

dedicated to Joanne Meschery

Special thanks to Ilya Kaminsky
and the MFA faculty

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I always tell people that I became a writer not because I went to school but because my mother took me to the library. I wanted to become a writer so I could see my name in the card catalog.

SANDRA CISNEROS

EDITOR'S NOTE

The purpose of this Anthology is two-fold. The first is to showcase the outstanding work and aptitude of the students in the MFA program at SDSU.

The second purpose is more specific: so that we may read our fellow writers' work as something other than works-in-progress. As students in the MFA workshop, it is our duty to find chinks in the armor of each others' work, we prod and poke and test its durability--this is the nature of the workshop. But when we read a book or poem by an author we trust, the world around us dissolves and we're transported, so to speak; we lose track of time, we forget to eat, but we're *there* and it's fantastic. Unfortunately, the workshop environment does not always facilitate this kind of aesthetic experience.

The MFA Anthology of Creative Writing is meant to give students in the program the opportunity to read each others' poems and stories, and regard them not as things to be tested, but as literature.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of a Writers Collective is an old one. In Russia, for example, writers like Akhmatova, Mandelstam and Mayakovsky came together to recite their poems in a famed Stray Dog Café. Spanish language writers are famous for their friendships. In France, the friendship among surrealists has changed their country's cultural landscape. In this country, places like City Lights Bookstore became legendary for giving a start to "the best minds" of a generation.

Similar situation happens in publishing. Many of contemporary America's most important literary presses, including City Lights, Fiction Collective 2, BOA Editions, Cooper Canyon, Graywolf, and many others began as start-ups, cooperatives and collective undertakings of a few courageous souls who believed they can bring about a change, further innovation, open up the borders. And, they did. Today, the literary cooperatives such as Alice James Books publish some of the most exciting writers at work in contemporary America.

All this is to say that there is a wonderful literary history of an authors' collective that gives us hope for the future of literary arts in this country. Perhaps this idea of a collective is our only hope for the survival of the arts in America today. Here, in San Diego, we are about to observe the beginning of such a collective. The volume you hold in your hands brings together the work of fiction and poetry by students and alumni of San Diego State University who felt the need to come together and work here creating a community for themselves and their world. I think they are doing a wonderful job at this—their art is impressive and their drive to make an impact on each other and their surroundings deserves our attention and support. I very much hope they continue this interesting and important work.

ILYA KAMINSKY

ALVISO

by NANCY ALVARADO

"You got a problem with me, puto?"

"Why don'tcha take a fucking picture? It'll last longer."

"Yeah, puto, take a picture!"

The teens came, shouting, toward James. They filled the aisle between the stands, and other shoppers moved out of their path. Not James, though. He had been staring at them, at their baggy clothes and close-shaved heads, the tattoo one sported on the inside of his forearm. He had assumed he was invisible to them, thought they wouldn't even see a 30-year-old white guy with a beard and glasses, unless they were looking for someone to mug. It was obvious they were looking for trouble, but not violence, not in broad daylight with the flea market full of people. He realized, heart pounding as the group closed around him, that he had miscalculated, that they were looking to flaunt the power of their number and their sheer boldness.

"So, yeah, what's your problem?"

"No problem." James tried hard to keep his voice even.

"Then what the fuck you looking at me for?"

"Just reading your T-shirt." The boy's T-shirt had giant iron-on black letters. The letters were Old English, and James had a hard time making out the message. It was a red shirt; all the boys had red or burgundy shirts and baggy jeans. One of the four had a few inches of red web belt dangling down his leg, and two had red shoelaces in their enormous white tennis shoes.

"That's right, you read that shit, white boy. Alvisoooooo!" The last word came out in a yell.

"Alvisoooooo!" echoed the others.

"You down for that, white boy? Puro Alviso norte!" The leader began a series of hand signs, and the pack followed him. They ended with the index finger of their left hands extended, pointed toward

the four extended fingers and hidden thumbs of their right hands. The motions looked choreographed, well-rehearsed, and almost beautiful. James knew he was supposed to be impressed by their precision and the message inherent in all that fingerwork.

"Um, nice. That's nice." James looked around, hoping for someone to intervene.

"Nice!" the leader hooted in derision. "You hear that, Chuy?" He turned to the teen nearest him, gangly in a giant 49er's jersey. "White boy thinks norte is nice. He thinks Alviso is nice. Nice! Nice to meet you, estúpido."

Alviso. James wracked his brain. Alviso was a small Mexican neighborhood. He hadn't ever been there, although it was just on the outskirts of San Jose, but he'd read about it in the newspaper. Every few years, after heavy rains, Alviso would flood and the newspapers would run articles about how it was time to pave the streets and do something about the drainage. He thought it was near the municipal dump or maybe the sewage treatment plant. Somewhere smelly, that much he remembered. Was he supposed to say Alviso was nice?

"Speak up, puto. I can't hear you." The others hooted and jostled each other, trading triumphant shoulder punches. An Asian lady with a shopping bag full of produce scooted around the group. James wanted to scoot along with her, pick up some T-shirts at the "3 for \$5" stand and browse through the record bins in the collector's corner, but he stood still.

He took a deep breath. Sweat beaded on his forehead under the midday sun. He didn't know what to say about Alviso. He thought about walking away, but he was afraid they'd follow him, jeering and shoving. Better to stand his ground, he figured. "So, what's your shirt say?"

"Alviso, puto. Alviso BALs. You down for that?"

Alviso balls? James absurdly pictured a school playground, children chasing red rubber four-square balls in all directions. "What's an Alviso ball? Were they invented in Alviso?"

The leader rolled his eyes, an exaggerated imitation of a plea to the heavens for patience. "Alviso BALs, pendejo. BALs. B. A. L. S. Barrio Alviso Locos." This provoked another round of crowing and hand signs.

James couldn't help himself. He knew he should keep his mouth shut, but he couldn't help it. "Your shirt says Alviso Barrio Alviso Locos? Isn't that kind of redundant? It should be just BALs. Barrio Alviso Locos." He said "barrio" flatly, without even attempting to roll the "r."

"Listen, asshole, thanks for the classes, but it's Alviso BALs. Got it? Alviso is our barrio, and we're the Barrio Alviso Locos."

In his enthusiasm, he rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, moving closer to James. His breath, inches from James' face, was hot and salty. Flecks of spittle dotted James' glasses, but he resisted the urge to step back. If he backed away, maybe they would sense his fear, the way dogs did. "I understand that, but I'm just saying, your shirt doesn't make sense. How can you be the Alviso Barrio Alviso Locos?"

"Because that's who we are. That's who we've always been. BALs has been around since back in the day."

Another voice chimed in, "Yeah, my grandma was an O.G.!"

The leader whirled around, half-laughing. "Original gangster? More like Old Grandma. My grandma could kick your grandma's ass!"

"Yeah, but my grandma makes better menudo than yours."

They laughed, and for a moment James felt startlingly alone in the midst of their easy camaraderie. He wanted to slip quietly away among produce stands and old men selling tools behind rickety tables, but they turned toward him again. "Mira, white boy, you wanna know about Alviso BALS? Fucking gringos think you know everything; you don't know shit. We've been around since before your ass was born, guey. Our grandparents came here from México when Alviso was nothing but fields. They lived in a bunch of shitty trailers out in O'Neil's Camp, picking lettuce and strawberries. They spent their whole lives bending over picking so the güeros could have cheap salad."

Another boy, the one called Chuy, chimed in. "Yeah, ain't nobody gonna do us like they did our abuelitos, man, picking all day in the rain, fucking jefe don't pay them shit. Them trailers flooded all the time and they had to clean that shit up. My jefa never had nothing but old clothes, ripped-up stuff her sisters and cousins had already used. Fucking muddy shoes full of holes, raggedy old muddy

pants. Fuck that. We don't take nothing offa nobody. We locos."

A boy, who was obviously the youngest of the bunch, maybe thirteen years old, stepped up to the front. He was short and skinny, and trembling with indignation. "Mi jefe says the other kids called them mud ducks. Their school only went up to 5th grade, so after that they had to ride the bus to another school, en el barrio de los gringos. When the kids from Alviso got off the bus, everyone would shout, 'Here come the mud ducks!' Mi jefito said they couldn't even answer back because they didn't speak English!"

The leader laughed. "Yeah, I think the first thing they learned to say in English was 'Fuck you!'"

James stayed quiet amidst this litany. There was nothing he could say. He wanted to walk away, but at the same time, he wanted to hear this story. Most of all, he wanted to avoid provoking their wrath, or at least reminding them that he was a convenient target for payback.

"So they got together," the leader continued, "and they decided they weren't gonna take any shit from anybody. Not from the white kids, not from the teachers, not even from O'Neil himself — he could shove his stupid muddy trailers up his ass with his lettuce and his strawberries. They were sick of it."

"So that's why they started the..." James hesitated. Group? Gang? Certainly club was the wrong word. "The Barrio Alviso Locos?"

"Nobody messes with us now, that's for sure!" shouted the younger boy. "Nobody messes with Alviso!" The other boys whistled, howled, threw hand signs triumphantly. "So next time you see us, you'll know. We ain't no mud ducks, we're locos!"

By this time, a crowd had begun to block the narrow aisle, attracted by the shouting. People at the stands around them peered over their piles of merchandise. Maybe, James mused, they thought they were going to see a white guy get beaten up by four ruthless gangsters. A pair of security guards in twin brown shirts ambled up, hands on their batons. "Everything okay here?" James nodded. "Alright, then, move along. C'mon, move along. You're blocking traffic here."

James waited to see if the others would stand their ground. To his surprise, they turned and began to walk away without protest.

He stood for a moment, watching them laugh, jostle each other, trade high fives. As they moved into the distance, the youngest one turned around. He looked straight into James' eyes, an intense, unwavering gaze. "Locos, not mud ducks. Got it?"

The leader followed suit, pumping his fist in the air. "Locos, puto!" he shouted.

Ignoring the leader, James looked at the youngest boy. He held his gaze for a long moment, and then nodded slightly. "Locos. Not mud ducks. Got it."

TIJUANA, OH GREAT AND TERRIBLE CITY

by NANCY ALVARADO

I would turn myself inside out for you.
Let me work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

Let me toss coins to your hungry children,
bread to your wizened widows,
stained sweaters to the girls with high
piled hair and Mami's pilfered lipstick,
steel-toed boots to the boys who believe
they are men.

To fill the emptiness, Tijuana, left unfilled
by tortillas, by tequila,
by the finest jayna, by the thirteenth baby,
I empty out my coffers.

I bring you the healing of a green-eyed
thief named Gato, fulfill Dulce's dream
of dinner, fill your markets with heaps
of bananas, green chiles, red tomatoes.
Let me pile platters high with greasy chicken
to feed the dark birdlike women
in multi-colored dresses
giggling in Mixteco.

Tijuana, I hear your song -
orchestra of busses and mariachis
and internet cafes.

TIJUANA, OH GREAT AND TERRIBLE CITY

I sing with you
of stray dogs and Coca-Cola
and checkered aprons.

I fill your veins, Tijuana,
with the songs of a thousand praying *donas*;
fill your sky
with the stained glass saints
of a thousand decades.
Your border fences shall become altars,
each stealthy climb over them, a sacrament.

I lay myself upon the stone, Tijuana,
await the sacrifice you ask of me.
Grab my chest, Tijuana -
wrench out the heart,
feed it to your hungry gods,
so I shall die fulfilled.

GOLDFISH BOWL

by **BRANDON JAMES ANDERSON**

So I went for a drive today, man. It was a little different being back in town this time; I felt mature for once. That's probably because I was driving my dad's big white construction truck. That, and it was cold for October. Real cold. Well I don't have to tell you — you felt the snow this weekend, didn't you?

Anyway, I drove around Flint and it made me weary. I guess it was witnessing the homeless walk down Dort Highway without coats and the mere sight of the GM plants with their parking lots barely a quarter full.

Eventually, the drive made me remember what it was like back when I was 16, when we all started hanging out. Back then, I wanted to drive around the west side because I spent my entire life being shuttled around the east side. To school, to church, to grandma's. Besides, all my new high school friends were on the west side, like you for example.

"Hey guys, let's go find something to do. Hit up the high school parking lot," I probably said to you and whoever else was with us.

"Sounds good," you said, and we all piled into Peezy's Jeep.

No need for seat belts, that's what always made it fun, didn't it? Especially when Peezy slammed on the brakes and one of the assholes in the back hit their head on the crossbar.

"Got the hackey sack man?" somebody probably asked you.

Weren't we supposed to grow out of that fad by seventh grade? Drop that shit like we did with collecting pogs and Grant Hill rookie cards. None of us cared enough to bring that up, especially when there didn't seem to be any other options. We weren't old enough to get into bars and this was still a few years before it became acceptable by Peezy's parent's standards to pass around a bottle of Captain's and get high in the living room while they argued about money in the

kitchen.

But back to the high school. Eventually we figured out that if Peezy could climb the pine tree, he could jump onto the fence that enclosed the varsity tennis courts and unlock it from the inside. Yeah, I guess it was pretty impressive. Maybe that's why we would bring girls along whenever we could convince one we were cool enough to go out with.

"Check it out, I can run and jump over the net!" you said.

"Anyone can do that dumbass," Mikey Gibbons replied. And then fell on his face upon realizing five and a half cans of warm High Life affected his timing.

I pulled into the parking lot, driving around the perimeter to get a look at those courts, then parked in the faculty parking lot. Why'd I go back to that place? Just wanted to drop in and say hello to Mr. Farraday. You remember him, don't you? He was the one who gave me an A and failed you because you maintained a policy of not setting foot in the building until 10:25 a.m. Anyway man, I walked in through the backdoors by the gym like you always did at 10:25. Like we all occasionally did. But things are different now, I was told. Beecher shut down, did you know that? And half of the kids came to Carman and the others went to Flint Northern. And pretty soon the little black boy who had a small role in Bowling for Columbine - - you know man, the one who shot that Kayla Karr girl - will be a student at our... well, my alma matter. So to get a leg up on the matter, the school board members take turns volunteering as guards. They said they didn't know who I am, so they wouldn't let me in. I tried explaining I have a degree in English and Mr. Farraday assigning A Farewell To Arms played an integral part in that. Did I tell you about my degree? Anyway, that wasn't sufficient for them. "Well in that case, you can make an appointment during his planning period and come back another day," they told me.

