ugly head
or heads
in our midst
or mist but missed the
boat or a beat
or both completely.
Such was the flux of the day, but
O the humidity! To survive
we made up
songs in the city
streets about desire
undiminished by arson
or horse-and-buggy malarkey.
The people listened
and embraced us and tolerated each
other in large numbers much
like ladybugs.
This started a party
we sought to escape from
in the trees where dripping
with ambiguities we discovered
fresh wings.
So Much Revealed and Even More Hidden

There was a woman who adored
a man from afar and then farther and farther
until he was no more
than a fossil
perfectly crystallized in a worm-riven underworld.
He was the buried treasure,
the sweetest jawbreaker,
of a congenitally loopy Medusa. And then she thought,

in every revolution of the earth, there’s
so much revealed and even more hidden.
Even now, look:
an ant’s antennas speculate
from its secret tunnel. How deep does it go?
How many more ants
wistfully sigh within its curvilinear passageways?

And then the ant, in turn, thought
it detected death
among other great things
towering brightly above, spiraling out of control.
All of its friends instantaneously agreed.

The man of stone, on the other hand, mused
about three angry rivers of magma
that, in turn, collectively dreamed
of a woman who loved
the child she cut from the lucid heart of an onion.
Dragon Flight

A dragon flies for the first time
on a major American airline.
It’s a jeweled winter’s morning tinged
with raw significance.
The dragon feels happy
at its window seat bestowing names
upon random puffs of animal-shaped clouds.
Happy, in spite of its evil-
tasting snack-box, inadequate tail room or
that wily passenger trying to set fire to
his shoe with two little sticks. It’s a typical journey
according to the sayings on the Web and TV.
The dragon joyously christens a turtle-shaped cloud
“Jesus,” for its own particular reasons and
“Hoo-ha,” similarly
to a cumulus hoot owl silhouette. When out of
the blue, a gremlin
scampers across one wing, leaps and
pratfalls over to the other side.
The dragon fears for the worst and
considers confessing its unconditional love of
prophecy over the intercom. Too late—the plane
lands in Phoenix, sans further razzamatazz.
That, however, enchants the dragon.
At the baggage-go-round it reflects:
Sometimes a gremlin is just a gremlin.
Sometimes a coyote is a super genius, or not.
But wherever the dragon flies, so will the mind
and where is the danger in that?
I Am the Zookeeper

Wild animals don’t belong
in domestic settings,
monkeys stick their fingers
where they don’t belong,
hungry lions will jump any fence,
& bears stink on purpose.

I am the zookeeper.
My body smells of feces
& blood
& I like it.

I am the zookeeper.
I fell in love with a flea
that lived in a fine
& private place.
My love was deep.
My love was like a man
driving toward distant
mountains, released from time,
& abiding.
One day I scratched myself
under an ancient lightbulb
& caught my flea.
From under my nail she lept
& went toward the cages.
Every wild thing runs for shelter,
every tame thing, too.
I weep
& send her my love.
The Zookeeper’s Loss

I am the zookeeper who
fell in love with a flea.
Nobody else knew
how sad is my blood, black
& iron rich
like the tracks
a night train runs on.
With her, how ecstatic
was my scratching!

Now I’m nothing.
In my mouth
is a tongue gone wrong
& my new way is silence.

Don’t even listen to these
written words.
I’ll not be telling
you anything you
don’t already know.
You, too,
have made
adjustments.
Rebecca Balcárcel

Rebecca Balcárcel’s work has appeared in over 30 journals and magazines, including North American Review, Mothering Magazine, 5AM, Concho River Review, and South Dakota Review. Her first book of poems, Palabras in Each Fist, is due out from Pecan Grove Press in Fall 2009. Trilobite Press published Ferry Crossing, a chapbook of her poems in 2002. She took her MFA from Bennington Writing Seminars in 2002 and received their Jane Kenyon Poetry Prize. Rebecca teaches creative writing at Tarrant County College where she is an Associate Professor of English. Daughter of a Guatemalan father and Anglo mother, Rebecca often writes of her bi-cultural upbringing. She lives in Texas with her three sons, aged 14, 12, and 12 (yes, identical twins). Fun facts: Rebecca has jumped out of a plane, nursed twins, and biked 1,300 miles while pregnant.

About the Work

I first wrote “By Any Other Name” to be a light, humorous piece about my unusual name. My first draft was a short homage to all the mutations of Balcárcel I’d seen on mail and heard on the phone. However, this light version didn’t address deeper issues about my name and its connection to my identity. It contained some clever lines, but skirted the topic of my bi-cultural heritage. It failed the “So what?” test.

My biggest challenge in writing the full version was to do the inner, psychological work of exploring these issues before coming back to the page. Philip Lopate says that the personal essay’s plot is not the events that take place in the essay, but seeing how far the author can “drop past her psychic defenses.” It's that journey towards deeper self-knowledge that engages the reader. My first version followed the usual good writing recipe of strong verbs, use of metaphor, and a catchy voice. But it was raw dough, uncooked by the fires of honest disclosure. It did not offer a journey towards self-knowledge. To turn my dough into bread, I called friends and talked through my experiences. I asked my mother to explain again how my legal name came to be misspelled. I relived scenes from my elementary classrooms, and I tried to keep in touch with how I felt about it all. When I returned to the keyboard, I’d generated enough heat to do some baking.

As I wrote the new version, I kept a mental mirror handy. After each story or anecdote, I’d look into the mirror and ask, “What's the real issue here?” I took a lesson from Vivian Gornick who says that every personal essay conveys both a situation and a story. Situation refers to the outer goings-on in the essay — George Orwell shooting an elephant, for example. Story refers to the underlying issues that the speaker explores—the underbelly of Imperialism and Orwell's crisis of conscience. Gornick would say that my first version was all situation, just events and scenes, whereas my full version added story, the issue of bi-cultural identity. By interrogating myself, I deepened the piece and fashioned an answer to “So what?”

My experience reminds me that the lofty goal of connecting with another person through language cannot be achieved through craft alone. No matter how well one writes, one must also say something. And that something must be authentic. It must be real. Otherwise we are wasting the reader's time. If I speak beautifully about a lifetime of events, but forget to explore what they mean; if I write cleverly about every incident of my life, but fail to find the lessons learned; if I compose lovely descriptions of the places I've lived, but forego the chance to discover their...
significance, then I've missed an opportunity to add to our understanding of this life. Michel de Montaigne asserts that every man has within himself the entire human condition. In writing personal essays, we must strive to speak to that condition, trusting honest self-inquiry to yield world-worthy answers.

**Rebecca Balcárcel on the Web**

tinyurl.com/mqs6fs

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www.mothering.com/clothesline

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www.amarillobay.org/contents/balcarcel-rebecca/visiting-tia.htm
Jenn Blair

Jenn Blair is from Yakima, WA. Currently she is a Park Hall Fellow at the University of Georgia. She has published in Copper Nickel, SNR Review, Innisfree Journal, and the Fairfield Review, among others. She lives in Winterville, GA with her husband Dave and daughter Katie.

About the Work

I started to write early on, a natural response to reading that most likely occurred in the way Madeline L’Engle once described rushing home as a child to draw what she had just seen in a New York City art museum—it could sound like hubris—the imitation—but at the very heart of it is joyful response. Being moved by beauty in a Keatsian way—never minding the fact that the first utterances back are awkward and embarrassing and wonderful (“mawkish” to borrow from Keats again—a word traceable to maggots. Again, these things don’t bear very much looking into). I think most of our first efforts are ones only our mother would want to hold onto, yet they remain invaluable for the practice and more than that—the way they kept you alive and more than alive during the actual physical space and time the effort occupied.

