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### The Watermark: A Journal of the Arts - Vol. 06 - 1998-1999

University of Massachusetts Boston

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A surrealist illustration of a face. The face is composed of a light blue, textured surface. The eyes are large, dark, and almond-shaped, with long, dark eyelashes. The nose is replaced by a large, dark green, leafy tree. The mouth is a simple, dark, curved line. The background is a bright blue sky with white, fluffy clouds. The overall style is dreamlike and artistic.

# THE WATERMARK

A Journal of the Arts • University of Massachusetts • Boston



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# *THE WATERMARK*

A Journal of the Arts • University of Massachusetts • Boston

Volume 6  
1998 - 1999



# *The Watermark*

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## **Editor's Note**

*The Watermark* is a student run and student funded organization. It exists to showcase both the art and writing of students at the University of Massachusetts Boston. *The Watermark* is published once a year and is distributed free of charge to the entire U Mass Boston community. We would like to thank everyone who contributed in the production of *The Watermark*. We are indebted to Donna Neal, Warrior Princess of Student Life, for her contributions of equipment and time. Without you, Donna, there would be no *Watermark* this year. We would like to thank Martha Collins and Lloyd Schwartz of the Creative Writing Program for their on-going support and advice. We would like to thank *Mass Media* for lending us our Production Doyenne, D. Anne T. We would also like to thank the Wit's End Cafe for their constant generosity.

The selections included in this volume were chosen by an editorial staff of U Mass Boston students. Selections represent what the staff considered to be the best work submitted this year. Those students whose submissions were not accepted for publication are encouraged to submit again next year. Every year the editorial staff changes, bringing fresh eyes and different editorial styles.

## **Submission Guidelines**

We ask for blind submissions because we don't want our judges to know who wrote them. The genre of submitted work, name, address, telephone, and student ID number should appear on a separate cover sheet. Only your student ID number should appear on each page of your submission. Written work must be typed and not exceed 4500 words. Fiction and non-fiction should be double spaced and submitted in duplicate. Poems should be typed as you would like them to appear and submitted in triplicate. Please bear in mind that artwork needs to be reproduced and often reduced in size. Please limit submissions to no more than five. Unfortunately, we were unable to publish several wonderful poems because there were no coversheets, ID, or phone numbers to tell us who wrote them.

This year we had five readers for fiction and prose, and three readers for poetry. Each reader was asked to write "yes," "no," or "maybe" at the top of each submission and then initial their choice. The Editors-in-Chief then broke any mixed votes. Readers were not allowed to vote on their own submissions.



## **Please Join *The Watermark* Staff**

A journal like *The Watermark* is not an easy undertaking, but offers many rewards. Working on the staff provides students the opportunity to become involved in the planning and production of a major publication. Next year's Co-Editors-in Chief will be Jane Winans and Kate O'Brien. Announcements seeking Fiction, Poetry, and Art Editors, as well as production assistants shall be placed in the student newspaper *The Mass Media* in the fall. Please contact us then. We look forward to the new editorial staff who will undoubtedly bring out a fresh and invigorating edition of *The Watermark* in the year 2000.



## **The Lillian Lorraine Jones Memorial Prize**

Through the generosity of the Creative Writing Program, this year *The Watermark* is able to offer a prize for an outstanding piece of either fiction or prose. The editors of *The Watermark* are pleased to announce that we are awarding **The Lillian Lorraine Jones Memorial Prize to:**

**Jackie Cornog**  
for her poem

**“Housedresses”**

Congratulations from *The Watermark*  
and the Creative Writing Program.

### **Honorable mention:**

Erica White for “The Bay of Somnus”  
John Black for “Little Beauty”

## House Dresses

She used to be cold  
in the old house,  
and dressed in coats and hats

with attached scarves.  
She wore gloves and fumbled  
with her mail and hoped

like hell she'd win  
the biggest prize,  
but only saw

her breath and better luck  
next time. Then the move,  
before the house fell on her head.

To the house where she  
was always hot and sat  
in the back bedroom in the house

dresses. She pinned  
her pockets when they ripped,  
and pushed her glasses up

when they slipped as the sweat  
ran down her nose.  
The mail came same as before,

and rose in stacks on the bed.  
She read the regrets  
and try-agains, burning

to win. She wore flowered  
house dresses and used  
contest forms for fans.

Jackie Cornog

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Untitled, Digital photos by Suthir Shanmugasundaram

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*The poetry section is dedicated  
in memory of*

**Chris Bouchie**  
*our fellow student*

## The Bay of Somnus

Picture in your popped mind  
six swimming elephants.  
Breathe in  
and skim the surface chop.  
See the six submarine scopes of air.  
Submerged and seasoaked  
their rotund bodies  
are barely buoyant.  
Beneath the bobbing  
heft of the day  
their thick torpid legs  
become a forest of swimming trunks.  
From below  
the pachyderm yachts  
cruise above your coral reef.  
A dream spectacle of blue-green algae.  
This night  
the powder blue prisms are  
hunted by striped marauders.  
They flyby  
jurassic sea fans swaying delicately.  
And all the while  
nestled in the sands of subconscious  
the stingray  
patiently waits for you  
thirty meters down.

Erica White

# Social Work

Christopher Craig

She's standing in the doorway wearing the bath robe I slipped from my house, the rose-colored one with the frayed ends. She's hacking and squeezing out tears. In between hacks she sucks on a menthol and asks me for some cash. I kiss her wide forehead and hand her two tens. Be right back, she says. Inside, the couch is piled high with clothes she never wears and the sink in the little kitchenette overflows with dishes. I'm used to the smell, but I'll never get used to the bugs.

I met her a year ago. Someone had filed a 51A and I came out to do the interview. The week after her children were placed I had to come out to see her again. She was a mess. She said she hadn't slept in days, that she was broke and could she borrow twenty bucks. It was her wild green eyes and the waxy scar over her lip that made me go for it. I thought about it for a second. What do I get? I said.

Anything you want, she said.

I didn't always have money, but she didn't mind. You got sweet lips, Baby, she said. Sometimes I'd see her every few days, sometimes not for weeks, but when I was away from her, everything seemed dull and flat. I'd do that tired dance we all do sometimes. Work all day and then come home to the couch, drifting away in the droning, blue light of the tv. Laura, my wife, would get home late as always, and I'd be too stoned on sitcoms to say much. But she'd lie next to me anyway, and sometimes we'd fall asleep together. Fat and happy, that's what the old man would've said, but it didn't sit right with me. Too much couch and I'd start believing I belonged there.

Fifteen minutes. I'm waiting in her apartment for fifteen minutes and I'm getting edgy. When she comes back she's whacked. Hmm, Baby, let's get it, she says. I'm always afraid I'm going to hurt her, she's so damn skinny. But she moans and groans like it means something so I keep going. Afterward, I don't even get the condom off before she's hitting the pipe.

She sucks down a hit and whispers in my ear. I slide her a ten spot and then slip out the door after she's gone.

When I get to the office she's left three voice-mail messages. Peggy comes by my desk and gives me a sleeve of pink paper and a clumsy smile. She says it's an emergency.

I look at the paper and shrug.

How's Laura? Peggy says.

I take an interest in a file that's on my desk and I'm leafing through the pages. I've known Peggy a long time, even longer than



Laura. You work with someone for nine years and you get to understand them. You know what motivates them, how they think. You get to know stuff about them you wish you didn't know, and they know stuff about you.

Laura's good, I say, leaning back in my chair and running my hands through my hair. We've gone this way a few times before, questions about Laura when Peggy thinks I'm with someone else. A few years ago, I hooked up with this fiery Latina from Jamaica Plain. She had lips like pillows. Maybe I was smiling too much, or maybe I was just careless, but Peggy caught on. She must have invited Laura and me out to dinner a hundred times.

Laura's good, huh? she says.

I see the disappointment in her eyes and I get this sinking feeling, like that time in high school when the old man caught Bobby Driscanelli and me naked in the bathroom. His eyes went flat and we never talked much after that.

Peggy picks up a pen from my desk and tosses it onto my lap. Michael and I are going down to New York this weekend, she says. Dropping the kids at my mother's. You guys doing anything?

I don't know, I say, wishing she'd just give up. You know Laura, she works a lot, I say.

Uh, huh, she says. How about lunch at one-thirty?

Her eyes get soft and for a moment I think it would be okay. But I say no, anyway. I've got an appointment, I say.

Yeah, I bet, she says. She walks over to her desk and gets on the phone. She keeps shuffling pieces of paper around, opening her drawers and then closing them. She takes the picture of her kids and wipes the frame with her sleeve. When she turns back to me she's got those wounded eyes, again. And I wish she'd turn them away or start screaming or something.

My stomach's boiling and there's a pressure building behind my right eye. I pick up the phone to cancel my plans. She doesn't have her own phone so I call her at Sidney's, the albino crackhead next door. The two of them hustle their asses all day for hits off the pipe and ashtray change. She picks up the phone on the first ring. Where'd you go, Baby?

Don't call me here anymore, I say.

Okay. You comin' back later? She's grinding her teeth so bad it sounds like she's gnawing on the mouthpiece.

No, I say.

Then I'm calling you back, she says.

I slam down the phone. Peggy's staring at me again. I take a deep breath. I used to like that she called. All of us around here saving the world, and she'd be talking about my sweet kisses. But she's been like this too often, lately. Two weeks ago, she said she'd start yapping if I didn't get her kids back.

It's not just up to me, I said. And besides, who do you think they're going to believe?

Me, she said. When I tell 'em to check for that hairy mole on your ass.

She had a point. I'd been probing Judy, my supervisor, trying to get a feel for how much she knew about the case. But you've got to be subtle in these matters, so I never learned all that much. One day I just asked her what she thought. It's your case, she said. You tell me.

I need to get some distance if I'm going to recommend against her. But it's probably too late, I've got paper work that says I should do otherwise. Still, I'm looking for a way out. Every day for months I've been telling myself that this is it, the end. But I can't shake her smooth hands on my back or that hungry look she throws me sometimes. And, she haunts me. Once, last month we were lying in bed and she started sobbing. Talking about how tired she was lately. Spent, Baby, she said. But her eyes said she'd never known anything else and I got tired just thinking about what it takes to fill her up. She slid in close to me, pressing her bony shoulder against my armpit. You ever get tired, Baby?

Sure.

Of me?

When I didn't say anything she put her hand on my belly, surfing her fingers across my blond hair. We ain't so different, she whispered.

I knew she was right; we chased the same demons.

Later that night, she dug her nails into my ass. Love wounds, Baby, she said. I'd never punched a woman before and I was surprised by how mean I felt after I did. How I wanted to keep going until there was nothing left of her. When I finished, she lay on the floor, laughing. That all you got, she said, wiping her bloody ear with a stiff towel. You ain't nothing.

Now, I can't shake her at all, everywhere I go I see her; only it's not her. Nobody's that skinny, but I see parts of her in everyone.

My phone rings and Freddie's on the line. Freddie knows. Hey, he says.

Yeah, I say.

At the desk next to Peggy's, Betty Norris argues with some woman about a charge she's picked up. Her kids roll around on the floor, their skin as gray as the tile. She's screaming and her kids keep right on rolling.

You sound crappy, he says.

I got problems, I say.

Peggy shuffles back over to my desk shaking her head and staring at the floor. She looks across the room at a woman sitting against the wall with her three kids. She's got a kid in each arm and one on her lap. They're all staring at a box of doughnuts on Mary's desk.

A startling revelation, he says. The girl?

What else, I say.

Give it up, already.

Can't, I say.

Christ, Peggy says, walking toward Mary's desk.

I don't understand you, he says, as if I might be able to explain it to him. I don't understand either, I say. And even if I did, I don't think it would solve my problem. I mean, why do people do anything?

Freddie doesn't say anything. Then he says, I thought you knew about that stuff, why people do what they do.

It's all bullshit, I say, and hang up.

I walk to the water-cooler, fill four paper cups with water, and put them next to the doughnuts. Peggy's picking out the chocolate ones and placing them on napkins. She smiles. See, she says.

My face sizzles. Yeah, I say. Well, they're gonna need something to wash that crap down with.

She touches my arm. Let's have lunch, okay?

I'm thinking no, but I nod anyway.

Lunch is a sermon on my virtues. I get back to the office thinking Peggy's either a really good friend or maybe just stupid. I call Laura at work and tell her I'm going out with Freddie tonight. She says that's no problem and tells me not to forget that tonight's trash night. Make sure you leave it by the curb when you get home, she says.

Then I call Sidney's. Yeah? she says.

See you and the freak, tonight.

After work I go to the bank, deposit my check, and withdraw a few twenties. Then I stop at Wally's and buy some of that Boone's Farm wine she likes. I park in a garage near work and take the subway. On the train I keep an eye out for anybody I might know. Once I ran into a friend of Laura's. She was all, Hey, nice to see you, what's going on. Where you headin'? Meanwhile, my heart's smashing my ribs and I'm weighing every word I say like I know she's wearing a wire. She must have thought something was up because she told Laura I looked frightened.

When I get to Sidney's apartment they're both cooked. Sidney's eyes are like pink flying saucers. He's running around cleaning things he's already cleaned twice — emptying the same ashtrays over and over, scrubbing the white plastic end tables until his knuckles blister. He keeps pulling his hair, yanking out little clumps like cotton.

She's looking through the door's peep hole. Shhh, she whispers. There's cops in the hallway.

You're crazy, I say, opening the door to show her. Nothing but piss yellow walls and green carpet.

Five minutes later her face is two inches from the doorknob.

Look, she says. It's moving.

I've seen her like this before. Too high. She'll be tough to get with now. I give Sidney a twenty and tell him to go cop some H. He snaps the money from my fingers. Right on time, Baby, he says.

While he's gone she tells me about what's up. Rolled an old queen today, she says. She's on her hands and knees picking stuff from the burnt-orange carpet. Down near the bus station, she says. She puts everything she's collected onto the chrome coffee table and sifts through it. They love Sidney, she says. He's such a freak.

Sidney comes back like jello. Here, Baby. He cuts a line and she snorts. Her face gets all twisted as the heroin slides down her throat. The only time I ever snorted anything was in college during finals. I ended up sitting by the Charles drinking whiskey and watching the sunrise with some guy I hardly knew. We went back to his apartment and watched porno flicks. When he made his move I was too wired to say no. It was the first time since Driscanelli and over in minutes. Later, his roommate came home and eyed me suspiciously; it was a familiar look, and I left feeling naked and cold, wishing, like before, that I could take it all back.

Now she's in the bathroom, heaving. I should leave, just walk out. Go home to Laura and stay there. Pray that someday this doesn't come back to bite my ass. But she comes out of the bathroom, smiling. Fresh lipstick's smeared across her cheek. She runs her hands through her hair, which is dark with sweat and matted to her face. And I'm a little dazed by how torn I feel, how I wish she'd just disappear.

She sits on my lap, cracks the bottle of wine, and takes a swig. How did you get this? I say like a hundred times before, running my finger along the smooth scar above her lip.

No story, Baby. Just some bad night. She lights a menthol and blows smoke rings in my face. Let's get it with Sidney, Baby, she whispers.

Upstairs a baby's crying and its father is laying on the sweet talk. Shut up. Shut the fuck up. Shut the motherfucking fuck up.

Baby? She gives me this worried look. Come on, Baby, Sidney's waiting.

Fuck Sidney, I say.

Yeah, Baby, that's the idea, she says, giving me those eyes. She tumbles from my lap and gets up, laughing. Come on, she says, tugging at my hand. I follow her to the bedroom wishing the guy upstairs would shut that kid up.

Courtrooms make me nervous. She's sitting at the table across from me, her eyes like stones. She's trying not to look at me, but she still does. Judy's watching her. The foster parents are watching her, too. The judge is waiting for me to say something. Well? he says.

I'm thinking what the hell kind of question is that: is this woman ready to be a mother again? She was never ready in the first place. But I've got about a hundred pieces of paper that says she's ready. I recommend a series of home visits.

You've inspected her home, he says.

Thoroughly, I say.

Fine, he says.

The foster parents look sick. They're firing me the eyes. All I'm thinking is, I've gotta figure a way out.

That night I'm in the bathroom of the bus station with some guy my old man's age. He doesn't care who I am or what I've done, only that I'm willing. I stand stiff, my hands pressed against the peeling gray walls of the stall. My head's tilted back and I'm staring at the low yellowed ceiling. I can hear him moaning, and when I can't listen anymore, I give him what he wants, only I don't feel anything. Later, I go to a bar and get trashed. When the bartender cuts me off, I get loud, then I get tossed out on my ass. A police car follows me as I stumble down the street. I can see the cops watching me, waiting. I go past my car and into the subway, sit on the cold concrete near the turnstile with the rest of the derelicts.

A few days later I sense that something is happening; though, I don't know what it is. Judy's left me a message to meet her after lunch, and I can feel it in my gut, that churning that says, soon, nothing will be the same.

I come back from lunch and walk into work watching everyone's face. Judy's in her tiny office, behind her desk with that severe look she saves for firing people and delivering bad news. I feel heavy and numb. I sit down in the stiff wooden chair across from her. She hands me the file.

Did you know about the crack and the heroin? she says.

No, I say.

No?

No.

I find that hard to believe, given the detail of that file.

It's not Judy's style to be indirect, so I don't say anything more.

She got busted, Judy says. Some beat cop found her Sunday morning in the D street projects, cowering behind a dumpster. Got the call this morning. You know Denny Green? He told me they damn near had to break her fingers to get the crack pipe from her.

She's watching me closely and I'm wondering how much I'm giving away. There's going to be questions, lots of questions, for which I've got to start covering my ass.

She doesn't really have anyone, Judy says. But some people will want to know how we could recommend she get her kids back just a few



days before she's busted for possession. She's looking right into me, waiting for me to tell her something she can believe but knows isn't true. But I don't have anything. I only shrug.

Judy looks down at her hands, which are folded on her desk, and takes a deep breath. She wants to make a deal, Judy says, suddenly. Says she's got something on you.

Judy picks up a pen and legal pad, writes something down. Anything you want to say?

You're going to pursue this? I say, my hands trembling. My voice sounds funny, like I'm talking through an electric fan.

Got to, she says, still writing.

This is bullshit. I'm getting queasy and light headed, and I can feel my heart beat in my temples.

I hope so, she says. She puts down the legal pad and folds her hands. Take a few weeks off, she says. Paid, of course. Then she gets up and walks to the door.

On my way out I see Peggy, but she picks up her phone and looks the other way. They're all looking the other way and it occurs to me that this is how I'll remember them, picking up phones that aren't ringing and staring at meaningless pieces of paper.

Laura wants to go to Vermont for the weekend. You know how much I love the fall foliage, she says. And it'll be good for us.

We haven't been anywhere or done anything together in a long time, but I nod thinking that maybe I'll be able to find something there, something to give me courage. During the first few years of our marriage, we went all the time. Killington, Stow, sometimes even Lake Champlain. We did it in the car on the way up, on the golf course at night, even in the woods a few times. In those days, we couldn't get enough, and I felt indestructible, but eventually we did get enough. Laura got busy and I got bored and somehow the trips didn't seem like so much fun anymore. We'd fight a lot and it seemed stupid to drive two hundred miles just to yell at each other.

On the ride up Laura's playful, telling me stories about work and touching my arm. We're staying at a resort in Killington. We've got a condo. Jacuzzi in the bathroom, mirrors on the walls, its even got a fancy kitchen and a fireplace. Laura naps for an hour and then we head out to the mountain, take the gondola up to the top. She's brought a bottle of wine and a blanket. We spread it out and look at the colorful valleys. I can't help but think that it will all be gone in a few weeks, barren and waiting on the snow.

Peggy called me the other day, she says. I get a chill down my back and then go numb, waiting. She fills a glass of wine and hands it to me. I take a swig. Thirsty? she says and refills my glass. Peggy says you've been pretty stressed out lately, because of a case you're working

on. You want to talk about it?

I shake my head and point out some slow moving clouds that look like trains. I sip the wine and try to enjoy the breeze. Laura's wearing this brown sweater that I bought for her birthday a few years ago. It looks great on her. She has a fantastic body, Laura does, and wavy chestnut hair, too. She looks relaxed and hopeful, like maybe we're going to do something later. She seems more like a date than a wife, and I like that. I lean over and kiss her and she kisses me back. You've got beautiful lips, she says. I miss your kisses. I kiss her again, wishing she'd shut up.

Later, I watch us in the mirror and wonder why it feels so different, like we've never done it before. Afterward, we build a fire and stare into the flames. Laura's got her head in my lap and I'm stroking her hair, just watching the fire. The flames dance their little dance and I'm not thinking about anything but the dance of those flames. When I wake up in the middle of the night, Laura's asleep next to me and the tv's going. The fire's gone and there's nothing but a few glowing embers. It's cold. I grab a log and throw it into the fireplace, but nothing much happens.

That Monday we're sitting in an outdoor cafe downtown. Laura looks striking in her business suit. The kind of woman that I would follow halfway around the city just so that I could watch her walk. Her hair's pulled back tight and her black sunglasses give her that sophisticated, stylish look. I want to protect her, keep her from harm, only I don't know how to protect her from myself, from the things that I know will happen. I haven't told her anything, but sooner or later she'll call me at work.

Let's go away, I say. Italy or someplace.

When?

Now.

She smiles and touches my hand. I had a nice time, too, she says. But I can't leave work just like that, and neither can you.

Watch me, I say.

How can we afford it?

We can't, I say. But so what?

Her smile fades. What's wrong, she says, taking the sunglasses from her face.

I just want more, I say.

I'm right here, she says, grinning. We don't have to go to Europe to fuck. She rubs her ankle up my shin. Let's have dinner tonight, okay. I'll leave work early.

Remember our honeymoon, I say.

She smiles. Remember the trains in Switzerland.

You want to go back? Come on, we'll leave tomorrow night.



Nothing special, we'll stay in dumps. It'll be like college.