And you know how busy I am whenever I come back to this fucking shit hole. So I left, of course, and kept driving around in my dad's truck, getting the speed up to 76 on Elms Road. It's weird how that feels fast when just five years ago that was the minimum speed for all of us. But anyway, as I kept driving, the memories kept coming back.

Check out that tank in front of the VFW. Let's get high and climb it.

Of course, back then, it wasn't like we knew little Mikey Gibbons was gonna have to ride in one of those things. This was before nine-eleven — I assume someone's come by and explained nine-eleven to you, right? Back then, we figured the world's wars are fought by planes. Like video games. Mikey Gibbons can play video games, right? Apparently not, man. He was riding a tank through Fallujah and ended up with shrapnel in his back and right arm. At least that's the story, I wasn't around Flint in 2005 when he came back on disability — you're not much use to the Army with one arm. I guess he came back and found out "Mad Dog" Winters fucked his little sister and got her pregnant. It was her second abortion by as many soccer players in as many years I hear. Word gets around about those kinds of things, you should know that.

Before I knew it, I was out towards Flushing so I figured what the hell, I'll roll through Western Hills. Remember when we gave Meredith Nash a lawn job with the Jeep? Classic. Or the time you, Peezy, Miner and me TPed Janet Hollinger? And we decided the TPing wasn't enough and ordered nine tomato pizzas to her house. Great times, man. Whatever happened to the video we took of that? Probably lost in a box somewhere at Miner's new house. You know Miner moved, don't you? Actually, I don't think you do. He moved like two years ago, about a year or so after his dad died. Miner was 19, man and some fucking trailer trash ex-employee of his dad's shot him in the face over \$300. If you can't afford a lawyer, one will be appointed to you, right? That's only in criminal cases. In civil cases, if you can't afford a lawyer in this city, you settle the dispute with bullets I guess.

Driving through the Hills, I thought about stopping over at my cousins', then thought against it. Between my grandma and their grandmother and my brother and their youngest kid, there's more than enough interaction between the Scottish branch of my family tree. Besides, it's weird to be in that house after that one party. Remember that? Not that party — that one was at Renee Hudson's. I'm talking about the one senior year during that time period that T.J. wasn't going to school anymore and before my uncle sent him to Utah to go to boot camp. I guess you wouldn't remember. Either way, I had invited Ashley Morris to the party and T.J. fucked her. My rich cousin, who lived on the good side of town and had everything, decided he wanted more and took a girl from me. That's when T.J. and

I stopped hanging out. I imagine it was for the best, I mean look how he ended up. Our little group was busy playing hackey sack and riding tanks and he was snorting coke.

I never saw him after that night, until a few years later at the funeral of course. Actually, even then I didn't see him, it was a closed casket after all. When you hit a tree at 90 mph, it tends to disfigure you pretty badly. Look who I'm talking to... Plus his corpse burned. I had to take a week off from my sophomore year for that. Even Aaron Dunbar was there. Granted that was before he and Jack joined that pyramid scheme and converted to Baptism. What was it called? Yeah, Team of Destiny. Maybe if T.J. had died a year or so later they wouldn't have attended a Catholic funeral, but whatever, they still came.

Has either of those guys come by to talk to you recently? I went out for a beer with Jack like a year ago. He said he was about to become the leader of New Calvery's youth group. Imagine that, dude. The first guy to fuck Mikey Gibbons's sister. The guy who used to steal weed from his mom's dresser and sell it in school. That guy. Strange world, uh? I never went out for another drink with him because word got around about him as well. Remember his girlfriend that he routinely cheated on? He broke up with her "because God doesn't want him to be with a Jewish girl." Those were the words that got around at least. Maybe I should have asked him about it, but I just chose to believe. Enough people have dropped out of my life, so I figured "What's one more?"

I wish I could stay longer, man, but I can't. I've got to get going. But I at least wanted to confess this to you. It sounds fucked up, but I think I'm envious of you. You were the first, man. You didn't have to go through the loss of yourself like we all did. You got to skip out on the grief of everything that's happened since. If our dads weren't shot in the face like Miner's, they died of cancer. If our relatives weren't injured or killed in Iraq, then they ODeD or crashed into trees. I suppose it's good that I got out of this town, but every time I come back, the truth hits me harder: I've lost all my friends to drugs, the military, and organized religion.

But like I said, I've got to get going. There are a couple more tombstones that I need to talk to.

PASSERS-BY

by TONY BONDS

I received an acceptance letter in the mail, it was from my first-choice college. I wasn't the only person to receive news, though; draft numbers had been issued today.

In order to celebrate properly I bought a fifth of Bushmills. The man behind the counter asked me when I was shipping out. I smirked. "I'm not going to fight, that's what this is for," I said, pocketing the bottle. The man's face was grim, and he said he'd seen a lot of other guys my age come in today and buy bigger bottles of whisky, but for a different reason.

The bottle was half-empty by the time I got to the beach. Should have gotten the bigger size, I thought. The black ocean waves came and went back out in the same steady pace. I heard a pattering of feet slapping wet sand, then I saw a couple of guys running right at me. I braced myself for a pummeling, but they seemed to not notice me at all as they passed. One was running right on the heels of the other. Maybe the first guy had stolen something from his pursuer, I thought. Or maybe the pursuer was homicidal and sought out a perfect stranger to chase. Or maybe they were both chasing a third guy. Or maybe they are separately running for exercise on the beach at night in street clothes. My lack of understanding made the situation interesting.

Both of them began to laugh as they neared the shoreline and they slowed, then stopped, then dropped to their knees in exhaustion. At first I couldn't tell whether they were chuckling or weeping. They were only silhouettes. One was clutching himself tightly. Then he began to howl with laughter, the kind of full-hearted laugh it takes your whole body to make. After a few moments both of them plopped down indian-style in the sand, no longer chuckling.

Closer up I could see the deep lines in their foreheads. Then one of them looked at me. "Hey man," he cried, waving an arm. "Got

any more of whatever's in that bottle?" Both of them eyed me as I walked toward them. I took a pull and handed it to the one who'd spoken to me—a guy with kind of a round, tall forehead that made him look like he had a big brain. He took a long pull and puckered his face before slapping the bottle into the hand of his friend, an emaciated guy. He didn't make eye contact; he took a sip and handed the bottle back to me. I screwed the cap on. The brain guy told me to sit down so I did.

"When do you go out?" he asked. "I don't, I just got into school." The skinny guy looked at me for the first time, the brain guy bit his top lip.

"What about you guys?" I asked.

"We got our numbers today," said the brain guy.

"What are they?" I asked too quickly.

Both of them spoke at the same time: "One." I shook my head. They shook their heads. I handed the bottle to the skinny guy. He unscrewed the cap.

MONKEY SQUARE

by **TINA V. CABRERA**

I don't know what ever became of them – Cinda or Richard. Come to think of it, I don't miss either of them, but I do remember Monkey Square with fondness.

I spotted my first Monkey Square on the way home from school one day in fourth grade. I reached down to pick up what I thought was a penny. But it was drilled into the sidewalk, the circle in the middle of the cement square. It resembled an old rusted penny, without the head of the president. The small metal circle had a smaller circle inside. When I realized I couldn't lift it from the sidewalk, I moved on. Then I saw another one like it, in another cement square. This time the circle wasn't in the middle, but closer to the crack dividing this square from the next. I was fascinated with these circles in squares. What were they doing there? Before I realized it, I had spotted several at random, by the time I arrived home.

That night as I drifted into sleep I dreamed of circles and squares, dancing around one another, of different colors and sizes. First they danced around each other, and then they merged, invading one another's space. Circles and squares – they didn't belong together. This dream left a deep impression on me, for in the middle of it I awoke all drenched in sweat. On the way home that day, I created a new game and called it Monkey Square, because I felt all goofy and wild like a monkey.

Monkey Square became my favorite game. I had no one to walk home from school with, so it was a way to quiet my noisy mind. I created specific rules: When you spot the small circle in the square, you have to avoid it. You jump over the square if you can, or if it's too far to jump, walk around it. Leaping over is the best – it's much more fun. Do whatever you have to as long as you don't step inside the square. The most fun is when you jump far enough to make it over the square. These were the rules I created. But when I tried my

game alone, I found it very lonely. There was no one to cheer me on when I made it over the square, and no one to make fun of when they stepped inside one by mistake.

I could have invited Scottie to play with me, but he was gross. I caught him several times in the neighborhood kneeling down on the dirty curb, licking at the water running down the cracks in the sidewalk – water from people watering their lawns or washing their cars. He used to suck on my hair in Ms. Hollister’s third grade class while we watched Disney movies. The first time it happened, I felt my head pull back, and when I turned around I saw him sucking on my long hair like it was a licorice stick. I was about to ask him to stop, but then he pulled it out of his mouth, smiled real wide with his two front teeth missing and didn’t seem at all embarrassed or surprised.

I couldn’t ask him to play with me after he asked me to go around. He was walking on the opposite side of the street, yet I felt him staring.

“Hey Abigail!” he shouted.

“The name’s Abby,” I said, glaring over at him. No one called me Abigail except for my parents. He remained on the other side of the street for a time, but then without my invitation crossed over to my side. I’d been playing Monkey Square on my own as usual, and he interrupted my game. “Hey Abby,” he said much softer now, “Wanna go around?” He reached his hand towards me and instantly I tucked my chin in turtle-like. I thought he was going to touch my neck. No one was allowed to touch my neck. I had a phobia that left me fearful of pronged forks, necklaces and turtlenecks. My cheeks felt hot, as they did whenever I was the center of attention, but this time I was blazing from my neck up into my eyelids. No one had ever asked me to go around. Most of the boys called me toothpick, Olive Oil, or bean-pole, including Scottie. Scottie wasn’t ugly – he had dirty blond shaggy hair covering his eyes – but I didn’t know how to answer him. He kept walking with me, and I was afraid he could see the safety pin keeping my khaki colored pants from falling off my waist, or the masking tape keeping the hems of my pants from dragging on the ground.

“Well?” he asked.

“Maybe another time,” I answered without looking up. Scottie said nothing as he walked back across the street, the cuffs of his jeans

making a swooshing sound as he walked faster.

I remembered my dreams about Barbies without their clothes on – on top of shiny new cars. The Barbies turned into real naked women. I remembered the Barbie games with my neighbor Sheila who lived right across the street from us. She was the same age as me. Sometimes I slept over her house, and sometimes she stayed over mine. One time when I spent the night at her place, she took out her best Barbie and Ken – the brown-skinned ones – and took off their clothes. She started making them kiss, and then put Barbie on top of Ken, mashing their bodies against each other. I felt hot in the face when she asked me if I wanted to try. Hesitantly, I put Ken on top of Barbie, but couldn't make the kissing sounds. Neither of us said much to each other that night. I never spoke much to Sheila at all because she only played with me at home. At school, she was another Sheila, the one with all the friends – boys and girls. She never included me in the sticker club and never picked me for her team in softball.

I first discovered Richard in the summertime transition between fourth and fifth grade. I stepped onto the bathtub to slide the window open, when I spotted Cinda my next-door neighbor, swinging in her backyard, talking to herself. I watched her for a few moments, then I spoke loud enough for her to hear, "Hi Cinda, this is Rrrrrrrrichard!" in a high, falsetto voice. I don't know how this happened, but it did.

I became Richard beginning at high noon when my mother started her daily, hours-long ritual of watching the television lineup. It started with the 12:00 local news, followed by General Hospital and Days of Our Lives. Cinda would be swinging on her homemade device of plywood and jump ropes, talking to herself. I'd step onto the bathtub, slide open the window and start talking to her with my Richard voice. She'd dart her head up quick like a startled feline, but couldn't see through the frosted glass window that I slid open just enough for her to hear me, but not see me. I'd repeat, "Hi Cinda, this is Richard." Then she'd ask, "Who's that?" I'd say, "I'm Richard your friend." Her eyes would dart back and forth, up and down, while she slowed her swinging to a halt. "Where are you? Why don't you come out and play?"

Coming out to play with Cinda was not an option. We went to the same school, and she was one of the E.D. kids, the emotionally dis-

turbed. On the playground, she would turn red, start to shake and snap her teeth like a mad dog, and I never knew why. Her special class was allowed to play with the normal kids under the supervision of Ms. Rickenbacker or the other teacher's assistant. Ms. Rickenbacker was about as skinny as I was, hipbones showing through her polyester pants, her face sunken in like a skull. I wondered how she managed the group of kids, all of varying grade levels from third to sixth grade. Sometimes the regular kids would let Cinda play dodge ball at the order of the adults, but only if she promised not to play too rough. One time she pelted a fifth-grade boy so hard in the face he began to cry, and then ran over to give him one of her great big bear hugs. He kicked her in the knee. That day Cinda was so strong, she resisted the helper trying to restrain her from behind, kicking her feet against the hot afternoon wind.

Cinda was a stocky kid with long blond hair almost white in the sun. She was neither pretty nor ugly. But her twisted, red face seemed scary when she had her fits. I wondered what made Cinda the way she was. I thought maybe something really bad happened to her, and she needed to let all that rage out somehow.

That was one way I could relate to her. She must have felt as I did when my parents screamed at each other so loud the house shook. I'd scream into my pillow till I nearly suffocated. At one point, I took a pair of scissors and chopped off my hair until I was left with short, uneven bangs. It felt good doing this as I watched the long pieces of black hair fall all over my lap.

I loved our secret game, mine and Cinda's. And it continued on into fifth grade.

It always started off the same way, whether right after school or on the weekend. I'd talk in my high voice and then ask her what she was doing and was she being a good little girl. Cinda told Richard that she didn't like playing alone, and how most of the kids at school didn't like her. I told her I would always be her friend. Richard, not Abby. Secretly at school, I wanted to play with her because she was good at wall-ball and kicking the soccer ball real far. But if I did, I wouldn't hear the end of it from the rest of my class. I wanted her to teach me how to kick the ball, as I always seemed to miss or at best, kick only a few feet in front of me. My mind and heart were restless and I realized that if I played with her in my backyard or hers, there

would be no one there to see. Still, I could not bring myself to knock on her door and ask if she could come out and play. My parents wouldn't have let me anyways. They didn't mingle with what they called her white, wild mom Gina. They often mentioned her wildness with disdain, and assumed that's how she became an unmarried mom. I liked how pale Cinda's face and hair looked in the sunshine, as if they were one and the same, compared to my blazing black hair and brown skin. But I liked our game the way it was, and I enjoyed being Richard.