Two of these poems are distressingly autobiographical. Yes, we can always talk about a writer’s selves, the way that in fiction especially we are and are not the characters we present. I know the stress teachers place on the difference between speaker and poet in a poem—and also the way that we can tend to lapse even as we verbally discuss a poem in a classroom setting. “The speaker” we bother to say, but really, wink, wink, we end up having the sneaking suspicion in so many instances it’s actually Donne himself (that old devil!). So although a piece of writing can never fully encapsulate the complexity of a human being, “Outside my Window” happens pretty much like the poem unfolds. I will admit that I changed the locale to “my room” when in truth, it was a classroom tucked away in the middle of Virginia. I was a grad student at the time, doing my best to pay attention in an English class, but it was spring and the trees were that green that Patty Griffin calls “new like a baby”—a vibrant and joyful contrast to the bookshelf beneath the window filled with what seemed like old and dusty textbooks. “Confession” is my attempt at a sophisticated response to my unabashed love of the iconic American road trip (the stranger the festival and the produce it’s celebrating, the better). We usually feel we are getting away with something when we can get away, and I feel that even more when I can get away early in the morning (no small feat these days with a ten month old child!). As my husband sometimes ends up asking, “Who are these people living out here?” Even as we ask, we know others must be shaking their heads at us, in confusion and awe: “Who are those people always driving by?” I recommend Richard Hugo’s Triggering Town (introduced to me by Judith Cofer) for the inspiration that locale can have on a writer. I also recommend Eudora Welty’s account (in One Writer’s Beginnings) of how train trips with her father and other family journeys were crucial in provoking her curiosity about other lives. A writer who isn’t curious is a fraud.

As for “Molly Jenkins,” suffice it to say that she is a compilation of many women (in my own family and my own reading) who might not have said something aloud, but were certainly thinking it. Subaltern subjects ready to kick some…
Jenn Blair on the Web

newportreview.org/?archive/issue-2/jblair.html

web.mac.com/tomkoontz/Site_18/Blair.html

www.hamiltonstone.org/hsr12poetry.html#ultima
Michael Cirelli

Michael Cirelli is the author of the collection, Lobster with Ol’ Dirty Bastard (Hanging Loose 2008), which was listed in the New York Times as an independent press poetry best seller. He also wrote the award-winning teaching curriculum, Hip-Hop Poetry & the Classics (Milk Mug 2004), and is the Executive Director of Urban Word NYC. His new collection, Vacations on the Black Star Line, is forthcoming from Hanging Loose Press.

About the Work

The poems in Segue are from my forthcoming collection, Vacations on the Black Star Line. That collection, partly inspired by Mos Def & Talib Kweli’s “Black Star” album, deals with race and white privilege while paralleling some of the astrological impulses in the album. From these themes, the idea of “other” started to transfer itself onto robots, aliens and space-related imagery. My previous collection has many real life “characters” (emcees, rappers, etc.) and in this new book T-Pain started to evolve as a person that interested me because he seemed to revive this whole wave in popular hip-hop and R&B that uses robotic voices. He became a perfect character of exploration that supplemented many of the nuances in the greater work.

The poems about T-Pain were relatively easy because they are my imagination imposing a reality onto a subject. They are essentially writing exercises. I like to work on concepts and keep pushing the story, but also need to find the balance and include some of my own personal experiences/elements in the work. That is always difficult for me. Right now, the forthcoming collection has about nine poems that are about or mention T-Pain. I think that is enough. The tree house poem is pretty standard as well, and fits in well with the themes of the collection. True stories, which this is, are always easy to write. And true stories where weird things happen, like burying knives and hooks in the ground, always make for good poems.

When my work is challenging, there is never really resolution. There is always more that can be done. As a writer, there is always the initial impulse to write, and the actual final product (which is either better or worse than what was intended originally).

I work with teens on a daily basis, so poetry is about so many things. For them (and me), it can be about saving lives. For my nerd-brain, it can be about high art, or conceptual ramblings, or showing off. But for now, I feel I am too young and novice to really know what poetry is about for me, which may be a good thing.

Michael Cirelli on the Web

www.urbanwordnyc.org
Ryder Collins

Ryder Collins is a poet and fiction writer who lives in Auburn, Alabama. Her work has been published in The Southeast Review, Diagram, Rhino, and Hayden’s Ferry Review, among others.

About the Work

I think writing should always be about facing those things within one’s self that are frightening. Not that they’re necessarily bad; I’m not just talking about the Id or anything like that. It’s those things that are large and that hide and need to be made manifest; those secrets that speak to something about humanity, even if it isn’t entirely universal. (I’m not sure if I always believe in the concept of universality, sometimes I feel like that’s used for normalizing certain behaviors and beliefs).

I began writing my PARIAH series as a reaction to and even celebration of the fear of being outcast. Pariah, for me, is such a strong word; I wanted to come up with this strong persona to match it, this woman who didn’t care if she wasn’t accepted, if she was banished, if she lived on the outskirts of normal everyday society. A persona who could come and go as she wished, who found freedom in her exile. Of course, she’s also got some angst, I mean, jeez, no one really wants to hang out with her. That’s part of being a pariah, I guess. My poem, “Hard to love a woman: a poem for cons, hipster doofuses, ex-baristas, etc.,” is also about facing fears: the fears attendant with love, the fear of imprisonment, of losing freedom, the fear of our government institutions being run by private companies, etc.

Not to make this a manifesto, but I feel like poetry should also be about strange connections—those hook-ups you see taking place in a bar close to last call, the weird leaps between the rational and irrational. Logic can only do so much. That’s why in “Hard to love…” I move from strophe to strophe, bringing in babies, Trotsky, Some Kind of Wonderful, Angel Heart, etc. In “To get her through, the PARIAH snorts,” I begin the poem in a visual state of disintegration and I end it in logical and emotional disintegration. The PARIAH’s an adult, living in the hard, adult world, but she still carries the childhood memories of those squishy bologna sandwiches and of closeness with her sisters. But for the PARIAH, closeness’s not always a blessing.

“Wherein the PARIAH plans to put her dog down” comes out of my bewilderment about the disappearance of all those honeybees in the U.S. Why aren’t more people concerned about the honeybees going missing? It’s also a reaction to death, which I think explains the almost cartoonish, surreal turn the poem takes in the dancing, flying syringe. Death is scary, it’s strange, and there’s no way the PARIAH’s gonna be the one who figures it out for all of us.

Ryder Collins on the Web

thediagram.com/8_2/collins.html

http://www.thediagram.com/7_5/collins.html

Alison Eastley

Alison Eastley’s work has been published in Mannequin Envy, SN Review, Ascent, and many other fine and quite ordinary online literary sites, as well as in many small presses and anthologies, one of which was an Australian anthology edited by Peter Porter.
About the Work

To me, a poem is a voiced form that melds intuition and language. Elements like identity, musicality and, say, karmic cake emerge in the making, like a sketch of a basket—or, say, an existentially aware basket—after testing, erasing and committing myriad hatchmarks to a page. And voilà: a basket! Or, in this case, a poem.

Many poems start from a trigger that blends into (and often out of) revision. As for “be a mediator!,” I’d encountered a vivid word (I think it was “gung-ho”) in the course of various readings, and I was inspired by its let’s go! energy to create a plucky, headstrong voice. The emerging poem showed signs of infomercialfose, a breezy idiom that’d like to sell you something (”by gum,” anyone?); I used boldfaced anaphora to sharpen its piquant bursts of intellect. Though it’s hard to articulate this precisely, at some point substance and form seemed to click: the poem felt as complete as it would get.