I'm not in college anymore, she says, frowning. And I didn't go anywhere in college, anyway. I've told you that. Still, I can see her working it out in her mind. It's unlike her to make quick decisions, but I'm hoping that the weekend wasn't enough. Finally, she says, maybe in a few months. We can't right now.

We finish our lunch and I kiss her goodbye. She walks off and I watch the heads turn as she goes. Then I drive by the bus stop, watch the boys in their tight jeans as they slip into cars or alleys with their anxious men. I wonder what those guys think about when they're home with their families, how many of them wish they could make it all go away.

That night we're sitting on the couch and I tell Laura. It's all my fault, I say. I knew she wouldn't be able to handle getting her kids back, that she'd go back to using, but I did it anyway. People like that, they can't handle when good things happen to them, they always find some way to mess it up. I put my head in my hands. I see it all the time, I say. I'm gonna catch hell for this one.

Laura gently pushes me back into the fluffy couch. She puts her hand on my thigh. Why did you do it then, if you see it all the time? She's cautious, like maybe she doesn't want to push it, maybe it's better left unsaid. But she's started now, so she goes on. I mean, she says, why did you recommend she gets her kids back?

I slide down the couch a little, slip off my shoes, and ease my legs under the coffee table. Laura puts a pillow behind my head. I've had time to think about this, but I don't know why I did it. She didn't want her kids back any more than I wanted her to have them, but there we were, her lying to save face and me lying to save my ass. In the end, we both got what we wanted, and I suppose that I should be grateful. But I'm not, I'm not anything.

I take Laura's face in my hands and I look into her big dark eyes. I want to tell her everything, but I know I never will. So I say this: Those kids were her only chance.

I watch as she makes some sort of connection, I see things fall into place. She gets up and looks down at me. I thought your job was to care for the kids, she says. She shakes her head and walks away, treading quietly up the stairs.

I turn off all the lights and stand by the window. Outside, it's black and nothing moves. Then a light comes on across the street. I watch my neighbors having a drink by their kitchen window; they're looking outside, too. I know they can't see me and I feel invisible. I watch them for a long time, my eyes adjust to the dark and things get clearer. When they shut off their light, I slip upstairs. I hear Laura get out of bed, then the hallway light comes on. She's standing in the

doorway to our bedroom still wearing her skirt and blouse. You did it, didn't you? She says.

I nod, slowly, wishing that I could shake my head. But it's too late, even I know that.

There's no anger in her eyes, only recognition. Whatever denial she's had vanishes all at once, and I can see the hurt, the white-hot pain of my deception. I want to hug her, reassure her that it's me, that I'm the problem, but the look on her face tells me she knows that. I don't know what to do, so I say, I'm sorry.

My God, she says. Then she smiles and shakes her head, as if she's just caught a child in a foolish lie. She turns off the hallway light and shuts the door to the bedroom. The bed creaks and suddenly I know what her body feels like pressed against mine. I smell the salty scent of her hair when she sleeps and hear the slow rhythm of her breathing. I remember other things about her that are familiar, too, yet somehow seem new to me, now. I slide down the wall and hug my knees, missing her like she's been gone for years. I don't expect her forgiveness. I don't even want it, but I know I'll never get things right without her. I feel empty and that feels good, a chance maybe, to start over. I get up and try the bedroom door, but it's locked. So, I just sit there by the door, waiting.

## Time Concerto

hours pass pass  
so slow dragging with them  
every breath of mine still heavy  
sticking to the after-presence of you  
in the room.  
every stillness is an entity lurking  
tapping lightly my shoulders  
and always I'm turning quickly trying  
to catch you behind me smiling.  
your voice still there  
ripe on the vine, and your scent  
...fading I guess I'm breathing in too deeply  
holding in your essence while alone.  
shadows sleeping on the walls and  
everything is so awfully quiet that  
the tangling of veins under skin  
makes a chime-like clanging as  
I dream of you.  
it's not the distance that pains the most  
it's the silence.

Kristen Bennett

## Flux Density

With different rules, under a new order,  
the slant may tilt at an alternative angle,  
the floor could become the ceiling,  
creating a whole new set of circumstances.  
Try imaging for a minute your life then.  
Nuances, while not so subtle,  
could save your life.

Then again, the very thing that wants  
so badly to turn everything upside down  
may very well be the the inverted idea  
of an idea already standing on its head.

And yet, with another set of rules,  
the order could slant towards other,  
more fantastic angles, where the weight  
of change may grow too troublesome to bear.  
And so, in order not to be crushed  
by the process, another change  
becomes necessary, leaving things  
as they are, in a permanent state of flux.

Peter Birckhead

## Hitchhiking Out West

I awoke with a bloody nose on the embankment of an off ramp  
outside of Cody, Wyoming. Trucks bellowed past on Highway 14  
going east and west like giant steel centaurs  
determined to extinguish the day before it began.  
Wide drapes of sky covered the windows  
of the world from rim to rim. The dark road carved  
into the landscape like an old scar still bearing its crusty scab.

In the breakdown lane I gave the passing traffic my best  
posture while imagining I was entertaining an audience.  
I sang broken refrains while cars flooded me with exhaust.  
I juggle stones trying to ignore my insignificance  
in that vast setting. I could not give in.  
Yet. later that day — the traffic in my head overcoming  
the roar of the highway — I remember throwing those stones  
in anger at the speeding cars leaving me behind.

Sometimes I sat in a diner all night over bottomless cups of coffee  
and huckleberry pie, writing to friends while waiting for the light. Or  
I'd eat bread and cheese in my sleeping bag, with a chocolate bar  
to sweeten solitude's approach, and sleep along side of the road.  
On clear nights the stars would connect my thoughts and I could see  
reason's intelligible scrawl — that there is nothing but straight-aways  
and curves to shape the folly of dreams — as if  
all those mysterious constellations above me were suddenly revealed.

Peter Birckhead

## Spoon-fed

Patches of white—doctors and nurses— hover  
in the ether above. The world  
is swimming in darkness.  
Voices poke and prod with facts  
and data outside my senses.  
The surface has been reversed and slips inward.

Fate's swivel brings me closer to stillness,  
where the earth is slanted and veers towards its rim;  
gravity lends an ear, and I float  
between points unseen in the mosaic  
of consciousness.

Blindness lifts its tattered veil and reveals  
sutures and incisions, broken bones and double vision,  
the sad down-strokes of life's back-peddling.  
Everyone says how much better I'm looking—  
the entire catalog of well-wishers that softens  
the landing with kisses and forgiveness.

Everything is forgotten, the accident was a dream—  
clouded and dense. I rest and re-situate,  
following all the right angles  
of the doctor's straight lines. On the bedside table  
a pushpin fastens the maps and legends of re-entry—  
my way back into the world.

Peter Birckhead



Downtown Crossing  
Suthir Shanmugasundaram





Night Shot of St. Basils in Red Square  
Theresa Hadley

## father

she asked to see your body  
for us  
as children ask questions  
and answers were scarce

she asked to see your body  
for her: i imagine  
to know the last of your intimacies

as your mother had known the first  
those women who had held you inside them

she asked to see your body  
and i can only conjure images

your face  
uncaked  
bluish: i imagine  
your toe  
untagged  
the hair  
on your hands  
coarse  
the watch  
on your wrist  
ticking on without you

Jeanine Boulay

## water bubbles

like porcelain fins  
your shoulders shone against  
chlorine blue  
so beautiful, you  
and me  
slippery legs on your back  
even then  
you swam so close to death  
life bubbles breathing out of you  
your effervescence  
filled the pool  
and me

Jeanine Boulay

# Little Beauty

John A. Black

We were all sitting around Dan and Georgia's kitchen, having a few drinks and shooting the shit and laughing a lot. I was sipping my bourbon and water, listening to Jen talk about *Dial M For Murder* and how Alfred Hitchcock was the greatest director. She'd seen *The Birds* when she was a child, and it had made her afraid of all animals; she saw *North By Northwest* last year and when she saw the scene at the end, the chase scene on the rocks, she'd decided to take up rock climbing. Then she started on this really weird tangent about her childhood and this turtle she'd had and how she always wished that she could be her turtle so she could just duck inside her own little shell and disappear from the rest of the world whenever she wanted. I thought about the silver turtle earring I used to wear in college and wondered what had ever happened to it.

Jen was wearing a black cotton dress with a low cut bust and she wore a long thin gold chain with a rope design that curved around her neck and disappeared between her breasts. I wondered if there was a crucifix at the end of the chain and thought that being Jesus would be a pretty good gig under those circumstances. Jen and I had only been dating for a little while, and she was meeting my friends for the first time.

"You'll never guess what the name of my turtle was." She leaned over close like she planned on whispering the name in my ear, and my eyes fixed on the smooth skin of her neck and breasts. I could see the end of the chain dancing in the darkness of her cleavage and there was something attached to it but it wasn't gold and it wasn't a crucifix and I couldn't tell what it was. It looked like some sort of charm or something.

"Was it Judy?" I figured that was as good a name as any for a turtle I'd never met.

"Judy! What kind of a name is that for a turtle? You don't even like animals either, do you? Judy the Turtle?"

I do like animals, and I couldn't see what was so bad about a turtle named Judy. I was about to guess "Harry," when Georgia shrieked. Stefan had told me he was going to freak her out. I looked over at Stefan. He'd gotten out a baby jar with Georgia's gallstones in them and started shaking it like it was a maraca. Stefan was probably the last person anyone would suspect of being a doctor. He looked like a grunge rocker when he wasn't practicing medicine, and when he'd done his residency in trauma surgery, he used to sneak out pieces of people's

digestive tracts and dry them and use them for macabre musical instruments. He'd fill dried sections of stomach with navy beans, or use an esophagus tube for a kazoo. One time he even stole a skeleton from school and used the rib cage to make an elaborate xylophone and he played it using two fibula bones as strikers. He actually had a great ear for music and said someday he would become a concert pianist. I believed him.

Anyway, Georgia was taking it quite personally, even though he had lots of people's gallstones in the jar. She began to get really belligerent, like she does when she drinks. Jen started laughing hysterically. She reached between her breasts and plucked out the missing links and held the chain in front of her face and then I could see that what wasn't a crucifix was actually a human tooth. The kitchen got real quiet and everyone looked at Jen as she said, "I still have all my baby teeth in a jewelry box at home except for this one. This one I use for a talisman because Little Beauty died the day this one came out." She slipped the tooth back into its fleshy pillows and looked at me. "That was the name of my turtle. Little Beauty."

Joel stood up, bobbed for a second, and then placed his left foot on his chair. "That's nothing. Wait till you see this," he said, as he rolled his pant leg up past his knee. "I've had two operations on this knee. They used staples instead of stitches. Look at that scar. Eighty staples. They took a tendon from my foot and put it where I tore a ligament in my knee." He proudly shifted his knee, first to the left, then to the right. We all oohed and ahed at the topographical train tracks shadowing down his leg. Satisfied, Joel reseated himself. I looked at Stefan as I remembered the stringed instruments he made using ligaments and tendons and hair.

"I had brain surgery once," Heather offered. We all cast her dubious looks. She hesitated for a moment, then looked down, took her long hair between her hands and parted it just to the left of center. "I was in a car accident when I was seventeen and went through the windshield. I was thrown sixty feet and landed in an above-ground pool. I don't remember any of it, but they said I hit my head on the bottom of the pool. I was in a coma for five days. They thought I was going to die." She shifted her hair to reveal more of the rear of her crown, to show us a section where the scar formed a cross. "They said they had to cut through this section of my skull to relieve the pressure of the blood on my brain. Otherwise, I would have died." She bowed her head and slowly rotated her scarred skull towards us for verification. I felt kind of queasy. Not because of Heather's display. I got a nervous feeling in my stomach as I realized what was happening. I dug the nail of my index finger into the edge of my thumb, forcing away a little piece of dead skin.

Heather looked at Dan. "Well? Your turn, Dan."

"I pass," he said, motioning with his three-fingered right hand, knowing that we all knew the story — except Jen, who had whispered to me earlier at dinner that she hadn't known how to shake hands with him, and wanted to know why hadn't I warned her. She didn't even ask me how it happened, so I didn't tell her about the lawnmower, the toad, and the sixth-grade science project.

Dan pointed his thumb at Steve and said, "All you, Stevie."

Steve cleared his throat and looked down. "I'm not going to show you any scars." Thank God, I thought. I flattened the fresh hangnail down, ignoring the sting and hoping that the game was finished. Steve rose from his chair and walked over to the refrigerator and grabbed himself a Heinekin. He stood there while the door closed. He read the magnetic poetry for a second, then removed a picture from the freezer door. The picture was of Georgia and Dan and it was held by a heavy spring-clip connected to a large round magnet. He came back to the table and held the photo up like he was Elliot Ness tracking racketeers. "I bet you never saw this before," he said to all of us, as he looked at Dan and Georgia. He brought it over to about an inch above and an inch behind his ear, shuffled a few of his blond curls away, and stuck the magnet to his head. It stayed there. The kitchen got real quiet and everyone stared in horror and disbelief, except Stefan. He smiled, looked at Steve, and said, "Motorcycle accident?"

"Excellent diagnosis doctor, and the treatment was a metal plate." He pointed to his head, as if one of us might think the steel saucer was in his hip. The silence turned to Wows and Christs. I didn't say anything, but I twirled the ice cubes in my empty glass, then pressed the frigid fingertip against my thumb. The cold felt numbing and good and I dug some more at the flap of flesh, looking at the cloistered blood that lay in the tiny pink channel of skin beneath. I'd only broken one bone as a child. It happened while I was sledding, and I remember thinking at the time that it must've been real serious when I heard the nurse tell my mother that the break was "superficial." They did put it in a cast though, and for four weeks I crutched my way to classes and everybody signed the cast and drew on it and I was a celebrity. I hadn't wanted the doctor to remove the cast. I cried when it came off, and saved it for years until I tossed the trophies and superman sheets in favor of blacklight posters, strobelights, and album cover art. Now I was spinning my cubes and husking my thumb and wishing that I'd saved the cast and brought it with me tonight, that I'd never outgrown the caped crusaders, or at least that my leg hadn't healed so damned well. "Here's to Dan and Georgia," said Steve, pulling the magnet off his head, "and Stefan."

Stefan would have something I figured. And that would leave Erin and me as the only two yet to show. I began to feel really resentful towards Georgia for having the gall to start this whole thing. I stared at



her, Georgia, who only minutes ago had complained about the fruits of her surgery being displayed in a baby food jar, was now critiquing each exhibition siskel-and-ebert style, I swear to God, thumbs and all. I went to the counter and poured myself a good stiff bourbon on the rocks — no water this time — and took a swig. After easing back into my chair and stirring the ice and bourbon, I wet the torn skin on the side of my thumb-nail. The whiskey burned.

Stefan started unbuttoning his shirt. “My scars are more emotional than physical,” he said, “but you might find this interesting.” He untucked the shirt to open the last button and spread the fabric wide open to reveal his clean shaved chest. There wasn’t a hair on it, except for a birthmark sprouting sable hair. The blemish was the size of a quarter, on his sternum, and the hair was really full and about three inches long. Stefan had it braided quite neatly. The way it was placed — centered between bald nipples and two inches lower — made his torso look like an alabaster bust with a cat shit stuck to it. He started preening the braided beauty mark with his index finger like he was petting a kitten’s neck. Georgia chortled and waved her upthumbed fists wildly side to side like a delirious hitchhiker. “I want to touch it,” she said, “can I? Please? Can I touch it?” Stefan didn’t appear too thrilled at the idea, and looked at Dan, who simply rolled his eyes and slumped, the shrug of a man who has seen his wife have too many drinks at too many parties. Georgia walked up and stood next to Stefan. “Oh my God, it feels so weird,” she said, lightly touching it, then rubbing it with a finger. Its unfamiliar feel soon wore away, and she said, “It feels really good.” Then she started stroking the braid up and down with her thumbs, saying, “two thumbs up, two thumbs down, two thumbs up, two thumbs down.” Then she got bored and sat back in her chair and lit a cigarette, adding, “yours is definitely the must see of the season, Stefan .” When he closed his shirt back up, I noticed that you could see a shadow of the bearded peculiarity through his shirt.

Only Erin and I hadn’t exhibited yet, and I had nothing, as emptyhanded as an illiterate bible thumper. My only hope now was that Erin wouldn’t have anything to display either. I looked at her; she giggled, nervous and shy. She glanced at the expectant faces around the table, but didn’t say anything. I ripped some more skin from my thumb, pulling it down from the side of the nail towards the base, marveling at how stubbornly, like a green banana, it peeled. The trench of skin it exposed was raw pink and blood pooled under the translucent surface. I dunked my thumb into the drink and stirred it up, iced bourbon scalding the hangnail for a second till it went cold numb. Why couldn’t I have had some hairy birthmark, or at least the plaster cast with the colorful artwork and autographs of my childhood peers? Erin broke the stale-mate. “Well,” she said, “I have a tattoo.”

I withdrew my thumb from the glass and sucked the cold drops



from it. I was saved, if only momentarily, by Erin's offering. I looked at the hangnail now, and it was begging for removal so I closed my teeth on it and pulled. The skin stretched and ripped away from my nail, separating like a loose thread you know better than to pull, tearing like a pair of old underwear you'd use for a paint rag or something. By the time the skin broke loose from my thumb, it had gone completely under the base, below the cuticle, and up around the other side. There I sat with a strip of flesh in my teeth and a hangnail that was more a gash, a messy manicure crafted with a blunt instrument. The blood below the under layer of skin was no longer dammed and it rapidly pooled, a crescent shaped basin of liquid red. I swear it hurt like hell and I didn't know what else to do, so I stuck it back into the drink and I winced in silence. But in a second, it went cold numb again. Nobody seemed to notice.

"Does a tattoo count?" asked Erin. The reaction was mixed. Georgia was the loudest supporter of having it count, but only if we got to see it. "What is it of," Georgia wanted to know, "and where exactly is it?"

"It's on my left hip," Erin said, lifting her glass and taking a sip of wine. She set her glass on the table, then stood. She stepped up onto her chair and turned to face away from the table. She was wearing a black velvet skirt, a plum-colored silk camisole, and a black velvet sweater. She unzipped her skirt just a little bit, and wriggled it slightly down her hips. She lifted her shirt just enough to expose the tattoo, and by now, we were all leaning towards her from every direction like teepee poles. When we saw the tattoo we were speechless. It was a fish, but it looked like it was alive. When Erin flexed her leg muscles, the fish appeared to be swimming. The brilliance of the dyes was unbelievable, and I don't know what kind of fish it actually was but I'll call it a rainbow trout because it had ten or twelve different colors — cobalt blue and royal magenta and sunset orange and mercury silver — and the scales were each shadowed with fine black lines. The fish had amethyst eyes and an iridescent glow and you could almost smell the ocean.

Georgia, quiet and unblinking, saddled up next to Erin. She touched the fish and jerked her hand away, as though fearful it might start flopping and writhing like a fish on the bottom of the boat, released and forgotten by the fisherman. Her alarm vanished though, and she began doing the same primping motion she'd done on Stefan's braid, "two thumbs up, two thumbs down, two thumbs up, two thumbs down." She looked at Erin, noticed that Erin didn't find it amusing, and slipped back to her chair.

I looked at Jen who was looking at me. She turned away and I glanced around the table, everyone gaping at me standing there. They were waiting for me to show them something or fold. I'd always felt fortunate for my good health, right up till that minute, when I wished for

anything — *anything* — besides a bourbon marinated thumb. Georgia said, “well? What have you got there big guy? Let me see some skin. I’m the critic here.”

I pulled my thumb out of my glass and held it like a child offers a boo-boo to a parent, purple and raisined, with a smear of blood across the nail that pooled into a giant pear shaped scarlet drop. “How’s that?” I asked, knowing that it wouldn’t qualify, knowing that the rawness of fresh wounds never merits the respect, or carries the wisdom, of old scars. A drop of blood fell onto the white lace tablecloth and melted into a crimson snowflake.

“Jesus Christ, you better wash that,” said Stefan.

“Let me see, how did you do that?” Jen came over and took my hand in hers.

“Don’t you have anything better than that?” asked Georgia, “at least something that’s scabbed over. Scabs don’t even really cut it, we’re looking for scars.” Evidently, fresh blood or scabs were like “B” movies to the critic. Georgia came and peered closely at my thumb, smirked, gave it two thumbs down, and added, “this year’s clunker. Weak, weak, weak.” She went back to her chair, her throne. “Everybody has scars. If you haven’t been cut, you haven’t lived. Don’t be shy.” She seemed bent on crucifying me.

Jen cradled my hand in her fingers. “Are you going to be able to drive with that?”

I figured I might as well play the martyr, and asked her if she would take me home. Stefan came from the bathroom with a first-aid kit, led me to the sink, assured me that it wouldn’t hurt, and poured peroxide over it. It burned like hell, but I didn’t say anything. Georgia came over, looked again, and said, “No. Two thumbs down. That’s my final judgment.”

“What about you?” I asked, “you haven’t shown us anything.”

“Gallstones,” she said.

“Scars,” I said, “we want scar tissue.”

“You first,” she said. “I’m the critic.”

“Gallstones, my ass.” I couldn’t believe I was arguing with Georgia this way, but she was fun to taunt, especially when she’d had a few drinks, especially when I’d had a few too. Stefan broke a piece from an aloe vera plant, applied the extract to a bandage, and wrapped it around my thumb. The tip was tender and throbbing. I sat back at the table and took a soothing swig of bourbon. It felt a little better. I took another soothing swig for good measure.

Jen came over and sat on my lap and embraced my thumb and even kissed it. I’d never seen her act so maternally before, the way she nestled my face into the soft perfume of her silk laden breasts and wrapped my free arm around her waist. She rocked us fluidly back and forth and I felt a stirring between my legs and Jen must’ve felt it too

because she subtly shifted in my lap, increasing the pressure on my groin. My excitement was growing but trapped in an uncomfortable position, my boxers like the jaws of a vise holding the hand of a hostage. When I rearranged my legs to a more fitting position, I suddenly remembered that I had had surgery once, but it was elective surgery and I'd been too young, too speechless, to object. I thought about all these beautiful and grotesque bodily disfigurements in the kitchen, about how everyone has a little beauty, about beauty being in the eye of the beholder.