One day my Richard game took a turn.

"Come closer," I said to Cinda. I mean Richard said. She came off the swing and closer to the chain-linked fence dividing her yard from mine. She clung to the fence and stuck her lips between the wires. They were cherry-colored, sparkling like the wet-kiss lip-gloss my mother had bought me for my birthday and that I had never tried on. As I stood on the bathtub, my legs began to tire, shaking at the knees.

"Where are you?" she said louder than usual, darting her eyes again. "Remember our rules?" I said. "You can never see me, but I'll call your name often and talk to you often." I peeked through the window, not showing my full head, even though I knew she couldn't see me through the frosted glass. Just then, her mother slid their back sliding door open.

"Cinda, 'what's going on?'" She walked hurriedly towards Cinda and unglued her from the fence. She looked suspiciously up towards the window as I crouched down, holding on the edge of the windowpane. I nearly slipped into the bathtub as I heard rustling of dry grass and the patio door slam shut. I held my breath as I snuck back into my bedroom, closing my door quietly. I was terrified that the doorbell would ring, and Gina would uncover my secret game. I knew what had to be done. I would have to tuck Richard away, somewhere back where he came from.

The next day, I snuck up to the window to see if Cinda was playing in her backyard, and there she was, on the swing. "Richard, are you there?" she whispered, trying to keep me a secret. When I didn't answer, she said, "Richard, where are you? I miss you." I wanted so badly to answer, but I was scared her mom was waiting inside, peeking out and listening to see if Richard would answer. Poor Cinda, she looked so sad.

The following week at morning recess Cinda was playing on the swings. I saw her as I hung by my legs from the monkey bars. My long hair was swinging back and forth, but I could still see Cinda upside-down, swinging higher and higher. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but some strands of her glowing white hair were loose, waving freely in the breeze. The shoelaces of her soiled white sneakers were untied, and as her swinging slowed, my dizzy head confused her frown for a smile. Then it all became twisted. I spun myself up to the top of the monkey bars and watched her twisting the chains of the swing – twist and untwist – and this was against the rules. The line of kids waiting to use the swing got wildly impatient. The one next in line shouted, “28, 29, 30, my turn!” Cinda ignored him, pushing herself off the ground with the force of her toes, up into the air. She fiercely kicked as I watched in wonder. “Ms. Rickenbacker, Ms. Rickenbacker,” the line screamed in unison. Ms. Rickenbacker came running towards Cinda and asked her in a gentle voice to come down. Cinda kept spinning and spinning as the chains unwound and then swung again into the air. “Cinda, your turn is over,” Ms. Rickenbacker insisted, louder this time. The swinging slowed, but Cinda twisted herself between the chains like a pretzel, shaking and screaming, kicking one foot against the other. Ms. Rickenbacker bravely came from behind and untwisted Cinda, hugging her arms around her while the other aide grabbed her by the legs. By this time, several more kids had formed a circle around them, some giggling, others whispering into each other’s ears. Me – I felt a pain in my chest as I just sat on top of the bars and didn’t move. I was sure Cinda had exploded because she missed Richard.

Even before the seasons changed and the air became cooler, Cinda hardly ever came outside anymore. Though I had given up Richard, I still peeked through the window from time to time. When she did get on her swing, she didn’t swing as high. She wasn’t humming or even talking to herself as she usually did. Often she just sat there staring up at my window, waiting.

When the rains came my mother drove me to school and picked me up. I missed playing Monkey Square. I missed Richard. All I had left was my favorite stuffed animal Monchichi. So when I came home from school I dragged him with me around the house. I held him next to my cheek and created a dreadful smile on my face. I wagged

the monkey at my mother's face, which annoyed her. After I did it once or twice, she yelled at me to stop and to go to my room and find something better to do. My brother hated it too. One time – I clearly remember – he snatched Monchichi from me and threw him across the hallway against the full-length mirror. I nearly lunged at my brother, but he grabbed me from behind and held my kicking feet away from him. I screamed that I hated him, and that just because he was in high school didn't give him the right to bully me. I don't know what prompted this strange habit of wagging my doll in other people's faces. It was a similar feeling to my neck obsession, to the urge to wipe my snots in a row on the bedroom wall next to my bed, and to take on the voice of Richard.

Spring came along and I was back to walking to and from school. Richard had nearly disappeared from memory, as I hadn't attempted to resume. But I hadn't forgotten Monkey Square. I thought again of inviting Scottie to join me, but he had started going around with Sheila, much to my surprise. She did her best to keep it a secret at school. I didn't feel too old to play Monkey Square as I did for other games like hopscotch or Barbies, but I longed for someone to join me. I thought of Cinda, but she wasn't allowed to walk home by herself; her mom dropped her off and picked her up from school every day. The following summer, after fifth grade but before sixth, Cinda and her mom moved away, I don't know where. They were only renters, drifters maybe, just the two of them.

Now that I am so many years removed from my childhood days, I don't dream of naked women as often. Richard has never returned. Once in awhile, when I'm walking down another street in another neighborhood, I spot those Monkey Squares and find myself tempted to resume my childhood game. But the consciousness of others around me – circles and squares – prevents me from doing so. Often, when I see the Monkey Squares, I imagine Cinda's crown of shining white.

MIDNIGHT NEAR THE MARNE RIVER, JULY 15 1918

by GARRETT CHAFFIN-QUIRAY

Specialist Gabriel Nestor Blackmun adjusted his bootlaces, squatted to loosen his pants around the knees, and tightened the leather chinstraps of his helmet. Standing six-feet tall, several inches taller than most other Doughboys, he'd made a habit of befriending warrant officers to get uniforms that fit. This was especially important because he was also 20 pounds heavier than the typical 145 pound soldier, and his specialization required a closer-fitted, more flexible uniform than was typically issued from Washington.

Brown eyed with brown hair, Gabriel had volunteered for the American Expeditionary Force, Pershing's war machine at the service of President Wilson's new internationalism. But for him, the world, even this European world at war, was little more than a danger to outlast until peacetime delivered him safely home to Sedalia, Missouri, where he would again sew corn fields and tend chickens. In the mean time swinging his arms to stretch the fabric around his chest, he was grim, taut, and anxious, and he smelled of the earth in which he'd lain most of the evening, awaiting a call to arms.

"Ready?" asked the staff sergeant in a low voice, knowing that a shout might bring unwanted attention from the enemy line. He stared disgustedly at the eight men assembled before him, their faces smudged with ash, and spat disapproval into a puddle beneath the duckboard where he stood.

"Ready," Gabriel answered, recognizing the revulsion that passed over his staff sergeant's face.

"Okay then," the staff sergeant said, and spat again into the mud puddle. "Move out," he said and turned away from the night patrol but then thought better of ignoring them, these men who were still

his to care for and command, although he loathed them their death craft in the night. “Keep your heads down,” he warned and filled his mouth with tobacco. “Be back by dawn or I’ll have to write your Mommas.”

Gabriel nodded, turned on heel, and began jogging a few hundred yards through zigzagging fire bays and traverses along the trench his battalion called home. All the while he tried to ignore the surge of pride he felt at leading his squad as the Division’s best marksmen, a title he’d earned after shooting a German through the eye from a distance of 200 yards during a rain storm one month before.

Having been handpicked for sniper training at Camp Clarke, he’d spent the previous winter training with a British scope to extend the range of his army-issued weapon, a Spanish-American War relic Krag-Jorgensen, which often jammed and proved unsatisfactory. Upon his commission, and once he’d made his needs known to a particularly entrepreneurial supply office who’d also located an over-sized uniform for him, he’d traded for a simpler gun. This new mistress, whom he reverentially named “Ruth Junior” in honor of his true love back home, was his one luxury this side of the Atlantic, a Springfield ’03 with forward and rear sites, a chestnut stock, and a bolt-action chamber he loaded by hand, one round at a time. When she cooperated with him, and when the wind was still, he was deadly accurate to 500 yards and dangerous to 500 yards more. When she didn’t cooperate, though, or when the weather held sway, he hid from view, unmoving for hours, his spotter at his side, brothers in arms and leather boots.

Approaching a sap in the earthworks, no more than a series of artillery craters that hadn’t been filled in to reinforce the pre-existing trenches, his squad formed into their normal working pairs just at the spot where two mumbling sentries stood guard. Armed with a Hotchkiss machine gun and piled grenades, these gatekeepers smelled of carelessness and gum disease, so Gabriel turned away from them and into the sap towards No Man’s Land, his happy hunting ground until morning.

He crouched down, his shoulders lifted up to his ears. So doing, his chinstrap pulled tight against his throat and he was reminded of his first combat mission when he’d stumbled into barbed wire during

a battle coordinated by the French XXI Corps.

His arm had torn open and he'd bled more than he thought possible before he lost all sense of direction. Collapsing, his French trainer found him in a stupor, staunched his wound with a dirty handkerchief, and then threw a grenade to wipe out a German machine gun nest. Afterwards, Gabriel understood caution and had since sustained no further injuries, not even a scratch.

Entering the last shell crater at the end of the sap, he stopped short, the better to listen to the night, and kept himself from staring at a carcass being picked clean by rats. Behind him were the other seven specialists, four pairs of two like linked sausages, each man guarding the man in front of him, no one making a sound.

Fanned by superstition, Gabriel's squad was independent of normal Army command. Led by an absentee captain posted to 3d Division Headquarters under General Dickman, they organized themselves around confirmed kills rather than cowed discipline. Ruth Junior's breech was their standard, where Gabriel had carved his 22 notches for headshots, ignoring bodywork as the mess of regular infantry.

Always, they talked around the fact of the German snipers they knew were setting out each evening just like them. Doing so, they accepted various rumors as fact; that some Germans were eight feet tall; that some were bullet-proof, that still others had fangs and drank blood. Mostly, they resolved that, all things being equal, the only sure way to armistice was killing every ordinary or supernatural German they might find in their sightlines, and they each passed by Gabriel, touching Ruth Junior's breech for good luck before melting into the night.

Rolling into a ready crouch, Gabriel saw how the landscape was newly pocked by the further havoc of war. Where there had been pastures trampled by cows, there were now only scars and smoke. He saw the kill zones that were lined up opposite machine guns emplacements and he noted markers for safe passage back to the American line, one of which was a desiccated German soldier half buried in mud, his mouth gaping and his eye sockets empty.

Mindful of finding an evening's nest, he spotted a bomb crater that offered particularly good protection and crawled towards it, taking his time to hear coughs and snorts, and judge the likelihood of

killing another man before morning. Alongside him was Specialist Brian Aaron Jessup, his spotter, a man shorter than Gabriel, sized more like the Army's typical soldier. He had gray-blue eyes and a winning charm cultivated through several generations of exemplary military service and a seeming genetic disposition of optimism in the face of present circumstances. His father had been army cavalry and his grandfather had been Union navy. There were even rumors about further military service in the Jessup line, dating back through colonial times and into old British conquests, speculation which often filled their early evening hours before setting out for hunt under the scowl of another discomfited staff sergeant.

Where Gabriel was cautious and withdrawn, Brian was forward and quick. Less skilled with a rifle than the Missourian, Brian was more adept at judging distance and wind velocity, and it was his responsibility, armed with a handgun he named "Mary," to keep them safe from enemy sight lines. In short, Gabriel meant to kill the Hun while Brian was responsible for making sure the Hun didn't kill them.

Lying prostrate with their outpost established, a handful of stars shining through the cloudy canopy, the two Doughboys began nudging up the crater wall to spy on the German line when the heavens transformed into a canvas of hash marks and sulphurous smoke. Tracers crisscrossed trenches and flares burned beneath cotton parachutes, outlining two trench lines in parallel, at most 1,000 yards apart.

Gabriel pressed his face into the mud and lay flat. Cold and damp, the earth embraced him, and he fought the urge to retaliate by pulling Ruth Junior's trigger in some random strike.

Brian wiped mud from Mary's muzzle and spit. "Goddamn it," he said and winced, habitually rubbing the insignia of rank on his shoulder, a good luck charm coat of arms embroidered over an inverted chevron with a yellow silhouetted soldier on a field of green. "Goddamn it," he repeated but was muted by the deafening roar of German artillery.

Knowing they weren't the focus of enemy fire, they shared a look to remember the night's many curves and disappointments. All they knew for certain was that survival meant remaining concealed, regardless of how bombs shook the earth through a second, third, and fourth volley.

American 18-pounders gave answer as hostile canon fire met in the sky over France. Stokes mortars and 75 mm canon took turns barking; a munitions exchange of molten iron and sparkling filament, and the cries of dying men rent the night, echoing past Gabriel and Brian in their relative safety. Then the deluge poured from the stars, the rain falling in earnest, causing spillways to resume, and puddles to form within rings of still bigger puddles.

Drawn up, then, as if for a performance in some military academy, so textbook was the artillery prologue to infantry advancement, a German officer's whistle sounded and with it there arose a mass of men. To Gabriel and Brian, it was like all of Germany was suddenly climbing up and out of the ground, berserkers in their droves, stepping into the American crossfire to roar in the face of potential doom, and in so doing give the Doughboys pause for surrender, so ferocious was this glimpse into the heart of a seasoned army taking up arms against a near-virginal foe.

"What do we do?" Brian asked.

"I don't know."

Brian winced at the dull thump of bodies absorbing bullets, surrounded by falling rain and the patter of hundreds upon hundreds of boots, all around their artillery crater. Germans, Bavarians, and Prussians fell for the harvester's lathe but still they marched forward toward the American line, which had earlier been established by the French in the fall of 1914, and which now began to fail.

"We wait here 'til it's safe," Gabriel said, black mud creeping into the folds of his shirt, pants, socks, and into his ears, making him feel he was buried alive. He fondled Ruth Junior's trigger guard and chambered a clean round before reciting the 23rd Psalm, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies," when memory faded and he started into his favorite passage from Tarzan of the Apes, "Tenderly Kala nursed her little waif, wondering silently why it did not gain strength and agility as did the little apes of other mothers," chaining this memory of the great white ape further still into another memory of the summer afternoon when he'd learned to swim.

Around their crater, General von Boehn's 7th Army advanced

into a hail of tracers. Pistols and rifles fired against machine gun emplacements. Men fell and the two snipers could hear a group of Germans collecting in a nearby crater, no more than a few paces from where they wallowed in the mud.