Judging from their flow and seeming inevitability, many poems seem like they were a cinch to write. But, as another poem meta-notates, the writing process can be quite painstaking. In fact, the creation of “When I think of ribbons, apparently I’m a girl” felt less like writing than like sculpting a tiny constellation, fastening and reordering stars into a delicate pattern. The form was so exacting and for such a short poem that I often thought, I’ll just put this aside, I’ll move on. But, quite prosaically, I kept with it. Persistence may be the plainest of strategies, but it often seems to work.

Lacking a fixed form, an artist might feel overwhelmed by the infinite tangents of the imagination, like the speaker of “Lemon drops, or lack thereof.” Nonetheless, the very exasperation of said speaker helped me to come up with surreal imagery (“jukeboxes made of snow,” “yin-yang cakes”) and to create an almost operatic tone and command of language (the dipping stanzaic forms, the cliff-hanging “for me”). In creating this poem, I felt a little like that “moving backcloth”—floaty, detached, collapsing into the words for it. And yet, I was also moved by the speaker’s desperation, a state that might be latent in anyone, artist or not: “I am so often speechless, and what do I say: everything happens.”

So. Are these poems? Sophisticated toys? Closed systems? Self-parodies? Self-tragedies? Such doubts are prominent as I decide if I should share my work. That said, I might not have a categorizable style, but I think each of these poems has a clear voice, one that is uniquely surprising, rhythmic, smart and beautiful. And even if many don’t see them as poems, these “formal” voices might open up how someone thinks about the genre. I mean, just how do you approach a poem that features a “singing slice of ham”? 
Marit Ericson on the Web

www.prickofthespindle.com/poetry/2.4/ericson/good_night_and_all_that.htm

www.prickofthespindle.com/poetry/2.4/ericson/the_stoic_subliminal.htm
Elizabeth Eslami

Iranian-American author Elizabeth Eslami holds a B.A. from Sarah Lawrence College and an M.F.A. from the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous literary journals, including G.W. Review, Bat City Review, Minnesota Review, Neon, and Natural Bridge, among others. Her novel, Bone Worship, will be released by Pegasus Books in January.

About the Work

When I begin a short story, I am usually spurred by a single image—something striking and often something bizarre. The seed for “It Is All Getting Away From Us” was a photograph from Arthur C. Aubertin’s textbook on mummification, The Scientific Study of Mummies. In examining the cause of death of one mummy, Aubertin includes a disturbing (yet fascinating) photograph and description of a dermoid cyst—a benign growth with hair and teeth. I was captivated by the notion of something utterly grotesque also functioning as a symbol of life. This ugly cyst was not merely an aberration of nature; it was also beautiful evidence of the unstoppable urge of cells to grow. (This of course can be equally horrifying, as unchecked cell growth is the cause of cancer.)

My focal point then became the meeting place between the grotesque and the beautiful. I wanted to blur the two in the same way that, stylistically, I enjoy blending comic elements with darkly tragic ones.

In Aimee Bender’s “Ironhead” (from Willful Creatures) and Raymond Carver’s “Put Yourself in My Shoes” (Where I’m Calling From), the comic and the tragic butt up against each other incessantly until they become nearly indistinguishable. On the surface, a story like “Ironhead” seems like it can only be comical; it features a family with pumpkins for heads, with an anomalous iron-headed son. Yet this story is so emotionally resonant, it’s clear that Bender doesn’t need human-headed people to tell a “human” story. Consider this sentence, after the ironhead (who emitted steam instead of tears) son’s demise: “The pumpkinhead family sat together at the cemetery and the mother kept uncovering dishes of warm food so she could release steam on his grave, because she wanted to give him voice, to give him breath again” (p137). With “Put Yourself in My Shoes,” the reader experiences a comic/tragic tightrope of stories folded within stories, all treated with grave seriousness. Someone dies from a soup can to the head, a fight breaks out because a cat was brought into the Morgans’ home, a woman drops dead. Carver epitomizes this dichotomy by having Myers laugh hysterically at Mr. Morgan’s fury. Emotions clash, and in the end, we aren’t sure whose side we’re on, or what those sides really were. Indeed, Carver writes of Myers, “He was at the very end of a story” (112), but we don’t know which of these stories he’s come to the end of or what it means for him.

In a similar way, I wanted to discombobulate the reader with my story. I began with a paragraph out of place (and time). A disembodied narratorial voice tells us about water, about an unidentified character named Shirley. There’s a reference to God. (This paragraph reappears later when the momentum of the story shifts into high gear—in fact at an emotional peak for Mona Mather—but at this point, the reader is adrift in terms of what’s going on.) One is then also discombobulated tonally because the narrative moves into the comical first-person narration of
Mona telling us about cat turds; this is an abrupt shift from the opening paragraph solemnly invoking God.

This kind of jagged back-and-forth of tone is tricky to pull off, as is having an unreliable narrator. The risk is that your reader develops literary vertigo from bouncing between tones. An unreliable narrator may also become too unlikable for the reader to follow. I wanted to pull off a sleight-of-hand with Mona, for you to question her decisions—for they are poor decisions—but for you to become immersed enough in her point-of-view to be able to sympathize with her. She’s so isolated that her cyst has become her closest connection with any “living” thing. The easiest part of this story was finding Mona’s voice. She thinks she’s a realist; she looks at the world in a pragmatic way. This matter-of-factness was easy to juxtapose with the extreme elements, the grotesqueness of the cyst or the harsh way she sees the missionaries.

The Mormons are perfectly friendly, yet because they are linked (in Mona’s mind) to the cats, they are invaders. Indeed the cats invading (and desecrating) the yard occurs at the same time as her realization of the Mormons’ presence in the duplex. As the story progresses, the line is blurred between what’s grotesque and what isn’t, what’s real and what’s only imagined. “He was just imitating what men do,” Mona says of Neville, already making a distinction between life and the imitation of it. Ultimately everything unravels for Mona—the positive becomes nightmarish, and the repugnant (Shirley) is child-like. (It’s no accident that the cyst is on her ovary, the birthplace of eggs.) One by one, peripheral characters disappear, until we are left with only Mona, whose point-of-view is fraught with fear and suspicion. Mona even begins to disappear, talking through Shirley: “Shirley can laugh at the world in a way I can’t.” In the end, what does it mean that Mona and Neville’s relationship has come undone and yet the bond of the missionaries is stronger than ever? What does it mean for it to all get “away from us,” when it is our own doing?

Writing, for me, is about creating something beautiful. That seems hokey, but it’s true. I must have read Sherwood Anderson’s “Death in the Woods,” a dozen times, yet each time I think, “How did he do that?” The image of a circle of dogs running around the old woman in the woods is a perfect image. I intend to spend the rest of my life trying to write a story as perfect as that, or at least get as close as I possibly can.