Georgia sneaked up behind me and tapped my shoulder and her shirt was lifted, belly exposed, holding a roll of her stomach in one hand, pointing to a faded pink scar with the other. "There, are you happy?" she asked, pinching the tiny "x" with her fingers, "it was a laproscopic gallstone procedure. Two stitches. It isn't much, but it's something at least. At least I got something."

Pretty weak, I thought, but even Georgia has a little beauty to be proud of, and for that, I quietly gave her two thumbs up.

"You lose," she said, "and I win."

"You win," I said. "You wouldn't want to see my scar anyway, I don't even remember the surgery."

"Liar," she said, "you don't have any scars."

I whispered into Jen's ear. She smiled and said, "I don't care. It's your scar, show it to whoever you want to."

"She wouldn't want to see it," I said.

"It's definitely two thumbs up," Jen said.

"Thanks," I said, "but Georgia's the critic, and she wouldn't want to see it."

"I want to. Of course I want to. For Christ's sake, show it to me!"

"Really?" I asked.

"You've never had surgery. Liar," she said.

I didn't have any choice. I got up, determined to uncover the scar I'd been carrying my whole life, the cut I'd endured because of my parents' beliefs, because of their parents' beliefs, because of their parents' beliefs. It's the original scar, the scar that keeps on giving, the scar for all eternity and the scar of immortality. I guess you could say I did it in the name of religion, or at least in the name of bourbon, but I did it.

"What the hell are you doing?" Georgia said.

The blood drained from her face at the sound of my zipper descending.

## Peter's Shoes

Your shoes lied to me,  
with dark brown leather  
sensible tie-shoes,  
whisper waltzing, posing,  
simply polite on your feet.

Later, waiting in the hallway  
while we got drunk on the couch,  
the left shoe told the right shoe  
your toes' musty secrets.

With brass eyelets and dark soles  
they couldn't wait to scuff the kitchen linoleum,  
and sat still, hoping I could smell them.

They claimed they didn't care  
that my cat had shit on the welcome mat  
(I claimed I hadn't seen it).

I saw how they held the laces  
all lazy and lecherous and knew  
they had no plans to grace my hallway again  
regardless of your will.

Amy Browne

## 2 Earrings

posed or poised above Shelly in the dim afternoon light through her  
second pair of

curtains this year                      the deep red ones

*do you have two piercings in that ear?*

I laugh and think nothing of it

I think nothing of it until later

as I sometimes do

until I'm driving home that night

from 95 to 91 to 87 to the turnpike as

my CD player grinds at my teeth and ears

I turn the knob and laugh                      laugh out loud at how little she knows

about me in that life

my life

me

when I was at *Syracuse*

about *Syracuse* at all

about all those times

the time

I get my

right ear

pierced on St. Patrick's Day

with my

roommate Tim

(we

split

the

cost-

we

each

had

one)

and fall over on one

of the tight paths  
and slide

down

a steep  
snow bank

and laugh  
and laugh  
and meet  
after me  
and

up with Tasha later

Tim and Kyle order  
five pizzas and fifty wings  
the man on the phone was a salesman I guess  
she wears  
thigh highs  
under her

blue jeans

but it doesn't much matter

because she  
jumps on me  
and we

topple over

on my bed

I wake up later

and go back out

because it's St. Patrick's Day and I am half Norwegian a quarter German  
and a quarter of what my Mother always calls Yankee

I buy books on my  
Father's credit card  
for other kids  
and go  
to 44's with the cash  
and drink  
a lot

I dye my hair

pink and when I shave it there are pink spots on my head  
she doesn't know about Ox

or Jamie  
Kyle or Tim  
OLM or Hale  
Ronnie or Bernie  
Dan and Chris  
or that OLM meant Other Level Mike

Jamie breaks his hand by punching a parking meter  
I get suspended for work

I show up at noon instead of 8  
I quit because they suspend me

Tim and Kyle take turns breaking bottles  
over each other's heads

Chris loves *Thunderbird* wine  
Dan paints his car his old *Firebird*  
with all sorts of pictures  
including *Yoda*

which is a good picture  
especially with spray paint  
but not on a *Firebird*  
no matter how old it is

I sleep with my RA  
suddenly remember that there is a case of beer in our room  
and I start drinking by myself  
flipping through a picture album listening to *Jimmy Buffet*  
playing *Last Mango in Paris*  
over and over again  
and start to think about Michelle  
and cry  
especially at around

my eighth beer  
when my mouth is  
thick  
and  
sweet



Michelle comes up to visit  
 she gets up from bed and faints  
 and is laughing  
 while my roommate snores  
 or maybe Shelly does know that  
 I don't remember  
 we trip  
 on shrooms  
 and walk around South campus  
 or North campus  
 or something  
 and wind up in  
 some random  
 apartment  
 where these girls  
 dance for us  
 or in front of us at least  
 and do body shots off each other  
 licking salt  
 and sucking limes from juicy mouths and I am just thirsty and giggly  
 I write papers for people in exchange for pot  
 and I am in love with Joanna  
 and she asks me to  
 write her a paper for  
 her for her birthday  
 and I get a D  
 or she gets a D minus  
 and I haven't been to class  
 myself in months  
 she probably doesn't know that I was in love with Joanna  
 Joanna breaks up with me at *Friendly's* in Westfield  
 while I  
 eat the  
 soup and salad that  
 she thinks  
 I want  
 but it's the  
 only thing I can afford  
 and I am  
 stoned as  
 always

from smoking the whole  
 car ride down  
 I am  
 actually surprised  
 that she  
 has had  
 enough  
 but glad I have the 5 bucks  
 and tired  
 real tired  
 5 bucks all you can drink  
 Fridays at 44's

we coolly call it 4's  
 buck night at the *OC* *Orange Cafe* that is  
 fishbowls at Maggies two for Tuesdays  
 the party at Sig Ep where they have a whole beer truck and some guy  
 singing (yelling)  
*House of Pain* Songs  
*Jump Around*  
 Simon asks if I can store some stuff for him and I say yes and just take off  
 skip town  
 at OLM's house I drink *Champale* (it really was called that)  
 Joe gets the shit kicked out of him outside *Sutter's*  
 the drug deals we make I make  
 Bernie is kickboxing in his  
 basement before we go out  
 and Ox's laughing  
 Ox's laughing  
 driving she does know now  
 that I had two earrings and she is surprised that I had 2 earrings  
 I am surprised too

Kurt Cole Eidsvig

## BEATNIK POETRY READING UMASS ART GALLERY

*(for Dick Lourie and Hettie Jones)*

It starts with the wake-up wail of the saxophone  
against that doorstep bassline,  
a man wearing black jeans  
and a turtleneck, a Donovan-style felt hat  
over graying curls, talking about line  
breaks and the blues.

Then this tiny Jewish woman flashing  
a toothy grin keeps raising her fist  
in a power salute and reads poems  
featuring her lover's sweet ass.  
She says the word "Luhhvuvv"  
and reads poems about driving  
too fast. All this for college kids  
who weren't born before answering machines.

For days after, strange stuff pops  
into my head: those sad, fluffy Easter chicks  
died in bright colors, poodle skirts and the way  
they make you swirl your waist, a car  
I bought for \$20 once.

It's like the doorbell rang and some  
tie-dyed dude in love beads walked in,  
sat down at the almond formica kitchen counter  
next to the labeled spice jars,  
and pulled out a spliff the size  
of a Havana cigar. "Want some?"  
he says and suddenly I do.

Cathie Desjardins

## HEAT WAVE EARLY SPRING

Kids in the playground are pelting around  
in their personal saunas, winter coats  
they won't take off, eyeing me warily  
when I ask if they don't want to.  
Little sugarbabies are melting without sunhats.  
We all stand around stupefied  
in the sunshine, except for those kids  
who hurl themselves against the brightness  
like a wall.

The next day I plant peas bare-armed  
80° in March, remembering the ice slivers  
in the clods I broke apart a year ago.  
But this is the same: my thumbs pushing  
wrinkled green-white moons into  
the dark earth that sinks back in  
around a secret.

By the fifth day, nearly 85° everyone's  
a little loopy. I sit with the baby on the porch  
after work, peeling off his rumpled clothes,  
watching the small traffic of birds.  
Trees are barely budded: I can see  
forsythia exploding chrome yellow  
two blocks over. Somewhere, the clack  
of storm windows being raised...  
Cars spurt by, trailing streamers of songs.

I crack open in the heat, weeping because  
the woman getting in the red car down  
in the street moves heavily like my sister.  
I think about booking a flight, arriving  
impromptu to see her after decades of silence.  
Crows are attending noisily to crow business  
and anything seems possible, watching  
the baby's smooth bare bottom in the sun.

Cathie Desjardins

## Honey Bear

I spent the morning  
Filling up the honey bear  
On a day I had  
much else to do.

A foolish economy:  
melting jar dregs of honey  
in thick bowls  
of warm water:

the granulated glaciers of  
my new husband's  
bachelor honey  
kept on a high shelf  
for hot toddies  
and women who might want tea,

the cutglass gift  
a friend brought back  
from distant fields,  
exotic flowers.

I watch the alchemy  
of melting gold, lick  
rank sweetness  
from my fingers,  
the stemjuice taste  
extreme as summer  
on this overcast day.  
I tilt the jars out,  
stretching the spooling.

Soon, I'm dazzled as if  
mead-drunk, honey-poulticed,  
by this centuries-old sweetness  
loosing its latticework,  
seduced as a bee  
following a stippled path  
down the throat of a flower  
to the vibrating golden center,  
pollen clotting my legs  
in nectarous ecstasy.

The tawny tide mounts  
the honey bear's toes, filling  
its dented stomach  
(too eagerly squeezed),  
lightening the strokes  
of would-be fur, as it rises up  
the gently curving arms,  
to mouth, twin ears  
and monkey-dark eyes.

Twisting his yellow cap  
I see the clock and  
sigh for a squandered morning.  
But the honey bear smiles,  
a sated Buddha,  
knowing that one could do worse  
that watch time drizzle golden  
away.

Cathie Desjardins

# Creation

In the beginning there was the Mommy, and also the Daddy, and through them

all else was made manifest.

And on the first day all manner of small things, among them, buttons, fuzz, wrappers and crumbs were scattered over the firmament. And these were to be harvested and eaten. And it was good.

And on the second day, the moon and the stars were set high in the heavens and

the moon henceforth did follow them everywhere, even unto the day-time and food could be gummed to its shape.

And on the third day, four-legged creatures populated the earth: horses, cows, pigs and goats, but chief among them were cats and dogs. And these were cause for great celebration and were also named by the sound each of them uttered.

And on the fourth day, bye-bye came into the world, and thereafter there were

constant leavetakings and departures among all creatures of the earth.

And bye-bye begat peekaboo by which all things continually disappeared and reappeared. And peekaboo begat uh-oh, by which henceforth a multitude of calamities were visited upon them in every hour.

And on the fifth day, creatures of the air were brought forth and multiplied and

were called by some: pigeons, sparrows, bluejays, seagulls, crows

chickadees, starlings, cardinals, blackbirds. But they all made the same noise and their true name was buh.

And on the sixth day, busses and trains and trucks came forth and flooded the

byways and overpasses of the earth. And their number was legion.

And the seventh day was Happy Birthday and there was much rejoicing in the land and many gifts were brought and the table was laid with a multitude of good things to eat. And henceforth in emulation and delight each day was called Happy Birthday.

And it was good.

Cathie Desjardins



# INTERVIEW WITH NOVELIST BHARATI MUKHERJEE

Fall 1997

Annie Gauger

At the beginning of every semester when I've gone to the bookstore, I've noticed that several courses use one of my favorite novels: *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukerjee. This semester when I went to buy my books I was pleased to discover we'd be reading *Jasmine* in a course called American Identities 100 taught by Professor Rubin.

In 1990 when I first read *Jasmine*, my life had been completely altered by the four years I'd spent living in and out of an ashram in New York state with a SadGuru from India. Perhaps it was cultural appropriation on my part, but I saw myself as a negative blue print of Jasmine.

The story of *Jasmine* opens with the village astrologer predicting Jyoti's widowhood and exile, and evolves into the story of how Jyoti becomes Jasmine, Jase and finally Jane Ripplemeyer of Baden, Iowa, near Iowa City, my own home town. *Jasmine* travels through her many lives within this life and ends up an Iowa Banker's wife at the ripe old age of 24.

My life has been the opposite, I started out in Iowa and almost ended up in India—but stopped only when my small-town-Iowa astrologer warned me if I went to live in my Guru's ashram near Bombay I would never return—I'd see no reason to. My astrologer has never been wrong, so I've chosen to stay in the west.

Because Hinduism has gradually become part of how I understand life, and ironically, part of my American identity I have always been intrigued by Bharati Mukerjee's writing. She blends the concepts of fate and modern science in astonishing ways, which consistently leaves me full of excitement, validation, and most of all, questions.

I have always wanted to talk with Bharati Mukerjee, so back in September I called her in Iowa City where she is teaching this semester to see if I could interview her for *The Mass Media*. She said she'd think about it, being as she's very busy, all of the time. When we hung up, I asked the elephant God Ganesh—the remover of obstacles in Hinduism—if He might help her to say yes.

When I called the next day, she said she'd be willing to talk with me. Ganesh, much to my delight, came through. So without further ado, I present the author Bharati Mukerjee to the U Mass Boston community. The following interview took place on November 5th, 1997.

**AG** You were named after a Goddess of Literature and learning, which one?

**BM** Saraswati is another name for Goddess of learning, and Bharati is the alternate name. Saraswati and Bharati are the same icon. Hindus believe in only one Godhead who is faceless. For people without literacy, since 80 percent of the country (of India) consists of villagers, or non intellectuals, different aspects, different attributes of the cosmic energy is metaphorized and given different forms, so learning is Saraswati.

**AG** In your book *Jasmine* you open with the character Jasmine having a reading with the village astrologer. I wonder, did your own parents consult an astrologer when you were born, and did they predict your own life in Iowa?

**BM** I do have a horoscope as do all my relatives, and it's cast. The Hindu cosmic chart is a little bit different from the one used in the west, but everyone has a chart that is consulted for marriages. You cannot get married, and most people have arranged marriages, and so in addition to selecting caste, background, compatibilities, and social-economic backgrounds, the horoscope is used to make sure that the two parties involved will get on. And in fact — my older sister — when marriage had almost been negotiated to a groom we didn't know — who had been picked out in the traditional way — in the last moment the marriage plans had to be canceled because their horoscopes didn't agree. So, it's still very much followed.

**AG** Did your astrologer predict that you'd end up living in Iowa?

**BM** Not in Iowa; it's not in my horoscope, which simply says I will travel a lot, and says when I am going to die, and in what year. But an astrologer had predicted in my own life, back in Calcutta, that I would marry a non-Indian European, with blue eyes, and that I'd live abroad, which is not something one would expect to hear astrologers to say.

**AG** What age were you when you found that out?

**BM** About 13.

**AG** So, did you draw your opening of *Jasmine* from your own experience?

**BM** Not in the sense of villagers swimming or finding a dead dog in the water, but the astrologer, yes. The scar on the forehead? I have that.

**AG** Oh, you do?

**BM** Yes, it happened at age three. In my family, in the middle class in India, no one thought of taking me to the emergency room for stitches, so instead, for decades afterwards they would rub either butter or the flesh of green coconuts on the scar to make it go away which of course it didn't, but it meant that I was likely going to have a very hard time finding a groom, having this big scar.

**AG** Is it right in the center?

**BM** Right in the center, and now it's not that visible, but this was something the whole family worried about all my growing up.

**AG** Your opening of this book has such a breath taking impact. Every once in a while I just open the book and read the beginning to shock myself a little bit.

**BM** And I wanted in that beginning to sort of set up to what extent is one's life controlled by destiny, and to what extent do independent-minded girls like Jasmine, even when she's a village child, manipulate destiny. So it's a look at the battle between free will and destiny.

**AG** Is it okay to ask what year you were born?

**BM** 1940.

**AG** Where did you go to school in India, and was it unusual that a woman went to college?

**BM** In my family, yes. I came from a very protected, very traditional, very old-fashion family. My father was a big patriarch. My mother was married at the age 16 and had my oldest sister within 9 months. Mother was not allowed to leave the house for college, or anything, even though she wanted to very much. It was a very strict household. My mother's mother had been thought of as an old bride because she got married at age 7. Studying, reading books was very discouraged for women.

**AG** So did they discover through your astrology chart that perhaps this was your destiny...

**BM** No, no, I think it's all my mother's doing. She was very quiet in her

way; she wouldn't have known words like "feminist." She was a very brave woman, and because she was not allowed to study she wanted us to get benefits she had been deprived of. She named me Bharati because the year that I was born there was a woman in the city of Takka that had done very well in high school exams, so, mother thought "That's the role model I want for my daughter."

We lived the first 8 years of my life — all the Mukherjees, 45 of us — cousins, uncles, their wives, all lived together in one house. Mother took a lot of abuse from her mother-in-law, her grandmother, and various uncles because she said "I want to send my daughters to a good school." And we're talking about physical abuse. But she persisted and instead of going to the local school, we went to the Bengali language school that was a little bit better.

Then father went for pharmaceutical research to England and Switzerland. He owned a pharmaceutical company in Calcutta. And that set the big break in Mother's ambitions, and our lives. So having gone to school in Switzerland and England, when we came back, mother insisted in putting us in the fanciest girl's school in Calcutta, and that was run by Irish nuns.

**AG** And so you learned English at a very young age?

**BM** I didn't know or hear any English until age 8, but when I went to school in London it was a sink or swim situation. I quickly learned.

**AG** How did you decide to go to school in the U.S?

**BM** It was a very lucky accident. We were three sisters, no brothers which I think was the only reason my father tolerated the idea of sending us abroad to study, while he was looking for the perfect Bengali grooms for us. I had been scribbling stories in lined notebooks all my life. So when the very first American we ever saw — he was a UCLA drama professor who happened to be African-American, so he was also the very first African-American we ever saw in all our lives — was visiting India with a group of American students, my father invited them all for dinner. My father asked this professor (because he was a professor) "Where do I send my daughter who's going to be a writer?" And the man said "To Paul Engle," and he gave the wrong town in Iowa. So my father wrote off the letter to Paul Engle and asked "will you be her father as well as the director of the program?" and Paul Engle said "Yes," and that was at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop.

**AG** And what year was that?

**BM** 1961.

**AG** So you came to Iowa because of the workshop?

**BM** Yes, because it was the only place in the world at that time that gave degrees in creative writing within the university.

**AG** I once read an interview where you said that when you arrived in the U.S. you had no pockets in your clothes, nor had you ever handled money, nor did you know how to work a vending machine, will you tell us about that time?

**BM** Part of being sort of aristocratic and living a 19th century patriarchal life in Calcutta of the 1950's was being helpless—to be aristocratic it was culturally encouraged to be helpless about practical things. I'd never walked on a public street on my own. We were always surrounded by armed body guards and a servant usually did any kind of purchasing, even if it was pencils and notebooks for our school work. In Calcutta I'd never seen a cafeteria, let alone a cafeteria line. The packaging that you have of food, I'd never seen any vending machines. It's like if you put someone from another continent in front of an ATM machine, they'd be dazed and confused in the beginning. That's the situation I faced, with what people had taken for granted. I'd never seen a television, either. The laundry in my women's dorm was confusing—I'd never seen laundry machines.

**AG** So how did you adapt, did you get a purse, or clothes with pockets?

**BM** (*she laughs*) I still don't have clothes with enough pockets. But no, I used to wear saris all the time for my first 10 years in north America, and I avoided as much as I could, things like vending machines. I watched what other people did, and then followed.

**AG** Did you have a back pack?

**BM** No, absolutely not. For a long time I wore very pretty, colorful Indian sandals, and then in the snow, my teacher looked at my feet, no socks, no stockings, no covered shoes, and he said "I'm going to take you to my house right now and give you a pair of my daughter's riding boots. And so for the second winter I wore very pretty silk saris, and peeking from under the silk saris, were these huge leather riding boots.

**AG** How did it strike you to be walking in down town Iowa City not needing a guard?

**BM** It felt free. I think that was the most attractive aspect of America to



me, that no one knew who I was. In India I grew up as the daughter of an owner of a pharmaceutical company at a time of labor union agitation, and when labor unions were being introduced. Eventually, west Bengal became communist. In the 50's there was always danger. There were kidnappings of wives and children, or there was acid thrown on the faces of family members of directors of companies. This was the way of corporate war-fare, of how labor union disputes were resolved, so that's why I had all these guards.

Being a nobody (in Iowa) where no one cared who I was or where I went was a great sense of relief and freedom to me.

**AG** Iowa City was probably pretty tame in the early days.

**BM** Very tame! And very small—I'd never been in such a small town, or such uncrowded streets. It was really striking to me.

**AG** Have you ever had the fears Jasmine has about her illegal immigrant status?

**BM** Not me personally because I came as a foreign student, and when I married an American citizen, a fellow student in my Writer's Workshop class, I went through the legal procedure. Certainly in the 1980's I have known and heard of many cases.

**AG** Do you still teach at UC Berkeley?

**BM** Yes, I'm a full professor at Berkeley.

**AG** So, are you on sabbatical in Iowa?

**BM** No, I'm a visiting professor, I'm on leave from Berkeley just for the semester, and teaching at the Writer's Workshop in Iowa where my students are really brilliant. My husband is the director of the International Writing Program at U of I. So this is our strategy for being together for this fall semester, otherwise I have a commuting marriage.