More munitions exploded into a false dawn and then another whistle sounded from the German trenches. Marking Jerry's advantage, this wave of reserves, probably middle-aged Bavarian pensioners, ran out to meet the retreating Doughboys and shoot as many Midwestern farm boys in the back as possible.

From a corps-level view, Quartermaster General Erich Ludendorff's strategy, carried out by von Boehn, was to break open a new gap in the Allied line, an advantage which hadn't been successfully executed in over three years fighting. To Gabriel and Brian, though, within the confinement of this massive aggression, restricted to a battlefield of mere inches, such a strategy meant they were now cut-off from the succor of their reserves, alone.

"You okay?" Brian asked in a whisper.

"No," Gabriel answered, aware of how they would uniquely incur the wrath of their enemy if captured, a sniper being less than a man on both sides of the conflict.

Brian considered his body, noting the sweat along his groin and in his armpits. "You hurt?"

"No." Gabriel blinked and shook his head. "You?"

"No. Hungry."

Only a few hours had passed since rations but already Gabriel hoped for a sweet stick of gum. "We're caught," Gabriel said over coincident machine gun fire and closed his eyes to try and think. He dreaded having to face the German squad only a few feet away and he further dreaded the effort to safely gather the other four pairs of American sniper teams so they might keep from picking each other off in the wild. Mostly, though, he dreaded surviving the night and coming day without help from the rear since no one would miss them, save for their captain, who would just-then be mounting a counterattack while their staff sergeant was, in all likelihood, dead.

COMBUSTIBLE

by LISA HEMMINGER

If you never listen to your mother—
do so, if possible, on the deathbed.
Fire is more likely easier to climb into, but once
I'm in it, it's inviting and smells like her home.

My shiny ornament eyes
swing on invisible strings up
and pull her smile. It's (still!) like staring
at the sun. An embarrassing anger shoots
a flare between us —You aren't the sun!
You're already a tipped-over urn!

The last I heard of her:
a sappy vacation Bible school tune,
the squish-squish of nurses' clean shoes,
my hands rubbing. That night I saw

her again, a child's body
washed in 10,000 colors.

When sun comes around again
I realize she was talking about it,
the sun, at least in the way it measures days
and days. "One day, honey
everything spills its secrets. For instance," she says to me
"all my life I held a reservation for this"
(she couldn't say the D word)—

I waved to her, but she was gone,
too busy swimming straight into the sun.
That shocked me so much I fell out

of my dream. How can something dying
for such a long while hit so hard and be so bright? Right
after, the sun called me to work.

MATINEE

by LISA HEMMINGER

So here's the plot: I'm on a blind date, doing something I never do,
Watching a movie I've seen before, trying to be someone I never am and
Never will be for someone for whom I'll get no real feel.

THE date is blind, but unfortunately MY date is not.
She totally sees so totally sees that she's loose publicly with a
 humungous bruise,
The squished-out brown slime of a dropped or thrown-down banana.

And now....
The movie's stuck,
The movie's stuck,
The movie's stuck,
With giant red lips about to do the dance and say the words fuck
And I wish that I WERE blind
And security's problem to clean up, though some would say
That's just the problem.

And I wonder what movie your watch
What movie your watch
What movie your watch
What movie your watchdog is letting you watch these days.
Then the projectionist straightens up the spine--
And present presently presents itself.

And the loop de
Loop de
Loop de
Loop de Love rolls on.
And then again
 then again
 we're blind.

MY FAMILY'S STORY

STORY PROBLEM

by LISA HEMMINGER

Bobby and Jo want to start a family. They've only known each as long and wide as four beers and 10 cigarettes kindly provided by the USO, but they come from homespun hometowns about 53 miles apart that have taught them both that war times, at all times, is equal to or greater than one million pounds of best intentions. They are both into numbers—Bobby crunches them and Jo, well... she just is one. They are both decorated veterans.

Add Bobby to Jo and the result is 17 children, five of which are allowed to live, and in hoping to be perfect parents, Bobby And Jo try to decorate each child in a unique but similar way, like China patterns all swirling in. Instead, each of the five runs either parallel or perpendicular to the subset of function, making Bob and Jo scream Why? Why? Why? after all the songs that we've sung you. Without precedent, Bob starts to screw the parabola, hoping to find a wild hair amongst his too many straight lines.

Miles away is a variable we'll call the J&B Electronics store, which, had it been built of 1960s plywood (which cost about 60 cents a yard), would have increased this couple's happiness by about 10 times to the 17th power. Bob and Joan own seven dogs, too many cats for Joan to ever handle and pine trees with diameters twice the size of the entire family abroad. All of which is not enough for now career-in-arrears Robert, who at 46, chooses a top-shelf 22, counts to ten more times than anyone should count to ten, takes his last breath, number 500 billion or so, thinks of his wife, so pert at 5'2", his favorite daughter with a husband half her age, and his youngest, who, he thinks, if she takes the right number of steps in the right direction will end up happy in this little world, which for him, has now shrunk down to below the realm of negative numbers. Factor in BLAM.

Joanne goes on for another 21.378 years, during which she cries 1,799, 116 tears, finally leaving her five children behind at 5:22 p.m. EST about as far into the year 1991 as is left behind. Of the five, three get along with another three, and two get along only with another two, although one of those three hasn't seen all three she claims in about five times as many years. Three run the xy gamut, two the xx, and like their dad they all, though statistically improbable, tend to screw the parabola.

Now, how many steps would Bobby and Jo have had to miss all those years ago in order to bring this story problem to its most positive conclusion, if, of course sentimentality were subtracted? It's a question my siblings and I have been pondering for years and we've decided that although there must be appendices of answers somewhere, it is skewed along the lines of the screwed parabola, which stretches wildly knowing into the unknown.

TWO MINUTES TO TALK TO EMILY DICKINSON

by LISA HEMMINGER

I like your hair. After you died, your sister Vinnie argued and cried about it, it was too tight, too thin, too closely pinned to your head like your mouth through its life. You are, Emily, the only nova you never knew. You blew a century aside with dried up ink, you first, fast mistress of mistrusted meter, postmodern cadence and beats measured out unlike any recipe, ever. I hold you very carefully in my heart where you're alive and well and in the prettiest state — the finally knowing where all poems start. For 100 years and counting, we've been tapping on your grave. Men live in Amherst just because you died there and there are 66-year-old women named Emily after you. Libraries hold you high in the air, schools dissect you, philosophers digest and reassemble thoughts you thought long since left behind. You teach me words like daguerreotype, tippet and tulle. I dreamt you swept through my life on a Saturday night, laughed and then said, "Lisa, you party like multiple tables of men!" I have both footnoted and noted you loudly instead. I carry your words around and around in things called busses that lap modern miles. Your most famous poem became "Because I could not stop for death" and did you really never? You laid a town down when you entered the ground in a white, flannel shroud. You constantly show me the strength of a pause. So, if I worship in orchards and count the bees in the field and save wild nights, wild nights for mooring in thee will I someday make my glorious way to women like you and Anne and Sylvia? Have you chatted with Plath? Do you talk incessantly now in death to work out shy anemone pains of your past? I know you're safe and warm in your solitary cell. Sleep well, Emily. I'll continually croon for you, my epiphany, my poltergeist poet, my fuselage muse.

THE VINDICATOR

which is the name of my hometown newspaper

by **LISA HEMMINGER**

My paper route included Higgins Funeral Home,
where I saw my dad dead in his favorite suit.
Every Monday through Friday at 3:15 PM I laid
The Vindicator to rest in the black mailbox that
 creaked like the coffins inside.

Then I pulled my paper sack down the scented hallway
to the water fountain for the living people. I'd tiptoe
tennis-shoe soft up to each exhibit and stare at the
 black fingernails
of men and peeling lipstick of women who didn't have time to primp.

Occasionally, there was a funeral alive in the building and that meant
Mr. Higgins, who lived upstairs, embalmed and bottled bodies
 in the basement,
monitored dirges on the floor between. He'd rub my sweaty
 10-year-old bangs
with a fish-cold hand that stank like flowers. I balked
and walked away remembering my dad's hair,
parted on the wrong side—forever.

THE ALPINIST

by **R.J. JORDAN**

Alistair came home on Friday and hung his coat in the hall closet as he usually did. He kicked off his leather shoes, took out his gortex jacket and his bomber hat and put them on. Then he laced up his hiking boots, grabbed his gloves, his sunglasses and his ice-pick and proceeded to climb the stairs to the second floor.

The hardwood boards gave way to mossy stones growing tiny purple flowers. The banister disappeared in the icy air. The going was tough but the sun hung low in the sky like a fair-haired child and he felt happy to be on the mountain again.

Halfway up a herd of weary caribou passed him heading down.

“Where are you going?” he asked after watching them a while.

“We’re going to the reservation to live with our Eskimo brothers,” one of the stragglers answered.

When Alistair reached the summit, he breathed in deeply to completely fill his lungs. He could see the horizon and his favorite landmarks being overrun by the growing city, and the caribou just below him with the yearlings playing behind the herd. As bittersweet as it all was, he felt grateful. Although his children would never know the world he loved so much, he, at least, could come to know the world they loved for themselves.

**ONE-
OR
TWO-
OR
MORE-SIDED**

by **KATHY J. LEE**

Intimate

We talk.

For lunch, he had sushi at that place downtown—the one that feels like a narrow hallway with the fat chef who has blond hair. I stubbed my left toe on the damn coffee table again, and my editor is finally divorcing that auto-mechanic who hangs her panties from his rearview mirror.

They dance.

He scrutinizes every curve and twist of her lithe body in its loose cotton t-shirt and pants that end just below the knee. In turn, she looks to him, searchingly, for any hint of a smile or a nod or cock of the head or purse of his lips.

We quote classic William Shatner, we lose chess pieces to the dog, and we litter the refrigerator door with fluorescent Post-Its. On Sunday, we had Bobby-and-Cheryl over for white wine and chicken parmesan.

They touch, taste and breathe grimy bass lines, and they grip one another's skin as sweat slides down the dips and crevices of their bodies. On Tuesday, she called to say that she felt inspired, and they disappeared together into the studio.

We share secrets that are no longer even secrets. We purchase ottomans at Ikea. In the mornings, he grunts softly while emptying his bladder into the toilet that we take turns cleaning.

They pull; they push; they move and tire.
They use few words.

We make love, he and I, on over-washed, navy-blue jersey sheets. He keeps his eyes closed, and I wonder who he's fucking.

Utility

"How come you're only nice to me in bed?" he murmurs.
"Am I really?" she idly replies.
She slips her naked curves against the hard slope of his back.
"I love you when you're naked..."

First Love

With exquisite care, he charmed the inner porn-star to the surface of his beloved. With her newfound power, she went out to conquer the world.

Addiction

She, who steeped herself in the colors etched on his skin, inhaled his magic through her button nose and devoured his attention with her dilated eyes.

He has a fiancé, who would scowl when young women came over and take her clothes off when young men came over.

The mistress, who craved the hurt of his hand around her waist, the sting of his lips against her skin and the thrust of his body from behind hers.

The cheater, who worshipped the warmth and welcome of her cunt.

They cut thick white lines on the smudged glass next to Gideon's Bible, took bottles down from the wall to pass them around, and kept the rooms awake with their crashing laughter and moans.

Today, he is shirtless in his yard, and his hair is freshly buzzed—sometime within the last three days. He ducks his head, and he dives behind a van.

She keeps pressure on the gas pedal, averts her face from the woman by his side and vows this will never happen again.

Stained

There is blood all over his penis. It is smeared on his stomach and his pelvis, and it clings to the neatly-groomed wires of his pubic hair.

But she cannot see the blood, as she cannot see his face. Her back is arched, and she waits on her hands and her knees. Inside of her, there is heat; and yet, there is nothing—there is no head, there is no face, there is no body, and there is no heart. There is only blood.

Hot Potato

One marriage, two marriage, three marriage, four.
Five marriage, six marriage, seven marriage—whore!

Secret

He had pimples on his back—all over his back, and they came in assorted sizes and colors.

The big, purple ones frightened her. She was wary of their pulsat-

ing anger, like they might light up and buzz if she grazed them in the wrong way. They boiled out of his skin, like the dying burble of a reptilian beast sucked into the swamp, and Jenna's smile stretched tighter if she was ever seen out in public with them.

"Let's go to the beach," he'd say. To which she would smile slyly and tug him towards the bedroom.

"Mmm...sounds great," she'd whisper, kissing his neck and lingering behind his ear.

Some of the smaller, pinker ones stood ready to squirt at any moment. Some of the tiniest, flesh-colored ones weren't even visible; they were palpable only to the tips of her fingers.

Her manicurist hated the flakes of dead flesh that always accumulated beneath her nails.

"What you do when leave here all time?" Sue Lin chides. "Scratch with dead dog all day? Why nails all time so dirty?" Sue Lin scoffs and shakes her head. Inside her own head, Jenna hears his playful voice:

"Scratchy, scratchy?" he requests. When Sue Lin deftly massages Jenna's hand and fingers, it almost feels like he is nudging his head into her lap.

The first time that she slept with him, Jenna had been drunk—too drunk to remember anything the next morning, the next week or next ever.

"None of it?" he asked, dripping onto the bathmat. "Look at the welts on my shoulders!"

And so she looked, and what she saw was that he had pimples on his back. Since then, she's been a lot more careful.

Longevity

A pink little porker—disposed of her baby pudge by year three.
Grade-school reserve, obedience rankled into deadly adolescent silence and brooding. Then, Motherhood! Over and over and over.

Her instinctive love mutates, and her protective impulse is misunderstood.

Thus, four beautifully flawed daughters will wear matching blacks on the most anticipated day of their lives.

BUBBLE GIRL

by MEAGAN MARSHALL

scours the city in search
of a pin, one steak

knife to end this seclusion—
Pop the doll of herself,
 rubbed past its plush
into an action figure
with punchy, working parts

 Through
pinkened square eyes: a tissue

film that retracts her
words; they bounce,
 burst – silence edges
once and awhiles

Afternoon, she lobs herself
off the Coronado bridge,

to puncture and drain,
egress pure as boiled water

 Her tailspin scarcely
ripples the earth,

when cold swells curl
at dusk, she'll float to shore
watch sun pour into the Pacific,
pray for a needle—

CHANGING FORM

for Rebecca

by **MEAGAN MARSHALL**

Sanitized sheets and care packages
wrapped us in that room,
the change of form already begun.