Elizabeth Eslami on the Web

www.theminnesotareview.org/journal/ns7172/eslami.shtml

www.neonmagazine.co.uk/content/n18hormigas.htm

www.neonmagazine.co.uk/content/n18interview.htm

www.elizabetheslami.blogspot.com/
Louis Gallo

Louis Gallo is a professor of English at Radford University in Virginia. He was born and raised in New Orleans. Only within the last eight months has he ventured into Internet publishing, having published previously in print journals such as Glimmer Train, Texas Review, The Southern Quarterly (forthcoming), Missouri Review, Baltimore Review, American Literary Review, Tampa Review (forthcoming), The Ledge (Pushcart nominee), The Journal (Ohio State), Portland Review, Hiram Poetry Review, Rattle, The MacGuffin, New Orleans Review, The MacGuffin, and many others. His latest Internet publications can be found at the following sites: Paradigm, Raving Dove, Clapboard House, Mused (forthcoming), Bartleby-Snopes, Oregon Literary Review, Poetry Midwest and others. He has an Amazon blog, and a number of his short stories can be found by going to "Louis Gallo Amazon Shorts." He has a MySpace and Facebook page as well. He has a poetry chapbook accepted for publication called The Truth Changes (Finishing Line Press).

About the Work

All of my writing is autobiographical, fiction and poetry. I believe in writing about what one knows, and what do I know more about than what happens in my life each day? The danger here is a lapse into the pedestrian. But I also believe in Kierkegaard's notion of “the sublime in the pedestrian,” which is, the way I see it, also fairly Taoistic and Buddhistic (though Kierkegaard would turn over in his grave to hear it). This notion informs the work of one of my favorite novelists, the late Walker Percy, who borrowed the idea straight from Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel.

OK, so I intently observe whatever happens at every moment, and all material becomes potentia for writing. Next is where craft and editing emerge. What is given in life must be transformed in writing into something interesting, universal and hopefully engaging and revelatory. This is what I hope I achieve in my work. The poem “Tom,” for example, is about a real guy I once knew in Columbia, Missouri, and it's all true except maybe for the writing prize named after him—that is my own invention, though it may have really happened over there. “Cyrus McCormick” stems from an ordeal my daughter had when she was about twelve years old, trying to memorize a class presentation on the subject of Cyrus (yawn). What impressed me most was the agony of her practice, in front of me and my wife, reciting her spiel over and over until she got it right. She actually cried, and suddenly I saw both the teacher and Cyrus as mythic figures of evil, intent to torture my child. Hence, the poem. “Old Man's Cane,” another true story; in this one just about everything written actually happened. What I recall most is the pride in the old man's feeble voice when he announced that he had made the cane himself. He stressed how long it took. A small moment, to be sure, but an amazing one, at least to me. “After the Poetry Reading” is yet another true story that happened only about a year or so ago. Our university sponsored a poetry reading by a fairly famous poet and editor, who started things off by telling us about his bout with throat cancer. That word, “cancer,” just about reversed reality for me, as he read on, and I felt I must get out of the auditorium (which brought to mind Whitman’s escape from the astronomer for entirely different reasons). As fate would have it, on my way back to the car, I happened to see this beautiful young woman, presumably one of our students, dancing all alone on the lawn, a graceful,
classical/jazz ballet number. In the background some other students were playing mellow rock music. The moon beamed down on us all. It was a moment of convergence, and, for me, redemption. The old poet with throat cancer versus the beautiful young dancer—somehow they connected, and she changed everything, life was good again, not replete with paranoia, rage, depression. This connection may not work for others, but I hope it does for some who read the poem.

Now, all that being said, I am also extremely interested in dreams, omens, visions, the mystical. Many of my poems arise directly from dreams, as do many sequences in my short stories. These tend to be surreal and magical realist expeditions, though I regard dream and vision material as equally “real” as “reality,” and maybe more so. I keep dream notebooks, of course, and have studied dreams mostly via Jung, Freud and Eliade (shamanic visions), but I pay attention to the mystics of all religions as well. If you seek omens, just pay attention, be mindful, for they are everywhere, all around you, every single day and night. Our objective-empirical culture has shortchanged us on this what I call “typhonic” reality by opting for logic, rationality and syllogism. But as Freud said, “consciousness is the tip of the iceberg.” And where do logic and rationality reside but in consciousness? The unconscious is far more interesting to me, as is revelation and visionary awareness.
Ricky Garni

Ricky Garni is a graphic designer and musician who gave up his instruments a long time ago and then made the sad decision to look at pictures of the sorts of instruments that he used to own, found them, looked at them, and wept with longing. Now he writes poetry (Amazon and lulu.com, various www.), seldom plays music at all, and tries not to weep with longing so much.
John Grey

*John Grey’s work has been published recently in* Agni, Worcester Review, South Carolina Review *and* The Pedestal, *with work upcoming in* Poetry East *and* REAL.
Ian Haight

Ian Haight has been awarded translation grants from the Daesan Foundation, Korea Literary Translation Institute, and the Baroboin Buddhist Foundation. He is the co-translator of Borderland Roads: Selected Poems of Kyun Ho (White Pine, 2009). His poems were awarded the John Woods Scholarship, and were selected as finalists for the Pavel Strut and SLS fellowships. Poems, essays, and translations appear in Barrow Street, Writer’s Chronicle, and New Orleans Review.

About the Work

There’s nothing too magical or mysterious about how I became interested in poetry. I think I liked writing haiku as it was introduced to me in elementary school.

I lived in what was then a small farm town and came from a family that placed a high value on respect and admiration for the natural world. I liked the idea of making images I had a reverence for conform to a formal structure.

In my early college years I was smitten with romantic impulses, and studying the Romantics suited me well. Add to this I’ve always been interested in “the spiritual” or mysticism. The same holds true for meditation. The idea of bringing all these interests into language and a discipline of art was inspirational to me, and I began to consider seriously writing poetry.

“Living in This World” is a poem I wrote approximately twelve years ago, based on notes I wrote thirteen or fourteen years ago (?). It was inspired by a point of view derived from what happens in meditation. “Moving On” was written around the same time, perhaps a little earlier. It was inspired by my desire to be successful with my meditation/spiritual practice. Both poems went through at least twenty revisions, but looking over what past copies are readily available, the changes were fairly minor and involved the loss of clichés and abstractions.

“Miasma” is the oldest of the three, starting from notes I drafted maybe twenty years ago. It’s gone through over fifty drafts. Keeping it simple, the current form is primarily the result of taking images I didn’t want to lose and trying to determine a way they could work together. The meandering simplicity of Cavafy’s city poems offered some clues. Later the poem evolved into a quasi-renga, using the requirements of that form as a binding agent. But finally with years of dissatisfaction leading to fiery impatience, in one of those most beneficial fits I decided to cut just about everything irrelevant and unproductive and see if anything remained that could be called a poem. Thank you, Segue, for publishing it.

Ian Haight on the Web

www.ianhaight.com
Allan Johnston was born in La Jolla, California, but moved to Pacific Palisades when he was six months old. He started writing poetry at about age sixteen, and did an undergraduate degree in English at California State University Northridge. Jeffers, Eliot and Plath are poets who haunted him early on. Between 1974 and 1976 he lived intermittently between eastern Washington state, Denver, Colorado, and southern California, and in 1979 moved to Davis, California, where he received an M.A. in Creative Writing and a Ph.D. in English from the University of California—Davis, working with Gary Snyder. Since 1989 he has lived near Chicago. His poetry has appeared in over sixty journals, including Poetry, Poetry East, Rhino, Weber Studies, and Rattle. He has published one book (Tasks of Survival), and has a chapbook forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. His awards include a fellowship from the Illinois Arts Council and placements in competitions sponsored by Two Review, New Letters, Roberts Writing Foundation, and other venues. Besides writing poetry, he has published studies of authors and literature in ISLE, Twentieth-Century Literature, AUMLA, and other journals, and is currently president of the Society for the Philosophical Study of Education.