**AG** In Berkeley, these days, how do you feel about the anti-immigration climate of California?

**BM** Well I think it's a very complicated situation, that the average Californian citizen tends to lump together legal immigrants and undocumented aliens, and that's why I'm a little weary of using the word "immigrant" for both groups. One is following the law and going through incredible numbers of hoops, to fulfill all the requirements the US Government demands of you. Then you have large numbers in

border states like California who have easier access to territorial United States than, say, undocumented aliens from far away countries like Africa or Asia. Having said that, I work as hard as I can for all immigrants and entrants to be given access to justice and to full access to civil rights.

**AG** Have you ever in California been randomly harassed by the INS?

**BM** No.

**AG** Your book jackets say you have two sons—have they ever had that sort of harassment?

**BM** No, I'm not sure immigration is central to their lives because they were both born American; they've never been challenged. They've never had to go through the kinds of hoops that people like me coming in from another country have had to.

**AG** Did they grow up in Iowa City?

**BM** One was born in Iowa City, the other in Montreal of an American father, and they both graduated from West High, here in Iowa City, and one from the University of Iowa. The younger one went to Reed College in Oregon.

**AG** You're from an upper caste in India, getting back to *Jasmine*, what was your catalyst to write about a village girl from Hasnapur?

**BM** What the germ of this novel was, was a short-story called *Jasmine* in *The Middleman and Other Stories*, the book just before this that won the National Book Critics Circle Award. And that had been about a woman of Indian origin that's third generation in Trinidad who had come as an illegal alien through Ontario into Michigan and was a live-in au pair in a professor's family in Ann Arbor. At the end of the story while she is making love to her boss while the wife is away, she thinks that "alright, I don't have a passport, I don't have a birth certificate, now I can make up any kind of self history that I want." And she feels free, rather than lost, because she has no legitimate documents. I thought the story was the end of *Jasmine*. I put my pen down, and that was it. Then, *Jasmine* the character who wants to test borders, and who has a pioneering spirit and a kind of grit, just wouldn't let go. I realized I had to give the character *Jasmine* a novel. When I came to write it, I didn't want someone out of the new world—so Trinidad being part of the Americas seemed not to offer the traditional restrictions that people like me growing up in the old world had. As I started writing, setting the novel in India I realized



that for dramatic effect, coming from a less privileged background than mine would make the blossoming of her Americanization even more powerful. I had just co-authored with my husband, Clark Blaise, who's also a writer—a non fiction book on the terrorist bombing of an Air India Jet—flight 182—that was bombed off the coast of Ireland. It was a Canadian tragedy, 329 people died.

**AG** Is that what your story “The Management of Grief” was based on?

**BM** Exactly! The story was based on the non-fiction book we did about the horrible, horrible terrorist bombing by Canadian citizens of Indian origins. 90% of the victims were also Canadian citizens.

**AG** What year was that?

**BM** 1985 was the incident itself. As a result of researching the non-fiction book, I had enormous amounts of information on the terrorists themselves both in north America, and India. So, you know Sukki the hot-dog vendor in *Jasmine*? He very much comes out of research. All the stuff that's set in the villages of the Punjab: the school teacher being abused by young terrorists, and then the bombing that kills off that first husband of Jasmine in Punjab. All those are based on actual research.

**AG** What exact Iowa year is *Jasmine* set? Is it during 83 or 84—the year of that terrible drought?

**BM** It's more like 86-87 when there was a huge farm crisis in Iowa. The maiming of the Husband is really inspired by a murder. A farmer who thought he was being foreclosed on in two days first killed his wife.

**AG** That was in Hills, Iowa, about five miles south of Iowa City?

**BM** Yes, and the banker that was shot dead, was the father of a very close friend of my younger son's at West High.

**AG** I remember that time, it was devastating. Wasn't it right at Christmas?

**BM** Exactly, just before Christmas day. So I did a lot of research with bankers, farmers, counselors, and social workers—the Prairie Fire Foundation—who were just beginning to understand that there was a right-wing movement to enlist the sympathies of disaffected farmers.

**AG** I wondered about that because you hint about it in the book but you don't really blow it up.

**BM** Because it hadn't broken in a big way, yet.

**AG** So that's happening now in the 90's?

**BM** Yes, the right-wing militia movement is happening now in the 90's. And so the car that comes by, (in the book) the calls that come to Jasmine's household in Iowa are the early hints of the right-wing movement.

**AG** Do you think the family farm has become obsolete in Iowa?

**BM** Well, I certainly think it's very much on the decline.

**AG** Do you think that Iowa farms are going more corporate?

**BM** Yes, and I think that an awful lot of farm land, every day, is transformed into industrial parks or more housing. The urbanization is just spreading second by second.

**AG** My dad now describes Iowa City as looking like it has a case of melanoma.

**BM** Yes. Absolutely. And just on drives from Iowa City to the Cedar Rapids Airport you can see every week how more and more farm land has been scoured, gauged out for non agricultural development.

**AG** Do you know the book *Shoeless Joe*? Which was the inspiration for the film *Field of Dreams*.

**BM** Yes, of course.

**AG** Both *Jasmine* and *Shoeless Joe* are on reading lists for different classes at the University of Massachusetts Boston. I'm afraid to ask, did you like *Shoeless Joe*? It's set around the same era as *Jasmine*, I've always thought, and what intrigues me about it is the same farming crisis as in your book: people selling out, the collapse of the family farm, and the use of land for non ag-purposes.

**BM** I had already read it at the time I was writing *Jasmine*. But my husband knows Kinsella, and they used to go to Triple A baseball just outside Iowa City. But the farm crisis—it's just so much in the air that I can see an awful lot of people being inspired to write fiction about it.

**AG** Do you like films?

**BM** I don't have enough time to see film, but yes.

**AG** More so, what do you think of films based on books?

**BM** I understand from my L.A. agent that an English company has just bought the rights to *Jasmine*. But I never saw *Field of Dreams* as a film.

**AG** Do you think Americans could deal with a film version of your novel if the film remained true to the non-sentimental nature of *Jasmine*?

**BM** Well, I have no idea if it will ever get made. These things always take so long, so there is no reason to anticipate what the audience reaction would be.

**AG** I've noticed you consistently have characters who have scientific minds—able to manipulate technology.

**BM** I'm pretty interested in non-fiction, and especially cosmology, and virtual reality, which I use in my book *The Holder of the World* as a very central image. So, chaos theories are very dear to me. I spend a lot of time reading chaos theories.

**AG** Do you think science and fate are intertwined?

**BM** Yes, absolutely, and I believe in fractals as a way of ordering.

**AG** What are fractals?

**BM** It's a mathematical principle that talks about how there are no accidents. As an example, every little curve and indentation in the coastline of a bay can be figured and predicted by computations, so that it's all mathematically determined. And fate, many Hindus will tell you is also a sort of computation. A figuration and computation of possibilities, and that's how horoscopes are predicted. I'm coming to these chaos theories out of my initial interest in the Hindu religion.

**AG** Do you have many friends who are scientists?

**BM** Yes, and at Berkeley there are an awful lot of very interesting minds. I know as many people in, say, physics, bio chemistry and medicine, as I do in English literature.

**AG** Have you read much of the Indian-Anglo literature being written in England?

**BM** I think very vigorous writing is coming out of England. I call this the “Anglophone literature of the England diaspora.” Some of the graduate courses that I teach have to do with tracking identity and nationhood. Identity and acculturation, in say, writing by people of Indian origin in Trinidad, Guyana, as well as in some African countries, Sri Lanka, south Asia, America, England and Canada. But I can’t say that I’ve read everything.

**AG** Who can? Jasmine becomes a nanny in New York, and later becomes the lover of the man she works for. Unlike many, Jasmine has a positive relationship with her employer. Do you feel that young girls are exploited when they come to this country and pay their way with being nannies?

**BM** I’m not addressing this particular nanny case in Cambridge, [Louise Woodward] so let me answer in a two part way. When I was researching all the background for *Jasmine*, I read every published and unpublished article, meaning graduate research theses on the Caribbean women coming into this country, who provide day care and look after the children of young professionals, like lawyers. I discovered how much tension there was—sometimes articulated and sometimes not, between the au pair and the employer. And many of these women were not young, so that’s why I’m separating it from the Woodward case. These were Caribbean women who may have left their own children behind in the islands in order to come as indentured labor, or sponsored labor. So the au pairs resented, one, the fact they were cleaning up someone else’s dirt when they had been bank tellers, or professionals of some sort in their own countries, and were not looking after their own children. There was some resentment there.

With the Woodward case I don’t know about the au pair being exploited at all. I think that the Dr., Mrs. Eappen was on a mommy track so that she was not really a professional who is sacrificing her mommyhood for a career. But when you have an au pair who’s more interested in adventures in Americana, in having a good time, and being a teenager, you have a problem. I just don’t know how much racism is involved in the case.

I ask myself if the nanny had been a British citizen of Filipino origin would the British public have made such a fuss? I blame the agency that obviously did not do enough checking of references.

**AG** Do you think Louise should be allowed to go home?

**BM** It’s a legal thing, I wouldn’t want to get into that. But I think we should remember, there has been a murdered baby that no one is willing

to talk about.

**AG** Back to *Jasmine*, and I thank you for your comments on that. It's just that it happened here and is constantly in the news.

**BM** Nannyng is central to *Jasmine*, and I like to think of my novel as a re-imagining of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. I had always disliked two things about *Jane Eyre*. As an Indian I resented the comments about India's heathens having to be "enlightened" by the goody goody alternate lover that she chooses, and then whom she rejects. Then, two, the desexing of the lover; going into a religious tract at the end. That's the part I wanted to totally reconstruct. I wanted the end to come off as an American pioneer who would have regressed had she stayed with the disabled lover. And two, the re-imagining of the new American families of the 1990's where, instead of *Leave It To Beaver* or *Father Knows Best* what you have is a family that has chosen to be together as a family though no one is related by blood to anyone else in that unit.

**AG** I've always been happy that she leaves in the end.

**BM** I couldn't help it; I didn't know she was going to.

**AG** My last question—I had forgotten my favorite line from *Jasmine* until I read it again—I had scrawled it on a Post-It-Note and had it tacked on my desk in Provincetown for several years—until I moved to Boston—I liked it so much because it coaxed me to take risks that were disastrously integral to the path my life has taken—the line is:

"...There are no compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams."

How or where did that line come from—why do you suppose it stands out like a gem?

**BM** When I'm in character, once I have become the protagonist the lines just tumble out of me, they write themselves. I think that murdering—that painful trauma comes strait out of my own experience. *Jasmine* has absolutely no autobiographical events in it. I'm not from the same class, nor did I go through the adventures she did, but it's the most autobiographical novel in that that's my personality. She's passionate—she's the person I would have liked to have been.

**AG** That's interesting, I never would've thought of it that way. You say when you're in character is it as if you are an actor?



**BM** I become that person; I can't write any other way. There's a whole physiological change. So much adrenaline is pumping and until I've gotten to that physical transformation, I know it's not the final draft.

**AG** It sounds almost like theater, when one becomes the character.

**BM** Right, absolutely. I'm totally inside that skin, and I'm simply being dictated to. And I don't look at my earlier drafts, I always start afresh and I know that the final draft is when I reach that trance like state and I'm writing 22 hour days for two months. I begin, I end, and I collapse. Have you seen *Leave It To Beaver*? It's like the sun twin, or evil twin of *Jasmine*. It's the novel that came out in June.

**AG** No I haven't. I've been in school year round, so I tend to read only what's assigned, or else I'd never do my school work. But I look forward to seeing it. What are you working on now, by the way?

**BM** On a book of short stories, and just beginning a biggish novel.

**AG** I'll look forward to seeing them. Well, that's all my questions. I want to thank you for talking with me.

**BM** You're welcome.



## Allen

You left without saying good- bye.  
And I, angry at your mortality  
and my impotence in the face  
of that wretched truth,  
hadn't called.

Three weeks you languished,  
spigot dripping red. Retta said  
it was terrible at the end.  
She had never seen  
anyone  
suffer  
so.  
Even her father,  
liver destroyed, lungs bleeding  
went more peacefully.

\* \* \*

But I remember that humid picnic.  
You lay with him beneath that gentle tree,  
long dark legs entwined,  
his head on your generous arm,  
and you with your sideways look  
dreamt of Broadway.

Ben Garcia

## 83 Prospect St., #86

Into the blue  
i feel myself spilling  
    over the brim of glass  
    into your parted lips  
i rush, swimming  
    my legs fold into a mermaid's tail  
i dive into you

i smile at your calm  
    your blue peace fills my lungs  
i nestle into aqua warmth  
    and into your liquid haven  
i close my eyes  
then  
i jolt awake  
    the sun is hot on white blinds  
    my slip shows my thighs  
    your hair is tangled on the pillow  
i feel my legs for scales  
    i put my hand on your chest  
    (are you swimming too?)  
    i hear glass break outside  
you wake up  
    i pretend to sleep

why do i have to dream  
to feel close to you?

Bonnie Gerepka

## a pearl in the seafood restaurant

once  
i had a lobster bib on  
while i ate fish sticks  
my mother opened  
a faded clam  
and let it speak to me  
it was blind  
and could not see me  
i listened to its wisdom  
it had a tiny pearl  
hidden on its body for me  
it was modest in its nakedness  
and i pet its elusiveness  
the pearl was tiny  
and was lost in my palm  
my mother swallowed it grey  
and i kept its words.

once  
my sleeves were rolled up  
and i sipped on green glass brew  
i opened a door  
and you came in  
i was blind to your smile  
later, in bed, wanting  
to understand  
why you  
why me  
you whispered  
“remember when you were  
a little girl  
and you believed what your  
heart asked you to?”  
i felt the sea pulsate in my palm  
and i kept its words.

Bonnie Gerepka



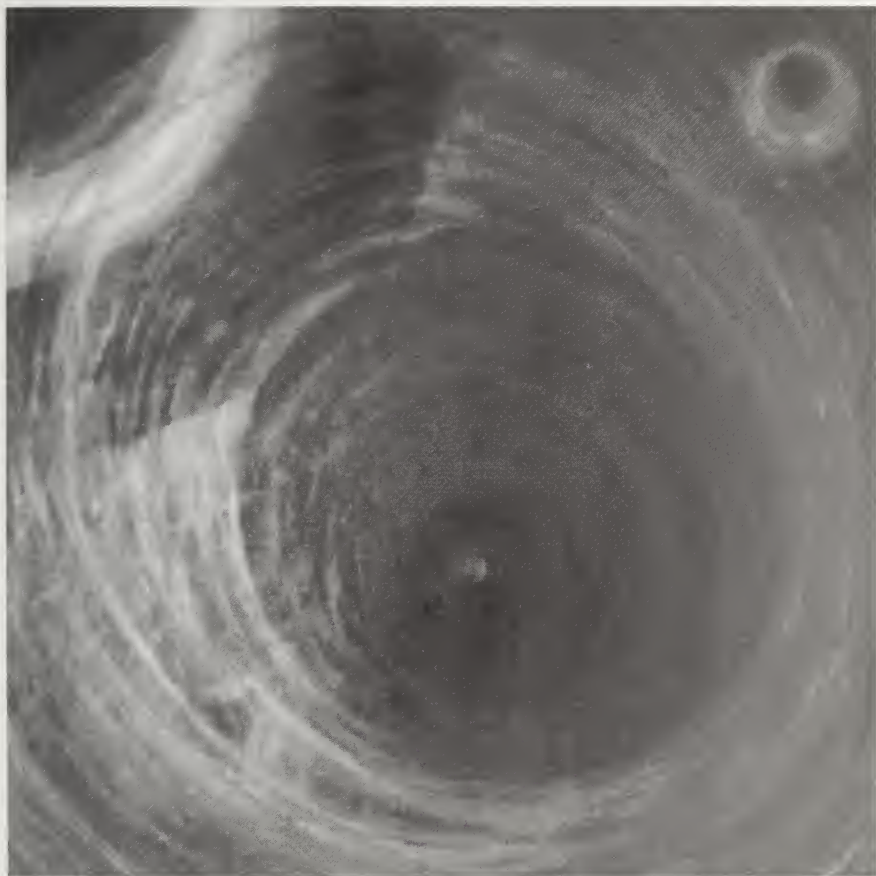
The Breakdown Office  
Jeanne Kent



My Kitchen Table  
Jeanne Kent



Moon Tree  
Jeanne Kent

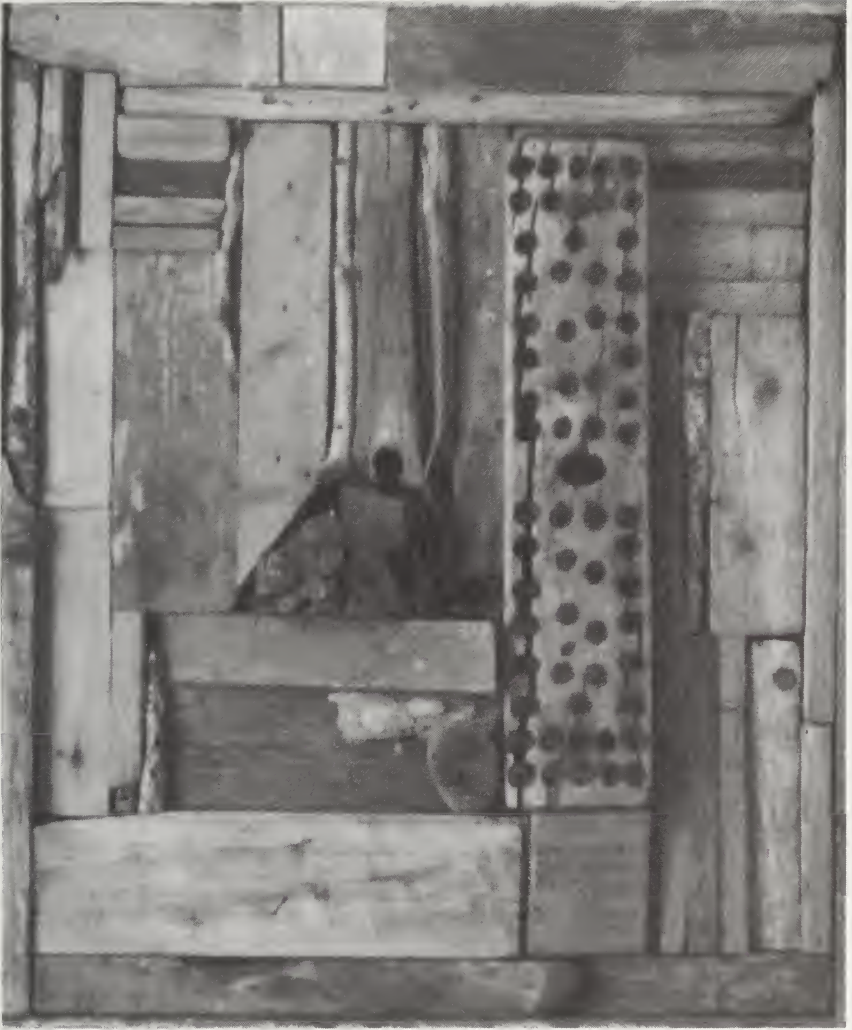


Hole  
Fukiko Cudhea





Driftwood Collage #1  
Herbert Kirshnit



Driftwood Collage #2  
Herbert Kirshnit



Shorebirds  
Herbert Kirshnit



Dunes, water color  
Herbert Kirshnit

## memoirs of a volcanic sentiment

your eruptions keep interrupting me lover  
i just keep admiring your lava  
i just can't keep away from that which could  
    heat me  
boil my temperature  
    way above safety level  
i know the crimson tide is almost here  
that the scathing could kill  
but i know if it were to happen  
i would be preserved  
would be safely corroded  
not crumbling unless touched  
    by curious seekers in distant time  
but they wouldn't understand  
that here in the shell of past hot  
would i be most sheltered in my own skin  
for i sacrifice all that i am  
just to be covered by you

Bonnie Gerepka

## Monkey in the Middle

pigeons victory dance in hollow cracks  
    of grey urban echoes  
basketballs pounding wilted sidewalk  
    like a hammer to a nail  
sticky lime summers clinging  
    to strawberry peeled porches  
splinters under fingernails  
roses creeping past rusting gates  
tulips undulating with potato chips wrappers  
screams and speeding laughter pedaled on bikes  
    zooming past itching fingers

under  
billowing sky  
wavering sun  
gasping, we would conjugate, disassemble,  
daring to leave yourself behind  
always leaving hope to melt in your pockets

but, do you remember cutting stars  
and the moon  
    slicing through  
        smog?

Bonnie Gerepka

## Walking in the dark

Sometimes when it's safe--  
on a wide, smooth sidewalk,  
by the Esplanade or on the straight  
of a school track--  
I adventure to close my eyes  
for several steps;  
the sunlight glowing red  
against my eyelids.  
I discover the pit of my breath  
and the inner life of my stride,  
the outline of my body slicing air;  
my arms stirring;  
my eyes working anxiously against  
the inner lids, looking  
for footing.

Lisa Kim



## Having the Writing Room

Having the writing room  
being the litter box room  
and writing being first in dreams  
last in day means  
scooping out the boxes  
and the little one's frozen puddles  
not covered on the side of the  
smaller box at nine thirty and then  
tapping on the keyboard feeling  
like it got on my fingers and  
am not able to get up and wash  
them for fear of never coming back

Not shopping for too long and running  
out of litter and getting the not no-track  
clumpable means little sandy pieces of  
litter all over the room, on the desk on the chair  
under the teacup

The best part about doing this anyhow is  
laying in bed (having written or not)  
dreaming about a plastic covered book---  
'this is my answer to how I feel about you,  
this is my answer to everything'

Jared Fuller

# Family Car

Lisa Lloyd-Kindstrand

I must have spent the whole of my infancy with my eyes turned to the heavens while I lay back in a car bed or bassinet. The sky of our world was blue. The sky of our car was blue. Blue. Like my eyes. Everyone says I was just a pair of big blue eyes peeping out at the world. But I was peeping way beyond it.

Mom: Our first car was white. We still had it when you were born.

Lisa: I thought it was blue.

Mom: The inside was blue. But you can't possibly remember that.

Lisa: But I do, Mom. I can remember everything.