Six stare and wait
no words but sobs,
sucking my stomach thin

Your breathing labors,
tasting is a labor you say,
doesn't savor as it did

Skin drawn over caverned bone
the tubes and drip run,
coagulate with humming din.

We watch the Padres lose.
We watch the steady slowing chest
shallow breath and blue fingertips—

we watch.

FEBRUARY

by **MEAGAN MARSHALL**

Yr tips have yellowed,
branches darken in the rain
scabbed bark slithering to suck
moisture from our day,
one drop to crack your knuckle—

February birch,

my skin is just as thin, it breaks
and rips, my tips, like sugar, glazed
cubes, your handfuls of winter expose
cities at the thick of me,
February I walk to you—

I let the rain stream through.

SAN DIEGO AT 1 AM

by MEAGAN MARSHALL

I drove south on the 5—
sliding unconsciously by like water,
through the 8 east—
to the 15 with glass cracked
One. Big. Glum. Circle.
Dead of night drying salt
rivets on my jelled neck

Billboard promises present and pass
like new— like another city I happened
to be just sailing through,
the side show its usual yet
shifted, this time I sunk in
the la-di-da houses,
one long insuck of thin breath—
mustard Shells, row of palms, plexi-green dot,
as I shot through the cool black
trying to get back into your light.

TONIGHT IT'S RAINING

after Marguerite Duras

by **MEAGAN MARSHALL**

pouring around the house and on the beach.
I no longer love you as I did on the first day,
with teeth like baseballs,
each eye a perfect mud pool,

I no longer—

Everything was as usual—the asters,
the cobalt shadow of our terrace
turning in cloudy puddles, and yet you,
you, you shifted— you were absent,
and then, I began to write—

while I no longer love you I no longer
love anything, my words
pour into the sand.

WHAT YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT 4 BROWNS

by TYRONE NAGAI

10 Things You Don't Know about James Brown

1. James Brown was a Republican.
2. Miles Davis credited James Brown as a musical influence.
3. James Brown dropped out of school in the seventh grade. He never learned to read sheet music.
4. Al Sharpton sang background vocals for James Brown.
5. James Brown played semi-professional baseball. He was a left-handed pitcher. He also boxed.
6. James Brown idolized Little Richard. Both grew up in Macon, Georgia.
7. James Brown supported Hubert Humphrey for president in 1968.
8. Because there were few African American youth living near the studio in Los Angeles, James Brown used a group of mostly white and Asian children to sing the chorus on "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud."
9. James Brown spent a total of six years in prison.
10. James Brown is still alive.

11 Things You Didn't Know about Jim Brown

1. Jim Brown was a centerfold in Playgirl magazine in 1974.
2. When he was four years old, Jim Brown attended a segregated school in Georgia.
3. Jim Brown's mother worked as a maid for a wealthy family in Long Island, New York.
4. While attending a mostly white high school, Jim Brown lettered 13 times in football, baseball, basketball, lacrosse, and track. He also founded a gang named the "Gaylords."
5. After high school, no one offered Jim Brown an athletic scholarship because of his race. Instead of collegiate sports, he played minor-league baseball for the New York Yankees. He was a pitcher.
6. Jim Brown retired from professional football to act in the war movie *The Dirty Dozen* (1967).
7. Richard Pryor was a close friend.
8. Richard Nixon was a friend too. Jim Brown supported Nixon's 1972 presidential campaign.
9. Jim Brown founded the Amer-I-Can program in 1988, which aims to empower inner-city youth. The organization facilitated a cease-fire between the Bloods and Crips in Watts, California.
10. On March 13, 2002, Jim Brown started serving a six-month jail sentence for refusing to attend domestic violence counseling.
11. Jim Brown is alive.

12 Things You Didn't Know about John Brown

1. John Brown fathered 20 children.
2. John Brown lived briefly in Ohio with Jesse R. Grant, the father of Ulysses S. Grant.
3. Southerners believed John Brown's 1859 attack on Harper's Ferry, Virginia represented the wishes of the Republican Party. Republicans deny this.
4. John Brown's commitment to abolition galvanized after a pro-slavery mob murdered Minister Elijah P. Lovejoy in 1837.
5. While raising funds for his insurrection, John Brown met with William Lloyd Garrison, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and Frederick Douglass among others. Douglass discouraged blacks from joining Brown's movement.
6. John Brown expected an army of 4,500 abolitionists to meet him at Harper's Ferry. Even though a total of 21 men showed up, he proceeded with his attack.
7. Lieutenant-Colonel Robert E. Lee captured John Brown at Harper's Ferry after several days of fighting.
8. Victor Hugo wrote an open letter calling for the pardon of John Brown and warning of a possible civil war in the United States.
9. John Wilkes Booth borrowed a militia uniform to watch the execution of John Brown.
10. John Brown was hung for treason at 11:15 am. He was pronounced dead at 11:50 am.

11. John Brown's wife and children moved to Red Bluff, California in 1864.

12. John Brown is dead.

13 Things You Don't Know about Henry "Box" Brown

1. Henry Brown worked at a tobacco factory in Richmond, Virginia. He once saw a slave whipped 100 times for stealing six cents. On another occasion, he saw a slave lashed 200 hundred times for excessive singing.

2. Henry Brown used his wages to buy "time off" for his wife Nancy, so she could raise their three children. All five Browns were slaves. Henry and Nancy married in 1830.

3. In 1848, Joseph H. Colquitt sold Nancy and her three children to a Methodist minister in North Carolina.

4. As Nancy and the children shuffled away with ropes around their necks, staples in their arms, and shackles on their feet, Henry Brown's oldest child repeatedly cried, "Father, father, father."

5. Henry Brown walked hand-in-hand with Nancy for four miles, until he was forced to let her go.

6. To escape his bondage, Henry Brown paid a friend \$86 to mail him in a dry goods box to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

7. The box was constructed by Henry Brown to be two feet and six inches deep, two feet wide, and three feet long. It was labeled "This side up with care."

8. Henry Brown made the 350-mile journey to Philadelphia in 27 hours. He traveled by rail, wagon, and ferry.

9. When the box was opened, Henry Brown said, "How do you do gentlemen?" Then, he sang a psalm from the Bible.

I awaited patiently for the lord, and he heard myself in prayer.

10. Henry "Box" Brown created a moving panorama called the "Mirror of Slavery." It depicted slave life and unusual escapes. He became an outspoken abolitionist.

11. Frederick Douglass once said: "Had not Henry Brown and his friends attracted slaveholding attention to the manner of his escape, we might have had a thousand Box Browns per annum."

12. In 1850, Henry Box Brown moved to Great Britain to dodge the recently enacted Fugitive Slave Laws. Twenty-five years later, he returned to the United States as a mesmerist and conjurer. No one knows if he ever found his family.

13. The spirit of Henry Box Brown will never die.

A STORY ABOUT THE FOOT

by TAYLUR THU HIEN NGO

An ancient seaside village in 1970: my father's right foot goes out one night alone. My father speaks of this matter as if the foot were a girlfriend from whom he'd simply grown apart. After the war he thinks deeply about how to walk again. He stops slouching, wears hand-made wool trousers, every night, he dreams in English. And when his second daughter runs off with a writer, he rubs the stump and tells her, I have eaten more salt than you have rice. In another country my father's talk of returning home fills the years with myth, nothing more. Where did that right foot go? I heard the foot never belonged to my father but to the old man selling cuttlefish by the river. I heard the foot longed to see Ha Noi in the springtime, the blossoms silent and alarming. I heard the foot spoke to the G.I.s outside our window when they came that night for the one named Charlie.

HELLO

by **ALYCIA RABY**

After a long day at the office, Leigh smiled when she saw the three missed calls from Audio. On the way home in the car her fingers dialed instinctively.

“What took you so long?” Audio said without preliminaries.

“I was at work. You know I have to work until 4:30. I’ve told you a million times,” Leigh said, imagining her sister leaning back in her desk chair by the window. The window would be partway open and a breeze would ruffle the leaves of the plant on the window sill. Audio would swing back and forth in her swivel chair.

“Yeah, well, maybe you should check your phone anyway. Do you know if this town has any cemeteries?” Audio would swing around to face the window, leaning forward to put her elbows on the windowsill. She was still new enough to this town to call her sister up to ask where things were.

“I assume it must. Why wouldn’t it?” Leigh turned the radio down so she could hear Audio better.

“There doesn’t seem to be much else, so I thought maybe you had to go out of town to visit some grandmama’s grave as well.” Audio was used to the life of a larger city. Leigh imagined her flicking imaginary dust motes out her window. Cars would roll by lazily before the heavier rush hour traffic.

“You know, if a town has nothing else, it usually has a cemetery. People get sort of touchy about their dead.” Leigh turned right several streets away from her apartment. “Do you have weird body parts in your freezer or something else I should know about?”

Her sister would pick at the leaves on her plant, rolling the velvet between her fingers and brushing the petals of the only open flower, a rich blue-violet flower with white brushed up from the center.

“No. I just like to sit at night in the cemetery. I think better

there. Ones with headstones are better because then there's something to lean against. It's so beautiful with the stars above and so quiet," Audio said. She would have found a brown leaf and pinched it off.

"And you don't find this creepy in any way?" Leigh asked while making a left turn.

"No, why should I? I mean it's not as if an undead hand's going to come up from the grave to get me for sitting on it. They should be happy they have company." Audio would run her finger meanderingly up and down the sill edge, keeping her face neutral for the next question. "Have you ever tried it?"

Leigh pulled into her parking spot at her apartment complex and turned off the engine. "Sitting in a cemetery? No." She gathered up her things to get out of the car.

"Afraid of what you'll see in a dark graveyard?" Audio asked as tonedead as possible, which meant she felt it was an important question, so much so she would have stopped moving to wait for the answer.

"Not really. I guess cemeteries have always felt crowded to me. As if I don't belong there. It's not the spirits or the graves, but the sense that lives have been lived, and everything is so... constricted." Leigh fumbled with her keys to unlock her apartment door.

Audio would have sat up in her chair and put her hand out on the desk. "That's too deep for me."

They decided under the fort in the yard was where the undersea grotto would be. Inside the fort was the shore, where they made the prince sit. Leigh had two mermaid tails for her dolls and Audio didn't have any, but the secret was to cover the legs to make them whole because that made a mermaid and mermaids always had grottoes. Some of their mermaids had colored or flowered tails depending on the type of fabric they used. Leigh even found a flower from a nearby bush to give her favorite mermaid doll.

Audio swam her doll through the air up to the level of the fort.

"No. She can't talk to the prince yet," Leigh said. "She has to see him first and he sees her and then she disappears into the grotto. He only gets a peep of her first and then she suddenly changes to a human and they walk on the land together."

Audio continued to swim her doll through the air without paying any attention to Leigh. A breeze moved Audio's hair.

"No. You're doing it wrong. Besides my doll is the one with the real tail so she gets to have the prince."

"I want to be the real mermaid," Audio said, stopping her doll mid-swim. "You always get to be the real mermaid. I thought they were all sisters anyway. That makes them all princesses."

"No, the mermaid princess only has six sisters. I've already got them all. Yours just live in the grotto and don't go up to land."

Audio put her doll down to pick up the prince, making him walk along the beach by himself.

"Did you hear what I said?" Audio asked.

"Hm? Oh, yeah. It's weird she's getting married. I guess I didn't really picture her as the marrying type." Leigh imagined the church with the copious amount of ribbon that would be involved, as the two women gossiped over a mutual friend.

"I guess if she's certain. . ." Audio said. Leigh tried to imagine her sister sitting in a church like that and failed.

"I was thinking, when you said Rachel was getting married, of this TV show I watched last night. They put on the perfect wedding or something like that. You know, one of those dream-come-true shows? Well, anyway, the bride picked out these really ugly bridesmaid dresses. I thought of everything she could have picked, she chose something unflattering to any body type." Leigh paused for a moment to mentally place the bridesmaids in the church. "I think ruffles should be banned in these affairs."

"Yeah, I wouldn't do that to my bridesmaids," Audio said. Leigh mentally placed her sister at the front of the church instead of the back where escape was easy.

"I thought you weren't getting married. Ever," Leigh said. The thought of her sister at the top of the aisle was enough to make Leigh laugh on the phone, but she stopped herself.

"Okay, yeah, but if I was, I wouldn't humiliate my bridesmaids like that. I might not even have bridesmaids." Audio was all alone at the front of the church in Leigh's mind.

"Can I wear ruffles at your wedding?" Leigh asked.

A CHRONOLOGY OF SISTERHOOD

After A. Loudermillk's "Daring Love"

by **ALYCIA RABY**

I am daring time to stand momentary,
to be the single digit AM asleep, to be rat-touched
eighth-note lipstick. Time, suspend with me,
insects unhuggable and red spilled hair,
time: be CDs heartbeating the wall, be the giant African rat.

Time, the car like my sister's underwear,
gravel on the roof. Time is the music-blown fuse,
time curled hair into dandelion puffs. Stop, time,
an apology under the door, superhuman swings,
hair caught on the wires under my bed. Time
is the willow tree wild and sawdust piles,
fingernails and kicking, a protection that goes
beyond pride. Stop with the panda and
which animal is better. Tell me, time, why you have to
change the current when we don't even want to swim.

Become, time, banana french toast and not
speaking to mom, hunting eggs out of season,
animals shadowed on walls. Become nights cracked up into
sleep, counters claimed in single, and questions
only called by her. Time, be the cup of leaves,
games spread floor-length. I am asking, time,
for pillow lodgings against lightning, suitcases individual

A CHRONOLOGY OF SISTERHOOD

and duplicate. Give me the mice of two lifestyles,
lines forgotten and remembered eternally.
I want the stagecoach to nowhere and the house
outside, a tissue box in miniature.

Just leave her and me in the shallows. I dare you—

THE DEVIL IN MY SHOES

by **ALYCIA RABY**

The corner used to follow me
with its extinguishing shadow,
 but tonight
the most intoxicating alcohol
is mine in the black strap curving
heel over bone. The power
of refusal snakes from the point
tattooing the wooden floor.
The seductively silver buckle
over my fourth toe sways around the fire
reflected by the counter top
in the forest of barstools,
and the red of my nails is the
siren voice that cries out,
capsizing the men,
while they swim the burn to shore.

REDDENING

by **ALYCIA RABY**

I am the spindly crown of the valley,
north of the known northern California,
the unheard of regions readily explored,
barely recognizable without sunny beaches.