About the Work

All three of the poems came more or less as word flows sparked by memory or association. “Pacific Palisades” reflects back on the extensive time in my childhood I spent climbing in the canyons near my house, and the cliffs that face the sea and crumble underfoot. “Homeless” stemmed from readings I did of a commentary on Dogen’s Mountains and Rivers Sutra combined with associations with landscapes I encountered in northern California while fighting forest fires. “Dawn” most probably reflects on Lake Michigan, which I live by. Stanzaic structure would be the most worked on component of these works; “Dawn,” for instance, started as a free flow, free verse work, and only slowly moved to the quatrain pattern it now holds. The same holds for the stanzas of “Pacific Palisades,” which underwent two-line and other stanzaic patterns before reaching its current form. I resolved these tensions by playing. Playing, self exploration, word exploration, world exploration, and finding out what you know by what you write and rewrite are all part of what makes poetry for me. In the moment is the muse, and I love that instantaneous moment of creation; in the labor is the joy, when things take form out of slow buildings-up of possibilities.

Allan Johnston on the Web

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

www.rattle.com/blog/2009/02/goats-by-allan-johnston/

www.poetsencyclopedia.com/allanjohnston.shtml

tiptonpoetryjournal.com/tpj9/johnston.htm

www.pw.org/content/allan_johnston
Rosalie Morales Kearns

Rosalie Morales Kearns is a fiction writer of Puerto Rican and Pennsylvania Dutch descent, with short stories published in Painted Bride Quarterly, Fringe, Kalliope, Natural Bridge, and other journals. She is seeking a publisher for her story collection and is at work on a novel. Kearns has also published a scholarly article on creative writing pedagogy, and is planning a book-length project exploring what instructors of creative writing can learn from feminist and postcolonial theory, composition studies, and teaching practices in the performing and visual arts. Kearns received her M.F.A. from the University of Illinois. She is currently a Visiting Lecturer at the State University of New York at Albany.

About the Work

My writing is glacially slow, and my memory poor, but I’ll try to reconstruct how this story evolved. About ten years ago I was copyediting a book manuscript on pirates and came across a quote from an 18th-century “history” in which a pirate’s nagging wife is blamed for driving him to his life of crime. That accusation irritated me, and I always wished the wife could have rebutted it. I was also thinking about how there are certain words that many of us automatically picture as describing men: not only pirate (despite the existence of female pirates) but also warrior, sage, and so on. I thought about doing some stories from the point of view of the wives of these men. Thus evolved a story cycle called “The Wives,” with a revolutionary’s wife just as brave and fierce as her husband; a pirate’s wife who also longs for the freedom of the open seas; and a priest’s wife (had to go back to 10th-century England for this one) who is much more intelligent, spiritual, and profound than her well-meaning but somewhat dim husband, a semi-literate village priest.

The original plan was to do each story in first-person, with different modes; for instance, a traditional first-person narrative, and then one in which the narrator is addressing a specific character; then perhaps a dramatic monologue, etc. The plan quickly went awry. I felt claustrophobic in this point of view, with the result that only “The Priest’s Wife” is consistently in the first person (she addresses the Virgin Mary throughout). In “The Revolutionary’s Wife,” the wife is answering questions from a reporter, interspersed with a third-person narration describing her life before exile. “The Pirate’s Wife” has an omniscient narrator in a fabulist mode.

I always knew that the fourth and last part of the cycle would be “God’s Wife,” evoking the pattern of demotion the goddess underwent in patriarchal traditions: originally a stand-alone goddess-mother, then the mother of a male god, then the wife/consort of that god, and then poof—she disappears.

I had nothing beyond a few fuzzy ideas for this while I wrote the first three stories. I thought at first that this wife’s voice would be blissful and expansive, as I might feel if I were a deity. Then again, wouldn’t I be annoyed that I’d been displaced by a junior male? And wouldn’t it be fun to overthrow him?

These ideas took me only so far. First of all, I thought that something whimsical would be more satisfying to write. After all, the universe doesn’t take itself so seriously. Plus, having her angry about her dethronement, or triumphant after battling the usurper, would have left me with a one-note song, and I wanted something more complex. I also wanted to play with metafictional
techniques. So here was my opportunity for that (“She would like a change of scene. So would I. Let’s do that,” etc.).

I had a lot of fun writing “God’s Wife.” For the first time I placed myself inside a story: “a follower, a foolish little person, who wants to write … about the fall of a male sky-god.” I also had fun evoking elements of the first three stories in this last one. The revolutionary’s wife, an atheist, makes a disparaging remark about the cheap furniture that is all she can afford:

they take the little odds and ends of lumber and grind it into sawdust. Then they mix it with water and press it into whatever form they want, tables, chairs. Before you know it God will show up and form it into people. Maybe better than our kind.

The pirate’s wife, on the other hand, imagines God as indifferent. When she climbs up into the sky to confront him, “all she can think to say is, ‘The king is in the counting-house, counting out his money.’” This evokes the nursery rhyme, the next line of which is “The queen is in the parlor, eating bread and honey.” So in “God’s Wife,” when the follower climbs up to God to ask her question, she finds him “trying to construct people out of different materials. He tries particleboard. He tries bread and honey.” Waiting for him to turn into a statue evokes the priest’s wife, who takes a statue of the Virgin Mary out of the chapel, tucks the statue against her hip, and sets it down in a forest stream. And of course God’s glassy-eyed non-responses (“I have no recollection of that”; “That statement is now inoperative”) could have come from any number of White House press conferences during the Bush-Cheney years.

Rosalie Morales Kearns on the Web

www.terrain.org/fiction/22/kearns.htm

home.comcast.net/~wapshot1/fall08/Fiction.Kearns.html

www.cezannescarrot.org/vol3iss2/wildwood.html

fringemagazine.org/issue_05_fiction.htm
Jo Neace Krause recently published a collection of short fiction which won the Ontario Award from Black Lawrence Press. Prior to this her stories appeared in various literary journals such as Yale Review, University of Windsor Review, Exquisite Corpse, Witness, In Posse, Web del Sol, Potomac Review, River City, et al. Two of these stories will be republished by Massachusetts Review and Adirondack Review in November.
About the Work

Much of what we do in life is meaning-poor. It tends to be a part of a general rush that involves careers, relationships, houses, kids, and dogs. Much of what we do in life seems to be disconnected from and resistant to larger meaning. Poetry, good poetry remedies this situation by establishing, by insisting on deeper meanings and wider connections that exist among seemingly disparate events and happenings. Poetry is a disciplined way of seeing with one’s eyes wide open, seeing with a gift of both reflection and refraction. It is a way of knowing what eludes us in our day to day lives. Writing poetry stops time, marks the path we are on and throws a wide net over lived life and intellectual and emotional life. It brings these together both in edifying and unsettling ways.

I write poetry as a private act of mental, moral and ethical hygiene. I do not trumpet the idea that I am a poet which, I feel, has something narcissistic and indulgent about it. Yet, writing poetry can bring one to oneself in a way that no other activity can. The two poems I submitted to Segue bear out these ideas. King Cake came about as a result of the strong feeling that the Mardi Gras King cake we bought for a Mardi Gras celebration would have slipped into meaninglessness without “poetic intervention.” The hidden plastic baby Jesus promising good luck / blessings begged for poetic appropriation. In writing this poem, I feel I wrested a deeper sense of awareness not only of the oddness of the idea of a king cake but of the ideas informing the idea of a king cake and the connections they had to other ideas. Sermon on the Mount is a fictional superimposition of the kindly and useful Sermon on the Mount onto the oftentimes sermonizing that goes with relational disaffections.