The Ford Falcon was black and chrome and shiny because Dad always washed it in the driveway, scrubbing away rust, grime and the skin of his work worn hands with steel wool while spraying us with the hose so that our laughter evaporated into the hot summer air. The inside was red. Altogether it matched the checker board pattern of floor tile in the upstairs bathroom which is decorated pink these days. But that checker board is a fashion statement for all time.

Our thighs would stick to the vinyl car seats. If you moved there was no question about it. I loved the door locks that could be unscrewed and subsequently lost. Crawling around the floor to find them was easy enough at 70 miles an hour on interstate 95. We didn't know what seat belts were for in those days. If we didn't tuck them in the butt crack of the cushions they'd end up, painfully, in our own.

Dad: What are you girls doing back there?

Lisa and Vicki: Nothing.

Dad: Well cut it out.

So we cut out doing nothing. That vinyl was such a snitch.

What was with that wood strip panel running around the station wagon? The first of many station wagons. The same artistically disinclined engineer must have thought he was quite clever with those two rear seats facing each other.

Lisa: Mommy, I don't feel very good.

Mommy: Just look forward.

Which I am but my forward sees forests flying by in a blur of nausea.

Lisa: Mommy...

Mommy: Bill! Pull over!

Bill: Damn it.

Our next wagon had one rear facing seat, not unlike the one in my own family wagon in the driveway. Which is where I like to keep it. Being a one car family that rarely drives just confuses the shit out of neighbors who feel the need to know our constant whereabouts. Dan bought it, or gained us 60 months of payments rather, in a fit of whining about never having owned a new car. Obviously that remains true. He can't see this. I immediately became queasy when I saw the rear seat.

Lisa: What did you get a puke seat for?

Dan: Excuse me?

Lisa: The girls are going to puke back there.

Dan: They'll tell us if they feel sick.

I still have nightmares thinking about the road side egg salad sandwiches my mom absolutely had to feed us if there was a chance in the world that we might be driving 100 or more miles.

Lisa: (in the front seat, mind you, rolls the window down in January) Can we stop for a coffee or something?

Dan: We're almost there. Are you sick again?

Lisa: Please stop the car. It's the new car smell.

Dan: Are you sure you're not pregnant?

Lisa: Dan! Pull Over!

Dan: Damn it.

Egg salad.

When Dan and the girls come to drive us home I sit in the back next to my newest blue-eyed baby. I watch her gaze unfocused past the ceiling of her new world and I can't help but wonder, and being a mom, worry about how this tan upholstery will ultimately color her memories.



Nostalgia 1997  
Suzanne Gallant



Rave 1997  
Suzanne Gallant



Stan: Before and After  
Suzanne Gallant





Untitled  
Harumi Oyama

# New Orleans

John Lynds

I haven't seen morning in a while, haven't walked through the shadows it casts on this hardwood floor. I woke to jazz and a hand under my pillow, under my head. The weather is crisp today, listening to jazz while I feast on chocolate milk and eggs. My legs are sore, stretching out, I feel it's time to go, to school, to work, to the Quarter. I make my way down rod iron stairs and hit the street. Constence, yeah, that's the street I'm staying on. It runs parallel to St Charles and leads straight to the French Quarter. I light the first cigarette of the day, first haul, slight buzz, and head for the sin.

Sweat drips from the brow of the junkie on my corner, tempted by a better life and the thrill to forget. I lost my words in his gaze; bloodshot eyes and a dizzy head, he feels my presence fade as I pass by. That's why I am here, a passer by. I never talk with him but I worry when he is not there in the morning, begging for a fix.

Glorified chicken and Crawfish Et touffe tempt my belly as I cut through the city into the Quarter. It is about a fifteen minute walk to where I have to go, and sweet Jesus its hot! Walking down here is like constantly walking through the mist of a lawn sprinkler that spurts warm water.

Its early May and I eat everyone's smile for breakfast on my walk down Magazine. Tongues speak certain impossible words as one-syllable laughs fall on empty shoulders. Southern charm travels through these conversations. This is the weather I like, early May, when summer teases glistening arms and hard brown faces. The weather makes dreams uneasy to conceive under cool sheets.

The landscape and palm trees make me feel safe in this seedy town. Deep purples and pinks paint the houses lining the street. Mardi Gras beads still hang from the trees while jazz spills from the belly of a certain cafe, stinging the ears of tourists, bringing tears to my eyes.

I've died here a million times, plagued by the voodoo and Congo drums that play all night from the forest like possessed spirits under the cotton comfort of a crescent moon. I have seen souls stolen on this walk. Yeah, I've seen them rise up between gravity and grace; they searched, wandered, dancing death to the song of the angel child. This is a holy land and both the devil and Jesus exist. That's what the sign on the Baptist Church says on the corner of Magazine and Etuepe. Temptation comes in many forms and five dollars will get you far. Liquor, drugs, prostitution, and gambling mix like a savory Cajun dish served hot.

These elements steal souls. Lawyers and businessmen all pining to lose their breath in something more tangible than a three piece suit. I tell them everyday, be careful of the Queen of New Orleans, the voodoo, Lady Laveau. I knew her well, she sat Indian style on my floor and shared cigarettes with me, exhaling the ancient wisdom of this place I still do not understand. A little drunk, we fell asleep in her blanket, our bodies made the shape of closed lips. I still dream of her dancing under the midnight sun, head tossed back, body on fire. She told me this city comes with no boundaries, no laws, and I still carry her city with me everyday. Down here, in the South, she wakes sleepers out of idle dreams and idle minds and prepares them for the next day. She wipes the ashes from my pages and reflects on the conversations born in her belly, but I sometimes do not appreciate the birth. At best I am up and walking the boundaries of her city that are vast and quickly moving away from mute testimonies that now have become her sermon and my remedy. I always have to wait for the Widow Paris to have her laugh on me. This morning, on this walk, is the longest I have had to wait. I want to sit, crouch, sleep in the new alphabet her lips construct and the promise of her smiles. I wait. I wait for the day when I can shape her words the way I feel I need to hear them to understand the mysteries of this city.

The street is moist with last night's rain. I look for the shape of my lost friend in the tiny pools that form under my feet. My pace is slow and I stop at the next block, cross under the highway and proceed into the Quarter. I walk on the shadow side of the street to cool down, and hang a left onto Rampart. I follow it down inhaling the sweet smell of Madri Gras cake cooking in the bakeries, cinnamon and spices fill the air in the early morning hours.

I head into the Dixie Drug Store, and she stands before me like a terrible dream. A dream I couldn't imagine in a hundred conscience thoughts. Her alter, garnished with chicken feet and Haitian money, is a mute witness to those in search for money, luck and love. Peppers and roots hang from the rafters that split the store like an egg. The sun cracks the window and scatters across the floor in a million patterns that seek no explanation. I place my respect to her, a disregarded syringe that belongs to the junkie on my corner and I ask if she can return his soul and teach me more about this city.

I left New Orleans my second year in college. The streets in the North seem so callous compared to those of the crescent city. I look for his shape in certain corners of my room, now scattered with laundry and papers. I find his shape in my mind, but my mind questions his presence. I wonder what happened to him, did he get off the junk? Impossible, he was too hooked when I knew him. Maybe death struck him on a corner, hiding in a neat package of brown powder. Perhaps. I wanted to experience his life, the many mornings and weird nights he roamed

the city. The answers he must of held to all the questions I had boggled my mind. If only I had the chance to talk to him, he held the secrets, like Lady Laveau, he walked in the shadows creeping through the language of New Orleans.

## Sunset Villanelle

I love to watch the world in fading light,  
In peace that comes at closing of the day  
And moves on with the coming of the night.

Brown hair turns red and gold in slanted light;  
The scents of earth and leaves, on breezes stray.  
I love to watch the world in fading light.

Small, gray wings dance in ambivalent flight,  
And owls and crickets now have much to say.  
They sing to bring the coming of the night.

The sound of running water brings delight.  
The stream calls me to sit, quiet, and stay.  
I love to watch the world in fading light.

Leaves rustle somewhere nearby, out of sight.  
Could it be squirrels or birds, or maybe Fey,  
To dance before the coming of the night?

A beech supports my back, and all is right;  
We softly hold the dark and cold at bay.  
I love to watch the world in fading light,  
From here, before the coming of the night.

Marie Harter

## HOW DO I HATE THEE?

How do I hate thee? Let me count the ways.  
I hate thee to the debt and breath and hype  
My soul can plunge when feeling out of sight,  
For the beginnings of non-existence and idle Grace.  
I hate thee to the level of every daze  
Most quiet knead, by sun and fluorescent light.  
I hate thee freely, as women strive for Mr. Right;  
I hate thee surely, as they turn to Praise.  
I hate thee with the passion left aside  
With my old briefs, and with my childhood's fate  
I hate thee with a hate I seemed to lose  
With my lost paints, — I hate thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life! —and if God choose,  
I shall but hate thee better after death.

“Elisabet Barrette Brownin”

Jeanne Kent



Doubt  
presented,  
a  
hesitation  
to dial  
I  
wonder  
if I have become  
an obligation,  
pace the  
raw yellow  
linoleum  
and wait,  
cigarettes  
shrink  
into my lips  
and  
streetlights  
    slip  
left  
off the rooftops.  
It's true,  
the city is fucked up  
he said  
I mean,  
the sky  
is fucking orange.  
He threw his arms  
up  
at the strange horizon  
his breath crytallized,  
his voice was visible  
    on the cold  
and it was true,  
the sky was fucking orange.

Dina Varsalone

# Imprimatur

Drew Carver

*Alleluia*

*Alleluia*

*God is all loving and forgiving*

*Alleluia*

*Alleluia*

Those were the words the chanteuse led in song as the community's voices blended into one, singing, rejoicing, praising God's willingness to forgive. Those were the words sung before I stood at the pulpit, reading the Gospel and giving my sermon, my first sermon, in this community which I knew so well.

Yes, James Morris has returned. He was last seen attending the adjacent parochial school and then the not-too-distant Catholic high school. And then he left to an all-male college, a Catholic one. It could be nothing else. And then he spent four years at the seminary. Now, following my own request to the bishop, I have returned to my church, teachers and principal; older, wiser, though not different. It was expected I would become a priest.

So, there I stood, breathing slowly, pacing my heartbeat, knowing the expectations the congregation had of me. Most knew me since I was six years old, entering first grade at the school, St. Augustine's.

Now, I could see the first graders and all the other students seated in their designated pews. First Friday Mass. First Friday in September.

I could see my former teachers and principal, all nuns, sitting in the first bench, awaiting my words, waiting to hear the content of the sermon from their former protege, the boy whose destiny they had slated over twenty years ago. "At least one of those children turned out well," I read in their eyes. They didn't screw up all of their students.

I then glanced over to the bench where my parents used to sit every Sunday and weekday morning. May they rest in peace.

My body shook. Was I ready to speak from this position?

I glanced at the rib vaulted ceiling of the church. The ingenuity of architectural design that supported such an immense structure. The painted color. Diverse stain glass windows on the walls. So well-crafted, so intricately done. Precision. Many years ago, the stories portrayed on these windows were a means of education for the illiterate.

Education.

I surveyed my audience.

Some of the members of the community began to look at each other, wondering if this newly anointed priest was ready to give a sermon. I read "you are inexperienced" in the eyes of those who did not know me. To them, I had to prove myself, like I had to do at college and the seminary. In church, good grades mean absolutely nothing. It is the quality of the lectures which matters. I had to give an impressive homily.

"I will make my sermon brief because I know that some of you would like to get home early before the predicted rain shower begins. God only wishes us to get wet during Baptism. Otherwise, we are in need of Noah's Ark."

No response.

"For those of you who do not know me, I am Father James Morris. I was baptized into this community nearly twenty-seven years ago. In fact, I attended St. Augustine's from first to eighth grade. Many of the Sisters were my teachers. And, I'm sure they can tell you that I was a good student. I know that my studiousness will carry into my ability to serve this community. Thank you."

After Mass, I stood at the entranceway of the church, greeting parishioners, shaking their hands.

Many seemed pleased with their new priest, especially for the reason that they were in desperation for one after the deaths of two elderly priests within the past three years. They had believed they would be seeing the same four faces throughout the months. My arrival added a fifth, as well as reducing the average age of the clergy from sixty to fifty-four. I assumed that my arrival represented a change for the congregation.

Perhaps some feared that my age would mean I intended to introduce liberal ideologies.

In a sense, I did. Update the church and adjacent school from the 1950's beliefs which I knew they still professed.

End the lies they taught.

I gazed at the approaching people. The nuns. My former teachers. Walking towards me to greet me. To see me in the position where they damned me. From the central aisle they walked. I could see the altar from their advancing direction. So well decorated. The color. The way light hit it, achieving its highest radiance. Design. Color. Light. It all tantalized me from a distance, behind my former teachers. It spoke to me from afar, telling me I could have achieved it. It could have been mine, destiny. An artist. It would have been my goal had I never

received the "divine" influence of these approaching women. I would not be wearing this white collar.

I stared in the other direction. I could not speak to them. They hindered my view of aesthetic appreciation.

Elements of life are unchanging.

"Father James," the principal called to me in her monotonic, though intimidating voice. "I was not aware that you had been a student here."

I nearly laughed in remorse to myself. She did not even remember me.

"I entered first grade the year you were made principal," I responded shyly, quietly. My voice could not be heard even by my own ears. Damn, I shook my head. She still roused my fear.

"Well, I'm pleased to have one of ours to return to the school system in the form of mentor. It is unfortunate that this generation of students is not as devout as yours."

Devout, I thought. No. Submissive, ignorant, and gullible.

"It is good to see you again." She nodded her head to gesture her approval. And then she walked on. Exited.

The other members of her clique imitated her motion and followed.

No praise, I reflected, standing now alone. Only approval. Never did I ever do what was right. Just avoided sin.

And then the thought haunted me.

The sermon.

My sermon was shallow. Completely empty, unsatisfactory. They hated it. The parish hated it.

I exited the church and walked towards the school.

My first impression was unsatisfactory. Showed no effort.

I entered the school. I walked through the dimly lit corridors, captured by memories, obsessed with those of my sermon. Was it satisfactory? If it were an oral exam back at the seminary, would it have been an A? So obsessed with grades and personal evaluation. I know the origins.

A student ran past me.

He had a solemn, expressionless face. He seemed to want to cry, but could not. This school allows no release of emotion. It is all sin. That is what is taught. That is what is learned.

I want to change it. But can I change it?

I want to right what is being done to them. I want to right what was done to me.

A moment of prayer.

A raised voice in the distance interrupted me. The tone alone identified the speaker. It was the sixth grade teacher. She was asking the students to donate money to a shelter for the elderly. Naturally, she

used threats. Anyone who did not give more than two dollars would be rebuked for selfishness. A mortal sin. Money for a good cause is more important than money spent on oneself.

I entered the room.

Sister held a young boy upside down, shaking him, waiting for change to fall from his pockets. She and the class laughed. Though the boy showed the humiliation in his eyes. It was visible to those who believed it was there.

I remembered when she did that to me.

She put the boy down. Then, she walked up to a girl who apparently had given no money to this cause which will supposedly bring good to people.

Sister yelled at this girl, asking her how she can afford fancy earrings, but cannot give to this good cause. The girl remained silent. She did not have to worry about being turned upside down. The skirt of her uniform saved her from that torture. It would be immoral for her underwear to be revealed. It could arouse some of the boys.

Anything concerning sex cannot ever be even implicitly implied. That is why it never leaves anyone's mind.

Sister turned her head to me and briefly greeted me. Then she faced the girl again. She hit her.

I winced. Closed my eyes.

She asked me to collect money from the row of students closest to the Virgin Mary statue. I was given a container resembling a milk carton and then walked to them. They shook at my foreboding presence. They feared me. I was one of "them," an enemy. Someone who had the authority to hit them. After I collected money from each student, I received an emotionless thank you from Sister and immediately left the classroom.

Heard another child being hit.

I hyperventilated.

I cannot save this school.

I'm still a student in the nuns' eyes. They order me to do things and I acquiesce, so quietly, so passively. So damn easily!

Another hit, this time from a different classroom.

Threats of damnation.

Cry, no cry, to cry is forbidden.

Deny yourself pleasure!

Love others, not yourself!

Resist temptation!

I shook my head. I glanced at a broom closet where temptation had struck me thirteen years ago. I almost sinned there. If I had not resisted then, I would not be wearing this white collar. Though what does this white collar mean? A license to abuse? To take personal money from children because it is for a good cause? To deny them any

sort of pleasure or love? To tell them that God will send them to Hell if they merely think a forbidden thought, never mind nearly carry it out! And once you're damned there is no hope for redemption. A stigma is ineffaceable. A sin is a sin forever. No forgiveness from God.

I hate these lies. I know they are lies. Yet, despite my many years of education, I still believe them. I have internalized them. I cannot teach the children otherwise when I do not feel otherwise! I am a product of these nuns. Like the rest of the staff, I am a danger to these children.

They will become either like me or my former classmates.

I could feel tears trying to form, though they could not. Like the boy who had run down the corridor, I could not release my emotions.

I shook my head.

I stared in a diagonal direction, through the open door of a classroom. A Sister was teaching religion, preparing second graders for First Communion. I remember her. She had hit me after I had received a passed note, a love note, a note from that girl who later invited me into the broom closet. Wanted to spit kiss me.

I was a sinner then.

I wanted to be able to cry.

Began to feel dizzy. Could no longer stand well.

I leaned backwards, allowing the wall behind me to catch me. The memory. That haunting moment was returning. Returning and turning, the turning point. The memory. It was Communion. First Communion.

The images of distorting, contorting, reverberated inside my head. First Communion. The note. The reaction. She had told me that God would punish me for evil. And then First Communion. The Host. It burned inside my mouth. My lips had become swollen. My breathing, choking. Shaking, convulsing. And then paramedics. They injected me with something before I was put into an ambulance.

Wheat. It was the wheat. The Host was made of wheat. My parents didn't know that. I was allergic to wheat. It was a reaction, allergic reaction, the doctors said. But Sister said it was God. He was punishing me. She had said that First Communion was Judgment Day for us sinners. That if we were evil and had omitted any sins during Confession then the Host would burn our mouths. Inflammation. Show us the heat of Hell. We believed her. I believed her. I saw Hell. I had to repent.

I had to embrace her beliefs.

I entered the classroom. Sister wanted me to tell the students something about First Communion.



"The Host is made of wheat bread. Although after the Miracle of the Eucharist when it becomes the Body of Christ, it still holds the property of wheat.

"When I was your age I was allergic to wheat, so I could not receive the Body of Christ. Instead, I would receive the Blood which is from the wine, which is made of grapes."

I paused a moment, trying to bring some order to the images and words which ran through my mind, telling me that I was not prepared to reach the goals I set. I was still a prisoner.

Damn! I wanted to warn them. I wanted to humiliate this nun before these children. But it would be a vengeance. I can't seek revenge. I'm supposed to forgive and learn and teach.

Dear, God. These children's eyes stared at me, asking for an end, asking for a moral to my story.

And so I continued, continued with words that were not my own but taught to me many years ago. Words that immediately reflected the extent of my own pain and its sorrowful progression. Words that deafened my own ears as they were said.

"But many years later, when I was in college studying theology and I knew I wanted to be a priest, the allergy went away. That day, after I declared my major as theology, I went to Mass and had the Body of Christ at Communion. It was the first time since my First Communion in second grade. I told myself that God would not harm me because I would become a priest. There was no reaction." I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer.

I heard Sister telling the students that God almost killed me when I was their age because I was a sinner. The allergy was God's doing. He took my allergy away when I repented and decided to become a priest. This was my story. It was a confirmation of the words she told them.

When I looked at them, I could see them tremble. They saw God as the Almighty Power who could strike them down as He almost did to me.

I left the room, trembling like the students. I did it. I became it. I was it. I told the students lies about God, like the nuns were doing. I scared them. I lied. But was it a lie? Were these lies or not? It was true.

My breathing intensified. My hands became cold and iced. Was this a reaction now? Was God striking me down? Dear God, please not a reaction! I did not lie to these children! It is said that nearly every graduate of St. Augustine's and of many other parochial schools becomes either religious or a sinner. I am saving these children. They will not become sinners. They will not be tempted into the broom closet! I must save them. Children smoke, intoxicate, and oversex themselves at such an early age this era. These children cannot become like many of my former classmates.

I had to help them.

I had to make time to hear these second graders first confessions.  
To teach them truth before the lies become deeply ingrained.

I tried. I requested.

Several days later, I was given the fifth graders, children whose grade level surpassed the midpoint of the brainwashing.

Because of the size of the class, there would be two priests to hear their confessions. Many of the children chose me. They liked something about me.

And so I heard their confessions. And they horrified me. Not that they had mortal sins. Many confessed incidences and experiences which were not even sins. Listening to music with warning labels. Seeing R-rated films. Using the forbidden f-word. Smoking cigarettes. Staying awake all night. Hating their teachers. They sounded like me.

"Those are not sins," I told some. A sin is usually premeditated. Losing homework and receiving a bad grade on an exam is not sinful. Even though I treated it as such when I was in college. I made sure to do well so that God would not reject me. What did these nuns do to these children? What did they do to me? What was I doing? I confirmed the lies.

I exited the church.

Kicked a puddle.

I walked. I needed to walk. I wanted to speak with some of the other priests. What do they think? Though, what would they think? I am inexperienced. Perhaps I am not really a priest. Perhaps the Sacrament of Holy Orders does not even count for me. I could not go through more years of schooling. I should be doing the teaching.

And so I walked and I said it. Only said it a few times in high school. In college and the seminary I never said it. I couldn't. But I said it now. I said it as a priest.

"Fuck." I said it silently.

I walked.

I breathed.

"Fuck this school." It felt so good. So calming. I said it five more times. I walked.

Kicked more puddles.

Turned around.

I walked back to the school. I saw the students in the parking lot for recess. They played. Many looked happy despite their surroundings. But some didn't. It was because of me, I who listened to false sins.