I am 75° and in a parka,
110° and not warm enough yet.

I am the live oaks wrestling with digger pines,
foothills evolving into mountains,
rivers pooling into unnatural lakes,
deer made bold by skittish civilization.

I am Theban dirt that bites back,
the clay that wants to stay in the ground.

I am the smell of wet in winter,
heat like a favorite blanket in summer,
history cemented into the bricks,
and nailed to the railroad tracks.

I am culture lofted frozen in museums,
cowboys spectral and embodied rodeo.

I am the permanent vacation,
three digit towns buried in themselves,
smoke like wildfire acres,
a downed swan bridge in still life.

I am coloring out loud.
I am red-dirt-wonderful.

BLACK ON BLACK CRIME

by DEROLD SLIGH

My beef
is with the brother
who is just like me,
that Mr. Me-Too,
that blacker-than-most
brother; his manuscript
is a mirror—my mug-shot
reflected in every page.
That brother who sings
rather than writes.
That standard written
English brother who said:
“When Reagan came,
the gangs came.”
My beef is with the one
who says: “Imagine someone putting a highway
right through your neighborhood,
then you’ll understand hip-hop.”
My beef is with a history
of black men running
from their own psychic frailty.
My beef is with the every-45-second
brother sexually assaulting
the sisters. I erase his education
with incarceration, spray graffiti
over that brother’s manuscripts
and get pissed when he defines it
as a palimpsest. My beef is with
the hybrid of something formal
and something urban—the hip-hop

DEROLD SLIGH

sonnet; the concrete sestina;
the 22-inch rims on the ode;
the platinum teeth of his elegies.
That outdated-map brother: your boundaries
are changing. America's stretched you
taut and raps on you like a drum.
America sneers at you
when you enter the club
and you scoff back. O negro slave,
O dark purple ripened plum
glistening in the sunset
of a noose-hanging horizon,
look what you've done
to the air molecules with your music—
they have not known such vibrato.
Go back to drying the dew-stained
ferns for the white man, brother baboon—
clear a trail for him and be that canopy of foliage
that keeps him dry in the dank pinewood-air.
I envy your hope and try to dig up your seeds
like a mole. Six feet won't do: that's only 3 inches
under the membrane of racism. America:
the compact mirror
I look through to see the world,
where I saw the plump lips
of your gummy grin. You talk
so loud when you argue;
you are just like me—brother,
my beef is with you.

GOD CREATED SIGN LANGUAGE

by DEROLD SLIGH

My father has one
hand—fist of love
is the wielder of switch,
the bolt-tightening mitt
of greasy parts, the metacarpus
that slices watermelons
into smiles—

the hand that says I love you
and compares love to a tree—
roots gripping earth
as if not to be thrown
from this spinning world.

Or did he say
love is a mirror? I am always caught
in the labyrinth
of his asymmetrical mouth.

Are individual fingers
people, hairs on a head,
flames of a fire, and
what device does my father use to record
such music—

the maple-veined hands of tongue.
I am crippled yet brought to life
by those flying words.

SONG OF THE CARNIVORE

by DEROLD SLIGH

White meat of my flesh,
orange meat of the melon—
so American of us
to discriminate between meats.
Fire-hoses and dogs for that meat;
country club and tax relief for that meat.

I was never sure if you threw up
or you just never ate.
Regardless, your parents never liked me:
I suggested race and you pushed the plate,
asked for spinach, knowing spinach
would never come.

During our break-up,
you went on a tour of America—
a rainstorm of long-stemmed roses
bombarded the stage,
crowds implored encores.
But I am sure
your lips are parched
and bleeding just as before.

Wake like a Parisian girl and shiver
the dew and the leaves from your hair.
A roast awaits you in the terrace
that overlooks the street.
As for me, I will never go
to Europe again—
the African and Indonesian girls have leaves

in their hair too,
but they also enjoy meat.

Do not let the meat touch
the blood! Shake the Jew
from your hair and eat meat.
Shake the flesh from your Christian.
Eat meat.

30 days of fasting
was a lifetime for you.
You wear the month
like a silk pair of slacks—
they keep sliding down
the camber
of your curve-less body.

Ramadan your body.
Ramadan your new boyfriends
and their winter hats.
Ramadan your sandpaper kisses.
Your steam-boat town
and its whiskey jug river;
your cockapoo and his happy,
wagging tail; your lovely sisters, Ramadan.
Ramadan the acres you own
and your parents' hillbilly song.
Ramadan—your bones revealed
as if your skin was lingerie
for something else,
a soul perhaps.
Ramadan your soul.

DEROLD SLIGH

At sunset, you go for the wine
or you could never sleep—
Ramadan on you.
I don't ask
for much; I ask for meat.
But all I get in return is
Ramadan, Ramadan.

THE BARREL FIRE

by ANDY STEWART

Forty fingers. Eight hands. Four pairs—some gloved, some not. Some partially gloved, as the digits were clipped at the knuckles so that the fingers could flick flints, pinch cigarettes, unzip zippers or snap along with the tune of the vagabond players on the cul-de-sac, arms hung mid-air, like marionettes, their hands hovering closely over the small flames of a barrel fire.

“Ice tonight,” the woman with no gloves said. She held her hands closer to the flames than the rest, yet while the heat brought the blood back to the fingers, it also brought an ache that caused the digits to curl under like claws. There, on her nails, remained the faintest trace of polish that had almost completely flaked away. They were once painted pink, her nails. Although the bottle wasn’t labeled pink, and it would be a crime to identify that specific hue by anything other than its own unique, branded name. The bottle was almost empty when she found it, and some of the polish had spilled thickly on the label, causing the name to be obscured in the not pink hue. Only the first three letters of the color name were legible. ‘Blu.’ Perhaps it was called ‘Blush’, ‘Blushing Rose’, or maybe the ‘U’ was an ‘O’, and the rest of the name was ‘Bloom’, or ‘Blooming Orchard’. She only had enough for one coat on each nail. That’s why it flaked off so easily. Two coats lasted longer.

Pink was always her favorite color, though, no matter the shade.

“Ice tonight,” the man with gloves clipped at the knuckle confirmed. “I heard it when I passed the pawn shop. The TVs said so.” He held his hands farther back than the other three around the fire. His hands were big, and the gloves somewhat too small. He only had them for a couple of weeks. Right before the first freeze he traded a half bottle of cheap vodka for them. Right now that idiot must be kicking himself, the man with clipped gloves thought. That bottle of vodka might have lasted a night. But with any luck, the gloves

would last him a few winters. They felt tight, though. They were beginning to stretch out, but the heat from the fire and the contrast of bitter cold caused his hands to swell. Tight gloves were better than no gloves. That was for sure. The visible ends of his fingers were callous and grimy, and black because he was a black man with black hands and black fingers squeezed into tight black gloves. No one noticed the small scars that extended slightly from underneath the glove to the insides of his ring and pinky fingers.

No one ever noticed. No one gave a shit about anything but keeping their hands warm: masked by gloves, or hidden in the cuffed sleeves of jackets, or sat on, or tucked under armpits with awkward arms crossing chests. Certainly no one noticed the pink scars contrasted against his black skin. But if anyone ever asked, he had a story: “When I was a boy, I accidentally grabbed onto a hot iron,” he would say. That’s what he’d said when he was a kid, anyway. The truth was that he was born with webbed fingers—like a fish, if fish had fingers. But more like a frog. His brothers always made fun of his hands, calling him a guppy or a frog man, but they never spread the rumors at school. It was their joke. The man with gloves clipped at the knuckle grinned. Frogman he thought, and managed an almost invisible smile.

“And to think its only going to get colder,” the man with the worn, dirty white gloves said. “I always seem to forget the cold of the winter during the summer. Then, winter comes again and reminds you just why you hated it so much in the first damn place.”

His hands trembled. Not just from the cold, though. They’d trembled since the spring, when there was no reason for it. He thought about going to the clinic, but there was no money, and if there was he would not waste it on bad news from a doctor. He did have a little money. A small wad of cash and change tucked away. Some of it he kept in his shoes, some tucked inside the lining of his coat, but the bulk of it, the big bills, he kept folded safely under the palm of his gloves. There weren’t any holes there, so no one could catch a faint glimpse of green, and no one would ever look so closely.

He was going to find his daughter and treat her to dinner. He would have enough to rent a room for an hour so that he could shower and clean up, and maybe would even have enough to buy a new shirt or slacks.

Twenty-eight dollars and fifty-seven cents.

He repeated the new amount to himself every time he came upon some more change. That was his grand total yesterday, twenty-eight dollars and fifty-seven cents. Today he got lucky. A woman coming out of the drug store on 11th and Wills saw him leaning against the wall and bent down, holding four dollar bills out to him from a pair of clean, powder-blue gloves.

Thirty-two dollars and fifty-seven cents. He said to himself now, hardly within range of anyone listening. No one listened, anyway. Everyone spoke to themselves, but no one ever listened.

“This is gonna be a bad one,” the man with proper, clean gloves said, shaking his head. “Damn right, I knew it. I knew it was gonna be a bad winter, Sandy, didn’t I tell ya’ it was gonna be a bad fuckin’ winter.” His hands were smaller than the rest, and he rubbed the fine cotton and polyurethane knit gloves together vigorously over the dying flames of the barrel fire.

“Yeah, Carlo. You sure did,” the woman with no gloves replied, her head down.

“Damn right, I did.” He hopped up and down in place. “Told you all. You gotta be prepared, ya know? Be prepared for the worst.” He rubbed his wet nose with the back of his gloved hand, leaving a faint streak of gleaming mucus on the fabric. “That’s why I got somewhere to go tonight. That’s why I’m gonna stay warm and you suckers are gonna freeze your asses off.”

“Go to hell, Carlo,” the man with gloves clipped at the knuckles said. His voice resounded deeply, all the way up the reaches of the brick alley way. “You got somewhere warm to be, then why the hell you here?”

“Just tryin’ to be hospitable, Frank,” Carlo grinned. “You know, all you fools can get in on this. Plenty of room,” he said, wringing his gloved hands and sniffing.

“I think we’re better off here,” said the old man with dirty white gloves.

Carlo laughed and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Suit yourself. Freeze your asses off.” He turned to walk away but paused before moving too far from the light of the dying fire. “Here,” he tossed

a small object to the ground where he'd stood, "Try it out and let me know if you feel the same way tomorrow."

He walked away chuckling to himself, leaving the three behind. They stared at him as he left and then towards the dark ground where he'd tossed the small object.

Ten fingers. One pair. Two small hands ungloved and damp from the wet street reached out from the shadows of a nearby garbage pile and carefully picked up the discarded gift.

The little girl moved slowly from her crouched position and moved towards the barrel fire. She had been there, crouched in the dark corner most of the night, watching and listening and rubbing her hands red for warmth. She always watched and listened. That's what she did at night, anyway, when there was no light to read. She clutched a book called an encyclopedia that explained everything in the world that started with the letters H through I. She'd found the encyclopedia lying in a pile of strewn trash, and thought it bad to ever throw away a book. That's what her mother had told her.

"Never throw away a book, There are plenty of people in the world who haven't read it yet." And then she would get a smack on the back of her hand that stung harshly and caused hot tears to run down her cheeks. Her mother was just a tall, thin silhouette, then, set against the whitish light of a window, telling her not to throw books away and smacking the back of her hand. That memory stayed with her night and day.

The little girl held the small plastic bag filled with the smallest amount of what looked like powder in the palm of her hand and inspected it. The fire flickered low, but the three strangers still stood around it, even though it was no longer warm, and cast only the faintest glow.

"Throw it in, little one," the old man with white gloves said, placing his hand on her shoulder. "Nothing there that's any good for you."

She stared at the packet in her hand, then at the fire before holding out her arm and turning her hand so that the packet slid off and fell in.

"That's a good girl. You ever see anything like that, you just either leave it or toss it, hear?" He dropped to his knees so he could look at her directly. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes," she said softly, gripping the book tightly in her arms.

"You don't have to be afraid," Frank said. "You got anybody lookin' after you?"

The child stepped closer to the barrel and looked down.

"You must be freezing, sweetheart," Sandy said. "Get closer. Bert, do we have anything else to burn?"

"No," the old man said, "Used the last bit of newspaper not too long ago."

"What do you have there, sweetheart?" Frank asked, lowering himself to his haunches.

She released her grip on the book and cautiously held it out for him to see.

"That's an Encyclopedia, huh?"

She nodded.

"Lot of good stuff to learn in there. What's your name?"

"Samantha," she said softly.

"Nice to meet you, Samantha. My name is Frank."

"We should throw the book in," Sandy whispered to Bert. "It'll stretch a few hours."

Samantha heard what the woman with no gloves said, and clutched the book to her chest.

"Goddamn it, Sandy. We ain't torchin' the kid's book. We ain't gonna burn it, Samantha," Frank reassured.

"She needs the heat, too." Sandy said, rubbing her already bulbous, red nose. "Look at her. She's blue."

Frank looked closer in the dim light, and the little girl was indeed pale. Her lips were a sickly blue and the rims of her eyes were pink and irritated.

"You feelin' okay?" Bert asked her.

"I'm cold," she whispered. "My feet and hands are numb."

"Get closer," Frank grabbed her shoulders and gently guided her closer to the small fire. He pulled off his gloves and held them out to her. "They big, but they should help."

She regretted letting go of her book, but the black man opened his hands kindly and she felt assured enough to let him hold it while

she pulled the large, black gloves onto her stiff hands.

“Throw it in, Frank,” Sandy said.

He didn’t reply, but instead shot her a glare that immediately silenced her.

“That better?” Bert asked.

Samantha nodded and grabbed the book from Frank’s hands.

Later in the night, when the other three were huddled close and asleep beside the barrel fire, Samantha grabbed her H-I encyclopedia and in the almost complete dark she thumbed through the first group of pages—Habalah, Habeas Corpus, Haiku, Hair and Haiti—and opened the book to her favorite page. It was about a place in Japan called Hiroshima, a place so warm that it had two suns. But one day the second sun grew too big and burned the entire city.

She closed her eyes and thought about the warm, sunny city in Japan. The book didn’t say if there were still two suns, but she imagined there was. A day sun and a night sun. The day sun would be brighter than the night one. It would never get cold.

A heavy wind whistled down through the alley and brought with it tiny ice pellets. They fell like rain drops at first, but as they fell in greater succession the pellets increased in size and bounced off the pavement in tcks. The last weak flames of the fire burned out, leaving only glowing embers.