As most writers know, one seldom gets a poem right on the first second or even third time. To get a poem “right” requires a sense of sound and a careful attention to how words “mean.” In this oftentimes characterized as cynical age, writing poetry still assumes that language has the power to signify deeper and fuller awareness and meaning. Making the kind of condensed meaning that you find in poetry, however, is not an easy task. I can liken the process to making pottery. You start with a clump of material and then given it shape by turning it again and again, paring it, excising large amounts of material in order to get at the idea. Much paring went into the writing of both these poems.
Steven Joyce on the Web

germanic.osu.edu/people/person.cfm?ID=821

www.munyori.com/stevenjoyce.html

h05.cgpublisher.com/proposals/77/index_html

utpjournals.metapress.com/content/7249213127155g87/

www.magnoliafloridajournal.com/issue%20magnolia/issue_2_8_a.html

tinyurl.com/no9hb3
Eric Maroney

Eric Maroney published Religious Syncretism (SCM-Canterbury, 2006), which is a full length book about comparative religion, and The Other Zions: The Lost History of Jewish Nations (Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming, late 2009), which is a book about Jewish history. He has written two articles on the topics of “syncretism” and “secular” for the Encyclopedia of Identity (Sage Publications, forthcoming 2010), and his fiction has appeared in Our Stories, The MacGuffin and Arch. Maroney has written an unpublished novel called The Malady, and is currently writing another novel called The People of the Land.

About the Work

“Not My City, Not My People” began as a problem: how can the complex political and religious dimensions of the Arab-Israeli dispute be represented in a work of very short fiction?

My solution was to make the main character an inanimate object: a chair. By discarding a person as the main character I gave myself a certain freedom to focus on the chair as a small, mobile current that could witness many sides of the Arab-Israeli dispute. The chair would act as the hinge around which the action develops, and would be placed in areas where ethnic conflict plays out. The chair, as a prized antique, exists well before the story begins, and continues to exist long after the story ends. So the story was able to develop as a series snapshots of a dispute which is ongoing, not solved, open-ended, and uncertain in its outcome. I shaped the chair as the repository of all of this, and used it as an accessible and conventional device that gives access to an unconventional time, place, and series of events.

After I decided on the chair as the main character, the rest of the elements more or less fell into place. All that was left was to bring the nuts and bolts of fiction writing into practice. For me, fiction has a simple mandate: the writer takes the reader on a journey. If the journey is good, the reader continues along, word by word, from the beginning to the end. The job of the fiction writer is to keep things moving forward to get to the finish. But along the way, the writer must suggest other directions, detours, and passages to the reader. Even in a very short story like this one, the intimation of more routes than the one presented is crucial to the success of a story. There must be the sense that more is happening than we can ever know, and that the world is bigger than us or our fiction.

All these elements came together in the writing of “Not My City, Not My People.” A profound human problem was distilled into a specific instance, the formal elements were created to put this problem into a place, and hints were here and there suggested that there is more in this story than explicitly stated. If any of these elements were missing or undeveloped, the story would have failed.
Eric Maroney on the Web

www.arts.cornell.edu/econ/em75/

www.ourstories.us/Spring%202008/Story_EricMaroney.html

www.artsci.wustl.edu/~archword/fiction/maroney/bio.htm

Ralph James Savarese


About the Work

I wrote “The Dark Night of Synecdoche” as an attempt to be funny in prose. I grew up in a family whose craziness could rival that of David Sedaris’, and though I liked his work, I wanted to produce something that was ultimately both sad and philosophical. I didn’t want the humor to be the point; rather, I wanted it to be the vehicle for a deeper understanding of family relations and, as important, a strategy for disarming the reader. A writer of memoir can’t begin with philosophy; it has to be smuggled in and rendered essential. I also wanted to see if I could write about sex—not just any old sex but teenage sex: that bumbling and charged alacrity with which the young reach for one another’s bodies. The most challenging aspect of writing such a piece was making the different registers fit and managing the transitions. I also had some difficulty sensing when the humor, which is rather masculine and jejune, went too far. How far is too far in a story, a factual story, that is already over the moon? The most pleasurable aspect was working with metaphor, allowing the piece to be richly lyrical. I favor nonfiction that is poetic without abandoning narrative drive or plot.

Ralph James Savarese on the Web

www.ralphsavarese.com

m.dmregister.com/detail.jsp?key=444894&#38;full=1

tinyurl.com/36czfc

James Sepsey

James Sepsey’s work has appeared in Glimmer Train, McSweeney’s Internet Tendency, and Senses of Cinema. He once received a very warm and encouraging rejection letter from Zoetrope: All-Story. These days he teaches high-school English.

About the Work

One day I read George Saunders’s “The Barber’s Unhappiness.” It was in The New Yorker and I remember thinking there needed to be a comma between “Mornings” and “the barber.” The story begins: “Mornings the barber left his stylists outside and sat out front of his shop…” I dwelled on this for several months. The more I read Saunders the more I realized how punctuation acted like rests in music: halves, wholes, quarters, so on.

I still dwell on this. But it taught me the virtues of dwelling.

This story began with someone returning a copy of Scanners. I had no idea who. The man in the overcoat sounded funny to me. So there he was. The initial conflict of the story concerned the video-store clerk and the protagonist; later it became more fantastical: a severe migraine, a supernatural mystery, and so on.

I was nostalgic for videocassettes, which might explain my preference for the videocassette format over DVD. I was also thinking of the stories of John Collier (from his collection Fancies and Goodnights mostly) and the episode of The Twilight Zone where Nan Adams sees the hitchhiker and finally learns to overcome her fear of death. Mainly because she is already dead.

As usual, the ending was the most difficult. What did the man in the overcoat give the woman? How would it be used in the end? It was that idea of Chekhov’s gun: If you show a gun in the first act, use by the third. What he left out was: Make sure the gun is loaded when the time comes to fire it. I sometimes forget to do that.

James Sepsey on the Web

www.glimmertrain.com/issue64fall.html

www.mcsweeneys.net/links/newfood/ (You will need to scroll for several days.)

archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/04/becker.html

jackpendarvis.blogspot.com/search?q=James+Sepsey

www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/ask/2008/12/questions-for-treisman.html
Sharon Suzuki-Martinez

Sharon Suzuki-Martinez grew up in Kaneohe, Hawaii, but now lives in Tempe, Arizona. Her poetry has or will appear in Columbia Poetry Review, Snow Monkey, Spooky Boyfriend, Tryst, Hawai‘i Review and other journals. She is the poetry editor of Bosphorus Art Project Quarterly, works as a copywriter, and enjoys feeding wild animals.

About the Work

Writing and reading poetry feels like skydiving. It gives me a sense of exhilarating freedom and the poetic process is all about falling (don’t laugh) in love. I’ll fall in love with a line I’ve seen online or misread along the road or dreamt or said or overheard or heard in my head while cooking dinner. Let me show you what I mean through my three poems in Segue.

One humid summer day, I noticed an odd cave-like smell in the apartment and told my husband, “It’s fusty.” He didn’t believe “fusty” is a real word (it is!). This sparked both an argument and the first line of “The Way of All Flux.” The rest of the poem is a celebration of life’s unpredictable fluctuations and perhaps unsurprisingly went through over a dozen revisions. Like most of my poems, it was fun to write and it shows. At least I hope so.