And then I saw her. That woman. That principal. That nun. She walked up to me so slowly. So casually. She knew she could ask me any favor. I was her product, like those who were becoming it.

"Father," she said so sternly. She never smiled. "Could you hear the confessions of the sixth graders? At this time of the year, all the classes give their confessions. Would you have time for the sixth graders today?"

I looked at her with the memories of the fifth graders. I could not hear any more of the ideas they had planted in the students and they still existed in me.

"Fuck you." I said.

Her eyes became bewildered, trying to backtrack her ears, wondering if she had heard me correctly.

"You're welcome," she said with an emotionless automation, assuming my words were thank you, welcoming me for the many thank yous I should have received from her.

"No, Sister. I said 'fuck you.' I am not hearing the sins that you planted in these students' minds. If anyone needs to go to confession it should be you and all the other fuckin' nuns who emotionally abuse students by telling them that they are evil so they have no hope of ever being redeemed. So, fuck you, Sister! Fuck you and fuck all of the other nuns who are still living in the 1950's when this sort of abuse was allowed! Join the sexual revolution!"

And I walked. I walked before she could speak, if she could speak. I heard nothing behind me. She was frozen, like myself. Shocked at my words. Shocked at my behavior. Shocked that anyone could say that.

And then it hit me. The image. The realization. I could not return. What would they do to a priest with an openly foul mouth, who said taboo words loudly in a parking lot infested with the children whom he was supposed to guide?

I was lost. I was damned. I could not return. I was a sinner on the path to Hell. I was past the redemption point. I would be going to Hell. I was like the graduates who become sinners: alcoholics and fornicators. I could not be saved. I had indulged in the flesh.

"I'm damned to Hell," I said aloud. Even if I confess this sin, I cannot be redeemed. The Alleluia at my first Mass was wrong. God is not forgiving. Though, He is. I know He is, but I cannot believe it.

And so I walked. Walked anywhere, letting my subconscious instincts guide me. And they guided me miles away from the church. Guided me to an area of many shops, including a record store where I used to buy classical music cassettes when I was younger.

There were many strange-looking people there. They wore earrings in all different areas of their face. That must be the new style.

I turned the corner and saw two teenagers smoking in an alley way. I walked towards them. I knew what they were smoking.

"Hey, Father," one of them called out. He gestured his joint to me. I could not understand why he did not hide it when he saw me, an

authority figure, approach. I suppose my age was welcoming to them. In fact, I looked younger than they.

I stared at the marijuana. Never had I tried drugs in the past. Never.

But something inside me wanted to try it. A new experience. Something missing from my childhood. To feel Heaven, even though it is not real.

I walked away from them, giddy from inhaling some of the fumes. I could not do it. I would regret it.

Instead, I went to a piercing booth near the record store. I asked for the price of piercing one ear. It was more than I had in my pocket.

One girl looking at the earrings on a counter turned to me. "I'll do you. It's so expensive to get it done here."

She gestured to me to leave with her. I then noticed that when the sales person at the counter turned his head, the girl put some earrings in her pocket. I said nothing. It was not even real. I felt I was in a dream.

We walked to her house, which was not far from the church. I asked her if she was in St. Augustine's parish. She replied that her parents are.

She seated me on a sofa in her living room. Her parents were away at work.

I felt comfortable being with her. I had always feared women who were not nuns. I was taught that they were seductresses who tried to make priests violate their celibacy. Though, this girl seemed kind enough, despite her thievery which I should not have condoned.

She entered the room, her fingers gripping her ear-piercing device. She assured me constantly it would not hurt.

She sat beside me, her warm body against mine.

I then felt a cold, vibrating metal touch my left ear lobe. It penetrated through the hole it created. Blood was discharged. It did hurt, though not in a painful sense. It was an unprecedented hurt, bringing a kind of internal release. A culmination of the experience.

After we were done, she removed a serpent earring from her pocket. Again, I experienced a cold, penetrating feeling as she thrust the pin of the earring through the hole in my ear lobe. My ear bled harder. Another release.

I felt the edge of the earring. It was sharp, like a razor blade. Cut my finger. More blood.

I asked her if this was her first time, piercing someone's ear.

She said she had done it many times.

She asked me if I had ever had an earring before.

This was my first time.

She warned me about letting the hole close. She said it's difficult to find someone who would do it for a priest.

I thanked her.

She hugged me then cuddled on her sofa.

I thanked her again and then I left.

It was raining.

My clothes seemed to absorb more water at every step I took. Winds blew, hindering me from approaching the rectory.

Suddenly, I began to experience accusatory feelings again. Had I committed a sin by condoning her theft? I was wearing one of the earrings she had stolen.

I shook my head. It didn't matter.

That experience with her was unparalleled. I had never undergone anything like it before. So novel. It fulfilled some mysterious inner need. Sustenance for a hunger. Energy. Elation.

I reached the rectory and entered my room.

Finally, I cried.

I fell asleep.

I spent the next day in my room. The other priests believed I was ill. In a sense, I was. My ear was red and burning. It seemed I was developing an infection.

Though, I was also intentionally avoiding them. I did not want anyone to see me. I felt transfigured, though not in a religious sense. No one would have understood me. I needed my loneliness now. Though, even it was shattered with that knock at the only entrance of my room, my world.

One of the other priests came in early to see me. He said I had an appointment. See a young boy. Answer some question.

He told me he could take it if I was too sick. Looked sick. Too pale. An illness. Illness struck me. Spanked me like the nuns had done. Slapped me. Not pierced me, though. No. I did that. Pierced my ear. Yes. A big hole. My body. All mine. Bloody. So bloody. But he didn't see it. No, he couldn't. I was lying on my left side. Earring sliced in the pillow. Not visible to him, he who offered to do my job, take my appointment.

So I said "No." No to him taking my duties. Holding to my commitments. If the boy made the appointment with me, I'd respond. It's a law, Canon Law. It's in a book, so it must be followed. I followed it.

My career decision must be valued by someone.

So, yes. I stood. I stood and walked to the room where the boy waited. No need to change clothes. Wore my uniform from yesterday. Last night. Earring evening, or was it afternoon? No memory. Could



not even recall making an appointment with the boy. Looked eleven. Could not. Could not even remove my earring. So much dried blood. Clots. Black clots. Brought more dimension to serpent figure. It had become part of the ear, my ear.

I closed my eyes. Was like a physical prayer. Not looking at the world. Looking into God or maybe oneself. It is a prayer. Has to be. Only prayer I can perform now.

And the boy. Yes, the boy. He was in the room waiting. Sat in a wooden chair, quiet. Smiled when I entered. I hoped he wasn't gay.

He held something in his hands. I noticed it when I closed the door behind me. It resembled a cassette case, but it was larger and thinner. Must be a CD case. I would never know. All I ever owned were classical cassettes and records. It was all my school and family would allow me to possess.

"Hello, Father," he greeted me with a nervous excitement. "Cool earring."

I frowned. Damn him. I hadn't even noticed him looking at my ear.

"What do you want?" I asked so bluntly as I found a seat beside a bookshelf of Bibles.

"Well," he stuttered. Completely unable to address me or ask his questions in a simple form. "I wanted to see you because you're a 'now priest.' You're young. You can sympathize with me."

I gazed at the bookshelf. Glanced at the ceiling. Regard anything but his perky, obnoxious, blemished face.

"What's your question?" My serious articulate tone startled him. I smiled. He moved in his seat. Uncomfortable.

"Can I hear this?" He handed me the CD case. The cover was almost entirely in black, except for some indiscernible gray sketches and a white label which read "Parental Advisory: Explicit Content."

I looked at him. What the hell do you want? What is this?

"My mom says the lyrics are bad. She said I couldn't hear it. It's a sin to hear it. That's why I was confessing it. But if a priest says it's O.K. then I can. So, can I hear it? I thought that you probably heard of PAs because you're not that old. So, can I hear it? It won't make me beat up anyone. They're just songs. I didn't even know the lyrics until my mom read them. So, can I hear it?"

I handed him back the CD. His eyes revealed bafflement, questioning the meaning in my gesture.

"Why are the lyrics bad?" I asked. Now I remembered him in confession. He and the other fifth graders had inspired me to incorporate "fuck" into my vocabulary.

"They have swear words. You know, bad words. Words my mom hates." He stared at my earring, almost telepathically calling to me, saying that if I can have my earring, he can hear his music.



"What words do they use?" I asked him, enhancing his nervous demeanor.

"You know. Like the f-word. R-rated words." He became pale. Shivered. I smiled again.

"What word is that?" I continued. Testing him. Tempting him.

"You know the word. The f-word." Shook more. Trembled. So confused.

"What f-word? Father? Fantasy? Fornication?"

He didn't seem to know the last word.

"The f-word." He repeated and repeated. No imagination.

Then he handed the case back to me. "Look inside! Read the lyrics! They're in there! I can't believe you don't know the word. It's everywhere. You must not get out much."

His last sentence consumed me.

"What word? What word!" I continued to ask again and again and over and repeat and ask and ask and avenge, avenge, revenge for what he said, that fuck, that little fuck. I stared. That fuck. I fuckin' stared into his fuckin' little fuckin' eyes.

"I'm not saying it to you!" He ended.

"Why?"

"Because you're a priest! I can't say it to you!"

I tossed the case onto his lap.

"Listen to it."

I stood from the chair. Too close to the Bibles. They were so looming. "Tell your mom I said you can hear it. And it's not a sin." I walked to the door, opened it. "You can hear your fuckin' CD. So go home and do it. And that fuckin' word is everywhere, like sin itself." I closed the door behind me, leaving him alone with the Bibles.

Fuck him, I thought. I fuckin' got out of bed so that he could whine to me. I don't give a fuck what that music does to him.

I hoped he would beat up someone. Slaughter, murder a person. Murder because of the music I approved.

I beamed with amusement while returning to my room. Maybe I should purchase a PA cassette.

Two mornings later, a Sunday morning, the pastor rebuked my behavior. The principal had not reported me; though, there had been many witnesses to my bout of obscene language, including that in the rectory.

The entire time, he stared at my earring.

I looked so different with it.

To my amazement, he showed concern for me. He said that I could discuss my problems with him. I should not have to suffer internally and use foul language as my only outlet. He then referred to me as

a "Generation X" priest, saying he understands that I experience different temptations than he.

Finally, he advised me to seek medical treatment for my ear.

I nearly laughed at him. It was awkward, since I had never laughed before, especially not in ridicule.

So I said nothing to him. I simply gazed at him, awaiting the termination of his lecture. I felt like a disobedient son being scolded by a parent. I felt changed.

I wanted to be with that girl again.

It was as though I were back in school and taking a different path. No longer was I the subservient student who obeyed the commands of the teacher. No longer was I a priest who obeyed the Commandments of God.

I was in a different role now. I was being reprimanded for committing a wrong and no longer cared. I was numbed. Nothing mattered to me.

Perhaps that is the purpose of childhood. To sin. To experience the ecstasy of sin and then regret it afterwards. And learn from it. St. Augustine was a sinner. And when he repented, he became a saint. I never sinned enough.

I shook my head as I left the pastor's room. No. These were impure thoughts. I must not sin.

Many days ago, I swore at the principal. I nearly smoked marijuana. I condoned a theft.

What was I? What was I becoming?

I studied all those years to become a priest. My behavior is akin to that of a policeman who commits a murder after graduating from the police academy. I broke the laws I should be upholding.

I fall into the small percentage of corrupt priests.

I closed my eyes.

I tried to pray.

I could not.

God did not hear me.

I felt detached from the Church. An unattached fragment that never really belonged with the whole.

I wanted to lie in bed for the remainder of the day. But I knew I needed some sort of exercise. Clear my mind.

So for the next few hours, I walked. It was all I could do.

Shiver.

Inhale the autumn air. Watch the colorful leaves fall from the trees. Notice how when one leaf parts itself from the tree, it eventually hits the ground and crumbles into dirt. Perhaps it blows in the wind for some time, journeying with the breeze, stalling its destination. But it always falls to the ground after some time.

I decided to walk in the opposite direction than I did several

days ago. At this moment, I felt I could not resist the marijuana. The fall leaves made me want to experience pleasures of the grass. I wanted to be rebellious, do something wrong.

I walked past the houses of the people of the church community. Some were in their yards, raking the fall leaves.

No one waved to me. Perhaps they did not notice me. Though, I'm certain that they did and chose to ignore me. I was the priest with the foul mouth, who swore near many small children and had to be reprimanded by his pastor. I lacked control. And my sermons offered them no insights, either.

Thus, I did not wave to them. I did not greet them. They were just bodies that sat in the church.

I didn't care about them.

They were nothing.

I was glad that my parents were dead.

I laughed.

I walked and ignored everyone.

Nearly everyone.

Then I reached the yard of a young woman who came to confession frequently. She was an adulteress. Confessed all her extramarital accounts. Believed she could do anything provided that she confessed it. Never considered that stopping the sin was part of the penance. Though it was all inconsequential to me now.

I knew why she chose to confess to me. But, I did not care. I was not penitent either. My knowledge of her sins and weaknesses were to my advantage.

I nearly hesitated before approaching her house.

I felt my burning ear. My earring. It kept me moving.

No more hindrance.

No feeling. No restraint.

She was in her yard, raking leaves.

She greeted me.

I stopped to talk to her.

She invited me into her house.

She served me a drink.

We had sex, passionate sex. I used a condom.

I left.

I continued walking. Energy. Ecstasy.

I went to the supermarket.

I bought a loaf of wheat bread.

I missed the Mass I was supposed to serve. No care.

I ate the loaf. Such indulgence.

Nothing.

I went to the church.

The woman was there. She wanted to confess our sin.

I laughed again.

We had sex in the Confessional. My idea.

So much heat. Was it a fever?

She confessed both sins.

She left.

Said good-bye. Did I say good-bye? I hoped I said good-bye.

And then...

It occurred to me.

The realization.

I sinned. Sinned in the church!

Mortal sin.

Though I felt no shame. I felt good. It felt good. It felt so good, the pounding heartbeat, the sweat, the elation, the fear the entire time of being caught. And in the end, getting away with it. This is society, this is life! Not only sinning, but sinning creatively, committing many sins at once! This is success! Laughing at my guardian angel for choosing me, thinking it would be an easy job! Self-destruction. The fucking path of self-destruction. No goals. No dreams. I can fuckin' do anything!

Fuck anything!

Fuck anyone!

Freedom!

I exit the Confessional, ready to run down the aisles, laughing, expressing forbidden emotion, truly living!

Screaming with ecstasy.

Shivering...

... And the statues stare at me.

Jesus. Mary. The Angels.

Asking how I could reverse extremes in such little time.

Shame, so much shame.

But, it doesn't matter. It doesn't f..... matter...

I'm free from the teaching of the nuns! I outright violated their teachings. They screwed me up, really up, all the way to the point of orgasm! I laugh. I laugh. I try to laugh...

I'm screwed up. Everyone can watch me be screwed up.

They can all enjoy it.

They can all watch it.

They can watch me...

God is watching me.

I outright violated Him.

I fall... like the leaves.

I cry.

To God, I cry.

The high is over. It was so brief. Ephemeral. But, why didn't it last long? I've said prayers that have lasted longer than that. And they have brought more pleasure. It's supposed to last! I indulged in carnal pleasure and it's supposed to last! Bring back that nameless woman! I want to try new things with her! She can be my teacher! She has to make me feel better! I need her! I need her company!

No.

I am alone.

Alone to deal with my sins and with what I've become.

I walk over to the altar. I kneel before it.

God knows that I am the worst of sinners. I have broken all but one Commandment.

I lower my head in shame.

I cry.

My body trembles as it did during the first Mass I said, except less stable. Much less stable.

What am I? I ask myself. I ask God the Father.

How has this happened? Once a devoted follower of God. Now, an unredeemable sinner.

How fast innocence is lost.

Though, was I ever really innocent? If I could fall this distance so swiftly, then never truly was I a devoted follower.

I was an actor playing a priest, never one myself.

Never acted like a true priest.

It is the fault of the nuns. They made me this way!

Bow my head.

"Father... I am sorry. I love you and I love Catholicism. However, it is not Catholicism that those nuns teach! They spread lies. All lies. Transforming us students into servants, slaves. Controlling our thoughts, judgments, latching us to the chord of their rosary beads, binding us to a cross that is theirs, not Yours. Haunting us with the fire of damnation, their own hell, their own inferno that engulfs our freedom, our future...

"Damning us to directions in life that are not our own. Not satisfied with our outcome or our decisions which are simply reflections of their guidance and overt coercion. We had no free will! They stole our youth and masked it as piousness!

"Church every day! A life in ministry! A life to guide other children into a cursed future lacking pleasure, love, remorse! No remorse! No care! No feeling!



"Each word on my tongue is the served food of theirs.

"Each lie I spit from my own marked lips was fed to me from a golden chalice sealed by You, Father, but poisoned by them, that coven of hell worshippers, dressed in the ebony black of darkness that comprised their lost and damning souls!

"It is not Catholicism they teach!

"And... it is not Catholicism that I have been practicing!"

I chose what I became.

"I am an evil sinner.

"I fornicate with a married woman. Fornicate in Your House, the Church. Fornicate in Your Clothes, the clothes of priests, the clothes I earned from all my hell-suffering years of study, study for a life I never wanted, a life that tantalizes me with what I truly wanted!

"Look at the rose windows, Father! They shine so radiantly in the light of Your sun that penetrates them with celestial awe. They magnify the light of Your creation! They are Yours, but someone earthly made them, someone on whom You bestowed the gift of aesthetic creation! Someone with the love of splendid brightness! Someone who teases me with the permanence of his work.

"Work I see from the chair on Your altar, another craft of art, another coalescence of a heavenly ensemble!"

I feel my high returning. The psychotic trembling. My heart initiating an emotional convulsion. My head ringing with pain, resonating with the never-ceasing throb from my chest. Imaginary lights surrounding me flicker like the candles of a funeral. They burn me afire. Scorch my soul of ashes. An inferno. A pyre. An aura. A passion that has never embraced me, returning free will to the repressive void of my soul.

"I want my life worth something. So I have to close down the school, Father. And the only way to do that is to close down the church."

Still kneeling at the altar.

"I will create art, Father. I have not painted since I attended this damn, stifling school of nihilism. Never did I use that talent with which you imbued me!"

I remove my earring and hold it to the altar.

"A serpent earring, Father. Look! I have a serpent earring!

"I never liked serpents! They are an evil breed of reptiles. Tempting people away from You!

"Tempting us into self-destruction!"

Feel its sharp edge.

I close my eyes. My body spasms with bloody ecstasy.

A rush. A sexual rush.



"Father, please bless the janitor. He'll have to wipe away my bloody masterpiece, my magnum opus."

I cackle a debauched laugh.

My body. My mind. My soul. Shaking, shaking, trembling.

Open my eyes again, just briefly.

An ultimate glimpse at the glorious windows and altar.

And the pain...

Forgive me, God.

## Seduced

Smooth curves flow into each other  
Stimulating my mind to an excited state  
Curve after curve, one after another  
Creating an increase in my heart rate

Carefully and swiftly I descend down  
Caressing each curve in savior  
Slight whispers of intoxicating sound  
Strengthen this animalistic behavior

Sweaty palms from an inner heat  
Squeak as I plunge into this region unknown  
Calculating rhythmic motions in a familiar beat  
Choosing to stay until I must go home

Continuously reminded how short this pleasure will be  
Seduced at this moment in time ... I ski

Peter Jackson

## John Wayne, a novel

They'd seen its sort before--

Swaggering in off of some frontier or another, beating the dust off its pants with the confidence of a maverick, a John Wayne, a Jane Mansfield, a Rin-Tin-Tin...

This tale runs all the gamits. It climbs out of the trees, discovers fire and flight, uncovers its ancient civilizations and gazes at the wonder of its works.

It crosses its own boundaries, discovers its new land.

It seeks.

It's the first hesitation before the first, first kiss, it's the first parent and first unwanted pregnancy. This story rode across a continent in a Greyhound bus, meeting a lanky trucker, traveling with a middle-aged hippie who believed she had once been Pocahontas. It introduced itself as John Smith Jr. with a roguish grin and lit their cigarettes. This is the tale that sat on the virgin prairie, listening to the crackling of a lone campfire, not wanting to look up at the immensity above, preferring, instead, the immensity within.

Which, if there can be one, is a beginning.

Brian Morrison

# Universal Pattern

we all compromise--  
wooing the ugly sisters  
because Cinderella  
wasn't home at the moment

Brian Morrison

## Six Years and Counting

Like a bee,  
You must have left some part of yourself  
inside me, I can still feel it: tingling,  
nauseating waves that throb up my arms and into my  
stomach and head, and I can see you clearly, before me.

Like a spider,  
your bite has swollen and spread and turned black—  
infected— and, even when lanced  
has left a significant scar.

Kate O'Brien

## Tidal Flats

I remember going to the beach  
when I was eight.

The tide was low and acres of mud stretched out before us,  
populated with odd creatures.

Burbling with excitement, I flitted from  
skulking crabs to stinky seaweed.

My brother's panicked shout reined me in  
and I hurried to investigate.

He'd sliced open the ball of his foot, from big toe to little,  
on an oyster shell.

I stared at the oddly bloodless cut,  
fascinated by this glimpse of the workings under our skin.

I wanted to put my fingers in it, I wanted to play with it.

I stared so long I

sank into the mud

and had to be pulled out, so we could head to the doctor's.

I lost my cheap, blue rubber flip-flops,  
prisoners to the mud.

All the long way back to the car my feet were scorched and abraded  
made penitent by the sand and the sun.

Kate O'Brien



# Arnie Tried To Pull The Plug

Jared Fuller

Arnie pulled the plug and stepped out of the tub eyes pink with a slack goofy grin, singing. "You got the hooch, baby baby, you got the freshy freshy, you got the only sweetest thing in the world." He towed himself off, dancing. "Let's get real let's get heavy 'til the water hits the levy, 'til water hits levy lets get loose." The drain made a sucking sound and he turned the water on again and swished it around the tub with his hand to get the rest of the hair down. He stood up again and looked into the mirror and for a second stopped smiling. The only place on his entire body that he had not shaved, excluding his rectum and nostrils--which he figured were technically the inside of the body--were his eyebrows. He wondered again for a moment if he should have shaved them and then remembered, "Self-doubt was the hair under my balls, I shaved, I drained it, it's gone." He smiled and rubbed the smooth dome of his head.