One of the huddled three stirred, coughed, and fell silent once again.

Samantha could no longer see the pages of the book in her lap, but knew that it was open to the page of her favorite city. Without seeing, she carefully pulled at the page, angling so as to tear it out as close to the binding as possible. She didn’t want to lose a word or image. After a moment of slow tearing, she successfully freed the page from the rest of the book, carefully folded it into quarters and tucked it safely into the breast of her coat.

“What are you doin’, sweetheart?” It was Frank’s husky voice. He stirred himself from sleep and peered from behind his heavy hood.

She didn’t answer. Instead she ripped pages from the book and began crumpling them. Once she had a handful, she stepped to the barrel and tossed them in.

THE BARREL FIRE

The embers were not yet dead.

Frank pushed to his feet and moved beside the girl, placing a hand on her small shoulder.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said.

“I wanted to. It’s so cold.”

Both shivered as they leaned over the lip of the barrel and blew lightly on the embers. They glowed brighter in the darkness, then caught a small piece of the tinder aflame.

“The sleet’s picking up,” Frank said, pulling back his hood, directing his gaze upwards. “We’ll be fine, though. The fire will help.”

The pages ignited after only a moment, and Samantha went to tearing more from the book.

Twenty fingers. Four hands. Two pairs—one gloved, one ungloved. All, hovering over the small flames of the barrel fire.

“Do you want them back?” Samantha asked, looking down at the massive black gloves on her hands.

“No, Samantha.” He rubbed his scarred hands briskly and held them close to the flames. “I got thick skin.”

She checked inside her coat for the folded piece of paper. It was safe. The rest of the book really didn’t matter, so long as she could still read about her favorite city. The fire cast their bodies into long, watery shadows up the tall walls of the alley—like the lean shadow of her mother bending over her. Like one of the pictures of Hiroshima after the second sun burned it up: shadows forever burned onto a wall.

LAST LETTER TO AN OLD FRIEND

by ALICIA UPANO

Dee,

I am not sure this letter will reach you, partly because I no longer know where you live, or even if you are still alive. I imagine you are, as I'd often thought there was no end to your youth, and besides, outliving me won't be very hard to do. My wife has been telling me to go to the doctor for years now, but only recently have I felt that something has invaded my insides, making it hard for me to breathe. It is an anchor in my chest each morning, and I find it difficult to speak. I've come to writing Lani notes, which I believe she thinks is a sweet gesture I've concocted in my hours of retirement boredom, but it saves me from speaking often. At this point in our lives, there is not much to say anyway. She has known me these 43 years, though not as long as you. I feel that she and I can predict the substance of our days; it was she who felt the sickness coming before it arrived and I who feels her fatigue when she returns from the university. Yet she refuses to retire. She has never felt so young, she says, but her body, too, is aging.

I woke this morning, as always at 4:30, to walk the dog, Spotty, buy the Advertiser on the corner where the candy store used to be, and return to coffee, which Lani has timed to brew at 5 a.m. Ever since I retired, I have taken a liking to the crossword and Sudoku puzzles, which the wife says keeps my mind going. In these seven years, I've also read more than I had in all the years before. Left alone in the house, I discovered Lani's office to be a treasure that I had overlooked our entire marriage. I had teased her before, So many words, I'd say, what else can you learn? You're so smart already. And she would say, 'There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in

your philosophy,' All these years I thought she was a smart aleck, until I read her leather bound Shakespeare collection. Hamlet is one of my favorites; perhaps, I too, will go crazy, but it is you, Ophelia, who has haunted me.

While she is at the university, or grading blue books at home, I busy myself around the house. Last year I painted the house white and the trim green, the way it was when my parents lived here (you remember, don't you?) and redone the kitchen with those fancy countertops that Lani wanted. I even cook now, though admittedly mostly barbecue. Yesterday, I drove to Tanioka's to buy the dried aku poke that my neighbor told me about. Being only three days before Christmas, the parking lot was crowded, as well as the store. I bought two containers of the poke, some sashimi and tako, some sweet bread for breakfast, and a few mullet because they were on sale (fish is so expensive these days). When I finally reached the checkout, I saw a woman that was you, but you 49 years ago. She had that athletic build, as if she had been running the streets barefoot fueled on only rice and shoyu since she was a kid: broad shoulders, curvy arms, skin aglow. All that sunshine and sugar. She had your jaw, with that pointy chin and high forehead, and eyes a bit too close together. A cocky smile, with dimples, almost cartoonish. Even in her apron, while handling dirty money, she stood with her back erect, as if a rod was attached to her spine. Shoulders back. She was ready for a fight, or a runway. So oddly beautiful: combative and indiscernible. She must be yours, Dee. By the time you were that age, I had vowed to love you all the years of my life and when I saw her, your daughter, because it could be no one else's, I may have fallen in love with you all over again. She rang up the fish and bread, \$21.45. I shook my head at the past, how much a few fish and some bread would have cost back in 1958, and at you, caught in time through your daughter. Preserved. I thought, for a moment that I was young, too. That I was a different man.

I tend to write tangentially, but I suppose that's the problem of too much time. I do have a point. This letter to you is one of many. At first, when the heaviness in my chest proved that it had no intention of passing, I began to write my girls. I've got three: Miriam, Leila and Joyce. It was perhaps the first sentimental moment in my life as a father, and unfortunately, they will discover it after my death, as

I've sealed all these letters with specific instructions. Then I wrote to my brothers, Roger and James. Ricky died in 'Nam, did you know? I am considering writing him one anyway, and perhaps burning it. I am becoming more convinced, as I've moved on to Lani's philosophy texts, that there is something beyond my failing body, a part of me that will remain. So, Ricky must be somewhere, too. To Miriam I said, I remember you as a girl in that pretty Sunday dress, and I have been proud of you all my days. To Roger, I said, I've been lucky to have a brother so constant and courageous, and who can reel in a mahimahi nearly by himself. He is still the strongest of us, though he is now 72. And then there's only you and my wife left to write letters to, but I have been compiling this one since the day I last saw you in '61, in my head, this goodbye. Now I have been rankled by the young check-out woman yesterday, and am unsure of what to say. In my age, and through my reading, I have become more formal, but less kind.

I know it's foolish. Foolish words for a man with few days and spoken words. But I suppose that's what the hours are for, alone in the house I've always lived in. They say the closer you get to death that you begin to live your life backwards. My dad, he died back in '79, would only speak the old language in his final months. We'd gather around his hospital bed—me, Lani and my brothers and their wives—and he would say the names of his brothers, long dead in the old country. As if they had all come to visit him instead of us, or perhaps he was preparing to visit them.

I'm not sure I will be like that, living backwards. English has always been my language, this island always my home, these rooms always the containers of my life. For example, this morning when I woke up it was still raining. It has been raining all month, as it does most Decembers. As Spotty and I stepped onto the driveway, I watched my neighbor across the street pushing his car out of the mud. I watched another white pick-up put-put down the street, the exhaust coughing into the clear day. The anthuriums are blooming and the purple orchids are tumbling over the milky branches of the plumeria. The dogs are barking in the distance, the same place where they do military target practice. From here, the sound of the bullet hitting the target arrives as a tit-tit-tit, and is still as regular as a ticking clock.

What makes this day today, Dec. 22, 2006, rather than some De-

ember day in 1949, when I first met you? Back then, it was your Uncle who was spinning his Ford in the mud, the Garcia family car that would put-put-put down the street. How is your Uncle, by the way? Did he find happiness in the old country? The Garcia family has moved to the town over, to those new houses with chimneys. Here, the birds are still chirping in those trees that line the creek, the flowers are still blooming or dying under the relentless rain.

And so, nowadays I think that I am living in both times at once. I am a boy in my childhood home and a man in my own. Then I hear the gravel crunching in the driveway and I realize that Lani has returned from work, and that you, the 8-year-old you, is not coming by to ask me to play today.

You, as always, are an exception, Dee. All the other letters have been addressed to family, who have put up with my stubborn refusal to see the doctor. Perhaps I hope to ease any misplaced guilt after my death. I see it in my girls' faces when they come to visit, in Lani's when she sees me coughing over the crossword, their desire to fix the problem that is my body. But you, who has cared so little not to search me out on this island of nearly 600 square miles, will feel no guilt. Perhaps you'll read my obituary in the Advertiser.

You have meant something to me. Of course, you've known that many years of my young life I loved you, but perhaps you did not know that in all the years since I have hated you. In fact, I think I should cease until after the holidays, as the thought of you makes me angry, mostly with myself.

'Til 2007, old friend, Mele Kalikimaka and Hauoli Makahiki Hou.

Rodney

THREE CABS

by ALICIA UPANO

“No,” I say, “I’ll go.” I reach over and grab your hand, you squeeze back and then let go.

We are in a cab heading from the hospital to our loft, that sprawling space you insisted on, and proceeded to break into camps. We each had little when we first arrived, your canvases and brushes, my second-hand wardrobe and a few books. Packed together in the rental truck, it looked like something or the start of something. But in the vast space it looked like mere trinkets from the city that glimmered beyond. The city would be our furniture, our interior design, we said that first night over Chinese take-out and wine. Who needed a proper end table when we had the city to nestle us, that two-dimensional view beyond the windows? The bridge was as good as a dining table. The lights were our wallpaper. The tower in the distance reaching up through the fog was our piece de resistance.

I remember this conversation now, but the apartment is still empty. You hold my elbow as I make it up the stairwell to our sixth floor apartment. The elevator is broken again. I am bleeding again. Like all things that catch us unaware, it ends slowly, leaving in an uneven trickle, clumps of tissue. Life, literally, draining out of me.

I take off my shoes and walk over the cold tiles to the closet in the corner and take out the blue dress with the low back I bought on 23rd Street last week for this occasion. You dress in your suit, your only suit, your tie matching your eyes. You look like a man in a clothing advertisement. That shaggy hair, that five o’clock shadow, the well-shined shoes.

Another cab ride, back into the city, to the gallery whose window reads Alan Maxwell: Impressions. It is your first solo show. I head to the cocktail table, figuring a drink will help quell the pain, the cramps, the blood soaking my panties like an inkblot. I imagine myself in a shrink’s office, sitting on the couch and this man wearing paisley-cov-

ered socks shows me a series of inkblots. What do you see, he says. And I say baby, baby, baby.

They all toast you. They say wonderful things about your ugly paintings. The paintings are harsh, too much paint neglected before it could be stroked, tempted to move. Your hand is heavy, drawing abstractly and sometimes shapes become recognizable but often not. It makes the viewer want to reach out and touch the painting. Your talent is texture, roughness, the clash of things. The viewer who touches it, which you encourage, becomes part of that confrontation. They never win because they question and feel and try to answer, but the painting remains, unmoving.

It is the end of the night. You behold me as a porcelain doll, beautiful and delicate. As if I may break at any moment. Another cab, another hand on the elbow up six flights of stairs. You open your mouth to say something and then close it. What would you say? We didn't want this child anyway?

I curl into bed and start to sob. Nurses said that these emotions are normal given the residual hormones and shock. You go into the kitchen, your shiny shoes echoing on the floor. All I hear is the telephone conversation with my mother in the hospital, repeating in my head. God knew better, she said. "God who?" I say now, not realizing the words escaped aloud until you linger over me, a cup of water in hand, and set it on the nightstand.

"God nobody, baby," you say and kiss my forehead, bidding me goodnight. It is the most you have said to me this evening.

Then I watch you enter your studio, a circle of canvases on easels, a few on the periphery lay horizontal. You circle them around you so your art becomes separate from our lives. I hear you prepare your paints, that familiar click of wooden brushes. I sit up, and I can see you through the gap between easels, you are mixing orange paint. You go to the blank canvas—there are always blank canvases mounted here—and you begin to trace a figure. It is an amorphous figure, a vertical blob, until I see your brush create breasts, then an arm, and finally a child.

You always said you'd paint me, but I did not imagine like this. I see me, but perhaps it's not me. She has breasts like a Gaston Lachaise sculpture, a buxom, all-encompassing femininity. She is cradling a tiny creature, a child no larger than a fist. It is our child. Is this a mon-

THREE CABS

ument to me, or to our failure?

In the morning, it is done. She is dynamic, all breast and arm in swirls of orange and red, the child barely distinguishable as a separate entity. They fuse together. They swim in a background of aqua blue, like the ocean, where everything washes off.

AFTER THE FIRE

by PATTIE M. WELLS

only a few puddles and a rivulet. With shoes
in hand, I rolled up my pants and barefoot

stepped into the water. My fingers disturbed
the surface as I scooped up a crayfish,
slippery as crude oil; twitching, snappers clicking,

a survivor of the lost river and drought. I stared
into the seeping water, thought I witnessed
myself between the specks of ash coasting by.

Bubbles emerged as I dipped my fist in, opened
my hand and watched the life in my grasp
stir then disappear in the current.

Rio Grande River 1952

A FIELD OF RADARS

Fort Bliss, Texas

by **PATTIE M. WELLS**

Beyond our backyard wall, the radars
all pointed upward like large ears
waiting for directives from heaven.
One morning they were gone
and gray rocks a foot deep
covered the field. Thousands
of thumbnail grasshoppers basked on the warm rocks.
I caught them, ripped their wings
and fed them to pet lizards.
They only ate grasshoppers
if they were alive.
I put sand in their boxes and a stone,
jar lids of water, twigs of brush
and tucked pieces of torn
tumbleweed in the corners.
Every spring, desert storms
blotted out the sun and sky
shaping tall rippled dunes.
We kept our mouths
tightly sealed and shielded
our eyes from the sand.
Tumbleweeds rolled in the wind,
thorny limbs scratched
everything they touched.

A FLY MOVES SLOWLY SIDEWAYS UP THE WALL

by PATTIE M. WELLS

Tonight they crave fly meat. Ants circle the fly morgue
on the sill. Teams of two drag the dead husks up the wall—

after hearing about the clots in my father's lungs, I
notice ants in my house, ants on the counter, dragging a fly up.

I close my eyes and my house lies on an anthill. While I sleep,
they carry me to their catacombs. Tonight I can't sleep so I watch
bugs,

forget about the blood in dad's lungs, but remember
his whitened fists and the pearls of sweat on pallid skin.

I spot two moths mating. Buddhists say do not
kill an animal, do not kill a bug. I do not.

I sink into a tub. I walk past blackened bananas
as a net of fruit flies rises and falls.