“So Much Revealed and Even More Hidden” came to me as I was in my kitchen preparing some Japanese chicken curry and shooing away ants. Had I been cooking something simpler, like a frozen pizza, I probably wouldn’t have written this poem. The sparking line that drifted into my thoughts as I tearfully chopped onions was: “There was a woman who adored a man from afar.” I wrote the poem from several simultaneous points of view to create a world that increases in both fullness and mystery. I wanted to play with the idea that the more you know, the more you realize—you don’t know.

I heard the first line “A dragon flies for the first time on a major American airline” in my head while riding the bus to work. I was thinking about a trip I’d just taken to Phoenix. It was a typical, bright-frozen, winter’s morning in Minneapolis. As the bus crossed over the Mississippi River, I felt happy. I became the dragon or the dragon became me. By the time I reached my office, I had a rough idea of what would happen in “Dragon Flight.”

I know I have a poem when I can’t stop spinning a story-song around my first line. Next, I write down my thoughts and obsessively read aloud and revise until the poem feels three-dimensional: alive with a body, spirit, voice, and a world all its own.

My poems are out to seduce readers into having a soulful good time as they open themselves to worlds lush with unexpected possibilities. I want people to understand that even when a poem is funny, it’s never frivolous (unless it’s a limerick). Poetry is like skydiving and knowing you can grow wings or sprout balloons or become a thundercloud or be rescued by Zeus or be saved by Sasquatch before reaching the ground. I love William Carlos Williams’ line: “It is difficult to get news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.”
Sharon Suzuki-Martinez on the Web

www.bapq.net/

spookyboyfriend2.weebly.com/sharon-suzuki-martinez.html

www.tempe.gov/arts/events/Poets/09Poet.htm

www.mtn.org/accesstoart/archive/ep5/index.html

www.leftfacingbird.com/LEFT%20FACING%20BIRD/LEFT%20FACING%20BIRD.html
Bryan Walpert

Bryan Walpert’s book of poems, Etymology, was published this year with Cinnamon Press. His poems have appeared widely in the U.S. in anthologies and in journals such as Agni, Crab Orchard Review, Hayden’s Ferry Review, and Tar River Poetry, as well as in journals or anthologies in Canada, the UK, and New Zealand. An American, he teaches creative writing at Massey University in Palmerston North, New Zealand, and is the poetry editor of the New Zealand-based international literary journal Bravado. In 2007, he won the New Zealand Poetry Society International Poetry Competition and the James Wright Poetry Award from the Mid-American Review. His first collection of short stories, Ephraim’s Eyes, is forthcoming November 15, 2009, with Pewter Rose Press.

About the Work

Sincerity and the Lyric Poet

A collection of poetry is a record of obsession. Or so it seems to me. Obsess once meant “besiege” or “occupy.” This is how the interests that wind up in poems make themselves manifest. They besiege me. They occupy me. I am occupied by them, and often too late to realize it. An interesting phrase sparks a poem. Or an image or word or, perhaps most frightening, an idea. Whatever—it’s a Trojan horse. This gift from the muse creaks open overnight, and out marches its invading army. There are any number of obsessions that besiege me, one of which is etymology, which turned out to be the title of my first book of poems, which is what can happen once obsessions overrun the town of which I thought I was the mayor. But etymology is not the obsession I’m interested in today, in this essay, which is meant as context for the poems generously featured in this issue of Segue, poems I’ll have to get back to more specifically later on despite my discomfort discussing my own work. Rather, reviewing the poems I’ve written over, say, the past decade, it’s clear that another of those obsessions has to do with an old-fashioned word: sincerity.

Alady I’ve lost about half of you, I suppose, lip curled in contempt and off to get another cup of coffee after sending Eric Melbye, our esteemed editor at Segue, an indignant email about the sudden decline of a good journal with such potential, really it’s a shame, and asking him to cancel your subscription. Look, I can understand why. You’re embarrassed by the word. I’m embarrassed by the word. Maybe I’m projecting my embarrassment on you. That’s how uncomfortable I am. Sincerity went out a hundred years ago, didn’t it? Or maybe it was in the 1960s and 1970s, when if post-structuralism taught us anything about ourselves it was that we have no selves. The self is illusory, a product of intersecting discourses. Language poetry arose from these post-structuralist insights—I’m referring to the insights of Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, among others (who isn’t?). And if Language poetry was considered marginal for awhile there, and if it seems even a bit quaint now, its influence has turned out to be rather staggering. Plus there’s the fact that an increasing number of contemporary—that is, young—poets are enrolled in Ph.D. programs. That means these young poets have been catching up on their Derrida, Barthes, Foucault.

And yet. Despite rumors of its critical demise—Lionel Trilling acknowledged the “decline” of “sincerity” when he published Sincerity and Authenticity way back in 1971—the word sincerity
over the past few years has re-emerged as a means of examining those aspects stubbornly central to
the lyric: voice and subjectivity. An Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre Colloquium in May 2007, for
example, took its theme as “Authenticity and the Lyric Voice” (featuring such papers as “Sincerity
and Form in Recent U.S.-based Poetry”). Sincerity has been cropping up in individual essays—poet
and critic Hank Lazer, who has more than a passing interest in Language poetry and other
alternatives to mainstream Romantic-type poetics, recently suggested that the current generation of
poets is “beginning to advocate and explore renewed ways of engaging sincerity” (Boston Review,
April/May 2004, for those interested in tracking it down). Deborah Forbes recently devoted a
whole book to it: Her monograph Sincerity’s Shadow (Harvard UP, 2004—maybe 2004 was the year
of sincerity) examines American poetry between 1950 and 1980. Forbes says she aims to “preserve
the question of sincerity a little longer than postmodern criticism has tended to do in order to
observe the particular opportunities poetry provides for claims of sincerity to construct and undo
themselves within poetry’s own terms.” Perhaps of even more interest is the way that the issue of
sincerity was framed by a recent discussion on the blog site associated with the journal Poetry. The
conversation concerned the so-called “post avant” poets, whose work is informed by various avant
garde movements but which has moved beyond being ensconced any one of them (hence “post
avant”). These poets, wrote Reginald Shepherd, who compiled an anthology of “lyric
postmodernism,” “frequently problematize and question the notion of self and of personal
experience” yet they “don’t just discard the self as an ideological illusion.”

That, as economically as I could make it and without becoming too bookish—and I realize I
might have failed there—is what we call the critical context. Now for my opinion. I don’t believe
all those sophisticated poet-readers out there want to go back to some naïve notion of sincerity—
that is, sincerity defined as “I said what I did” (poem as some accurate record of the poet’s
experience) or “I said what I mean” (poem as an accurate record—that is, expression—of the
poet’s feelings about, say, yesterday’s sunset or her mother). The kind of sincerity at issue here
might be better summed up as “I mean what I’ve said.” The sophisticated writer knows that the
sophisticated reader knows that the poet
can’t possibly mean what he or she says—because what he or
she says always means more and/or something different than what he or she thinks he or she
means by what he or she says.

If you’re like me, you want to cry. If you’re not planning to write Language poems or even
Language-influenced “oppositional” poems—if as much as you dig them as a reader, it’s just not
your bag as a writer—and you’re not going to write naïve Romantic-style poems because of all of
the above, where does that leave you as a lyric poet? As I mentioned, but will briefly in this
paragraph (largely plagiarized from another essay I once wrote about something else) specify with
selected juicy quotes, some purveyors of postmodernism go so far as to suggest that we do not have
real “selves,” unique individual cores, apart from language. What we think of as a “self” is not
unified but fragmented; selves are really composed of ideologies embedded in language. There is no
“I” apart from language. As Fredric Jameson famously put it, postmodernism announces “the
‘death’ of the subject itself—the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual.”
Nick Mansfield, in his study on subjectivity, explains that postmodernist thinking rejects “the image
of the subject as autonomous and free, as authentic and naturally occurring—the subject of
Rousseau and of Romantic poetry; the thinking, feeling agent making its way through the world,
giving expression to its emotions and fulfilment to its talents and energies.” I’m doing a lot of
simplifying here, but whatever differences might exist among the poststructuralist theorists who dominate the second half of the 20th century, Mansfield notes, “they agree in seeing this older form of the subject—the ‘individual’—as a mirage or even a ruse.” Jameson—he’s terribly fun to quote—goes so far as to say, “there is no longer a self present to do the feeling.”