Arnie had not shaved his eyebrows for two reasons, the first being the real reason and the second the rationalization of the first, although both valid. The first was that shaving his eyebrows would make him look psycho. He wasn't psycho and wasn't trying to make people think he was. A guy with a clean shaven head is not too unusual these days. He knew a white guy with a bald head was more unusual than a black guy, but it still happened, mostly with balding guys, which he wasn't, but no one would know. The rest of it, legs, arms, feet, whatever, someone would really only notice if it were pointed out.

The second was that, technically, the eyebrows are the only hair on the body that serve a real and necessary purpose. Hair on the head or balls might serve as a temperature control, but substitutes like hats and underwear were always used anyways whereas, as he remembered hearing somewhere on tv, people without eyebrows have problems with sweat and dust going into their eyes all the time.

He went into the kitchen. It was around two o'clock in the afternoon. He had called in sick that morning to figure out what he was going to do. He called Marie at work. "Hello, Wright Association, Marie speaking."

"Hey Marie, it's me."

"Hi"

He hesitated for a moment and then remembered. "Hesitation was the hair on my fingers and hands holding me back from action. I

shaved it, I drained it, and now it's gone."

"Marie, I don't want to go on driving each other crazy like this. I love you, I want to be with you forever, I want to raise kids with you, we can figure out all the little stuff later. We're killing our love story getting hung up on stuff that doesn't belong in a love story."

"Arnie, where is this coming from?" Her voice was very low.

"Marie, will you marry me?"

"Arnie, don't do this, it's not fair."

"What's not fair? You want to get married in a Catholic church, raise up Catholic kids, I'm ready. This is all little stuff. The little stuff was the hair on my toes. One of the toughest spots to get, but I shaved it, I drained it, it's gone."

"What are you talk.... Arnie, I'm so sick of this, why are you doing this?"

"Marie, will you marry me or not?"

"Arnie, this morning you said you were staying home to think about whether you wanted to move out or not. Now you're asking me to marry you. It's not fair, Arnie." Her voice was low but more strained. She was trying not to cry.

"Marie, I'm making it simple, will you marry me?"

"That is not simple, we have been fighting for the last three weeks, you're just saying this to get an easy way out, Arnie, it's not fair."

"Are you saying no?"

"Arnie, you know this isn't how I wanted it to happen."

Anger flared up in him but he remembered that that lingering frustration with her hang-ups was the hair that grew on the back of his neck and he had shaved it, drained it, and now it was gone. "Marie, I love you, this is where we are right now, will you marry me?"

"Arnie, you can't do this."

"Is it yes or no?"

"No Arnie, I won't let..."

"Okay Marie, goodbye." He hung up the phone and before everything hit him he looked down at his still naked body. His penis was sculpture like and he rubbed the smooth skin right above it. "That whole cycle is gone, I could've been getting a tux, instead I'll be packing my stuff. That itchy, tangled cycle is gone."

He picked up the phone again and called his friend Phil at work. "Global, this is Phil."

"Hey Phil, it's Arnie."

"Hey Arnie, what's going on, you at work?"

"No, I'm at home."

"What are you, sick?"

"No, took a mental health day, hey, I wanted to see what you were doing after work."

"Nothing, it's Monday."

"You want to go out for a couple drinks, at Marty's, maybe? I got some news."

"Uh oh, Marie's pregnant."

"No." They both laughed.

"Well what is it?"

"Nothing big, you wanna meet me there?"

"Yeah sure."

"All right, I'll see you there at five or so."

"All right, later."

Arnie bounced around the apartment packing stuff. He had a beer. He was jittery and frustrated and knew he couldn't get it all packed or out by five and had nowhere to go, which was one of the things he wanted to talk to Phil about. "This is it, this is it." He kept telling himself, rubbing his head, under his arms, anywhere hair had been. He knew a thousand times before he had tried to make changes in his life, trying to get up early every day, trying meditation, trying to write a book. He felt like his whole life was that time when you wake up at seven on a Saturday morning with a choice: You could get up and do the things you want to do, or you could stay in bed a little longer since you didn't have to get up after all, it was Saturday. His whole life was going to bed thinking he would get up, waking up and then deciding to sleep a little longer. But he had shaved all the hair from his body, what the hell, something had to break.

He left the apartment with a couple boxes packed, the drawers of the desk cleaned out and the tv unplugged. "That'll piss her off I'm sure," he said when he unplugged it. The tv had been his before they had moved in together. He took the subway close to the bar and walked. It was 4:30 and the streets were starting to fill up with people heading home but still had the midday feel to them. It was February and he wore a wool cap to keep his head warm.

He ordered a drink in the bar, a dark, long, narrow bar that would soon fill up with after work drinkers and empty for the most part before nine. "Why did I pick this bar?" He had only been there after work in the busy hours and forgot its loneliness. "Complaining was my arm hair," he said to himself, thinking, "I feel tired" and then forcing himself to perk up, realizing the danger he would be in by quitting so soon. "I shaved it, I drained it, and now it's gone," he asserted to himself.

Phil came in and saw Arnie's head shining in the dark light of the bar. "What the hell did you do to your head?"

"I shaved all my hair off."

"Are you crazy? What the hell were you thinking?"

"I needed a clean break, a new start."

"Dude, you look like an idiot. Only bald guys shave their heads you moron."

"I don't care what I look like."

"What the hell does Marie think about it?"

"I don't care."

"Oh man."

The bartender walked up and Arnie finished off his beer and they both ordered one. Arnie was feeling jittery again.

"I can't even believe you did that. I guess it doesn't make you look that bad, your ears kind of stick out but you're lucky you don't have some kind of weird shaped head. Still, has Marie seen it?" Phil just kept looking at Arnie's head. They had grown up together and lived together in an apartment before Arnie had moved in with Marie.

"No, but I don't care what she thinks, she's a big reason why I did it."

"Dude, what are you talking about?"

"I need a clean break, from Marie, from working in an office, from living here, from half-assing my life."

"You mean you're breaking up with Marie?"

"Yeah, that's what I want to do."

"Oh shit, what happened?"

"Nothing, nothing new, we're just different, I mean we've always been different but we've always stayed together. But what's the fucking point. I don't want to settle. That's what I feel like I'm doing, settling. That's what I feel like I'm doing in everything. I mean, doesn't it drive you crazy when Jan gets all uptight about this or that, or gives you a hard time for going out or whatever?"

"Yeah, but you're not going to find a girl who isn't like that."

"Then I'd rather not be with anybody at all. And I don't mean I'm pissed because I can't go out more or whatever, I don't want to go out more. I just feel like I shouldn't be given a hard time about every thing I do. I want to travel, go live in another state, do something, and she's afraid to do anything."

"Dude, that's not reality and you know it. Marie's great, you guys have been together for what, four years? You couldn't do much better than her."

"Then I don't even want to fucking live in this world, you know what I mean, because love should be heaven and if this is heaven then fuck everything."

They finished off their beers and Phil was not in the crazed, let-everything-go mood that Arnie was in but after Arnie explained the complete baldness of his body Phil realized the severity of Arnie and called Jen and started really drinking. Arnie had talked himself back into life and as they walked from that bar to a pool hall/bar two blocks away he yelled at the sky, some late commuters looking up at him. "Guilt was the sweaty, smelly hair in my pits! I shaved it, I drained it, and now its gone!"

They stopped at a sub place on the way. Arnie felt drunk and dizzy from not eating most of the day. They got slices of pizza and water and went to the pool place. It was only spotted with people, unlike most every weekend night when it was jam packed. The waitresses in the short black skirts were still there though. Standing around and talking and yawning. Arnie and Phil got a table and a waitress came up to order their drinks, her breasts stretching the front of her blouse and bobbing forward in her heeled walk.

"Man, if you and Marie break up, that means you'll be free again." Phil said watching the waitress walk away. "Imagine being able to have that?"

"That's not what this is about, I don't want to be single, I want to break free of that whole thing too."

"What whole thing?"

"Craving every girl that walks by in a tight shirt, sitting there watching tv and thinking, 'Oh she's hot, oh she's hot, oh she's hot. Phil, you ever notice that every one of those girls look the same?'"

"Man, I thought you were going to hitchhike out to California and live like Mick Jagger. A new girl every night." Phil did his Mick Jagger impersonation calling Arnie "Keef." They laughed.

Arnie used the bathroom, which was empty, and looked again at the baldness all around his penis. He laughed at how it looked, the little pot belly it made right at the bottom.

They started playing, both lost in early drunkenness which takes away time and memory for awhile. Phil racked up a game and stood up and said, "This is about that yoga meditation stuff you've been doing, isn't it?" Arnie laughed.

"This is about everything! I don't want to sit around and plan vacations to the Africa to hike around the Kilimanjaro then come back and sit in front of my computer or read about Jack Kerouac flip flopping the country and then look at people driving Suburbans and say 'you asshole' and then go back to my job and put more money in my 401k." The waitress brought more drinks and gave a slow, disapproving look up at Arnie's head.

"Bet you wished your boyfriend had a nice bald head like that." Phil said to her.

She laughed, insincerely, and said, "I think I'd kill him if he did that to his head." Phil looked displeased, thinking she would say she didn't have a boyfriend, and only gave her a dollar tip. Arnie laughed. Triumphant pride was the hair on his chest, he shaved it, he drained it, and now it was gone.

On and on Arnie talked. Phil listened but paid more attention to the pool. It was how Arnie usually talked, more or less. They finished that drink and Arnie talked Phil into going to one more place, a dance club that he knew had a DJ on Monday nights. They took the subway to



get there and on the train there were only quiet students and the crazy people that didn't quite seem homeless that were always on the subway at night.

They had to pay a cover which Phil laughed at annoyed and that Arnie paid for both of them. Inside it was dark and the music was booming. It wasn't crowded but there were more people than at the pool place. It was mostly girls, mostly looking college aged. They got a drink and stood by the bar yelling to each other. "This is pretty cool, I would have never thought that Monday night would be a time to see all these women in one place."

"Hey, you want to do a shot?" Arnie screamed at Phil.

"Yeah, what the hell, I think I might be getting into this whole thing."

Arnie ordered them a kamikaze and became sad in a drunken sentiment. If it were him, he thought, and Phil had called him on a Monday, he would probably had not even gone out. If he did go out, he wouldn't have gone to all these places, spending money, probably getting into trouble with Marie, being hungover for work. He wished he was more like Phil, that he didn't have to shave all his hair off to feel comfortable with himself. Phil would have ordered a shot of Jack Daniels. He couldn't think of which hair on his body envy had been, what not being able to let go was, but he wished it was shaved, drained, and gone away.

They drank the shot and drank down their beers to fight the fatigue that the weekday hour was bringing. The dance floor was not that big and it was almost filled up, every person a woman except for two guys in different groups. "Mo Money Mo Problems" came on and they went into the middle of the dance floor and danced. "I don't know what they want from me..." They screamed into the air. They got some shrugged eyebrowed looks from a few girls when they started, it looked like the women weren't used to guys on that night and figured Arnie and Phil would start hitting on them. Also, the women were a mix of colors, and Phil and Arnie were dressed the whitest of any of people, making their dancing to hip hop seem out of place. Arnie forgot he had a shaved head too.

After a couple songs the DJ said into the microphone "Go white boys go white boys go" to the beat of 'It takes two to make a thing go right' and a bunch of the girls Whoood and Arnie and Phil kept doing their moves, laughing and yelling too. Phil did a joking spin and the DJ said, "Yeahhhhh."

A group of four girls came over and started dancing with them.

They sort of simulated Phil and Arnie's dance moves, exaggerating Arnie's finger pointing and Phil's shoulder shifting. Arnie laughed and saw Phil laughing too. He thought he was a pretty good dancer and didn't care what people thought, especially when he was this drunk



"That's some hair I'd like to keep," he said to himself lowering his hips and cranking his head side to side.

Two of the girls seemed to have an interest in Phil, while one, a thin brown and yellow skinned girl with what he now saw were green eyes was dancing more with Arnie, and one heavy white girl in hip hop overalls was looking down at the floor and dancing like she was alone. Arnie danced like he was dancing with the heavy girl as well as green eyes, he liked the way the heavy girl danced and he felt superior to everything, even the smooth slender rocking body of the girl with green eyes. She had on skin tight black pants that flared at the bottom and a tight blue shirt that showed she wore a push up bra and had thin breasts, and her butt squeezed against her pants. Her black hair was in a bun on the top of her head with a curl of hair placed down around her left cheek.

They danced for a few songs until the two groups made their own circles. The green eyes girl had all of Arnie's attention but he didn't show it, dancing as if he were dancing equally and distractedly with the both of them.

Arnie saw Phil and his two girls go up to get a drink. Phil pointed to his bottle and raised his brows to Arnie and Arnie screamed at the two with him, "You want to get a drink?" Only the green eyes girl answered, with a light accent Arnie didn't know. "Yeah"

He looked at the heavy girl and she was still dancing, her head still down. He noticed her eyes were closed. "I think she's all set." Green eyes girl smiled at Arnie, putting her warm hand softly on his arm to reach up to yell into his ear. "Once she gets on the dance floor she doesn't leave until the last song."

They walked off the floor to get drinks. Arnie ordered a grape crush for her after asking her name, Michelle. They stood next to Phil and his girls and then Phil and one of them went off to the bathroom. The other one stayed and Michelle stayed near Arnie's arm. "I'm Aria," said the girl who stayed. She was shorter and had on a tight black shirt that bulged from her chest and let a flab of stomach out at the bottom. "Your friend said you're having some sort of nervous breakdown and that's why you shaved your head."

"Well, sort of, I just felt like a change."

"You're not a skinhead or anything are you?" Michelle asked. She had a cocky attitude in her voice and accent but her eyes were soft and she smiled when she talked. They both laughed enough so that he didn't have to answer. "I like it, it's cute," she said and rubbed the top.

The DJ announced that the next song was the last. Arnie was crazed with love for Michelle and guilt for Marie and alcohol and music and a sadness that would make him cry if he were alone. Phil was back from the bathroom and he and the two girls were getting a shot that Arnie and Michelle turned down. They were a couple for a moment and

Arnie put the strand of hair on her face behind her ear and kissed her fantastically. The song was a remix of Mariah Carey's "Honey" and Michelle said, "Ooh, I love this song," and grabbed his hand. His body tensed with fear and disappointment and realization and he let her take him out.

She directed him, where to put his feet, where to have his hands. She moved to the beat so his body just followed with hers and a pain came to the top of his throat. She danced like no one he had ever danced with and her body moved his around like it had been an untuned guitar that she had tuned. When he danced usually he thought about it, what was moving, how his shoulders were, where his feet were. She moved like the music was hooked up to her nervous system, no strain on her face, no concentration, she even had a smile on her face near a laugh at his clumsiness and his hesitance, which she was reading as shyness.

They crossed up their movement and she brought him back to the beat and reached up and kissed him on the lips. He shook with impotence. Without his hair he could not act. All he had done was take away. He was a snail without his shell but saw no other around to climb into. When the song ended they stood straight and she tilted her head to the side and kissed him and even his tongue stood limp in his mouth from fear. He opened his eyes and there was the heavy girl, looking around as if coming out of a sleep and waking to an empty bed, her lover snuck off.

Michelle led him over to Phil and the others. Phil said when they got over there, "Hey, they want to go back to their dorm and do some more drinking. What do you think?" Phil's face was mushy and sagging from his drunkenness. Arnie didn't say anything but they all walked outside, he and Michelle holding hands.

He put his wool hat on gratefully though he couldn't feel the cold. They walked a little while and then he stopped and turned and kissed Michelle. It felt so incredible, like he had never kissed anyone before in his life. He cupped her face in his hands and pulled back and looked at her. "You're shaking," she said, smiling.

"I have to go," he said to her and then kissed her again. She pulled away. "Why don't you come with us? I don't mind if you stay." She put her hand under his shirt and around to his back.

"I'm sorry, I have to work tomorrow." He looked over at the others and they had stopped and were waiting. "Hey Phil, I gotta get going, you want to come?" He yelled out.

"What? What did you say?" And then Arnie's tone dropping through his drunken fog, "You fucking asshole." He stomped towards Arnie. "You're a fucking fraud. You're kidding right?"

"No, I know, but I have to go."

"What are you talking about? C'mon, let's just walk them home and go have one more drink."

"No, I gotta go, you can go."

Phil turned and yelled at the girls he was with. "Well, I gotta go because my friend is a FUCKING ASSHOLE!"

Michelle was looking at Arnie with a sneer. "Fine, whatever." She waved her hand at him and walked to her friends. Arnie heard the heavy girl for the first time speak, in a heavy hip hop accent, "Stupit bald-headed motha fucka look like a dopey deer caught in the headlights." And then she laughed. "Shit."

Arnie and Phil turned their backs and started walking towards a main street where they could catch a cab. "No matter what you ever fucking say for the rest of you life, Arnie, you are all talk. All fucking talk." Phil was pissed like Arnie couldn't remember. "You're an asshole. You are a fucking asshole. FUCK!" He stopped and faced Arnie. They had never had any kind of physical confrontation. Phil reached up and grabbed Arnie's shirt with his hands and Arnie stayed limp. "You are so full of shit. Full of SHIT!" He let go with only a little push to Arnie. "Get your own fucking cab, I'm out of here."

Arnie didn't even try to hail a cab before Phil got into his and it drove off. He felt as if he had lost everything he had. He remembered getting out of the tub that day having gotten rid of everything except for that one feeling, that one juice that was his only happiness. He saw that it was gone and even his sadness could not fulfill as he couldn't even cry without that juice.

He put his hand out for a cab. There were things he could get back. The job, Marie, the Catholic kids and the house and the car. And of course the hair. He thought about what he would tell Marie. She would give him a hard time basically until the hair on his head was long enough that people wouldn't gawk at it, about two or three weeks he figured. "This is a great time to grow a goattee," he thought to himself as a cab pulled up. Inside he told the cabbie where to go and snuck a hand down his pants beneath his balls to scratch the little itchy stubble that was already growing back.

## Haiku

*From the morning window*

giant glass ice cube  
juts into our warm breathing,  
our feather cream down

*last winter*

coarse air like cold salt  
difficult to inhale to  
breathe in like thick tears

*I left you*

green or blue the soft  
sun is not like the ocean  
roaring between us

*for Milan.*

Sunrise rushing cool  
gush of fresh crisp air water  
sunsets are thick blood

Amanda White

## Streets

I grew up with no streets;  
at least not in the sense that most people have streets.  
I never careened around a concrete corner  
behind a brand new set of red plastic hot wheels;  
instead Kim and I raised money  
for glow-sticks; we'd sneak  
tulips from her mother's flower garden and  
wrap them in wet paper towels and tinfoil  
and sell them along with red kool-aid  
to the loggers that would speed their big  
trucks along the gravel road  
that snaked alongside the river—  
15 miles into the mountains  
500 miles into the state—  
trails, paths and routes slithering off;  
we never rode pink banana seat bicycles  
with baskets down the block;  
we galloped horses in the grass  
and sometimes  
I would climb into the rusty red wagon  
we tied to the back of Kim's Honda 50  
and we'd do loop-d-loops  
in the summer meadow.

Amanda White

## birthmother

I dreamt she and I  
were buried together  
in the back yard.  
We were warm  
under the roots  
of the little  
cherry tree.  
Once it stood bright  
but now only a stump remained,  
and I went home.  
In earth  
I remember,  
she didn't quite fit.  
So, in three days  
or in one night  
she would rise.  
I cleaned my room.  
Afraid  
she might have super powers,  
I drifted like  
the skeleton clouds  
outside my window.  
I welcomed  
her  
into the house.  
She spoke clearly  
and gently  
to plaster and lathe.  
A somnambulant angel,  
she was not to be feared.  
After all,  
this was my dream.

Erica White



## Phenomenon Recurring

From the mountains of the moon  
the wide earth vein  
Nile runs north.

Silt urges tiny fingers  
to pry open  
the alluvial mouth.

Alexandria close  
for centuries  
as civilization's sundial.

Here Ptolemy's scientific methods  
were uncovered, until  
the harbor devoured legend in its youth.

Just yesterday,  
archaeologists discovered  
"Cleopatra's lost city."

The satellite eyed  
the hidden city  
from space.

Dark sediment surrendered  
as scientists hauled out  
a perfect sphinx.

Its time etched face  
told tales  
of triumph and tragedy.

How the civilization  
of the Ptolemys  
fell too soon,

and how someday our silt  
will flow  
from the mountains of the moon.

Erica White

# LESBIANS LOVE BUSH

Annie Gauger

There was an ambulance in front of the post office blocking traffic because it was skirt day, and some pretty-young queen was riding along and had gotten his petticoat caught in his bicycle chain. He'd been flipped off, and the Rescue Squad was trying to figure out if he was injured or just tragically embarrassed. Miranda was waiting for the traffic to clear when Howie Libidowitz jammed on his brakes and jumped off his bike to admire her skin-tight Naugahide dress.

"Lord do me a favor," he said, shaking his braced arms at his God in the sky, "in my next life let me look like MIRANDA!"

This is what Howie said when they met at AA, and this was what he'd holler at the top of his lungs every time they passed in the street. She'd always been the fat kid while growing up, so his worship won her heart and made her crave his company.

Miranda reached the bottom of her Peach-Schnapps dixie cup on her 27th birthday when she crashed her car into a parked State Trooper's cruiser. When they dragged her ass off to the slammer it was Howie she called. He'd been her AA sponsor ever since, and graciously admired Miranda right into thinking she could be a ruthless, heart-breaking Goddess if she wanted. Just like that, Howie pumped her full of the self-esteem.