In the morning, the phone rings, I answer and hear dad's voice.

As I open the door, a stripe of sun warms my face
and lights the porch revealing a cricket.

MRS. ARGIA BRAIDOT'S TWO TALES

by PATTIE M. WELLS

1

MERMAN AT LA JOLLA COVE

He finds a purse concealed in rocks,
opens it discovering coins in nickel, copper
and green paper faces. He dumps the contents
to sand then fills the bag with a sprig of pine,
a starfish, a seaweed wreath, two crabs,
a pinch of sand and three stones webbed
with charcoal veins in slate and celery.
He breathes fire from sun-heated air.
A film of moisture evaporates from scales
as he watches a phalarope flap on a branch.
A caw jabs his sea ears, so unlike the deep,
slurred tones of coral cities. Cliff high
the creatures gather to gawk at him: brown,
beige, large and small ones. He gazes at them,
notices how strange they are, yet similar.

POGANY'S PARSIFAL LEAVES THE CASTLE

As you touch the man on the bridge
in Pogany's Parsifal,
you walk into canvas,

sky unfastens and rain pummels rooftops.
Your umbrella veers water to streams,
sheets of tree frogs ricochet off
like the sound of grapes pelting sailcloth.
Your heels clack over cobblestones

as you rise above castle Neuschwanstein.
The umbrella shrinks and you land on a tower,
descend stone steps to Singer's Hall
with murals of swans and Wagner's opera
Parsifal. You hear lake water pulse
and dripping stalactites in the grotto,

then enter the Byzantine throne room, unfinished
and still waiting for crazy King Ludwig.
A swan statue awakens, wings spread
as you climb on, fly through a door
crawling with vines, soar over Bavarian Alps
then land along the green snake of the Rhine.

Pogany's canvas reappears,
one chance to step backward
as the road beckons you ahead.

ME AND MY OLD MAN

by RYAN WILLINGHAM

The bronze colored hills stretched off to Jake's right, and the ocean reached out to the sky on his left as he drove up the highway towards home for the second time after starting graduate school. He looked in the rearview mirror and remembered when he had seen his father's senior yearbook picture and thought it funny because he looked just like him. It'd been like peering into a black and white mirror. After several miles Jake noticed a tractor sitting in a plowed field, its paint was faded and it looked rusted from what he could tell. Jake thought of his family's ranch and a time, it must have been ten years ago now, when his dad had needed his help.

John walked up the driveway past the mailbox and the cluster of cacti to the farmhouse. His permanently sunburned red and tan skin shown from the open collar of his work shirt, his clothes smelling like engine oil. He told his boys he had a job for them so they changed quickly and rode the ATV down the road. John had been plowing the pond basin across the road from their vineyards until the tractor became stuck in the mud. He instructed his sons to begin digging around the tires so he could drive out of the wet earth. Jake and Sam worked quickly, their father telling them, "Hurry up, I've got work to be done."

Jake plunged the nicked blade of the shovel into the chunks of black soil, and listened to the sucking sounds of mud separating in heavy clumps as he tossed it aside.

He could feel the sweat seeping into his work shirt as he dug around the massive treaded tires of the tractor. Jake's father barked orders to dig next on the right sides of the tires at a 90-degree angle and he hurried to whatever new spot his father found. He could feel the nervousness rising in his stomach because he couldn't find the spots his father was pointing to, and the longer it took the boys to dig

where he told them, the louder he got. Jake tried to contort his body around the plow and crouch between the machine's tires to scrape out the damp soil from beneath the tractor's hulking red and black frame. His legs ached from crouching, his body cramped between the tires. His brother's small frame fit more comfortably between the plow and tractor. They hurried as the pallid sunlight burned away in the cloud-strewn country sky overhead. John's bad back prevented him from doing the digging himself. Years of lugging people out of burning buildings, putting out fires in the city and driving tractors at home had only worsened the pain that dug into his body.

Jake didn't want to be out there in his worn grandfather's work jeans and old tennis shoes, fixing his father's mistake. One of their neighbors came by and talked to John. Jake listened to their conversation as he and Sam kept digging to get to the wet wheels.

"What happened here John?" the neighbor asked.

"It's...the mud...it a...sucked the tire right down."

He was drunk again; over the years Jake had learned to tell when his father's voice sounded off. Jake thought about how much he hated his father's habit and wished he would stop. He wasn't a drunkard. He did his jobs well and did right by his boys and wife. But sometimes it was there, lurking underneath the surface. When his dad would come back to the house after dark, he could hear the alcohol in his voice while he watched TV in the living room. The glazed look in his eyes gave it away, too, but then sometimes he was wrong; sometimes what he saw was only weariness in his father's stare and not the look of a drunken stupor. It was the uncertainty that made it worse for Jake because he wasn't sure how to act around his father. He wished something would kill the thirst that lived inside his dad; he wished something could make it go away. After they finished digging, his father finally managed to drive his tractor out of the hole and the boys drove the ATV home, glad the job and the shouting was over. Jake's mother could tell he was tired and angry when he came in the back door of the farmhouse.

Jake didn't want to remember the time he walked down the hill from their campsite last summer, taking his shivering soaked father back up as he drunkenly trudged along, while Jake worried his dad would drown or fall down the hill the next time he stayed out too long on the boat.

One of Jake's earliest memories was of a car ride home from his babysitter's. He was half asleep in his parent's station wagon, curled in a ball on the chilly leather upholstery. His parents were arguing about something but Jake didn't remember what. After they had gotten home Jake lay in bed crying to himself. His father came in and gently brushed his hair as he whispered for Jake to calm down and that he was alright. He stopped crying and he sank into sleep. John had comforted him then and Jake wished deeply that he could comfort his father now.

Jake returned home from his freshman year of college for the winter holiday. He'd been nervous about coming back. They'd moved to a new house and Jake wondered if their same problem had followed them from the farm. He had an idea of the tension from telephone conversations with his mother, but he had only really seen it three weeks earlier at Thanksgiving. He remembered how his father barely managed to sit up and stay conscious during dinner while his mother tried to keep everyone from staring. His mom was at work and his brother was out somewhere with his friends, leaving only Jake and his father in the house. The sky outside was iron, making the house even darker with the lights off.

His father hadn't left the house much since his parents had sold the farm and his dad, due to his many work related injuries, was forced into retirement from the fire department. When Jake was home, he would watch TV or read, glancing up as his father occasionally emerged from his room to go to the fridge or pantry. Their exchanges were limited to a hello to one another, but not much else. His father would refill his cup with more ice and brandy or beer then return to his room. He had traded his station uniform for his old blue robe, worn with age, holey in several places. At any hour his thin hair was upturned in corkscrews of black, like he'd been sleeping, which Jake figured he did a lot. His eyes had that glassy look in them, and his face gave way to little expression under the frost of his white beard. Jake didn't like being home alone with his father. It wasn't that his father acted cruelly. He didn't do much of anything; it was the quiet in the house. The silence was broken only by the soft clink of ice in the bottom of his father's glass. After Jake heard the door to his parents' room click shut, stillness filled the house.

The silence was like a weight pressing down on him and a con-

stant reminder of what his father's life had become. He was a husk of the man who'd spent the last twenty years saving so many people and now he couldn't save himself. He didn't try and get a new job even though the family needed the money and Jake's mother's jobs weren't enough. He would just lie there for hours, believing he was a failure. Jake knew it wasn't his father's fault they had to sell the farm; the market had gone bad--they had to pull out, and his father couldn't get past it. Jake crept up to his father's door sometimes to see if he could hear if his dad was moving around. He heard very little from the room. A picture kept tearing its way into Jake's head despite his resistance, despite his distracting himself with a book or the TV. These only drove the image further into his skull, locked in his mind. Jake imagined himself reading or watching TV and the silence shattering by the crack of a pistol shot from his father's room. He saw himself approaching the room and finding his father's body there, sprawled on the floor next to a warm barrel. Jake wanted out of the house.

That spring day over a year later the sky was bright and Jake could feel summer pushing through like the buds used to on the vines at the farm before he moved away. His father pulled up to the apartment in Jake's new car. It wasn't a revved up hot rod, just a dark green Honda Accord. Jake beamed. When he told his parents his first car had broken down and the mechanic said it would need to be replaced, he wasn't sure how they would take it. Rather than get angry with him, his parents started looking and they found him a used car with low mileage. His parents didn't ask him to pay for it and his dad even drove upstate to drop off the car and sell the old one.

Jake and his dad had breakfast and drove the car to the shop. The old car was shot, they told him. After talking to the mechanic, John took the car over to another shop he had called and they checked out the car. They said they could fix it and so John had them repair it. Jake felt dumb. Why hadn't he taken the old car to another shop before telling his parents it was shot? His father didn't yell. Jake expected the old anger to rise up in his father's face, but today he was calm and understanding and Jake was perplexed. He had grown up accustomed to his father's bad temper, and was used to hearing the anger swelling in his father's harsh tones, scolding his sons' mistakes. None of that was in his father's voice now. They

drove back to Jake's apartment in the Accord. Jake told his dad he had to go to class, so he showed John how the DVD player worked while he waited for the auto shop to call back about the old car. On his way home, Jake stopped to meet his father, who was taking a look at the engine before he drove back downstate. When John was sure the car was all right, he said goodbye to his son and drove away. Jake returned home and on his desk was a note his father had left him. It read: I'm really glad we had a few hours together. I know you're a busy guy. Good Luck with your new car, you deserve it and much more. Jake I'm so proud of you, so keep up the grades and I hope you don't try and work too much! Have some fun! Love, Dad. Jake sat at his desk and wiped his blurry eyes, trying to blink his vision clear again. The note surprised him, he knew his father loved him but his words, jotted out in his father's rough script, meant something. The note still sits on his desk, buried under old birthday cards and random papers but easier to pull out than his father's tractor had ever been.

In a few hours Jake would be home. His car had held out, taking him up and down the state. Jake was glad to be seeing his family. The years had been hard for them all, but they were still together, still going on. That's what his family did they were survivors. He was happy knowing that.

Contributors

NANCY ALVARADO has been working on an MFA in fiction since 2005 and is taking the scenic route toward finishing. During the rest her my life, she is a 5th grade teacher, mother of 2, and wife. She lives in San Ysidro, where she looks out at Tijuana from her bedroom window.

BRANDON JAMES ANDERSON is in his second year in the MFA program at San Diego State. A graduate of Central Michigan University, Anderson's writing often examines what life is like for those in his hometown of Flint, Michigan, a city known as the birthplace of the labor union and infamous nationwide for it's degenerated state caused by the decline in the automotive industry.

TONY BONDS enjoys reading Haruki Murakami, Italo Calvino, and Kafka. When not reading or writing, he is mostly focused on playing the ukelele, baking, or trying new wines. If he could be any animal, he would be a howler monkey.

TINA V. CABRERA is completing her MFA in Fiction at SDSU. Her thesis in progress is tentatively titled, "For the Former Things Have Passed Away." Two excerpts from her novel have appeared in Insolent Rudder and Anderbo.com, and she has fiction forthcoming in the "Freak" issue of Fiction International and City Works. Check out her website at http://www.myspace.com/canny_uncanny.

GARRETT CHAFFIN-QUIRAY attended the USC film school and has since sponsored film festivals, taught media history and writing, and published various reviews, scholarly essays, and one short story. Having also managed information technology for an investment bank before undertaking a dot-com adventure in the late '90s, he now lives in Escondido, a San Diego County suburb, where he writes fiction, chases after a vibrant four-year old daughter, and enjoys the generous support of a loving wife. "Midnight near the Marne River, July 15, 1918" is excerpted from *Chattels*, a novel in progress.

LISA HEMMINGER: After years of beating the streets as a pesky reporter, poet Lisa Hemminger was lucky enough to return to the shiny world of

post-graduate academe. Inspire is her favorite verb; Joel Hodgson, her favorite role model. Matinee was first published as “A Kiss is Still A Kiss”, Outrider Press 2001.

ROB JORDAN retired from the Coca-Cola business world to write about his native Mexico.

KATHY J. LEE is a graduate of Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois) with a B.A. in English Literature and Mathematics. Currently, she splits her time between the snow-covered mountains of South Lake Tahoe and the congested highways of southern California. In her spare time, she enjoys laughing, snowboarding, devouring newspapers, practicing yoga and rearranging the furniture in her apartment.

MEAGAN MARSHALL is a poet and performer from San Diego, California who loves sandwiches and swimming pools. She received her BA in Theater and Dance from the University of California at San Diego, and is in the process of earning her MFA in Creative Writing at San Diego State University.

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ALYCIA RABY is a first year MFA student in Fiction. She comes from UC Davis with degrees in Classics and English. She is very much addicted to chocolate and enjoys a well-placed semicolon.

DEROLD SLIGH, originally from Michigan, is currently in his first year in SDSU's MFA program for poetry. He soon plans to submit his manuscript for publication entitled, Suburban Hymns for an Urban Other. He believes the ability to think outside of oneself is the beginning of all abilities and that the meaning of life is love.

ANDY STEWART is a first year MFA Creative Writing major at SDSU. He earned his undergraduate degree from Baylor University in Texas.

ALICIA UPANO is a Hawaii native that has been on the lam for a decade. She has worn many hats (journalist/teacher/surf short seller) in many places (East/West/Far East/Pacific rock). She likes the sunshine, parentheses, and getting her hands dirty (in the garden, of course).

PATTIE M. WELLS was born in Franklin, Indiana and has lived in many places including Trieste, Italy, Baumholder, Germany and Fort Bliss, Texas. She received a Bachelors degree in Psychology and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at San Diego State University. She is a poet, translator and fiction author and is currently working on a novel in short stories. She has been adjunct faculty at SDSU, Grossmont College and Southwestern College. Currently she owns and operates a dance center in San Diego. Her work has or will appear in San Diego City Works, Grab-a-Nickel, Timber Creek Review, Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry, Green Hills Literary Lantern, Wisconsin Review, Parnassus Literary Journal, Sow's Ear Poetry Review, Acorn Review, River Oak Review and ZYZZYVA.

RYAN WILLINGHAM grew up on a farm in California's central valley before moving upstate to attend college at UC Davis where he majored in English and Film Studies. After graduating he moved to San Diego to join SDSU's MFA Creative Writing program. He plans on creating a collection of short stories or a novel for his thesis and is particularly interested in horror, historical and dramatic fiction.