Still, we have this very persuasive illusion of feelings. We bear them, react to them—often poorly—want to get them off our chests or suppress them with expensive medication or explore their origins with expensive psychotherapy. The illusion that we are individual selves with real things called feelings, sometimes about other seemingly cohesive entities with seemingly real feelings (nearly as real as our own), is so persuasive that, barring sudden enlightenment, of which I am a proponent, isn’t there a kind of pleasure to be found in a poem that in some way deals with this? I’m reminded of something Charles Baxter once wrote. He was referring to the notion that characters in fiction are just words on a page, but it seems equally applicable to the idea that we have no selves apart from language: “It’s like telling a bride on her wedding night that her spouse’s body really consists of carbon molecules and hydrogen atoms and smaller subatomic particles such as quarks. It’s true, but priggish, and beside the point.”

So what does this mean for the poor lyric poet, who traffics in feelings, so often the feelings of an implicit or explicit “I”? How difficult to be unapologetically sincere—to take an emotional or intellectual stand—knowing that your readers know your views on the world have to some extent, some would say have been fully, shaped by the language you use, a language that both arises from and imposes a set of values that are merely relative to other values. How difficult to deal with feelings and to ask the reader to share them. How difficult, in other words, to write a lyric poem in which a speaker observes the world and draws some kind of conclusion about his feelings for it—particularly if we are invited to see the speaker as some sort of version of the poet. How can you deal with feelings without appearing sincere—because that’s the problem. And that, really, is the problem, to put it more clearly: not sincerity but the appearance of sincerity.

There is a nervousness in the context of postmodernism not just about taking a stand, but about the appearance of having taken one. Given all we know about language, in other words, even the illusion of sincerity looks foolish and naïve. That’s how we get so much irony. I mean irony in the way philosopher Richard Rorty means it when he says that ironists are “never able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus of their selves.” It’s not just poetry, either. Everyone’s got a wink and a nudge; it’s hard to know where anyone stands. Look around you—at talk shows, sitcoms, advertising, even essays for online literary journals: the all-too-familiar arch tone, the self-conscious-calling-attention to one’s language or rhetorical strategies when tackling serious subjects, as though terribly afraid—not of being caught with one’s emotional pants down, not even of not being aware they’re down, but rather of being thought by others of being unaware that they’re down. I know that you know that I know that you know, etc. I meant to write a poem, but I think I need to lie down.

It’s not that ironists don’t feel anything (or, if you’re a postmodernist, it’s not that ironists don’t think they feel something or, if they’re postmodernists, it’s not that ironists aren’t aware that they merely think they feel something). It’s just that given the distrust of sincerity—born of relativistic values (cf. “grand narratives”) and a distrust even of the language we use—it is simply not hip to adopt the mask of a speaker who is expressing his or her feelings, at least not without
winking at us and elbowing us in the ribs by making damn sure we know the speaker ain’t you and that these feelings are in some way contingent and not to be trusted. It gets a bit tiring. As David Foster Wallace put it a decade ago—referring to fiction—irony is “bigger than ever after 30 long years as the dominant mode of hip expression. It’s not a rhetorical mode that wears well.” He explains, “This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function,” adding:

I find gifted ironists sort of wickedly fun to listen to at parties, but I always walk away feeling like I’ve had several radical surgical procedures. And as for actually driving cross-country with a gifted ironist or sitting through a 300-page novel full of nothing but trendy sardonic exhaustion, one ends up feeling not only empty but somehow…oppressed.

The lyric poet has a similar problem, hence my obsession: Can you be ironic and sincere at the same time? Can irony be a type of sincerity? Or, maybe—and this is what my obsession is—is irony a way through to sincerity? Can some difficult balance be achieved? Look, this is not me talking. I know better; I know this is all foolishness. It’s the guys with the spears and shields in that damn wooden horse. They’ve taken over.

All of which gets me to my own poems, about which I should probably talk in more detail—the ones published here in this issue of *Segue*, some of which are from *Etymology* (Cinnamon Press), some of which are in the next completed manuscript (*A History of Glass*—currently seeking a publisher, by the way), and one of which is destined for a third, New Zealand-oriented, manuscript under construction (watch this space). But look, hey, I’m out of room. Too bad. I was looking forward to dissecting my own work. Next time. Just you and me. We’ll do lunch. I’ll call you.

**Bryan Walpert on the Web**

[www.mid.muohio.edu/segue/1-1/Walpert.htm](http://www.mid.muohio.edu/segue/1-1/Walpert.htm)

[www.poetriesociety.org.nz/aboutopenpoems#au](http://www.poetriesociety.org.nz/aboutopenpoems#au)

[www.poetriesociety.org.nz/aboutopenpoems#ap](http://www.poetriesociety.org.nz/aboutopenpoems#ap)


[web.bryant.edu/~blr/poems.htm#jacob](http://web.bryant.edu/~blr/poems.htm#jacob)
Theresa Williams

Theresa Williams has published a novel, The Secret of Hurricanes, and stories in The Sun, Hunger Mountain, and other journals. One of her poems was a finalist for the Ginsberg Prize. She teaches literature and Creative Writing at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

About the Work

“I Am the Zookeeper” and “The Zookeeper's Loss” grew out of a haiku project I started on my blog. I had been frustrated for some time by my inability to produce writing while teaching. Writing haiku, I reasoned, would make me look more closely at the world I inhabit. Connecting to the physical world is something I have to make a special effort to do. By temperament I'm a dreamer. Physical reality is secondary to me, yet I know how important it is in grounding creative work. I made a goal to write 100 haiku in a year. I have so far surpassed that goal and am close to writing 200 haiku.

One day I ran across a reference to a zookeeper in my reading—I can't remember the source—and I had a sudden insight. For some time, I have been working on a novel about a man who travels the Ohio River in a little boat. What if he was a zookeeper? How would this shape the narrative? I began to think about what the inner life of my zookeeper might be like. So I wrote two or three haiku poems about a zookeeper. They were strange and wonderful haiku; I immediately saw that I needed to construct longer poems in order to discover more about the zookeeper. These Segue poems are part of that exploration.

While developing the inner life of the zookeeper, I began to think about a childhood fascination I had with insects and remembered a book from my childhood called The Golden Book About God. There were no images of God. The book suggests that God is found in the physical world; this includes the creatures who inhabit the planet with us. This idea led me to the possibility that the zookeeper loves insects, not just in a romantic sense but also in a spiritual sense.

Finally, it occurs to me that the process I just described is a similar process I used while writing my first novel. Often I would recast prose sections into poetry and then shift them back to prose. This process helped me to find images and to condense the writing. Poetry—reading and writing it—is my fuel. This zookeeper is now finding a prominent place in the new novel I'm working on. Once he stepped on the novel's stage, I felt a new energy and a new reason to finish the novel. I want to know what happens next. I mean, I really want to know.