Goddess was what Miranda wished her mortal self could be. She'd fallen under the spell of a she-devil type who had the reputation of hypnotizing emotional virgins and then eating out their hearts.

"How are you, darling?" Howie said.

She shook her head and decided to be AA-meeting honest, "I am so depressed..."

"Are you busy right now?" he said.

Miranda liked the look of grave concern that passed over his face. She liked that, together, their two bicycles made a fence that pushed back foot traffic. For once she was more important than all the world ready to rush right by.

"No I'm not really busy," she said, tugging on the new tassels that hung from her handle grips. Miranda wanted to tell him everything: how the object of her affection never called like she promised, and how she was bewitched, doomed to constantly search every direction for the form and face of her love. Miranda looked into Howie Libidowitz' gleeful eyes until her gaze involuntarily slipped over his shoulder to search the passing crowd.

"Would you mind coming over to my house and shaving my

head?" he said. "I'll fix you a nice cup of my Hazelnut-Prozac blend."

Distracted for the first time in days, Miranda could hardly say no; so they stood on their pedals and sailed their bikes over the hump of the narrow seaside town, and down Shankpainter Road which Howie had renamed "Pank-canker" in red lipstick on several street signs the Easter Sunday before.

"What are you going to do with all your tumult?" he said, once they were seated at his kitchen table, and she'd listed her complaints twice.

"Sometimes I just want to die," she said shaking her head.

"Hi, my name's Miranda, I'm beautiful and I want to die," he said, in monotone. "It's not fair, if you're going to kill yourself can we swap bodies? Will you leave me your Betsy Johnson hoop skirt, the one with the dots?"

She sat glumly, looking at the rhinestones on her sandals.

"Listen," he said, "someday you're going to have to give her up." He set his razor and shaving mug down like he was preparing for surgery, poured her a cup of coffee and handed it to her. "You know this is her thing: charming the ladies and then pushing them away. I've seen her do it a dozen times."

"Damn," said Miranda. "Why did I let this happen? I have a free choice. I could let it go, but look at me."

"She's a hypnotist," said Howie "and you're part of her food chain. Trust me, she's not worth dying over."

Miranda got up and put her arms around his neck. "What do you want?" she said.

"To have my head shaved like a bare ass so my wig will fit right," he said.

She let out a snort and decided to stop moping. Her funk began when she and that she-devil took a hot tub alone. At last, after two months of side by side painting lessons; after five months of out and out stalking each other, after umpteen touchy feely hugs at the end of the Wimmin's Beach Bongo Drumming Consortiums, Sheila—the woman Miranda thought she loved—finally floated into Miranda's arms and kissed her hard. Miranda was splayed out and soaped up. She was blissed with a wide-on for days—until the phone rang. Out went the candles, on went the lights. Sheila called it quits—it was her no-good, long-distance girl friend calling from Walla Walla. Sheila fled the pleasure of the steam, leaving a ring of Kama Sutra Pleasure Bath for Miranda to scrub from the tub. For days after that Miranda was like a giant frustrated snail riding all over town on a bicycle, her silver trail sopped up by Levis. Miranda rode rode rode everywhere, the sea air filling her lungs like perfume, and her ass scrunching up from peddling the one-spud bike from one end of the town to the other.

"What's the occasion of this great shave?" said Miranda. She expected yet another queer-O-rama tea dance at Slut Beach.

"We're going to the Ritz Carlton in Boston for Mother's Day brunch. Want to see my dress?"

"How could I say no?" she said.

"Do you mind if I model for you? I'm really proud of it—I just sewed it together this afternoon." He fled up to his loft before she could say yes, leaving her in the kitchen staring at a sculpture of a wooden penis on a crucifix with nails driven through it like milagros, and the word "guilt" spelled out in gold leaf across the top. She opened her mouth to ask about it when Howie flounced down the stairs wearing an enormous, baby-blue and seafoam-green prom formal. He waltzed through the living room, twirled, and fell to the floor in a feminine pose. Miranda started to snort uncontrollably—Howie was as hairy as a shag carpet, and shaped like an old fashioned Frigidaire with rounded corners. Howie got up and twirled again and Miranda saw that his dress was like the faces of Janus—two dress fronts sewn back to back.

"Do you love it?" he said. "Can't tell if I'm coming or going. I took two formals and sewed them together."

He spun around one more time, "it feels like a big tank top."

"Tell me honestly," he said, "should I be brave and go bald, or..." he dashed into the bathroom, and returned wearing a bouffant wig with a bird's nest of blue jays at the top. By this time Miranda was doubled over wishing she was wearing a Depends. Laugh—she thought her pants would never dry.

"Do you think I'll stand out?" he asked, earnestly.

"How could you not?" she said.

"I'm dead serious," he said.

Miranda quit laughing.

"You hear the church bells ringing today?" said Howie. "It's another fucking memorial. Mary died, and the girl's last wish was to have some boy ring the bell all damn day." Howie did a shimmy as he stretched a different wig over his head. "It's 1990, man, I might be doing a dance of death, you better believe I want to stand out."

"Who are you going with?" she said.

"Oh, about seventy members of ACT UP," he said. "We're going to have a die-in on Arlington Street. All this after church, of course. You know, the Reagans are in town to campaign for Bush. OoHHH!" he screeched. "You should come with us. I have the perfect sign! Don't move!"

Howie disappeared and returned with a sandwich board that said, "Lesbians Love Bush."

"How beautifully gross," said Miranda.

"What do you say," said Howie, "will you come? The fag wagon leaves at six. Will you die for a good cause for an hour? I'll lend

you my yellow tuxedo.”

“Fag wagon?”

“That rolling pleasure barge—we’re going Greyhound, sweetie.”

Miranda just sat there nodding her head as the church bells tolled. Mary dead and not even thirty. She thought of proper blue-haired ladies doting on grandchildren, sitting at tables next to Howie, seventy members of ACT-UP and herself. As Miranda imagined herself donning the sandwich board and waving to the Reagan’s motorcade, she forgot all about Sheila and could not possibly say no.

## A Parisian Breakfast

It all comes down to the pear--  
curvaceous, luscious,  
gritty pulp dissolving on my tongue,  
sweet watery juice  
dripping down my chin.  
Oh, to taste the morning  
in the immense shadow of Notre Dame.

Jane B. Winans



## Around the Corner

The wind spreads the news.  
Trees begin their transformation,  
    dreaming of colors to come.  
The fly sits on the brightest blade of grass.  
Flannels and corduroys arrive on campus.  
The Fool shivers in his T-shirt,  
    aware of the back of his neck  
    and low blood sugar,  
    too sleepy to care.  
A crow dances with a candy wrapper.  
A squirrel steals a cookie to fatten up.  
Football season starts.  
White triangles are out for  
    one last ride on the horizon.  
Eyes squint at lean shadows.  
Sun glares with insufficient light  
    on stick figures.

Jane B. Winans

## THE LIFE OF A CAPE COD TEENAGER

“Is this where we get the bridge to Nantucket?”  
bumper to bumper on Rt. 28  
closed in heat  
no time for the beach  
greasy fried smell hanging on my body  
“I’ll have the fried clam plate please”  
teenage drunks with nothin to do but Parrr-tee  
cruising deserted beach lots till dawn  
puking in the frigid dunes  
same pop songs on Cape 104fm  
another D-Y alumni dead from boredom  
strangers invade on Memorial Day  
and jam up the Rt. 6 rotary till Labor Day  
Summertime = money  
Wintertime = arguing over money  
Fall my favorite time of year  
seeing the same faces every day at school  
friends who don’t move away in 3 months time  
Parents home at night to tuck us into bed

Jane B. Winans

## The Second Coming

As a girl, I worried that *any minute* it could happen.  
That's what all the Baptist songs said: morning or night or noon.  
Coming again. Coming again. Sunday after Sunday we sang it.  
But what if it happened while I was at school?  
Would I have time to get from my desk in Miss Leavitt's class  
up to my older brother on the third floor?  
And what about our family? My father so often in the hospital,  
and our baby brother always sleepy: how would they know what to do?  
I imagined the crowds ascending to heaven,  
had seen the lovely renditions of how it will be:  
the watery colors of heavenly skies with golden beams  
of sunlight coming toward me. I had always imagined  
the beams a kind of holy escalator, and escalators don't stop.  
Plus, there would be so many of us (our God is an abundant God).  
I had been to the city at Christmas: I know what a crowd can do.  
A six year old girl could be swallowed up, like that!  
And what good are those streets paved in gold  
when you don't have your mother? Please God, don't let it happen,  
I used to pray. I'm sure heaven really is better, but it's good here:  
the smell of dad's worn shirt, and my mother's  
voice harmonizing country songs with his after supper.  
We are moving soon to a place they just bought and there is a barn  
and a cold brook and warm pond. My father says  
he's going to fill that barn with animals. And mother says  
we can swim in the pond if we don't mind the muck.  
We don't mind at all. And God, I love to swim.

Kate Young Caley

# We Don't Know How To Be

*for Judy Goleman*

"Now don't you worry:  
You're the kind of gal  
who'll look *great* in a wig!"-  
I really mean it when I tell you:  
that didn't help.  
Or, " I just know  
everything will be fine."  
Because, really,

you don't know that.  
And it doesn't help  
that they're doing  
wonderful things  
these days with treatment.  
I don't want treatment.

Say: " I pray  
a gentle outcome. Love, M."  
Or, " The trees are great today.  
Let's walk."  
And say, " We get confused at how to be."  
Because I do too.

Tell me the rain last night,  
and the wind, blew down your fence  
and you were so tired  
you drove over it, instead of getting out.  
This morning your tire was flat.  
Tell me you were already late for work  
when you saw the flowers in your garden  
all broken down  
and spattered with dirt from the storm.

Tell me you lifted them  
from the ground, from their trampled stems,  
and carried them with a vase to your kitchen sink.  
"It's tender business to wash a daffodil."  
Tell me that. Because when you say it,  
I understand.

Kate Young Caley

# What Really Matters

## *An Essay*

Joseph David Moya, III

It was Christmas Eve, 1962, a dark and cold night. My parents had loaded all nine of their children into the car, packed it with our personal belongings and headed to grandma's house for the holiday. As we approached the house, I could see the colorful lights that decorated the Christmas tree in the window, and as I entered the house, I was disappointed that there were no gifts under the tree. Little did I know that dad had packed the trunk of the car with our gifts that were to be opened Christmas morning.

I was always grandmother's favorite grandchild, and I recall that as she held me tightly, I could smell the "tamales," a traditional Christmas food that was being prepared by the ladies in the kitchen. In south Texas where I grew up, eating tamales on Christmas Eve is a Mexican-American custom that is observed by many families to this day. My grandmother was a stern woman, who stood firm on her convictions on tradition, ceremony and ritual. My brothers and I were told to play outside, while the girls were only permitted to play with dolls indoors. With grandmother's approval, I ran in and out of the house on to a screened porch that housed my favorite swing, relishing the moment, for I knew that this was the only time I could do so without the repercussions of my father's wrath.

Although it seemed like it had only been moments since we had arrived, it had actually been hours that we had been there, and now it was bedtime. I remember lying in bed waiting with anticipation for Christmas morning to see if Santa would deliver the toy drum I had told him that I wanted. After I had gone to sleep, a commotion in the house awakened me and my brothers and sisters. I wondered if it was Santa finally making his delivery. I fought the temptation to get out of bed to look, for a fear of being reprimanded. Suddenly and without warning, I heard a woman scream in agony. I sat up in the bed as the woman shrieked endlessly. We all stared at each other as my mother tried to divert our attention. Desperately, she finally said, "it's okay children, your grandmother is bringing a baby."

I had heard that my grandmother, a midwife, "brought babies" into the world, but I didn't exactly know what that meant. The woman's shrieking scared me and I asked my mother why the woman was crying. I later translated her response, "you're not supposed to hear that" to

"you're not supposed to know that." Left unanswered, the piercing cries filled the house and my mind as they broke the silence of the peaceful night. It was no surprise when they stopped, that I could not sleep the rest of the night. Even the much anticipated Santa had vanished from my mind. I was confused, for before this night all I knew about babies is that they were brought home from the hospital, and yet one was being born in the adjacent room. I was perplexed because I could not make the connection between that baby's birth and the screaming. After all, I had seen my baby sister come home from the hospital wrapped in a blanket and my mother wasn't screaming.

Six months later, I was summoned to my grandmother's house to gather for what was going to be my first major experience with death. I was told that my godfather had died, and out of respect, I was instructed that I must attend his "Velorio," an Hispanic religious ceremony for the dead. Similar to American wakes, a Roman Catholic Velorio incorporates certain rituals, such as transforming the funeral chapel into a church-like setting, with a Crucifix propped behind the casket, candles on either side of the casket, a kneeler in front of the casket, and flowers surrounding the casket. Mourners pay their respects to the deceased, then condolences to the bereaved family. Later, a priest conducts the religious aspect of the ceremony, which includes blessing the body with Holy Oils and Holy Water, and is then followed by a recitation of the Holy Rosary, and a litany of the saints. Here I remind you that my grandmother stood firm on tradition, and these were our traditions, and therefore I, the godson, must attend the Velorio to pay my respects. In some Spanish customs, the expression of sympathy, "le acompaño su pensar" is very profound, especially for a child. The literal translation is: "I accompany you with your heavy burden." I was coached repeatedly on the proper delivery of the expression, but it all seemed so awkward to me. What did I know about burdens, let alone how to accompany someone with their grief?

At age five, my concept of death was the equivalent of terror. Not even knowing whom my godfather was, I was confused and wondered why I would have to attend this event. I remember with vivid detail that horrible night as my grandmother thrust me into a setting that was upsetting, and for years remained a psychological scar.

As the car approached the funeral chapel, I recall the lump in my throat and the anxiety that filled my body. As we entered the building, my aunt took my hand as she signed the book of remembrance. I remember standing at the back trying to break away from her because I knew she was going to drag me to the casket bearing the deceased. From the back, I could see the dead man lying in the white cloth-colored casket, and I could smell the red carnations that adorned the top. Being in the presence of a cadaver was so overwhelming that I wanted to scream and run away because I just knew he was going to jump out and



grab me. It was like being in a horror movie, but at age five I did not fully comprehend the difference between reality and the movies.

The women surrounding the casket were dressed in black from head to toe, their heads veiled, and many of them wailing. Once again, I heard cries of pain and horror that resembled the cries the night the baby was born. The wailing pierced the room. Overwhelmed, I stood paralyzed, unable to talk or run or hide. Then as my aunt started to walk towards the casket, I began screaming “No! No! No!” I begged relentlessly for my mother to come and take me away.

Finally overcome with embarrassment, my aunt turned and walked me through a side door of the funeral parlor. Outside, she slapped me on the face and told me in a very angry voice that I needed to learn respect. I hated my aunt in that moment because I had been taught how to honor my elders and anyone who knew me could testify I was a completely courteous little boy. I revered my elders and I would never have dreamed of being impolite. As a child, I failed to see how being traumatized was a violation of the consideration for others that I was learning. Tortured and confused, I begged for the night to end, and I continued to resent my aunt for totally disregarding my fears.

I’ve carried those two experiences with me all of my life. For years afterwards I could not look at a pregnant woman without hearing the screams of December 24, 1962. And until 1972, when my beloved grandmother died, I could not even look at a dead body or even come near one. And for years I struggled with the elusive answer to the question I had formulated as a child, “why do birth and death sound the same?” Naturally as an adult I know the answer, at least in part, but in those formative years, it was extremely difficult to reconcile, and it is in that context that I attempt to make the connection between death and dying.

In May 1994, I became a volunteer at an in-patient hospice facility in Boston. Although it has since closed and I am no longer involved with it, it is fair to say that the difference between that night on Christmas Eve, 1962 and May 1994 is incredibly significant. My hospice experiences undoubtedly reshaped my perceptions of death and dying, and yet, even though I look at it differently, I am still left to ponder so many dimensions of the process.

Before I examine these, let me briefly share some of the deaths that I have personally witnessed as a result of my volunteer work. There was Maria, age 32. Olivia, 65. John, 28. Bill, 32. Boz, 26. Harriet, 82. Norma, 15. Max, 31, Kwok-Cheung, 10. Mr. Johnson, 72. George, 6 months.

Dying is the most sacred moment of a person’s life. With or without a religious/spiritual affiliation. How did I go from that first death experience as a child to literally holding the hands of terminally ill patients as they are dying? After the first experience, it seemed death

was around me all the time. I have experienced the deaths of literally hundreds of people, many of them relatives, neighbors, and friends. I have seen death come in many forms ranging from natural death to murder to war. I have witnessed sudden deaths and long, labored, agonizing deaths. I have witnessed death in a motor vehicle accident, and a mother holding her child as he died. I have seen cancer, AIDS, suicide, and at age 40, I have no doubt experienced more death than most people will experience in a lifetime.

I have often wondered why God chose me to participate in this difficult ministry. Perhaps it was His way of healing the wounds of my past. Or perhaps this was God's way of liberating my mind from the clutter that dominates our modern lives.

As a volunteer, I was called upon at various stages of the dying process, both for the patient, and often times for their grieving families. Bearing witness to the moment of death is a spiritual moment. After a while I learned to see the beauty of it amidst the pain. I learned to reconcile the loss with a new beginning. Eventually I learned that while the death moment is so similar in many people, the death process itself is as different and individual as our lives. It is in these differences that I wonder about God's design for living, for death, and for dying.

There came a point in time when death became so routine to me, that I almost became desensitized to it. I was reminded of the passage in scripture which asks the question, "Oh death, where is thy sting?" Yet, there was always that one thing, or that one person that inevitably brought me back to reality. For example, in my experiences at the hospice, I witnessed some patients die embraced by their loved ones, their death moment filled with compassion and love. By contrast, I witnessed other patients die discarded by their families and society. What did God mean by this? What was the lesson I was supposed to learn from this?

I witnessed what I called "personal triumph" as a patient fought his demons to his last breath, but died in peace. On the other hand, I saw a woman die waiting as her inner peace was held at bay. I always wondered if this was so because of her private quarrel, or perhaps she needed someone else to complete the reconciliation. Whatever the case, the anger she took to her grave magnified the tragedy of her loss.

I once witnessed a young man's death process that was transformed to a bowl of Jell-O. His disease had completely incapacitated his cognitive function, and everything for him became a bowl of Jell-O. I once asked him, "what would you like to eat?" and his barely audible reply was "nothing, I've just had that bowl of Jell-O." There wasn't a bowl of Jell-O within 3 floors of the building, yet in his mind there was. He died peacefully that night. I try to understand why so many deaths are so agonizing while others seem easier, like "a bowl of Jell-O."

I held back the tears as I saw Norma say goodbye to her 4-year

old son. She knew she would never see him again. I tried desperately to maintain my composure as I watched him say “goodbye mommy.”

What is God’s plan for his life? Will he be angry with God for taking his mommy away? Is it possible for her to watch over him from beyond the grave? And if so, what is wrong with that? Doesn’t every child need his mommy in one way or the other?

I frequently fed patients what was to become their last meal. Often it amounted to no more than holding a spoon up to the patient’s lips so that they could smell the food and barely taste it with the tip of their tongue. What was it like to have it and not be able to eat it? How was this supposed to enrich my life? Or is that even the question?

I saw patients challenge their spiritual dimensions as they entered the last stages of their lives. Some yelled at God with such rancor their energy could have split a cement wall. Why did God send me to be a vehicle for them to vent this anger? Others expressed God in ways that were foreign to me, but I accepted them as valid nonetheless. Was this God trying to teach me to see the universe beyond the traditions of my esteemed Roman Catholic faith?

There was Diana whose perception of the world had been altered from continuously being fed a powerful narcotic intravenously to alleviate her excruciating pains. Where was she? What was going on in her mind? Why did it even matter any more? Was it better for her to feel nothing than to face the pain and hate the world for it? And would she?

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” says the 23rd Psalm of the Bible, here in this valley I came to the realization that while fulfilling, my life was becoming more and more an incomplete journey. Yes I had enjoyed the fruits of my career in corporate training and development, but it wasn’t what I really wanted to be doing. This realization did not come to me in some inventory checklist; I found it as I traveled with my friends in their dying moments.

I finally accepted that the truth and honor that I beheld in the highest regard was missing from my life. “To thine own self be true,” is more than an old expression. It is a challenge so deeply rooted that to answer it fully would require a separate essay. And so I was catapulted into pondering my future in ways I had never contemplated before. The bigger question became: “at what price?” My favorite quote for years has been, “the important thing is to be able to sacrifice at any moment what we are for what we could become,” and so the time to do this had finally arrived.

Consequently, I made the very difficult decision of giving up the riches of my last job to pursue an undergraduate degree in Theatre Arts, a dream of mine for many, many years. It is a dream that had been put on hold for the sake of comfort, convenience, and a small degree of certainty. When I saw Harriet’s soul leave her body at the age of 82, I

decided that life is indeed too short to wait, or waste.

At the moment of death the only thing you have left to defend is your honor. That is why I am here today at age 40 searching, no longer so certain and sure of myself, but well directed on a journey that will bring me many uncertainties, but the joys of exploration as well. Whether or not this effort is seen through to fruition becomes irrelevant. The important thing is I am better able to take this journey because I am asking new questions that make sense at the crossroads of my life. These are the questions that came into my life during my hospice experiences. Condensed into one question, it would simply be: "what really matters?" I am finding that every day is a search for that answer.

What matters is facing the challenge with dignity. What matters is preserving that dignity with courage. What matters is managing that courage with integrity. What matters is saying, "I can" when I'm not so sure. What matters is saying "I will" when I don't know how. What matters is greeting each day anew. And what matters is letting it take me as far as I want to go.

## CLUTCH

I see you sometimes

Standing on a cliff

Your chest bare, swelled

over the edge

Your arms wide

embracing the wind

You see the sky and sea with your

eyes closed

Your mouth is open to taste

the salt air

Your toes clutch the rock as they lift you

ready to

Dive

Stephanie Lorien Jones















